

Russia's Iran Policy

Global and regional objectives, political and economic interests

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Iran's nuclear programs and its putative ambition to build the atom bomb have produced what is generally considered to be at present the most dangerous international crisis. Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, neighbor of Iran in the Caspian area, and supplier of civilian nuclear technology and conventional weapons, is regarded as having more influence than any other international actor in Tehran. But what drives the Kremlin's policies in the dispute? How serious and realistic is its declared objective to forge a "strategic partnership" with Iran? What linkage, if any, is there between Putin's Iranian policies and the Moscow meeting with Hamas leaders? Finally, is it safe to conclude that Russia's interests and policies in that region are congruent with those of the West, or are they essentially at odds with each other?

One of the strands of Russian foreign policy conceptually developed by former Russian foreign minister and Arab expert Evgeny Primakov has been the idea of establishing a "multipolar world." Its primary aim is to counterbalance the alleged American quest for global supremacy. In East Asia and South Asia, as part of this quest, China and India have been courted as "strategic partners." In the Near and Middle East, Russia has made efforts to bestow this role on Iran. For instance, in May 2004, President Putin claimed, "[Iran has been] our stable partner for a long time." In October 2004, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov seconded this view, saying that "Russia can always count on Iran as a strategic partner in the region."

As such characterizations imply, the Kremlin has rejected the American view of Iran as a rogue nation and sponsor of international terrorism. Furthermore, until recently it even disassociated itself from the American and Israeli view that Tehran wanted to become a nuclear power. As late as in February 2005, after talks with the Iranian chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rohani in Moscow, Putin asserted: "The latest steps on the Iranian side have convinced us that Iran does not have the intention to build a nuclear bomb." Russia will therefore continue its cooperation with Tehran "in all areas including nuclear energy."

Iran – a “strategic partner”?

One of the Russian-Iranian partnership's goals is to keep the U.S. and NATO out of the Caspian region to the extent possible. Georgia's and Azerbaijan's efforts to become members of NATO have therefore encountered objections in both Moscow and Tehran. This applies also to ideas put forward in Washington to set up a Caspian Guard of up to 120,000 troops in order to fight international terrorist networks, protect the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and prevent weapons and drug trafficking in the region as well as the transfer of components for the production of weapons of mass destruction. Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan are supposed to participate in this force together with those of the United States. Moscow has countered such ideas with its own initiatives. One of the examples is the proposal to create a joint naval force of the Caspian Sea countries, to be designated as CasFor. Its details have yet to be fleshed out. Only one thing is unambiguous: The proposal rules out participation of other countries, i.e., the United States, no matter whether this concerns provision of equipment, technical assistance, intelligence sharing, or personnel training. Those roles would be reserved for Russia. One of the technical rationales for this role can be derived from the fact that the Russian Caspian Sea Flotilla comprises more ships and on-shore, amphibious and air power than the navies of the four Caspian neighbors combined.

Iran's inclusion as an observer within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is presumably part of Russia's quest for a “strategic partnership” with the Islamic Republic. In addition to Russia, this grouping includes China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It supported Moscow's and Tehran's opposition to a United States military presence in the region during its summit in Kazakhstan's capital Astana in July 2005 and demanded the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Central Asia within one to two years. Due to President Karimov's pressure, the with-

drawal from Uzbekistan has already occurred.

Russia's efforts to establish a strategic partnership with Tehran have paid off politically. In the mid-nineties, during Tajikistan's civil war, the Iran refrained from supporting militant Islamic opposition forces and helped the Kremlin to mediate between the post-communist regime and the opposition. Similarly, the Islamic Republic have not extended any assistance to the Wahhabi jihadists in the North Caucasus, and Tehran has refrained from criticizing Moscow's massive and indiscriminate use of violence against what is after all a Muslim population in Chechnya during the two wars and the subsequent repression by federal Russian forces and that of the Kadyrov regime.

Russia has also profited economically from the partnership with Iran. This has less to do with the volume of trade and more to do with its structure. In 2005, the value of trade amounted to approximately US\$2 billion, of which Russian imports were an insignificant portion. The lion's share of trade are Russian exports which primarily consist of supplies for large projects such as the construction of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr and hydro-electric power stations. Another big item have been weapons and military equipment. Iran, behind India and China, has for years been the third largest importer of Russian weapons, with imports reaching approximately US\$400 million per year.

Russian weapons exports

The weapons that Iran receives are, according to Russia, not capable of destabilizing regional balances of power. In fact, Russia's weapons exports have quantitative and qualitative limits. The MiG-29S jet fighters delivered to Iran are out-of-date and not equipped with precision weapons for ground targets. The Su-24MK fighters, which were exported in small quantities, are rather old as well. The number of tanks and armored personnel

carriers delivered does not make up for the losses that Iran suffered during the long-lasting war against Iraq. The S-200 air defense systems do have a wide range, but their guidance systems are out-of-date.

The political explosiveness of Russian weapons exports is nevertheless clear. This is particularly true for the transaction agreed to in the fall of 2005, worth approximately US\$700 million, for the delivery of 30 Tor M1 surface-to-air missiles. With a range of 12 kilometers, they can hit targets as high as 10 kilometers and are capable of intercepting airplanes as well as drones and cruise missiles. These missiles could be used to protect Iran's nuclear plants from air attacks.

Is Russia helping Iran with the development of nuclear missiles?

"We should not forget that Iran has a rather well-developed medium and long range missile program," warned Foreign Minister Lavrov on January 12, 2006. The American government holds Russia partially responsible for the success of this program. As stated repeatedly in CIA reports, "Help from Russian units supported Iranian efforts to develop new missiles and to increase Tehran's independence with respect to the production of missiles." The undefined term "units," however, suggests that the CIA wanted to leave open the question of whether the Russian government knowingly consented or merely tolerated the transfer of missile technology or those elusive "units" illegally circumvented government regulations and controls. Notwithstanding the fact even today, there are still Russian missile technicians and engineers in the country, the CIA has acknowledged that North Korea's and China's support has made a more significant contribution to Iran's medium range missile development.

Russian-Iranian cooperation in space technology constitutes yet another dimension of the partnership. At the same time, the form it has taken supports the view

that the Russian government is averse to helping Iran become a nuclear power equipped with medium and long range missiles. Security and economic interests coincide on that issue. Thus, when Tehran announced in 2003 that it wanted to launch space satellites with booster rockets to be built by Iran, Russia failed to support the idea. Moreover, the U.S. and Israel vehemently opposed such plans because they feared that the booster rockets could also be equipped with nuclear warheads. As a result, communication and observation satellites are now built for Iran in research and development facilities in Krasnoyarsk and Omsk in Siberia and sent into orbit with Russian rockets from the northern Russian Plesetsk space complex.

Nuclear technology cooperation

Russia is building a 1000-megawatt nuclear power plant, officially at a cost of more than US\$800 million, in Bushehr, southwest of Isfahan. Several thousand Russian scientists, engineers and technicians have been involved in the project. According to initial plans, Russia was supposed to deliver the fuel to start the first reactor block in 2003. However, its completion has been postponed repeatedly. Now, the power plant is scheduled to be commissioned this year. But there are even farther-reaching plans: In July 2002 Moscow and Tehran agreed to an extensive plan of nuclear cooperation over a period of ten years. The plan contemplates the construction of six nuclear reactors, including four in Ahwas, 100 kilometers from the border with Iraq. Russia has been educating Iranian scientists at the Moscow Kurchatov Institute of nuclear energy, and training hundreds of engineers and technicians at the Novovoronezh nuclear power plant. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors have discovered that Russian technology for uranium enrichment as well as uranium enriched in Russia has been used in the gas centrifuges at the Natanz research facility.

Russia has rejected criticism of its cooperation with Iran. The power plant serves peaceful uses of nuclear energy only, it claimed. The light-water reactors in Bushehr were of the same type that the United States delivered to North Korea and other countries. No technology transfer relevant for military programs had occurred. The Kremlin supported the efforts of the EU-3 to persuade Iran to accept a moratorium on uranium enrichment research, and it put pressure on Tehran to sign the additional protocol with the IAEA that permits stricter supervision of Iranian nuclear facilities. The Russian government also stated that the Bushehr reactors would not be started until Tehran agreed to transfer the spent nuclear fuel to Russia.

Finally and most importantly, it proposed to Iran the establishment of a joint venture for uranium enrichment. Iran would convert uranium into uranium hexafluoride at its nuclear facility in Isfahan, but the gas would then be transported north for enrichment in Russian facilities. Would Iran have agreed to this proposal, Russia would effectively have become an international trustee who, together with the IAEA, would ensure that nuclear energy in Iran would be used solely for peaceful purposes. The Russian nuclear industry would also have profited, in Russia itself but also in Iran with the implementation of the plans for the construction of additional nuclear power plants.

The limits of cooperation

Iranian intransigence, however, has presented Putin with a dilemma. On the one hand, he is under pressure to live up to his role as chairman of the G8 and the special responsibility he has claimed for Russia as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. On the other hand, he does not wish to jeopardize the special relationship he has with his Southern neighbor. But the role of broker in the conflict has looked increasingly unconvincing and ineffective. The deterioration of that

role began with Iran's cancellation of the moratorium on uranium enrichment research and continued with the failure of the negotiations on the joint venture proposal. The Russian foreign minister, too, has now felt obliged to associate himself with Western opinion and to acknowledge: "The absence of economic logic and a realistic, practical necessity [for uranium enrichment in Iran] nurtures the suspicion that this program has secret military applications." The semi-official Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (CFDP) even thinks that the Iranian atomic bomb is inevitable.

However, while admitting that a nuclear armed Iran is potentially a threat to Russian security interests, the CFDP clings to the comforting notion that such a development should "not be considered catastrophic as long as the regime in Iran remains stable." Such a view evidently provides underpinning to the official Russian position that sanctions imposed on that regime would be counterproductive. This, in turn, warrants the conclusion that in the UN Security Council Russia would at best abstain on a resolution that calls for economic sanctions but that it would oppose the authorization of coercive measures. That may not completely satisfy the Ahmadinedschad regime but it has the, from the Russian viewpoint, advantageous effect that the United States and such European countries as are prepared to join a "coalition of the willing" will be settled with the onus of confronting Iran. Such a stance coincides with the approach taken towards Hamas. It is doubtful that Israel will accept Russia as an honest broker. But the Kremlin's premature acceptance of that organization as a legitimate representative of the Palestinians will make it less likely that Russia will become the target of Islamic ire.

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