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The Russian–Iranian Relations after the UNSC Resolution 1929

by

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Key Positions

- Russia is deceiving the West in its support for the latest round of UNSC sanctions against Iran.
- Russia continues to expand cooperation with Iran on its nuclear programme and agreements over sophisticated arms deliveries despite its moves to support sanctions.
- Russia may have an interest in expanding its political and economic cooperation with the West, but the likelihood of strategic cooperation with Iran remains stronger in the medium term.
- Russian President Medvedev’s announcement in mid-July that “Iran is close to developing nuclear weapons” occurring in parallel to Russia continuing to provide for Iran’s nuclear and military capabilities is a reflection of the pragmatic realism with which the current “diplomatic charades” involving Russia, Iran and the West should be understood.

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On 9 June 2010, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approved the fourth round of sanctions targeting the Iranian nuclear programme. While Russia gave its support to the new measures, this cooperation was contradicted in the immediate aftermath of the vote when Moscow announced that the 2007 deal with Tehran over the delivery of a Russian S-300 missile defence system would not be affected by the UNSC resolution. Even more

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surprisingly, Moscow further announced that cooperation with Tehran over its nuclear programme would not be influenced by the 9 June vote. Such contradictory behaviour requires a deeper assessment in order to more adequately account for Moscow's two-fold policy, particularly after November 2009 when the Kremlin appeared to be increasingly abandoning Iran and airing greater support for the position of the UNSC.

The proposition taken in this paper is simple: while Moscow has been more supportive of the Western position against Iran in public, in reality Moscow has been deceiving the West in its latest diplomatic movements vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear programme. We question the apparent optimism (from a Western perspective) that Moscow was rethinking its traditional policy toward Tehran and confirm the suspicions, suggested by some analysts between November 2009 and June 2010, that genuine cooperation with the West over Iran was always unlikely. We argue that while it is possible to consider that Russia may have been tempted to reduce the scope of its strategic ties with Iran if this would have led not only to greater levels of political and economic cooperation with the West, but also with key Middle Eastern pro-Western states, such as Saudi Arabia, it would be wiser to view the Russian position with greater realism. Russian President Dimitry Medvedev's announcement in mid-July of this year that "Iran is close to developing nuclear weapons" occurred in parallel to Moscow signing a new round of agreements with the Islamic Republic in the energy sphere, including nuclear energy, which clearly indicates a reflection of this realism.

Relations prior to the UNSC Resolution

The partnership between Moscow and Teheran started to gain firm momentum in the mid-1990s due to the mutually beneficial economic and strategic advantages which both parties saw from the development of such an axis. Moscow needed new export markets for the cash-strapped Russian military and nuclear industries as well as international support for its struggle against Chechen insurgents, who were at the time aided by other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia. Tehran was in search of support for its nuclear and military ambitions for which Russia could provide technical assistance and diplomatic support. Iran had regional power ambitions in the Middle East; Russia had aspirations to regain weight in global affairs; and, taking into account the changing composition of the Middle Eastern power balance, a confluence of interests began driving the two countries into an even closer partnership.

In 1995, Moscow took over work on the unfinished Iranian nuclear power plant in Bushehr, originally started by the German company Siemens in 1974, while the Kremlin also committed itself to supplying Iran with nuclear material and supervising the training of Iranian scientists. In 2002, the two countries recommitted to a new 10 year renewal of the Bushehr contract. Russia also developed active cooperation with Iran in the military-technical sphere. Agreements for the delivery of Tor-M1 missiles were signed in 2005, while further agreements for the supply of S-

300 missiles were reached in 2007 and are currently being implemented. In 2008 and 2009, Iran demonstrated some capacity for the development of a space programme (which was believed in some circles to be a cover for further military build up), in which Russia is also likely to have rendered assistance. After the intensification of the American campaign to isolate Iran economically and bring it under the focus of the UNSC, Moscow also provided diplomatic protection for Tehran by “watering down” the four UNSC sanction rounds which hit the country between 2006 and 2010.¹

Relations between November 2009 and June 2010

In September 2009, although Russia announced that it would carry on with its conventional, supportive policy towards Iran by excluding further cooperation with the UNSC over sanctions, Moscow appeared unexpectedly eager to reformulate its priorities and commit to serious cooperation with the West in spite of its previous partnership with the Islamic Republic. The change in the Russian approach appeared to have been shaped during the course of the November Asia-Pacific Summit where Russian President Medvedev met with US President Obama to discuss the renewal of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. Medvedev announced that Russia could support a new round of sanctions unless Tehran adopted more cooperative behaviour towards the uranium enrichment plan that Russia backed in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Soon after the Asia-Pacific Summit, the opening of the Russian-constructed Bushehr power plant, which was supposed to become operative in 2009, was postponed by the Kremlin. In February 2010, Russian-Iranian relations appeared to be further deteriorating when Moscow announced a possible freeze of the delivery of the S-300 missile defence system signed in 2007.

Spokesmen for the Russian side announced that “there are fundamental principles linked to the sale that we have never, in accordance with our legislation, and according to our international obligations, taken any actions that will lead to the destabilisation of certain regions”.² Commitment to setting limitations on Iranian nuclear proliferation was repeatedly professed by Medvedev in spring 2010 during his meetings with the leaders of other UNSC member countries. In March and April, the Russian President agreed on cooperation over a new sanction round with

¹ See Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?*, Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007; Ingmar Oldberg, “Russian-Iranian Security Links”, in *Russian & CIS Relations with the Gulf Region: Current Trends in Political and Economic Dynamics*, Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2010; A. William Samii, “Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at work”, *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, VIII (1) 2001; Ariel Cohen, “Russia’s Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama”, Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, no. 2359, 2010, available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/Russias-Iran-Policy-A-Curveball-for-Obama>; Janusz Bugajski, *Dismantling the West: Russia’s Atlantic Agenda*, Washington D.C: Potomac Books Inc., 2009.

² Quoted in http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2010/02/24/world/international-uk-russia-iran-lavrov.html?_r=2&scp=10&sq=iran&st=cse

French President Sarkozy and US President Obama. The accusations launched by the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, against Russia's compliance with the West reinforced the impression that the gap between the two partners was widening. Maintaining what appeared to be a watershed course in Russian-Iranian relations, Moscow backed its promises before the UNSC to support measures against Tehran by voting in favour of the fourth UNSC resolution on 9 June 2010.

The Russian Deception

How does one account for such ambiguity in the Russian position? While opinions within the analytical community may be divided over interpretation of the apparent reversal in the traditionally protective Russian position towards the Iranian nuclear programme since late 2009, we refer to two possible schools of thinking which may provide some further elaboration for the Russian position. According to the first, the ambivalence of Russian policy stemmed from the fact that Moscow sought to preserve its energy and trade dealings with Tehran, but at the same time did not want to undermine its relations with the European Union (EU) and United States (US), especially in the context of Obama's "reset" policy with Russia. Similarly, the perspective of having a nuclear power at the very borders of the former-Soviet Union may have led Russia to cooperate with the UNSC.³ This school of thinking is also supported by those analysts who believe that Russia is ultimately seeking closer ties with the EU and the US, as was the case during the 1990s, and would gladly limit its strategic partnership with Middle Eastern quasi-rouge states such as Iran, and to a lesser extent, Syria, if offered a chance for greater political and economic cooperation with the West in return.

The second school of thought, on the other hand, is reflected by a growing analytical consensus denying the existence of any genuine Russian "scruples" in not jeopardizing relations with the West, and endorses the view that Moscow is actively considering its national interest first, even if this is viewed in the West as "the politics of confrontation", or even brinkmanship. There is no shortage of analysts who continue to take this position. Ariel Cohen, for example, argued in a commentary last January that Moscow's position was nothing more than a skilful diplomatic game that would allow Russia to deceive the West and influence the negotiations for the sanctions in favour of Tehran.⁴ The current Russian deception (of the West over Iran), is the latest in a long line of Russian deceptions, according to Cohen. After analysing the Russian position in the three previous sanction rounds against Iran, Cohen pointed out that Moscow had taken part in previous international initiatives to limit Iran's nuclear programme in order to

³ Ingmar Oldberg, "Russian-Iranian Security Links", in *Russian & CIS Relations with the Gulf Region: Current Trends in Political and Economic Dynamics*, Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2010.

⁴ Cohen, "Russia's Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama". Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, no. 2359, 2010, available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/Russias-Iran-Policy-A-Curveball-for-Obama>

reduce the scope of any potential fallout which Teheran could have experienced, rather than due to Moscow's will to cooperate with the West against the Islamic Republic. He predicted that the new Russian position in seeking to more actively limit Middle Eastern proliferation (announced by the Kremlin in November 2009) was clearly linked to a joint Russian-Iranian strategy promulgated in 1997, where Russia aimed to provide greater diplomatic protection for Iran and where both countries sought to reduce the risks to Gulf security which they jointly deemed to be the result of the dominant presence of the US in the region.⁵

This line of thinking is also reinforced by a number of recent studies of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which highlight this structure's efforts to build a regional coalition that would counter US efforts to isolate Iran, by intensifying energy cooperation, in both the nuclear and oil & gas sectors, between Iran and the SCO members and observer countries (especially China, Kazakhstan and Pakistan).⁶ This approach fits into the broader framework of the objectives and greater strategic cooperation between the SCO states. Such countries, which include Russia, China and the Central Asian republics, are interested in limiting Washington's hegemonic position in the Middle East, and to a lesser extent Central Asia, but likewise have no desire in worsening their relationship with the US due to a multitude of political and economic factors. They see Iran's empowerment as a regional power broker as an instrument compatible with the development of such purposes. Furthermore, there appears to be general agreement amongst analysts that Russia "created" Iran's nuclear ambitions in order to present itself as indispensable mediator between Tehran and the international community. This would allow Russian diplomacy to walk once more on the stage of the most important international negotiating processes, turning Moscow once again into a powerful global player. From this perspective, Moscow's behaviour toward Iran would be just another chapter of its broader strategy of "creating problems in order to offer solutions", with which Russia aims at resurrecting its lost role in global decision-making processes.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶See Ezeli Azarkan, "The Interests of the Central Asian States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Ege Academic Review*, 10 (1), 2010: 395–420; Michael Snyder, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A New Order in Central Asia", *Voices*, Winter 2008: 16–22; Christina Y. Lin, "The Writing on the Wall: China-Russia-Iran Axis in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Nuclear Tipping Points in Middle East and East Asia", Paper for the Institut fuer Strategie-Politik-Sicherheits und Wirtschaftsberatung; Christina Y Lin, "NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: New Energy Geopolitics for the Transatlantic Alliance", *AICGS Transatlantic Perspectives*, 2009.

⁷ Janusz Bugajski, *Dismantling the West: Russia's Atlantic Agenda*, Potomac Books Inc.

The Diplomatic Charades

Both of the schools of thought briefly cited above add some value to our efforts in understanding the Russian behaviour towards its notable post-Cold War client, Iran. The more optimistic position, that Russia is seeking to participate in wider international efforts to limit the capabilities of Iran's nuclear programme, is reinforced by the view that Russia, with its youthful, apparently liberal President, and his Western educated advisers (including chief presidential aide, Arkady Dvorkovich), is not only conscious of jeopardizing relations with the West over Iran, but also with other key Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia. Moscow has been active in its efforts to court Riyadh for greater economic and political cooperation in recent years, and the Saudi Kingdom offers Russia great potential in the energy and military industry sectors, which are yet to be fully realised. Close ties between Moscow and Tehran have prevented Riyadh from building a solid partnership with Russia, especially after the 2007 deal over the delivery of the S-300 missiles to Tehran.⁸ Moscow's interest in developing closer ties with Riyadh could therefore be viewed as another means of interpreting the recent shift in Russian policy towards Iran, endorsing the cooperative approach not only in the context of Russian relations with the West, but also in Moscow's ties with other key pro-Western countries.

Although the cooperative approach provides insights into why Russia supported the 9 June UNSC resolution, it fails to account for Moscow's parallel decision of unfreezing the delivery of S-300 missiles and proceeding with work on the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which appeared to be put on hold just a months ago. Such steps are hardly compatible with declared efforts by Moscow to "limit Iranian proliferation" or building trust with its Western partners over its relationship with Iran. Upon closer examination of the Teheran-Moscow axis, it appears evident that if Russia had frozen its cooperation with Iran in the nuclear and military spheres, it was only doing so in order to deceive the West about its intention to continue supporting Iran in both areas. In this context, Moscow stressed that the agreement for the delivery of the S-300s was fully legal and not contradicting the 9 June sanctions decision, reinforcing the position of Cohen and others, that Moscow was once again seeking to instrumentalize its cooperation with the UNSC in order to ensure that the impact of UNSC sanctions on Iran's military and nuclear programmes would remain watered down.⁹

The triangular diplomatic charades involving Russia, Iran and the Western members of the UNSC continued into July 2010, when Russian President Medvedev announced publically that

⁸ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?*, Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007

⁹ Cohen, "Russia's Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama". Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder*, no. 2359, 2010, available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/Russias-Iran-Policy-A-Curveball-for-Obama>

Iran is close to developing nuclear weapons, a message appearing to be in line with long-held Western concerns about Iran's nuclear build-up. In a repeat dose of the follow-on from the Russian decision to support UNSC sanctions of 9 June, however, a round of new agreements was signed between Tehran and Moscow over cooperation in the energy sector, including nuclear energy. Russia is therefore not only willing to preserve and expand its friendship with Iran, but also continues to be the key stakeholder in Iran's nuclear build-up despite Medvedev's latest warning to the international community.

Conclusion

Moscow appears destined to continue supporting Iran's nuclear programme in the medium term and any movements at the diplomatic level should be viewed as carefully-choreographed manoeuvres designed to mislead the West into a sense of false security about a more conciliatory Russian position and confluence over positions on Iran. In the very latest development, when on 26 July the EU announced new sanctions targeting Iran's foreign trade, banking and energy sectors, Russia's immediate response was to brand such sanctions as "unacceptable". Moscow claimed that such measures undermined international efforts to limit Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Whilst Iran's foreign ministry condemned the EU's latest actions as "deeply regrettable" and vowed to continue its uranium enrichment work, Russian foreign ministry officials professed that the EU's efforts would only serve to undermine joint political and diplomatic efforts to regulate Iran's nuclear programme, and that they "show disdain for the carefully calibrated and co-ordinated provisions of the UN Security Council resolutions".¹⁰ The Russian foreign ministry's announcement is more reflective of the Russian position towards UNSC sanctions prior to the perceived shift pre-November 2009 and implies that Russia will seek to remain both the facilitator of Iran's nuclear programme as well as its chief source of meditation at the international level in the foreseeable future.

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¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-10774802>