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Russia and Iran: A Balancing Act

Moscow seeks to combine pragmatism with maximum leverage, at least until Iran achieves a détente with the West.

By Richard Weitz

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To the surprise of many observers, it was France rather than Russia that played the lead role in opposing last weekend's proposed nuclear deal with Iran. There should have been no surprise, at least in the case of Moscow. A close study of Russian policy shows that Moscow's role in the Iranian drama is more complex and subtle than simply fanning tensions between Iran and the West.

Russian officials have to balance a complex set of goals in their relations with Tehran: supporting nonproliferation, averting war or regime change, maintaining regional security, minimizing sanctions, enhancing Moscow's diplomatic leverage, limiting U.S. influence in Eurasia, and advancing energy and economic cooperation. The hierarchy of these objectives varies depending on changing circumstances. Furthermore, some of these aims conflict, at least in the short run, requiring Russian policymakers to choose among them or behave schizophrenically.

In general, the present stalemate, with Iran and the West in a state of nonviolent conflict, seems best suited for promoting Russian security interests since it elevates Moscow's influence in Tehran. The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new president has not fundamentally changed

Russia's relationship toward Iran. Since entering office, Rouhani has continued his predecessor's praising of Moscow for its supportive role in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and has continued Iranian calls for enhanced bilateral economic ties. But Rouhani has focused his diplomatic outreach on reconciling with the West, trying to demonstrate that his government is not pursuing nuclear weapons. A relaxation of Iranian-Western tensions could provide some benefits to Moscow, but a genuine reconciliation could prove economically, diplomatically and strategically costly for Moscow.

Russians do not want Iran to have nuclear weapons. Tehran's stubborn refusal to heed the demands of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to reign in its nuclear activities and come clean about its alleged earlier studies of how to design a nuclear weapon have clearly exasperated Russian officials. In both institutions, the Russian government has voted for critical resolutions and other measures aimed at coercing greater Iranian cooperation. In addition, Russia has leveraged its role in completing the construction of Iran's first nuclear power plant at Bushehr to discourage Tehran from pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities. For example, Russia successfully demanded that Iran return the fuel Russia supplies to the plant. Through reprocessing, technicians can extract plutonium, a powerful fissile material, from spent reactor fuel.

Iranian officials have rejected proposals to abandon their plans to develop their own national fuel-making infrastructure and rely on Russian-made fuel or multinational nuclear fuel centers to supply their nuclear program. They claim not to trust the international community to provide them with guaranteed fuel deliveries or assured access to such centers. Nonetheless, Iran's present enrichment capabilities and supply of uranium are insufficient to produce sufficient reactor fuel for Bushehr, but are adequate enough to make a few nuclear bombs. Moreover, the reactor under construction at Arak in western Iran does not, unlike the light-water reactor at Bushehr, require uranium fuel; it is designed to use heavy water, which makes it more easily employed to manufacture weapons-grade plutonium. Even so, if Iranians seek to build a nuclear weapon, they will do so not at Bushehr or at other locations (such as the Natanz enrichment facility) under IAEA supervision. Instead, they would design and build an atomic bomb at some clandestine facility, such as the one exposed in 2009 near Qom. That enrichment complex is remote and deeply buried, shielding it from foreign surveillance satellites and possible air strikes. For this reason, Russian diplomats have joined their Western colleagues in demanding that Iranian nuclear activities are fully transparent to international observers.

What Worries Moscow

Moscow's opposition to an Iranian bomb program is not because of concern about an Iranian attack against Russia but to other considerations. Russians worry about the health of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime at a time when many potential nuclear weapons aspirants are located in Russia's vicinity. Even more, they fear that Israel and the United States might respond to an Iranian nuclear weapons program with a military strike, resulting in unpredictable consequences for one of Russia's neighbors. If tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear program spark a war, Russia might derive immediate benefits from surging world oil prices, but mass

conflict could result in unwanted regime change in Tehran, with a more radical government directly challenging Russian policies toward Chechnya or the Caspian Sea Basin, or threatening other Russian interests. Even in the absence of war, Iran's nuclear and missile activities are helping NATO justify its missile defense programs, which Russians profess to fear could eventually degrade their nuclear deterrent.

To counter such malign outcomes, Russian officials regularly downplay indications that Tehran is seeking a nuclear arsenal (as opposed to a capacity to make nuclear weapons) or is developing a fleet of long-range missiles that could present a near-term threat to Europe or the United States. In addition, they defend Iran's right to pursue nuclear activities for peaceful purposes, such as civilian energy production and medical research, provided these activities proceed under appropriate safeguards. For example, this September, Russian President Vladimir Putin insisted that, "Iran, the same as any other state, has the right to peaceful use of atomic energy, including enrichment operations." Russian officials also argue that threats against Tehran are counterproductive, only increasing Iranian's interest in having a nuclear deterrent against potential foreign threats.

Still, the Russian government has employed pressure as well as engagement to constrain Iran's nuclear program. Despite Moscow's denials, this pressure has included slowing down construction at Bushehr and drawing out negotiations to provide Iran with fuel for the reactor, declining to provide Iran with the most advanced Russian weapons systems such as the S-300 surface-to-air missiles (whose delivery could precipitate a preemptive Israeli air strike), and backing several UNSC resolutions imposing sanctions on Tehran after Iranian officials ignored UN demands to suspend these activities.

The Russian government has even cited these UN sanctions as the reasons for limiting advanced weapons sales to Iran and for blocking Tehran's bid to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Eurasia's most prominent multilateral institution. Russians welcome Iran's potential contributions to any SCO energy club, but do not want to unduly encourage Western worries that the organization is becoming an anti-Western bloc of Eurasian authoritarian regimes.

Since voting for a fourth UNSC sanctions resolution in 2010, Russian officials have strongly resisted imposing new sanctions on Iran, arguing that the existing measures were sufficient to induce Iran to negotiate with the international community without inflicting excessive harm on the Iranian people. In line with this "no new sanctions" policy, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has proposed a "step-by-step" plan whereby Iran would make moves to address IAEA concerns about the potential military dimensions of its nuclear program and the Security Council would respond by easing sanctions. Ideally, the process could become reinforcing, with sanctions relief inducing greater Iranian cooperation and vice-versa

Opposing Sanctions on Principle

Conversely, while Russian officials have accepted sanctions as a means to pressure Iran toward negotiations, they oppose the “crippling” sanctions advocated by Israel and some Western governments. Russians object in principle, if not always in practice, to using sanctions or other coercive measures to alter Iran’s behavior, let alone as an instrument of regime change, claiming that such measures would be counterproductive and harden the Iranian regime against making further concessions regarding its nuclear weapons program. Russian diplomats have often worked in the UN and elsewhere to weaken proposed collective sanctions.

They also strongly object to U.S. efforts to induce countries to apply unilateral U.S. sanctions on Iran or to adopt their own sanctions beyond those agreed to by the UN Security Council. Russia considers such measures illegitimate since they try to force other countries to apply foreign laws that these national governments have not supported and that lack Security Council authorization. The fact that Russian companies are regularly punished by such unilateral sanctions undoubtedly contributes to the opposition to these measures.

In general, Russian officials argue that the best way to moderate any Iranian nuclear weapons ambitions is to make Tehran’s external environment less threatening. Russian officials have often faulted the United States, whether the George W. Bush or the Barrack Obama administrations, for driving Iran into a corner. Although Russian officials cite humanitarian and tactical (“don’t back Tehran into a corner”) considerations, they also want to avoid harming Russian business interests in Iran by measures that would affect the everyday economy.

And as we have seen, Russian officials have always opposed the use of military force. Apart from the unpredictable consequences, there are also fears that radical Iranians might transfer nuclear material to terrorists, who could then attack Russian targets.

The Russian position differs from that of many Western governments. Whereas many U.S., Israeli, and European officials seek comprehensive if nonviolent regime change in Tehran, Russian leaders want Iranians to change their policies but not their regime. Russia benefits in several ways from Tehran’s confrontational policies towards the West, providing those policies do not escalate into war or lead to Tehran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. The frictions between Iran and Western countries leave Russia (and China) as Iran’s major economic partners, exclude Iran from contributing its territory or oil and natural gas to Western-sponsored trans-Caspian energy pipelines that would reduce European dependence on Russian supplies, and help prop up world energy prices by keeping Iranian oil and especially natural gas sales on international markets low. A new regime in Iran could easily challenge Russian interests. While more radical leaders could provide greater support for the Islamist insurgents in the North Caucasus seeking independence from Moscow under a new jihadist state, a government led by Iran’s Green Movement could punish Russia for its past support for Iran’s clerical dictatorship, which has used Russian weapons to suppress the opposition, by redirecting Iran’s diplomatic and economic ties towards the West.

It is true that the overall economic ties between Russia and Iran are minimal, especially given the size of the two economies, and that Russia’s economic and strategic interests regarding the West

are much more important than those concerning Iran. Yet, two influential economic groups, Russian nuclear and defense firms, profit considerably from Iran's dependence on Russian-made nuclear technology and weapons. Meanwhile, Russian energy firms benefit from Iran's difficulties in producing and selling oil and gas on international markets. Sometimes these narrow interests trump Russia's general national interest in non-proliferation.

Consequences of a D tente

Conversely, a relaxation of Iranian-Western tensions could reduce world energy prices, both in the short run due to the decline in global tensions and in the longer run as Western firms resume large-scale investments in Iranian energy projects. Both trends would work to the detriment of the Russian economy. Iranian businesses could also seek to replenish their inventories of Western goods and technologies, diverting purchases away from Russian firms in the process. Russia might also lose its enviable position as mediator between Iran and the West. In the past, each party has sought to secure Moscow's support against the other. Russian policymakers have exploited this position to press Iran to make some concessions regarding its nuclear activities while blocking or watering down efforts to impose multilateral sanctions on Tehran through Russia's power to veto resolutions in the UN Security Council.

But Russia's mediation efforts encounter the same problems that trouble anyone else dealing with the Iranian regime. Ideological differences, historical animosities and a lack of trust in each other's commitments combine to make neither party fully comfortable relying on the other. Few Russian policymakers see Iran as Moscow's natural strategic partner in the region. The perceived differences in concrete interests and ideology, as well as the two nations' legacy of historical tensions, have been too great to make Russians fully comfortable allying with an Iranian regime that seems determined to minimize its dependence on Moscow even as it uses Russian-Iran ties to enhance Tehran's tactical leverage vis- -vis third parties.

Seeking to make the best of this situation, Moscow strives to leverage this distrust to keep Iranians cautious about overly annoying Washington. Russians themselves are annoyed that their past opposition to sanctions has not induced more Iranian gratitude. Moscow's backing of some sanctions also shows Iranians that Russia could support more punishment if Tehran remains uncooperative with the IAEA or if there are revelations about more clandestine nuclear sites or activities such as the covert uranium enrichment facility at Qom. While Russians publicly denounce the new unilateral sanctions adopted by the West outside the Security Council, they might privately welcome these extra-UN sanctions since their diplomats can tell Iranians that Moscow has saved Tehran from more sanctions in the Security Council but might not do so for long if Tehran does not moderate its behavior.

At the Geneva talks and elsewhere, Moscow wants to be seen as a swing state, capable of defending Iran but also of leaving Tehran to confront the West unaided, while avoiding being seen as sabotaging the talks to keep Iran in its orbit. Under Putin's steady pragmatic realism, Russian diplomacy will likely continue this "leverage maximization" approach for the indefinite future until Iran and the West return to what should be their natural economic and geopolitical

partnership, which was artificially severed by the many miscalculations made during the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution.