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Russia reaches out to Iran

By M K Bhadrakumar
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A recurring feature of the Russian-Iranian relationship is that it mostly languishes on the horizon but can be trusted to move to the center stage whenever there is a criticality in the Middle East situation. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi made a point recently in an interview with the Russian media when he described Iran as the "most significant neighbor" of Russia, which stands in the way of the Western strategy to encircle Russia.

The message was unmistakable: "You need us more than we need you." To be sure, Russian-Iranian relationship is tiptoeing to the center stage. The steady erosion of the "reset" in the ties between the United States and Russia provides the big backdrop.

Meanwhile, the US-Iran standoff has aggravated lately, calibrated largely by the Jewish lobby in America, which exploits the overall drift in the Barack Obama administration. Other templates are also appearing which draw Moscow and Tehran together - the US's missile defense program, the Turkish question, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, Moscow has hurriedly scheduled an intensive strategic dialogue with Tehran during the coming fortnight. Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev is heading for Tehran next weekend and immediately thereafter Salehi is paying an official visit to Moscow.

It appears that ignoring the US-Israeli protestations, Tehran and Moscow are finally going ahead

with the formal commissioning of the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran built by Russia, drawing to a close a 13-year saga dripping with the geopolitics of the Middle East.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry has confirmed that the agenda of the consultations with Patrushev will include the Iran nuclear issue. Tehran has lately warmed to the Russian proposal for a "phased" approach to resolve the impasse over the nuclear impasse whereby there could be an easing of sanctions in a staged schedule in lieu of steps by Iran to address the international concerns and the unresolved issues with the International Atomic Energy Agency. The Russians are moving on this front on the basis of prior consultations with Washington.

The expectation seems to be that if positive impulses can be generated during Patrushev's consultations in Tehran, follow-up talks during Salehi's visit to Moscow could generate momentum for breaking the deadlock on the nuclear issue. Significantly, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad will be attending the United Nations general assembly session in September in New York.

The Israeli propaganda of a schism within the Iranian regime stands exposed. Tehran's decision to engage Russia on the nuclear issue carries the imprimatur of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. (So indeed, Ahmadinejad's choice of the former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps commander Rostam Qasemi as Iran's new oil minister.)

What is there in it for Moscow? Aside an overall lowering of tensions in the Middle East, Moscow hopes to place itself right in the first circle of a process, which could have positive fallouts for the US-Russia reset. Moscow is doing all it can to forestall Washington from placing the components of the missile defense system in the Black Sea region, especially in Turkey.

Russia's envoy to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Dmitry Rogozin, recently made the allegation while on a visit to Ankara that the anti-ballistic missiles (ABM) deployment in Turkey could be prelude to a US military attack on Iran.

Both Moscow and Tehran are perturbed over the fluidity in the Turkish policies over Syria. The Islamist government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan played a double game - systematically destabilizing Syria and weakening it while professing interest in peaceful democratic reforms; flaunting empathy with the Arab Spring while succumbing to the temptations of "green money" from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Erdogan's future trajectory following the recent crisis with the Turkish army leadership is a question of utmost concern for both Moscow and Tehran. (See [Turkey says farewell to the generals](#), Asia Times Online, August 4.) An uncertain period lies ahead. A Jerusalem Post editorial comment on Wednesday said:

As the prospects for joining the European Union dim, Erdogan clearly aims to shift Turkey's focus toward the Muslim east. With secular opposition parties weakened, Erdogan has also become increasingly autocratic.

In this nation - torn between Westernization and traditional Islam - the unraveling of the Kemalist legacy and the resurgence of Islamist populism at the expense of the military will

reverberate well beyond Turkey's borders. It is a clear and troubling signal - if we are only discerning enough to hear it - that the dissociation of Turkey from the West is already upon us. Russian and Iranian interests would lie in Erdogan pursuing an independent foreign policy course. Erdogan's inclination to allow the deployment of the ABM becomes an acid test of his regional policies. But it is over Syria that Moscow and Tehran have drawn very close. Both voiced support of reforms in Syria and abhorrence of outside interference.

Salehi said last week: "We see the deliberate misrepresentation of the Syrian people's demands by external forces, it is unacceptable ... What we see here is a clear picture of foreign involvement serving colonialist interests ... Syria plays a very important role in the region. It has significant influence in the Middle East, being at the forefront of resistance against the Zionist state. And the pressure currently exerted on Syria is directly related to this country's role in such resistance."

Tehran is pleased that Moscow will not repeat the mistake over Libya in allowing the West to grab the fig leaf of a UN mandate for armed intervention in the conflict. From Iran's viewpoint, Russia's firm stance on Syria is a litmus test of Moscow's grit to hold the ground in the face of US pressure. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said on Monday in an interview in Moscow:

We believe that Syrians should address their problems as part of their domestic agenda. This is an internal civil conflict and it should not be internationalized ... On the other hand, we should learn from our lessons. This refers to the UN resolution on Libya. We are all witness to it and we still see it now - that a number of international players tend to digress from the strict observance of the instruction and the spirit of the resolution.

Again, Moscow appreciates the nuanced role that Iran plays in Iraq - not confrontational with the US and albeit passive or sub-optimal at times, never collaborative with the US. The controlled animation over the US's Iraq predicament is entering a new phase with the Barack Obama administration throwing all pretence to the wind and virtually pleading with Baghdad to allow 10,000 troops to be stationed in that country beyond the December 2011 cut-off date.

Tehran openly and vociferously opposes long-term US military presence in Iraq whereas Russia refrains from voicing strong opinions and seems lost in thought. But neither Russia nor Iran stands to gain from an unstable Middle East and what they seek is an end to the US's cold-war era pre-eminence in the region.

However, Moscow and Tehran have quite some distance to cover to become real partners in a substantive Middle East project.

Simply put, mutual trust and confidence needs to be built in a sustained way. The suspicion is mutual that the other side may covertly strike a deal with Washington. Iran has had unhappy experiences of being a victim of the US-Russia reset. Moscow would wonder whether Iran would have time to spare if a US-Iran normalization does materialize at some point.

Thus, the commissioning of Bushehr assumes importance. Russia balked at the last minute many a time at various stages of the Bushehr project. Moscow would factor in that displeasing Tehran once again at the present juncture could prove injudicious. With the US's policies in the Middle

East in disarray, a political dialogue with Tehran is indeed becoming necessary for Washington at some stage.

The geopolitical reality is that Iran's regional influence is poised to increase. The West's quagmire in Libya and the collapse of its attempts to overthrow the Syrian regime; Turkey's lurch toward Muslim Middle East and the breakdown in its relations with Israel; the collapse of the US-Israeli-Saudi axis and the surge of the Syrian-Iranian axis; US predicaments in Iraq and Afghanistan; Egypt-Iran rapprochement; high probability of UN recognition for Palestinian statehood; and not least of all, China's determination to build a strategic partnership with Iran - all these work to Tehran's advantage.

To add to it, Tehran has now begun a fence-mending with Riyadh and if the International Monetary Fund is to be believed, the Iranian economy is doing well.

Moscow would be aware that any further neglect of the strategic ties with Iran can impact negatively on its Middle East policies. The initiative on the nuclear issue enables Moscow to play back into the game, as it were, and resuscitate the strategic dialogue with Iran.