

Russian-Iranian Relations in the Context of the Tehran Declaration

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Abstract

There has been a marked *volte face* in Russia's position toward the Islamic Republic. This was made clear when at a critical political juncture – namely the watershed agreement on fuel swapping between Brazil, Turkey and Iran – Russia expressed support for the US-led UNSC resolution to impose a fourth round of sanctions against Iran. This paper argues that Russia, a country that has traditionally shielded Iran and weighed down on the US from pressuring her, obstructed the initiative out of economic and geopolitical considerations. Prompted by the eternal quest to restore Russia's former status as a great power, the Kremlin has had to re-evaluate its relationship with Tehran. Moscow is in dire need of foreign investment, advanced technology, and even markets, which requires thawed relations with the US. Moscow is ostensibly dissatisfied with the NATO's eastward encroachment and also needs the US to turn a blind eye to its geopolitical aspirations in the former Soviet space. These considerations require that Russia warm up to the West in general and the US in particular. Incidentally, Obama is offering Russia a carrot – a diplomatic reset – and Moscow is biting the bait. Today, it appears that Russia needs the US more and the Islamic Republic less. However, Russia's about turn suggests that Moscow is conscious that if the nuclear impasse is resolved, Iran would be on its way to becoming a genuine regional power. Furthermore, the Iran-Turkey cooperation axis could also suggest diversification of energy supply routes, breaking Russia's monopoly on gas. With geopolitical considerations and energy politics in the balance, the stakes are higher, explaining why Russia has acted in an increasingly unfriendly manner than Iranians seem to have expected.

Keywords: Russian-Iran Relations, Tehran Declaration, Nuclear Fuel Swap, Relations with West/US, Security Council Resolutions, Energy Politics

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Introduction

Historically, relations between Russia and Iran have been multifaceted and complex, wavering between collaboration and rivalry. Observers find it difficult to get an accurate fix on Russia-Iran relations. Terms like “strategic partner”, “healthy rival” and “natural ally” have been used by observers to qualify the dynamism between the two countries. Perhaps, “ambivalence” is the most suitable term to describe bilateral relations. However, recent unexpectedly critical and even harsh exchanges between Tehran and Moscow following the May Tehran Declaration and the subsequent Security Council sanctions resolution cast new light on a question that analysts and historians have grappled with: Is Russia a friend or a foe? Moscow’s reaction to this watershed agreement and full-fledged support for the Council resolution highlight the underlying drivers that motivate Russia in dealing with Iran. This then begs the question: where are Russia-Iran relations going?

This paper will make the case that there has been a significant downgrade in Russian-Iranian relations. Moscow’s support for the United States-led United Nations Security Council resolution to impose a fourth round of sanctions against Iran allows us to glean an important development: there has been a marked turnabout in Russia’s position vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. We will support this contention by exploring factors that have prompted this sharp turn. However, first, we will provide a brief survey of Russian-Iranian relations in order to support the claim that there has been more change than continuity in bilateral relations.⁽¹⁾

Second, we will examine the implications of the “reset” policy initiated by US President Barack Obama in dealing with Russia. Why has Russia responded favourably to this initiative? Certainly the Kremlin has warmed up to the West by backing the UNSC resolution. We will examine the principles and priorities behind this apparent thaw in Russia-US relations.



Third, we will consider the implications of an Iran-Turkey cooperation axis. The breakthrough reached by Turkey, Brazil and Iran suggests paradigmatic shift in relations between the three countries. The nuclear fuel swap could have potential far-reaching implications, threatening, *inter alia*, Russia's dominance in the energy market that supplies Europe. The rapidly shifting landscape suggests that a new regional energy hub could potentially emerge. This would allow for diversification of energy supply routes, thereby breaking Russia's monopoly on the kingpin of fossil fuels: natural gas. Russia's motives towards Iran are overwhelmingly guided by this new geopolitical calculus, one in which Moscow faces unprecedented competition in energy politics.

We will explore these themes against the backdrop of the May 2010 Tehran Declaration. By weaving together these two perspectives we will achieve a more substantive understanding of why relations have soured between Tehran and Moscow. The premise of this argument is based on the assumption that Russia's calculations and conduct has instigated this downgrade. In this study we attempt to unravel why.

Tehran Declaration

The joint declaration by Iran, Turkey and Brazil on nuclear fuel swapping was a historic turning point. The agreement, brokered by Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazilian President, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, would see the transfer to Turkish custody a large proportion of Iranian stockpile of low enriched uranium within a month, subject to monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran, in return, would be supplied with the more highly-enriched material used in medical isotopes in no more than a year's time. In this way, the myth of an Iranian bomb would be dispensed, and Iran would retain its own control of the mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle.

The response to the deal by the US was hasty and uncompromising: American Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, announced that the US had reached an agreement with the other four permanent UNSC members, including Russia and China, on a draft proposal for the imposition of new, harsher sanctions on Iran. While sending a message to Tehran that it cannot escape sanctions, the US also sent a counterproductive message to Turkey and Brazil: their independent diplomacy –



even if purportedly prodded on if not outright prompted by the US [Obama's letter to Lula] – was unwelcome interference and would be ignored. Washington's definitely hasty reaction to the fuel swap was somewhat unexpected – aside from the three Tehran Declaration signatories, the general expectation had been that the US and the 5+1 would give it at least the benefit of doubt and assume a “let's wait and see” attitude. However an interesting twist occurred in this tale. After what appeared to be a foreign policy watershed, Russia, traditionally regarded as an Iranian ally (albeit a mercurial one) consented to a UNSC draft resolution calling for quite strong and expanded sanctions to force Tehran to halt the uranium enrichment programme.

Between friend and foe

When Vladimir Putin took office first as Russian Prime Minister in 1999 and then as President in 2000, he inherited a strong Russian-Iranian relationship from his predecessor Boris Yeltsin. While there have been a number of ups and downs in bilateral relations, for Tehran, Moscow has been the closest thing to an “ally” in the Middle East, both under Yeltsin and under Putin. In particular, since 2003 when the Iranian nuclear dossier became an issue at the IAEA and subsequently at the UNSC, Russia actively fostered the impression that it would guard Iran against US pressure. For example, despite voting in favour of UNSC resolutions in 2006, 2007 and 2008, Russia blocked further punitive action against Iran in September 2008, even after the IAEA alleged that Iran failed to cooperate. Russia also refused to participate in a 5+1 meeting in 2008 to discuss levelling additional sanctions against Iran. Moscow publicly supported Tehran's right to peaceful nuclear technology and helped supply materials and expertise to build the Bushehr nuclear plant.

In March 2009 Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev claimed that he would cooperate with Obama on the Iranian nuclear issue, yet a month earlier he had also discussed negotiating a 10-year fuel supply deal with Iran to fuel the Bushehr nuclear power plant.⁽²⁾ Medvedev defended Iran in an interview with Italian media in July 2009, arguing that problems associated with Iran's nuclear programme were significantly different from those caused by North Korea's programme. He asserted that Iran's programme was less disconcerting than North Korea's “because, whereas Iran is communicating with the international community, North Korea has



now virtually cut all of its contacts.”⁽³⁾

Echoing Medvedev’s views, Russian Energy Minister, Sergei Shmatko stated in July 2009 that it is “much better to cooperate with Iran in construction of nuclear power plants” in order to ensure the transparency of Iran’s nuclear programme. Shmatko went on to say that Iran’s nuclear energy sector represented a “significant market” for Russia.⁽⁴⁾ In March 2010, while Clinton visited Russia, Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov clashed publicly after Lavrov announced that Russia would complete a nuclear power plant in Iran by the summer of 2010.⁽⁵⁾ Clinton argued “we think it would be premature to go forward with any project at this time, because we want to send an unequivocal message to the Iranians.”⁽⁶⁾ Lavrov responded that the project would definitely be completed.

Also in March, a top Russian Foreign Ministry official announced that Russian and Chinese envoys pressed the Iranian government to accept a UN plan on uranium enrichment in Tehran in early March. He added, “Russia would consider supporting sanctions tailored to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, though it is certainly against any paralyzing sanctions that are aimed not at non-proliferation but at punishing Iran or, God forbid, regime change.”⁽⁷⁾ Russia also explained its reluctance to impose sanctions on Iran due to the historic ties between the two countries; namely that they are “economic and cultural partners, as well as neighbours on the Caspian Sea.”⁽⁸⁾

In late March 2010 the climate began to change as senior diplomats from Britain, the US, France, Germany, China and Russia agreed that they should press for a new round of sanctions against Tehran.⁽⁹⁾ Medvedev expressed support for the US-led push to impose sanctions on Iran stating, “We cannot turn a blind eye to this.”⁽¹⁰⁾ In April, the 5+1 held a second round of talks concerning new sanctions against Iran. Russian and Chinese United Nations ambassadors both noted that there would be more talks in the near future. Finally in May, the 5+1 reached a new agreement regarding sanctions against Iran. Remarkably, the new round of sanctions – endorsed by Russia – came after Turkey and Brazil brokered the nuclear swap deal with Iran. Rather than support the nuclear fuel exchange proposition, Russia turned its back on Iran.

Tehran’s reaction was swift: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad quickly rebuked Medvedev asserting: “Today, explaining the behaviour of Medvedev toward the



nation of Iran is very difficult for us... the people of Iran do not know if the Russians are our friends or are against us.” He advised President Medvedev to speak with more caution and forethought about “such a large and capable nation as Iran.” He went on to warn Obama that the Tehran Declaration represented a “historic opportunity for him” should he genuinely want “change” – and an opportunity to begin respecting the rights of other nations and to abandon wrong and inhumane policies, treating other countries instead with justice and fairness.⁽¹¹⁾ The comments rapidly generated condemnation from Moscow. Chairman of the International Affairs Committee in the Russian Parliament, Konstantin Kosachev, said he was “disappointed by today’s quite harsh statement by Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad about the Russian and US presidents.”⁽¹²⁾ Medvedev’s foreign policy advisor Sergei Prikhodko witheringly scolded the Iranian Chief Executive that “political demagoguery” never worked.⁽¹³⁾

Russia’s reaction to the watershed deal was unexpected. Rajab Safarov, director of the Centre for Contemporary Iranian Studies in Moscow argues: “Never in modern history has there been such an aggravation in relations between Russia and Iran.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Russia’s balancing act

Since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic has systematically cultivated an increasingly close partnership with post-Soviet Russia that has been characterized in many quarters, in Iran and elsewhere, as “strategic” partnership or even alliance. Of course, for many Iranians, there is heavy historical baggage attached to relations with Russia and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, from an Iranian perspective, Russia would provide the counterbalance to American hegemony in the post-Cold War world – an important strategic consideration given ongoing US antagonism toward the Islamic Republic.

From a Russian perspective, Iran has been a market for sales of conventional weaponry and civil nuclear technology. Iran has also been a constructive partner for Russia on regional security issues in Central and South Asia, taking what could be described as “pro-Russian” stance on a number of regional conflicts since the early days of the post-Cold War period.

In addition, Russia has worked hard to present itself as a potential partner in



the development of Iran's energy resources. In 1997, Russia's state-owned energy company, Gazprom, became one of the first foreign energy companies to invest in the development of the South Pars gas field (in a joint venture with Total and Petronas). After Vladimir Putin became President of the Russian Federation in 2001, Gazprom and the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Petroleum formed a joint committee to coordinate Iranian gas exports with Russia. The Russian government provided early political support for a planned gas pipeline from Iran to Pakistan and India, while Gazprom offered technical support and even indicated its willingness to help finance the project.

Just a few years ago, Russian-Iranian relations seemed to be headed toward even closer strategic cooperation. For instance, in an important symbolic statement, in 2007 Putin became the first non-Muslim head of state or government to be received by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Yet, since Dmitry Medvedev replaced Putin as President of the Russian Federation in 2008 (with Putin becoming Prime Minister), the limits on Russia's willingness to act in strategic partnership with the Islamic Republic have become increasingly apparent.

As we shall explain later in the paper, it has become clear, for example, that Moscow's willingness to support Iran's emergence as a gas exporter is ultimately conditioned by Russia's own position as the world's leading producer and exporter of natural gas – a position which, among other things, gives Russia an especially strong interest in forestalling direct competition with prospective Iranian gas exports to European energy markets, where Gazprom is established as the leading foreign gas supplier.

More broadly, Moscow's still compelling need to balance its interest in closer ties to Tehran against other important foreign policy interests – including relations with Washington – has regularly frustrated Iranian efforts to maximize the strategic and economic gains from cooperation with Russia. Over the last 20 years, Russia has been willing on a number of occasions to curtail its arms exports to Iran in exchange for concessions from the US. Likewise, in response to American pressure, Russia stepped back from commitments to provide the Islamic Republic with uranium enrichment and reprocessing technologies. Political developments since the June 2009 presidential elections appear to point in the direction of growing



weariness among various Iranian political currents (including much of the populace) with Russia's antics. The public's chants of "Death to Russia" in the course of popular demonstrations during the past year are a clear reflection of such sentiments in Iran, which could perhaps explain why – amongst other things – Moscow has taken obvious steps to distance itself from the current administration in Tehran.

Russia's toing and froing is most apparent in its approach to the Iranian nuclear issue. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Russian leaders have been intent on constraining a unilateral resort to military force against Iranian nuclear targets by the US or Israel. To this end, Moscow has a strong interest in keeping the Iranian nuclear issue in the UNSC – where Russia, as a permanent member, has considerable influence – rather than having the US deal with the issue independently through something like an *ad hoc* "coalition of the willing" that would almost certainly not include Russia. Therefore, Moscow has never been prepared to use its veto to give Iran wholesale protection from Security Council sanctions. Instead, on four occasions, Russia has supported resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programme, while also working diplomatically to water down the measures actually authorized – that is, the language and measures with specific negative repercussions for Russian economy and enterprises – and to ensure that nothing in these resolutions could be construed by Washington as authorizing the use of force. Myriad reports and analyses since the adoption of the recent Council resolution indicate that the Russians have been quite active in diluting sanction measures affecting them directly. Paradoxically, the same analyses indicate that Russian authorities have been instrumental in crafting a preamble paragraph in the resolution with dubious implications for possible future use of military force!

This begs the question: does Russia genuinely want to see a diplomatic resolution to Iran's nuclear issue? Another point to note is that if diplomatic progress is achieved, it would most probably go hand in hand with a substantial measure of US-Iranian rapprochement. While Russia clearly opposes US (or Israeli) military strikes against Iranian nuclear targets, Moscow has never pushed Washington to offer Tehran substantive security guarantees or other strategic incentives that could facilitate productive nuclear discussions. Washington's failure



to pursue effective diplomacy with Tehran creates a workable paradigm for Russia. Interestingly enough, Tehran's consistent policy during the past three decades of choosing not to talk to – let alone deal – with Washington has in fact put itself in a tight corner with limited options and the inevitable, undesirable position of relying exclusively on Moscow, and to a lesser degree, on Beijing. The US may engage just enough to forestall a destabilizing military confrontation with Iran, but not enough to achieve real rapprochement – which could, among other things, undermine Moscow's exclusivity and strategic value to Tehran and unleash Iranian gas to compete directly with Russian gas exports.

To the extent that Moscow has proposed specific solutions to the nuclear issue since 2003, these solutions have emphasized Iranian participation in multilateral fuel-cycle centres, centres that would be based, conveniently enough, in Russia. In October 2009, the US, France and Russia struck a multilateral nuclear fuel deal with Iran stipulating that Iran would export more than 1,200kg of its 3.5 per cent low-enriched uranium to Russia for refining to 20 per cent purity to fuel the Tehran Research Reactor that makes medical isotopes. France would then turn it into fuel rods. The fissile material would be in a form that would be difficult to turn into weapons-grade uranium.⁽¹⁵⁾ Russia's support for the proposal was self-serving: the arrangement would have given Russia an enhanced role while simultaneously circumscribing the development of Iran's indigenous fuel-cycle capabilities. Following a general consent by the Iranian team attending the Geneva meeting, headed by Saeed Jalili, Iran's Chief Nuclear Negotiator, doubts abounded in Iran which appeared to be mostly emanating from domestic political considerations and rivalries, and the deal fell through. Subsequent Iranian pronouncements portending a softer line with a possible compromising formula of sorts failed to receive any meaningful response from the other side. For example, in late November 2009, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast told reporters that although Tehran was not opposed to sending its low-enriched uranium abroad for further enrichment, Iran wanted a 100 percent guarantee that there would be a simultaneous exchange for fuel for its nuclear reactor on Iranian soil.⁽¹⁶⁾ Emphasis on the "Iranian venue" – even Kish Island, as was indicated in other pronouncements – seemed to forestall any progress on the original deal, until the deal with Turkey and Brazil could be put together in May.



The new Russia profile

Moscow's willingness to move ahead with a fourth round of UN sanctions against Islamic Republic even after Brazil and Turkey had brokered a similar fuel-swap deal in Tehran should prompt re-evaluation of Iran's posture toward Russia. Iran must understand that the so-called "strategic partnership" – if as indicated previously it ever existed as such – with Russia is highly constrained, and perhaps a thing of the past. In the view of this author, it would best to describe Russia's allegiance to Iran as "conditional". Russia has no friends or enemies, only interests – as the old British dictum goes or as by conventional wisdom any state or country would or should be pursuing. This constitutes the foundation of Russia's foreign policy. In order to defend this claim, we need to determine the drivers, priorities and incentives behind Russia's changing behaviour toward the Islamic Republic. Russia's new political orientation is very much dictated by new geopolitical and economic considerations. Let us glean through recent developments in order to draw more substantive insights.

Just three years ago, Putin was warning that the US was trying to become "the one single master" of the world as he blasted NATO for "creeping up to Russia's borders." He also commissioned a revision of Russia history textbooks to glorify the role of Stalin, alarming the world with the suggestion that a rehabilitation of the Soviet dictator was imminent. These days, he sings a very different tune: in April 2010 Putin admitted the brutality of Stalin's regime as he stood side by side with Poland's prime minister at Katyn, where Soviet troops executed 20, 000 Polish officers in 1940.

Putin's softness of tone does not reflect any softening of his overriding goal: to restore Russia's great power status. What has changed is that for the first time in a decade the world is finally going Putin's way. In his term as president, from 2000 to 2008, Putin fought to defend what he regarded as Russia's rightful sphere of influence. Poland was seeking to become a base for US anti-missile defences and the Ukraine and Georgia were determined to join NATO. Georgia sought to throw Russian troops out of its breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Now the Obama administration has backed off plans to station missile-defence batteries in Poland and the Czech Republic; NATO membership is off the



table in Ukraine, owing to the victory of a pro-Moscow president; and Russia has effectively annexed the northern territories of Georgia as a result of its 2008 invasion. NATO has even offered to include Russia in European missile-defence plans. Only last month Putin signed a deal extending Russia's lease on its naval base in Sevastopol, Ukraine, long the home of Russia's controversial Black Sea fleet. Putin has also strengthened Russia's energy dominance of Europe, inking agreements and deals on the South Stream pipeline, delivering Russian gas directly to Bulgaria and Central Europe.

Against this backdrop, the US no longer looks so threatening to Russian interests. Thus, Putin, Medvedev and the Russian elite can afford to accept Obama's offer to "reset" bilateral relations. Obama, in the words of Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's ambassador to NATO, is "a young, modern thinker" who has worked to defuse Russian fears that the US wants to lure away Russia's former allies through colour revolutions. Thus, the geopolitical tug of war seems to be water under the bridge.

However, Russia's new friendliness is also driven by another important factor: foreign cash. The Russian elite believe that an essential condition for maintaining power is the success of Russia's economy. Today, this translates into closer relations with the US and Europe, which encourages Russian leaders to accept at least some of the demands that Washington and its allies have put to Moscow, including Iran's nuclear programme. By drawing closer to the West, Russia hopes to extend the country's economic and strategic reach.

Igor Sechin, Putin's former right-hand man at the Kremlin, chairman of Rosneft, and a leading figure among the *siloviki* (former Soviet military, security and intelligence officers who assumed a dominant role in the reassertion of state influence during Putin's leadership) explains "the [global economic] crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of the Russian economy in its dependence on certain types of raw materials. This cannot help but concern us."⁽¹⁷⁾ The fact is that Russia's Putin-era boom was founded on oil money, but most Russian companies actually grew on cheap capital borrowed from the West amounting to \$450 billion. That well has now dried up. In early 2010, Russia's Ministry of Economic Development calculated that between now and 2013 Russia will require about \$1 trillion in order to implement plans to restore infrastructure (roads, railways, schools and hospitals)



and the budget cannot cover more than a third of that sum. A \$150 billion stabilization fund set up during boom years will run out by the end of 2011. Clearly, the Kremlin has realized that Russia cannot develop and modernise without foreign investment.

Let us not forget that in 2008 the price of oil hit \$146 a barrel, double today's levels, and the Kremlin was inundated with a windfall. Dmitri Trenin of the Moscow Carnegie Center states, "The economic crisis has eliminated the hubris that marked the end of the Putin presidency." He adds "If you accept that unless you modernize, you are marginalized, and if you accept that you can't modernize on your own ... then your foreign policy is quite clear. You need to reach out to developed countries that can become resources for your modernization."⁽¹⁸⁾

Russia seems to be taking this advice, devoting much energy to rallying foreign investment. According to Duma Deputy, Sergei Markov, a close member of Putin's team for more than a decade, "90 percent of Putin's *démarche* to the West is because Russia cannot modernize without Western specialists and technologies." The other 10 percent is driven by the fact that "Putin needs the West to fight the threat of radical Islam that Russia is facing" both inside its own borders in the form of ongoing insurgencies in the North Caucasus and Islamist radicals in Central Asia.⁽¹⁹⁾

In the wake of these developments, Russia seems to need the US more and Iran a little bit less. In the recent past, collaboration with Iran was important to Russia for psychological reasons. Partnership and cooperation with Iran represented Russia's independence from the West. Back in 2004, Putin suffered a number of embarrassing failures, both internally and externally. The debacle in Beslan demonstrated just how far Putin was from neutralising the situation in Chechnya, and the pro-western 'Orange Revolution' in the Ukraine in November and December 2004, indicating the defection of Russia's most important CIS neighbour, underscored the weaknesses of Russian foreign policy. Putin realised that he had to demonstrate Russia's continuing importance in world affairs and reinforcing his alliance with Iran was his version of an 'I did it my way' scenario. Today, Russia does not need to prove its independent national strategy.

However, Russia does have a significant interest in preserving ties to Iran. Even after supporting the fourth draft resolution, Putin and other Russian officials



publicly reaffirmed Russia's commitment to bring the Bushehr nuclear power plant on line. Nevertheless, this has little to do with loyalty. Rather, Iran is an "economic space" that Russia wants to dominate. Russian business interests have been able to gain opportunities for trade with and investment in Iran that they might not have obtained had they had to compete with the American and other Western business. This brings us to another important consideration: Russia has gained enormously from US-Iranian hostility. The US has blocked Iran from serving as a corridor for Caspian Basin oil and gas, and has discouraged Europe from developing and buying gas from Iran. As a result, Russia has benefited from more Azeri and Central Asian oil and gas flowing through pipelines into Russia (thus allowing Moscow to both reap transit revenue and exercise political leverage) than would have occurred had Iranian routes been available. These advantages would be lost if an Iranian-America rapprochement occurs.⁽²⁰⁾

These are the considerations that motivated Russia to distance itself from the triumph of the May Tehran Declaration. In the view of this author, all things considered, Russia was uncomfortable with the Tehran Declaration not for substantive reasons but because Moscow was fundamentally uneasy about Iran's emergence as a regional power – on its borders. On the greater international level, Russia identifies the new Iran-Turkey-Brazil axis as a potential problem for its own position. Russia and China, like the other permanent Security Council members, will not concede their monopoly on supervising unconventional weapons so easily. Beyond this, Russia wants to prevent Turkey from assuming Russia's role and becoming the mediator vis-à-vis Iran. In fact, Russia feels highly threatened by potential Turkish-Iranian cooperation on energy transport, which would jeopardize Russia's monopoly on supplying Europe with gas. We shall explore this angle further in the study.

Russian reset or roulette?

It has become transparent that during the past few months there has been a marked shift in Russia's position toward Iran owing to a series of considerations we have identified above. This repositioning has a lot to do with Obama's less hawkish stance toward Russia. The question is how real is this thaw in US-Russian relations? Is this a genuine trend? Will there really be a long-term qualitative shift and how



does Iran feature in this equation? Optimists in Washington seem to think so, arguing that Russia's gesture on the nuclear dossier was evidence of Moscow's readiness to work constructively with the US. The Kremlin, they maintain, is finally willing to support Obama's administration. Russia's seemingly not-so-reluctant consent with and active support of the resolution is being trumpeted as a triumph of Obama's *reset* diplomacy. In the view of this author, the reason behind Russia's *volte-face* has little to do with patience or support. It is not in Russian character to experience such diplomatic epiphanies. Russia is neither a friend of the East nor of the West. Russia is only Russia's friend – as reason, conventional wisdom, or the cruel imperatives of Realpolitik would dictate.

By taking a closer look at Russia's behaviour in the recent past it becomes clear that Russia has responded to the Obama administration in the same ways it did to the administration of George W. Bush. That is, before the so-called *reset*. In fact, Moscow has been playing this game for years. It has sold the same rug many times but the only difference is the price.⁽²¹⁾ As anyone who ever shopped for a rug knows, the more you pay for it, the more valuable it seems. The Obama administration has paid a lot in exchange for Russian cooperation on a wide gamut of issues and situations, including the Iranian nuclear dossier.

As we mentioned above, Obama has eradicated the Bush administration's planned missile defence installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. What is more, Obama has officially declared that Russia's continued military occupation of parts of Georgia is no obstacle to US-Russian civilian nuclear cooperation. The recent deal between Russia and Ukraine granting Russia control of a Crimean naval base through 2042 was shrugged off by Obama officials, as have been Vladimir Putin's suggestions for merging Russian and Ukrainian industries in a blatant bid to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. The effect of this *reset* has been to produce a wave of insecurity throughout Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltics where people are starting to fear they can no longer count on the US to protect them from an expansive Russia.

As the story of Russia's consent to the draft resolution broke, it became apparent that the US had thrown in some last-minute deal *sweeteners*. The Washington Post reported: "The Obama administration failed to win approval for key proposals it had sought, including restrictions on Iran's lucrative oil trade, a



comprehensive ban on financial dealings with the Guard Corps and a US-backed proposal to halt new investment in the Iranian energy sector.⁽²²⁾ In addition, the Obama administration revealed it had ended sanctions against four Russian entities involved in weapons trade with Iran and Syria since 1999. It also emerged that the draft included a loophole that would exempt a 2005 Russian deal, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars, to sell Tehran five S300 surface-to-air missile systems capable of intercepting ballistic missiles and aircraft, making them particularly valuable in the event of an Israeli air attack. Notwithstanding, a series of originally contradictory pronouncements with regard to the missile system presented a confusing picture of where Moscow stood on the case. Apparently the defensive system is not included in the list of the sanctions enlisted in the resolution, and the early statements by Moscow officials highlighted this. Later, however, while drawing attention to this aspect, Russian authorities (inclusive of Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov), made it clear that Moscow would not deliver the system, which tends to reflect the efficacy of the Israeli lobby with the Russians and has proved reassuring both to Washington and Tel Aviv.⁽²³⁾ In late September, Russia issued a statement firmly ruling out the sale of S300's to Iran. Furthermore, Medvedev's statement at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in June 2010 (from which Ahmadinejad shied away) against the Iranian application for membership because Iran is under Security Council sanctions is clearly reflective of the substance of the Russian *volte face*.⁽²⁴⁾

The list goes on. Russian officials had complained about the sanctions against the entities, one of which (Russia's state arms exporter, Rosoboronexport) was sanctioned for its dealings with the Islamic Republic in 2006 and 2008. Sanctions were also lifted on the Moscow Aviation Institute, sanctioned in 1999 for providing military technology to Iran; the D. Mendeleyev University of Chemical Technology of Russia, sanctioned in 1999 for aiding Iran's missile programme; and the Tula Instrument Design Bureau, sanctioned the same year for supplying antitank equipment to Syria. Though US officials for weeks had confidently said they had secured Russian support for action against Iran, Moscow raised its demands for an end to the sanctions only a few days after agreeing to the draft resolution.⁽²⁵⁾

This was an expensive deal for the US, but it begs the question: in return for what? History is bound to repeat itself: Moscow's approach to the UNSC



resolutions of the past can shed light on the essence of Russia's character and behaviour. In 2007 after months of negotiation, the US finally convinced Russia to consent to a resolution tightening sanctions on Iran. Senior Russian officials made strong statements about Iran's nuclear programme that they had long refused to make. The Russian ambassador to the UN declared that Iran was obliged to cease enrichment. In the eyes of the Americans, this was considered a triumph. In fact, this 2007 "breakthrough" came after a similar 'breakthrough' in 2006, when months of negotiations with Moscow had produced the first watered-down resolution.

Both were followed in 2008 by yet another "breakthrough" when the Bush administration convinced Moscow to agree to a third resolution after more negotiations. All of this vacillation failed to yield substantive results, and whilst Bush declared that he had seen into Putin's soul, there was much left to be desired in winning genuine Russian support in the UNSC against Iran. Given this history, few accomplishments have been more oversold than the Obama administration's success in getting Russia to agree – for the fourth time in five years – to yet another UNSC resolution. It remains to be seen whether this latest agreement has greater meaning than the previous three. The fact is that the Russians have not said or done anything in the past months that they did not do or say during the Bush years, except that they were much more circumspect in divulging the essence of the policy as contrasted with the recent episode when the Russians – and for that matter, Iranians – seem to have left the gloves off.

The reality is that by nature Russian interests will always diverge from those of the US. To Russia, Iran may not be a real "partner", however it has been a de facto ally when it comes to Moscow's plans to reshape the power balance in the Middle East and to dilute US influence in the region. Russia and Iran will always be united by a shared national interest - limiting US hegemony in world affairs. Moscow and Tehran share, and will continue to share, the goal of fostering a more multipolar world. This objective will always constitute the main pillar of bilateral relations, regardless of diplomatic resets or global economic crises. The US should expect only token assistance from Russia in countering what the so-called "Iranian nuclear threat".⁽²⁶⁾ Again what is important to note are Russia's interests in the *longue durée*: reclaiming Russia's status in the global strategic calculus and positioning the pawns on the chessboard to that effect.



Energy rivalry: natural gas

Russia may view Iran as an ally when it comes to curbing US world dominance, but the Kremlin is categorically ill at ease with Iran's role in the regional dynamics of the gas market. This factor can explain why Russia tried to indirectly obstruct the fuel swap agreement. It is not in Russia's interest to back processes that would promote Iran's international integration. Russia does not want competition in the energy market. The fact is that with its vast reserves of natural gas, Iran is an inherent competitor to Russia. Arguably less well positioned than Iran to supply both Europe and China, Russia is nevertheless a major player and has been assiduously courting China with an export deal since 2006. However, negotiations between the two countries have been on and off and pipeline construction has been slow. Russia's ambitions to expand its natural gas exports can explain why it has shown itself to be such a fair-weather friend to Iran. Moscow's reaction to the fourth draft resolution suggests all too clearly that Russia has its own agenda for hampering Iran as a regional energy rival.

The China National Petroleum Company's (CNPC) involvement in Iran's South Pars gas field can serve as an explanation of much wider geopolitical developments. The \$5 billion project - signed in 2009 after years of foot dragging by Western energy giants Total and Shell under the shadow of US-led sanctions - reveals the main arterial system for future world energy supply and demand.

With the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US had set sights, among others, on gaining control of the Central Asian energy corridor. The focus was on oil. However, the CNPC-Iranian partnership reveals that natural gas will be even more pivotal to the world economy: specifically, the dual flow of this fuel westwards and eastwards from Central Asia to Europe and China. In fact, the rising importance of natural gas as an energy source has been steady and inexorable over many years. All energy industry agencies agree that the premier sources of future natural gas are the Middle East and Eurasia, including Russia. The US-based Energy Information Administration puts the natural gas reserves in these regions as nine and seven times those of North America's total - the latter itself being one of the world's top sources for that fuel.

Within the Middle East, Iran is one of the main holders of gas reserves. Its



South Pars gas field is the world's largest. If converted to barrel-of-oil equivalents, Iran's South Pars would dwarf the reserves of Saudi Arabia's giant Ghawar oilfield. The latter is the world's largest oilfield and since it came into operation in 1948, Ghawar has effectively been the world's beating heart for raw energy supply. In the imminent era of natural gas dominance over oil, Iran will oust Saudi Arabia as the world's nucleus for energy.

Both Europe and China stand to be arterial routes for Iranian and Central Asian gas generally. The infrastructure reflects this: the 3,300-kilometre (2,050 mile) Nabucco pipeline is planned to supply gas from Iran (and Azerbaijan) via Turkey and Bulgaria all the way to Western Europe. While outside pressure – presumably from the US – has prevented Iran from joining the Nabucco pipeline, Turkey in particular has reiterated its support for the idea of delivering Iran's gas to Europe through the pipeline. Nabucco, once operational, will effectively break Russia's monopoly as Europe's sole gas supplier and put an end to Russian dominance.

In addition, Iran also exports gas via pipelines separately to Turkey and Armenia and it is also following up export deals with other Persian Gulf countries, including the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Another major arterial route is the so-called "Peace Pipeline" from Iran to Pakistan and on to India. Notwithstanding its extremely long and roller-coaster period of gestation and the persisting ifs and buts, the Peace Pipeline could give Iran the potentiality to export gas to two of the region's most populous countries. However, as in other energy-related pipelines in the area, the pernicious element of outside politics and pressure can hardly be underestimated.

Even more important for Iran is the 1,865-kilometre pipeline that supplies natural gas from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan into China, due to operate in 2012. Turkmenistan shares a 300-kilometre border with Iran to its south and already has a gas export deal with Tehran. If the Iranian-Chinese South Pars gas field development can be incorporated into the above trans-national pipelines, Iran would become the hub of a world economy in which gas is the primary energy source. This is amplified further by China's rising demand – a country that EIA predicts could be dependent on imports for over one third of its natural gas consumption by 2030.

In this context of a major realignment in the world's energy economy there



will be a diminished role for the US and also for Russia. In so far as the future energy market is concerned, Russia's ostensible blessing for the US-driven UNSC resolution can be seen as an attempt to conceal its fear of facing greater competition in the energy market. Pressuring Iran with further sanctions, and attempting to undermine the Tehran Declaration are part of a last-minute effort to cut up the energy arteries of a world economy that Russia, and for that matter, the US, will no longer be able to dominate.

All the evidence suggests that Russia has little interest in supporting initiatives that would improve Tehran's international image and subsequent integration. However, as we underscored above, it is important to note that by acting as such toward Tehran does not suggest that Moscow is being a friend of Washington's. Russia's love-hate relationship with Iran is convenient: it allows Moscow to endear herself to Tehran and in the process manipulate the US and Europe. Concessions such as building the Bushehr nuclear power plant – whose repeated delays in completion has irked Iranians and even created open political fissures in Iran on the matter – or threatening to sell S300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran – which is now practically off the table – have been tactics Russia has used to capture Washington's attention. It may of interest to note that certain political currents – mostly of critical/reform tendency – have argued that the Bushehr plant will not be completed until and unless the nuclear dossier is resolved in its entirety, a view strongly challenged by the government authorities who have kept announcing specific dates for the plant to come on line – the latest of which is set for late summer 2010. Given the recent fuelling of the plant amid much Iranian fanfare, one would wonder whether the promised full operation represents part of an international [read US-Russian] agreement paving the way for a major turnabout in the dossier or not. This notwithstanding, there is little doubt that Russia may appear willing to grant small concessions to Iran, but its overriding interest is to keep Washington's focus on Tehran. The more distracted the US, the more room Russia has to cement its dominance in the former Soviet space and to keep Europe's energy needs under its thumb. If the US were to reach an understanding with Tehran and rely more heavily on an ally like Turkey to tend to issues in the Islamic world (as it has with Tehran Declaration), then it can turn to the pressing geopolitical issue of how to undermine Russian leverage in Eurasia.



Turkey: rival and regional soft-power broker?

Russia's reaction to the Tehran Declaration and its effort to hamper the initiative through support for the US-led draft resolution is very much conditioned by Moscow's perceptions of Turkey's objectives in the region. Russia has much apprehension over Ankara's role as a broker, which it interprets as Turkey's broader strategy to become an energy corridor between the East and the West. The fact is that Turkey is situated at a pivotal geographic intersection possessing three-fourths of the total oil and natural gas reserves in the world. Many Russians are bound to assume that Turkey has used the Iran deal as a platform for Ankara's long-term energy strategy. The argument is that using geography and non-European/cultural affinity, otherwise known as "soft-power", Turkey has used geostrategic advantage to establish itself as the gateway between the energy-rich countries and primary energy users. There may be some truth to this reading of Turkey's brokerage in Iran's nuclear standoff with the West, but there are other variables in this geopolitical equation.

For one, Turkey needs to diversify its energy imports in order to meet domestic demand and to maximise its energy security. Turkey is reliant on Russia as its main energy supplier and constitutes a very lucrative market for Russia. One third of Turkey's oil needs and more than 70 per cent of its gas currently come from Russia. The Blue Stream project in particular, which runs across the Black Sea, fastened this link between both countries. Completed in 2005, it transports gas to Turkey with an annual capacity of 16 billion cubic metres. Whilst secondary sources exist in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (and the Turkish government is keen to explore them), it will take a couple of years until they have been developed to accommodate Turkey's domestic energy requirements. Marc Herzog argues that the existence of the fully functional Blue Stream pipeline has allowed Russia, at least for the short-term future, to corner the Turkish market.⁽²⁷⁾

Turkey's relationship with Russia at the international level is conditioned by Turkey's domestic reliance on Russian energy exports. Thus, Turkey's foreign policy needs to ensure not to be out of line with Russian interests. However, at an international level, there is the potential for bilateral competition or divergence, which also becomes intertwined with the energy interests of the EU, which itself, is



anxiously attempting to diversify the sources of its domestic energy. On this last note, Turkey has made no secret of its ambitions to make the most of its location to become a broker between the Caspian region and consumer markets in Europe. This was well illustrated with the completion in 2005 of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey. Turkey's long-term plans to emerge as a regional energy player are caught between the opposing objectives of the EU and Russia. With the North Sea oil and gas deposits in definite decline, the EU is desperate to diversify its energy sources in an effort to weaken its reliance on a Russia that has become increasingly more assertive on the international stage. This is also one of the major motives behind the EU's determination to build the Nabucco project despite its huge financial cost.

Russia, however, is intent on keeping the EU reliant on its energy reserves for the near future and is betting on rival projects to counter EU attempts to find alternative sources. South Stream, a pipeline project that would bring Russian gas into Italy and Austria over Bulgaria, met with Turkish approval in August 2010 when Putin met his Turkish counterpart in Ankara on a state visit. Nevertheless, projects like the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and Nabucco reveal that Turkey is not binding itself solely to Russia on the plane of energy politics and that there is ample potential for future competition in this crucial field – if, interestingly enough, Iran could be kept out of them, for one reason or another and through never-ending “cheap tactics.” An example would be the decision, in late August 2010, to shelve a plan to source gas from Iran to Europe via the Nabucco gas pipeline given Iran's “political situation.” The European-backed Nabucco consortium cited that they had reached this decision owing to “international laws and regulations.”⁽²⁸⁾

Turkey's foreign policy has become increasingly adept in recent years in being able to juggle and reconcile relations between seemingly adversarial international actors such as Syria and Israel or the US and Iran. This new-found skill will be in much demand in order for Turkey to manage its bigger strategic political goal of becoming a major regional player as well as an energy transit hub. The recent Gaza flotilla incident clearly underscores Turkey's effort to assert itself more boldly. Turkey's involvement in the affair sent out a clear message: the West cannot afford to ignore Turkey.

On this subject, Con Coughlin writes, “Certainly the West cannot afford to



ignore Turkey's disturbing involvement in the whole [flotilla] affair. Its geographical location alone makes it imperative that it remains a close and valued ally, and is not allowed to drift to the wilder shores of Islamist extremism".⁽²⁹⁾ Albeit narrow-minded, such a reading of Turkey's activism, following Ankara's initiative to defuse Iran's nuclear crisis is telling. Such an interpretation of Turkey's role in sensitive regional issues can explain why EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, Catherine Ashton recently conceded: "Turkey has recently started to become more assertive in its foreign policy. We welcome the increasingly important role of Turkey in the region. In this context we will also look at the ways in which the EU and Turkey can enhance cooperation".⁽³⁰⁾ The implications of this statement are far-reaching: Turkey is assiduously carving its own place on the international political map.

What emerges is a rather disquieting prospect for Russian strategists. Turkey's prime geographical location, the politics of alternative gas pipelines, the potential for collaboration with Iran, the substantive upgrade in Ankara's role in the region (including its objective of becoming a regional energy hub), suggests that Russia may face stiffer competition for definitive control of the Caspian region's energy resources.

Conclusions

The day after the nuclear fuel swap agreement was signed between Iran, Turkey, and Brazil, the Security Council's permanent members, including Russia, signed a proposed resolution to impose sanctions against Iran. One month later, the fuel swap agreement was simply pushed out of the immediate radar with the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1929. Iran's repeated pronouncements as to the continued willingness to pursue the deal have all but fallen on deaf ears. Whether the deal will take shape once negotiations resume between Iran and 5+1 as of September – as indicated by all sides – is yet to be seen.

Russia's support for the UNSC resolution took Iran by surprise. Taken aback by the speed and force of the reaction, Tehran finds itself dealing with a Russia that is increasingly difficult to read. This paper has attempted to glean the following insight: Russia's reaction to the Tehran Declaration explains why in dealing with Iran in the recent decade, Russia has invariably taken one step forward and two



steps back. What has become patently clear is that Russia's political manoeuvring with Iran is based squarely on the former's self-interest.

The argument here, while openly critical of the Russian behaviour towards the Islamic Republic as of late, does not, however, intend to suggest that a paradigmatic or conceptual shift of an irreversible nature has occurred in Russian-Iranian relations. Rather, the focus has been on this particular chapter to shed more light on a relationship dynamic that has been difficult to describe. What has become transparent is that the Moscow has placed a ceiling on relations with Tehran. Thus, at the very most, bilateral relations can be described as *conditional*. Back in January 2007 I was of the view that "For all intents and purposes, Russia may succumb to lucrative dividends or benefits in the future, and turn its back on the Iranians."⁽³¹⁾ In retrospect, that seems to have been corroborated. Now with economic considerations and energy politics in the balance, the stakes are higher, and a substantive downgrade of relations is much more probable than previously was the case. The famous 19th century Russia novelist-poet Fyodor Dostoyevsky once wrote: "To Europe we have come as beggars for a slice of bread; to Asia, however, we come as lords and masters." The Islamic Republic, which will continue to have to deal with Russia – a permanent member of the Security Council and also a former superpower aspiring to regain part of its lost empire and hegemony including in areas adjacent to and of great bearing for Iran – must work hard on its own part, with wide-open eyes and a much more nuanced and even-handed foreign policy and bigger manoeuvring space, to prove that the 19th century illusions just belong to a distant, bygone past.

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