

Iran & Russia: From Balance of Power to Identity Analysis

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Abstract

Various theoretical approaches in the field of international relations offer different answers to the existing ambiguities and questions about why Russian-Iranian ties have expanded in the post-USSR era. While realist approaches try to define the growth in Russian-Iranian cooperation within the framework of ties between major powers and their continuous efforts to establish balance of power, liberal approaches relate states' motives and aims of establishing such levels of relations to economic and material interests. Here, a subject being somehow ignored by the two approaches is that both Iran and Russia, as far as identity developments are concerned, have passed through a situation in which they felt a need to reconstruct their identities after the demise of the USSR.

This article argues that during the aforementioned period, Iran and Russia, apart from meeting each other's security needs or rare material interests - reliable foreign exchange for Russia and embargoed technologies for Iran - they were also a source for meeting their identity needs. The post-USSR era, and especially under Vladimir Putin, Iran has served as the most important arena providing Russia with the possibility of acting like a major world power. Russia's behavior has been one of the major challenges to the international isolation of Iran in recent years.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, the west, international relations theories, balance of power, identity

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Introduction

Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, Iran and Russia never historically enjoyed close ties or relations at the level seen in the post-USSR era. After the end of the Cold War, Moscow and Tehran established a level of ties in many areas which created concerns for major Western powers and inherently, turned into an issue of an international nature. Russia, and to some extent China were not only accused of technologically supporting the Iranian nuclear energy program, but from the political point of view, they were also viewed as the most important obstacles in the way of UN Security Council members assuming a harsher stance towards Iran.

During a period of struggle between Iran and Western powers over different issues, though actions and positions taken by Russia did not fulfill the Iranian people and probably leaders' satisfaction, they instigated many debates and questions among analysts and politicians, keeping the way and atmosphere open for Iran to move, from the Western viewpoint. Russia was the first degree defendant, accused of equipping Iran with nuclear technology and advanced weaponry at a time when there remained many questions about the nature and dimensions of the bilateral ties between the two, to be answered.

I. Challenging Questions in Russian-Iranian Relations

Politicians and analysts who assay Russian-Iranian relations are faced with a body of questions and ambiguities in this regard: Why did Russia and Iran establish close and balanced relations with each other



in the post-USSR era despite their far from cordial ties? Why was Russia not as worried as the Western states vis-à-vis the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons although it is geographically closer to Iran? Why does Russia, although military strengthening Iran and equipping it with advanced weaponry could be a serious threat to Moscow itself, continue to cooperate with Iran in these fields? Why have several years of U.S. attempts to lure, threaten and convince Russia to stop its nuclear and military cooperation with Iran been unsuccessful? Why did Russia not consider Iran as a threat at the inception of its international life and continued to regard the U.S. as a threat although it was in a dire condition and hopeful of cooperation with the West? Why was the issue of Islamic movements especially within Russian borders ignored intentionally by the both sides in the arena of Russian-Iranian relations? And finally, why did Iran and Russia try to assess their actions in the Caucasus, Caspian Sea region and Central Asia based on goodwill while they were historical competitors in these regions?

Various theoretical approaches in the field of international relations offer different answers to the abovementioned questions on Russian-Iranian relations. Through the prism of realist approaches, these questions often receive a simple and at the same time decisive response: the necessity to balance against American power and/or threat. Emphasizing concepts like security and power, realists interpret strategic cooperation between Iran and Russia as due to a joint feeling of threat felt by the two from the side of the U.S. and/or due to their tendency towards establishing balance of power against the said state. Both Iran and Russia are after some level of power balance against American threats and unilateralism, and forgo their forthright influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus region through strategic partnerships. From the neorealist viewpoint, the emergence of a more violent and more aggressive foreign policy in Russia is a natural outcome of structural pressures exerted by the international system (Hopf, 1999:61). Those states who do not consider



international relations as a field of competition will be severely punished for their idealism (Hopf, 1999:61).

Realists in their all forms, from structural realists to defensive and offensive ones, agree that Russia is among two, three or more powers that made up the global balance of power system in the post-Cold War era. However, these theories are not in consensus over how such balance has been established or how it works and what kind of a possible future is imagined for it.

Liberals and critics of realist analyses of Russian-Iranian ties prefer to analyze different dimensions of these ties at bilateral or regional levels (low politics) instead of promoting the level of analysis to the arena of relations among great powers (high politics). For Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, there is scant evidence that a desire to balance U.S. power explains the relationship between Iran and Russia. They argue that regional security concerns and economic incentives have remained consistently at the forefront (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005).

In the heart of liberal discourse, understanding why states cooperate with each other is not principally complicated and difficult. The absolute advantage of states in establishing ties based on mutual benefit convinces them to set up such relations, though states' inclination towards deception and 'free riding' is acknowledged as an important obstacle in the way of cooperation for absolute gains.

While it seems that realist approaches are used to define the issue of Russian-Iranian cooperation within the framework of relations among great powers and their permanent attempts to establish balance of power, liberal approaches relate the motives and aims of these states to establish and expand ties to material motives and economic interests. A matter ignored more or less by both groups is the matter that both Iran and Russia, as far as identity developments are concerned, were passing through a situation in which they felt a major need to reconstruct their identities after the demise of the USSR.



The hypothesis of this article is that in this period, Iran and Russia, apart from being considered as a source for meeting each other's' security needs or rare material interests (reliable foreign exchange for Russia and embargoed technologies for Iran), were also a source for meeting their identity needs. This article argues that in the post-USSR era, Iran served as the most important reason, and more clearly, most important field for providing Russia with the possibility of acting like a great world power.

The article first answers the question about why existent analyses of Russian-Iranian relations (including realist and liberal analyses) do not do much explaining – or even express anything in this regards – about the abovementioned motivation for cooperation. Then, the author makes an attempt to evaluate posed claims based on a constructivist approach to international relations. This article is based on two fundamental hypotheses rooted in the constructivist approach to international politics: first, that it is identities which define the interests of states. Second, identities are built through a social process. As Alexander Wendt emphasizes, social structure can matter in various

ways: by constituting identities and interests, by helping actors find common solutions to problems, by defining expectations for behavior, by constituting threats, and so on. (Wendt, 2006:24).

II. Theoretical Perspectives on Iranian-Russian Relations

Repeated requests made by the Western powers to Russia to stop its nuclear and military cooperation with Iran and also its resistance against these pressures and refusing to give responses desired by the West, inherently signifies that Russian-Iranian ties, in their entirety, are an issue which could be analyzed at the level of power relations and within the framework of ties among great powers. Though it is not clear if Iran and Russia are very interested in defining their bilateral relations at this level, a majority of theoreticians who have analyzed the state of international relations in the post-Cold War era



have paid attention to Russia's cooperation with Iran within the framework of Russia-West interactions in assessing the status and behavior of Moscow.

In the West also, the phraseology and propositions explaining Russian-Iranian relations are often conceptualized around the notion of “threat”, and there is an enduring attempt to make these relations seem dangerous and threatening. In their bilateral talks with Russian leaders or on different occasions, U.S. presidents have always stressed that Russia's strengthening of the nuclear capabilities and military abilities of Iran could constitute a potential risk for world peace and security. Reflection of Russian-Iranian relations compels many analysts to look at the issue of these relations solely within the framework of the macro-level aspects of Russia-West ties and in the context of realist discourse. This issue also indicates that despite the end of the Cold War and the rise of new discourse, the balance of power discourse is still prevalent in the mindsets of many Western politicians.

Nonetheless, any analysis of Russian-Iranian relations within the framework of realist theories requires an explanation about the situation of the two countries and answers to three basic questions: Balance against which power? With which goals? And how? Do realist theories offer cogent answers to these questions?

Although the dominant preference of analysts is to analyze and construe Russian-Iranian relations within the framework of both sides' efforts to balance against the American threat, realist analysts have been reluctant to analyze and explain Russia's status in the international arena in the past two decades. This issue is probably derived from the theme that Russia has not shown the degree of behavioral stability which could serve as a basis for analytical assessments during the said period. Despite the stability seen in China's behavior at the international level, Russia has shown contradictory behavior during the past two decades; from conflict and confrontation in Kosovo and Georgia, to cooperation and flexibility



on the Afghanistan crisis and in the framework of institutions like the G8.

Following reviews and doubts about the capability of realist theory to explain events and developments in the post-Cold War era, Kenneth Waltz, in an article written in 2000, tries to argue that structural realism and balance of power still enjoys more credibility over other theories and concepts for analyzing the status quo at the international level. For Waltz, with the demise of the USSR, the international system turned unipolar, and the U.S. was recognized as the supreme world power by other states. Nonetheless, Waltz maintains that this issue did not imply that such a situation is sustainable. "In the light of structural theory, unipolarity appears as the least durable of international configurations", Waltz said (Waltz, 2000:27). Waltz's argument to prove this is that "unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others. The powerful state may, and the United States does, think of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world. These terms, however, are defined to the liking of the powerful, which may conflict with the preferences and interests of others. In international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads others to try to balance against it." (Waltz: 2000:28). Based on this assumption, Waltz holds that, theoretically, one should expect the re-establishment of balance in the international system. Candidates for becoming the next great powers and naturally, restore the balance of power according to Waltz are: the European Union or Germany leading a coalition, China, Japan, and in a more distant future, Russia (Waltz: 2000:30). For Waltz, the formation of a multipolar world system does not only reduce competition among great powers, but it also fuels it. In a more-than-two-pole world, states rely both on their own internal efforts and on alliances they may make with others for their security. Competition in multipolar systems is more complicated than competition in bipolar ones because uncertainties about the comparative capabilities of states multiply as numbers grow, and because estimates of the cohesiveness



and strength of coalitions are hard to make.” (Waltz: 2000:5-6). In his article, Waltz argues that the international system, as in the past, is based on power and self-help through various reasoning and evidence. He argues that even if all states turn democratic, the structure of international politics would remain anarchical, and even the mushrooming of international institutions and strengthening of interdependencies among states will have no influence on changing this situation. In the environment described by Waltz; Russian-Iranian ties have a clear and specific meaning which is not far from the proposition-based framework in realist discourse, i.e. the necessity to balance against a superior outside power. As a great power, Russia will naturally try to make use of all capacities at its disposal to establish a balance of power with the United States. Although Waltz maintains that weak foundations of power in Russia have kept it several steps behind other great powers, this has not stopped it from seeking to achieve balance in the international arena.

It could be derived from Waltz's analysis of Sino-Russian ties that he would probably analyze Russian-Iranian relations within the same framework, albeit at a lower scale. For Waltz, the way the U.S. dealt with Russia and China, and its unilateralism following the collapse of the Soviet Union, moved Moscow and Beijing towards cooperation despite all their historic differences and border disputes. “To alienate Russia by expanding NATO, and to alienate China by lecturing its leaders on how to rule their country, are policies that only an overwhelmingly powerful country could afford, and only a foolish one be tempted, to follow.” (Waltz: 2000:38).

In an analysis of the process in which a new balance of power was shaped in the post-Cold War era, Waltz mainly considers the traditional concept of balance; i.e. hard balance, which, as Robert A. Pape writes, focuses on building military facilities, military alliances, transferring military technology and the like. According to Stephen Walt, such balancing is aimed at building a coalition equal to and powerful enough to control the dominant power. In the post-Cold



War era, such efforts have actually been made by the U.S. itself rather than other great powers, and especially challenging ones like China and Russia. The east-ward expansion of NATO, unilateral exit from the anti-ballistic missile treaty, deployment of a missile defense shield in eastern European states and building new military bases in the Middle East and even some central Asian countries, are only some of the actions taken by the U.S. in the post-Cold War era. Although opposed to such measures, Russia and China are very cautious, even within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to prevent the establishment of a security-military alliance acting as a counterweight to NATO. The most important instance taken by realist theoreticians in pointing to the nature of the strategic bonds between China and Russia is the conclusion of a strategic partnership treaty between the two in 2001 which lacks all hardware dimensions. In the past few years, the world has witnessed the intensification of unilateralist American action rather than balance-seeking efforts by other great powers.

In recent years, especially following the explicit opposition to an American military attack against Iraq by Germany, France and Russia in the run-up to the 2003 invasion, theoreticians like T. V. Paul, Stephen Walt and Robert Pape tried to offer a broader definition of the power balance concept in order to bring about more conformity between realism theory and the world status quo. For these theoreticians, in the post-Cold War era, great powers are seeking a new shape of balancing, which contrary to the past is not based on hard measures.

In a fairly lengthy article, Stephen Walt argues how despite unquestioned American superiority throughout the world, attempts to establish balance within the framework of soft balance could be meaningful. For Walt, three goals are sought by states through their balancing attempts against the United States:

"First, and most obviously, states may "balance" in order to increase their ability to resist U.S. pressure, including the use of



military force;

Second, joining forces with others is a way of improving one's bargaining position in global negotiations, whether the issue is trade, the regulation of genetically modified foods, environmental safeguards, labor regulations, or even issues of "high politics" like the use of military force. Thus, soft balancing may arise in response to some discrete issue, or it may be used when states are bargaining over the broad institutional arrangements that regulate international behavior;

Third, soft balancing can also be intended as a diplomatic "warning shot" to remind the United States that it cannot take other states' compliance for granted." (Walt, 2004:14).

Walt offers various arguments to prove his claims. However, what is linked to Russian-Iranian ties, is how for Walt, Russia's interest in cooperation with Iran in parallel with other policies such as strategic cooperation with China, is among the attempts made by all three to establish a soft balance against the widespread power of the United States. According to Stephen Walt, Iran and Russia have quietly expanded their strategic cooperation at least partly due to the expanding U.S. influence and presence in the region. Walt emphasizes that Russia and Iran have begun cooperating to limit the influence of the U.S. and its allies (Turkey and Israel) in the region. Russian-Iranian cooperation is thus a strategic response to U.S. efforts to develop influence in the area through its ties with Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan (Walt: 2004:15).

This theory is backed by Robert Pape, who argues that the great powers are reluctant, in the post-Cold War era, to establish a balance against the United States. Pape argues that they neither feel a reason nor have the ability to do so, offering several examples such as European states, China, Russia, Japan and even regional powers like Brazil that have tried to show balance-seeking reactions in different forms to American measures. Pape argues that in the near term, France, Germany, Russia, China, Japan, and other important regional



states are unlikely to respond with traditional hard-balancing measures, such as military buildups, war-fighting alliances, and transfers of military technology to U.S. opponents. Directly confronting U.S. preponderance is too costly for any individual state and too risky for multiple states operating together, at least until major powers become confident that members of a balancing coalition will act in unison. Instead, major powers are likely to adopt what this author calls “soft-balancing” measures, that is actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies. Soft balancing using international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements has already been a prominent feature of the international opposition to the U.S. war against Iraq. (Pape: 2005:10).

For Pape, soft balancing could even lead to the rehabilitation of hard balancing and constitute the pillars of practical hard balancing against the United States. “Perhaps the most likely step toward hard balancing would be for major states to encourage and support transfers of military technology to U.S. opponents. Russia is already providing civilian nuclear technology to Iran, a state that U.S. intelligence believes is pursuing nuclear weapons.” (Pape: 2005:42).

Contrary to Waltz and other realists, John Mearsheimer maintains that what is worrying for Russia is not American power but the emerging power of China. Mearsheimer assumes that great powers are firstly seeking regional hegemony and therefore, if faced with the emergence of a new power or other great powers, there is a possibility for these powers showing an inclination towards an extra-regional balancer. Based on Mearsheimer's theory, Russia as the regional hegemon, faces other great powers in two regions; emerging China in the east, and other European states and especially Germany in the west. For Mearsheimer, if Russia successfully reforms its economy, it could eventually once again become the most powerful nation in Europe, but it would face a unified Germany and would not



be so dominant as to solicit renewed active U.S. intervention as an offshore balancer. (Mearsheimer: 2002b). In the east, however, in case of China maintaining its robust economic growth over the next few decades, there will probably be an engagement of China and the U.S. in a severe security competition which would have the potential to turn into a war. Under such circumstances, many neighbors of China, including India, Japan and Russia would join the U.S. to contain the Chinese power (Mearsheimer, 2005). According to Mearsheimer, Russian-American relations will not be as bad over the next twenty years as they were during the 1990s, in large part because a growing China will push them together. (Mearsheimer, 2002a).

Based on Mearsheimer's theory, Iranian behavior vis-à-vis Russia, given the fact that it lies within its sphere of regional hegemony expansion, should principally be explained by one of these two strategic options: “band-wagoning” or “balancing”. According to this definition, Iran either plays the role of a Russian follower or should establish a balance against the state through creating strategic bonds with an extra-regional balancing power.

Analysis of Russian-Iranian ties based on Mearsheimer's theory is vividly in contradiction with the realities of the ties between the two and also views expressed by other realist theoreticians. Existing conditions in Russian-Iranian relations - at least based on what has happened so far- indicate that both states have defined their regional roles, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This issue is probably rooted in their concerns over the U.S. and its Turkish ally's influence throughout the region. However, in any case, Iran and Russia have never moved towards confrontation or domination over each other.

While realist analysis of Russian-Iranian ties do not offer rather convincing responses to many of these problems, it also fails to answer why post-Cold War Moscow, rid of its ideological enmity with Washington, did not take the same path as other Eastern European states. Realism fails to answer why Russia did not choose to gain the



benefits of assuming a pro-Western stance and instead opted to establish a new identity for itself. In many cases, many of the analyses offered by realists are too broad and general to add much to existing knowledge.

Realist analyses of Russian behavior in the post-Cold War era have also been faced with some criticism on the part of liberal analysts. Paul, Stephen Walt and Pape's views on the attempts made by the great powers to establish soft balance against the United States were responded through fairly vast criticism by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth. In a joint article, titled "*Hard Times for Soft Balancing*", the two argue that there is little empirical evidence proving the claimed emergence of power balance in the form of soft balancing. "Although states do periodically undertake actions that end up constraining the United States, the soft-balancing argument does not help to explain this behavior." (Brooks and Wohlforth , 2005: 75). For Brooks and Wohlforth, one should not attribute any bargaining attempt to balancing efforts. Even during the Cold War, when balancing was in an almost completely bipolar form, such behavior was referred to by Paul, Walt and Pape as an endorsement of the concept of soft balance, and could be seen in the behavior of some American allies. French withdrawal from NATO's military command, European states abstention from helping the U.S. with the Vietnam war, French attempts to undermine the Bretton-Woods system by purchasing large amounts of gold from the U.S. Treasury, and other similar actions were carried out at a time when a common enemy like the USSR had pushed all these powers towards one corner (Brooks and Wohlforth , 2005: 76).

Brooks and Wohlforth, pointing to how some analysts consider the support extended by some great powers to states opposed to the United States as an instance of soft balancing - in this regard, Russian-Iranian ties being the most prominent instance of soft balancing - argue why Russian-Iranian cooperation should not be attributed to balance-seeking measures. According to Brooks and Wohlforth,



Russia has numerous reasons besides balancing U.S. power to seek good relations with Iran. “Nuclear sales, technology transfers, and other moves that appear to bolster Iran serve as part of an engagement strategy that is itself driven by Moscow’s need for Iranian cooperation in resolving a complex nexus of regional issues surrounding the exploitation of petroleum and other natural resources in the Caspian.” (Brooks and Wohlforth , 2005: 88).

Brooks and Wohlforth's criticism of the soft balance concept, although reflexive and pillared on historical evidence, fails to prove its arguments about Russian-Iranian ties in a manner that is applicable to all dimensions of the ties between Moscow and Tehran. Just as the “economic interests” and “regional security” emphasized as concepts explaining Russian-Iranian ties by Brooks and Wohlforth, the soft balance concept can be put forward on the basis of historical evidence to the same extent.

Many analysts of Russian foreign policy under former President Vladimir Putin believed that, similar to Brooks and Wohlforth, pragmatism and stressing economic interests play the key role in Russia's foreign policy orientation. However, many facts and events during the Putin era, and also during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev indicate that economic interests have not been the only pivotal proposition in Russia's foreign policy – at least when it comes to ties with Iran. In the nuclear field, it is safe to assume that if the Bushehr plant project is completed fast and with a desired quality, there is the possibility of Russia being awarded more projects in Iran. Iranian authorities have announced several times this year that they intend to design and build new nuclear power plants. GholamReza Aghazadeh, former head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, announced in May 2006 that Tehran will soon tender some plans to build two new nuclear power plants. Vladimir Pavlov of Atomstroyexport, which is now busy building the first Iranian nuclear power plant in Bushehr, announced afterwards that Russia may participate in the tender bid for building two other nuclear power



plants in Iran (Fars News Agency, 2008). The fate of this tender bid is not clear. However, what is clear is that even these incentives did not encourage Russia to complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant - at least over the next several years. In the military field, Iran has been prepared to purchase new but costly arms from Russia. However, Moscow has merely agreed to sell some defensive weaponry to Iran.

Apart from some theoreticians who have considered some dimensions of Russian-Iranian relations to establish their own theories, a rather considerable group of Iranian issues analysts have offered different conclusions of the entirety or certain dimensions of Russian-Iranian ties as theoretical or expert assessments. Due to the lack of clear theoretical commitments, a majority of these analysts have stressed on different propositions within the framework of theoretical approaches. For Mark Smith, Russia follows three goals through its relations with Iran: 1) Acting to have a longer presence in the Persian Gulf, 2) establishing a multipolar system, and 3) displaying an independent foreign policy. According to Smith, Moscow hopes that through establishing close political, economic and security ties with Iran, it can secure its long-term presence in the Persian Gulf region. Russia's relations with Iran have developed in parallel with the expansion of ties between Moscow and Washington. Smith also stresses that during the 1990s, Moscow opted for ties with Tehran as a key factor in its attempts to establish a multipolar international system. It was thus one of the ways in which Moscow demonstrated its determination to pursue an independent foreign policy to Washington (Smith, 2002:1). For Smith, "Iran will look to Moscow as a partial counterweight to the US imposed isolation to which she has been subjected since 1979" (Ibid:5).

Yuri Fedorov, political science professor at the Institute of International Relations attached to the Russian government, also holds that "at the beginning of the 21 century, Russia got into problems with Western countries again and even some requested Russia to react to the American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic



Missiles Treaty... Russians, in fact, tried to limit their actions to issue ardent statements, reducing their level of cooperation with NATO and withdrawing from START2, which meant to the West that Russia could not take practical steps. In such circumstances, Russia, to prevent itself from being isolated by the West, opted for weak and problematic states like Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Cuba” (Fedorov, 2005).

Some analysts maintain that Russia's defeat in Bosnia and issues like the Western refusal to extend economic support to Russia, and east-ward expansion of the NATO led to the intensification of revenge sensations among some Russian decision makers. According to Sergey Karaganov, head of the Russian Foreign policy and Defense Council, proponents of this theory were for the enhancement of military power, creation of a military economy, supporting hostile states like Iran and Iraq, and establishing closer relations with China on an anti-Western basis (Karaganov, 2000).

Katzman holds that the reason why Iran moved towards Russia for cooperation was mostly its limited alternatives, underscoring that it was not necessarily because of the reason that there had been strategic or ideological solidarity between the two. Russian-Iranian ties were overshadowed by perpetual fear of Russian power and intentions. To try to thwart U.S. efforts, Iran has cultivated close relationships with foreign suppliers that are not allied to the United States, especially Russia, China, and North Korea (Katzman, 2003).

In general, the majority of analyses of the dimensions of Russian-Iranian ties following the demise of the Soviet Union assume (explicitly or implicitly) one of the three following propositions or a combination thereof:

1. First proposition: strategic cooperation between Iran and Russia in the military and nuclear technology fields is a function of strategic observations of the two regarding balance of power at an international level.
2. Second proposition: Russian-Iranian cooperation in different



fields including the military and nuclear technology ones is a function of economic observations and objective interests of the two at the bilateral level.

3. Third proposition: Russian-Iranian cooperation in different fields is a function of regional observations of the two.

III. Identity Issue in Iranian-Russian Relations

The abovementioned propositions, mainly emphasized in a clear manner by analysts of Russian-Iranian ties, are assumptions based on a materialistic ontology. In other words, these propositions (being realist or liberal), seek the reasons for enhancing Russian-Iranian ties in the existence of materialistic factors like objective threats, tangible economic and security interests, or the inclination towards gaining more power. The most important feature of the materialist ontology is that it interprets power and interests as a function of merely materialistic forces. This is while based on an idealist ontology, seemingly material conditions are actually a function of how actors think about them (Wendt, 2005: 371).

The hypothesis being explained in this article as a secondary objective is that stressing the merely materialistic factors in Russian-Iranian ties cannot offer a precise explanation of these ties. Although no one can ignore the role played by material factors, what is important is that these factors regain their meaning in a bed of ideas and images, and finally, “it is through ideas that states ultimately relate to one another, and ... that these ideas help define who and what states are” (Wendt, 2005:372). In this process, the international environment in turn, leaves an existential impact on the construction of identities and interests.

The stress put by Mark Smith and many other analysts on the Russian struggle to “display an independent foreign policy” through establishing close relations with Iran, the stress put on Russia's determination to “prevent itself from being isolated” by Yuri Fedorov, Karaganov's reiteration of Russia's “revenge taking” against



the West through cooperation with countries like Iran, Katzman's emphasis on "limited alternatives" for Iran and most importantly Russia's interest in playing the role of a great world power, before having material dimensions, are indicative of the existence of a collection of mentalities and notions making Russian and Iranian leaders inclined to cooperate with each other. The West's manner of dealing with Iran and the international community in its entirety has also had a direct impact on the formation of both Tehran and Moscow's identities and interests, pushing the two towards specific definitions of themselves. The persistent American attempts to weaken Russia's regional and international position in the post-Cold War era have convinced the Russians that to regain their lost international position and identity, they must find a new path for themselves.

Looking back, at the outset of the 1990s, both Iran and Russia underwent somehow similar situations with regard to reviewing their attitude towards international circumstances. The Russians, after 70 years of specific and absolute definitions of enemies and viewing the West as the "other", expressed doubts over the Marxist insistence on a permanent and non-reconcilable conflict between socialist and capitalist systems following Gorbachev's perestroika. In Iran, following the eight-year war with Iraq and the exigencies for reconstruction after the war as well as the opening of fundamental changes in the international situation, the discourse governing Iranian foreign policy - which defined a majority of states as enemies or accomplices to enemies due to the conditions under the war - was gradually replaced by a more pragmatist attitude emphasizing the necessity of cooperation with the world and détente.

From this angle, the 1990s was an important period for both Russia and Iran from the perspective of re-definitions of identities. During the period, both Iran and Russia tried to introduce themselves as conventional actors, but at the same time, none was willing to be considered as an ordinary country. Both were seeking to replace their



black and white look at the world with paying more attention to grey areas. Like many other states during the following years, Iran and Russia passed different steps and stages of identity development and engaged in a process of forming each other's identity, in a manner which deserved contemplation. They were both in severe need of recognition as effective and determining powers (At the global level for Russia and the regional level for Iran) and they continue to do so. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russians started an enduring effort to instill the imagination that Russia is still a great power. Cooperation with Iran - beyond any economic interests, and even more, the impact it could leave on establishing a balance against the US – has provided Russia with the opportunity to stabilize its identity as a great power.

Immediately after the end of the 8-year war with Iraq (depriving Iran from the opportunity to act at the regional level, and which had pitted almost all world and regional powers against Tehran), Iran started a seriously consistent and vast effort to stabilize its stance as a prominent regional power. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s provided Iran with the opportunity to fill, to some extent, the vacuum in Central Asia and Caucasus; an opportunity Iran did not intend to lose through confrontation with Russia. However, during the past few years, what has appeared to guarantee and ensure Iran's need of being “recognized” and its role being accepted - at least at the regional level- is its identity as a nuclear power, with Russia playing a crucial role in its birth, formation and sustainability. Iran's joining of the club of states that have nuclear technology, with all the related difficulties, has created an environment for Iran in which it could define its place even beyond the mere regional level.

Another reason why identity problems are important in Russian-Iranian ties is that, with regard to material or spiritual outcomes and achievements, the relations between the two are not eye catching or significant. From the economic point of view, the volume of their ties is not determining or obligatory for them. As far as cultural relations



are concerned, there is not much similarity or strong bonds between the two. Moreover, politically, there is not much in their positions that are in tune, except for some stances at the macro level. From a broader perspective, the leaders of the two countries - and even many international affairs analysts- intentionally and based on their definition of the bilateral ties, avoid attributing the word “strategic” to Russian-Iranian relations (Parker, 2008: 210). Even in the military and sensitive technologies field which is considered as the most important area for cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, the two countries are very cautious about synergism. Former Iranian defense minister Ali Shamkhani publicly complained that Russia only sells armaments that are not sensitive in the eyes of the U.S. to Iran (Parker, 2008: 213).

Moreover, Russia has the position as the main supporter of the Iranian nuclear and military programs at a time when, on the one hand, its leaders - including Vladimir Putin - have repeatedly announced that in case Iran attains nuclear weapons, Russia has a better reason to be concerned than Western states considering its geographical proximity to Iran, and from the other hand, based on the Russian security and defense doctrines, “any country with a substantial military potential—whether an advanced Western democracy, an emerging Asian power, or a restive Middle Eastern regime—can become a threat to Russia” (Ternin, 2007: 35).

Therefore, the question of why cooperation between Iran and Russia has been considered as threatening by many Western politicians, and why Russian-Iranian relations - as a bond which could potentially be decisive - has attracted the attention of international relations theoreticians, indicates that mere materialistic dimensions do not play a pivotal role in determining the level of ties between Iran and Russia.

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