

TACKLING THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN CONNECTION

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In the widening international crisis over Iran's nuclear program, no country is more important than Russia. For more than a decade, concerns over potential Islamic separatism in the "post-Soviet space" and a mutually beneficial arms trade have nurtured and strengthened the strategic ties between Moscow and Tehran. Over time, these contacts have also assumed a distinctly geopolitical dimension, with both countries viewing their partnership at least partially as a hedge against American interests and U.S. policy in the greater Middle East. Today, Russia serves as the Islamic Republic's chief strategic partner, and a key enabler of its atomic ambitions.

So far, Washington has had little success in severing this connection. Despite repeated American overtures over the past decade, support for Tehran still represents something of an article of faith in the corridors of the Kremlin. Indeed, against the backdrop of the War on Terror, strategic ties appear to have assumed a new significance for both countries.

Yet signs also suggest that Washington may soon find a much more constructive tenor to its long-running dialogue with Moscow over Iran. On a number of crucial strategic and diplomatic fronts, Russia and Iran have begun to drift apart. This divergence provides a hopeful opportunity for the United States, should it choose to seize it.



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Moscow's Faustian bargain

The Russo-Iranian entente traces its roots back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Serious bilateral diplomatic contacts had begun during the mid- to late 1980s, but ties between Moscow and Tehran truly blossomed with the USSR's demise. The breakup of the Soviet Union unleashed a wave of ethnic and religious separatism in Russia's turbulent "southern rim": Central Asia and the Caucasus. Kremlin officials watched this development with deep apprehension, afraid that the emerging extremism could spill over into parts of the Russian Federation. Having seen Iran's domination of Lebanon in the early 1980s, and its global efforts to "export the revolution" thereafter, they also became justifiably worried about Tehran taking on a similar role on their periphery.

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The resulting deal struck between Moscow and Tehran included a pledge of Russian sales of conventional arms (and later the sharing of nuclear know-how) to Iran in exchange for a tacit understanding that Tehran would steer clear of meddling in the Near Abroad. Iran was eager to comply; still struggling to reconstitute its regional standing and military might in the aftermath of its costly eight-year war with Iraq, the Iranian

regime rightly saw Russia as a major potential arms supplier.

The Russo-Iranian entente may have begun as a marriage of convenience, but by the late 1990s it had become much more. In January 1996, President Boris Yeltsin replaced his docile, Western-leaning foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, with Yevgeny Primakov, the wily spymaster who headed Russia's foreign intelligence agency, the *Sluzhba Vneshnei Rozvedki* (SVR). The reshuffle marked the start of a new era in Russia's Middle East policy. In his day, Primakov had served as the chief Middle East specialist for the government of Leonid Brezhnev, and as the Kremlin's *de facto* point man on ties with Iraq, Libya, and the PLO.¹

Primakov's ascendance repositioned Moscow as a geopolitical counterweight to Washington in the Middle East, and Russian attitudes toward Tehran underwent a corresponding change. Under Kozyrev, Russia had aligned itself with the U.S. in opposing Iran. This was not without good reason; at least some policymakers in Moscow saw Iran's potential to export fundamentalism to Russia's periphery as the cardinal threat facing the Kremlin in the post-Cold War era.² Under Primakov, however, these worries gave way to a more benign view of the Islamic Republic. Ties with Tehran have come to be seen in Moscow as a pivotal geopolitical alliance—and as an important hedge against America's perceived hegemony in the Middle East.

The strategic partnership nurtured under Primakov took on a new dimension in the last days of 1999, with Vladimir Putin's assumption of the Russian presidency. Far from breaking with his predecessor's embrace of the ayatollahs, Putin actually strengthened the Kremlin's tilt

toward Tehran. In November 2000, in a public show of support for the Iranian regime, Russia officially abrogated the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin Agreement, under which Moscow had agreed to curtail new nuclear-related exports to the Islamic Republic. The importance of ties with the Islamic Republic also became a feature of the foreign policy blueprint issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry that same year.³

The partnership, post-9/11

September 11, 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror did nothing to dampen the Russo-Iranian entente. To the contrary, over the past four-and-a-half years, strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran has accelerated, as both countries grapple with America's intrusion into the "post-Soviet space."

For Russia, continued cooperation with Iran has become a partnership of perceived necessity. Initially, Washington's plans for a campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan had met with the blessing of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Over time, however, the steady expansion of America's strategic presence in the "post-Soviet space" has fanned Russian fears of a long-term U.S. foothold in the region—and a corresponding diminution of Moscow's influence there.

Iran's ayatollahs have similar worries. The 2002 ouster of the Taliban, and the subsequent overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, may have eliminated Tehran's chief ideological and military adversaries. But in their wake, Iranian policymakers have grappled with how to deal with the new, pro-Western governments that have emerged in Baghdad and Kabul, and with the possibility

that further Coalition successes could profoundly constrain their country's foreign policy horizons.

These common concerns have served to reinforce the Russo-Iranian relationship. At the outset of the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan, Moscow and Tehran began discussions of a common political and security agenda for Central Asia and the Caucasus—one that was designed, among other things, to forestall the creation of a U.S.-backed government in Kabul.⁴ Since then, the two countries have made substantial progress toward this goal, animated by mutual fears over the growing American strategic presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Russian officials, for their part, have taken pains to support Iran's chief strategic priority: its atomic drive. In October 2004, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov paid a high-profile visit to Tehran, where he met with his counterpart, Kamal Kharrazi, and with Hassan Rowhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. The meetings yielded mutual affirmations of the strong strategic bonds between Russia and Iran, and an important symbolic message from the Kremlin—support of Iran's inalienable right to nuclear technology.⁵ Since then, Russian dignitaries like Federal Atomic Agency Director Aleksandr Rumyantsev and Federation Council Chairman Sergei Mironov have visited Tehran to confirm their country's commitment to ongoing atomic cooperation—and to a coordinated approach between the Kremlin and the Islamic Republic to "peace and security" in the Middle East.⁶

Turbulence ahead

Yet, despite these commonalities, the Russo-Iranian relationship is

now headed into uncharted territory. For, though it is still publicly committed to its long-running partnership with Iran, the Kremlin appears to be waking up to a set of alarming new strategic realities.

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Threat potential

The active proliferation of WMD-related technologies and know-how from Russia to Iran over the past decade has been driven in large part by the Russian notion that such activity was essentially a cost-free exercise. This is no longer the case; Tehran's substantial investments in its strategic arsenal over the past several years have dramatically expanded the threat the Islamic Republic now poses to Russia. As long ago as 2003, for example, Moscow's prestigious PIR Centre, a leading nonproliferation think tank, was estimating that by the middle of this year some 20 million ethnic Russians in the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan and Ukraine could be at risk from a potential Iranian nuclear strike.⁷

Russian politicians are beginning to grasp this reality. High-profile policymakers like Andrei Kokoshin, the influential chairman of the Russian State Duma's Defense Committee (and a former Russian National Security Advisor), now speak publicly about the Iranian threat to Rus-

sia's security.⁸ And, while strategic cooperation has continued, there are encouraging signs that Russia's contributions to its partnership with Iran have become more cautious. When Iran launched its first indigenously-developed satellite, the *Sinah-1*, in October 2005, it did so from the Baikonur space facility in Kazakhstan under Russian supervision and using a Russian-made booster.⁹ The foreign launch was a telling hint at Russia's hesitance to provide Iran with the technological capabilities to carry out a space launch, thereby indirectly aiding the Islamic Republic's efforts to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Regional radicalism

Worries over the possibility of Iranian support for radical separatism in Russia's turbulent "Southern Rim" were at the core of Russian-Iranian contacts a decade ago. Back then, Moscow moved quickly—and successfully—to secure Tehran's good behavior in exchange for arms and nuclear assistance. But the Russo-Iranian understanding over the "post-Soviet space" could soon become a thing of the past.

For one thing, telltale signs indicate that Iran is expanding its involvement in the spread of radical Islam in the region. In the first part of 2002, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) uncovered new intelligence indicating that elements of Iran's clerical army, the *Pasdaran*, were secretly providing training and logistical support for insurgents from the radical al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).¹⁰ Iran is likewise suspected of sponsoring the rise of radical religious and separatist movements in neighboring Azerbaijan over the past several years, and of using them as a means to desta-

bilize and pressure the Aliyev dynasty in Baku.¹¹ This troublemaking has led Russian media outlets to openly question the prudence of continued strategic alignment with Iran.¹²

For another, Iran remains a serious potential threat to stability in the Caucasus. Officials in Moscow understand full well that, despite Iran's historic abstention from sponsoring separatism in the "post-Soviet space," Tehran in the future could use support for Chechen insurgents (or other regional radicals) as a blackmail tool against Moscow if it feels threatened by Russia's strides toward the West, or as a means to blunt international pressure over its nuclear program. Indeed, signs of such activity are already becoming visible; in a November 2005 exposé, London's influential *Sunday Telegraph* reported that the *Pasdaran* has begun "secretly training Chechen rebels in sophisticated terror techniques to enable them to carry out more effective attacks against Russian forces."¹³

Diplomatic priorities

For years, Moscow has served as Iran's chief strategic partner, backing Tehran in its escalating disputes with the European Union and the United States. But amid the ongoing international stand-off over Iran's nuclear program, and Tehran's own, increasingly-evident atomic ambitions, cracks have begun to appear in the Russian foreign policy consensus over cooperation with Tehran.

Moscow's doubts have manifested themselves in an increasingly stern diplomatic tone. In an August 2005 communiqué, Russia's Foreign Ministry took the unprecedented step of criticizing its long-time strategic partner for its intransigence on the nuclear issue. "It would be a wise decision on the part of Iran to stop

enriching uranium and renew cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency," the public statement urged.¹⁴ More recently, Moscow has taken the initiative and proffered a compromise nuclear deal—as of this writing supported by the IAEA, Europe and the United States—that would permit Iran to retain limited uranium enrichment capabilities but transplant these processes to Russian soil.¹⁵

Other foreign policy priorities have begun to impact Russia's partnership with Iran as well. As Russian political scientist Ednan Agayev has pointed out, Russia's new role as chair of the G8, and its growing diplomatic dialogue with the European Union, necessitates a change in the Kremlin's stance toward Iran. In light of these considerations, Russia "must assume a leading role in putting international political pressure on Iran," Agayev, a professor at the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations, told the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* newspaper back in August. "Moscow should not send Iran false signals that the G8 can be split."¹⁶

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Ending the affair

Can the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran be severed? So far, the United States has not seriously tested this proposition. Instead, for much of the past decade, it has contented itself with superficial (and ultimately self-defeating) discussions with the Kremlin about just one

aspect of the Russo-Iranian entente: Iran's nuclear program. Today, policymakers in Washington should be thinking deeply about a broader sort of dialogue with their Russian counterparts over Iran.

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Such a discourse would need to take into account Russia's legitimate security interests in the "post-Soviet space." Russia's recent revival of imperial rhetoric vis-à-vis the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus—and its deepening involvement in regional security constructs like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—reflects a growing fear that America's new strategic presence in the "post-Soviet space" could turn out to be a permanent affair. This sense of siege, moreover, has only deepened in the aftermath of the "color revolutions" in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and the perceived American connection to these events. Nevertheless, Moscow and Washington share congruent interests on a number of regional security issues, from preventing the growth of radical Islam to combating the rising tide of narcotics flowing from Afghanistan. Whether formal or informal, a Russo-American security arrangement that addresses Moscow's fears—and capitalizes on such commonalities—could help reduce Moscow's perceived need for strategic partners such as Iran to counterbalance the United States.

U.S.-Russian dialogue should also exploit Russia's enduring need

for a sustainable economic partnership with the West. President Putin has made economic integration with Europe and the United States a major tenet of his economic program, pledging in his 2004 State of the Nation address to double national GDP by the end of the decade.¹⁷ So far, Russia has managed to more or less meet these expectations, largely because of the high price of world oil, which has allowed the Kremlin to amass some \$140 billion in hard currency reserves to date. But petrodollars cannot provide a lasting fix for Russia's macroeconomic problems, among them lackluster foreign direct investment and the absence of a long-term mortgage sector. For that, Moscow needs deeper economic cooperation with—and investment from—Washington and European capitals. The United States should exploit this opportunity to condition economic confidence-building measures on Kremlin cooperation vis-à-vis Iran.

It should do so confident in the knowledge that the long-term interests of Russian leaders—to say nothing of the Russian people—align much more closely with the United States and Europe than with the radical theocratic regime now in power in Tehran.

In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush made clear that every country in the world will need to make a choice between terrorist groups and rogue states and the governments that confront them. Notwithstanding its long-standing struggle with separatism in Chechnya and its brief assistance to the United States against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Russia has so far not been forced to resolutely make such a choice. Addressing the Kremlin's alignment with the world's

leading state sponsor of terrorism is a perfect opportunity to test the depths of Moscow's commitment to lasting partnership with the West.

Ultimately, however, only Russia can decide whether it values true cooperation with the United States more than its strategic ties to Iran's ayatollahs. Washington's role should simply be to make clear that the Kremlin cannot have both—and to provide it with the incentives necessary to make the correct choice.



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