

Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Under Putin:

The Impact of 9/11 and The War in Iraq

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In analyzing Russian policy toward the Middle East under Putin and the impact of 9/11 and the war on Iraq on Russian policy, it is first necessary to note that only three countries in the region are of primary significance to Moscow, and these are Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Iran and Turkey border countries in Central Asia (Iran) and Transcaucasia (Iran and Turkey) which are seen as the “soft underbelly” of the Russian Federation, and Moscow has been quite concerned that Turkish and Iranian influence in the two regions could significantly compete with Moscow’s own influence there.¹ At the same time Iran and Turkey are major military and economic trading partners of Russia, and Putin has sought to cultivate them to strengthen the Russian economy. Iraq, an erstwhile ally of the Soviet Union until the latter part of the Gorbachev era, retains importance for Russia because of its eight billion dollar debt to Moscow and for the expectation that Russian companies would be able to develop Iraq’s extensive oil reserves.

Of secondary importance to Moscow are Saudi Arabia and Israel. Russia has had mixed relations with both countries. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Moscow and Riyadh, as major oil exporters, are tacit allies in seeking to keep world oil prices high. On the other hand, Russia harbors deep suspicions that Saudi Arabia is a major source of funding for the Chechen rebellion. In the case of Israel the situation is more complex. Trade between Russia and Israel has reached

\$1 billion a year; there is close cultural cooperation because of the more than one million Russian-speaking Israelis who emigrated from the former Soviet Union; the two countries are collaborating in the production and sale on world markets of military equipment such as helicopters and AWACS aircraft; and there is a sense of solidarity because both suffer from attacks by Moslem terrorists.² However one major problem seriously troubles Russian-Israeli relations and this is the sale by Russia of sophisticated military equipment and nuclear reactors to Iran, whose conservative clerical leadership is a sworn enemy of Israel.

Other than Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel, the other countries in the Middle East do not matter very much to Russia at the present time. Yet there is one important factor to keep in mind when analyzing Putin's policy toward the entire Middle East. Moscow was once a great power and aspires to be one again. In the interim period whether by participating in the so-called "quartet" (U.S. Russia, EU and UN) working to achieve a settlement to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, or threatening to use its veto power at the United Nations during the period before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Putin has sought to demonstrate that Russia is still a very important factor in world affairs, and one which the United States has to take into account. While there has been increased Russian-American cooperation since 9/11, especially in the war against terrorism, as the paper below will demonstrate, the post 9/11 spirit of U.S.-Russian cooperation has not yet affected Russian policy toward the Middle East in a major way. Indeed, Russian behavior during the war in Iraq helped cause a chilling of Russian-American relations.

The Putin Approach to Foreign Policy

One of the most striking aspects of the Putin Presidency has been his ability to bring quasi-independent players in Russian domestic and foreign policy under tighter centralized control. Thus Putin has all but eliminated the political influence of oligarchs Boris Berezovsky

and Vladimir Gusinsky and deprived them of their media outlets. He has also replaced Yevgeny Adamov, head of the Ministry of Atomic energy, who had a habit of trying to make nuclear deals with Iran not approved of by the Kremlin, with Alexander Rumantsev. The powerful gas monopoly, GASPROM, heavily involved in Turkey and Central Asia, had its director, Ram Vakhirev replaced by Alexei Miller, while the Defense Ministry had its leader, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, replaced by the Secretary of the National Security Council, Sergei Ivanov. Putin also changed interior ministers, set up plenipotentiaries to oversee Russia's 89 regions, and consolidated Russia's arms sales agencies into Rosoboronoexport in an effort to gain greater control over a major source of foreign exchange. Putin also put a great deal of emphasis on improving Russia's economy, not only through the sale of arms, oil and natural gas (the Russian economy has been blessed with high oil and natural gas prices during much of his first three years in office) but also on expanding Russia's business ties abroad, and business interests were to play an increasingly significant role in Putin's foreign policy.³ Making Putin's task easier was the support he received from the Duma, especially from his Edinstvo (Unity) party, (now the enlarged United Russia Party) which was a clear contrast to the hostile relations Yeltsin had had with the Duma from 1993 to his resignation as President in December 1999.

Overall, Putin's foreign policy has been aimed at strengthening the Russian economy in the hope that, in the not too distant future, Russia might regain its status as a great power. In the interim he has sought to create an arc of stability on Russia's frontiers so that economic development can proceed as rapidly as possible. At the same time, however, mindful of voices in the Duma and the security apparatus unhappy at Moscow's appearing to play "second fiddle" to the U.S., Putin has from time to time asserted an independent position for Russia, as Moscow's behavior in the recent Iraqi war indicated. Indeed, both Iran and Iraq provide an area

for independent policy action for Putin, something he appears to believe will help him as the Russian elections near.

Russia and Iraq

Putin inherited three main goals in Iraq from Yeltsin. The first was to regain the more than \$8 billion dollars owed to Russia by the regime of Saddam Hussein. The second was to assist in the pursuit of major Russian business interests in Iraq, especially for Moscow's oil companies and GASPROM, interests that could be developed only when the U.N. sanctions regime against Iraq was lifted. In the interim, Putin wanted to be assured that Moscow would continue to make millions of dollars through contracts awarded by Iraq under the U.N.'s "Oil for Food" program. The third goal was to secure a partial or full lifting of the sanctions so Russian firms could begin to work in Iraq. Meanwhile, the danger Putin faced was that the U.S., which together with Britain had heavily bombed Iraq in December 1998, and since then had periodically bombed Iraqi air defense positions interfering with U.S. patrols over the "no fly" zones in Iraq, would again launch a major attack against Iraq which, like the December 1998 attack, would make Russia look impotent as one of its erstwhile friends came under U.S. attack.

Even before the U.S. attack in March 2003, Russia's policy toward Iraq was a mixed one. Russia first supported and then abstained on a UNSC vote in 1999 establishing the UNMOVIC inspection system which was a weaker version of UNSCOM. Despite UNMOVIC's weakness, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein strongly opposed the agreement and expressed his displeasure at Russia for supporting it. Yet as the Bush Administration, which took office in January 2001, took a tougher and tougher position toward Iraq including a major bombing of Iraqi air defense positions in February 2001, Saddam had no choice but to draw closer to Moscow as the U.S. pushed first for "smart sanctions" and then prepared for war. While initially Saddam used a ploy

he had tried against Yeltsin – threatening to cancel contracts already signed with Russian oil companies Lukoil, Zarubzhneft and Mashinoimport, unless they began to develop Iraqi oil fields despite the sanctions – he quickly backed off from his threats in the hope that Russia would more vociferously oppose U.S. plans for tighter sanctions.⁴

Following September 11th, Putin moved closer to the U.S., and this policy was reflected in Moscow's new willingness to cooperate with the U.S. on disputed items in the “oil for food” program.⁵ Nonetheless, as the U.S. moved inexorably closer to war in 2002, Putin faced a clear dilemma – how to maintain good relations with the U.S., while at the same time protecting Russia's extensive business interests in Iraq and its hopes for future contracts there. As the crisis deepened, however, Putin saw some benefits flowing to Russia. Oil prices, on which Russia depends for more than one-third of its tax revenues, shot up from \$25 per barrel to an average \$38 per barrel, giving Russia an economic windfall. Under the circumstances, the Russian leader adopted a dual strategy. First, he sought to prevent the war by calling for the UN Security Council to legitimize any decision to go to war. Second, he sought to prolong the crisis as long as possible so as to keep the extra income flowing to the Russian economy. This, in turn, would keep Russian growth rates high, would enable Moscow to pay off some of its international debts (thus enhancing its international investment climate), and would provide enough extra spending power to get Putin not only through the Duma elections in December 2003 but also through the Presidential election in the Spring of 2004.

At the same time Moscow sought to maintain contact with the United States, as well as with both the Saddam Hussein regime (Primakov was sent to Baghdad) and, discretely, with the Iraqi opposition so that no matter who emerged on top in Iraq, Russia would continue to have access to Iraqi oil. Saddam Hussein, however, was less than happy with Moscow's policy and,

in December 2002, canceled the lucrative contract Lukoil had to develop the West Qurna oil field, although he left the contracts with Machinoimport and Zarubzhneft in place.⁶ Nonetheless, by also floating the possibility of up to \$40 billion in new trade deals, he sought to entice Putin to give him greater support.⁷

Interestingly enough, as the war approached, U.S.-Russian relations did not immediately suffer. In part, this was due to the fact that the leading forces opposing a U.S.-British attack on Iraq were the French and Germans, and this provided diplomatic cover for Moscow, and in part it was due to the fact that the U.S. kept hoping for Russian support, or at least neutrality, during the war, hinting that it would in return respect Russia's economic interests in Iraq. Nonetheless, once Putin publicly sided with French leader Jacques Chirac, U.S.-Russian ties began to deteriorate.⁸ The situation was to worsen once the war broke out in late March. Putin, while not being forced to veto a resolution calling for UNSC support of the war, because the U.S. decided not to seek such a UN resolution, nonetheless spoke out sharply against the Anglo-U.S. attack, calling it the most serious crisis since the end of the cold war, and asserting that it was "a direct violation of international law, and a major political mistake that could cause the International Security system to collapse."⁹ Russian-American relations were further hurt by reports that Russia had secretly sold military equipment to Iraq, including night vision goggles, anti-tank missiles, and devices to interfere with U.S. GPS positioning systems.¹⁰ In addition, the Russian Ambassador to Iraq accused U.S. forces of shooting at a Russian convoy exiting Baghdad; the Kremlin protested a U.S. military spy plane flying over Georgia; and the Duma postponed action on an arms control treaty.¹¹ Putin also, perhaps hoping to further prolong the crisis, demanded a cease fire during the first week of the war, as U.S. forces encountered unexpected resistance.¹²

In seeking to explain Putin's apparent hardening of policy during the war, there are

several possible explanations. First, with the Duma elections drawing closer, and the Russian public strongly against the war,¹³ Putin did not wish to leave the issue solely in the hands of the opposition communist party, especially since his own party, United Russia, was running into problems.¹⁴ Secondly, with the Moslem world opposing the war, Putin may have felt that a strong anti-war position could keep Russia's 20 million Moslems, many of whom were unhappy with his policy on Chechnya, in check. Indeed, Putin asserted, "Russia has a community of 20 million Moslems and we cannot but take their opinion into account. I fully share their concerns."¹⁵ Finally, with Germany and France also strongly opposing the war, Putin may have felt that the newly created Franco-German-Russian bloc of states could serve as a check on U.S. unilateralism, and Russian opposition to the war would strengthen the prospects of what Yevgeny Primakov, one of Putin's predecessors as Prime Minister, called a multipolar world. It may also have been that Putin got very bad advice from his military advisers, who, perhaps influenced by Russia's serious difficulties in Chechnya, thought the war would last far longer than it did, and thereby open up a number of diplomatic options for Moscow, which, however, failed to materialize.

Once the war came to a speedy end, Putin had to rethink his position. With the U.S. controlling the Iraqi oil fields, calling for an end to the sanctions program, and even calling for some of Iraq's debts to be forgiven, Moscow stood to lose billions of dollars. Under these circumstances, Putin initially took a tough position, stating that U.N. sanctions should not be lifted until it was clear that the threat of WMD had ended. Whether Putin noted the irony of his position is unclear, given the fact that for almost a decade Moscow had been calling for the lifting of the sanctions. Putin also called for a continuing major role for the U.N. in Iraq.¹⁶ Then, however, after some additional bargaining with the United States, Russia agreed to the U.S.-

sponsored UN Security Council Resolution No. 1483. While leaving the United States in full control of Iraq – a major Russian concession to the U.S. – and lifting sanctions on Iraq (except for the sale of military equipment) the resolution did have a few face-saving elements for Russia. Thus it provided a role for the United Nations in the form of a special representative (albeit with ill-defined powers) and noted that the goal of the resolution was for the Iraqis to independently decide their own fate and manage their own natural resources (thereby holding out hope for Russian oil companies to obtain lucrative contracts)¹⁷ Russia also benefitted from the Resolution's six month extension of the oil-for-food program, which gave Moscow the hope that it would be able to cash in on a number of already signed agreements under the program including one of \$700 million for Machinoimport.¹⁸

In sum, in assessing Russian policy toward Iraq under Putin, it appears that Russian economic interests, and particularly the role of Russian oil companies in developing Iraq's oil fields, have been a primary consideration. Second, with the Russian Duma elections on the horizon, Putin's position was evidently aimed at outflanking the opposition communists and helping his own United Russia party, which also took a strong anti-war position. Finally, while during the war Putin took an anti-U.S. position, following the war there was a reconciliation which appeared to underline the fact that Putin saw the future of Russia's economic development linked to good ties to the United States.

Russia and Iran

Introduction

With the world's attention riveted on the U.S. war with Iraq whose ostensible aim was to rid that country of WMD, next door in Iran the Khomeini regime was rapidly moving ahead with its program of WMD and the means to deliver them. This is not only a U.S.-Iran problem, but a

Russian-American one as well because, given the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations over Iraq, the possibility of a U.S.-Iranian conflict could cause a far more serious disruption in U.S.-Russian relations, which would, in turn, affect their anti-terrorist cooperation. This is the case because, of all the states in the Middle East, Iran is the one most important to Russia.

This importance does not begin with Putin, but dates back to the very beginning of the Yeltsin regime. Even in the halcyon first year of Yeltsin, when Russia was cooperating with the U.S. almost everywhere else in the world, it continued to sell weapons to Iran despite U.S. opposition. Indeed throughout the Yeltsin period, Moscow made only two concessions to the U.S. on military/nuclear sales to Iran, both in 1995. The first occurred when Yeltsin apparently reversed his Minister for Atomic Affairs and canceled the sale of uranium-enriching centrifuges to Tehran. The second was the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement under which Moscow promised to end arms sales to Iran when existing contracts expired at the end of 1999. In retrospect, neither concession turned out to be a serious one, because Putin was later to reverse Russia's promise to cease arms sales, while Iran's ability to develop its own centrifuges could well have been due to Russian technological assistance.

Why, then, the close Russian-Iranian relationship? At the time Yeltsin stepped down as Russia's President, there was a great deal of Russian-Iranian cooperation, on a bilateral basis as well as on the regional and world scenes. As far as regional conflicts were concerned, Russia and Iran were cooperating in maintaining the shaky cease fire in Tajikistan, were aiding the Northern Alliance in their battles against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and were jointly supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan, which neither Russia nor Iran wanted to emerge as a major force in Transcaucasia. Both Iran and Russia also denounced what they saw as U.S. efforts to establish a unipolar world.

As far as bilateral relations were concerned, Russia was Iran's primary supplier of weaponry, including supersonic jets, tanks, and submarines, and Moscow was also building a nuclear reactor complex for Iran at Bushehr. The CIA reported that Russia was also covertly aiding Iran in the development of ballistic missiles, such as the Shihab III with a range of 1,500 kilometers, that could hit U.S. Middle Eastern allies such as Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

There were, of course, problems but most of these were still then "over the horizon." The first dealt with division of the Caspian Sea, with Iran holding out for 20 percent – even though its coastline was only 12 percent – while Russia was moving to divide the seabed into national sectors, as its agreement with Kazakhstan in 1998 indicated. The second dealt with the routes for the export of Caspian oil and natural gas. While through most of the 1990's Moscow had wanted all the pipelines to go through Russian territory, by 1999, after its August 1998 economic crisis, and with a rapprochement with Turkey under way centered on the Blue Stream gas pipeline project, (see below) Moscow grudgingly acquiesced in Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. However, by locking up most of Turkmeni gas, in the short run at least, Moscow dealt a serious blow to Iranian hopes of being the main transit route for Turkmen gas. Still, Iran kept working on tripartite deals to involve Russia, Iran and Central Asian energy producers.

The Putin Era

Putin faced a major problem in Iran when he first took office. The problem was his decision to invade Chechnya following a series of bombing incidents in Russia that were blamed on the Chechens, who were seeking their independence from Moscow. Chechnya was a predominantly Moslem republic of the Russian Federation, and the Russian army began to kill large numbers of Moslem Chechens whom the Russian army called "terrorists." As the then

leader of the Islamic Conference, Iran could not sit by while Moslems were being killed, and a war of words over Chechnya quickly erupted between Tehran and Moscow. Yet state interests took precedence over Islamic ideology in Tehran as both the conservatives who dominated the levers of power, led by Ayatollah Khamenei, and President Khatemi, who had a great deal of popular support, but very little real power, downplayed the conflict as an “internal” problem of Russia. This was the case primarily because Iran needed Russia as a secure source of sophisticated arms and as a diplomatic counterweight to the United States. This demonstrates that Islam, as an ideology, can take a back seat to state interests, much as international communism often took a back seat to the state interests of the USSR.

Perhaps as a reward for Iran’s low profile on Chechnya, his number one problem, Putin, in November 2000, unilaterally abrogated the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of June 30, 1995 under which Russia was to have ended all military sales to Tehran by December 31, 1999 once existing arms sales contracts had been completed. This decision risked U.S. sanctions, ranging from a ban on the use of Russian rockets for satellite launches to the discouragement of U.S. investments in Russia, to U.S. pressure on the IMF not to reschedule Russian debts. While improving Russian-Iranian relations, and clearly benefitting Rosoboronoexport, Putin’s new consolidated arms sales agency, the decision to abrogate the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement clearly hurt U.S.-Russian relations.

Then at the beginning of 2001, Russian-Iranian relations began to run into problems. With an approach to foreign policy that was increasingly based on aiding the struggling Russian economy, Putin moved to improve relations with Azerbaijan so as to expedite oil production, and the profits from it, from the Caspian Sea. This was the case because Russia had found sizable oil reserves in its own sector of the sea. While Iran had been demanding a 20 percent share of the

seabed, Moscow, as noted above, had signed an agreement with Kazakhstan in 1998, splitting the sea into national sectors, and followed this up in January 2001, in a Putin visit to Baku, by signing a similar agreement with Azerbaijan, thus apparently siding with the two major oil producers in the Caspian, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, against Iran. Tehran was clearly angered by this development, as well as by the military exercises Moscow carried out on the Caspian during the Putin visit to Baku. The Iranian news agency IRNA cited a source at the Iranian Foreign Ministry as stating: "Iran believes that there is no threat in the Caspian Sea to justify the war games and military presence, and such measures will harm the confidence-building efforts of the littoral states in the region."¹⁹ Ironically, Iran was to use just such military pressure several months later.

The Caspian Sea dispute, along with military cooperation, were high on the agenda of Khatemi's visit to Moscow in the middle of March 2001. The Iranian Ambassador to Moscow, Mehdi Safari, in an apparent attempt to solicit support from Rosoboronoexport, dangled the prospect of \$7 billion in arms sales to Iran, prior to the Khatemi visit.²⁰ This followed an estimate of up to \$300 million in annual sales by Rosobornoexport director Viktor Komardin.²¹ Meanwhile, U.S.-Russian relations had sharply deteriorated as the new Bush Administration had called for the abrogation of the ABM Treaty, and for the expansion of NATO into the Baltic states. Making matters worse, soon after taking office, the administration had angered Moscow by bombing Iraqi anti-aircraft installations and by expelling a number of alleged Russia spies. Given this background of deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations, one might have expected more to come out of the Putin-Khatemi summit than actually happened. To be sure, Putin formally announced the resumption of arms sales, Khatemi was awarded an honorary degree in philosophy from Moscow State University, and the Iranian President was invited to tour

Moscow's contribution to the international space station. Former Russian foreign minister and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov waxed eloquent over the Khatemi visit, calling it the biggest event in the history of relations between Tehran and Moscow. Yet the treaty to emerge from the meeting, (titled "The Treaty on Foundations of Relations and Principles of Cooperation") merely stated that "if one of the sides will be exposed to an aggression of some state, the other side must not give any help to the aggressor."²² This was far from a mutual defense treaty, and something that would allow Moscow to stand aside should the United States, one day, attack Iran. No specific mention was made of any military agreements during the summit, and Russian deputy defense minister Alexander Luskov, possibly in a gesture to the United States, stated, "The planned treaty will not make Russia and Iran strategic partners, but will further strengthen partnerlike, neighborly relations."²³

As far as the Bushehr nuclear reactor issue was concerned, despite U.S. protests, Putin (who was anxious to sell Russian nuclear reactors abroad) and Khatemi stated that Russia would finish work on the complex; and the director of the Izhorskie Machine Works, Yevgeny Sergeyev, stated that the first reactor unit would be completed in early 2004, and "as soon as the equipment for the first reactor leaves the factory, a contract for the second nuclear reactor will be signed."²⁴

Following the Khatemi visit to Moscow, the Caspian Sea issue again generated problems for Russian-Iranian relations. On July 23, 2001, Iranian gunboats, with fighter escorts, harassed a British Petroleum research ship, forcing BP to suspend its activities in the region, which was located within the sea boundary of Azerbaijan according to the Russian-Azeri agreement, but according to Tehran lay in the 20 percent share of the Caspian that it unilaterally claimed.²⁵ The fact that Turkey subsequently sent combat aircraft to Baku (the arrangement to send the aircraft,

however, predated the Caspian Sea incident) complicated matters for Moscow, as the last thing Moscow wanted was for a conflict to arise between Turkey and Iran, both of which Putin was cultivating.

The Impact of September 11th

Putin's decision to draw closer to the U.S. after September 11th, and particularly, his acquiescence in the deployment of U.S. troops in Central Asia was very dimly viewed by Tehran. Iranian radio noted on December 18th, following the U.S. military victory in Afghanistan, "some political observers say that the aim of the U.S. diplomatic activities in the region is to carry out certain parts of U.S. foreign policy, so as to expand its sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and this is to lessen Russia's traditional influence in the region."²⁶

A second problem in post-September 11th Russian-Iranian relations dealt with the Caspian Sea. When, again due to Iranian obstinacy, the April 2002 Caspian summit failed, Putin moved to assert Russian authority in the Caspian. This took three forms: first, there was a May 2002 agreement with Kazakhstan to jointly develop the oil fields lying in disputed waters between them;²⁷ second, a major Russian naval exercise took place in the Caspian in early August 2002 with 60 ships and 10,000 troops. It was witnessed by Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov. The exercises took place on the 280th anniversary of Peter the Great's naval campaign in the Caspian, both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan participated, and Putin called the purpose of the exercise part of the war against terrorism.²⁸ Finally, in September 2002 Putin and Azeri leader Aliiev signed an agreement dividing the seabed between them but holding the water in common.²⁹ A perceptive Russian journalist Alexander Reutov writing in *Kommersant* on September 24, 2002 noted:

If Iran tries to prevent Caspian oil from reaching the world market (via Baku-Ceyhan) Iran could very well find itself the next country, after Afghanistan and Iraq, to be run over.³⁰

Interestingly enough, while Russian-Iranian tension rose over the Caspian, Russian nuclear reactor sales and arms sales continued. In July, just a few weeks before the major military exercises on the Caspian, Moscow announced that not only would it finish Bushehr (despite U.S. opposition) but also stated it had begun discussions on the building of five additional reactors for Iran.³¹ It remained unclear, however, whether the spent fuel would be sent back to Russia so it could not be made into nuclear weapons.

As Moscow stepped up its nuclear sales to Tehran, the U.S. sought to dissuade Russia through both a carrot and stick approach, threatening on the one hand to withhold \$20 billion in aid for the dismantling of the old Soviet military arsenal, while also promising \$10 billion in additional aid for Moscow.³² Meanwhile support for the Chechens who seized a theater in Moscow in October 2002, by Iranian newspapers, including those close to Khomeini, raised questions in the minds of at least some Russians as to whether Moscow was backing the wrong side in the U.S.-Iranian dispute over the Iranian nuclear program.³³

In December 2002 it was revealed in a series of satellite photographs that, in addition to Bushehr, Iran was building two new nuclear facilities, one a centrifuge plant near the city of Natanz and the other a heavy water plant near the city of Arak. Initially Russia downplayed the development, with the Director of Minatom, Alexander Rumantsev, stating that the photos taken of the plants were not sufficient to determine their nature, and, in any case, and Russia had nothing to do with the two plants. Other representatives of Minatom said Russia was ready to supply the long-awaited nuclear fuel to Tehran – but only if the Iranians guaranteed return of the

spent fuel to Moscow.³⁴ Rumantsev, however, said Russia was ready without conditions to supply to nuclear fuel to Iran.³⁵ By February 2003 Rumantsev was hedging his position, noting “at this moment in time” Iran did not have the capability to build nuclear weapons.³⁶ By March 2003 however, with an IAEA team visiting the two plants, Rumantsev had further changed his position and asserted that Russia could not tell whether Iran was secretly developing nuclear weapons, stating “While Russia is helping Iran build its nuclear plant (at Bushehr) it is not being informed by Iran on all the other projects currently underway.”³⁷

Following its success in the Iraq war, the U.S. stepped up its pressure on Russia to halt the Iranian nuclear weapons program. In response, Russian FM Igor Ivanov noted in an Interfax interview at the end of May 2003 that Russia wanted all Iranian nuclear programs to be under the supervision of the IAEA.³⁸ Then, following the Bush-Putin talks in St. Petersburg in early June, Putin asserted that the positions of Russia and the U.S. on Iran were closer than people thought. However, he added that “the pretext of an Iranian nuclear weapons program (could be used) as an instrument of unfair competition” against Russian companies.³⁹

By early June 2003 it appeared that the U.S. was making two demands on Russia, vis-a-vis the Bushehr reactor, First, Moscow should not supply any nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor unless Iran agreed to send all used fuel back to Moscow. Second, Moscow should also withhold the nuclear fuel until Iran signed an additional protocol with the IAEA permitting that agency unannounced visits to all Iranian nuclear facilities. On the latter issue, both the G-8 (of which Russia is a member) and the EU have been pressuring Iran, albeit up to the time of writing (June 10, 2003) without any success. Indeed, the G-8 statement issued in early June noted:

We urge Iran to sign and implement the IAEA Additional Protocol without delay or conditions. We offer our strongest support to comprehensive IAEA

examination of this country's nuclear program.”⁴⁰

The question, of course, was not only how far Iran would go to comply, but how far Russia would go to pressure Iran. In this there appeared to be some initial confusion in Moscow. While British Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted that Moscow had agreed not to deliver nuclear fuel until Iran signed the IAEA protocol,⁴¹ Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Yakovenko, stated that Moscow would only freeze construction on the Bushehr plant if Iran refused to agree to return all spent nuclear fuel to Russia, and that Iran was not required to sign the protocol, because “the protocol is an agreement that is signed on a voluntary basis.”⁴² Meanwhile, perhaps to deflect some of the U.S. pressure, Minatom Minister, Alexander Rumanstev announced on June 3, 2003 that the Bushehr reactor would be completed in 2005, not 2004 as originally planned. While he blamed the delay on the need to replace the reactor's original German parts, it could well be that this was an important gesture to the U.S.⁴³

In assessing the reasons why Moscow proved willing for such an extended time not only to forego substantial U.S. economic aid but also arouse the ire of the U.S. because of its supplies of nuclear equipment and technology to Iran, there are several hypotheses. First, Moscow is keen to develop its nuclear reactor industry, which employs thousands of top-grade Russian scientists, and Iran pays hard currency for the reactors. Second, the sale of such sophisticated equipment fits right into Putin's plans to rebuild the Russian economy. Third, aid from the U.S. is problematic, because whatever the Executive branch of the U.S. may decide, Congress could cut the appropriation.⁴⁴ In addition, by earning its own hard currency, rather than depending on hand-outs from the U.S., Putin can demonstrate Russian pride in its own scientific achievements. Finally, by standing up to the U.S. on the issue of nuclear assistance to Iran, Putin demonstrates that despite 9/11, Russia is still following an independent policy line and he may feel that such a

position will be beneficial to him as the Russian elections near, much as was his tough position during the Anglo-U.S. invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless, by delaying completion of the Bushehr reactor, and now publicly requiring Iran to return the spent nuclear fuel to Russia, Moscow also seeks to avert a possible U.S. attack on Iran, something that would have posed another painful choice for Putin.

The reason for this is that Russia's nuclear assistance to Iran, coupled with its anti-American position during the war, not only caused a deterioration in U.S.- Russian relations, it posed a serious risk for Moscow. The U.S., having conquered Iraq, one member of the "Axis of Evil," might move against the Axis of Evil nation right next door – Iran. To be sure, unlike Iraq, the Iranian government was split, with the reformers pitted against the ultra-conservatives. However, from the U.S. perspective, the reformers who appeared to want improved ties to the U.S. were losing out in the power struggle, and in 2003 the U.S. began hardening its position against Iran. Thus the U.S. pressured Haliburton and ThyssenKrupp to curtail their operations in Iran and was preparing a blacklist of foreign companies investing in Iran's energy industry, as it appeared the Iran-Libya sanctions act was being reinvigorated.⁴⁵ Furthermore the Bush Administration was taking an increasingly dim view of Khomeini and the ultra-conservatives whom it accused of supporting terrorism. Not only had they been implicated in the Karine-A episode where they sought to smuggle rockets and C-4 explosives to the Palestinians, but the Argentinian government had finally implicated Iranian officials in the 1994 terrorist bombing of the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires.

Under the circumstances it may have appeared, at least to the Iranians, to be a possibility, as the *Kommersant* correspondent had noted, that after Iraq, the U.S. might come after Iran. This clearly posed a problem for Putin, Bush's erstwhile ally in the war on terrorism. Just as Russian

companies, by supplying night vision equipment and GPS jammers, and anti-tank missiles, had alienated the U.S. over Iraq; as relations cooled with Washington there was the possibility that Moscow might sell weapons to Iran that could greatly complicate U.S. maneuvering in the region. Such sales might include the new Russian ship-to-ship missiles with ranges from 120-280 kilometers that could threaten the U.S. fleet not only in the Persian Gulf, but in the Indian Ocean as well, and the improved version of the SAM 300 anti-aircraft missile that could engage U.S. aircraft at high altitudes.⁴⁶ Indeed the type of weapons systems that Moscow sells to Iran along with its position on the Bushehr reactor will be good barometers of U.S.-Russian, as well as Russian-Iranian relations.

In sum, in looking at the factors influencing Russian policy toward Iran, it would appear that arms and nuclear reactor sales, as well as the desire to demonstrate Russia's independence from the U.S. were the primary factors, along with the Russian desire to exploit the oil riches of the Caspian Sea, irrespective of Iranian concerns.

Russia and Turkey

Relations under Yeltsin

Unlike the cases of Iran and Iraq, where policy continuity marked the Yeltsin era, Putin inherited a relationship with Turkey that had veered from cooperation to confrontation and back to cooperation. In the initial period following the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991-1995), there were major elements of both cooperation and competition. In the area of cooperation Russian-Turkish trade rose rapidly reaching more than \$10 billion per year. The trade was highlighted by major Turkish construction projects in Russia, including the repair of the Duma, damaged in the 1993 fighting; a major Russian "suitcase" trade, centered in the Laila district of Istanbul, and extensive Russian tourism to Turkey, especially to the Mediterranean port city of

Antalya. In addition Russia sold helicopters to Turkey, which it could not get during this period from its NATO allies, because of the Kurdish insurrection in southeast Turkey.

On the negative side Russia and Turkey accused each other of aiding separatist groups [the Chechens in Russia and the Kurds in Turkey], and both sides competed for influence in the newly independent states of Transcaucasia and Central Asia, with some Russian commentators seeing Turkey as a stalking horse for NATO, and especially the United States, in these areas of the former Soviet Union. There was also competition for the main export route for Caspian Sea oil and natural gas, with Turkey favoring the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route, while Russia preferred all pipelines from the Caspian Sea to go through Russian territory. Related to this was Turkish concern over the increase in tanker traffic through the straits due to the development of Caspian Sea oil.⁴⁷

By 1996, when hard-liner Yevgeny Primakov had become Russia's Foreign Minister, the mixture of cooperation and competition tipped to confrontation. Primakov began to push the sale of the SAM-300 surface-to-air missile system to the Greek controlled portion of Cyprus. Had the SAM-300 system been installed, it would have controlled much of the airspace over southern Turkey. Consequently, Turkey threatened to "take out" the missiles if they were emplaced, a development that could have led to a direct conflict with Russia. In addition, as part of his efforts to create a multipolar world, Primakov sought to form an alignment of Iran, Greece, Armenia, Syria and Russia against Turkey and the United States. The only bright spot, besides trade, in the Russian-Turkish relationship during this period (January 1996 to September 1998) was the Russian-Turkish agreement to construct the "Blue Stream" natural gas pipeline across the Black Sea between Turkey and Russia, which would, by 2009, send 16 billion cubic meters per year of natural gas to Turkey.

The Russian economic crisis of 1998 began the third stage of the Turkish-Russian relationship under Yeltsin. Realizing it did not have the resources to maintain the confrontational relationship with Turkey, and perhaps surprised by the rapprochement between Turkey and Greece, Russia switched to a policy of cooperation. Thus it acquiesced in the Greek decision to deploy the SAM-300 missiles in Crete rather than southern Cyprus; refused to give Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan asylum in Russia, acquiesced in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline; and redoubled its efforts to expedite financing for the Blue Stream project.

Relations under Putin

This was the situation which greeted Putin when he became Russia's Prime Minister in August 1999 and then President in January 2000. Putin strongly backed the new policy of cooperation, centered around the Blue Stream project and while still Prime Minister, in December 1999, got the Russian Parliament to approve \$1.5 billion in tax breaks for the construction of Blue Stream, and Gasprom and ENI signed a contract for the construction of the underwater section of the pipeline.⁴⁸ Cooperation between Turkey and Russia took another step forward in late October 2000, when, in a journey to Turkey, Mikhail Kazyanev, who had been appointed Russia's Prime Minister after Putin became President, stated "Our main mutual conclusion is that Russia and Turkey are not rivals but partners, and our governments will from now on proceed from this understanding."⁴⁹ During his visit, in which he promised additional gas supplies for Turkey, Kazyanev also offered a lower price for the Russian-Israeli KA-50 combat helicopter in an effort to spur additional Russian arms sales.⁵⁰ With the war in Chechnya again raging while the Kurdish uprising was dying out thanks to Turkey's capture of Ocalan, both countries pledged to step up cooperation in the war against terrorism, and, to underline Putin's interest in using foreign trade to strengthen the Russian economy, Russia and Turkey

stated it was their goal to bring trade back to the \$10 billion per year level it had reached before the Russian economic collapse of August 1998.⁵¹

As 2001 dawned, the overall positive thrust in Russian-Turkish relations, motivated by Putin's desire to improve the Russian economy, continued. The key to the relationship was the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline that was due to start deliveries in 2002. The Blue Stream project, however, ran into charges of corruption and payoffs in Turkey's so-called "white energy" scandal, as the prosecutor indicted former energy minister Cumbur Ersumer, although parliament voted not to open an inquiry, possibly due to pressure from Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, of Turkey's Motherland Party, who was accused of taking bribes to promote the project.⁵² In any case, Turkey, by moving ahead with a gas import project with Iran and signing an agreement to import natural gas from Azerbaijan's Shakh Deniz field (that will begin sending gas to Turkey by 2004,) moved to limit its dependence on Moscow.⁵³ Meanwhile, in another positive gesture, Russian deputy foreign minister Ivan Ivanov, speaking at a seminar on Turkish-Russian economic relations in May 2001, said that Russian firms were now ready to participate in the building of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, even though Russia still had doubts about economic viability.⁵⁴ For his part, also speaking at the seminar, Turkish Foreign Ministry deputy undersecretary Mithat Balkan said that the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline would be cheaper than expected, and he offered its use to Moscow to avoid the possibility of a further overcrowding of the straits following the completion of the Tengiz-Novorossisk pipeline, which threatened a threefold increase in the amount of oil passing through the straits.⁵⁵

Perhaps the most serious problem facing Russian-Turkish relations in 2001 under Putin was Chechen terrorism. In March 2001 Chechen gunmen hijacked a Russian passenger jet from Turkey to Saudi Arabia, and one month later pro-Chechen gunmen raided the Swiss hotel in

Istanbul, leading Moscow to criticize Turkey for allowing “extremist terrorist groups” to operate on its territory.⁵⁶ Russian foreign minister Ivan Ivanov called for tougher measures against Chechen terrorism following the incident, and journeyed to Turkey in early June where he stated in a news conference that Turkey and Russia should cooperate in a new partnership in the fight against international terrorism.⁵⁷

The events of September 11th had a mixed effect on Russian-Turkish relations. Both Russia and Turkey joined in the U.S.-led anti-terrorist alliance, but some Turks expressed suspicion that Russia would seize the opportunity to tighten Moscow’s control in Transcaucasia, especially Georgia, and avoid meeting the CFE limits (these concerns were partially mitigated when the United States sent its troops to Georgia.) On the other hand the U.S. activity in Central Asia, which seemed to limit Russian influence there, was seen positively in Ankara.

Two months after September 11th, Putin moved to further consolidate relations with Turkey. At the UN meeting in November 2001 Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, signed an “action plan” for their countries to cooperate in Eurasia, which emphasized increased economic cooperation and the fight against terrorism.⁵⁸

The fight against terrorism was to dominate Russian-Turkish relations in 2002, as trade lagged, this time primarily because of the slow-down of the Turkish economy which had suffered a severe crisis in 2001. With Putin still concerned over the war in Chechnya, which showed no signs of ending, and the Turkish government still concerned about the revival of the PKK threat, even though Ocalan sat in a Turkish prison; in late January 2002, Turkey and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement calling for the exchange of officers for training purposes, and the two countries promised to prohibit terrorist organizations on their soil from acting against each other.⁵⁹ For its part, Turkey informed Moscow of its willingness to consider

the extradition of Movladi Udugov, one of the main leaders of the Chechen rebellion.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Turkey came under criticism from Russia during the October 2002 Chechen seizure of a Moscow theater. The Russian ambassador to Turkey Alexander Lebedev accused the Turkish media of hypocrisy in reporting the theater seizure, noting “Is a terrorist who carries out terrorist acts against Turkish citizens in Turkey a completely different thing to the Chechen terrorist who carries out sabotage against Russians in Russia?” Lebedev went so far as to ask “Is opposition to Russia a genetic syndrome (in Turkey)?”⁶¹ Meanwhile, for its part, then Turkish Foreign Minister Gurel denounced the theater seizure as a “terrorist act,” and stated, “We will never approve of a terrorist action, no matter what the cause.”⁶²

The other major issue troubling Russian-Turkish security relations was also Chechen related, the on-again, off-again Russian pressure against Georgia (which now had more trade with Turkey than Russia) over the Pankisi Gorge. Given the fact that the Shevardnadze government which signed a regional security agreement with Turkey and Azerbaijan in January 2002, was none too stable to start with, and that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline which is set to run through Georgia, had begun to be constructed, Turkey was clearly concerned about the Russian pressure on Georgia, which included some serious military threats and a bombing of Georgian territory on August 23, which elicited a letter of protest from the Turkish Foreign Ministry.⁶³

On a more positive military note, Russian-Turkish military cooperation was stepped up in 2002. An inter-governmental commission on military-technological cooperation was established and held its first meeting in September.⁶⁴ One suggested project was a helicopter building industry in Turkey, that would be linked to the joint Russian-Israeli KA50-2(Black Shark) military helicopter and also the KA-115 light multipurpose helicopter.⁶⁵ Given Turkey’s

weakened economic position, the Russians may have felt Turkey would now be more willing to purchase the Russian helicopter rather than the AH-12 King Cobra helicopter being offered by the U.S. company, Bell Helicopter. The Russians also claimed that the KA-50-2 payload was greater (up to 2500 kilograms) with a 450 km radius, and a faster maximum speed (350 km/hour.)⁶⁶

On the trade front, the major development was the completion of the 1400 kilometer, multi-billion dollar Blue Stream pipeline. Turkey already was purchasing more than 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year from Russia (70 percent of Turkey's annual needs), and with Blue Stream functioning, Turkey is expected to further increase its gas imports from Russia. Interestingly enough, Turkey appeared to exploit the completion of Blue Stream as well as the weakness in the Turkish economy to get a nine percent discount on the gas it was purchasing from Iran and sought to get a discount from Gazprom as well.⁶⁷ However, the Iranians might have been willing to give the discount in an effort to spur exports to Europe via Turkey – something that put it in competition with Russia, while also weakening U.S. efforts to economically isolate Iran.⁶⁸

On the negative side of the energy trade, however, the issue of the straits continued to be a problem in Russian-Turkish relations as the Caspian pipeline consortium complained that in October 2002 Turkey had implemented new regulations limiting loaded tankers to 200 meters before they could pass through the straits and then only in daytime and with 48 hours notice.⁶⁹

Finally, the election of an Islamist government, albeit apparently a moderate one, in November 2002 had to be of concern to Moscow given the fact that Turkish Islamists had been among the major supporters of the Chechen rebels in the mid-1990's. However, the initial selection of Abdullâh Gül by the Justice and Development (AK) Party as Prime Minister, the

least Islamist of the candidates, appeared to reassure Moscow, as Gul, in an interview on November 15, 2002 in the *Turkish Daily News* stated “Our aim is to show the world that a country which has a Moslem population can also be democratic, transparent, and modern and cooperate with the world.”⁷⁰ In addition, the visit of AK leader Reccip Erdogan (who was later to become Prime Minister) to Moscow 2002 in December appeared very positive as Putin expressed satisfaction with the level of ties with Turkey, and the two countries agreed to work to further develop economic cooperation.

During the Erdogan visit, both countries announced their support for UN Resolution 1441 on Iraq, and Foreign Minister Ivanov called for the expansion of trade “especially in the military area.”⁷¹ Putin was particularly effusive in his comments praising the completion of Blue Stream, and noting: “Turkey is our long-standing reliable partner and our relations have been developing very intensively lately. I expect that the best traditions in relations between Russia and Turkey will be preserved and we will bring them to a new level.” Putin also thanked Erdogan for “his tough stance on resisting terrorism and his condolences in relation to the act of terrorism in Moscow.”⁷²

On the diplomatic front, the two countries drew closer as the U.S. invasion of Iraq approached as neither supported the U.S. attack, with Turkish public opinion even more opposed to the war than Russian opinion.⁷³ Nonetheless, despite all the good will, and Putin’s effusive remarks during the Erdogan visit, Moscow had to be concerned that the AK party’s Islamic moderation might not last (it had, after all, the same roots as Necmettin Erbakan’s strongly Islamist Welfare Party)⁷⁴ and if it turned in a more fundamentalist direction, that could pose problems for Russia not only in Central Asia and the Caucasus, but also in Russia itself.⁷⁵ In addition, the Straits problem remained unsolved and in May 2003 Russian Prime Minister

Kasyanov openly criticized Turkey for the restrictions it had imposed six months earlier stating “We understand Turkish officials’ preoccupation, but we must solve these problems together. Decisions to change cargo transit rules should never be taken unilaterally.”⁷⁶

In looking at Russian policy toward Turkey under Putin, there are two main factors to consider. The first is trade. Russia, with an effort centered around the Blue Stream pipeline, has sought to rebuild trade with Turkey, at a minimum back to the 10-12 billion dollar level it had reached before the Russian economic crisis of 1998 and the Turkish economic crisis of 2001-2002, and Moscow has also pressed its efforts to sell additional military equipment to Turkey. Second, with the war in Chechnya continuing Putin has sought to curb Turkish aid to the Chechen rebellion, apparently with a modicum of success. Nonetheless, problems in the Russian-Turkish relationship continue, although they are far less severe than in the Primakov era. These problems include the transit of Russian tankers through the Turkish straits, and continuing Russian pressure on Georgia which could threaten the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. From the Russian perspective there may also have been the concern that the moderate policies of the Islamist AK party, elected to run Turkey in November 2002, could take a more fundamentalist turn and this could well cause problems for Russia, not only in Chechnya but also in Russia and in Transcaucasia and Central Asia as well.

Conclusions

In analyzing Putin’s policy toward Iraq, Iran and Turkey, the main countries of importance to Moscow in the Middle East, one can point to a number of common factors. First is the desire to promote Russian business interests whether in the form of oil field development (Iraq), nuclear reactor sales (Iran), or natural gas sales (Turkey). Second is the desire either legally (Iran and Turkey) or illegally (Iraq) to sell weapons systems. Third, as Russian elections

neared, a shifting of the Russian position away from the close post 9/11 embrace of the U.S. appeared to be a good political tilt for Putin, and in the case of Iraq, the prolongation of the crisis helped keep oil prices high which, in turn, helped the Russian economy. Fourth, Chechnya remains a major preoccupation for Putin and the further warming of relations with Turkey, along with continued cooperation with Iran over arms and nuclear reactor sales, if not over the Caspian, contributed to the low profile political position that both Turkey and Iran adopted toward Chechnya. Finally, it appears that while 9/11 did help to improve Russian-American relations (at least until the U.S. invasion of Iraq), it had relatively little effect on Russian policy toward Iran, Iraq or Turkey as Russian policy goals and behavior toward all three countries showed great continuity from the pre-9/11 period, although, to be sure, Iran took a dim view of U.S.-Russian cooperation in Central Asia and Georgia, while Iraq in the pre-war period objected to increased U.S.-Russian cooperation on the sanctions issue and over Resolution 1441. Still, on balance, 9/11 had little effect on Russian policy toward the Middle East while the war in Iraq, where Russia and the U.S. clashed, may have had the paradoxical effect of motivating Moscow to take a tougher stand with Iran over the Bushehr reactor.

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Notes

1 On this point, see Robert O. Freedman, Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Since the Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Challenge for Putin (University of Washington: Donald W. Treadgold paper no. 33, 2001, pp. 7-10.)

2 Ibid, pp. 51-56.

3 This policy was affirmed in Putin's May 16, 2003 State of the Union address (translated in Dave Johnson Report No. 7186, May 19, 2003.)

4 Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East, op.cit.*, p. 36 and Robert O. Freedman, "Putin and The Middle East," *Demokratizatsiya*, vol. 10 no. 4 (Fall 2002), p. 517.

5 Interviews, U.S. State Department, Fall 2002. See also Yelena Suponina, "New Sanctions, Old Problems," *Vremya Novosti*, May 8, 2002 (translated in *Current Digest of the Post Soviet Press* [hereafter *CDSP*] vol. 54 no. 19, 2002, p. 15.

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8 See Craig S. Smith, "3 NATO Members and Russia Resist U.S. on Iraq Plans," *New York Times*, February 11, 2003. Two weeks later Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, in a news conference in Beijing, threatened to use the Russian veto against a proposed U.S.-British resolution in the UN Security Council authorizing the use of force against Iraq (AP Report "Russia Warns of Iraq War Resolution Veto," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2003) Putin himself, in Paris on February 12 had hinted that Russia might use its veto (John Leicester, "Putin: Russia could use its veto at UN," *Moscow Times*, February 12, 2003.)

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