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Possible Russian Responses to an Attack on Iran

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As international activity surrounding the Iranian nuclear program intensifies, it seems that the question of a possible war on Iran is taking center stage on Russia's agenda as well. There is evidence of heightened diplomatic activity, along with military preparations and an expanded public debate reflecting differences of opinion within the Russian establishment.

On the diplomatic and political levels, there has been extensive Russian activity for quite some time, but the pace is accelerating to match the heightened international pressure. Amidst this, the Russian stance on the Iranian nuclear program has undergone several changes, in particular since the publication of the most recent IAEA report. If before the report was published Russia refused to recognize the existence of the Iranian program, the current stance is as follows: Russia views the nuclear program in a negative light and sees it as a threat to the international system and Russia itself, but there is still no unequivocal evidence on the existence of such a program (although some say that Iran is well on its way to becoming a threshold state or has in fact already become one); the international community must act to contain the program, but not by means of sanctions, which are in any case ineffective and will not achieve their goal; and of course, there should be no military action, which is deemed catastrophic and harboring the seeds of destruction, both for the region and on the global level. The only solution is the diplomatic one, and Russia currently supports holding negotiations between the international community and Iran, with Russia and the West cooperating in this endeavor. Russia believes that it has a definite capacity to influence Iran, and it is likely that Russia expects to translate this into bonus points on the international arena. Indeed, Russia is expected to take an active part in the upcoming P5+1 talks.

Thus for the diplomatic level. In tandem, there are Russian voices – fairly authoritative ones, it should be said – averring that an attack on Iran is already a done deal and will take place within the next few months. Some identify an American intention to start an all-out war against Iran, even if the attack is carried out by Israel. This is understood as a threat to Russian interests because it is an attack on a Russian ally and a member of the political

axis headed by Russia. Moreover, such a war can be expected to spill across Iran's borders into the sphere of Russia's geopolitical interests, especially the Caucasus, and to draw regional states into the conflict. At issue specifically are Azerbaijan and Georgia, together representing one component of a Western strategic axis (it is customary to mention Israel too in this context) blocking Russia's access to the south, as well as the Iranian border. Armenia is further south and is presented as a member of the Russian-Iranian axis; Russian army units are currently deployed there. In this setting one also hears of a scenario in which a conflict between these Caucasus states can be expected (several reasons for this have accumulated in recent years), in which Russia would be forced to become involved and make its way south, through their territories, in order to extend help to its allies – Armenia and Iran. Beyond this, dire warnings about a large influx of refugees that would for some reason flee northwards from an Iran under attack towards the Caucasus and eventually Russia itself have been sounded from many quarters for quite some time. Even if this last scenario is highly dubious, it has become a major (propaganda) justification in Russia's regional military preparations.

Nor has the subject remained entirely theoretical, and in recent months Russia has prepared in practical terms for just such a war. This includes formulating operational and logistical solutions to prepare Russia's southern regional district, via staff and troop exercises and including ABC warfare, for a possible confrontation. The forces deployed across from the likely arena of conflict – supposed to encompass regions beyond the Caucasus, including the areas of the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean – are being beefed up. The current Russian-Turkish tension is also relevant in this context, as Turkey is liable to become an active enemy of Russia. Also noteworthy is the activity of the Russian Navy in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, which involves friction with the Turks in the waters of Cyprus, and the constant presence across the coast of Syria, Russia's ally in the same axis (and Russia's conduct on the Syrian issue over the past year figures in this calculation as well).

All of the above has recently begun to surface in the media, and at the same time there seems to be a kind of debate in Russia about the Iranian issue among senior politicians, military personnel, and academics. Generally speaking, one may discern two camps in this debate: the camp supporting a war, spouting anti-Western slogans, and calling for violent action to advance Russian regional and global interests while exploiting the situation to solve ancillary geopolitical issues both in the Caucasus and the Middle East. Some are calling to remove the threat from Iran, Russia's ally, by undercutting the sanctions, consolidating an anti-Western coalition, and even threatening the use of strategic weapons. A few even view Iran's desire for nuclear weapons in a positive light – as a means of increasing regional stability.

On the other hand, there are academic and public figures vehemently opposed to these drums of war. Discerning elements that are interested in seeing a war erupt in Iran that

involves Russia, this camp warns of the destructive ramifications of this scenario and calls for more modest Russian international aspirations, with Russia taking a firm stand within the international community and acting in concert with the other nations to contain Iran's nuclear program, whether through dialogue or through the application of coordinated international pressure.

The impression has thus been created that Russia as yet has no clear, unequivocal stance, at least externally, on how it would react if and when Iran comes under attack. Internal disagreement reflects both indecisiveness and various ambitions. Nonetheless, the preparations for a military response to an attack on Iran seem genuine enough. At the same time, it appears that Russia is not keen on direct military intervention on Iranian soil, but would rather deal with one of the following scenarios:

- a. One scenario would be meant to display power, perhaps by moving military units to the Iranian border or by flying the flag around the Caspian, Black, and Mediterranean Seas, while making use of bold rhetoric in order to gain points on the international arena (suffice it to remember Russia's need to recover from damages incurred due to the Arab Spring).
- b. In a second scenario, Russia could exploit an attack on Iran – should the proper circumstances present themselves – to promote its geopolitical interests in the Caucasus, while moving forces towards Azerbaijan and Georgia to help its allies, solve humanitarian problems (such as the flood of refugees), and engage in similar activities.

In any case, it seems that Russia is facing a dilemma over which there is now a charged debate with implications for all sides involved.

