

**RUSSIA, IRAN, AND THE (INCREASINGLY) LONELY SUPERPOWER****By John R. Haines**

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*The translation of all source material is by the author unless noted otherwise.*

*Leadership is the other side of the coin of loneliness.*

-Ferdinand Marcos

*There is no loneliness greater than the loneliness of a failure.*

-Eric Hoffer

"The Lonely Superpower" is the title of Samuel Huntington's 1999 essay in which he wrote, "The circle of governments who see their interests coinciding with American interests is shrinking. This is manifest, among other ways, in the central lineup among the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council."<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere does it manifest more clearly today than in the current P5+1 talks with Iran. The P5+1 group consists of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—plus Germany. According to Kayhan Barzegar, who directs the Tehran-based Institute of Middle East Strategic Studies, "The logic of Iran-Russia relations in the P5+1 has so far been based on three strategic principles: implementing diplomacy, removing sanctions, and containing the threat."<sup>2</sup> Barzegar claims that in January, the P5+1 signaled a shift in emphasis away from strategic and weaponization aspects of the Iranian nuclear program—"the Israeli and the Saudi paths...to bring the Iranian nuclear program to zero"—and toward considerations of verification and transparency.<sup>3</sup>

The three European P5+1 members' reaction to the recent letter to Iran's leaders drafted by Arkansas freshman Senator Tom Cotton was unsurprising if varying in tone. The letter was "unhelpful" according to German Foreign Affairs Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, whom Senator John McCain proceeded to excoriate—with no apparent intent of irony—as belonging to "the Neville Chamberlain school of diplomacy."<sup>4</sup> United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond warned the House of

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington (1999). "The Lonely Superpower." *Foreign Affairs*. 78:2 (March/April 1999),

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/54797/samuel-p-huntington/the-lonely-superpower>. Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Kayhan Barzegar (undated). "Iran-Russia Relations after the Geneva Nuclear Deal." Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies [published online in English]. <http://en.cmess.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=620>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "Iran In The Regional And Global Context: is There Life after the Comprehensive Agreement?" *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security*. 20:3-4 (2014), p. 96. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19934270.2014.988975>. Last accessed 15 March 2015. Barzegar is Director of the Tehran-based IMESS and a former fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center. He writes elsewhere, "Given the past bitter relations between Iran and the United States, it is unlikely that the two countries would establish close and comprehensive political-security relations in the near future. In other words, establishing a strategic alliance with the West is out of the question for the time being."

[<http://en.cmess.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=620>. Last accessed 14 March 2015]

<sup>4</sup> McCain added, "The foreign minister of Germany is the same guy that refuses—and his government—to enact any restrictions on the behavior of

Commons that the Cotton letter “could become a spanner in the works” of the negotiations with an “unpredictable effect on opinion” inside Iran.<sup>5</sup> France's most noticed public response was a laconic tweet by its ambassador to the United States, Gerard Araud: “For a foreigner, Washington can be full of surprise....”<sup>6</sup>

The individual reactions of Germany, the United Kingdom, and France each echo Huntington's earlier description of the European Union:

“Undoubtedly the single most important move toward an antihegemonic coalition [...] As French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine has said, Europe must come together on its own and create a counterweight to stop the United States from dominating a multipolar world.”<sup>7</sup>

If (at least from Europe's perspective) discordant views held by the executive and legislative branches of the United States government have produced a collective cognitive dissonance, Europe's alternative is *strategic patience*. German Foreign Minister Steinmeier expanded on that theme a few days ago:

“Henry Kissinger wrote something very insightful in his latest book: If we insist on achieving the end result immediately, we risk setbacks. He is right. Our foreign policy context is hardly ever black and white, and we need to spend much time and effort on sorting out the many shades of grey. [...] My experience after several years in foreign policy is: It might only take days to spark a crisis but it could well take years to resolve it. In diplomacy, even more than in real life, tenacity is a virtue!”<sup>8</sup>

Others see Europe's posture in a less virtuous light:

“Europeans are said to lack geopolitical nous. They think too narrowly, and are loath to use coercive tools to achieve strategic objectives.”<sup>9</sup>

That leaves the other two P5+1 members, Russia and China, whose common normative position Huntington captured when he wrote:

“One by one, the major regional powers are making it clear that they do not want the United States messing around in regions where their interests are predominant.”<sup>10</sup>

While “the United States would clearly prefer a unipolar system in which it would be the hegemon and often acts as if such a system existed,” Russia and China want to “pursue their interests, unilaterally and collectively, without being subject to constraints, coercion, and pressure” by the United States. The implication is clear in the context of the P5+1 process:

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Vladimir Putin, who is slaughtering Ukrainians as we speak.” [http://www.thelocal.de/20150313/steinmeier-attacks-us-republicans-over-iran. Last accessed 14 March 2015] A few days earlier, Germany's ambassador to the United States, Peter Wittig, said the two governments agreed in February not to send lethal defensive aid to Ukraine, notwithstanding President Obama's comment at the time that while “a decision has not yet been made [...] the possibility of lethal defensive weapons is one of those options that's being examined.” See: “Obama decided not to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine 'after talks with Merkel'.” *Ukraine Today* [published online in English 10 March 2015]. <http://uatoday.tv/news/obama-decided-not-to-supply-lethal-weapons-to-ukraine-after-talks-with-merkel-414361.html>. Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>5</sup> “Iran condemns 'untrustworthy' America as Senate letter casts doubt over nuclear deal.” *The Telegraph* [published online in English 10 March 2015]. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/11462598/Iran-condemns-untrustworthy-America-as-Senate-letter-casts-doubt-over-nuclear-deal.html>. Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/GerardAraud/status/574766019975245825>. Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Huntington (1999), *op cit*. Lest there be any doubt the European perspective is different from the American, the European Union refers to the negotiating group as the “E3/EU +3” rather than the “P5+1” favored by the United States. See: “You say P5+1, I say E3+3.” *Foreign Policy* [published online in English 30 September 2009]. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/30/you-say-p51-i-say-e33/>. Last accessed 14 March 2015] For its part, Russian sources tend to refer to use “P5+1” but list Russia first among the P5. [For example, see: <http://rt.com/news/240277-iran-sanctions-lift-talks-us/>. Last accessed 14 March 2015]

<sup>8</sup> “Maintaining Transatlantic Unity in a Complex World.” Speech by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 12 March 2015. [http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2015/150312-BM\\_CSIS.html?nn=479796](http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2015/150312-BM_CSIS.html?nn=479796). Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Willem Th. Oosterveld & Sijbren De Jong (2015). “Why Turkey is crucial to solving Europe's gas conundrum.” *EU Observer* [published online in English 13 March 2015]. <http://euobserver.com/opinion/127981>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Huntington (1999), *op cit*. Similarly, regarding Iran, Huntington wrote that it “strongly opposes the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf. The current bad relations between the United States and Iran are the product of the Iranian revolution. If, however, the Shah or his son now ruled Iran, those relations would probably be deteriorating because Iran would see the American presence in the Gulf as a threat to its own hegemony there.”

“[N]either Russia nor China [will] ever allow another UN Security Council resolution to pass that might authorize the imposition of any kind of sanctions against Iran. It is not really because Russia loves Iran or China loves Iran in the international policy context, but because of their pursuit of shared strategic interests. [Nor will] any kind of resolution pass through the Security Council to authorize or even hint at the use of force against Iran for the next 10 years given, if you like, the economic situation and Iran's role in the region.”<sup>11</sup>

The coalescing interests of the “P5 *minus* 1” (i.e., excluding the United States) vis-à-vis Iran gives rise to a new, perhaps underappreciated impetus for a collective negotiating process, one many American commentaries reflexively consider a *de facto* bilateral one.

What of Russia's position? Former intelligence officer Igor N. Morozov, now chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Russian Federal Assembly's upper house,<sup>12</sup> declared on 10 March, “Today, Iran has been rescued from the dead end in which it found itself due to its own national nuclear program.”<sup>13</sup> In an interview three days earlier with the Russian news portal *Vestnik Kavkaza*, he said “Russia and Iran have many topics to discuss,” adding that President Putin would visit Tehran “in the very near future.”<sup>14</sup>

Whatever disruptive effect Senator Cotton's letter may have on the P5+1, it is small beer compared to the persistence of Russian leaders in trying to undercut the position of the United States. Dr. Barzegar of Tehran's IMESS' writes:

“For Iran, Russia is a strategic partner that can offset the threat of America and its allies in Iran's security backyard. For Russia, Iran can be a means of balancing the threat posed by America and its regional allies in its Near Abroad region, especially in the Caucasus. [...] The regional and strategic logic behind Iran-Russia relations will strengthen the traditional bond between the two countries, which is based on nuclear cooperation and transfer of sophisticated defensive weapons systems...the two items that the West has never been keen to provide to Iran.”<sup>15</sup>

It is notable that these heretofore-Russian themes—the congruence of Iranian and Russian regional interests, and Iran's rearmament (with Russian ordinance)—appeared in an Iranian foreign policy forum of record.

For its part, the Russian government-controlled news portal *Iran.ru* published an extended analysis last October from which the following text is excerpted:

“In fact, only Russia and China have approached fairly the question of Iran's nuclear program. After all, Moscow has never linked a solution to regime change in Tehran...nor tried to foment ethnic conflicts in the multiethnic Iranian state, like the United States.

“Unlike the United States, Russia is interested in a strong Iran, which can resist an aggressive onslaught of pressure from America, the EU, NATO, Israel, and the GCC monarchies. And Russia is ready to help strengthen Iran, particularly its defenses, by supplying it the most modern weapons and military equipment, especially air defense systems, combat aircraft, armored vehicles, ships, etc. And then Tehran will not have to fear threats and blackmail by the West, Israel and the GCC.

“After all, Russia and Iran are in the same boat. Therefore, we must unite and attract other countries that could potentially be targeted by Western sanctions. The priority is to create a strong regional security structure like, for example, the SCO [the Shanghai Cooperation Organization]. This could entail a new regional security system involving Russia, Central Asia, the Greater Caucasus, and Iran. Another option is to establish a new organization consisting of Russia, Iran, Syria and Iraq, with headquarters in Tehran. Over

<sup>11</sup> The quote is part of a longer statement by Wu Bingbing, Director of the Department of Arabic Language and Culture at Peking University. While outside the central theme of this essay, he is clear that China, too, has wearied of the sanctions regime. See: “Iran In The Regional And Global Context: Is There Life after the Comprehensive Agreement?” *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security*. 20:3-4, p. 96. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19934270.2014.988975>. Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Formally, the Federation Council of Russia [Russian: Совет Федерации. Russian transl.: *Sovet Federatsii*].

<sup>13</sup> “Negotiations with Iran 'most useful' in many years.” *Russia Beyond the Headlines* [published online in English 10 March 2015]. [http://rbth.com/international/2015/03/10/negotiations\\_with\\_iran\\_most\\_useful\\_in\\_many\\_years\\_44373.html](http://rbth.com/international/2015/03/10/negotiations_with_iran_most_useful_in_many_years_44373.html). Last accessed 14 March 2015. *Russia Beyond the Headlines* is a news aggregator sponsored by the Russian government-owned news portal, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.

<sup>14</sup> <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/video/67496.html>. Last accessed 14 March 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Barzegar, *op cit*.

time, other countries can join. These steps would be consistent with the new doctrine of Russian foreign policy announced a few days ago President Vladimir Putin at the Valdai Forum in Sochi.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, President Putin in February discussed the status of Iran's bid for membership with its special representative, Ali Akbar Velayati,<sup>17</sup> and pledged Russia's support at the SCO summit this July in Ufa. All parties agree that the main obstacle to Iran's membership in the SCO is the UN Security Council-imposed sanctions regime.

It is interesting that a Russian government-controlled media portal raised the issue of "air defense systems, combat aircraft, armored vehicles, ships, etc."<sup>18</sup> given the continuing hard feelings in Iran regarding President Dmitry Medvedev's September 2010 cancellation of an arms sales agreement in order to comply with the UNSC sanctions. This included the Russian S-300 defensive missile system, for which Iran prepaid USD800 million and was forced to seek redress before the Paris-based International Court of Arbitration. There is also the matter of Russia's longstanding refusal to service Iran's submarine fleet, which would have given Iran increased operational maneuverability in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

As one commentary put it, "the perennial mistrust of Russia's ultimate objectives in its latest overtures toward Tehran stay robust inside Iranian officialdom." This is not without some basis: for decades, Russia have used Iran as a bargaining chip in its complex relationship with the West, siding with Western powers on all of the major UN Security Council resolutions related to Tehran's nuclear program, including UNSC Resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1929 (2010).<sup>19</sup>

Russia has had its own misgivings about Iran, particularly as regards the prospects of an Iranian nuclear weapons program, which Russia made abundantly clear at last year's Non-Proliferation Conference in Moscow.<sup>20</sup> Russian leaders also deeply resent how they were shut out of secret negotiations between Iran and the United States. These talks were mediated and hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, and paved the way for the Geneva Interim Agreement on the Iranian Nuclear Program. Russian leaders saw the talks as part of a growing and disturbing trend towards bilateral negotiations between the United States and Iran outside the framework of the P5+1.<sup>21</sup> Russia must also be worried about Iran's ambitions to become a main supplier of energy to Europe, knowing full well that energy supplies are a major incentive for the West to resolve the Iranian nuclear status issue.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia and Iran in January signed a defense pact during an official visit to Tehran by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to meet Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan, who is Iran's Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister. It was the first visit to Tehran by a Russian defense minister since 2002. Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency quoted Dehghan:

"We consider this trip and agreement a starting point for the development of g military cooperation within a specified time frame [...] What we focused on above all else was our common assessment analysis of the phenomena of terrorism and factors that destabilize the region; and America's grand strategy to interfere in regional and global affairs, and the necessity of confronting factors that cause crises to arise."<sup>23</sup>

Afterwards, the Iranian government news agency *IRNA* (Islamic Republic News Agency) declared "The Russian minister's visit brings Russian-Iranian relations to a new level of cooperation in the field of security."<sup>24</sup> The Russian news portal *Sputnik*

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Alekseev (2014). "России нужен сильный и стабильный Иран" ("Russia needs a strong and stable Iran"). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 27 October 2014]. [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytcs/95093/Rossii\\_nuzhen\\_silnyy\\_i\\_stabilnyy\\_Iran](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytcs/95093/Rossii_nuzhen_silnyy_i_stabilnyy_Iran). Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Velayati was Iran's Foreign Minister from 1981-1997.

<sup>18</sup> According to Sergei Chemezov, chairman of the Russian defense company Rostec (and on United States sanctions lists since April 2014 in connection with the Ukraine crisis), the Russian government offered in February to sell Iran the advanced Antey-2500 air defense system. It is true, however, that Russia has threatened and withdrawn such offers in the past, including the 2010 sale of the less advanced S-300 air defense system. See: Anna Borshchevskaya (2015). "How Russia Views the Iran Nuclear Talks." *The Washington Institute Policywatch* 2382 (12 March 2015). <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-russia-views-the-iran-nuclear-talks>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Azmi Bishara, et al. (2015). "The Widening Scope of Russian-Iranian Coordination: Egypt Aligned." *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (30 January 2015). <http://azmibishara.com/Ideas/Readings/The-Widening-Scope-of-Russian-Iranian-Coordination.aspx>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Vitaly Naumkin (2014). "Russia's Middle East policy after the G-20 summit." *Al-Monitor* [published online in English 24 November 2014]. <http://bit.ly/1uwkkaK>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Laurence Norman (20-13). "Two-Track Negotiations Led to Iran Nuclear Deal." *The Wall Street Journal*. [published online 24 November 2013]. <http://on.wsj.com/1zRZok8>. Last accessed 15 March 2015. Cited in Bishara, et al. (2015), *op cit*.

<sup>22</sup> Bishara, et al. (2015), *op cit*

<sup>23</sup> Fars New Agency [published online in Farsi 24 January 2015]. <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931030000571>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Tatyana Rusakova (2015). "Russia, Iran sign defence pact, prospects uncertain." *Russia & India Report* [published online in English 23 January 2015]. [http://m.in.rbth.com/economics/2015/01/23/russia\\_iran\\_sign\\_defence\\_pact\\_prospects\\_uncertain\\_40979.html](http://m.in.rbth.com/economics/2015/01/23/russia_iran_sign_defence_pact_prospects_uncertain_40979.html). Last accessed 15 March

quoted Dehghan as saying “[During negotiations,] the importance of the need to develop Russia and Iran’s cooperation in the joint struggle against meddling in the affairs of the region by external forces that are not part of it was framed.”<sup>25</sup>

We may see the first test of this new security cooperation in Yemen, where the late January capture of the capital city, Sanaa, by the Iranian-aligned Houthis precipitated the collapse of the Yemeni government. Russia senses an opportunity to reacquire its Soviet-era toehold in the region (when it had access to air and naval facilities in the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen *aka* South Yemen) and to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia, whom both Russia and Iran accuse of conspiring with the United States to reduce world oil prices. Russian leaders also sees the Houthis as part of a wider Shi’ite axis with which Russia finds itself in a tacit alliance against Sunni threats to Russian strategic interests.

Bilateral cooperation has intensified and expanded to other sectors. In August 2014, the Russian Energy Ministry announced an oil-for-goods swap worth USD1.5 billion per month under which approximately 500,000 barrels of Iranian oil per day priced at a discount will be traded for Russian goods and services. While some question the accord's feasibility, it remains on the table. And in December 2014, Iranian ambassador to Russia Mehdi Sanaei reportedly announced plans to boost bilateral trade from the current \$3-5 billion to \$70 billion.<sup>26</sup>

On the other side, while some Russian analysts are quick to dismiss “myths about Russian competition with Iranian natural gas,”<sup>27</sup> Iranian officials are more circumspect. Iranians gas reserves could reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas, for example, if the new Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline to transport gas from Azerbaijan (and it is rumored, at Turkey's invitation, Turkmenistan) also carried Iranian gas.

Iran's Deputy Oil Minister Abbas Shahri Moghaddam said on 19 January, “We are surprised by the fact that Russia, which produces almost as much oil as Saudi Arabia, is not ready to act in concert with Venezuela, Iran and Iraq to cut production by two million barrels a day.”<sup>28</sup> His point quickly entered the Russian narrative:

"If, in the face of the Saudi and American conspiracy [to drive oil prices lower], the Russian Federation had coordinated its oil policy with Tehran and drawn in Iraq and Venezuela at the same time, the price of oil would not have fallen, but risen, perhaps as high as 200 dollars per barrel.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Iran has pressed Russia for support of its claims regarding the division of the Caspian Sea.<sup>30</sup>

A broader geostrategic vision may animate the Russian government's engagement with Iran. Both Russian and Iranian interests would be served, Russia believes, if the two were “to create a 'southern corridor' from the Indian Ocean to the Volga River and on to Europe”:

“Iran's territory is the shortest transit route for Russia to South Asia and Southeast Asia. And Russia, in turn, is a transit area in this direction for central and northwestern Europe. [...] The geopolitical significance of a

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<sup>25</sup> "Russia, Iran Sign Joint Military Cooperation Agreement." *Sputnik* [published online in English 20 January 2015].

<http://sputniknews.com/military/20150120/1017111548.html>. Last accessed 15 March 2015. Sputnik is a news portal operated by *Rossiia Segodnya*, which itself is owned and operated by the Russian government.

<sup>26</sup> Borshchevskaya (2015), *op cit*.

<sup>27</sup> Igor Pankratenko (2015). "Иранский газ и мифы о «конкуренции» с Россией" ("Iranian gas and myths about 'competition' with Russia"). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 9 February 2015]. [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96186/iranskiy\\_gaz\\_i\\_mify\\_o\\_konkurencii\\_s\\_Rossiey](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96186/iranskiy_gaz_i_mify_o_konkurencii_s_Rossiey). Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Alexeev (2015). "Реалии и перспективы российско-иранских отношений" ("Realities and perspectives of Russian-Iranian relations"). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 13 February 2015].

[http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96275/Realii\\_i\\_perspektivy\\_rossiysko\\_iranskih\\_otnosheniy](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96275/Realii_i_perspektivy_rossiysko_iranskih_otnosheniy). Last accessed 15 March 2015. The original Persian language report of Moghaddam's comments is found here: <http://tnews.ir/news/FEEE36168654.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Efimov (2015). "Российская стратегия в отношении ключевых стран Ближнего Востока" ("Russia's strategy for key Middle Eastern countries"). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 24 February 2015].

[http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96378/Rossiyskaya\\_strategiya\\_v\\_otnoshenii\\_klyuchevyh\\_stran\\_Blizhnego\\_Vostoka](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96378/Rossiyskaya_strategiya_v_otnoshenii_klyuchevyh_stran_Blizhnego_Vostoka). Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Russia's position, supported by Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, is based on its Modified Median Line (MML) formula. The MML divides the Caspian seabed and leaves the superjacent waters open for navigation by all littoral countries. Under the MML, the more coastal area a nation has, the more area of the Caspian Sea it gets. Russia and Azerbaijan would each get almost 20 percent of the Caspian seabed, Kazakhstan 30 percent, Turkmenistan 17 percent, and Iran 13 percent. Iran's proposal is to divide the Caspian Sea into equal fifths, and to have a complete division of the sea rather than limit it to the seabed. See: Bahman Aghai Diba (2015). "Caspian Sea: is Iran changing its position on the Caspian legal regime?" *Payvand Iran News* [published online in English 13 March 2015]. <http://www.payvand.com/news/15/mar/1077.html>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

project to create a Russia-Iran-India political union—and eventually to connect it to China, Southeast Asian, and Asia-Pacific—would pose a powerful juxtaposition to the aggressive NATO bloc led by the U.S.”<sup>31</sup>

### Russian-Iranian Southern Corridor



Source: [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/93975/Rossiysko\\_iranskiy\\_yuzhnyy\\_koridor](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/93975/Rossiysko_iranskiy_yuzhnyy_koridor)

An analysis published last Friday on the Russian government-controlled news portal *Iran.ru* leveled a serious criticism at Russia's past mishandling of relations with Iran:

“It is striking that over the past 23 years, Russia has not developed a short-term or a long-term foreign policy strategy toward Iran. Russia's actions have been a patchwork, an after-the-fact response to geopolitical developments in its relations with Iran.”<sup>32</sup>

The same analysis went on to observe:

“Iran should be under no illusions. The sanctions will not be cancelled. No one in the West will cooperate with the current government of Iran. Tehran urgently needs to prepare to repel an air attack against its nuclear facilities, which most likely will be followed by attempts to foment a 'color' revolution. In the meantime, Iranian authorities seem unprepared. Clever gambits that appear to advance the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program and the partial easing of sanctions have caused the Iranian leadership to relax. But there is still time to gather strength.”<sup>33</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts

Huntington's neologism *uni-multipolar* describes a system with one superpower and several major powers. He concluded his essay with this thought:

“In the multipolar world of the 21st century, the major powers will inevitably compete, clash, and coalesce with each other in various permutations and combinations. Such a world, however, will lack the tension and conflict between the superpower and the major regional powers that are the defining characteristic of a uni-multipolar world. For that reason, the United States could find life as a major power in a multipolar world

<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Alekseev (2014). "Российско-иранский южный коридор" ("Russian-Iranian southern corridor"). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 24 June 2014]. [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/93975/Rossiysko\\_iranskiy\\_yuzhnyy\\_koridor](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/93975/Rossiysko_iranskiy_yuzhnyy_koridor). Last accessed 15 March 2015. The online news portal *Iran.ru* publishes in Farsi, Russian and English. It is operated by the Russian government-owned Russian Information Agency.

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Alekseev (2015). "США хотят одного – смены режима в Иране" (The United Statesers wants one thing - regime change in Iran). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 13 March 2015]. [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96584/SShA\\_hotyat\\_odnogo\\_smeny\\_rezhima\\_v\\_Irane](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/96584/SShA_hotyat_odnogo_smeny_rezhima_v_Irane). Last accessed 15 March 2015. The quoted text reads in the original Russian: "Поразительно то, что за 23 года новейшей истории России так и не была разработана ни краткосрочная, ни долгосрочная стратегия внешней политики в отношении Ирана. Все действия России – это латание дыр, запоздалая реакция на геополитические процессы в связи с Ираном."

<sup>33</sup> Alekseev (2015), *op cit*. This echoes an early warning by published on the same portal in November 2014: "In strategic terms, a policy of strengthening relations with Russia...will become an objective necessity for Hassan Rouhani's administration. [...] Regardless of the West's promises, all its efforts will be directed at 'reformatting' the Islamic Republic into something that is not in the interests of the Iranian leadership or the Iranian people." Igor Nikolayev (2014). "Нужна ли Россия Хасану Роухани в качестве партнера?" ("Does Hassan Rouhani need Russia as a partner?"). *Iran.ru* [published online in Russian 7 November 2014]. [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/95209/Nuzhna\\_li\\_Rossiya\\_Hasanu\\_Rouhani\\_v\\_kachestve\\_partnera](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/95209/Nuzhna_li_Rossiya_Hasanu_Rouhani_v_kachestve_partnera). Last accessed 15 March 2015.

less demanding, less contentious, and more rewarding than it was as the world's only superpower.”<sup>34</sup>

President Obama would not be faulted for thinking that either Huntington was wrong, or his multipolar world has yet to arrive. In either case, it appears he will not submit whatever emerges from the P5+1 process in the form of a treaty for the advice and consent of the United States Senate.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is the specter of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which in 1999 became the only security-related treaty since the Treaty of Versailles nearly 80 years earlier to fail in the Senate.

There are published reports to the effect that the P5+1 product may instead go directly to the United Nations Security Council for adoption as a so-called “Article 41 resolution,” giving it significant force under international law. This is similar to the approach taken by the Obama administration in September 2013 with respect to the “Framework For Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons.”

Legal scholars have different views as to how this might be reconciled with sanctions earlier adopted by Congress, and what happens if what the Security Council eventually adopts conflicts with American statutes. That, however, is not the question here. It is whether the P5+1 has simply tired of the sanctions regime, concluded that it has failed to contain Iran's nuclear program, or both.

Iranian Brigadier General Reza Khorram Tousei declared last week, “Today, we are at such a level of power that the superpowers are forced to sit to the negotiating table with us.”<sup>36</sup> He may be forgiven for thinking so, but his explanation is improbable. So far as Russia is concerned, Anna Borshchevskaya writes, “If the P5+1 is unable to reach a deal, Moscow can wait and then continue expanding nuclear cooperation with Tehran. And if a deal is reached, Moscow will strive to ensure that the terms allow it to maintain such cooperation.”<sup>37</sup> In the face of European inaction, President Putin has a demonstrated capacity to make dangerous history. Witness that on the same February day that the P5+1 announced a preliminary agreement had been struck with Iran, Russia's state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec offered to sell Iran an advanced anti-aircraft missile system. That day, the “spanner in the works” belonged to President Putin.<sup>38</sup>

Moscow's approach is a complicated mix of skepticism and realpolitik, and should be viewed through the lens of broader Russian policy toward the United States. Allying with Iran may be, as *The Moscow Times* put it last year, “Putin's ace in the hole.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Huntington, *op cit*.

<sup>35</sup> It is an interesting historic footnote that in 2010 President Putin was able to sidestep domestic opposition to a UN Security Council resolution on new sanctions against Iran because their implementation did not require ratification in the Russian parliament. Instead, they enter into force by Presidential decree.

<sup>36</sup> <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931218001165>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Borshchevskaya (2015), *op cit*.

<sup>38</sup> "Putin Throws Wrench in Iran Nuclear Talks." *The Fiscal Times* [published online in English 23 February 2015].

<http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/02/23/Putin-Throws-Wrench-Iran-Nuke-Talks>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>39</sup> "Allying With Iran Is Putin's Ace in the Hole." *The Moscow Times* [published online in English 19 August 2014].

<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/allying-with-iran-is-putin-s-ace-in-the-hole/505408.html>. Last accessed 15 March 2015.