



BULLETIN

No. 114 (846), 14 December 2015 © PISM

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New Phase in Russia's Relations with Iran: Not Only Syria, Not Only Opportunism

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The final nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran has not resulted in worsening relations or a renewal of the historical rivalry between Moscow and Tehran. Russia and Iran have common interests in and outside Syria, namely strengthening the areas of bilateral diplomatic, military and economic cooperation. The visit by Russia's president to Iran and his participation in the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Tehran on 23 November 2015, suggest a new phase in Russia's relations with Iran, which, though, might have a negative impact on the interests of the West, Turkey and Arab countries.

War in Syria. The growing scale of Russia's military intervention in Syria is giving a minimum of a chance for Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime to remain in power, and amidst the more favourable circumstances, granting Russia an important role in global diplomacy. It is also an opportunity for the consolidation of Russia's partnership with Iran, which is influential among Shias in Iraq and across the Middle East. The closeness of Moscow and Tehran's coordination of plans is illustrated by the latter allowing the Russian military to use its airspace for planes and cruise missiles targeting sites in Syria. The last few months have also shown a clear division of roles: Russia is trying to restore discipline and improve the capabilities of the weakened Armed Forces of Syria (which has up to 120,000 soldiers), while Iran has provided advisors to coordinate Syria's paramilitary National Defence Forces (with 100,000 troops), as well as Hezbollah units and Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen (in total, some 20,000 fighters) operating in Syria. These approaches are based on historical ties between the Russians and Syria's military and intelligence services, as well as between the Iranians and the Assad family and the ruling Alawites.

Russian and Iranian assistance to the regime in Damascus is wider than military issues, however, and by playing the card of the threat of the Islamic State (IS, a.k.a. ISIS) they are seeking to leverage their positions and that of Assad vis-à-vis the West. This strategy is supported by Russia's proposals for a regional conference on the Syrian war and for building a wider coalition against IS and Al-Qaeda. There is no doubt that after the terrorist bombing of a Russian civilian airplane and the attacks on the streets of Paris, there is a much improved climate in terms of Russia's relations with France, Egypt, Jordan and Israel. Nevertheless, the likelihood of recognition of the common Russian and Iranian interests by Turkey and the majority of the Arab countries is low and can be illustrated by the crisis in Moscow-Ankara relations after the Turkey shot down a Russian bomber. Because neither Russia nor Iran want to remove Assad from power, this approach *de facto* eliminates the possibility for dialogue and compromise among the major Syrian factions.

Mutual Respect of Interests. Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Tehran on 23 November 2015, might have been the introduction of a new phase in Russian-Iranian relations. This was made possible after a deal was reached in a dispute over Tehran's nuclear ambitions between Iran and the great powers and the planned end of UN, EU and U.S. economic sanctions on Iran in 2016. For more than a decade, this dispute has provided Russia with avenues for presenting itself as an important and responsible member of the UN Security Council, gaining some influence over Iran's nuclear capabilities, and blocking some international pressure on Teheran to gain concessions from the U.S. and Israel on other issues. The hopes of some politicians in Western countries for more flexibility from Russia on the Syrian war and weakened relations with Iran do seem baseless given the current, visible trends. Although both countries remain suspicious of each other and have a long history of rivalry, they hold a common hostility amongst

their elites towards the West (especially the U.S.). They also perceive their people and territory as part of separate civilisations and desire a multi-polar world to counter the strength of the West. Moreover, Tehran, unlike Turkey or Pakistan, has recognised the former Soviet republics and states in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia as within Russia's "sphere of influence." Iran has also not been a political or economic model for these states.

The first phase in modern, pragmatic relations between Tehran and Moscow was seen in Iranian assistance to Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan (1991–1994) and in ending the civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1994). The second phase of convergence in Iranian and Russian strategic interests was joint military aid to the Afghan Northern Alliance against the Taliban (1996–2001). What was of more importance to Russia in the last two decades was that Iran has never shown any sympathy or solidarity with the Chechen separatists and Islamists. Also, for the last decade Russia and Iran have been united against U.S. policy in the Middle East, distanced themselves from the NATO-ISAF mission in Afghanistan, and criticised the intervention in Iraq and the Arab Spring, perceiving the latter as mere "colour revolutions" inspired by Washington.

Prospects for Closer Military Cooperation. Iran is not a key market for Russian military equipment but in the last two decades Russia has sold 36 MiG-29 fighters, 10 Su-25 bomber-fighters, 22 Mi-17 helicopters, a few dozen SA-15 and SA-22 air defence systems, and three Kilo-class submarines to Tehran. This equipment has not changed the conventional military balance in the region but has augmented the capabilities of Iran's Armed Forces, previously dependent on now-obsolete equipment from China and North Korea.

With the removal of the UN and EU sanctions on Iran, there are new possibilities for Russian participation in the modernisation of Iran's Armed Forces and elite Revolutionary Guard Corps (numbering 523,000 troops in total). Especially attractive to Iran is rearmament of its air force, which is technologically behind its neighbours (some estimate its plans will cost about \$13 billion). The end of international sanctions is also an opportunity to end the Russian-Iranian dispute on the delivery of the SA-10 or SA-23 air and missile defence systems. Of no less importance for Russia is also the fact that its military equipment and assistance is favoured by the Shia-dominated government of Iraq (with signed contracts so far amounting to \$4.2 billion). It's noteworthy that Iran has financed the majority of Russian arms deliveries to Syria since 2011, which soon should become less of a financial burden on Tehran and more of a boon for Moscow.

Growing Economic Cooperation. During Putin's visit to Tehran, more details on the \$21 billion oil-for-goods deal were publicised. Due to international sanctions, trade between Russia and Iran decreased from \$3.8 billion in 2011 to \$1.7 billion in 2014. The sanctions' removal will open Russia up to more opportunities to start 25 joint energy and infrastructure projects. That should be much easier for Russia's Gazprom or Rosneft, which count on the Kremlin for \$5 billion in credit and are not concerned with the possibility of a snap return of sanctions (a deterring factor for any big investor from the EU or Asia). With improvements in Iran's economic situation, Russia also will have much better prospects for building eight power plants and additional nuclear plants. Rosatom has already built two light reactors in Bushehr and will assist with the conversion of a heavy-water reactor in Arak. Moscow will be Iran's only nuclear fuel supplier and receiver of spent fuel. Wider and easier access of Iranians to civilian universities and nuclear institutes in Russia might also be expected (the latter has already trained some 1,500 nuclear engineers and experts from Iran).

The Russian and Iranian economies are dependent on oil and gas exports and are feeling the effects of the current low prices. During the latest Gas Exporting Countries Forum, Russia and Iran together expressed their concerns about the "shale revolution" as it pertains to gas markets. However, Moscow is not concerned with the rapid return of Iranian oil and gas to the global economy. Iran is facing growing natural gas consumption in its internal market (and is in fact importing small quantities from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan) and for many economic and technical reasons, it is unrealistic that it will join the Nabucco gas pipeline project or add LNG export terminals to Asia. Tehran is also constrained in the growth of oil exploitation and export, so even a fast return to the global marketplace would not result in lower prices of oil (especially since 30% of planned growth will be sent to Russia). In this context, it should be noted that in the 1990s Iran was unable to attract investors to its energy sector and dropped out of the rivalry over export pipelines from the Caspian Region.

Conclusion. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia and Iran have progressed in close strategic cooperation based on mutual recognition of their respective "spheres of influence" and relations built on opposition to the West. Despite their historical rivalry and the presence even today of mutual suspicion amongst their elites, Russia and Iran have become informal allies and the ties will endure as long as the regimes in both countries are preserved. The partnership between Moscow and Tehran entered new phase with the P5+1 deal, and the prospects for opening the Iranian market to Russian arms and energy companies is increasing, as is their military intervention in the Syrian civil war. The Russian-Iranian partnership might result in regional counter-moves by Turkey and Saudi Arabia; however, less likely is effective containment by Israel. These relations seem to be solid and will not be threatened, even with Iran's reactivation of its long-range ballistic missile programme in the coming months. This factor will temporarily complicate Russian diplomatic opposition and the rhetoric against NATO's missile-defence plans but will intensify with the opening of bases in the coming year or so with such systems in Romania and Poland.