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Russian Backing for Iran and Syria: For What and for How Long

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In recent years, Russia has in practice served as the gatekeeper of international pressures on Iran and Syria. These nations, along with Hizbollah and Hamas, constitute the Middle East's anti-Western (and of course anti-Israel) "axis of evil," dedicated to a global struggle to promote its members' radical agenda. However, it is necessary to distinguish between two current issues: international pressure on Syria in the wake of its brutal suppression of the popular uprising, and developments stemming from the publication of the International Atomic Energy Agency's report on Iran's nuclear program.

In the case of Syria, what is at stake is the possibility of forceful intervention from outside (in the form of NATO) to stop the violence by the Syrian regime and in effect topple it. Russia's vigorous defense of Syria stems from its interest in vying with the West for influence on the international scene. Russia views Syria as a strategic partner that in addition to affording political advantages to Russia vis-à-vis the West, can also supply military advantages, in particular thanks to the use of Syrian military infrastructures (the most important being the port of Tartus, which has become a Russian naval base in the Mediterranean).

However, although Russia has undermined every possibility of international intervention in Syria, it seems that for some time it has been aware that Asad's regime may soon collapse, even without external intervention. Therefore, in order to preserve its future status in this country, Russia has been active on two levels: on the level of public diplomacy, it has transmitted public messages to the Syrian regime calling for it to avoid excess violence, while on the practical level it has been in contact with Syrian opposition leaders. Thus Russia is preparing for the possible end of the current regime while paving the road for cooperation with the succession.

Iranian matters, at least until recently, seem to differ. In fact, Russia's support for Iran after the publication of the IAEA report if anything grew stronger, despite Iran's becoming an international strategic threat because of its support for radical Islamic activity and especially because of its nuclear program, now entering its home stretch. Russia, which for years has worked to curb pressure on Tehran, continues to view Iran as

a critical lever to promote its own interests. Because of Iran's geopolitical weight and friendly policy towards Russia (non-intervention in Islamic issues in Russia proper as well as in regions of Russian interest), Moscow sees Iran as a key nation in the Middle East. In addition Iran is a key player for Russia because of its affiliation with the anti-Western axis in the Middle East ("the axis of evil"). Russia's support of Iran has raised its value to the West, desperately in need of Russia's help in containing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Russia for its part is managing to leverage this trend to upgrade its own international standing.

However, in the final analysis, Russia's support is not so much pro-Iranian as it is anti-Western, with Iran being Russia's primary tool in promoting this trend. Currently, Russia's backing, which seems secure, is undergoing closer scrutiny at home as a result of the IAEA report. Russian-Iranian relations have had their ups and downs in the past. Usually the nations manage to smooth over differences as their shared interest in cooperation outweighs other considerations. Nonetheless, Russia also has many reasons to be wary of Iran, primarily regarding unpredictable Iranian conduct after it attains nuclear capabilities. A nuclear Iran does not seem in Russia's interest, not just because of the direct strategic implications for Russia's own security but also because of the concern that Iran intends to leverage nuclear weapons to position itself as a superpower with all of the geopolitical ramifications this has for the region, including damage to Russia's standing. All of this comes in addition to the concern that the entire international arms control regime, which is important to Russia, is on the verge of collapse.

It is not inconceivable that respect and suspicion alike motivated Russia in the past to act against Iran and cooperate with international frameworks (such as support for most UN resolutions about Iran, participation in IAEA activities, and the P5+1), and support the international sanctions against Iran in 2009, which prompted furious Iranian reactions and much tension between the two nations. However, in exchange, Russia gained significant American rewards in the form of the reset policy, which included some substantial political benefits.

If so, then why was Russia, at least until recently, opposed to the international effort to stop the Iranian nuclear program? First, Russia's overriding interest is to establish itself as an influential power in the Middle East that competes with the West. In this context Iran is Russia's main partner in shaping the anti-Western axis. The fall of the Iranian regime because of growing pressures would topple this axis and drag all of Russia's efforts down with it.

Second, Russia has been severely damaged as the result of the Arab spring. The regimes that were friendly towards Russia have been toppled and the future is highly uncertain; both the Islamic and the democratic options are inconvenient from Russia's point of view.

In this context Iran and Syria are the last line of defense for Russian interests in the Middle East.

Third, Russia and China are even now competing, at times openly, for future influence in the region. China, desperate for energy from the Middle East, will not hesitate to take Russia's place and take over as a central player, should Russia be unseated from this role.

Nevertheless, one cannot conclude that Russia's stance is inflexible or beyond change. In the past Russia found itself in similar situations, as it joined in the sanctions when the conditions were right, i.e., when it was offered appropriate incentives. Therefore it is quite possible that this time too Russia's opposition to the growing international resolve against Iran stems from similar considerations. It may be that the offer of appropriate incentives again will allow Russia to cooperate with the West.

It appears that such cooperation has begun in practice. At first Russia raised a new proposal to resolve the Iranian issue – that met with tepid reception at best – in the form of the “step for step” initiative that suggested a diplomatic dialogue with Iran, preferably through Russian mediation. Later, after his meeting with President Medvedev at the Hawaii conference (November 12, 2011), President Obama announced optimistically that the US is working together with Russia on the Iranian issue. Soon thereafter there were confirming reports, namely, that both Russia and China are expected to show willingness to work together with the United States to deal with Iran's nuclear program. To judge by the most recent decision by the international community and various declarations by Russia and China, it seems that Russian and Chinese cooperation with the US has already been achieved in practice. Moreover, at the summit in Hawaii, President Obama announced that Russia has been accepted into the World Trade Organization. Considering the fact that Russia has tried unsuccessfully, mostly because of American opposition, to gain acceptance into the WTO for two decades, it seems that the announcement of its acceptance was not a coincidence. Perhaps it was offered to Russia in exchange for its rescinding its objections on the Iranian issue. And while Russia voiced its objection to the decision by the US, along with Britain and Canada, on new sanctions outside the UN framework (where Russia has veto power), it is likely that there will still be changes in Russia's policy on this issue.

