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RUSSIA III. RUSSO-IRANIAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA (1991-PRESENT)

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iii. Russo-Iranian Relations in the Post-Soviet Era (1991-present)

Since the end of the 1980s, Iran and Russia have sought to increase their cooperation in the military, nuclear, oil, and gas sectors. Both the Iranian government's decision to shift foreign policy interests towards the East and the unilateral sanctions of the United States against Iran have pushed Iran's foreign policy towards increased cooperation with Russia. This decision of the Islamic Republic was first initiated under the presidency of ʿAli-Akbar Hāšemi Rafsanjani (Rafsanjāni) and later intensified by the supreme leader, Ayatollah ʿAli Khamenei (Ḵāmenaʾi), and President Ahmadinejad (Aḥmadinežād) after his victory in the Iranian presidential elections in 2005. It emerged in the light of Iran's need to bypass Western restrictions on technology transfers in the nuclear, aviation, and military sectors.

Nevertheless, there is a debate inside the Islamic Republic's political establishment about whether this foreign policy decision is beneficial for Iran. The reformist and pragmatic conservative factions are using the Iran-Russia dispute on dividing the Caspian Sea to justify their opposition to an alliance

with Russia. Furthermore, since the contested presidential election of June 2009, the president and the supreme leader have been accused of selling Iranian national interest to Moscow and of focusing on a rapprochement with Russia's autocratic government in order to stop the internal, bottom-up democratization process. For instance, the newspaper *Mardom-sālāri* (July 2010) referred to the pro-Russian line of the supreme leader and the president, noting:

The damage done to Iran's interests by the newly-emerged czars [Russia] is not limited to the nuclear issue. They engaged in the worst sabotage in determining Iran's share of the Caspian Sea. They refused to deliver the S-300 defensive system. .... whereas Iran has not authoritatively reacted to the Kremlin's hostile positions ("Boldness of the czars and sleepy eyes," BBC Monitoring, Iranian press highlights, *BBC Monitoring Iran*, 14 July 2010).

In the present article, the dual nature of the Iranian-Russian relationship, which is both geopolitical and ideological, will be examined, based on mutual short-term interests, reciprocal hostility between Iran and the United States, and persistent American-Russian tensions in the post-Cold War Period. Discussion will include the question of whether it is possible to explain the relation without reference to ideology, and whether there is any entente between both countries regardless of their respective regimes, given the geopolitical interaction between Russia and Iran, geographical proximity, and oil and gas resources. There will be emphasis on the tactical dimension of this entente, which reveals an absence of any long-term foreign policy strategy to defend Iranian national economic interests.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow and Tehran could not maintain their "old duumvirate" (Mirfendereski, Shehabi's Preface, p. ix) over the Caspian Sea region. In the Karabagh conflict between Republic of Azarbaijan and Aremenia, both sided with Christian Armenia. They also shared a common interest in reducing American influence in Central Asia and in the Caucasus. Their common objective of maintaining regional stability and preventing foreign powers from involvement in regional affairs became the framework through which Tehran and Moscow built their partnership in the beginning of the 1990s. The relationship began after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, when both Iran and Russia gave military and financial aid to Aḥmadšāh Masʿud's Northern Alliance. Moscow's enmity toward the Taliban has since then been driven by a fear of the spread of Sunni fundamentalism in Muslim parts of the former Soviet territories. Tehran also feared the anti-

Shiʿite dimension of Afghan Islamists and was later to come to the brink of war with the Taliban regime after the 1998 killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazār-e Šarif (Roy, p. 32). Both countries, at this time, were opposed to the Taliban-American connection. Thus, after the 2001 international military intervention, Russia and Iran welcomed their former allies' rise to power (Rashid, p. 206) and have since aimed at preventing the return of the Taliban.

What is more, Tehran and Moscow also agree on the need to combat Sunni terrorism and drug trafficking and the regional instability they cause. These objectives are the main focus of their regional entente in Afghanistan and more broadly in Central Asia. Also, Moscow and Tehran have carried out a policy hostile towards ethnic minorities both domestically and on the international scene. Tehran refrained from helping the Chechens, except for some humanitarian aid, and after 1982-83, Moscow renounced supporting ethnic minorities inside Iran. Both Iran and Russia opposed Kosovo's independence. Finally, even when Moscow formally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008, in contradiction to its former ethnic policies, Tehran kept a low profile by proclaiming its neutrality (Therme, 2011).

By the end of the 1990s, the Caspian Sea had become a source of dispute between Iran and Russia. In the first years following the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow and Tehran agreed on the condominium regime on the basis of Soviet-Iranian treaties. Iran and Russia sought to base the new legal regime on the principle of equal rights in the use of the Caspian Sea as stipulated in the 1921 and 1940 treaties (Bavand, p. 10). This defined the Caspian Sea as a common resource under international law and stated that the five countries would equally share its resources. Nevertheless, given the refusal of the newly independent states to abide by the condominium plan, Russia began to act unilaterally (Mirfendereski, p. 201), and Iran became isolated, with Turkmenistan, in defending this theoretical condominium solution or, if no consensus could be reached, advocating an equal share of the sea (20 percent for each state). After the tripartite agreement of 2003 among Russia, Kazakhstan, and Azarbaijan, Turkmenistan rallied to the Iranian diplomatic position for an equal share of the sea between neighboring countries (Lukoianov, p. 70).

The stake behind the legal debate was the development of Azarbaijani and Kazakh hydrocarbon offshore reserves. Russian incentives to abandon its Caspian entente with Iran were motivated by the prospects of investing in oil

projects and thus reinforcing its position on the international oil market, as well as discovery of oil reserves offshore. The Russian diplomatic shift regarding the Caspian Sea and the decision to invest in Azeri and Kazakh Caspian oil projects along with Western companies has irritated diplomatic relations. Tehran perceived the new Russian policy as a threat to OPEC's global strategy. At this time, "the Caspian Sea became the main focus of Russian-Iranian discourse" (Mann, p. 992), and the shift underlines the pragmatic dimension of Russian regional policy in dealing with the West and the difficulties encountered by Tehran to bypass the American energy containment strategy during the Clinton administration. After 2000, the negotiations about the delimitation of the Caspian Sea showed no progress despite the establishment of a special working group and the commitment of the five littoral states to reach a unanimous decision on this issue. At the same time, Russia and Iran continued to cooperate in the Caspian area against the hypothetical realization of a Western- supported Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project (from Kazakhstan or/and Turkmenistan to Azarbaijan). They also led an active policy to fight against terrorism, drugs, and arms trafficking, as stated in the final declaration of the Tehran summit of October 2007. The Islamic Republic authorities presented the summit as a "diplomatic success," not only thanks to the defense of the "Iranian peaceful and civilian nuclear program" being mentioned in the final declaration but also because of the presence of the Russian president in Tehran (Mousavi, pp. 36-39). This visit was the first visit of a Russian president in Iran in the post-Soviet era. Moreover, the decision by all the littoral states that they should "not allow other states to use their territories to carry out military operations against another littoral state" was seen as a diplomatic victory by the Ahmadinejad administration, because, at this time, the risk of American military intervention was high (Mousavi, p. 39). Russia has repeatedly voiced its opposition to a military option to solve the Iranian nuclear issue.

The civil war in Tajikistan was initially a dividing factor between Iran and Russia (Parker, pp. 57-58). Between 1992 and 1997, the successive interventions by both Tehran and Moscow contributed in large part to bringing the Tajik civil war to an end. Initially, Iranians supported some "Islamist" political factions, while the Russians supported rival neo-Soviet groups. The risk of an intensification of the conflict and the destabilization of the Tajik-Afghan border (a place of transit for radical Islamists, weapons, and drugs), drove the two partners to seek a compromise solution. Indeed, in this case, Tehran and Moscow shared the same security interest. Iran pressured

groups of Tajik Islamists, who were refugees in Iran, to negotiate, and, in 1997, under the aegis of the Russian government and the United Nations, peace agreements were signed (Atkin, pp. 371-73).

On the energy side, in spite of the Iranian and Russian leaders' official positive statements, the shared objectives have appeared rather limited. One of the main projects initiated by Tehran in 2001, the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), served as a basis for Tehran's political project of starting a Gas OPEC. This idea was boosted by the public declaration on the Gas OPEC project following the meeting between the supreme leader, ʿAli Khamenei, and Sergei Ivanov, Russian Security Council Secretary, in January 2007. Beyond this diplomatic rhetoric, this project did result in increased cooperation between three of the world's primary gas producers, namely, Russia, Iran, and Qatar. This so-called Troika, officially launched in October 2008, is not an equivalent of a cartel-like organization such as OPEC for the world's oil producers. Indeed, the newly formed Troika is working in the framework of the GECF, and the objective is more to favor dialogue among Doha, Tehran, and Moscow than to control regional and international gas markets. Moreover, all three gas producers have conflicting interests and different approaches in their relationships with large Western energy corporations. Finally, the main advocate of this Gas OPEC project is still a net importer of gas, because of the rise of internal gas demand. One of the main determining factors for the future of this relationship will be Iran's decision on whether or not to compete with Russia on the European gas market.

The presence of Russian oil and gas companies in Iran is limited, the main project being the South Pars project (phases II and III) with Total S.A. (France) and Petronas Nasional Berhad (Malaysia) (Therme, 2008, p. 17). Russia does not have any incentive for investing in the Iranian energy sector, except perhaps in the Iranian pipelines network. On the oil side, unlike Moscow, Tehran is a full member of OPEC. Even if Moscow wants to influence the oil policies of OPEC's countries by attending their meetings more regularly, it remains unlikely that Saudi Arabia will give its tacit approval to a full Russian membership to OPEC, given that Russia is a potential competitor to Riyadh's leading position in the organization. Furthermore, Russia is traditionally reluctant to cut its oil production and does not generally share the other OPEC countries' desire to maintain the price of oil at certain levels. This position has always been a cause of tension in Russian-Saudi and Iranian-Saudi relations, especially in times of falling prices (Katz, pp. 117-18). Despite improvement in

the Russia-OPEC relationship, Iran and Russia still differ on the best strategies to influence international oil markets. This potential competition is limited by the fact that Iran has refrained from directly threatening Russian interests, since it needs Russia more than Moscow needs Tehran.

The establishment of a direct, bilateral military cooperation was not possible before the end of the Iran-Iraq War (see IRAQ vii) in 1988. This duly started in 1989, but since then, the two partners have been plagued by constant financial problems. At the beginning of 2000, Iran became the third-largest client of Russian arms sales, but Russia seemed disappointed with the profitability of the Iranian weapons market. This military cooperation has been condemned by American and Israeli diplomats as a threat to the international community's containment policies. From Moscow's point of view, bilateral military cooperation does not affect the regional security equilibrium, because Iranian military purchases are limited to defensive weapons. The desire of Russian authorities to appear as a responsible state on the international scene represents one element of the Russian military cooperation with Iran, but it fuels anger inside Iran's Islamic political elite. In 2009, the non-delivery of the Russian S300 surface-to-air missile defense system provoked harsh diplomatic and media comment in Iran, as Moscow was accused of sacrificing Iranian military contracts in negotiations with the Obama administration. The amount of bilateral military cooperation—seven billion dollars between 2000 and 2007 with a market share representing 85 percent of Iran's arms imports—constitutes a strong incentive for Russian diplomacy to avoid antagonizing Tehran (Dombey, Blitz, and Bozorgmehr, p. 7)

Concerning bilateral cooperation on civil aviation, the Islamic Republic has to find a way of bypassing international sanctions, including those by the United States, on sensitive technologies in the area. The consequences of these sanctions were both the development of an Iranian imports civil aviation black market and an attempt to develop an indigenous civil aviation industry. The Islamic Republic's purchase of Russian Tupolevs was also a consequence of United States sanctions on civil aircraft and dual-use (both civilian and military) technology, but not a first choice, given the inferior technology. Iran favored economic exchanges with Russia because of the hostile relationship with potential Western partners. But throughout the last thirty-two years, the Iranian preference for Western technology has been a constant threat to the pursuit of Iranian-Russian economic exchanges. This preference is especially true in the case of civil aviation, given the high number of Russian aircraft

accidents in recent years.

Apart from nuclear and military cooperation, bilateral economic exchanges between Tehran and Moscow represent a low percentage of Iranian international trade. In 2008, the Russian share of Iranian imports amounted to 5.6 percent, in contrast with 13.6 percent Chinese share (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, January 2010, p. 19). Nevertheless, the volume of trade was about 3 billion U.S. dollars during the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-13), despite an official target to have it set at 5 billion dollars in 2010. During the Iranian year 1391 (March 2012-March 2013), the volume of trade between Iran and Russia decreased to about 2 billion U.S. dollars (see Rozhnov; Sanaei, 2013).

Iranian entente has also been a way for Moscow to appear as an independent power on the international scene, while also being a tool to build a multi-polar world. Both Iran and Russia opposed United States policy in the former Soviet republics (the so-called Russian near abroad) in favor of democratization, and they also refused, for different reasons, NATO expansion eastwards. For Russia, NATO policy is based on a strategic rationale, and Moscow is reluctant to see American influence in the post-Soviet space. Iran's attitude towards the NATO expansion seems more motivated by ideological factors such as anti-Americanism than by strategic reasons. Nevertheless, opposition to NATO and more broadly to Western influence in the post-soviet regions is a key pillar in the regional entente between Moscow and Tehran.

Both countries have decided to discuss cultural and religious issues in a bilateral way within the framework of diplomatic cultural cooperation, and have advocated cultural diversity and cultural and religious dialogue (Sanaie, 2006, pp. 226-30). There is also the religious factor; the leadership in Moscow considers its relationship with Tehran to be a useful tool for improving its negative image in the Muslim world, brought about by the Chechen wars (Malashenko, p. 166). This strategy also includes Moscow's participation in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in which Russia became an observer in 2005.

Moscow has also chosen to open a religious dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Shiʿite clergy. In 1997, they created a joint Russo-Iranian commission that would meet on a rotating basis in Tehran and Moscow. According to the Russian patriarch, Alexei II, the main objective of the commission is to define areas of agreement, such as opposition to values of

secularization imposed from the outside in contradiction to religious values. As in the case of Russia's observer status in the OIC, the bilateral religious commission is also a means for Moscow to show its openness and good will for dialogue with the Muslim world, with which its relations have been complicated by the Chechen wars. The Russian objective is also to "make Russia more secure by limiting foreign support for Chechen separatists and possibly by deflecting Islamic extremists who have not targeted Russia as they have the U.S. and Europe" (U.S. Embassy cable; see "The Islamic Factor In Russian Foreign Policy").

The fear of a "velvet revolution" (that is, non-violent protests and disturbances leading to the change of the existing regime) and what Moscow perceived as Western democratization in the post-Soviet region form the main ideological framework at work in the Moscow-Tehran connection. Nevertheless, the state-to-state cultural activities have not reached the masses, as shown by the spontaneous expression of anti-Russian feelings after the contested re-election of Ahmadinejad. Unsurprisingly, Iranian authorities accused a "cultural NATO" of being involved in the post-June 2009 election popular protests, qualified by the Iranian state media as a "velvet revolution" (*enqelāb-e maḵmali*) and as a "soft war" (*jang-e narm*) of Western enemies against Islam. Indeed, the Islamic political elite believe that there has been a double threat since the fall of the Soviet Union, namely militarily (the presence of NATO forces close to Iranian territory) and culturally/ideologically. According to Tehran, the latter, coming from Western powers, is concerned with spreading Western values in the Islamic world (Hidraf, 2007, p. 97).

This ideological framework was used, after the contested June 2009 election, by the political opposition in order to emphasize the dictatorial nature of the presidential power in Iran. Ahmadinejad's alliance with Moscow was one of the elements seized upon by the population to delegitimize his re-election as president. Opponents called for protests in front of the Russian embassy in Tehran and during Hāšemi Rafsanjāni's Friday prayer on 17 July 2009, where some participants answered the revolutionary slogan of "down with U.S.A." and "down with Israel" by shouting "down with Russia" and "down with China." Russian national television made no mention of the protests contesting Ahmadinejad's re-election. No critics against the validity of Ahmadinejad's re-election appeared on official state television in Russia (Jégot). But some opposition voices, such as Garry Kasparov and the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper, criticized Russian support for Ahmadinejad during his visit to

Russia on 16 June 2009.

This popular reaction against Russia is rooted in the negative collective memory of Russian meddling in Iranian internal affairs and also lies in the belief of Russian support for the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei duo. Although this mistrust is not directed specifically at Russia, memories of past history are still present in the political imagination of Iranian decision-makers. Thus, a nationalistic turn away from the current pan-Islamist discourse of Tehran's political elite could also negatively affect the Iranian-Russian partnership. Iranian public opinion considers Russians as "beasts" or "warriors," especially in the northern provinces of Azarbaijan and Gilan, where the Russian military occupation of the area during World War II is still in citizens' memories (Personal Interviews in Gilan, January 2007 and in Azarbaijan, December 2007). At the same time, most Iranians recognize Russian superiority in international politics; in their views Russians are clever (*zerang*). According to Ria Novosti news agency's Persian service survey, 93.5 percent of Iranian public opinion have a bad view of Russia (BBC Monitoring, *Siāsat-e ruz*, 2009). This negative perception mixed with a respectful fear seems also to affect part of the political elite. Few Iranian politicians speak Russian (Sanaie, 2007, p. 180), and only three Iranian universities (of Gilan, Mazandaran, and Tehran) offered Russian language courses during the academic year 2006-2007. This limited offering corresponds to student demands, which are quite low. For instance, at the University of Gilan, 100 students followed Russian language courses, while the English language group had 300 enrolled students (personal interviews with university professors, Rasht, January 2007). Conversely, regime supporters focused on the Russian role in delaying and undermining any Security Council resolutions over the national nuclear program and tried to portray Russia as a political ally of the Islamic Republic.

After Ahmadinejad's rise to presidential power (August 2005), the will to build an alliance provoked political resistance in both countries. First of all, Russia tried to be a mediator between Iran and the West in order to appear as a responsible power on the world stage. The so-called Russian proposal of 2005 was designed to satisfy Western conditions and concerns about non-proliferation issues. From the Iranian perspective, its "right to enrichment on its own soil" was not taken into account. Given the inflexibility of the Iranian diplomatic position and the historical lack of trust between Moscow and Tehran, the proposal did not solve the Iranian nuclear question, even though Iranian diplomats never officially and directly refused it (Primakov, 2009, p.

367). The Iranian tactic was to delay the official answer and to reaffirm the right of all Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatories to enrich uranium on their own soil.

After February 2010, the Russian diplomatic objective of advancing the Iranian uranium transfer to Russia and France as agreed in principle at Geneva, in October 2009, caused a hardening of Iran's Russian discourse. This was further exacerbated by the Iranian decision to enrich uranium at 20 percent level. Russia's Security Council chief, Nikolai Patrushev, started to express growing suspicions regarding the ultimate goal of the Iranian nuclear program (see "Iran's enrichment plans"). Given its growing isolation on the international scene, the Islamic Republic is still forced to rely on an unreliable partner. Despite the shared geopolitical interest, the construction of a truly strategic alliance has not yet been possible. This can be explained mostly by Russian systematic defense of its national interest, the ideological nature of Iranian foreign policy, and historic rivalry between the two neighbors.

One example of the lack of trust contributing to the recurrent crisis between the two countries is the multiple delays by the Russian company, Atomexport, in completing the Bušehr nuclear reactor. After the Iran-Iraq War, Iran signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Russian company Minatom in 1992. The final contract was concluded in 1995 for one billion dollars, and the stated completion time for the nuclear reactor was fifty-five months. In November 2009, Russian authorities delayed the completion yet again. The reformist reaction to this new problem in nuclear bilateral cooperation was to accuse Russian authorities of hypocrisy and duplicity. Accusing Russian authorities of "bad faith," some Iranian reformist and pragmatic conservatives pointed out the fact that, since 1999, the completion of the reactor had been postponed seven times by the Russian company, according to the newspaper *Tehrān-e emruz* (17 February 2009).

Finally, following the official launch on 21 August 2010, Russian fuel was loaded into the core of the Bušehr reactor starting on 26 October 2010. But in late February 2011, it was removed as a necessary precaution. This last delay in the completion and the energy launch of the thirty-six year-old nuclear reactor was the latest manifestation of the long and unpredictable history of the construction of the nuclear reactor, which was first interrupted by the revolution of 1978-79. The source of the technical hurdles of February 2011 was the incompatibility between German components, more specifically the pumps supplied in the 1970s by the Siemens subsidiary company, Kraftwerck

Union (KWU), and the Russian design of the reactor. The example of the unfinished construction of the Bušehr reactor seems to confirm the widely believed statement that, in the international history of nuclear development, the Bušehr power plant was the longest construction process ever seen.

In September 2011, the reactor was connected to the national grid and was producing electricity at 40 percent of its capacity. The reactor started producing at its maximum power generation in August 2012, and the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), ʿAli-Akbar Ṣāleḥi, Energy Minister Ḥamid Čitčiān, and the Russian contractor signed an agreement to put Iranian engineers in charge of the 1,000-megawatt power plant at a ceremony held at Bušehr plant in September 2013 (see "Iran takes over control").

The Iranian policy vis-à-vis this powerful northern neighbor differed under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic. It is Western powers, not Russia, that the Islamic oligarchs visualize as the greatest security threat to Iran. This new perception of Iranian national interest is due to the end of the Cold War, but also to the need for the post-revolutionary Iranian political system to survive in the framework of Ayatollah Khomeini's ideological legacy.

The future of the Russo-Iranian partnership will mainly depend on external factors: a hypothetical Iranian-American reconciliation, U.S.-Russian détente, and Moscow's resistance to Israeli pressure to suspend sensitive cooperation with the Islamic Republic. It will also be affected by the fluctuation of oil prices, one of the main criteria determining the solvency of the Islamic Republic. The realization of an alliance faces many challenges, but the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic and a key pillar of Russian foreign policy, namely, opposition to the United States, will remain the main incentive for the two partners to pursue collaboration. In the end, the memory of a conflicted Russo-Iranian history does not contribute to trust between two powers in search of independence in the international system. This mutual mistrust is unlikely to be overcome, given the cultural resilience of the Iranian society subject to regime propaganda. The unpopularity of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei's Russian alliance strategy, both with the reformist political establishment and among a majority of the public, is a challenge that has to be faced by a revolutionary political system in crisis and in search of legitimacy on the internal and international stage. Russia does not seem to be capable of generating the legitimacy needed by the contested

president of the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, Russia can still provide the Islamic republic, in a limited number of cases (mainly nuclear and military cooperation), with a way of bypassing Western increasing economic pressure.

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