

DANCES WITH WOLVES: RUSSIA, IRAN AND THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

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Western countries, led by the United States, helped the Iranian nuclear program and facilitated the export of nuclear technology to Iran under the shah's regime. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, the U.S. administration withdrew its support for Iran's nuclear program. The Iran-Iraq War, combined with escalating tension with the United States, paved the way in Iranian security circles to new ideas on obtaining nuclear weapons to defend Iran in a hostile regional and international environment. The early revolutionary political elite in Iran conceived the world order in terms of rivalry among nuclear powers. This perception persists to some extent, despite the counterargument that nuclear weapons are unacceptable in Islamic terms. Whether for peaceful nuclear purposes or for producing nuclear weapons, there was a desperate need for external support to pursue a nuclear program. The most reliable, and for a long time the only, partner has been the Russian Federation. It is hard to find any analysis or statement on the Iranian nuclear issue that does not mention a Russian role. Moscow's policy has generally been interpreted as a short-term economically oriented policy, a mere response to U.S.

hegemonic policies or a search for regional influence.

In this article, we argue that Russia has a long-term goal of cooperation with Iran on the nuclear issue. This policy has been shaped in a period of transition from Yeltsin's chaotic order to Putin's visible search for greater influence in regional and international politics. Russian policy makers adopted a multi-dimensional approach with a system of checks and balances. Russia aims to satisfy the demands of international society while continuing to cooperate with Iran on the nuclear issue. Russian involvement in the Iranian nuclear issue goes beyond its cooperation with Iran, however, and requires more engagement in the international arena, rather than on a Russian-Iranian bilateral level. One component of this approach is to have Iran as a junior partner that provides implicit and indirect support to Russian policy on the nuclear issue by following a policy of coordination with Russian diplomatic maneuvers. One needs to answer a number of questions to prove this claim of Russian involvement in the Iranian nuclear problem. Is there a Russian strategy for backing Iranian nuclear ambitions? How does Russia reconcile the concerns of the international society vis-à-vis Iranian

demands? Will Russia continue to protect its image of being a responsible nuclear power while there is increasing suspicion about Iran's nuclear intentions? Will the Iranian nuclear issue strain relations between Russia and the United States? Does Russia's position represent a middle ground between the United States and the European Union? We will analyze Russian policy in a historical and analytical framework in the following sections. This article will conclude with an observation on Russia's nuclear strategy and its long-term objectives and policy orientations as well as the implications of the strategy in both regional and international contexts.

RUSSIAN NUCLEAR INVOLVEMENT

Several countries have contributed to the Iranian nuclear program since its inception: Argentina, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany, India, Italy, China, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, the United States, France, South Africa and North Korea.¹ The German company Siemens began to construct the Bushehr nuclear plant with two nuclear reactors in the 1970s. This investment amounted to 8 billion marks. However, Siemens did not complete the project, and the Iranian administration failed to persuade the German government to finish the job. China and Brazil refused an Iranian offer to cooperate on the nuclear issue.² Indeed, there was not much chance of finding a nuclear partner, and Iran chose Russia in due course to a considerable extent out of necessity. Iranian-Russian talks on completing the Bushehr nuclear plant began in 1990.

The Russian minister of atomic energy, Victor Mihaylov, and the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA),

Reza Amrollahi, met in January 1995 to discuss the completion of the half-built Bushehr plant under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This deal was worth \$800 million. Russian experts spent an initial three months at the site planning how to finish the nuclear plant and placing new reactors in it.³ Under this deal, Russia agreed to educate 20 to 30 Iranian experts in nuclear science at Russian institutes and promised to provide technological and scientific assistance and supply three light-water reactors (1000 MW each) to the nuclear plant. Russia refused to build a heavy-water nuclear facility, which could have been used to produce nuclear arms.⁴ The potential yield of this project was not to be limited to \$800 million; it was to amount to \$2.7 billion over a seven-year period of cooperation. This agreement was revised in 1998 when Russia agreed to complete two blocks of the nuclear plant and to provide uranium (without enrichment) to Iran.⁵

The nuclear contract added strategic value to the relations between Russia and Iran and contributed to further improvements in bilateral relations. Russia has been Iran's sole partner in the nuclear field since 1995. These years also witnessed rising suspicion, particularly in Western circles, over Iran's acquisition of nuclear know-how. U.S. and other Western policy makers expressed concern over Iran's nuclear intentions. They frequently pointed out in statements and documents that the Iranian nuclear program was the result of an agreement on the peaceful use of nuclear energy between Russia and Iran.⁶ The U.S. administration tried to make Russia suspend its involvement in the nuclear issue as a precondition for Russia's entry into the G-7. The Russian ambassa-

dor in Tehran, S. Tretyakov, underlined his country's stance: "Russia's position has not changed in this [nuclear] matter. From a political point of view, nothing can prevent our cooperation on the nuclear issue. There may only be problems related to the payments Iran has promised to make in the agreement."⁷

More recently, on February 28, 2002, Russia signed an agreement to provide nuclear fuel to Iran and take back used fuel to Russia. In July 2002, Russia undertook a ten-year project with Iran to promote cooperation in business, industry and scientific-technical areas. It also included the construction of \$8.5 billion worth of nuclear-energy facilities. The priority is to be given to Bushehr 1 and Bushehr 2 blocks; the other two will be built in Ahvaz. This project immediately drew criticism internationally, particularly from the United States.⁸

The international pressure on Russia did not prevent the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant; 92 percent of the plant had been finished by 2006. According to Russian and Iranian experts, it will begin to produce nuclear energy in March 2007.⁹ The Bushehr construction project created job opportunities for 300 Russian firms and 20,000 people; there are 1,500 active workers on the site.¹⁰ Russia wants to have a bigger share in emerging demand for nuclear energy and seeks to prove its capabilities in Iran. Therefore, the Iranian experience is not only an issue of political prestige but also an opportunity for Russia to emerge as a reliable service provider in the nuclear-energy market.¹¹

The head of the Russian "Atomstroyeksport"¹² firm, Aleksandr Gluhov, who is in charge of the Bushehr plant, has declared that Russia stands to

gain \$25 billion from the construction of power plants. According to him, Asia is the most promising emerging nuclear market; Asian countries are expected to have 80 nuclear plants — 40 in China and 20 in India — by 2020. This company is already constructing the Tyanvan plant in China and the Kudankulam nuclear-energy plant in India. It is also modernizing the Kozloduy nuclear-energy plant in Bulgaria. The total value of these projects exceeds \$4.5 billion. If we include the projections for other plant-construction attempts, such as Ukraine (Ukritie), Slovakia (Bogunitse-3 and Bogunitse-4) and Hungary (Pakh), the value reaches \$15 billion. As Gluhov indicated, these construction projects together provide employment for 300,000-400,000 Russians. For this reason, the Russian administration pays careful attention to the demands and needs of Russian companies operating in the nuclear area.¹³

While the U.S. administration tries to produce international opposition to Russia's moves, Moscow continuously argues that this issue is manipulated and over-politicized. During a CNN interview in September 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin argued, "We are not only a participant and signatory of NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty]. We are a most active defender of the application of this treaty. In addition, the emergence of a new nuclear power to our south is not something desirable from the perspective of our national interests." He also added that Iran should be open to the IAEA and that there is no reason to hide anything if they do not want to produce nuclear weapons.¹⁴

The Russian administration has expressed concern that a double standard related to economic interests lies behind

the political storm on the Iranian nuclear power plant. As Putin indicated in an interview in June 2003:

Iran is our neighbor and traditional partner. There is a systemic and high level of relations between our countries. We do not want to lose our position in Iran. We know that some Western European countries are in contact with Iran on the nuclear issue and want to sell nuclear equipment. We will strongly oppose the attempts to oust Russian companies from the Iranian market with the pretext of Iran's possible production of nuclear weapons.¹⁵

The Russian minister of foreign affairs, I.S. Ivanov, pointed out that the Russian administration is in favor of Iranian transparency on the nuclear issue. In his view,

It was a Russian incentive that made Iran provide information on the nuclear issue, to sign additional protocols with the IAEA and to stop the uranium enrichment program. For this reason, there is no reason to worry about the Iranian nuclear program. Russian cooperation with Iran is limited to the Bushehr plant and is in conformity with the NPT regime. The IAEA had 100 visits to Bushehr and did not recognize any problems.¹⁶

On November 9, 2003, the secretary of the Iranian National Security Council, Hasan Rohani, met with Putin in Moscow. Rohani announced Iran's agreement to sign an additional NPT protocol. He also made clear that the uranium enrichment program would be frozen for some time. This symbolic gesture was the result of Russia's constructive engagement on the nuclear

issue. Iran stepped back and showed that it does not want to escalate tension over this issue.¹⁷

Ivanov, in November 2003, added that he did not know of any country that wanted Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. He restated the Russian position as one that advises Iran to be open and transparent on the nuclear issue and to follow the dictates of the NPT regime and the IAEA's supervision. He confidently added that Russia will be one of the most reliable partners in nuclear deals and will prove its reliability in the Iranian case.¹⁸ An additional protocol, signed in December 2003, allowed the IAEA to send inspectors to Iranian nuclear facilities without prior notice. The Russian administration was following a double-track policy. While continuing to build the Bushehr nuclear plant, it also sent signals to Iran and the world that it was complying with international rules and standards. It further added that it had made Iran fulfill the NPT regime as a precondition to progress on the Bushehr project. However, this protocol has not been ratified in Iran due to a suspected reluctance to suspend the programs of uranium enrichment and fuel-cycle technology.

RUSSIAN MANEUVERS

Despite the problematic nature of the Iranian nuclear program, Moscow remains Tehran's sole partner on this issue. Iran's nuclear efforts are a high-stakes game with international political, economic and security perspectives, and Russian policy makers play a difficult hand. Although Russia will not be happy if Iran gains nuclear weapons, it is still, in Russian strategic thinking, vital to pursue the Iranian nuclear program as a facilitator of

regional geopolitical considerations and a prerequisite for securing a place in the global power-production market. In this section, we will discuss the U.S. factor, the IAEA's activities, EU policy and the North Korean legacy in Russia's dance with the wolves of international politics.

THE U.S. FACTOR

Discussions of the Iranian nuclear issue have an influence on relations between Russia and the United States. Y.K. Zverde, a security expert at the Russian Foreign Ministry, says the U.S. administration has a tendency to look at relations with

Russia, in particular in technology cooperation, through the prism of Iran.¹⁹ According to a former influential security expert in the U.S. Department of Defense, Richard Perle, Russia's nuclear and military cooperation with Iran is

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one of the few problems between Russia and the United States.²⁰ The head of the international security center at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Aleksey Arbatov, argued that the Iranian nuclear program began under the auspices of the United States during the shah's regime, and, if this regime had survived, the U.S. attitude would be different today.²¹

On July 8, 1998, the U.S. administration declared that it would impose sanctions on seven Russian companies because of their involvement in a missile-development

program. In January 1999, the same kinds of sanctions were imposed against Russia's leading scientific institutions, MAI,²² RHTU²³ and the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy's NIKIET²⁴ because of allegations that they provided nuclear know-how to Iran. In the same month, sanctions against the Russian companies and scientific institutions were approved by the U.S. administration.²⁵ Another law, dated March 14, 2000, which prohibits development of relations with Iran, has been interpreted as anti-Russian rather than targeting Iran.²⁶

In August 2001, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that Washington is sure that Russia is helping Iran to develop its nuclear potential and blamed Russia for transferring military technologies to hostile regimes.²⁷ Then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell added that if Russia

were proved to be helping Iran build its nuclear-weapons capacity, it would seriously harm relations between the United States and Russia.²⁸ In November 2001, President Putin sent a message to the United States arguing that Russia is against the delivery of any technology to Iran that could be used to produce nuclear weapons. He further pointed out that Russian cooperation with Iran is only related to nuclear-energy production and that he knew that there is the same kind of relationship between the United States and North Korea.²⁹

In 2002, Alireza Jafarzade, a member of the anti-regime opposition bloc, revealed the secret construction of two nuclear plants in Natanz and Arak in Iran. In September of the same year, the construction of a centrifuge plant and nuclear fuel-cycling facilities were detected. Neither Russia nor the IAEA was aware of those facilities. There was speculation that Pakistan and North Korea had helped in construction. According to Arbatov, Iran may have borrowed the required technology from Pakistan, probably from Abdul Kadir Khan, father of Pakistan's atomic bomb.³⁰ Following these developments, the United States accused Iran of attempting to produce a nuclear weapon, and the crisis began to escalate. The U.S. administration asked Iran to immediately approve an additional protocol and to put an end to its uranium enrichment activities. Increasing U.S. and Israeli criticism, the international environment after 9/11 and Iran's unexpected progress in nuclear technology created pressure on Russia to adopt a more careful stance. The head of the IAEA, Mohammad ElBaradei, paid a visit to Iran's nuclear sites in February 2003 and observed the clandestine nuclear research activities. During his visit to Moscow in June 2003, ElBaradei said that international control over Iran's nuclear program must be strengthened. The Israeli minister of foreign affairs, Silvan Shalom, expressed concern over the possibility of Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms.³¹

IAEA ACTIVITIES AND EU POLICY

Developments in the second half of 2002 increased the role of the IAEA and forced the EU to be more active on the nuclear issue. Iranian long-range missiles, which can reach many European countries,

increased apprehension about the nuclear issue. The Iranian level of nuclear technology made the missiles even more of a concern. Many parts of Russia are within Iranian missile range. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs harshly responded to an allegation published in *The Sunday Telegraph* that Russian military experts played a mediating role between North Korea and Iran over nuclear technology.³²

In June 2003, ElBaradei said Iran was hiding documents concerning certain nuclear materials and activities and urged more active cooperation from the Iranian administration. The Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs, V. Tubnikov, told the Iranian ambassador in Moscow that third parties were pressuring Russia not to cooperate with Iran, but Moscow would honor all its agreements with Iran, as they fit into the dictates of international rules and norms.³³ IAEA experts detected small particles of enriched uranium during their monitoring, and this further increased their suspicions. In June 2004, ElBaradei again charged Iran with non-compliance with IAEA safeguards and asked for accelerated cooperation.³⁴ Just after this statement, Iran gave a new order to start building a centrifuge plant in Natanz, and Iranian policy makers declared that they would begin uranium enrichment, thus halting voluntary suspension of such activities.

The IAEA decided on September 18, 2004, to ask Iran to stop uranium enrichment activities. The Iranian administration responded that it was ready to negotiate with the EU-3 — Germany, France, Britain — but wanted to maintain its legitimate nuclear program. The EU proposed to help Iran in its nuclear energy program if it stopped attempting to produce enriched

uranium. This incentive was not enough to persuade Iran. Tensions rose after this point, and the sides began to talk about transferring Iranian files to the agenda of the UN Security Council. On November 22, Iran again declared that it was willing to suspend its enrichment program voluntarily in order to start negotiations.³⁵

Alexandre Rumyantsev, president of Russia's Federal Agency for Nuclear Energy, signed an additional protocol with his Iranian counterparts and guaranteed the delivery of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr power plant. The two sides also discussed spent-fuel storage and reprocessing in Russia. In the meantime, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became Iran's president in August 2005 and appointed Ali Larijani to pursue the nuclear program and handle diplomatic negotiations. On August 9, 2005, the Iranian supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, issued a religious decree banning the production, storage and use of nuclear weapons. Iranian diplomats distributed the text of this document at an IAEA meeting in Vienna. However, Iran started its uranium enrichment program again on August 10, 2005, at the Esfahan site.³⁶ The next day, 35 members of the IAEA called for abolishing the enrichment program and asked ElBaradei on September 3, 2005, to prepare a report on the Iranian nuclear program. President Putin and President Ahmadinejad met on September 15, 2005, at the UN summit in New York, where Putin asked his counterpart to cooperate with the IAEA.³⁷

During the UN meeting, Ahmadinejad stated that the Iranian nuclear program was a peaceful one and that Iran had the right to enrich uranium under the regulations of the NPT. He invited foreign companies to take part in the Iranian

nuclear program to make sure that there would not be any illegal clandestine activities.³⁸ He even invited U.S. companies, though the Bush administration was searching for a way to bring the issue to the Security Council in order to create a suitable environment for further measures against Iran. China and Russia opposed the U.S. attempt to send the issue to the Security Council. On September 24, 2005, 22 members of the IAEA voted to send the Iranian file to the Security Council; 12 countries abstained, including Russia, China, Pakistan, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa.³⁹

Iran's major concern was Russia's possible withdrawal of cooperation under international pressure. The Iranian ambassador to Tajikistan said in a press conference on November 4, 2005, "We know Russian-Iranian relations are at a good level at the moment, but we are not in a state of naiveté that Russia will always protect Iranian interests."⁴⁰ In November 2005, the Iranian administration approved a plan for the participation of foreign investors in the centrifuge plant in Natanz. They also directed the Iranian atomic-energy agency to create the necessary incentives for domestic and foreign investments. The IAEA demanded more openness from the Iranian administration and noted in their November 2005 document that Iran does not allow controllers to inspect some military sites.⁴¹

Another point of contention was Iran's production of enriched uranium in violation of the IAEA's prohibition. After three long years of negotiations with the EU-3, Iran decided to start fuel-cycle activities. Despite Iran's attempt to distinguish between nuclear-fuel production and nuclear-fuel research, the EU was not

satisfied. The inconclusive negotiations narrowed the gap between the EU and the United States. The EU has traditionally been more in favor of a political solution to the problem. The Bush administration then turned its focus on Russia and China, perceiving that the EU was on board. It is, however, questionable whether the U.S. administration could be sure about an EU veto in the Security Council.

LEGACY OF THE NORTH KOREAN EXPERIENCE

Russia's attitudes and policy concerning the Iranian nuclear issue relate to its involvement with North Korea. Russia wants to distance itself from its North Korean experience. The former Soviet Union backed North Korea's peaceful nuclear activities and granted it a small nuclear reactor with nuclear fuel in 1960 for research purposes. This reactor was operational in 1996 under IAEA safeguards. But North Korea began to undertake a clandestine nuclear-weapons program and in 1989 had accumulated enough nuclear material to produce several warheads. The Soviet Union was in a process of dissolution at this time. During the eras of Gorbachev (1988-91) and Yeltsin (1992-94), Russia was preoccupied with its internal affairs and could not intervene in North Korea.⁴² Russia assumed that the North Korean nuclear program was solely oriented toward energy production. Ultimately this proved to be false, and Russian rulers had to accept the situation, considering their declining power and leverage on the North Korean nuclear program. This shifted the initiative to the hands of U.S. policy makers.

In due course, the United States, Japan and South Korea undertook the financial burden of forcing North Korea to halt its

nuclear program. Although Russia did not oppose U.S. involvement in the North Korean nuclear program (to provide light-water reactors in exchange for the nuclear program), some time later Russia began to criticize the United States for its double standard, when Washington took issue with Russia for constructing a similar kind of power plant in Iran.⁴³ Russia has been excluded from major steps to control the North Korean nuclear program; even Russia's offer to build a North Korean nuclear power plant in Russia's "Primorskiy Krai" region did not receive any positive responses.⁴⁴ Russia does not want to experience the same failure in the Iranian nuclear program and has remained firm in its cooperation with Iran. Russia is aiming to guarantee its share in the Iranian market, which is not under U.S. control. Iran, in this sense, is likely to be a stepping stone for more Russian investment in the global market.⁴⁵

RUSSIAN NUCLEAR POLICY

Ahmadinejad's controversial statements are also putting Russia in a difficult situation. Russia finds itself having to justify its cooperation on Iran's nuclear program during tense periods. The Russian administration eases the tension, while Iran chooses to follow a policy of controlled tension in international relations. There are a number of benefits to taking this stance on the Iranian nuclear program. First, Russia preserves its dominant position in the Iranian nuclear market. Second, Russia demonstrates its reliability on nuclear issues by mediating between Iran and international organizations and society. Third, Russian leverage on Iran increases and yields other benefits in regional policy and geopolitical security considerations.

Whenever Iran has a crisis with the United States or others, there emerges a pessimistic atmosphere in Europe that negotiations with Iran are useless. Then a high-level Iranian representative goes to Russia with a number of economic incentives to make sure that Russia is on their side. For example, the head of the Iranian parliament, Gholam Haddad Adel, showed up in Moscow immediately after Ahmadinejad's provocative speeches in December 2005.⁴⁶

Russia then brought new ideas to the table for ending the impasse in nuclear negotiations. Moscow put forward an offer to produce enriched uranium in Russia and provide storage and reprocessing facilities for spent fuel in Iranian nuclear power plants. It aimed to block Iran's acquisition of enrichment technology and accumulation of weapons-grade nuclear material. Russia would establish a joint facility in its homeland and, as a result, the Iranians would not be able to attain nuclear technology. This was a constructive diplomatic move, and the United States and the EU responded positively to the Russian offer. However, on December 26, 2005, the Iranian administration refused this offer and stated that it would produce enriched uranium in Iran.⁴⁷

Russia hardened its attitude to some extent after Ahmadinejad's statement that he prays for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's death. He has continuously escalated international tension by putting forward ideas such as destroying Israel and removing it from the world map. Russia condemned these statements, and the Russian minister of foreign affairs, S. Lavrov, talked about sending an Iranian nuclear file to the UN Security Council on January 12, 2006.⁴⁸ This move surprised Tehran. However, subsequent developments showed that Russia's real intention

was not to bring the issue to the Security Council. According to MGIMO professor Aleksey Malashenko, "Russia will not end its cooperation with Iran. Moscow plays a careful political game raising its voice against Iran."⁴⁹ Recep Safarov, director of the Iranian Studies Center, argued that "Russia's stance is not a game. It wants the Iranian administration to make up their minds."⁵⁰ On February 2, 2006, IAEA members decided to send the EU-3 draft by a majority vote to the UN Security Council. Russia supported this decision. Hamid Reza Asefi, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman, said, "This development is not the end of the road, and Iran wants to consider the Russian offer while pursuing negotiations on the nuclear issue." In contrast to this statement, Iran stopped the application of the additional protocol, despite the fact that they had accepted it of their own free will.⁵¹

Russia's offer to produce enriched uranium in Russia for Iran led to discussions and an emergence of differing positions in Iran. For example, Iranian political scientist Ali Reza Daveri argued that Russia was no longer a reliable partner and likened Russian intervention to China's insincere offers, which include common elements with U.S. and European demands. He favored Iran's change of diplomatic tone against Russia.⁵² Iranian Member of Parliament Hasmatolla Falyahatpishe argued that Iran should follow nuclear diplomacy in an independent manner and that it is useless to trust Russia as a mediator.⁵³ This period also saw increasing pressure on Russia on the nuclear issue due to the critical U.S. stance that emerged in the context of the G-8 meeting in 2006 and Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization. Russia played

the Iranian nuclear card carefully and attempted to persuade the international community that it follows a responsible nuclear policy.⁵⁴

Russia's policy is targeted toward creating the impression that Russia does not share the Iranian stance on the nuclear issue. The Russian administration aims to persuade the international community that it is playing a constructive role and to increase its leverage on Iran on the nuclear issue in both political and economic senses. Russian involvement was also extending the process; Iranian policy makers were helping by prolonging negotiations and gaining time by examining the offers. C.

Jehangirzade, a member of the Iranian parliament's commission on foreign policy and national security, made an interesting comment: "The West gave Russia a good policing role in the scenario written for Iran."⁵⁵

While all these developments were happening in the international arena, Russian-Iranian nuclear relations were following a separate track. On January 21, 2006, the head of Rosatom, Sergey Krienko, expressed an interest in building a joint facility to produce nuclear fuel for Iranian plants. Iran's new secretary of the National Security Council talked positively about the joint production of enriched uranium just a few days after Rosatom's statement of interest. According to the

deputy head of the Russian intelligence service, Vladimir Zavershinsky, there was no evidence in hand to prove that Iran had nuclear weapons or the capability to produce them in February 2006.⁵⁶ An Iranian delegation arrived in Moscow to discuss the nuclear issue on February 20, 2006. One day before the talks, the Iranian administration declared its intention to build 20 nuclear power plants. Although no solid progress occurred during the discussions, both sides restated their willingness to pursue a partnership on the nuclear issue.⁵⁷

A cyclical pattern emerged: Russia

Russia first makes an offer to bring Iran to the terms of the international community; Iran inclines toward the Russian position; after some time, Iran says it will take its own independent position, and the process comes back to the point where it started.

first makes an offer to bring Iran to the terms of the international community; Iran inclines toward the Russian position; after some time, Iran says it will take its own independent position, and the process comes back to the point where it started.

The early months of 2006 witnessed this pattern once again. Rosatom Krienko went to Tehran on February 26, 2006, to continue talks on nuclear cooperation. Krienko repeated the Russian offer to enrich uranium on Russian land. Iran's Deputy President Gholamreza Aqazadeh said that an agreement had been reached with Krienko. This declaration was interpreted internationally as a success for Russian diplomacy. On March 1, 2006, Larijani went to Moscow for a new round of talks. However, on March 13, the Iranian administration declared that it would not accept the Russian offer.⁵⁸

During an interview with a Belgian newspaper, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov said, "All our relations with Iran are transparent and in keeping with international regulations, including those of the IAEA. Russia accepts Iran's right to produce peaceful nuclear energy as a full member of the IAEA and signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty." He added that the Russian offer to construct a nuclear power plant in Iran would continue, with the condition of outsourcing enriched uranium and taking back the spent fuel.⁵⁹ The U.S. assistant secretary of state argued that "no state should support Iranian nuclear activities. There should be no support to allegedly civil nuclear activities in Bushehr." The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied with a statement underlining an independent state's right to cooperate with other states.⁶⁰

The head of Russia's friendship group in the Iranian parliament, Kazem Jalali, restated, on May 31, 2006, the strategic nature of the relationship between the two countries and the necessity of pursuing cooperation on the nuclear issue. He added that Russia would help to persuade the international community of Iran's peaceful intentions to produce nuclear energy.⁶¹ The Russian attitude does not mean much in the sense of bringing the international community to recognize Iranian points, but it serves to block measures against the Iranian nuclear program. The Russian and Chinese soft attitude toward the Iranian nuclear issue has created friction within the UN Security Council. They do not allow the other three — the United States, France and the UK — to impose sanctions on Iran. For example, during the discussions on the future of the Iranian file in the Security Council, Russia's permanent

representative, Vitaly Churkin, stated that Russia would support a decision in the council if it could make the necessary changes to the draft.⁶²

The 5+1 group, consisting of the Security Council's permanent five members plus Germany, discussed the Iranian file in Vienna in June 2006. They offered Iran a deal in order to solve the problem. They proposed economic and security guarantees for construction of light-water reactors in return for accepting the production of enriched uranium outside of Iran. The 5+1 package also included clauses on possible sanctions if Iran did not stop uranium-enrichment activities.⁶³ Russia's contribution in preparing this plan was considerable, and Moscow reiterated its offer to ease Iran's tension with the international community and put the negotiations back onto the right track. Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov expressed his hope that Iran would take this 5+1 offer seriously and start negotiations under the terms of international regulations. According to him, this new offer was a positive one and underlined the importance of uranium enrichment in the whole nuclear issue.⁶⁴ Lavrov added that there would be no use of force against Iran. If Iran accepted the deal, there would no longer be a Security Council option.⁶⁵ In other words, the Russian administration was conveying a message to its closest partner in the Middle East that, this time, there is not much room to maneuver.

During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting on June 15, 2006, the Russian and Chinese presidents, Putin and Hu Jin Tao, underlined the necessity to solve the Iranian nuclear problem through peaceful means. They also pointed out the absence of any alter-

native to civilian, political and economic measures against Iran. Both expressed their willingness to keep the dialogue open with Iran and continue their constructive engagement on this issue.⁶⁶ During a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, Putin added that “our purpose to involve the 5 + 1 group is to send back the Iranian file to the IAEA.” In his view, there was a good possibility of doing this.⁶⁷

Iran’s primary negotiator, Larijani, mentioned positive aspects of the 5+1 plan but also underlined the need to clarify some contradictions.⁶⁸ President Ahmadinejad expressed his

satisfaction with the good intentions of the plan and considered it a progressive step for the future. This statement was meaningful, since it was made after Ahmadinejad’s meeting with his Chinese counter-

part, Tao, during the SCO meeting.⁶⁹ Ahmadinejad stated that Iranian officials were examining the plan and would explain their ideas on the proposal in August 2006.⁷⁰ On July 31, 2006, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1696, which demanded that Iran suspend uranium enrichment activities by August 31 and implied possible economic and diplomatic sanctions if Iran does not comply with this resolution. The Iranian attitude follows the usual cyclical pattern, creating the suspicion that the whole process will end at the point it started. It is likely to be another example of Iran’s extending negotiations to

buy time, with international backing from Russia on the nuclear issue.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

As discussed in previous sections, Russian policy makers have a strategy of two-track diplomacy for achieving objectives, and they determine policy orientations on the nuclear issue in this context. The Russian rationale in backing Iran, the historical background of Russian-Iranian nuclear relations, the emergence of the nuclear issue in the international arena, the emergence of the issue as an international security problem, and the involvement of

the UN Security Council, all provide background for deciphering Russia’s objectives and explaining two-track diplomacy on the nuclear issue.

The first objective is to preserve Russia’s

dominant position in the emerging Iranian nuclear market, which is not dominated by the United States and other Western investors. The West can still make it tough for willing parties to collaborate with Iran on the nuclear issue. Russian policy makers and nuclear diplomats are aware of this difficulty but are still eager to take this risk in order to benefit from the Iranian nuclear market. This goal will be a main component of future policy as well as an objective of long-term policy. Russian nuclear policy seems to successfully draw on the trust of Iranian policy makers, who perceive Russia as their only potential

Russian involvement in the nuclear issue, among others, has the objective of maintaining Russian leverage on Iran at a certain level in order to make sure of Iranian backing in regional politics.

partner, now and for a long period of time. This means a Russian monopoly on the economic benefits from the nuclear program for this period.

The second objective is to obtain a share of the newly rising nuclear-energy market. Russia has the North Korean example as background for its involvement with Iran. The Russian administration aims to pursue the Iranian case successfully to keep this option open and demonstrate to the other nuclear-energy-seeking countries that it is a capable and a reliable partner. There is intense competition in the market, and Russia has already achieved some success, as discussed above. In the Russian perspective, further progress and new markets require the successful completion of investments and projects in Iran.

The third objective is to foster its image as a responsible nuclear power and an influential nuclear negotiator in international politics. This is also a preemptive tactic, to make sure the first and second objectives in its nuclear policy are met. Russia continues to be involved in nuclear-related international diplomatic maneuvers and holds active membership in international regimes and organizations on nuclear issues. Russian policy makers follow a soft but long-term negotiating policy; they honor the UN system; they safeguard the rules of the IAEA and the NPT. They are also in favor of multilateral participation and open dialogue on nuclear diplomacy in an age of excessive U.S. unilateralism. Nuclear diplomacy, particularly in the Iranian case, provides an opportunity for Russia to emerge as a globally responsible actor and to challenge U.S. unilateralism, which has created a sense of encirclement in Russia after increasing American involvement in Eurasia.

The fourth objective is reclaiming Russia's role in regional politics. Iran has critical importance for Russian policies toward the Caucasus/Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia. The Russian administration gives special importance to preserving its influential role in these regions. The Russian economy's dependence on oil and gas exports places these three regions — with rich energy resources and strategic position for energy-supply security — in the center of Russian regional policy. A decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in particular under Putin's administration, Russia has begun to reclaim its influential role in its neighborhood. Iran has been a strategic partner in Russian endeavors in these areas, and Russian-Iranian nuclear relations have been both the cause and the result of cooperation and strategic alliance in a complex regional context. As an example of Iran's importance to Russia, Tehran's rapprochement with Washington may change many regional balances from the perspective of Russian priorities in the region. Russian involvement in the nuclear issue, among others, has the objective of maintaining Russian leverage on Iran at a certain level in order to make sure of Iranian backing in regional politics.

Russia's strategy for achieving these objectives is based on a set of policy maneuvers in a two-track diplomatic game. Russia wants the Iranian nuclear program to produce peaceful nuclear energy. This is, however, not a simple guessing game. Russia has adapted policies to make sure that Iran will do this. Russia benefits from international pressure on the Iranian nuclear program. Iran can oscillate between the threat of international sanctions and the loss of Russian support for its

nuclear program. It cannot escape.

In this sense, Russia is sometimes a starter of diplomatic initiatives on the Iranian nuclear issue, while preferring to delay and block a number of other initiatives at the same time. Iran helps Russian policy, and both are able to create a cyclical pattern on the nuclear issue. This triggers a diplomatic process, raises hope and ends back where it started. Russian policy keeps international actors at arms length and controls Iran in a determined manner. Russian policy could lead to further internationalization of the nuclear issue and to an international consortium to address the Iranian problem, which may include the EU, China and even the United States. This might mean the loss of some of its advantage in the Iranian market but would prevent Russia from falling into the position of supporting an international pariah state.

The second track of diplomacy occurs between Russia and Iran. Russian-Iranian nuclear relations continue even under the worst international conditions, based on a mutual understanding that Iran satisfies Russian objectives and Russia protects

Iranian interests. There seems to be no option for Iran to slip the barriers of this relationship. The only breakthrough would be a rapprochement between Iran and the United States. Russian policy makers are also increasing their leverage in Iranian domestic politics by their careful and pragmatic approach on the nuclear issue. Russia is the only international actor that recognizes the legitimate right of Iran to produce nuclear energy and helps Iran to justify its position in the international forum. What polishes this positive image is Russia's help in the development of technology and science in Iran. This is highly appreciated in ruling circles and among the Iranian people.

Russia benefits from its multiple identities in foreign policy, employing dynamic bilateral, regional and international strategies for pursuing its nuclear agenda. Moscow has proved successful in balancing and reconciling many diverging and conflicting interests in a multi-actor context of the states, international organizations and regimes. In its "dances with wolves" Russia has succeeded in not getting bitten — so far.

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