

PUTIN, AHMADINEJAD AND THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has presented Moscow with both opportunities and challenges. This article will examine Russian policies toward and views of Iran since his election in June 2005 with regard to the most prominent issue in the Russian-Iranian relationship: the Iranian nuclear crisis. What this analysis will show is that Moscow has become increasingly frustrated with Ahmadinejad. Despite this, however, Moscow is unlikely to support a confrontational American approach to the Iranian nuclear issue, not only out of a desire to prevent the United States from becoming even more dominant, but also out of fear of losing what stakes Russia now has (and hopes to have) in Iran.

Early in his presidency, Russian President Vladimir Putin did much to improve Russian-Iranian relations when in October 2000 he unilaterally abrogated the secret 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin accord (in which Moscow agreed to limit its atomic energy and military assistance to Iran). Moscow then stepped up its efforts to complete the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr (work on which had languished under Yeltsin), strongly backed Iranian protestations that its nuclear program was

for peaceful purposes only, and increased Russian arms sales to Tehran.¹ After an Iranian opposition group revealed in 2002 that Tehran had a secret nuclear program that included a uranium-enrichment facility, though, the Putin administration sought to allay concerns that Iran was using its atomic-energy program to develop nuclear weapons by proposing that Russia supply the enriched uranium for the Bushehr reactor and reprocess the spent fuel from it.² (Moscow argued that these measures, combined with International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] supervision of the Bushehr reactor, should allay proliferation concerns.)

Moscow appeared to make important progress in this regard when, in February 2005, Tehran finally agreed to return spent fuel to Russia for reprocessing and storage. At the same time, Moscow agreed to begin supplying nuclear fuel for Bushehr.³ Even before Ahmadinejad became president, however, Tehran insisted that Iran would enrich uranium for its atomic-energy reactor at home and not depend on another country to do this. Tehran was then observing a voluntary suspension on enrichment that it had agreed to in November 2004 with the EU-3 (Britain, France

and Germany).⁴ The Putin administration hoped that Tehran would eventually see the wisdom of allowing Russia to supply its nuclear fuel in order to avoid confrontation with the United States. Such a move, of course, would make Russia important both to America and others (for ensuring Iran did not develop nuclear weapons) and to Iran (for protecting it from an America that might use force in an effort to prevent Iran from doing so).

Moscow, of course, had other concerns about Iran. There was a nagging fear in Moscow that one day a thaw in the Iranian-American relationship would cause Russia to lose its place to America and the West as Tehran's preferred partner in the petroleum, atomic energy and weapons spheres. In the wake of the Libyan-American rapprochement after so many years of hostile relations, an Iranian-American rapprochement seemed more likely to Moscow. As one Russian analyst complained, rogue states "force Moscow to do thankless work (for example, to shield them at the United Nations and protect them from sanctions), but later, when the time is right, they surrender to some American official on favorable terms."⁵

The election of Ahmadinejad did much to alleviate this concern. As the subtitle of a *Vremya novostei* article put it, "Iranian Elections Disappoint Washington, But Not Moscow."⁶ Others, though, saw his victory as posing a potential problem for Moscow if the ongoing negotiations between the EU-3 and Iran over the nuclear issue failed and the matter was referred to the UN Security Council: "In that event, if Moscow supports Tehran, it could find itself pitted against the consolidated position of Europe and the United States. And

demarches like that are not forgotten. On the other hand, by siding with the European Union, Russia would risk losing multimillion-dollar contracts in Iran."⁷

Russian fears in this regard were heightened when, just a few days before Ahmadinejad took office in August 2005, Tehran announced that it would end its moratorium on uranium enrichment.⁸ Moscow urged Tehran not to do this,⁹ but also indicated that it opposed moving the Iranian "nuclear dossier" from the IAEA (which does not have the power to impose sanctions) to the Security Council (which does), and that it would continue its nuclear cooperation with Iran.¹⁰

At the end of September 2005, Putin and Ahmadinejad met in New York, where they both had come to attend the annual opening of the UN General Assembly. According to a Russian press account, the meeting did not go well; Putin

...tried to persuade him to back away from the radical position he has now taken. The Iranian leader proved extremely intransigent and bluntly told his Russian counterpart that Tehran would not make any concessions or curtail its nuclear program. ... That no doubt displeased Vladimir Putin, because an Iran that possesses nuclear weapons is just as unacceptable to Moscow as it is to Washington.¹¹

The following month, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Putin and other Russian government officials in Moscow to urge them to join the United States in voting at the IAEA Council meeting in November to refer Iran to the Security Council. The Russians, however, insisted that this was not necessary.¹² Moscow then renewed its initiative to

resolve the crisis by proposing that Russia enrich uranium for Iran. To make the idea more palatable, Moscow proposed that this be done by a joint Russian-Iranian venture in Russia. But, while the United States and the EU-3 were willing to go along with this proposal, Tehran made it clear that it preferred to enrich uranium in Iran.¹³

The Putin administration appears to have genuinely believed that it was offering a solution to the crisis. Moscow, then, felt let down by Tehran's lack of cooperation, especially after Russia had done a number of things for Tehran, including the launch-

ing of an Iranian remote-sensing (i.e., spy) satellite in October 2005¹⁴ and the signing of a \$1 billion contract to sell Iran 29 Tor M-1 SAM air-defense systems along with Pechora-2A SAM systems the following month.¹⁵ Losing patience with Tehran, Moscow let it be known in January

2006 that it might join with the United States and others on the IAEA governing board and refer the Iranian nuclear dossier to the Security Council.¹⁶ Tehran responded by sending Iranian National Security Council Chief Ali Larijani to Moscow shortly before the IAEA vote with the message that Iran now took a more positive view of Moscow's proposal for a Russian-Iranian joint venture to enrich uranium for Iran in Russia, but insisting that the proposal had to be "refined."¹⁷

On February 4, 2006, Russia joined with most other members of the IAEA governing board in voting to refer Iran to the Security Council. The Iranian press denounced Moscow for its "betrayal." President Ahmadinejad responded by announcing Iran's withdrawal from the IAEA Additional Protocol, which allowed surprise inspections by IAEA officials of facilities in signatory countries.¹⁸ A few days later, the Iranian foreign minister announced Tehran's willingness to continue talks with Moscow about its proposed joint venture to enrich uranium, but only if part

of the joint venture was located in Iran.¹⁹ Moscow pointed out that this condition would be unacceptable to the United States and EU-3, but Tehran held firm to it.²⁰ On February 26, 2006, Tehran announced that Iran had agreed to a Russian-Iranian joint venture to enrich uranium in Russia, but on

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March 12, Tehran said this proposal was not on the table.²¹ One Russian press account saw this move as retaliation for Moscow's adopting a position on Iran similar to that of the EU-3 and even the United States.²²

Russia's position, though, was not the same as theirs. Russian officials have repeatedly indicated that Moscow will not support a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iran, thus portraying itself as Tehran's protector.

In addition, Russia (along with China) has expressed opposition even to the imposition of economic sanctions against Iran by the Security Council.²³ Although Moscow responded negatively to Ahmadinejad's April 2006 claim that Iran had "joined the nuclear club" through enriching uranium to power-plant level, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was insistent that the Iranian nuclear problem could not be resolved through the use of force.²⁴

On the other hand, there was recognition in Moscow that the United States might undertake unilateral military action against Iran. General Yuri Baluyevsky, chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, said that, "in the event of such a conflict, Russia would maintain neutrality."²⁵ This would be consistent with Russian behavior with regard to other U.S.-led military interventions Moscow disapproved of, such as in Kosovo and Iraq.

On June 6, 2006, the five permanent members of the Security Council along with Germany presented Iran with a series of proposals aimed at inducing it to renounce enriching uranium on its own territory. Larijani later noted that they contain "some positive points" and Ahmadinejad called them "a step forward."²⁶ But, much to the frustration of the international community, Iran refused to respond to them until the end of August 2006. The United States and the EU-3 want a UNSC resolution that at least imposes economic sanctions on Iran if it does not accept the June 6 proposals, but Russia and China have balked even at this.

Moscow sought to allay criticism from America and the EU-3 for its softer approach toward Iran by indicating that it could still help resolve the crisis diplomati-

cally. Indeed, Putin himself expressed optimism about this after his meeting with Ahmadinejad at the June 2006 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit (held in Shanghai).²⁷ Putin's optimism may have been enhanced by Ahmadinejad's proposal that Russia and Iran collaborate on gas pricing and not compete for export markets (Russia would sell gas to Europe while Iran sold gas to India and southern China).²⁸

By July 2006, however, Moscow seemed to become disillusioned by Ahmadinejad's delay in responding to the June 6 proposals for resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Indeed, Foreign Minister Lavrov said that this "absence of a positive reaction from Iran...runs counter to what President Ahmadinejad told the president of Russia a month ago."²⁹ Lavrov, though, again ruled out UNSC support for the use of force against Iran.³⁰ He did, however, indicate that Russia might support economic sanctions.³¹ But then Moscow backed away from this.³²

Russia voted in favor of UNSC Resolution 1696 (which passed by a 14-1 vote on July 31, 2006) calling upon Iran to verifiably suspend all nuclear enrichment activities by August 31, 2006, or face further UNSC measures.³³ Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak indicated, however, that what Moscow liked about the resolution was that it did not "carry the automatic threat of sanctions" (either military or economic).³⁴ Yet, despite the Russian Foreign Ministry's urging Iran to accept Resolution 1696,³⁵ Iran rejected it. Larijani, though, said that Iran "will continue developing relations with Russia and China, despite their supporting" the passage of this resolution.³⁶ Moscow, for its part, has continued to signal its unwillingness to support the imposition of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran.³⁷

Russian behavior since the time Ahmadinejad assumed office reveals a regular pattern that suggests something about Putin's policy preferences going forward:

- Putin does not want to side either completely with Iran or completely with America and the EU-3 in this crisis. Choosing sides would entail costs for Russia that he does not want to incur.

- Putin believes his proposal to enrich uranium for Iran offers a way out of the crisis that benefits Iran, America, the EU-3 and, of course, Russia. He is frustrated that Ahmadinejad has not accepted this proposal, especially after America and the EU-3 have done so (at least in principle). He may hope that, if the crisis gets worse, Ahmadinejad might accept it as a way of avoiding conflict with the United States.

- Putin will not approve any Security Council authorization of the use of force against Iran, especially if there is any ambiguity (something Tehran excels at creating) about its nuclear intentions. Since a Security Council-authorized use of force against Iran would undoubtedly be led by the United States, Russia would have even less of a role in the crisis (and would appear even less as a great power) than it does now. Further, Russian support for Security Council authorization of the use of force against Iran risks Tehran's curtailing or canceling Russian-Iranian economic cooperation in the atomic energy, weapons and natural-gas spheres.

- The deals that Moscow has (and even those it hopes to have) with Tehran are not worth much in Western terms. Completing the Bushehr reactor is said to be worth \$1 billion; additional reactors Russia may build could be worth \$1-2

billion apiece; the 2005 air-defense deal was worth about \$1 billion; and an Iranian retraction of the natural-gas cooperation proposal cannot hurt Russia unless Iran develops more of an infrastructure for natural gas exports to Europe. But the atomic energy, weapons and natural-gas industries are all politically powerful in Russia. Though not the biggest customer for Russian weapons, Iran is an important one that Moscow does not want to lose. Iran is one of the only customers the Russian atomic-energy industry has. Gazprom has plenty of customers, but it does not want to compete with other gas suppliers for markets. Putin undoubtedly understands that annoying Ahmadinejad could harm the interests of all three of these important Russian industries.

- Putin cannot stop the United States from using force against Iran without UN Security Council authorization, nor will he defend Iran if Washington takes this course. In the event, the greatest risk for Russia is that the American (or American-led) intervention will succeed and replace the present Iranian regime with a pro-Western one that drastically curtails economic cooperation with Russia. But, given the difficulties American forces are experiencing in pacifying two less populous countries on either side of Iran (Iraq and Afghanistan), it is more likely that any unilateral American military action against Iran would be limited to one aimed at destroying its nuclear capability and would leave the Islamic Republic intact. If America attacked Iran without Security Council approval and despite Russian objections, Ahmadinejad would not cancel or curtail economic cooperation with Russia, as he might if Moscow gave its approval for Security Council authorization

of the use of force against Iran. Putin might also regard the increased hostility toward the United States that would result from unilateral American military action against Iran as serving to increase the willingness of Iran and other countries (including West European ones) to cooperate with Russia.

• Putin is not likely to support even economic sanctions against Iran. The United States has long applied its own economic sanctions to Iran and thus has nothing to lose through the Security Council's imposing them. Russia, though, has important economic stakes in Iran that would be damaged by UNSC economic sanctions. Nor does Putin see the United

States as willing to offer Russia anything close to what Moscow would consider adequate recompense for supporting the imposition of such sanctions against Iran.

What either President Bush or President Ahmadinejad will do in the future is uncertain. They may act to escalate the conflict, ameliorate it, prolong it in its current state, or some combination of these options in succession. Putin has very little ability to determine what course of action they will take. Putin seems intent, though, on positioning Russian foreign policy so that it can both benefit and avoid damage from whatever they do.

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³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Factbox: Timeline of the Iranian Nuclear Crisis," (through June 16, 2006).

⁵ Gennady Sysoyev, "What's at Stake," *Kommersant*, February 2, 2005, p. 9 (*CDPSP*, March 9, 2005, p. 20).

⁶ Andrei Zlobin, "Revolutionary Guard Becomes President," *Vremya novostei*, June 27, 2005, p. 3 (*CDPSP*, July 27, 2005, p. 10).

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⁸ Andrei Zlobin, "IAEA's Seals Are Vanishing," *Vremya novostei*, August 2, 2005, p. 5 (*CDPSP*, August 31, 2005, p. 12).

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¹⁷ Aleksandr Samokhotkin, "Let's Enrich Together," *Vremya novostei*, January 26, 2006, p. 5 (*CDPSP*, February 22, 2006, pp. 14-15).

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