

Can There Be Common Ground?

THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM IN THE U.S.-RUSSIA DIALOGUE

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The development of the Iranian nuclear program continues to rank highly among challenges to international security, with tensions around this issue climbing to new heights in 2012. Since 2006, multiple UN Security Council resolutions on Iran have had little effect on the program's development. To a significant extent, this can be explained by the differing policies of the United States and Russia in regard to the Iranian problem. Although the United States and Russia are both founders and predominant supporters of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, their policies toward Iran differ. Whereas Washington sees coercion as the main tool to prevent Tehran from building nuclear weapons, Moscow favors a strategy of engagement and appeasement. This discrepancy may have a critical impact on the further development of the nonproliferation treaty (NPT) regime, potentially undermining its stability in the future. This paper explores three sets of issues:

- The similarities and differences between U.S. and Russian approaches toward the Iranian nuclear program, including their roots and justifications.
- The possibility for Moscow and Washington to find common ground on the "Iranian issue" in order to achieve successful resolution.
- The consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran for Moscow and Washington, in case both states' strategies fail to keep Tehran out of the "nuclear club."

U.S. and Russian Approaches toward Iran's Nuclear Program

The Middle East has been a subject of strategic rivalry between Moscow and Washington since the start of the Cold War. After the breakup of the Soviet Union,

however, U.S. influence in the region strengthened significantly while Russian influence declined. Two of the main goals defining U.S. strategy toward the Middle East include preserving global oil flows (33 percent of world oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz) and assuring the security of U.S. regional allies. A nuclear Iran might be an obstacle to both aims. On the one hand, a strong nuclear Iran might be able to dictate its policies in the region. It could control the Strait of Hormuz, thus interfering with the stability of world oil flows, essentially and directly damaging U.S. interests. As significant, Israel, one of Washington's key allies, considers the Iranian nuclear program the gravest threat to its security, while another, Saudi Arabia, sees it as negatively re-shaping the regional balance of power. The famous slogan of the Iranian authorities "to wipe Israel off the map" is often interpreted in Israel as an existential threat to the Jewish state, and a nuclear Iran is seen as a nightmare. In Saudi Arabia, Iran is regarded as both a competitor for hegemony in the Islamic world and as a regional rival. Often, Riyadh has stated that a nuclear Iran might push Saudi Arabia in the same direction. Therefore, limiting the Iranian nuclear program can be considered one of the United States' primary strategic goals, to be fulfilled through tactics including economic coercion (like sanctions), cyber-sabotage (such as the 2010 Stuxnet virus that managed to postpone the development of the Iranian nuclear program for two years), and the threat of military intervention.

Russia lost the majority of its Middle Eastern clients after the breakup of the USSR. However, it maintained some influence through sporadic economic cooperation with countries including Syria, Libya, and Iran. The latter gained the most importance when it became a primary consumer of Russian arms; Russia also provided Iran assistance with its civil nuclear energy development. The importance of Iran in Russia's Middle East policy has increased with the removal of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and the rise of turmoil in Syria. While Moscow deems that supporting the Iranian nuclear program is in Russia's strategic interests, it also believes that it is possible to prevent Tehran from opting for a nuclear weapons program by assuring the Iranian regime of its longevity. Furthermore, Moscow identifies Russian assistance in the development of Iran's nuclear program not only as a symbol of its presence in the Middle East. It sees the "Iranian nuclear dossier" as a bargaining instrument in its dialogue with Washington on related issues like missile defense.

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This brings us to the second point of discussion: the possibility of reconciling Russian and American positions in order to find a solution to the Iranian issue. A precedent was set in 2009, when the Obama administration hinted at the possibility of trading European missile defense for Russian cooperation on Iran. At first, a bargain seemed attainable. Russia postponed—and then canceled—the promised delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran, thereby supporting one regular UN resolution against the Islamic Republic. But the Obama administration's new plans for missile defense revealed the temporary character of the U.S.-Russia consensus on the Iranian nuclear issue. This demonstrated to Tehran the possibility of further developing its nuclear

program, since no radical Security Council resolution against Iran can be adopted without Moscow's consent. The possibility for convergence in Moscow and Washington is even lower today. This is not only given disagreement on issues like missile defense and Syria, but because of the contradictory ways in which the two sides have clarified their visions for the future of the Iranian nuclear program. Washington insists that uranium enrichment by Iran is unacceptable, while Moscow is ready to grant Tehran freedom of action in the field of civil nuclear development in exchange for Iran's full cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This disagreement practically rules out any common position among the five veto-wielding permanent members (P5) of the Security Council, which would be able to impose universal sanctions on Iran. However, the same lack of unanimity also prevents Moscow's variant, which relies on reassuring Iran that it will not be an object of external aggression and further economic pressure by the West. Being unable to unite all its members in a single strategy, the UN P5 is unable to resolve the situation. This gives Tehran the impression that it may carry on with its nuclear goals despite all the noise from the UN. This leads us to the hypothetical situation addressed in the final part of this memo.

A Nuclear Iran?

The emergence of a nuclear Iran would place both the United States *and* Russia in an uncomfortable situation. Washington would have to establish a strong system of restraint and extended deterrence in the Middle East, containing Israel from attacking Iran while deterring Iran from provoking or attacking Israel. This would be a difficult feat, and both sides could gravitate toward first-strike options. Iran might do so thanks to a small number of nuclear weapons and overall vulnerability to a first strike. For its part, Israel could opt for a first strike to protect its small territory. The doctrine of mutually assured destruction, which helped keep the United States and the Soviet Union from ending up in nuclear war, would hardly work in this case, due to the great disproportion between the territories of the two states, on the one hand, and their geographical proximity and absence of diplomatic ties, on the other. The first factor prevents any kind of parity between Iran and Israel, while the latter two leave no room for early warning systems or private communications. A lack of assurance to Israel or Iranian miscalculations could lead to the unthinkable: a nuclear catastrophe in the region, in which the United States would inevitably become engaged.

In such a context, Russia's role could be critical in at least two ways. First, and most constructively, Moscow might help deter Iran and support U.S. strategy in the region. This situation would be stabilizing for regional security as Tehran, being deterred by two nuclear superpowers, would be less reckless and more predictable in its actions, while Israel would be doubly assured in Iran's restraint. A nuclear Iran could also push the United States and Russia to overcome their contradictions on missile defense.

Second, and more destructively, Russia would pursue its geopolitical ambitions, emulating the role of China in its interactions with North Korea. This would give Moscow the unfounded impression that it could control Iran and would reinforce an

Iranian misperception that it has a powerful ally and is safe from punishment. Protected by the idea that global nuclear war is obsolescent, Tehran might perform some reckless regional actions (against Israel or Saudi Arabia), which could lead to military escalation and the transformation of a conventional crisis into a nuclear one.

Conclusion

In sum, the problems associated with the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue stem from a fundamental difference between the positions of key permanent members of the UN Security Council, in particular the United States and Russia. The main reason for these differences is the inherently opposing strategic interests of Moscow and Washington in the Middle East. These interests define different approaches toward the Iranian nuclear program, blocking the possibility of resolving the problem through common tactics.

Second, it is difficult for Russia and the United States to reach a common position on the Iranian nuclear program, due to the growing number of contradictions and unresolved issues in the U.S.-Russia dialogue. At the same time, some progress could be reached if Russia, for instance, received at least some concessions on issues it deems important, such as European missile defense. This possibility cannot be excluded, especially if the Obama administration stays in power.

Third, if Moscow and Washington fail to find common ground, the worst-case scenario, namely the emergence of nuclear Iran, can also not be excluded. This situation would be damaging not only for the NPT regime, but also for global nuclear stability. In this case, Russia's role could be critical.