Nuclear Programs in North Korea and Iran: Assessing Russia's Position

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Russia has not figured in the US presidential campaign for a number of obvious reasons. When Russian policy was touched upon--and nearly transformed into a scandal against one of the candidates--it was in reference to Russian-Iranian cooperation in sensitive areas, including advanced conventional weapons and the nuclear sphere.

Thus, it turns out that Russia's relations with states of concern (Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Cuba) are still a focus of attention for leading US politicians. These issues remain urgent for the White House and the Congress, as well as for those who seek to make a career in the executive and the legislature.

At the same time, all discussions under way in the US that concern Russia's nuclear, missile and other proliferation-sensitive contacts with Iran, Iraq and North Korea are extremely politicized and emotional, as in previous years. The arguments used are intended mostly for a domestic audience and for the US lobbying groups concerned. Efforts to start a new scandal demonstrated once again that the US lacks the facts (but not the allegations) to make a realistic assessment of Russian cooperation with the states of concern. This memo assesses Russia's attitude toward states of concern taking two examples--North Korea and Iran--from the point of view of their nuclear programs.

A History

The Soviet Union has helped develop North Korea's peaceful nuclear energy capabilities. It supplied Pyongyang with a small enriched-uranium research reactor, which became operational in 1966 and was under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. The USSR facilitated North Korean accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), taking advantage of Pyongyang's interest in building a nuclear power plant with Soviet help. However, in parallel to these developments, in the early 1970s, North Korea made a political decision to create its own nuclear weapons program. In 1986, North Korea started to operate its indigenous 5-megawatt gas-cooled graphite-moderated reactor with plutonium production capabilities. It also commenced with the construction of two more powerful industrial reactors to develop capabilities for the reprocessing of irradiated nuclear fuel and the separation of weapons-usable plutonium.

In 1989, North Korea was suspected of recharging a nuclear reactor, reprocessing discharged nuclear fuel and obtaining about 12 kilograms of weapons-usable plutonium. This amount was enough to manufacture a couple of nuclear warheads. From 1988 to 1994, the USSR and later Russia regarded the North Korean nuclear program as one of the most serious regional nonproliferation challenges conflicting with Soviet/Russian interests in the region. At the time, the USSR and then Russia were not able to control the development of Pyongyang's military nuclear program and did not have any significant impact on North Korea's activities. Moscow tended to believe that North Korea did not possess any nuclear explosive devices and that the program was frozen (allegedly since 1992). Nonetheless, there was no accurate data and this lack of information sometimes increased Russia's suspicions. For instance, Moscow presumed that if Pyongyang had finished the construction of one of the reactors it would have been able to produce up to 15 nuclear warheads per year (with maximum strain on its financial resources, and assuming the appropriate political decision had been taken).

Russia's inability to affect the Korean nuclear program--strengthened by fears that Russia was unable even to predict the development of events in the peninsula--resulted in a situation where Russian leadership and governmental experts put up with the loss of Russia's role in solving the North Korean nuclear problem, accepted their helplessness and blessed US negotiations with Pyongyang. These talks ended with the signing of a document known as the Agreed Framework. One of Russia's leading experts then admitted, "There is no price that would not be worth paying for refusal of any rogue state to acquire nuclear capabilities." Accordingly, the US, Japan, and South Korea willingly paid this price.

At first, Moscow agreed with the deal to exchange North Korea's nuclear-weapons program for construction of light-water reactors. But after a while Russia began to accuse the US of double standards, comparing Washington's policy toward North Korea (carrot) to that toward Iran (stick). One can hardly deny the existence of this double standard, but, in fact, initially Russia was not against the Agreed Framework and hoped to profit from US efforts and get rid of a potential long-lasting nuclear headache in the region. Moscow did not pay for the deal, only because it could not afford to. Moreover, it had a naive hope that the US would help Russia to get its share of the North Korean peaceful nuclear quasi-market within the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Some experts in Moscow presumed that this share would be "substantial," since Russia voluntarily left North Korea "for the sake of nonproliferation." In any event, as a result of the North Korean crisis in the early 1990s, Russia managed to escape a potential headache, but did not get any political gains and, on the contrary, incurred indirect economic losses by losing the market.

Unlike North Korea, Iran was definitely not a traditional Soviet nuclear partner. Only in the late 1980s did Tehran first propose that Moscow finish the Bushehr nuclear power plant, whose construction was suspended by the Germans. The USSR considered this business offer to be profitable but preferred a cautious approach towards nuclear cooperation with Iran, because it did not trust Tehran on this issue. The Kremlin suspected that Iran had intentions of developing a clandestine nuclear-weapons program

and eventually acquiring a nuclear explosive device. There were different assessments of Iran's financial and technological capabilities and Tehran's political decision-making was unclear. The NPT remained, however, a sacred treaty for the Soviet leadership, and even if it had been willing to overlook its nonproliferation commitments for a while, the emergence of Iranian nuclear might would have inflicted irreparable damage to Russian national security. This was one of the reasons why Moscow refused to assist Iran directly or indirectly in its nuclear efforts, despite all the commercial benefits of the project.

When Russia agreed to build a light-water nuclear reactor of VVER type, it was ready for no more than limited cooperation under IAEA safeguards. For instance, Russia rejected Iran's request to supply it with a heavy-water reactor. Moreover, in the early 1990s, Russia turned to the US with a proposal to have an informal discussion on mutual assessments of Iranian nuclear ambitions and capabilities. Russian experts wanted to know how much the US supplies of equipment to Iran (in different years and through a variety of channels) had contributed to the development of Tehran's nuclear program. The US, however, refused to engage Russia in this dialogue.

The Russian political leadership has so far taken no decision to accelerate nuclear cooperation with Iran in such a manner as to facilitate Tehran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons. In early 1995, the Minister of Atomic Energy Viktor Mikhailov signed of his own initiative a protocol of intentions with Tehran, which allowed for providing Iran with gas-centrifuge enrichment technology and equipment. This paragraph of the protocol nearly resulted in the immediate dismissal of the minister--and not due to US pressure. Washington did, however, profit from this afterwards by forcing Boris Yeltsin and then Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to refuse to supply Iran with conventional arms. Russia further tried to detect and prevent any possible attempts of Iranian visitors to obtain access to Russian nuclear technologies.

Diplomatic Pressures and Struggles

Russia learned from the KEDO experience that it needed to see to its own economic interests, political influence, and security assessments. Consequently, it strove to use the Bushehr plant for development of economic ties (which failed); for strengthening political influence in a US-free zone; and for getting information about Iran's military intentions by being close to the sources of such information. The latter might help Russia to control the situation and better predict its development. However, one noteworthy lesson of North Korea was that one could assist in building a nuclear power plant and still have no idea of what was going on in other parts of the country.

The US stick-and-stick policy towards Iran and towards the Russian-Iranian joint nuclear project had a counterproductive effect. Moscow was concerned about Iranian intentions and did not need US homilies, since Russia was trying to replicate in Iran the US experience with the KEDO, although unilaterally, and at an earlier (preventive) stage. This is why Moscow was so irritated and disappointed with the US pressure. As a result, a number of officials and military in Moscow tended to think that the US should be

addressed in its own tough language and that Russia should use Bushehr to demonstrate to Washington its independent foreign policy course. They might have also meant abrogation of Russia's international commitments in the area of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) nonproliferation. It is necessary to emphasize that Russia's ideas of expanding cooperation with Iran resulted from US and Israeli pressure.

Nonetheless, the Russian leadership did not allow this to happen. Its own assessments and views made it comply with the rules of the nonproliferation game. Nevertheless, some officials involved have accumulated negative sentiments toward the US as a result of its persistent and unreasonable pressure: since 1995, the Iranian issue has been raised in the course of all talks. This irritation can become a significant negative factor for future decision-making.

The Current Situation

Regarding North Korea, Russia has lately taken several attempts to participate in the nonproliferation dialogue in the region. All these endeavors have failed: Russia has missed the KEDO train, even the caboose. A Russian proposal to build a nuclear power plant for North Korea on the territory of Primorsky krai (the safest possible scenario as far as nonproliferation is concerned) has received no response. Nowadays, Moscow can only join the KEDO on general terms, including financial contributions instead of the expected financial tributes.

During President Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in July 2000, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, at least as far as Russia understood, expressed his willingness to abandon the North Korean missile program in exchange for launchers for North Korean satellites. Afterwards, however, it was reported to be Kim's "joke." It is noteworthy that Russian diplomats also tend to regard his words not as a joke, but as a diplomatic ploy, which, in fact, has nothing to do with plans for a North Korean missile rapprochement with the US and Japan under the mediation of President Putin. At the same time, the meeting of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Kim Jong-il within the framework of the latest round of US-Korean talks may portend a breakthrough.

Evidently, Russia does its best to restore its influence in North Korea. This year Moscow concluded a new Treaty on Friendship with Pyongyang. It envisages mutual contacts in case of security threats and consultations concerning a wide range of issues. Nonetheless, Russia cannot have a significant impact on the situation in this region, primarily due to its weak economic capabilities. As for Iran, Russia continues to build the first reactor in Bushehr and plans to continue with several others, as well as to train a limited number of Iranian nuclear specialists in Moscow.

In Iran, there are opponents and proponents of nuclear cooperation with Russia and it is uncertain whether this cooperation has brilliant prospects (as far as Minatom's commercial plans are concerned). The October 2000 visit to Tehran by Sergei Ivanov, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, was politically symbolic and probably

generally important, though it did not bear any particular fruit. Perhaps positive changes will emerge and new contracts will be signed during Iranian President Khatami's visit to Moscow in 2001.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin, like Boris Yeltsin, does not want to take any measures that may promote (directly or indirectly) the development of an Iranian nuclear weapons program. However, unlike Yeltsin, who noticed the irritation of his advisors concerning US pressure but still took into account US criticism, Putin's sole concern will be the risk of emergence of a nuclear Iran and any realistic threat to Russian security. Russia's assessment of the situation has not changed since the early 1990s, and Moscow believes that such a turn of events (which is quite improbable) would have a negative impact on Russia's security interests. This old argument is strengthened by the fact that Iran drifts (though very slowly) to restore its relations with Washington.

Conclusions

At the governmental level, Russia has never promoted, nor intended to promote, nuclear weapons programs in the states of concern. Any attempts of the lobbying groups and individuals to circumvent these restrictions have always been immediately prevented. There were some efforts on the part of enterprises and smugglers to make unauthorized supplies, but in the nuclear area, all these endeavors have failed. On the contrary, Russia has always feared even gossip about the possible emergence of nuclear instability near its borders. The "states of concern" definition is used in Russian political vocabulary about as much as in the US--with similar if not the same countries named. Russia has insufficient information resources to get an adequate read of the situation with possible new proliferation risks, especially in East Asia--and prefers to play safe, proceeding from the worst-case scenario.

Russia has neither the financial resources nor the political instruments to affect the policy of the states of concern, though Moscow at times deliberately bluffs. Russia has lost the competition with the US to prevent proliferation in North Korea, and Iran is probably the only remaining chance for Russian diplomacy to demonstrate its efficiency in nuclear engagement *a la* Russe. Russia's declared foreign policy priorities do not enable Moscow to publicly voice some of its concerns about the nuclear-weapons programs of other states. The absence of public statements, however, does not mean the absence of concerns and fears.

The United States' persistent pressure and meddling in Russian affairs increases irritation in Moscow, though the Kremlin realizes that this pressure is a demonstration for the US domestic audience and lobbying groups. At the same time, Moscow lacks an opportunity to take efficient steps toward preventing proliferation risks.

One cannot preclude that Putin's pragmatic approach may mean Russia's willingness to develop nuclear cooperation, even if there is a danger of violating or non-complying in full scope with international commitments. However, this is true only with respect to the

states that are regarded as Russian long-term strategic partners and not as potential sources of threats to Russian security. This is why even if Russia had the capability and willingness to meet the demands of the states of concern it would provide nuclear assistance neither to East Asia (China and North Korea) nor to the Middle East (Iran, Syria, and Libya). The only likely exception for advanced cooperation would be India.