Will the Ukraine Standoff Affect the Iran Nuclear Talks?

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Brief Analysis

Some Western policymakers seem to believe that Russia can be helpful on Iran even as it threatens to attack Ukraine, but they're missing the bigger picture.

Although Russia has always played a key role in multilateral nuclear negotiations with Iran, its recent escalation in Ukraine is casting an especially wide shadow over the current talks in Vienna, which aim to resurrect the imperiled 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Between the threat of open war with Kyiv, an ongoing crackdown in Kazakhstan, and assorted interventions in the Middle East, Russian relations with the West have reached perhaps their most dangerous inflection point since the fall of the Soviet Union. What does this mean for President Vladimir Putin's approach to the Iran talks?

Russia's Iran Strategy

Understanding Putin's current mindset requires a clear-eyed look at his past approach to Iran's nuclear program and related diplomacy. Although Moscow has always preferred a non-nuclear-armed Iran, it does not necessarily share Western goals, methods, or redlines on this issue. The Kremlin has supported sanctions against Tehran while simultaneously working to dilute them, claiming that Western concerns were overblown and were hurting its efforts to expand bilateral trade with the Islamic Republic. Russia has also used its support for sanctions as leverage to **extract concessions (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-russia-views-iran-nuclear-talks)** from the West.

Indeed, as negotiations waxed and waned over the years, many Russian analysts privately concluded that Putin could live with a nuclear Iran if necessary—of greater concern to him was the prospect of Iran turning pro-Western. As reported recently by the *New York Times*, this notion is supported by leaked audio of former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif admitting that his Russian counterparts in past negotiations did not want a nuclear

agreement to succeed "because it was not in Moscow's interests for Iran to normalize relations with the West." Although it is debatable whether this concern was ever warranted in the case of the narrowly focused JCPOA, Zarif's revelation nevertheless highlights Moscow's chief priorities.

Before and After Crimea

Even when they occur at the same time, Putin's policy decisions on Ukraine and Iran are better viewed as manifestations of a general anti-Western strategy than as directly connected actions. Hence, Washington should be cautious about how much store it puts in Moscow's assurances on either front unless they are accompanied by concrete indications of deeper policy shifts.

This imperative becomes clearer when looking at Russia's past technical and diplomatic involvement in Iran's nuclear program. By September 2013, Moscow officially gave Tehran control of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which had been built and previously operated by the Russian state-owned company Atomstroyexport. Two months later, Russia, the United States, and other members of the P5+1 signed an interim nuclear agreement with Iran.

Shortly thereafter, Moscow illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014 and began supporting separatists in east Ukraine. That decision engineered a frozen conflict that continues to this day and elevated Russia's standoff with the West to a new plateau. Meanwhile, Putin upgraded his relations with Iran to **unprecedented heights (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/vladimir-putin-and-shiite-axis)** due to the Syria war and the broader geopolitical struggle it portended, directly intervening in the conflict in 2015.

Russia's handling of the S-300 missile sale to Iran further illuminates how Putin often works against U.S. goals despite participating in U.S.-led diplomatic efforts—and, by extension, how dealing with Moscow in good faith can be naive. When the sale was originally agreed in 2007, key Russian defense entities such as Rosoboronexport were already subject to U.S. sanctions that were renewed in 2008. In June 2010, the UN passed a stronger arms embargo against Iran, and later that year, Putin suspended actual delivery of the air defense system under U.S. and Israeli pressure. Yet given the Obama administration's desire to secure Russian cooperation in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations, the United States did not renew sanctions; it also made the unprecedented concession of agreeing not to ban the sale of S-300s to Tehran. Once the JCPOA framework was agreed to in April 2015, Moscow proclaimed that an arms embargo on Iran was no longer necessary and resumed the S-300 sale in earnest.

Viewed another way, the Kremlin calculated early on that cooperating to some degree on the Iran nuclear talks was in its self-interest regardless of whether doing so might relieve international pressure stemming from the concurrent Crimea crisis. Years of P5+1 talks elevated Moscow's standing as a global power without whom major diplomatic decisions could not be made, bolstering its position as a counterweight to the West. The JCPOA also enabled Moscow to expand ties with Tehran while extracting concessions from Washington and Europe. As Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov put it at the time, "Would there have been a deal if Russia had not participated in these talks? I think there would have been a deal, but the conditions would have been far worse for the Russian Federation."

What's Different Now?

Russia vocally condemned President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018 and publicly supported subsequent European efforts to save it. Officially, Moscow supports the current talks as well. Yet Western policymakers should take care not to misunderstand the motivations behind these decisions.

First, when Lavrov noted in late December that the Kremlin opposes any changes to the deal, he was no doubt referring in part to the idea of incorporating a permanent arms embargo against Iran. The UN Security Council has previously failed to pass a resolution on such a ban after Russian (and Chinese) vetoes.

Second, Moscow is keen on continuing to portray itself as a key global powerbroker regardless of whether the talks bear fruit. In an interview with *Newsweek* last month, for instance, Russian ambassador Anatoly Antonov called on the United States and Iran to "demonstrate maximum flexibility in negotiations" and seek "the optimal combination of responsibilities and benefits for both the participants and the entire world community."

Third, even as it participates in talks aimed at bringing Iran back into compliance with important nuclear restrictions, Moscow is once again downplaying Western concerns about Tehran's intentions. In late December, for instance, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova dismissed assertions that Iran was stalling negotiations. Similarly, she defended Tehran in February 2021 by arguing that its refusal to comply with the JCPOA did not contradict its obligations to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—a notion that the U.S. State Department previously **disputed in great detail (https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-Compliance-Report.pdf)** .

Meanwhile, Russian commercial and defense transactions with Iran appear to have grown since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. According to the *Tehran Times*, total bilateral trade increased from $1.74 billion in 2018 to $2 billion in 2019. And last August, the Russian news agency TASS reported that trade had grown by almost 40 percent in the first six months of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020. One possible explanation is that Russia was less affected than other trade partners after Washington reimposed sanctions—for instance, cereals make up the bulk of Russian sales to Iran, and U.S. sanctions do not apply to such items. Moreover, Moscow is reportedly poised to sell thirty-two Su-35 fighter jets to Iran, which would significantly bolster the country's air force.

Thus, despite voicing pro forma condemnation of Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA, Russia largely avoided negative consequences from the resultant sanctions—in fact, it was able to spin the decision as another example of dangerous American unilateralism. And while joining the JCPOA framework in 2015 provided Moscow with short-term advantages, resurrecting the deal today may not necessarily reap further benefits. Yet remaining part of the discussions as long as they last can help Putin retain his role as a global powerbroker.

How Does Ukraine Factor In?

Russia's current military buildup on Ukraine's border and other destabilizing moves are more serious than previous provocations, and the demands it has delivered to NATO are seemingly deliberate nonstarters. After the Biden administration's **botched withdrawal (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-russia-stands-gain-thanks-bidens-afghanistan-disaster)** from Afghanistan and suspension of sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, Putin likely feels more emboldened than ever to renegotiate the terms of the Soviet dissolution. On December 30, he warned Biden that sanctioning Russia for the Ukraine buildup could lead to "a complete rupture of relations"—an unprecedented ultimatum that veteran analyst John Erath aptly described as "nuclear blackmail."

What does this mean for Iran negotiations? First, Moscow will remain committed to its own self-interest regardless of where the Vienna talks lead. Putin has worked hard to erode the U.S.-led global order for years, so he will do what he can to steer the latest developments in that direction. His original cooperation on the JCPOA was never a favor to Washington, and any seemingly helpful Russian behavior in Vienna should not be viewed through that lens either, regardless of what happens in Ukraine.

Second, because Moscow apparently has little to gain from renewing the JCPOA, it can afford to wait as it goes through the motions and posturing of Iran diplomacy. In contrast, the West still perceives Iran as a paramount threat, so Putin can keep using this fact as leverage in other theaters, perhaps even signaling that he will be more helpful with Tehran if Washington accommodates him on Ukraine. Should that happen, the last thing policymakers

should do is take him at his word.

In theory, Moscow could signal a genuine policy shift by taking concrete steps to limit Iranian influence in Syria, halting weapon sales to Tehran, and/or criticizing Iran on the nuclear issue. Unfortunately, none of these scenarios is realistic. Western policymakers may wish to believe that Russia can be helpful on Iran even if it makes harmful moves against Ukraine, but they need to see the bigger picture—Putin's anti-Western posture has never been limited to Europe. Accordingly, Washington and its partners should focus on building a unified strategy that not only strengthens the U.S. negotiating position in Vienna, but also demonstrates the political will to forcefully defend the rules-based global order if necessary.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book ***Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence)***. ❖

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