

How Russia Views the Iran Nuclear Talks

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Brief Analysis

As negotiations intensify this month, Moscow will continue pursuing its own agenda.

Diplomats from Iran and the P5+1 nations -- the United States, Russia, Britain, China, France, and Germany -- are rushing to conclude a nuclear agreement before the self-imposed March 24 deadline. While many details remain unavailable, the technical debate largely centers around the "sunset clause" under which international limitations on Iran's uranium enrichment program would expire after a set time period, with some constraints perhaps lifted earlier to reward good behavior. Critics -- most prominently Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu -- argue that rather than preventing Iran from producing nuclear weapons, such a deal could put it on a path to reaching that capability legally.

Moscow's approach to the negotiations is a complicated mix of skepticism and realpolitik, and it should be viewed through the lens of broader Russian policy toward the United States. On the one hand, Iranian officials have noted that the Kremlin remains their closest ally in the talks. And according to Sergei Chemezov -- the chief executive of the Russian defense company Rostec, who has been on U.S. sanctions lists since April 2014 in connection with the Ukraine crisis -- Moscow offered to sell Tehran the advanced Antey-2500 air defense system last month. On the other hand, Russia has threatened and withdrawn such offers in the past, including a frozen 2010 contract for the less advanced S-300 system. Moreover, U.S. officials generally regard Russia's behavior in the actual negotiations as more helpful than not, and Moscow has largely fulfilled its commitment to enforce some of the international sanctions against Iran -- this despite its skepticism about the utility of such measures and its past efforts to water down the toughest sanctions. Even so, Russia's warming relationship with Iran and its wider policies toward the Middle East pose significant challenges to U.S. security interests, and Washington should tailor its approach to dealmaking and Russia diplomacy accordingly.

INCREASED ECONOMIC AND MILITARY COOPERATION

The closeness of current Russo-Iranian ties is unprecedented, with many Iranian diplomats openly referring to Moscow as a friend. On the nuclear front, the state-run Russian firm Atomstroyexport helped the Iranians complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant and officially gave them control of the facility in September 2013. And last November, Russia's state nuclear corporation Rosatom announced an agreement to build two new reactor units in Iran, possibly to be followed by six more.

Bilateral cooperation has intensified and expanded to other sectors in the context of President Vladimir Putin's standoff with the West over Russian aggression in Ukraine. In August 2014, for example, the Russian Energy Ministry announced an oil-for-goods deal with Iran worth \$1.5 billion per month; under the proposed terms, approximately 500,000 barrels of Iranian oil per day would be provided at a discount in exchange for Russian goods and services. Analysts questioned the accord's logistical feasibility, and its current status is unclear, but the agreement remains on the table.

Similarly, Iranian ambassador to Russia Mehdi Sanaei reportedly announced plans in December to boost bilateral trade from the current \$3-5 billion to \$70 billion. Previously, in a June 2014 interview with the influential journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, he had offered advice on how to minimize the effects of Western sanctions and praised the prominent role Moscow is taking internationally.

Meanwhile, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has met with Putin four times in the past year, and other senior officials have held multiple meetings as well. Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu traveled to Tehran in January, the first such visit by an official in his position in fifteen years. He and his Iranian counterpart Hossein Dehghan signed a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation, and while the details remain sparse, the document apparently mentioned joint military drills. Russian press reports of such cooperation are only increasing as the P5+1 talks intensify this month.

OPPOSITION TO TOUGH SANCTIONS

In general, Moscow has sought to minimize tough sanctions on Iran, with top officials frequently claiming there is no evidence that Tehran is conducting nuclear weapons research. Indeed, when the International Atomic Energy Agency announced in November 2011 that Tehran had apparently been working for years on a weapon, the Kremlin accused the agency of bias and said it was interfering with diplomatic efforts toward a solution. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has also argued that Iran deserves to be an "equal partner" in resolving Middle East issues, and that sanctions hurt Russian-Iranian trade.

During the P5+1 negotiations, Russia has been a strong voice in favor of relaxing sanctions. In 2010, the Kremlin agreed to support the proposed sanctions, yet it convinced the UN to water them down, and it also extracted an unprecedented concession: the lifting of U.S. sanctions against the Russian military complex, which would technically allow Moscow to sell anti-aircraft batteries to Tehran. As mentioned previously, however, Russia agreed to suspend (but not cancel) an \$800 million contract with Iran for S-300 anti-aircraft missiles -- a system that could help shoot down American or Israeli warplanes in the event of a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Similarly, Russia played a prominent role in the November 2013 Geneva deal that aimed to grant Iran sanctions relief. Putin noted the success of Russian diplomacy in those negotiations; according to a report last month by the Kremlin-operated news agency RIA Novosti, he stated, "We put forth a conceptual basis for movement along this path -- the principles of gradualism and reciprocity. This approach was supported by all stakeholders."

ALIGNMENT WITH RUSSIA'S GLOBAL INTERESTS

For all of Moscow and Tehran's lofty public pronouncements about friendship and cooperation, Russia's Iran policy is ultimately driven by its global interests: namely, reducing the West's influence and raising Russia's, even at the expense of security. Iran's interests largely coincide with these goals, so cooperation with Tehran fits well with Moscow's agenda. Putin's repeated calls for a "multipolar" approach are simply a means of achieving these aims rather than a genuine interest in multilateralism.

From this perspective, Iranian analysts privately express reservations about the true extent of Moscow's cooperation with Tehran, and Russian analysts argue that Iranians have not forgotten the S-300 snub. Tehran would no doubt feel more assured if Moscow rejected sanctions altogether. It is also doubtful that Russia can deliver as much on the economic front as it promises. Yet the two countries share clear geopolitical and defense interests and will try to cooperate on them despite international sanctions, as signaled by the recent Antey-2500 offer.

This interest-based approach could affect Iran's nuclear future as well. The Russian nuclear industry has grown substantially since the mid-1990s, and the Kremlin plans to significantly expand the role of nuclear energy, new reactor technology, and exports of nuclear goods and services. For example, according to the World Nuclear Association, Russia is a global leader in fast neutron reactor technology. Further cooperation with Iran on nuclear energy therefore fits well with Russia's plans. Moscow often asserts that Iran is not an "outcast" and therefore sees no reason to halt cooperation.

Both countries also oppose any attempts to support democratic movements in the Middle East. Most notably, they continue to back the Assad regime in Syria and hold similar views on the Taliban in Afghanistan.

WHAT CAN WASHINGTON EXPECT FROM RUSSIA?

Moscow will no doubt continue to emphasize the importance of finding a multilateral solution to the Iranian nuclear issue -- it will also continue using this multilateral forum to push its own self-serving agenda. Although Moscow does not want Tehran to develop a nuclear weapon, it feels less threatened by Iran's program than the West. So if the P5+1 is unable to reach a deal, Moscow can wait and then continue expanding nuclear cooperation with Tehran. And if a deal is reached, Moscow will strive to ensure that the terms allow it to maintain such cooperation.

In either case, the United States can count on Moscow using Iran as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from the West on a number of fronts, such as minimizing international pressure related to Russia's behavior in Ukraine and Syria. Putin knows that Washington wants a nuclear deal more than Russia does, so why not profit from this disparity?

With or without a deal, the Kremlin will continue supporting Assad, proceeding with aggression in Ukraine, and attempting to profit from regional conflicts. In February, for example, Chemezov told reporters that conflicts in the Middle East help Russia's arms sales, which reached \$13 billion in 2014: "I don't hide it, and everyone understands that the more conflicts there are, the more weapons are bought from us. Our volumes continue to grow, despite sanctions."

If Washington hopes to counter this strategy, it would need to remind the Kremlin that a nuclear Iran is not in Russia's long-term interest, and that playing a constructive role in curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions would raise Russia's status as a global power that truly helps ensure global and regional security. Ultimately, however, Washington should have no illusions about Putin's intentions, and should not be quick to offer generous concessions for little in return.

Anna Borshchevskaya is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and a fellow with the European Foundation for Democracy. ❖

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