

What If the Ukraine Crisis Affects the Iran File?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Given Moscow's potential ability to undermine Iran diplomacy, Washington has yet another compelling reason to reestablish faith in -- and fear of -- America's willingness to use military strength.

Russian deputy foreign minister Sergey Ryabkov generated considerable commentary last week when he threatened potential "retaliatory measures" on the Iranian nuclear file if Washington pressures Moscow on Crimea. While this may be nothing more than a scare tactic, it deserves consideration as a worst-case scenario. Weighing all factors, the United States and its allies could cope with such a development given the favorable military and diplomatic correlation of forces in the Persian Gulf, but doing so would require determination and a more realistic approach to power in facing the unpredictable Vladimir Putin.

THREE QUESTIONS

The Russian threat, were it repeated or reinforced, would raise three linked questions. First, should the United States and its allies respond to such a threat by ratcheting back planned Ukraine sanctions and thereby "saving" the Iranian nuclear talks? Second, would Moscow seriously contemplate executing the threat? Third, how much damage could Russia actually inflict on the international effort to rein in Iran's nuclear weapons drive, and at what cost to Moscow?

In a well-functioning foreign policy system, the answer to the first question would depend on the answers to the second and third. If Washington is convinced that the Russians would not go through with such a threat or, if they did, would not succeed in derailing the international effort, then the answer to the first is "no." But if one believes that Moscow would act, and that it has a chance of succeeding, then Washington would have to weigh the strategic costs and benefits of a strong position on Ukraine versus the Iranian nuclear file.

The majority view thus far is that Russia would have more to lose than gain in playing the Iranian card, but that is no

sure bet. The Ukraine crisis has shed light on Putin's desire to stymie U.S. foreign policy, and on his love of risk and dramatic "coups de main." His penchant for risk is an important counterweight to Russia's interests in cooperating with its P5+1 partners (Britain, China, France, Germany, and the United States) on the Iran issue: namely, a stable Middle East, support for a nonproliferation regime that favors existing nuclear weapons states, fear of an out-of-control "Muslim bomb" with implications for Russian-majority Muslim areas, and commitment to the UN Security Council, which is heavily invested in the Iran talks. Emphasizing these interests is logical, but this same logic led the West to conclude that Putin would not hang tough on supporting the Syrian regime or forcibly change European borders.

Indeed, Putin keeps doing things that fly in the face of our "twenty-first-century logic." On seemingly any Western initiative, he sees progress not as a "win-win" for the international community -- including Russia -- but as an accretion of U.S. power. Because his focus is on containing this power as an existential objective, one cannot rule out Russia acting against its alleged best interests regarding Iranian nuclear weapons -- an issue that may be important to Putin, but not existential. A cold-blooded economic calculus could factor in as well. The greater the instability in the Middle East -- especially the Gulf region, which controls 20 percent of world oil exports and has important gas trade potential -- the higher the prices for oil and gas from elsewhere, including Russia.

ODDS STACKED AGAINST MOSCOW?

But what exactly could Putin do to undermine efforts against Iran were he so inclined? Here the situation is more advantageous to Washington and its allies, but only if they think in realpolitik terms rather than "twenty-first-century" terms. This means focusing on military forces, bases, and diplomatic relationships in the Gulf, where the United States is in far better position than in the Black Sea.

Several other factors also tilt the balance in Washington's favor. First, while the international sanctions regime rests on Security Council resolutions, the most effective measures have been U.S. unilateral sanctions imposed on Iranian oil exports with the help of importing states. Second, international condemnation of Iran's behavior is based on Security Council resolutions and is thus already the law of the land -- Putin cannot reverse these resolutions. Third, China is more dependent than Russia on the global trading system and has been careful not to fully endorse Putin's Crimea grab, which challenges Chinese interests. Beijing is particularly dependent on Gulf oil and stands to lose as much as Putin might gain from instability and resulting high hydrocarbon prices. Finally, the West's response to a worst-case move by Moscow could include undercutting Russia's gas and oil market advantages and its access to international financial and trading regimes.

PUTIN'S OPTIONS: UNDERCUTTING A DEAL, ALLYING WITH IRAN

The West's advantages aside, Putin does have cards to play. The easiest strategy would be to torpedo any final nuclear deal with Iran by coaching Tehran on the P5+1's bottom lines and opposing any tough position that would make an agreement palatable to Congress and U.S. allies. This would deny Washington a diplomatic victory, keep tensions high, and confirm the widespread fear that the interim Joint Plan of Action will be the high water mark of negotiations, thus locking in a rapid Iranian breakout capability. To be sure, oil sanctions would remain at their current level even under the Joint Plan's limited mandate. Over time, however, market demands, sanctions fatigue, and Russian manipulation could severely weaken these restrictions, which are based on other countries accepting U.S. interference with their private firms.

Playing to win, Putin could follow up on this gridlock strategy by reaching a bilateral nuclear agreement with Iran. This would satisfy Russia's concerns about proliferation, enhance its diplomatic posture, and -- by offering an alternative to the P5+1 effort -- explode Washington's unilateral sanctions regime.

In a worst-case scenario, Putin could go even further, resurrecting the sale of advanced air-defense systems to Iran (which are not prohibited by UN sanctions) and building on the Bushehr nuclear plant deal by giving Tehran more dual-use nuclear technology. Most seriously, he could take military steps such as establishing a naval base in Iran, announcing Russian opposition to any military move against Iran, deploying "technicians" to high-value Iranian nuclear facilities, or even stationing token Russian troops at strategic locations.

Pure fantasy? Alas, no -- Moscow has displayed similar high-risk behavior elsewhere, from sending token troops into Kosovo in 1999 to invading Georgia and Ukraine. In the face of resulting international condemnation, he could fall back on a bilateral nuclear agreement with Iran as mentioned above, openly challenge U.S. banking sanctions as unwarranted intervention in Iran's domestic affairs, and exploit international antipathy toward Washington on everything from Israel to the Iraq war.

THE WAY FORWARD

In the event that Putin ups the ante on Iran, the United States and its allies are well positioned to counter him. The more determined and convincing Washington is in limiting Tehran's nuclear weapons potential and meeting Russian challenges in Ukraine and elsewhere, the less likely it will have to deal with a new Russian gambit on Iran or other issues. But if the West tries to deflect Putin's mischief by going soft on Ukraine sanctions, he will just be encouraged to go rogue in the Gulf.

Accordingly, the United States should build an alternative international consensus to support its moves in the absence of new Security Council measures, exploiting the fact that Putin has made himself increasingly vulnerable by violating global norms. This includes using energy and other global economic tools to deter and contain Russian adventurism. Washington should also be solicitous of China on Middle Eastern issues, even though Beijing's Crimea-like behavior in its own near-abroad is worrisome.

Finally, Washington should make two things clear. First, resolving the Iranian nuclear question in a manner supportive of U.S. and allied security is a core American interest. Second, the United States will use massive military force to achieve that end if a cooperative diplomatic alternative is rendered impossible by Russian meddling. For these and many other reasons, job one for the Obama administration is to reestablish faith in -- and fear of -- America's willingness to use its overwhelming military strength.

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