

Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era

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Russian-Iranian relations appeared to improve dramatically in late 2007. Prior to this, there had been important differences between Moscow and Tehran over several issues. These included: Iranian unhappiness over Russian support for even relatively mild UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran over the nuclear issue, Iranian impatience concerning repeated delays in the completion of the Russian-built nuclear power plant at Bushehr, Russian dismay at Tehran’s refusal to accept Putin’s proposals for resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis by allowing Russia to supply all of Iran’s enriched uranium under various mechanisms, and other issues.

These Russian-Iranian differences, though, seemed to diminish when Putin made his first visit to Tehran in October 2007. Soon after this, Moscow delivered 82 tons of enriched uranium for the start-up of the nuclear power plant that the Russian firm, Atomstroieksport, has been building for Iran at Bushehr. In addition, the Iranian defense minister announced at the end of December 2007 that Moscow would supply Tehran with advanced S-300 air defense missiles. All of these led to much press coverage about how Putin was enabling Ahmadinejad to defy the U.S., and even that a Russian-Iranian alliance was emerging.

But disagreements between Moscow and Tehran have remained that cast doubt upon the extent to which the two governments are actually cooperating or can do so. Almost immediately after the Iranian defense minister announced that Russia was providing Tehran with S-300 air defense missiles, Moscow flatly denied this. Indeed, the Russian Federal Military and Technical Cooperation Service issued a statement saying that the supply of these weapons to Iran “is not being considered and is not being discussed with the Iranian side at the moment.” Moscow, in effect, called the Iranian defense minister a liar.

In addition, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed President Bush’s December 2007 statement that the supply of Russian nuclear fuel to Iran makes it unnecessary for Tehran to enrich its own uranium. This suggested that Russia shares American and European fears about Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Tehran, though, does not want to be totally dependent on Moscow for enriched uranium and so insists that it will enrich uranium inside Iran. This has disappointed Moscow and resulted in it

cooperating with the U.S. and other UN Security Council members to impose further sanctions on Iran.

These continuing disagreements between Moscow and Tehran point to even deeper problems in their relationship. One is that both Russia and Iran have prickly regimes that much prefer to defy America and the West rather than to cooperate with them. But while this would seemingly give Moscow and Tehran an incentive to cooperate with each other, the prickliness of each makes this extremely difficult.

Another is that the two sides have very different views about how much each needs the other. Understanding that Iran regards America as its primary opponent, Moscow sees Tehran as dependent on Russia for support and protection against it. From the Russian viewpoint, then, Tehran should be willing to make concessions to Moscow—such as agreeing to allow Russia to supply all of Iran’s atomic fuel and renouncing efforts to enrich uranium by itself.

Tehran, though, sees things quite differently. Iran has had troubled relations with Russia for far longer than with America, and there is deep distrust for Russia even among Iranians who distrust the U.S. Iranians who see themselves as successfully defying the world’s greatest power—America—see no reason why they should make concessions to Russia, which they view as a much lesser power. Indeed, many in Tehran see Russia as needing to make concessions to Iran for fear of risking the loss of Iranian business to China, India, or Europe.

What this suggests is that while neither Russia nor Iran is willing to cooperate with America and the West, they are not willing to cooperate very much with each other either. On the other hand, while their differences are likely to remain serious, it seems highly unlikely that there will be a breakdown or serious worsening of Russian-Iranian relations. So long as both Moscow and Tehran both regard Washington as their principal opponent, their contentious cooperation with each other is likely to continue.

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