
Iran and Russia : New Start After 30-Year Pause

By Vladimir Yurtayev
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Thirty years ago, in 1979 there occurred the Islamic Revolution in Iran which transformed the country from a constitutional monarchy under the Pahlavi dynasty to an Islamic republic. Those events gave birth to the so-called "Islamic factor". On 1 April, 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded to symbolize the return of Islam into big politics.

In early 21st century Iran continues to give rise to geopolitical ideas. Over the past 30 years Iran has expanded its influence dramatically if compared to the years under Shah Pahlavi. Then, backed by the US, the country played a role of "a gendarme of the Middle East". As of the beginning of the 2009, Iran is the most economically developed country in Central Eurasia, its army also being one of the strongest in the region. Experts say Iran will remain the second major OPEC oil producer at least till 2015 with a 7 percent share in the world trade and exports of oil. Iran is a great civilization, its human potential being 72 million people. It also benefits from its geographical location on the crossing of strategically important trade routes ("new Silk Road").

Iran's geostrategy seeks global leadership through imposing the Islamic way of living. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who sworn in as Iran's president on June, 24, 2005, proclaimed a "new start" for the Islamic civilization of Iran, rooted in the 1970s. Iran's 2006-2025 national development program reads: to build a fair and prosperous society with physically and spiritually healthy citizens and take active part in the international activity for the sake of global peace and mutual respect. The country which claims regional leadership should on parity basis join the projects implemented by other members of the international community and provide security in the region.

Currently Iran has to choose its longtime strategic allies.

In modern Eurasia the tendencies are as follows:

1. European (EU)
2. Arabian Islamic (The Arab League)
3. Iranian Islamic (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, some Afghan regions, etc)
4. Chinese (China)
5. Indian Buddhist (India)
6. Pacific Asian (ASEAN)
7. Eurasian (EurAsEs, Russia-Eurasia)
8. Global Asian (SCO)
9. Asia-Pacific (APEC forum)

From a geopolitical angle, in Western Eurasia a dominating project is NATO's eastward expansion. US presence in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan and

Uzbekistan), Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq has been traditionally strong. However, experts believe that cooperation with Russia and Iran in the region is not viewed as a priority by the Obama administration.

Historically, "Big Iran" comprises the Middle East and part of the Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), an Arab part of the Western Asia and Egypt. In 1990s Tehran was trying to take control over the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and in the Gulf. But amid the process of globalization, the newly-established organizations, for example OPEC, proved ineffective. Like Turkey, Iran failed to win the leading positions in the region and in 2000 gave way to China.

Since the status of the Caspian Sea yet has not been solved, the role of Iran in that region remains unclear. Arab member countries of the Gulf prefer to work within the framework of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG). Only after Saddam Hussein was toppled in April of 2003, Iran received an opportunity to enlarge its presence in the Arab part of the Western Asia, and its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict grew bigger.

In 1979 Iran was no longer listed among the allies of the western democracies and had no direct diplomatic contacts with the United States. The war with Iraq and the process of Islamization Iran had had launched on its own made its isolation on the international scene even more apparent. In early 2000s a sharp rise in oil prices and US mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan gave Iran an unprecedented opportunity to stand against US, this is what Ayatollah Khamenei and other hard-line politicians. Like his teacher Ruhollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Khamenei sees US as a "global arrogance". Washington and its allies cannot let Iran join the club of nuclear-capable states if Tehran continues to be faithful to Imam Khomeini's legacy.

Teheran's persistence in nuclear activities evokes serious concerns in US, Israel, UK, France and Germany. In early 2009 military confrontation between the West and Iran is very likely. In case of a war, Iran (as an Islamic country) is going to rely on ummah and on the countries supporting a multipolar world order (Russia, China, Latin America and others). But this support may not be enough.

The Iranians hope the US won't take risks to unleash another war due to the ongoing financial crisis. But still we should not rule it out. In Washington they probably believe that new military expenses could revive the US economy.

Unlike their colleagues in US, experts in Europe think the West has "lost Iran" due to its excessive attention to Tehran's full fuel cycle nuclear program. Probably, amid the current economical difficulties in US, the EU may offer Iran the policy of detente or other ways to partnership but provided that any Iran's attack on Israel would cause adequate responsive measures. Anyway, Tehran is expected to guarantee it would carry out no attacks on Israel, where such threat has long been widely discussed. Actually, the leaders of Iran have been under serious psychological pressure as well; it may be that Hamas attack on Israel in winter of 2008-2009 was a preventive measure amid the rumors about US attack on Iran ahead of Barack Obama's inauguration as president.

Iranian religious regime aims to avoid military confrontation with US to have a chance to improve its international image (whether with the help of Russia, US, China and Europe or without it). If we leave out Russia, today Iran dominates in Central Eurasia and in the Middle East, it is also one of the key countries in Central and Western Asia. That is why Tehran is

trying to gain time by actively implementing regional policies which serve its ambitions of Pan-Islamic leader. Thus Iran's regional policy should be viewed globally.

Experts talk about an arising strategic alliance in the Middle East: the Baghdad - Tehran - Syria axis. At the same time Tehran views struggle for Iraq as a complicated strategic process of confrontation with US, its aim being a unipolar world. Anyway, due to its vast energy resources and geographical location, Iran may become the epicenter of geo-economic wars.

Iran is seeking more intensive cooperation with India. The official Delhi sees counteraction to political Islam and international terrorism as one of its priorities. In other words, India, Iran and Russia, together able to restrain China's expansion in the region, are looking for the means to achieve a kind of a three-nation agreement.

A union between Iran and India relies on geo-economic aspects (energy security, the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipe, the "North-South" international transport corridor) and may emerge everywhere. Iran is ready for a large-scale cooperation with the region's member countries. The fact that Iran has been pursuing a goal to become one of the regional centers of oil and gas trading will only speed up the process of emerging between the Central Eurasia and Tehran.

Europe also has to take into consideration Iran's role in energy security. It may be viewed as paradox, but Washington will be unable to reduce Europe's dependency on the Russian gas without Iran's participation. Now it is for Tehran to decide whether to get access to the Western market through the participation in the Nabucco project or join Russia, China, India, Pakistan and some countries of Central Asia in the implementation of the "Energy of Asia". China has long been focusing on its system of energy security from the Caspian Sea to Japan despite any political problems.

China is likely to connect the Asia-Pacific region with some Asian countries to form a special kind of "continental" economy (as a counterbalance to "maritime" economy). This kind of economy may become an important link. By the way, waterborne transport is crucial for the Chinese economy as it deals with the shipment of almost two thirds of all cargoes. So, the development of transport network connecting other SCO and CIS members with China should be viewed as a long-term strategic project. It refers to both cargo and passenger transportation. Russia's water ways could be of much help there. When a trans-Iranian channel and the one between the Caspian, the Azov and the Black Seas appear, Eurasia will have a transcontinental deep water energy transportation system.

Tehran is perfectly aware of its location between China and Europe, between Russia and US. The countries of Central Asia know this as well.

If Iran, the only remaining island of stability in Central Eurasia, disappears from the world map, Russia will be taking serious risks as international terrorism and drug trafficking, unsettled inter-ethnic conflicts and wars for natural resources, will enter their new phase and thus destroy the process of regional integration and modernization.

Russia and Iran have necessary historical background to jointly create a new model of regional cooperation. This is not a geopolitical union of the two countries (political risks are too high), though in this case Russia would gain control over an extensive part of Iran, from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan and including Central Asia. Russia offers a new strategy, when the countries interested in a deeper cooperation with Moscow could switch on to other forms of collaboration. The Eurasian Economic Community

(EAEC) makes the core of the CIS integration process. By the year 2010 Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan are due to establish a Customs Union. The sides have also been involved in the creation of the Common economic area. The major aim today is to establish the first successful integration project. This is where Russia and Iran could also cooperate in future. However, amid the growing influence of the Great Silk Road in early 21st century, Russia and Iran cannot succeed in the implementation of continental geo-economical projects without each other's help.

From the one hand, all Caspian countries devoid of access to the sea, are interested in having plenty of alternative transport corridors. From the other hand, in a mid-term perspective, the SCO member countries (China, Russia and others) should expect an increase in regional home market integration process and growing shipments.

To boost economy and innovations in new regions (centers of natural resources development) it is necessary to provide access of transport to the area.

Probably, there are other reasons for a deeper Russia-Iran strategic partnership. The two countries have much in common from a historical angle. In early 20th century both countries lived through revolutions, and then in 1906 the Russian tsar and the Persian shah granted Constitutions to their people.

Both leaders dismissed parliaments (State Duma and Majlis) for three times.

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution the two nations suffered many hardships which ended simultaneously. On 16 November, 1920, Moscow was informed on the end of the Civil war, while three months later (on 21 February, 1921) in Tehran Persian Cossacks helped Reza Shah ascend to power (he was the Shah of Iran from 1925). In mid 1930s the people of Iran and the Soviet Union lived through repressions. In 1943 the Tehran Conference took place in the Iranian capital between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill to decide on the opening of a second front. In 1953 in both countries power was handed over to other politicians. In 1964 the Soviet leader Khrushchev was replaced, while R. Khomeini was expelled by the Shah to Turkey. In 1988 the war between Iran and Iraq ended, while the Soviet troops left Afghanistan in 1989.

In early 2009 the situations in Russia and Iran are again very much alike.

Moscow and Tehran adopted national strategies to gain leadership positions in a multipolar world. In terms of a foreign policy, Iran has managed to abandon the idea of "Islamic revolution export". Iranian fifth President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) put forward an initiative of "the dialog of cultures and civilizations", which was backed by the UN. Then the sixth Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suggested his "diplomacy of justice".

Cooperation within the SCO (comprising Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) appears to be the most convenient form of integration between Russia and Iran. Together with the countries having observer status (India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia), SCO covers the third part of Eurasia and borders the "Big Europe" area.

The SCO activity is predetermined by joint strategic projects, which in early 21st century are related with new routes of transcontinental shipments ("TransSib", "TRASEKA", "North-South", "North-North", "Western China-Western Europe", etc).

All these projects give a perspective view on a future transportation/

economic system within SCO. The area of a new Eurasian belt is in the north and borders the main meridional routes of Russia's water transportation system. It starts in Kemerovo and goes further to Krasnoyarsk-Novokuznetsk-Bratsk-Kyzyl and north-western China.

As we see how waterborne transport develops, we may estimate Russian exports: 2,5 million tonnes to Eastern Asia (metals, wood, coking coal, containers), to Europe-7,2 million tonnes (aluminum, timber, oil and oil products) and through the North sea way-up to 4 million tonnes.

The SCO would focus on a continental model of transport/economic policy in Eurasia in the 21st century.

Today Russia and Iran are facing not only problems of transport and tourism.

Among other issues there are atomic energy and biotechnologies, medicine, ecology, space exploration, security and demography. These all are not just fields where to spend money, but plenty of opportunities for joint strategic and other kinds of initiatives.
