
Russia and Iran Get Strategic

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While many analysts predicted a rosier picture for U.S.-Iranian relations with the Obama administration, the situation is rapidly becoming profoundly more difficult and more complicated. The new dimension is Russia.

On February 20, the Russian Federation Security Council and the State Council will approve a new national security strategy to go through 2020. Without saying the "United States," the draft document clearly identifies the United States as Russia's primary rival for the next decade. It goes on to say that the primary focus of the struggle will be for hydrocarbons in some very specific areas. The Middle East and Central Asia are mentioned specifically. In these areas, according to the document, the struggle could develop into a military confrontation.

Russia's last general security document was adopted in 2000 and was much more general than this one about the security objectives of the Russian Federation. The new draft is much more focused and gives indications of future policy directions.

Looking at the developments of the past 90 days through the filter of the new Russian security framework, a clearer picture emerges. It's no longer a question for the United States of whether or not Russia will support additional sanctions on Iran. That won't happen. Russia is on the path to make Iran a strategic partner, a counter to the United States in the regions of rivalry.

The United States falls into a trap in assuming that Russia doesn't want a nuclear-armed Iran. Russian officials repeat over and over that they have no evidence that Iran has a weapons program. U.S. officials discount that statement but shouldn't. The United States needs to remember that Russia has nuclear engineers inside Iran working with the Iranians.

Strategic Partnership

There are three examples in the past few months that suggest a strategic partnership: the nuclear power plant at Bushehr, the S-300 missile, and a refinery in Armenia.

The work on the Bushehr nuclear reactor has been punctuated by continuous delay. One almost got the impression that Russia was dragging its feet on purpose. However, Russia appears to have a renewed commitment to the work. Russia recently announced that it was planning to dispatch up to 3,000 technicians there. It's hard to argue that Russia has any interest in punishing Iran for enriching in light of this project.

Although the system hasn't been delivered, the Russians know that the United States and Israel don't want the new air defense capability, the S-300 missile, sold to the Iranians. The Russians seem to have gone ahead anyway. That makes no sense if they share our objective of punishing the Iranians for not suspending their enrichment program. The refinery in Armenia is not as blatant, but equally meaningful. The discussions between GAZPROM and Armenia are for a refinery that would serve both Armenia's needs as well as export to Iran. On the top of almost everyone's list for the next level of sanctions against Iran is refined

petroleum products; Israel wants it and even President Barack Obama suggested it when he gave a speech to the AIPAC convention last summer. Russia is diminishing the sanctions on refined petroleum in advance of a formal proposal by the United States.

On Friday January 23, Russia and Iran signed an agriculture agreement in Moscow. The Russian Minister of Agriculture called Iran a Russia "strategic partner." Although the agreement is a small step, this is the first time I recall a Russian using that phrase.

Over the weekend, I talked to a member of the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. He told me he has had recent conversations with some Iranian officials. They told him the United States has forced Iran in the direction of the Russians. That's certainly consistent with recent developments.

I also exchanged e-mails on this subject with a former European ambassador to Tehran. His made a very interesting point. Iran is the only potential competitor for natural gas to Europe. He said Moscow doesn't want Tehran to get too close to Europe to the point it could jeopardize Europe's dependence on GAZPROM. We've seen the evidence of Russia and GAZPROM leverage over Europe recently.

The consequences of the new Russian security strategy and the developing of a relationship with Iran are very significant. Incentives for the Iranians to agree to anything as a result of talking now have much less value for them. The Iranians haven't changed their behavior with over 30 years of sanctions. With the Russians as a strategic partner, there is no reason to believe any new sanction will be effective.

Another consequence of what we're seeing is an even greater separation between the objectives of the United States and Israel with Russia in the equation. That will make progress with both Iran and the other pressing Middle East issues more difficult for the United States. Israel will have to understand that although the United States supports its security, we have our own interests in the region. Israel must respect those interests. This isn't a done deal. Even if the Russians want to move to a strategic partnership, a new relationship may not be embraced in Tehran. The Iranians are suspicious of Russia. Iran also wants to be an independent power and not a power in the shadow of Russia.

The new Russian national security strategy is significantly changing the equation in the Middle East for the Obama administration, how they will react is anyone's guess at the moment.

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