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Resetting the Reset Button: Realism About Russia

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In Washington, there is a widely shared view that the United States needs Russian cooperation to stop Iranian and North Korean nuclear proliferation, particularly Iran's. This view rests on the premise that the United States should take Russia "seriously," and taking Russia seriously means accepting Russian demands for no missile defense in Europe and no NATO enlargement or further European integration of the countries of the former Soviet Union. In other words, the price of such cooperation means leaving Europe vulnerable to Russian military threats, such as those leveled against Poland in 2008 in response to the potential deployment of a U.S. missile defense system on Polish soil, and to energy blackmail and attempts at political subversion. Furthermore, acceptance of Moscow's demands allows Russia to exercise an exclusive sphere of influence in the States of the former Soviet Union. It is obvious that this price would be both a moral and a strategic disaster.

Beyond that argument, the idea that the United States needs Russia to cooperate on Iran presupposes an equally fallacious argument, namely that Russia wants to cooperate with the United States on Iran. While Russia certainly opposes Iranian nuclearization and is reportedly supporting the plan to bring Iranian nuclear spent fuel to Russia, it has been a prime supporter of the process, exporting scientists and technologists to Iran throughout the 1990s, and by providing major assistance for Iran's missile programs. Russia also continues to be the prime foreign supporter of Iran's fledgling space program; helping Iran to build the launchers for their anticipated nuclear missiles and for their satellites, which can be presumed to have military purposes as well. Likewise, Russian analyses of its position on the whole question of nonproliferation clearly state that Moscow does not take the threat nearly as seriously as we in the United States and our allies in Europe and the Middle East do and, indeed, Russian leaders publicly say that this is a U.S. concern and not necessarily a Russian one. Moreover, many Russians have persuaded themselves that Washington owes Moscow something in regard to Europe and the Middle East. Therefore, it is difficult for Russians to take Western concerns seriously.

Those who argue on behalf of taking Russia seriously concede that Russian policy in the region is heavily influenced because of their robust economic interests in Iran and

by major Russian lobbies from the industrial and nuclear defense technology (Rosatom, for example) sector who benefit enormously from deals with Iran. These advocates however, are less inclined to note that Russia also has tremendous energy interests in Iran and that beyond those energy interests its fundamental strategic interests lay in promoting Irano-U.S. hostility and not cooperation. Indeed, official statements from Russia call for strengthening Iran's role as a legitimate actor in a Middle East security system at a time when Iranian leaders threaten to destroy Israel and are unabashed supporters of state-sponsored terrorism. Foreign Minister Lavrov went beyond this and said that Iran should even be invited to participate in any security system for the Black Sea region!

For over a decade, Russian pundits and officials have openly stated that they want Iran to be a partner of Russia and not the United States, lest the United States succeed in consolidating its position as the leading foreign power in the Middle East, a region in which Moscow still desperately desires to be seen as a great power and capable of influencing regional policy. Irano-American hostility precludes such consolidation and allows Russia to exercise its influential role and to support the maintenance of a system of controlled tension there. Second, Iranian rapprochement with the West would represent a mortal blow to Russia's strategy of using energy as a weapon to subvert European security institutions and governments because Iranian gas and oil would then be available in large quantities for shipment to Europe. Not only would this undermine Russia's primary foreign policy weapon vis-à-vis Europe and Asia, it would also erode Moscow's ability to dominate Central Asian energy markets and thus Central Asian politics. Should Iran economically reorient itself with the West, foreign investment would likely increase. This would open up access from Central Asia through Iran to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean where Central Asian energy could flow to the entire world, bypassing Russia and undermining its ability to use its last real weapon, control of energy flow to Eurasia.

Russia's large arms program with Iran is driven not only by economic calculations to keep this sector in business, but by the long-standing Russian belief that if it did not sell these weapons to Iran, Iran would turn to other suppliers, particularly Europe, who would be only too happy to sell to Iran (this is probably not an unfounded belief). Moreover, Russia also sells arms to Iran because of Moscow's long-standing belief that an antagonistic Iran possesses formidable capabilities for stirring up trouble in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Therefore arms sales to Iran have always been an arrow in Moscow's quiver to prevent Iran from pursuing such a policy, and it has succeeded handsomely from Russia's point of view. To openly renege on outstanding contracts, e.g., the S-300 surface to air missile, would not only cause financial losses and Iranian anger and distrust of Russian promises, it would open the door to Iranian retaliation.

Finally, the present Russian regime has made it clear that it is opposed to additional Iranian sanctions despite Iran's refusal to allow its nuclear program to come under serious international scrutiny as outlined in the Nonproliferation Treaty, despite its quite visible violations of that treaty and subsequent protocols to it. Even though President Medvedev recently said that Iran's rejection of the latest Western offers could

lead to sanctions, he will not be able to make this decision on his own as the pro-Iran faction led by Premier Putin seems to be stronger. Russian leaders claim that there is no evidence of Iran having a nuclear military program even when their own military press openly discusses the threat that Iranian missiles and nuclear weapons pose to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and to Iran's other neighbors. Despite Medvedev's oracular statements to the effect that sanctions might ultimately become a necessity, he in fact is not in control of his own government, something which is painfully obvious to him as well as to domestic and foreign observers. The political bloc supporting Prime Minister Putin has made it clear that Medvedev will not be able to make this decision himself and that they are opposed to such sanctions. Instead, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov calls for maximum patience with Iran. This is an interesting perspective since Moscow has known at least since 1993, when it published an intelligence report on nuclear proliferation that Iran was attempting to build a nuclear weapon. Obviously, the Russian concept of patience is one that exists out of time and space.

For these reasons, the presumption that we can expect any kind of serious cooperation from Moscow regarding Iran is utterly groundless and even mischievous. Worse yet, the idea that the U.S. administration does not take Russia seriously is a canard perpetrated by Moscow and its adherents at home and abroad. It may well be the case that no foreign government can take Moscow as seriously as it constantly insists upon being taken. The Russian obsession with great power, rank, and international status, even as they are diminished due to the nature of Russia's political and economic system, is endless and can only be appeased by concessions to Moscow that will only generate further demands.

As this author has noted in previous studies for SSI, the opposition to missile defense stems from opposition to any U.S. military presence in Central or Eastern Europe and a determination to retain the capability to intimidate Europeans with threats of nuclear strikes. Indeed, on October 9 and 14, 2009, Nikolai Patrushev, Chairman of the Security Council, stated that the forthcoming defense doctrine will provide for preemptive and even preventative use of nuclear weapons in a first strike mode in a so called local and purely conventional war. No rational strategic basis exists for such charges as have been made against the U.S. program and indeed, it can be argued that Russia's obsession with her status and ingrained anti-Americanism are self-reinforcing postulates for the continuation of its neo-Tsarist and neo-imperialist regime. In addition, several analysts have argued that Russia's calculation is not based on a rational strategic assessment of costs and benefits of several policies as much as it is on the obsession with preserving great power and status.

Making these concessions to Russia concerning Europe would also be disastrous for the following reasons. Certainly, the Russian government and its representatives at home and abroad have frequently made clear their belief that the Central, East European, and post-Soviet regimes that emerged in 1989-91 are not fully sovereign and do not deserve to be treated as such, whereas only the United States and Russia are truly sovereign states. Moscow's demands for a free hand in its so called sphere of

interest represent an open and ongoing campaign to erode the sovereignty of these states as it tries to subvert them from the inside using energy, intelligence penetration, funds from Russian energy sales, and the linkages of the state with organized crime. In this campaign, researchers have found what they call an unswerving effort to bring maximum pressure to bear upon these states to undo the status quo that came into being in 1989-91. We can also see in Abkhazia and South Ossetia what little value Russia places on the integrity and sovereignty of its neighbors and the treaties it has signed. Similarly, Russia's call for a new European security architecture is a transparent call to erode the foundations of the current status quo, in particular NATO and the OSCE while leaving it a free hand to do as it pleases in the CIS.

Based upon the foregoing analysis, it is clear that we should [and in fact do] take Moscow and its aims and interests seriously. Unfortunately, for the most part those aims and interests are antithetical to the cause of stopping Iranian proliferation and of preserving peace and security in Europe, let alone deepening it. Nor should we delude ourselves that beyond a limited area of congruence in regard to arms control and Afghanistan that we share common interests in regard to Iran or that Moscow will be disposed to cooperate with us there in return for what could only be considered malign neglect of our interests and those of our allies in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. This understanding, rather than the fallacious and misleading view shared in many Washingtonian quarters, is the true basis for taking Russia seriously and engaging it diplomatically. The fact is that Russia has long since decided that we are its prime adversary and its model for relations with the United States is not far removed from the peaceful coexistence model of the Brezhnev era, another period in which detente only succeeded to a limited degree and foundered on Soviet adventurism in the Middle East and the Third World, and missile placements in Europe. Resetting relations with Moscow should be pursued on the basis of a cold-blooded calculation of U.S. interests, not sentimentality or illusion, and not on Moscow's self-serving definition of its bottom line, for as we can see for the most part it is simply not disposed to cooperate with Washington, but rather to oppose and obstruct it. Realism about Russia does not mean taking it lightly, but it does mean taking its interests seriously and advancing our own goals equally as seriously.

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