

**Advanced Research
and Assessment Group**

Middle East Series

07/33



**Russian Perceptions on the
Iranian Nuclear Issue**

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October 2007

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

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Key Points

Russia is ambivalent about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran. Moscow opposes such a development but appears to have a naïve faith that this problem can be resolved by diplomacy even though she has often complained about Iran's attitudes. A nuclear Iran could be a threat to Russia but Moscow may feel that this is something she could live with; it would have the benefit of undermining US domination of the international system.

Moscow is resolutely opposed to using force to resolve the problem, but is also opposed to sanctions, because Russia's economic stake in Iran is significant and is growing.

Moscow may have a vested interest in US-Iranian tension. It increases Russia's importance to Iran as a partner. It keeps the price of oil high, which suits Russia as an oil exporter and increases Russia's importance as a gas producer. Moscow would also benefit from the damage to the US image in the Moslem world if Washington took military action.

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The Russian Federation, in common with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), believes that it is unacceptable for Iran, as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to develop a nuclear weapon. Vladimir Putin apparently informed Jewish leaders at the European Jewish Congress held in Moscow in October 2007 that Iranian nuclear weapons would be a strategic threat to Russia, and that Russia and Israel are partners in this matter.¹

Moscow does, however, accept that Iran is permitted to have a civilian nuclear programme. Along with the other permanent members of the UNSC, plus Germany, Russia is engaged in a diplomatic process with Iran which attempts to ensure that Tehran's nuclear programme will remain peaceful in nature.

The Russian Federation has been extremely reluctant to support sanctions against Iran (in January 2007 Sergey Lavrov criticised the USA for imposing its own unilateral sanctions),² and has consistently opposed the idea of using military force to prevent the possibility of Iran developing a nuclear weapons capability. Moscow has argued that dialogue with Tehran is the only way of ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme remains peaceful in nature. Although Moscow has held to this position, the Russian leadership has admitted that Iran's conduct has been unsatisfactory, and said that there are many unanswered questions about the Iranian nuclear programme which give rise to the suspicion that the programme may have a military dimension. In January 2006 Sergey Lavrov commented that

We recognize Iran's right to create its own nuclear cycle under the IAEA's control, but we cannot ignore factors such as the lack of economic sense and the absence of any real need for it. These are issues which continue to feed suspicions that this programme may have a secret military aspect...It is cheaper for Iran to buy fuel abroad than to spend money on the creation of its own fuel cycle, at least at this stage.³

The Russian Federation sought initially in 2006 to prevent the Iranian nuclear issue being referred to the UNSC. Moscow argued that the IAEA should deal with all issues relating to the Iranian nuclear programme. The Russian approach has sought to offer Iran both a dialogue and incentives in order to persuade it to pursue only a peaceful nuclear programme.

Moscow's line appears in many ways to be illogical. Moscow accepts that Iran should not have a nuclear weapon, and that its nuclear programme gives cause for concern. The Russian leadership has expressed disappointment over Iran's consistent lack of willingness to cooperate with the "Six" (the five permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany). It has expressed disappointment that Iran has continued with its nuclear programme, with Tehran's rejection of the proposals put by the "Six" in June 2006, and with its general failure to fulfil IAEA and UNSC conditions in relation to its nuclear programme. It would appear therefore that diplomacy and dialogue with Iran have failed to achieve the desired results. The

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offer first made by Moscow in 2005 to set up a plant in Russia to enrich Iranian uranium did not result in Iran abandoning its own efforts to enrich uranium.

When the UNSC did begin to consider seriously sanctions in the autumn of 2006, Moscow was at pains to ensure that any measures adopted by the UNSC would be limited. Moscow managed to make amendments to a resolution drafted by the EU troika of France, Germany and the United Kingdom to this effect. Moscow was happy with resolution 1737 passed by the UNSC in December 2006 as it reflected the softer approach taken by Moscow, and could not be enforced by military action. At the same time Moscow has continued with the construction of the nuclear power plant at Bushehr, and has made it clear that it will not link Bushehr with Iran's failure to cooperate fully with the IAEA and UNSC. Problems have emerged between Tehran and Moscow over the former's apparent inability to meet payment deadline schedules for Bushehr, which have led to sharp disputes between both parties throughout 2007. This has led to a delay in the launching of the plant, which will now not take place in autumn of 2007 as earlier intended.⁴ Russia has continued to fulfil its commitment to supply Iran with Tor M-1 surface to air missile systems. The then defence minister Sergey Ivanov confirmed in January 2007 that these missiles had been supplied to Iran.

Moscow made it clear that it was willing to continue cooperating with Iran, and that it intended to continue to seek cooperation with Iran in spite of UNSC resolutions 1737 (December 2006) and 1747 (March 2007). However this approach has not been successful. It is striking how frequently the words such as "disappointed," "regret" and "bewilderment" are used by Russian officials commenting on Iran's approach to the nuclear issue.

- In February 2006 Chairman of the Duma international affairs committee Konstantin Kosachev expressed "bewilderment" in connection with a statement by Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinezhad on uranium enrichment (Iran's refusal to accept Russia's proposal to establish a uranium enrichment joint venture on Russian territory) at a time when the IAEA was looking into the possibility of the Iranian "nuclear dossier" being handed over to the UNSC.⁵
- In July 2006, Sergey Lavrov said he was "disappointed" by Iran's attitude towards the "Six's" proposals. "We were disappointed at the absence of a positive reaction from Iran, especially since this runs counter to what President Ahmadinezhad told the president of Russia a month ago while taking part in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization events...today formulae were agreed which rule out absolutely the sanctioning by the UNSC of any use of force against Iran."⁶
- In May 2007 Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Kislyak said that Iran's failure to fulfil IAEA and UNSC resolutions on the nuclear issue was "disappointing".⁷
- In June 2007 Russian IAEA representative Grigoriy Berdennikov said Iran's failure to meet the demands of the IAEA and the UNSC was "regrettable".⁸

At the same time, Moscow remains wedded to a non-confrontational and non-threatening approach. In late September 2007 Sergey Lavrov repeated the now standard Russian line that he opposed new sanctions against Iran, and that the UN should support the work of the IAEA on Iran.

However the problem of how to deal with the Iranian nuclear problem remains. The dilemma was well summed up in April 2007 by the chairman of the Federation Council international affairs committee, Mikhail Margelov:

*One can only guess what Iran is haggling with the world community for but it is quite clear that Iran has not accepted the conditions put forward to it at the time by the countries that could have become guarantors of Iran's security in exchange for its refusal to continue its nuclear programme, in other words **Iran refused the carrot and the world community has not got the stick.***⁹

Margelov, who is of the opinion that Iran's nuclear programme is probably not entirely devoted to peaceful ends,¹⁰ argues that military action is not a practical option, hence he believes the world community has no stick. In April 2007 the Russian Foreign Ministry also criticised the USA for sabre rattling, and warned that the use of force was futile. This line was again repeated by Sergey Lavrov when he met French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner in September 2007. Lavrov stated that "we are convinced that not a single modern problem has a military solution. This refers to the Iranian nuclear programme, too." The day before, Kouchner had warned in relation to Iran that it was "necessary to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war".¹¹ Kouchner argued in an interview in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* that measures additional to UNSC Resolution 1747 should be adopted.¹²

The Russian leadership appears wedded to the notion that the Iranian leadership can be reasoned with, even though it has at times professed itself to be "disappointed," and "bewildered" by Iranian conduct. There remains an optimism that the goals of diplomacy are achievable. At a press conference with French President Nikolay Sarkozy in Moscow in October, Putin stated:

*We have no information to show that Iran is striving to produce nuclear weapons. We have no objective data to this effect, and so we proceed from the premise that Iran has no such plans. We do, however, share our partners' concern about making all of Iran's programmes completely transparent. **We agreed yesterday - and Mr President [Sarkozy] confirmed it - that Iran is taking certain steps to meet the demands of the international community to achieve this state of affairs.** We are working cooperatively with our partners at the UN Security Council, and intend to work just as cooperatively in the future.*¹³

A similarly optimistic tone was taken by foreign minister Sergey Lavrov at the end of September 2007:

Our fundamental position is that - our main aim is to eliminate any ambiguity that still remains in Iran's nuclear programme, and remove all suspicions, that this programme is highly peaceful in nature and does not have any military component. This has been the aim of the efforts of the group of six in recent years. This has been the aim of the decisions of the IAEA board of governors, which were subsequently supported by the UN Security Council.

*The fact that, according to the IAEA, **the agreements that were at last reached between this agency and Tehran, and which are aimed at finalizing within a certain time - two to three months - all those questions that have not yet been answered by Iran regarding the nature of its nuclear programme - these agreements are being implemented.***¹⁴

If these arguments are followed to their logical conclusion, then diplomacy is working, and Iranian cooperation with the IAEA will make clear that Iran's nuclear programme does not have any military component. There appears to be little discussion about what should be done if Iran does not make its nuclear programmes completely transparent, or if it becomes indisputable that what Lavrov termed in November 2006 the "blank spots" in Iran's nuclear programme are military in nature.¹⁵ There is even less discussion about what should be done if Iran ever does develop an actual nuclear weapons capability, other than to say that force should not be used.

On 27 September 2007 Lavrov again stated that he opposed new sanctions being imposed on Iran. However Russia may face the prospect of having to agree to further sanctions. The statement made by the foreign ministers of the Six, plus the High Representative of the European Union on 28 September 2007 noted that:

*In view of the fact that Iran has not fulfilled the requirements of UN Security Council Resolutions 1737 and 1747, including the suspension of its enrichment and reprocessing activities, we agree to finalize a text for a third UN Security Council Sanctions Resolution under Article 41 of Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations with the intention of bringing it to a vote in the UN Security Council unless the November reports of Dr. Solana and Dr. El Baradei show a positive outcome of their efforts.*¹⁶

It is unlikely that the Russian leadership genuinely believes that Iran's nuclear intentions are simply confined to the development of a civilian nuclear programme. Russian press commentary tends to speak more openly than Russian foreign policy makers on this issue. In January 2006, IMEMO Middle East specialist Georgy Mirsky wrote in *Rossiskaya Gazeta* that Iran was probably seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, although he did not think that they intended to use them.¹⁷ Another commentary in *Rossiskaya Gazeta* just two days earlier argued that Iran was probably seeking a nuclear weapons capability and would therefore regard Russia as an unreliable ally due to its cooperation with other major powers in seeking to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme did not develop in this direction.¹⁸

In *Russia in Global Affairs* in January 2006, Vladimir Sazhin of the Institute of Oriental Studies wrote:

It is worth noting that negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, which a trio of European mediators – Britain, Germany, and France – held with Teheran for several years, were driven to a standstill following Ahmadinejad's inauguration to the presidential office.

At this point, the Iranians are reluctant to consider compromise proposals and insist on the creation of infrastructure in Iran for full-cycle nuclear fuel production (making it possible to enrich uranium to a level of 5 percent, or even 95 percent which is a weapon-grade level). Add to this the ongoing construction of a heavy-water reactor, which could be used to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Russia and some of the European Union countries, in particular Germany, believe that Iran has not yet made the final decision to build nuclear weapons, but the Iranians seem unanimous in the desire to create a research basis they might rapidly streamline to the production of nuclear weapons. Opinions of this sort are widespread in Iran and, most importantly, they enjoy support

*from all sections of society. The desire to possess nuclear weapons has turned into a national priority.*¹⁹

Analysts outside of government circles seem fairly confident in arguing that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapons capability. It was also reported in April 2006 that diplomats were privately considering whether it was really worthwhile for Russia to try to "save" Iran.²⁰

Interestingly, in March 2007 an editorial in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* criticised Russian policy towards Iran for its ambiguity. The editorial argued that a nuclear Iran was not in Russia's interests, and that Moscow should make clear its opposition to the emergence of a new nuclear power near its borders. It argued that Moscow's ambiguity encouraged the Iranian leadership in its opposition to western pressure on this issue.²¹ Another commentary argued that Moscow, while anxious to demonstrate that it will not be used by Washington, was instead allowing itself to be used by Tehran.²²

Why does Russia not take a more assertive stand over the Iranian nuclear programme, and echo the line of not just the USA and Britain, but also of France, whose new President Nicholas Sarkozy has argued strongly for massive economic sanctions as the only alternative to military action?²³

Russia has a strong economic interest in avoiding the imposition of a sanctions regime. The Bushehr nuclear reactor project is worth about \$800 million. In 2005 the Russo-Iranian trade turnover was around \$2 billion. In addition to arms sales, there are joint civil aviation projects, a space programme, and a gas extraction project in southern Iran. In 2006 a long-term economic cooperation programme was being developed which would be worth more than \$8 billion.²⁴ Russia has the largest natural gas reserves in the world and Iran the next largest, so they have a clear interest in cooperating in this sector.²⁵ In January 2007 Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i proposed to the secretary of the Russian Security Council, Igor Ivanov the formation of an organization for cooperation in the gas sector, similar to the OPEC oil cartel.²⁶ This was rejected by Moscow, but Vladimir Putin did talk about the need to coordinate gas policy with Iran and other gas producers.²⁷

It might also be argued that Russia has a vested interest in a certain degree of US-Iranian tension. Strong US pressure on Iran makes Russia important as a partner to the Islamic Republic. It also keeps the price of oil high, which benefits Russia as an oil exporter. US military action against Iran would push the price of oil even higher, and the possible disruption to Middle East oil supplies would increase Russia's importance as an oil exporter.²⁸ Furthermore US military action would probably seriously damage the USA's image not only in the Moslem world, but also elsewhere. Russia is probably not averse to the USA suffering a public relations disaster. Moscow would probably use such a development to argue for the merits of a multipolar international system. Conversely if a diplomatic solution is ever found for this problem, then Russia would be regarded as having been a major contributor to the settlement of this issue, and her importance to Iran as a partner would be enhanced.²⁹

Although then Deputy Prime Minister and then Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov stated in November 2006 in relation to Iran that "we do not want to have one more nuclear state at our southern borders,"³⁰ it is also likely that the Russian leadership may feel that it could live with a nuclear Iran, in the same way the world has learned to live with a nuclear India and Pakistan. The comments that Putin made

at the European Jewish Congress in October 2007 may therefore be disingenuous. An Iran with nuclear weapons is a blow to a US dominated international system, and Moscow may therefore see such an Iran as the lesser evil. There are concerns in some western circles that a nuclear Iran would be a radically different creature from other relatively new nuclear powers due to belief in the coming of the twelfth imam, whose advent will be accelerated by war. In other words the logic of deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction may not be relevant in the case of an Iran led by Mahmud Ahmadinejad or those who share his views.³¹ There appears to be little discussion in the Russian Federation of the ideology of Ahmadinejad and its possible relevance to the nuclear issue. There also appears to be little discussion of whether a nuclear Iran would pose a threat to Russia.

Endnotes

- ¹ Lily Galili, 'Putin: Nuclear Iran is strategic threat to Russia,' Haaretz, 11 October 2007 <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/911627.html> ; Haviv Rettig, 'Putin to EJC: Israel, Russia are 'partners' in facing Iran,' Jerusalem Post, 11 October 2007 <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1191257278990&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>
- ² Interfax news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1134 gmt 27 January 2007 from BBC Monitoring (BBCM).
- ³ Ekho Moskvyy news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1047 gmt, 1111 gmt 12 January 2006. (from BBCM).
- ⁴ 25 July Ivan Istomin, head of the Russian company Energoprogress, which is a subcontractor in the Bushehr project said it would not be possible to complete the power station, which is being built under the management of the Russian company Atomstroyexport, before autumn 2008. He said that it would be impossible to bring Bushehr into operation in autumn 2007, as the Iranian authorities had announced. RIA Novosti, Moscow, in Russian 0656 gmt 25 July 2007 (from BBCM).
- ⁵ Interfax-AVN military news agency website, Moscow, in Russian 1146 gmt 3 February 2006. (from BBCM).
- ⁶ Interfax news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1752 gmt 12 July 2006. (from BBCM).
- ⁷ Interfax news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1146 gmt 28 May 2007 (from BBCM)
- ⁸ ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1644 gmt 13 June 2007 (from BBCM)
- ⁹ Vesti TV news channel, Moscow, in Russian 1617 gmt 9 April 2007. (from BBCM) Emphasis added.
- ¹⁰ Interfax news agency, Moscow, in Russian 0941 gmt 26 March 2007. (from BBCM)
- ¹¹ Kouchner had stated on 17 September in a TV interview that "we have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war," (Il faut se préparer au pire, le pire monsieur, c'est la guerre ".)
- ¹² See interview with Bernard Kouchner in Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 18 September 2007.
- ¹³ Vesti TV news channel, Moscow, in Russian 0949 gmt 10 October 2007. (from BBCM) Emphasis added.
- ¹⁴ Vesti TV news channel, Moscow, in Russian 0542 gmt 26 September 2007. (from BBCM) Emphasis added.
- ¹⁵ ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1513 gmt 21 November 2006. (from BBCM).
- ¹⁶ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/sep/92944.htm>
- ¹⁷ Georgy Mirsky's commentary appears in Nadezhda Sorokina, 'The world and Russia. Tehran confuses the world community,' Rossiskaya Gazeta, 14 March 2006.
- ¹⁸ Yevgenny Shestakov, 'The world and Russia. Theatre of the nuclear absurd,' Rossiskaya Gazeta, 12 March 2006.
- ¹⁹ Vladimir Sazhin, 'Iran seeking Superpower status,' Russia in Global Affairs, 1, January-February 2006. <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/14/1007.html>
- ²⁰ Ivan Groshkov, 'Iran's time has expired,' Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 28-29 April 2006.
- ²¹ Editorial Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 15 March 2007.
- ²² Aleksandr Golts, 'Convolution of Sovereignty,' Yezhednevnyy Zhurnal, 10 April 2007.
- ²³ Matthias Küntzel, 'Berlin and Vienna Stand Against the West: European Divisions on the Iranian Bomb,' World Politics Review Exclusive, 11 October 2007; <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=1230> ; Sarkozy's comments can be found at: <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/President-Sarkozy-s-speech.html>

²⁴ Andrey Terekhov, 'They are trying to deprive Russia of eight milliard dollars,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 August 2006.

²⁵ Russia has an estimated 1,680 trillion cubic feet (tcf), and Iran has an estimated 974tcf in proven natural gas reserves. World reserves are estimated to be 6,183tcf. See <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Russia/NaturalGas.html> ; <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Iran/NaturalGas.html> http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/ieo/nat_gas.html

²⁶ IRNA website, Tehran, in English 1415 gmt 0729 January 2007. (from BBCM)

²⁷ Vesti TV news channel, Moscow, in Russian 0900 gmt 1 February 2007. Putin stated: "A gas OPEC is an interesting idea, we will think about it. However, for the initial stage, we agree with Iranian specialists, Iranian partners, and some other countries that extract large amounts of hydrocarbons, first of all gas, and supply them to the world markets. We are already trying to coordinate our activities on the markets of third countries and we intend to continue doing so in the future. We are not going to create some kind of a cartel, but I think it would be proper to coordinate our activities, taking into account the solution of the main task - the unconditional and reliable provision of the main consumers with energy resources." (from BBCM)

See also Ariel Cohen, 'Gas OPEC: A Stealthy Cartel Emerges,' Heritage WebMemo #1423, 12 April 2007, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/EnergyandEnvironment/wm1423.cfm>

²⁸ Mikhail Sergeev, 'War with Iran will bring Moscow tens of milliards,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 29 March 2007.

²⁹ See John Vinocur, 'America's Misplaced Hopes on Russia,' *International Herald Tribune*, 9 October 2007 http://select.nytimes.com/iht/2007/10/09/world/IHT-09politicus.1.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

³⁰ ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, in Russian 0014 gmt 1 November 2006. (from BBCM)

³¹ Con Coughlin, 'Will the 12th Imam cause war with Iran?' *Daily Telegraph*, 28 September 2007.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml;jsessionid=0VJQRBFDZSL5RQFIQMGCFEOAVCBQUIVO?xml=/opinion/2007/09/28/do2804.xml> ; Matthias Küntzel, 'Iran's Obsession with the Jews: Denying the Holocaust, desiring another one,' *Weekly Standard*, 19 February 2007

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/013/271uktmd.asp?pg=1> ; Ephraim Sneh, 'The Implications of a nuclear Iran,' Jerusalem Issue Brief, Vol. 6, No.26, 25 March 2007, Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs,

http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=1&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=380&PID=0&IID=1545&TTL=The_Implications_of_a_Nuclear_Iran ; Amil Imani, 'Who is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?' *American Thinker*, 24 September 2007

http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/09/who_is_mahmoud_ahmadinejad.html See the comment by Bernard Lewis in Islam and the West: A Conversation with Bernard Lewis, Pew Global Forum 27 April 2006, <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=107> :

"PAUL STAROBIN, NATIONAL JOURNAL: Professor, what, in your opinion, would be the impact on the mindset of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran if they actually possessed an atomic weapon?"

MR. LEWIS: I think that they would become impossibly arrogant. Remember that Ahmadinejad in particular, and his circle, as I said before, are in an apocalyptic mood. They believe in the end of time; it's imminent, and, therefore, the use of a nuclear weapon would not bother them in the least. And they would not, of course, use it in an aerial bombardment. What preserved us from nuclear warfare during the Cold War was what was known as MAD — mutually assured destruction. If they use it, it won't come with a return address on it; it will come from terrorist action. And that, I think, is the most likely way that they would use a nuclear weapon if they get one — no return address."

Want to Know More ...?

See:

Vladimir Evseev - The Iranian Nuclear Problem: A View from Russia, 3 April 2006 <http://www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/media/74098.htm>

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ISBN 978-1-905962-30-3

Published By:

Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom

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ISBN 978-1-905962-30-3