

THE NUCLEARIZATION OF IRAN AND THE POLICY OF RUSSIA

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The nuclear issue of Iran has become a political discussion of significance in both Iran and Western countries. A considerable disjunction has emerged between the political views of Iran and the West. Iran claims that it is entitled to nuclear sovereignty over civilian nuclear power and has denied that it has a nuclear weapons program; Western governments feel that Iran's "peaceful" nuclear program has hidden intentions to create nuclear weapons. International mediators have been making reconciliatory efforts with Iran but have met with little success. As a result, Iran is constantly criticized by the West, particularly the US and the EU, and has come under immense pressure, including facing economic sanctions by the UN Security Council and the IAEA in an effort to prod the regime into being more transparent in its nuclear activities. Despite this, Russia continues to support Iran's nuclear program. Indeed, many geopolitical, strategic and economic considerations have compelled Russia to support Iran. This work is solely devoted to exploring the considerations and perspectives of Russia concerning Iran's nuclear issue. It also includes an understanding of Iran's nuclear motivations and aspirations with a view to calculating Moscow's views.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, IAEA, NPT, US, geopolitics, nuclear policy

Introduction

As the Iranian drive for nuclear power has shifted into 5th gear, the international political debate concerning nuclear proliferation has also gathered momentum. The Iranian public views Iran's joining of the nuclear club as a means of modernizing and diversifying the country's energy resources; nearly all political groups are unified on the point that Iran is entitled to sovereignty over its civilian use of nuclear power, and that therefore it should continue to

develop its peaceful nuclear industry. Iran has consistently denied that it has a nuclear weapons program. On the other hand, the US and Western governments have asserted that Iran has hidden intentions to produce nuclear weapons. But neither the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)¹ nor Western governments have yet been able to present definitive evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program (IAEA statements GOV/2003/40, GOV/2004/60 and GOV/2005/67). The efforts of negotiation led by the EU, UN and P-5+1 (the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and Germany) have so far failed to yield satisfactory results. At the same time, Russia and China, as permanent members of the UNSC, have directly or indirectly been supporting Iran's nuclear program.

Under these circumstances, Russia's active involvement and support for Iran's nuclear program has emerged as an important international concern. Together with its European allies, the US has expended considerable energy in protesting against Russia's exports of nuclear technology to Iran, including economic sanctions against suspected Russian firms (White House, 1998). Amid much criticism, Russia continues to support Iran's nuclear program. Russia has paid little heed to such criticism and claims that its nuclear ties with Iran have been maintained within international obligations and under IAEA inspection. There is no doubt that several factors have persuaded Russia to follow this supporting policy towards Iran; the geopolitics of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region; Russia's quest for hard currency; the promotion of Russian arm exports; and the construction of its own network of alliances to strengthen its regional and international image as a superpower against US unilateralism feature among principal Russian considerations. Whatever the reason, Russia's support has been immeasurably valuable for Iran and therefore deserves considerable exploration. This article is solely devoted to examining the genesis of Russian-Iranian relations within the framework of Iran's ensuing nuclear program.

Iran's nuclear ambitions and motivations

Iran has a long history of nuclear development. As early as 1957 Iran and the US signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement as part of the US "Atoms for Peace" program, which allowed for the provision of technical assistance and the lease of several kilograms of enriched uranium (Department of State Bulletin, 1957). Iran acquired its first modest nuclear capability from the US – a small 5

¹ The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), with its headquarters in Vienna, Austria, was established in 1957 to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy and inhibit its use for military purposes.

–megawatt thermal research reactor for the Amirabad Technical College in Tehran. As a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),² Iran claims the unalienable right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. In 1974 Iran completed a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

Geopolitical developments in the early 1970s (the Arab-Israeli conflict and the subsequent oil crisis) compelled the Shah's government to accelerate their nuclear program. The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) was founded in 1974 and planned to build 23 nuclear power plants to generate 23,000 MW of nuclear energy within 20 years (Poneman, 1982). The US and the administration of Gerald Ford³ in particular, together with French and German companies, were actively engaged in Iran's nuclear programs, supplying Iran with the different components of the nuclear fuel cycle and training Iranian nuclear scientists. Considerable progress was achieved in constructing two nuclear reactors in Bushehr.⁴ Although these countries sought to help Iran develop nuclear energy, the Shah clearly had nuclear weapons in mind. The Shah remarked in 1974 that,

“The present world is confronted with a problem of some countries possessing nuclear weapons and some not. We are among those who do not possess nuclear weapons, so the friendship of a country such as the US with its arsenal of nuclear weapons ... is absolutely vital.” (Cottrell & Dougherty, 1977).

These nuclear assistances and activities were halted during and after the political turmoil in Iran in the late 1970s, which resulted in the removal of the Shah. The new Islamic regime, led by Ayatollah Khomeini,⁵ showed little interest in nuclear aspirations. But Iraq's bombing of the Bushehr nuclear power plant during the Iran – Iraq War in 1980⁶ and Israel's bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility in 1981 may have influenced Tehran to develop its nuclear

² The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is an international treaty which limits the spread of nuclear weapons. It was opened for signature on July 1, 1968. Currently 189 countries are party to the treaty, five of which have nuclear weapons: the US, the UK, France, Russia, and China. Four nations are not signatories: India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea.

³ Gerald Ford (1913 – 2006), the 38th president of the United States (1974 – 1977).

⁴ Bushehr, a city in southwestern Iran. In 1975 the government began building a nuclear power plant at Bushehr. After the Iran – Iraq War (1980 – 1988), Germany, the initial backer of the plant, decided not to complete it in 1995. However, Russia signed an agreement to finish the plant.

⁵ Sayyid Ayatollah Ruhollah al-Khomeini (1900 – 1989), leader of the popular revolution in Iran that toppled Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979.

⁶ The Iran – Iraq War began in September 1980 and ended in August 1988 with a ceasefire sponsored by the UN.

program further. In 1983 Iran declared it would restart its nuclear program with the help of China and India (MEER, 1983). Tehran also developed long-term cooperation agreements with China and Pakistan. China provided Iran with small research reactors, laser enrichment equipment, conversion technologies and natural uranium. Two significant events in the early 1990s affected Iranian national security in major ways. The first was the fall of the Soviet Union, which pushed the former superpower back from Iran's border and lessened the chances of an invasion into Iran. Ironically, the end of the Soviet threat increased the threat from the US as Washington was not as likely to be deterred from intervening in Iranian affairs by a rival superpower's presence in the region. The second was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Gulf War. The US's response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait caused its defeat, but it brought further fears of a US intervention in Iran.

The IAEA pointed out in November 2004 that Iran had neglected to report on its nuclear program "in a number of instances over an extended period of time," thereby failing to meet its obligations under its safeguards agreement (IAEA Statement, GOV/2004/83). Although the IAEA has yet not concluded that Iran must have been pursuing a nuclear weapons program, many within the international community have taken it as further proof that Iran has engaged in a secretive nuclear weapon program. Tehran's position is growing increasingly vulnerable, especially after Iran's submission to the IAEA in October 2005 of its nuclear history and particularly the quantity of centrifuges and other nuclear technologies that it purchased on the nuclear black market in the 1980s. In an attempt to justify Iran's nuclear moves, the former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani indicated in March 2005 that Iran had indeed engaged in intentional and clandestine nuclear development, but he reinforced the claim that this was only for peaceful purposes (Zhen, 2005). The crisis became more complicated when the IAEA referred the issue to the UNSC in March 2006. Iran started enriching its stockpile of low-enriched uranium to 20 % from the middle of 2010. It has constructed a facility in Isfahan to produce nuclear fuel pellets and rods, which will enable Iran to domestically produce reactor fuel for nuclear power plants (AP, 2011). In its report of 25 February 2011 the IAEA stated that "Iran is not implementing a number of its obligations, including: implementation of the provisions of its Additional Protocol;... suspension of enrichment related activities; suspension of heavy water related activities; and clarification of the remaining outstanding issues which give rise to concerns about possible military dimensions to its nuclear programme." (IAEA statement, 2011). On 11 April 2011 Abbasi Davani, head of the AEOI, stressed that Iran would continue to enrich uranium up to 20 % U-235, and that these activities might be expanded in the future (AFP, 2011). Uranium enriched to 20 % is

enough to produce fuel for a medical research reactor but far below the more than 90 % required to build the fissile material for nuclear warheads.

As a member of the NPT, Iran claims that its development of nuclear technology is within the framework of the NPT and that the peaceful use of nuclear power is its sovereign right. Article IV of the NPT states that all the parties to the treaty have the right to participate in the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy (NPT, 1968). Iran condemned Western opposition to Iran's nuclear activities as a violation of NPT clauses and the politicization of a purely technical issue. Ayatullah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, explained the legitimacy of its uranium enrichment, saying:

“The only common thing between nuclear weapons and nuclear technology, which we pursue, is uranium. 90 % enriched uranium is for the complex industry of nuclear weapons, but 3 – 4 % enriched uranium is for the fuel of nuclear power plants and today we have the Bushehr nuclear power plant. But look at the distance between 3 – 4 % and 90 %” (IRIB, n.d.).

Iran has condemned the West for having adopted a policy of double standards. Firstly, before the Islamic Revolution Western countries had encouraged Iran to build nuclear power plants, but after the revolution they changed their policy and attempted to prevent a nuclear Iran from taking shape. Secondly, Iran has signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)⁷ and the NPT, but other countries like Israel, India and Pakistan have neither signed the NPT nor are their nuclear programs under the supervision of the IAEA. On July 18, 2005, US President George W Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reached an agreement on civilian nuclear energy cooperation. As for the agreement, IAEA Director-General El-Baradei said, “this agreement is an important step towards satisfying India's growing need for energy, including nuclear technology and fuel, as an engine for development. It would also bring India closer as an important partner in the non-proliferation regime” (Washington Post, 2006). But at the same time the IAEA adopted different attitudes towards Iran, which touched a sensitive nerve. This included not only nuclear discrimination but also national dignity.

Iran has made remarkable progress in achieving nuclear power. The current nuclear program is headed by the president, the commander of the Iranian

⁷ The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) bans all nuclear explosions for military or civilian purposes. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 September 1996 and opened for signature on 24 September 1996. More information at <http://www.ctbto.org>.

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the head of the Defence Industries Organization, and the head of the AEOI. Currently Iran's nuclear power plants are scattered at 16 places throughout the country. These are: Arak, Anarak, Ardakan, Bonab, Bushehr, Chalus, Darkhovin, Isfahan, Karaj, Lashkar Abad, Lavizan, Natanz, Parchin, Savand, Tehran and Yazd.

Russia's involvement in Iran's nuclear program and its stance

Russia has had an extensive nuclear trade relationship with Iran and has been contributing to the development of Iran's nuclear program. While Moscow regards its nuclear cooperation with Tehran as legitimate and in compliance with IAEA safeguards, Washington and its Western allies have viewed such activities as contributing to Iran's covert nuclear weapons program. With the fall of the USSR, Tehran – Moscow relations witnessed a sudden boost and Iran began purchasing weapons from Russia. By the mid-1990s, Russia agreed to continue work on developing Iran's nuclear program and planned to assist Iran in acquiring full nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. This is ironic since Moscow was one of the principal threats against which Iran had begun its nuclear program. However, following geopolitical change in the 1990s, Russia became a partner of Iran's nuclear development. Russia formed a joint research organization with Iran called Persepolis, which has provided Iran with Russian nuclear experts and technical information (Tabarani, 2008).

Iran constructed a 1000 MW nuclear power reactor at Bushehr. However, the German contractor which had begun constructing it in 1975 abandoned the project following Iran's 1979 revolution. Then Russia came forward and agreed to complete the reactor. In 1995 the AEOI signed an \$800 million contract with the Russian Federation Ministry for Atomic Energy (Minatom) to complete the Bushehr reactor (Power-technology, n.d.). From the beginning, the US opposed the sale of Russian reactor technology to Iran, but Putin stressed that he was convinced that "Iran does not intend to produce nuclear arms" (CNN, 2005) and reiterated his unwavering support for selling nuclear reactors to Iran (Singh, 2005). On February 27, 2005, Russia signed an agreement with Iran to provide nuclear fuel for the Bushehr reactor under the condition that the spent nuclear fuel would be returned to Russia (FMA, 2005). Atomstroyexport⁸ sent the first shipment of LEU fuel to Iran on December 16, 2007, and near the end of January 2008 the reactor received the last shipment, containing no more than

⁸ Atomstroyexport is the leading Russian engineering company of the Russian state corporation "Rosatom" on the construction of nuclear power facilities: <http://www.atomstroyexport.com/about/eng/2>.

3.62 % uranium-235 and under an IAEA seal (Interfax, 2007). Though Iranian and Russian officials had said that the reactor would begin operating by the end of 2009 (Fars News Agency, 2009), Russian Minister of Energy Sergei Shmatko stated on November 16, 2009, that the reactor would not start up that year due to technical issues (Interfax, 2009). It is widely believed that Moscow was delaying the project in order to increase political pressure on Iran to comply with the UNSC Resolutions (UNSCR) as well as US pressure on Russia. Finally, Iran began loading fuel into the plant with Moscow's assistance and an official launch ceremony was held on 21 August 2010. At the ceremony, Iranian nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi said, "Despite all pressure, sanctions and hardships imposed by Western nations, we are now witnessing the start-up of the largest symbol of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities" (CNN, 2010). The plant started adding electricity to the national grid on 3 September 2011; the official inauguration was held on 12 September and was attended by the head of Moscow's nuclear agency, Sergei Kiriyenko (RIA Novosti, 2011). Under the terms of the Russia – Iran agreement, which was approved by the IAEA, Russia would be responsible for operating the plant, supplying the nuclear fuel and managing the spent fuel for the following two or three years before passing full control on to Iran (RIA Novosti, 2011). By the time of the inauguration, the plant was operating at 40 % capacity (Guardian, 2011) and full capacity was predicted to be reached in February 2012. The US had previously urged Moscow to end work on the project, citing that it could aid an Iranian nuclear weapons program by providing the country with access to nuclear technology and expertise (US Department of State, 2005). However, Moscow argued that the reactor would not pose a proliferation risk because it would operate under IAEA safeguards. Although the UNSCR has restricted the supply of nuclear-related goods to Iran, Russia has not paid this much attention. Iran has plans to construct 19 nuclear power plants (Fox News, 2007). Both Russian and Iranian officials have said several times that the governments remain engaged in discussions about the possibility that Moscow might build additional reactors for Tehran (Arms Control Association, 2005). Different Russian organizations at different times have aided the Iranian nuclear program with the supply of nuclear-related items and technologies.

Table 1. Russian Nuclear Exports to Iran (to 1999)

Category	Status	Export	Manufacturer	Exporter	Recipient
reactors	completed	one VVER-1000 light-water power reactor	Zarubezhatomen ergostroy	Minatom	Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant
	under negotiation	three additional power reactors	Zarubezhatomen ergostroy	Minatom	Bushehr
	under negotiation	one 30 – 50 MW research reactor	Zarubezhatomen ergostroy	Minatom	AEOI
	under negotiation	one 40 MW heavy-water research reactor	Probably Zarubezhatomen ergostroy	Scientific Research and Design Institute of Energy Technologies (NIKIET)	Unknown
	unknown	one APWS-40 desalination plant	Experimental Machine Building Design Bureau (OKBM)	Minatom	Unknown
enrichment, mining and milling	under negotiation	uranium conversion facility	unknown	NIKIET and Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology	unknown
	canceled	gas centrifuge plant	unknown	Minatom	AEOI
	unknown	assistance to mining & milling operations	unknown	unknown	alleged facilities in Yazd province
nuclear materials	planned	LEU fuel rods for VVER-1000 Reactor	Novosibirsk Chemical Concentrate Plant	Minatom	Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant
	unknown	2,000 tons of natural uranium	unknown	Minatom	unknown
training and know-how	ongoing	training for physicists and technicians	n/a	Kurchatov Institute and Novovoronezh Nuclear Power Plant	Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant

Source: WEHLING, Fred. "Russian Nuclear and Missile Exports to Iran", p. 135.

Russian cooperation with Iran in developing nuclear technology has led to increasing mistrust among Western countries about Russia's intentions. By contrast, Russia has resolutely stated that its cooperation with Iran was strictly maintained within the limits of international obligations and in compliance with international law to control the proliferation risk (Interfax, 1997). President Putin remarked that Western companies, not Russian entities, had furnished Iran with missile and nuclear technology. As Putin pointed out, "the US has taken on the obligation of building a nuclear power station identical to the one in Bushehr" (Hutcheson, 2002). At the same time, Russia has suggested pressuring and enticing Iran to allow more extensive IAEA inspections of the Russian-built nuclear reactor there (Tavernise, 2003). Moscow continues to vehemently deny all US accusations of government-sponsored nuclear technology transfers to Iran, but did admit the existence of 'individual contacts' between Iranian and Russian entities. Through it all, the Russians unofficially refuse to be shut out of the lucrative Iranian market for nuclear and missile technologies.

Russia's logic and considerations:

There is no doubt that Russia's supporting policies towards Iran's nuclear program are driven by different national and international considerations. Russia has been the major supplier of nuclear technologies and assistance to Iran. Moscow maintains that its nuclear cooperation with Iran's is legal, proper, and presents non-proliferation, arguing that Iran is a signatory of the NPT. Thus it has the right of peaceful use of nuclear energy while this is in compliance with IAEA regulations. In reality, Moscow has its own agenda towards Iran regarding its nuclear development, which has interwoven interests. While Russia has opposed several UN sanctions against Iran, at the same time it has agreed to limited sanctions. With this dual policy, Russia wants to show the US and the international community that Russia is a 'responsible stakeholder' on the issue of nuclear non-proliferation, while hoping to reduce the threat of a US or joint US-Israeli armed attack against Iran and pressuring Iran to fully comply with IAEA inspections. Moscow has endeavored to position itself as an intermediary regarding the issue. However, several geopolitical, regional/international and economic factors and considerations are persuading Russia to follow a supportive policy towards Iran's nuclear program.

Respecting the sovereignty of a nation

A nation's sovereignty is very important to Russia. It views recurring foreign intrusions into different parts of Russia from the middle of the 20th century as having led to the fall of the USSR, which has made the Russian government

sensitive to the importance of sovereignty. The existence of many insurgent groups inside Russia and its inability to reunify the country has reinforced this psyche, increasing Moscow's sensitivity to external interference in its internal affairs. Therefore, from a legal point of view, if Iran is genuine in its support of non-proliferation, Russia will support Tehran's right to civilian nuclear energy based on the principle of sovereignty. No international laws have ever abandoned any states from the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The only restraints imposed on the civilian nuclear facilities of non-nuclear NPT member states are the IAEA's nuclear safeguards. Even if Iran had never joined the NPT, Russia would still have no reason to oppose Iran's civilian nuclear program. According to current international legal arrangements, Iran has the right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Even if in the worst case scenario Iran has already developed nuclear weapons, it is still entitled to civilian nuclear energy as long as it has not done so while verbally committing to nuclear non-proliferation as an NPT member. Although the norm of nuclear non-proliferation is nearly universal, the decision to join the NPT remains a sovereign matter. Article X of the NPT was specifically created to protect national sovereignty through the right of withdrawal in the case a member state starts to believe that remaining in the treaty would harm its national interests. As a member of the NPT, Iran cannot build nuclear weapons when it still officially commits to nuclear non-proliferation. If Iran is found to have violated this commitment, the international community will be forced to take action. While IAEA has still not definitely concluded that Iran has a nuclear weapon program, its sovereign right to peaceful use of nuclear energy should be honored.

Promoting non-proliferation

As a member of the NPT, Russia is obliged to support the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. It has committed not to transfer nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states and non-state actors, and not to assist any non-nuclear weapon states in developing nuclear weapons. As a party to the NPT, Russia is of the opinion that the NPT has become one of the main pillars of the international security system. The NPT also promotes international cooperation in the development of the peaceful use of nuclear energy. This is why Russia attaches great importance to the comprehensive and impartial consideration of the NPT's functioning. Russia has also confirmed its position of principle in support of the efforts undertaken by the international community, including the UN and IAEA (Mostivets, 2002). Russia is not only scrupulous in meeting its obligations under international treaties in limiting nuclear armaments, but is also prepared to further reduce its nuclear arms. Russia has completely fulfilled its obligations under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (the INF Treaty), which

has an unlimited duration and which entered into force on June 1, 1988, and it signed the CTBT in 1996. Russia actively supports the IAEA's activities, including the strengthening of safeguards, the prevention of illicit trafficking of nuclear materials, etc. Russia was also an initial member of the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) in 1974, cutting nuclear relations with those refusing to join the NPT. Thus Russia progressed remarkably in the field of non-proliferation. As an advocate of nuclear non-proliferation, Russia wants a peaceful, non-nuclear and stable Middle East. Moscow believes that the emergence of a nuclear arms race in the region would destabilize the Middle East. It also believes in the right of all nations to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated, "We want to secure the unshakeable nuclear weapons non-proliferation regime, while also respecting the rights of every country participating in the non-proliferation accord to the peaceful development of nuclear energy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2006). Many in Russia view Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran as the same as US nuclear cooperation with North Korea. Continuous Iranian cooperation with the IAEA has always been an indicator of its transparency in this regard. Russia supports the Iranian peaceful nuclear program while maintaining international non-proliferation obligations.

Historical cooperative relationship

Russia and Iran have maintained a cooperative relationship over the centuries. By the early 20th century, Russia had begun to dominate northern Iran when it struck a deal with Britain in 1907 partitioning the country into two spheres of influence (Britain dominated the southern half). This arrangement persisted throughout both world wars. For three and half decades after World War II, there was mutual cooperation which was in the interests of both countries. Iran's signing of the Baghdad Pact in 1956, later on the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1958, was viewed in Moscow as an act of aggression since it contained an implied security commitment from the US and caused Russian hostility towards Iran (Lenczowski, 1972). But after Iran's assurance in 1962 that it would not permit the stationing of Western nuclear missiles on its territory (Sicker, 1988, pp. 92 – 93), relations started to improve. In January 1966 Iran agreed to sell "up to 10,000 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year between 1970 and 1985" to Russia, while Russia agreed to build a gas pipeline from Iran's "Khuzistan fields to the Soviet border west of the Caspian Sea" (Klieman, 1970). Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny stated that "Soviet-Iranian cooperation is built on the solid foundation of mutual respect, equality [and] non-interference in the affairs of each other" (Sicker, 1988, p. 105).

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Russia was cautious of its ideological differences, but quickly appreciated its anti-US sentiment. Ayatollah

Khomeini pulled Iran out of the CENTO agreement, which Moscow viewed positively (Rubinstein, 1981, pp. 599 – 601). On March 3, 1979, Leonid Brezhnev stated that:

“We wish the new revolutionary Iran success and hope that relations of good neighborliness between the peoples of the Soviet Union and Iran will fruitfully develop in the new conditions on the firm foundations of mutual respect, goodwill and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs.” (Sicker, 1988, p. 111)

But Khomeini criticized the Soviets’ actions in Afghanistan (Rubinstein, 1981, pp. 603 – 604). Despite several impediments, Soviet-Iranian ties continued to expand on several aspects. Before the revolution, Russia had been Iran’s largest export market and Iran had been the Soviets’ largest market for non-military goods in the Middle East (Keddie and Gasiorowski, 1990, p. 70.). After the revolution they persisted with economic and trade agreements. Russia’s neutral stand during the Iraqi invasion into Iran in 1980 was welcomed by Iran as it had previously sided with Iraq during the 1974 – 1975 Iraq-Iran conflict (Rubinstein, 1981, pp. 609 – 610). Both countries followed this gesture of goodwill by signing agreements to allow indirect arms sales, commercial trade and Soviet military advisors to go to Iran (Timmerman, 1989). Russia’s support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq war and its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 1988 removed major obstacles in Russian-Iran relations. On February 26, 1989, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze visited Teheran as the first Soviet foreign minister to do so since the revolution; Ayatollah Khomeini personally welcomed him, a privilege never afforded to any other foreign minister (Timmerman, 1989). Khomeini called for “greater cooperation between the two countries” (Timmerman, 1989). Rafsanjani, Speaker of the Majlis of Iran, visited Moscow in June 1989 and concluded a number of agreements, including one on cooperation on the “peaceful use of nuclear energy” (IRNA, 1989). Events at the beginning of the 1990s continued to fuel their cooperative relationship. After the fall of the USSR in 1991, Russia feared there would be a spread of Islamic radicalism with Iranian support. But Iran rapidly focused on economic ties, downplaying its religious role in the region. Relations further flourished when Putin became Russia’s president in 1999 and showed a clear intention to maintain a close relationship with Iran. The firm basis of Soviet-Iranian historical relations has made it possible to settle disputed issues to both sides’ mutual satisfaction, trust and respect.

Long-term geopolitical, diplomatic and strategic relationships

Russia and Iran have been building a potential geopolitical relationship based on economic, strategic, diplomatic and regional cooperation. During the Cold War era, the Soviet Union generally pursued relations with Iran in checking the imperialist expansion of the West. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran showed little interest in developing the relationship with Moscow. But during the Iran-Iraq War, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated bilateral cooperation with Tehran in order to check the US military build-up in the Gulf (Keddie and Gasiorowski, 1990, p. 86), which was viewed in Iran as an opportunity to rebuild its economy. The Soviet deputy prime minister, Georgi Korniyenko, visited Teheran on February 26, 1986 and agreed to “expand economic and trade relations, and to conduct joint oil exploration in the Caspian Sea” (Sicker, 1988, p. 128). The events of the late 1980s (the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the Soviet departure from Afghanistan in 1988) opened a new door for cooperation. Shevardnadze’s 1989 Tehran visit and Rafsanjani’s Moscow visit were turning points in relations between Russia and Iran. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the subsequent Gulf War, and the US military build-up in the region created a security concern which compelled Iran to rebuild its military capacity. These circumstances made Iran dependent on Soviet military equipment, and the Soviets were more than willing to seal a one billion dollar arms deal with Iran in 1991 (Shearman, 1995, p. 273).

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia continued to maintain good relations with Iran. Iran was also careful not to alienate Moscow, even though it did not recognize the independence of Azerbaijan (declared in November 1991) until the USSR had dissolved. The emergence of Islamic radicalism in different countries of central Asia confused Moscow about Iran’s role, while Iran reaffirmed its intention not to promote Islamic radicalism in Central Asian countries (Shearman, 1995, p. 273). Iran’s reaction to Russia’s invasion of Chechnya in 1994 was relatively mild, which indicated its intention not to disturb relations with Moscow. Believing in Iran’s responsible activity, Russia continued to strengthen relations and signed a contract with Iran in 1995 to install a nuclear reactor at Bushehr, which Iran had desired for some time (Freedman, 2000, p. 5). Even strong US criticism could not prevent Russia from selling nuclear technology to Iran.

Russian-Iranian strategic ties developed rapidly under President Putin. President Khatami stated after meeting Putin at the UN in September 2000 that:

“We share a lot of interests with Russia ... I believe the two countries can engage in a viable and strong relationship ... A stronger relationship would allow both countries to marginalize external

powers that are seeking destructive ends and which do not belong in the region.” (Washington Times, 2000)

In November 2000, Putin renounced the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin Agreement and paved the way to selling Russian arms to Iran (Gorodetsky, 2003, p. 160). During a visit to Moscow in March 2001, President Khatami expressed his interest in purchasing more diesel-powered submarines, TOR-M1 surface-to-air missiles and an additional nuclear reactor (Fawn, 2003). Khatami was awarded an honorary degree from Moscow State University and was invited to visit Moscow’s international space station. The Treaty on Foundations of Relations and Principles of Cooperation was signed (Itar-Tass, 2001), which former Russian Prime Minister Primakov called the biggest event in the history of relations between Tehran and Moscow (Ettela’at, 2001).

Despite the US protests, Putin reiterated that Russia would finish work on the Bushehr complex. Following the second Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1999, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesman expressed Iran’s displeasure (RFE/RL Reports, 1999). In 2001, Russia “officially” ceased operations in Chechnya, which was welcomed by Teheran. Iran played a very constructive role in ending the civil war in Tajikistan, which highlighted the importance of Iran in maintaining regional stability (Roy, n.d.). Iran also kept a relatively low profile in the newly independent states of Central Asia, emphasizing cultural and economic ties rather than Islam as the centerpiece. Russia initially feared that Iran would spread Islamic radicalism there (Gresh, 1998). But Iran focused on economic ties and downplayed Islamic radicalism (Shearman, 1995, p. 273). In Afghanistan, Russia and Iran stood together against the Taliban. They are working together on Azerbaijan, which neither Iran nor Russia wishes to see emerge as a significant power. NATO’s eastward expansion has increased Iran’s importance to Russia. Russia used this strategic relationship with Iran as a means of countering NATO expansion. In May 1995 an article in the Segodnia newspaper noted:

“Iran as an enemy can provide Muslim insurgents in [the] Northern Caucasus and Tajikistan with arms, money and food; and Iran as our friend, can be an important strategic partner for us. NATO expansion toward East has made us look for a strategic ally. An anti-American and anti-Western government in Tehran can become our natural ally.” (Freedman, 2000, pp. 3 – 7)

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati opposed NATO’s eastward expansion while he was visiting Moscow in 1996 (Beal, 1999). Many Russians see close Russian-Iranian relations as a counterbalance to increasing Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Freedman, 2001). Thus Russia has

found in Iran a useful strategic ally in a number of very sensitive Middle Eastern, Caucasian, Transcaucasian, and Central and Southwest Asian political issues, which has encouraged Russia to continue support Iran's nuclear program.

Russia's Greater Middle East Policy

Moscow's policy towards Iran almost epitomizes its policy towards the greater Middle East. Russia is increasingly keen on expanding its influence in the Middle East to strengthen its interests, which include securing energy resources, reducing US influence and restoring Russian prestige. Russia has been developing a friendly relationship with almost all the major countries of the Middle East.

Although Russia generally maintains a pro-Arab and anti-US stance, it has also developed closer ties with Israel. The volume of bilateral trade between Russia and Israel has increased from \$867 million in 1995 to \$2585 million in 2010 (RFSSS, 2009). More than 800,000 Russian-speaking Jews now reside in Israel (Sadeh, 2009). This close relationship with Israel enables Russia to play a leading role in the Arab-Israeli peace process and thus be a global player. At the same time Russia has maintained close ties with Syria, Iran, and even with Hezbollah, Hamas and Fatah, with strong opposition from Israel. Moscow supplied a missile system to Syria in 2005 (NTI, 2008). On the other hand, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas are also unhappy with the relationship between Russia and Israel. Despite their animosity towards one another, neither Israel nor Syria nor Hezbollah nor Hamas has distanced its ties with Moscow. Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon all have secular governments that work to contain Islamist forces which could support Islamist forces inside Russia. Thus Moscow gets benefits. Hamas and Hezbollah are of course Islamist movements with which Russia has maintained good relations (Interfax, 2006). In Russia's view, these two entities are very popular in the region and are justified based on public support. Russia also plays an important role in keeping Chechnya and North Caucasus off the agenda of these two Islamist movements. As a member of "the Quartet" (formed in 2002 by Russia, the US, the EU and the UN to mediate between Israel and the PLO), Russia wants to present itself as an unbiased arbiter to demonstrate its status as a great power (Trenin, 2010). Although Moscow approved UNSC sanctions imposed on Iraq for invading Kuwait in 1990, it strongly criticized the US-led intervention into Iraq. Saudi-Russian relations have developed remarkably in recent years. While there was almost no trade between Russia and the Saudi kingdom before the 1990s, Russian exports to Saudi Arabia amounted to \$693 million in 2006 (Sfakianakis, 2007). Crown Prince Abdullah's visit to Moscow in September 2003 and Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia in February 2007 as the first Russian

president was marked as a landmark in the development of the two countries' relations. Despite some problems, such as Riyadh condemning Moscow for supporting Tehran's nuclear program and Moscow condemning Riyadh for supporting the Chechen Islamist movement, relations are improving. After increasing Al-Qaeda attacks in Saudi Arabia, both nations found themselves as allies against the common enemy of radical Islam and Riyadh more or less stopped supporting Chechen Islamists.

Moscow has sought to balance its policy among Middle Eastern countries, whose interrelations have been mostly marked by hostility. Of all the states in the Middle East, perhaps none is more important to Russia than Iran given its influence in the region as a major oil-rich area and it forming part of the strategically important Persian Gulf. Moreover, Iran has cultivated strengthening relationships with many of the smaller Gulf states such as Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar. Russia seems to have developed a better position in the Middle East by cultivating friendly relationships with all countries, and particularly with Iran.

Geopolitical factors, regional security and anti-US hegemony

The collapse of the USSR created a geopolitical vacuum and Russia is now surrounded by fourteen new states, four of which are Muslim: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Most of the newly created republics are landlocked, which has limited their efforts in finding new alternatives to Iran's northern border and Russia's southern border (Roy, 1999, pp. 100 – 101). This has increased Iran's importance in Russian foreign policy. Both Iran and Russia view the US presence in the Middle East, Caspian and Central Asian countries as being against their regional interest and as a form of US hegemony on energy resources and political regimes. The 9/11 terrorist attacks added a new dimension concerning Moscow's policy calculations. Putin strongly condemned the attacks (Herspring, 2005) and Iran essentially supported the US efforts in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Although Russia has strategically supported the US theory of the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan, in many ways it is ambivalent about the long-term US army presence in the region. Iran's direction also took a dramatic turn when the US included Iran as a member of the 'axis of evil' in 2002 alongside North Korea and Iraq (White House, 2002). Iran views this as part of a conspiracy; after all, politics did not exist in Saddam's Iraq and North Korea still has a dynastic political system. By contrast, Iran has a vibrant and skeptical public which is increasingly open to debate and scrutiny of a regime that has squandered its political legitimacy. Iran is simply in a different league from North Korea and Iraq (RFE/RL Report, 2002). Russia has not supported the US idea of an 'axis of evil' (Teheran Times, 2002). Iranian radio noted that "the aim of the US diplomatic activities in the

region is ... to expand its sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and this is to lessen Russia's traditional influence in the region" (Radio Iran, 2001). Moscow and Tehran suspect the US strategic presence in Central Asia is an effort to have US bases there for an indefinite period (Interfax, 2005). Russia has waged a campaign and formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002 to prevent Central Asian states from affiliating with the US, NATO or Western military forces. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that:

"The countries of the region are members of the CSTO. And [if the countries of the region are] making a decision about hosting new bases on their territory, they should take into account the interests of Russia and coordinate this decision with our country." (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2005)

With the CSTO, Russia intends to develop a collective regional security structure under Russian command. In February 2009 President Medvedev called for the formation of a sizeable CSTO rapid reaction force based in Russia, which he claimed would rival NATO. Russia hopes to make CSTO a counterweight to NATO. Moscow and Beijing have also waged a campaign to impose limits on the duration and scope of the US presence in the region (The News International, 2002). They have also utilized the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform for collective security operation in Central Asia since 2003 with a view to unifying Central Asian governments in an anti-US regional security organization (Jefferson, 2006). Indeed the SCO's charter declaration of June 15, 2001, was clearly an anti-US policy document in Central Asia (Karniol, 2001). Iran was made a member of the SCO in 2008.

Russia suspects the US of interfering and supporting insurgent groups against Russia in the North Caucasus and Caspian regions. Russia condemned the US for meddling in the so-called color revolutions in order to overthrow local governments and replace them with more pro-US political forces (FBIS Feature, 2005). Putin viewed the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 – 2005 and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 as "part of a US-conceived conspiracy" (Trenin, 2009). Following the Russian invasion of Chechnya, Chechen terrorist attacks increased in the North Caucasus and even inside Russia (Hahn, 2011): on March 29, 2010, suicide bombings in Moscow killed 39 people. While President Obama condemned the bombings (White House, 2010), Russia suspects that the US provided undercover support to these terrorist groups. Therefore, Moscow has taken substantive and comprehensive efforts to undermine the US presence in Central Asia. The importance of Tehran to Moscow here is clear as Iran is capable of playing an important role in regional

geopolitics and is the only country which has a strained relationship with the US. Iran's nuclear issue within the framework of regional security is another concern for Russia.

Energy and economic concerns

The economy is a major Russian consideration in its relationship with Iran. The Russian economy has been suffering from several problems for several years. Although Russia's real GDP increased by 5.6 % in 2008 as a whole, it decreased by 7.9 % in 2009 (Nichol, 2012). Such economic crises have forced Russia to develop commercial relations with its neighbors. Iran is an important and prospective customer of Russian arms and metals, and most of Russia's nuclear industry. The Bushehr reactor, with a cost of around \$1 billion, is a flagship project of Russian-Iranian economic cooperation. Many Russians are engaged in operating the plant and training the Iranian personnel, while many more are working in the Russian factories supplying the reactor. In December 2002 Aleksandr Rumyantsev, the former head of the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy, claimed that 1,200 scientists and contractors from the former Soviet Union were working at Bushehr, of whom at least 60 % were Russian. According to an Izvestiia report, the Bushehr project has saved more than 300 enterprises from financial ruin (Leskov, 2002), while the pro-Kremlin website gazeta.ru has estimated that Russia would lose \$500 million a year if the project was not completed (RFE/RL Iran Report, 2003). Russia also expects to win further contracts in the Iranian nuclear market. Putin correctly underscored that "as far as energy is concerned, [Russia] focuses exclusively on economic issues" (Hutcheson, 2002). Russia also decided to build a rail link through Azerbaijan and Iran that would connect Russia to the Persian Gulf, which is expected to rival shipments through the Suez Canal and generate \$10 billion in revenues to be shared primarily between Russia and Iran (Blagov, 2005). Several agreements like this reaffirm Russia's commitment to improving economic relations with Tehran. Russian-Iranian trade volume had grown to \$3651 million in 2010 (Russian Federal State Statistics Service, n.d.). Both countries progressed on coordinating electricity grids, and negotiated on further arms and civilian plane sales and on the Russian launch of an Iranian satellite (IRNA, 2004).

Iran is also an important partner for Russia in the field of energy, oil and natural gas development. Iran holds the world's 2nd largest reserves of natural gas after Russia (15 % of global reserves) and is a major exporter of oil. Iran is going to be a gas-exporting country. In this context, Moscow wants to develop coordination with Iran over its oil and gas output and exports. Due to sanctions and European companies' reduced involvement in Iran, Russian oil companies have expanded their activities. Despite US objections, in 1997 Gazprom – the

largest gas company in Russia – signed an agreement with Iran as a party to a consortium with Total (40 %) and Petronas (30 %) to develop the South Pars gas field. Since 1997 it has engaged in the implementation of the 2nd and 3rd phases of the project. The Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) was formed in 2001 and both countries have been seeking to transform the GECF into a more institutionalized forum. Moscow wants to transport Iranian gas to South Asia instead of Europe. Moscow views Washington's call to terminate Russian exports to Iran as being motivated by the desire of US corporations to save future opportunities in the Iranian market. Thus the potential for Russian-US conflict over Iran and competition on energy issues cannot be overlooked. Russia desires to maintain strong economic and energy ties with Iran and thus could not risk losing its economic foothold in the Middle East.

The potential of the armaments market

Arms sales have been a very effective instrument in Moscow's foreign and economic policy. Russia inherited a large arms industry from the Soviet Union and has used it as a means of economic and technological advancement. Hence Tehran has been regarded in Moscow as an important market for Russian arms and militarily related technologies. Due to the worldwide decline in the armament market and particularly Russian arms, Moscow wants to develop relations with such prospective buyers as Iran, India and Syria. Iran has become the 3rd largest arms purchaser from Russia, while some other Asian clients have lowered Russian arms purchases. While Iraq and Libya were under UN sanctions and Syria lacked the hard currency, Iran by contrast could supply Russia with badly needed hard currency. The US military presence in the Persian Gulf, its defensive agreements with many Gulf states and the acquisition of vast amounts of US weaponry by Saudi Arabia, Iran's most important Islamic rival, have increased Iran's military dependence on Moscow. The Russian leadership is also convinced that Iran is acting responsibly in Central Asia and Transcaucasia. Thus Iran has become one of the most lucrative markets for Russian armaments.

A 1989 military agreement permitted Iran to purchase highly sophisticated military aircraft from Moscow, including MiG-29s and Su-24s, after its air force had been badly eroded by the Iran – Iraq war. They concluded a \$1 billion arms deal in 1991 (Shearman, 1995, p. 273). In 1992 Iran and Russia signed an arms contract valued at between \$4 billion and \$10 billion, consisting of "kilo" class submarines, T-72 tanks, MiG-29 and Su-24 aircraft, missile launchers and long-range guns. The Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Mehdi Safari, solicited support from Rosoboronoexport for \$7 billion in arms sales to Iran (Cohen, 2005). This was followed by an estimate by Rosoboronoexport's director Viktor Komardin of up to \$300 million in annual sales (Russia Today Online News Service,

2001). Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev visited Teheran in December 2000 as the first defense minister to do so since 1979 and discussed arms sales valued at more than \$3 billion (Cohen and Phillips, 2001). Upon acceding to the presidency in November 2000, Putin unilaterally abrogated the Gore – Chernomyrdin agreement (Freedman, 2006) as it limited Russian arms transfers to Iran, and in 2001 he initiated new arms agreements said to be worth between \$2 and \$7 billion (Freedman, 2006A). Despite strong criticism from the West, Russia signed a \$1 billion defense contract with Iran on December 2, 2005, to sell patrol boats, MiG-29 and Su-25 aircraft, Mi-171 helicopters, air radars and, even more significantly, 30 Tor-M1 missiles (Golts, 2005). Many Russians are also involved in modernizing Iran's arms industry. With Russian military advisors present in Iran, Iranian military forces have got access to Russia's advanced military technology. In November 2005 the Russians launched Sina-1, the first Iranian satellite (Nemets and Kurz, 2009). Thus the potential Russian-Iranian military relationship is also within the considerations of Russia regarding Iran's nuclear issue.

Balancing Washington and Tehran

The Iranian nuclear issue is also viewed in the context of US-Russian relations. The US perceives Iran's quest for nuclear energy as being aimed at achieving nuclear weapons and as a threat to its interests in the Middle East. In order to stop Iran from having nuclear weapons capability, the US has taken many measures based on economic sanctions such as bans on Iranian imports, export controls and the prohibition of foreign aid and credits. On the other hand, Iran perceives the US presence in the Middle East as being aimed at establishing control over fuel resources and as a threat to regional stability.

US-Russian bilateral relations have grown rapidly since 9/11. Since 2000, US exports to Russia have increased 22 % per year on average while US imports from Russia have risen 19 % annually (Nestmann, 2009). Even though the overall trade volume is low, it is increasing rapidly. Many in Russia view promoting good relations with the US as something vital for its economic development. Thus Russian nuclear ties with Tehran have posed a challenge in US-Russian relations. In many ways, Russia has tried to balance its relations with Tehran and Washington.

Negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue between the EU-3 (supported by the US) and Iran failed in 2005, and as a result the EU proposed to refer the issue to the UNSC. In reaction, the Iranian parliament voted to stop the IAEA inspections if Iran was referred to the UNSC (Jordan Times, 2005). At this critical turn, Moscow strongly opposed referring Iran to the UNSC (Wright, 2005) and advocated for Iranian negotiations with the IAEA (Interfax, 2005a).

After the failure of negotiation efforts and in the face of strong US criticism, Russia finally voted to transfer the issue to the UNSC in 2006 (Adler, 2006). During the UNSC's debate on Iran in March 2006, Russia criticized Iran but strongly opposed sanctions. Eventually the UNSC passed a resolution calling for Iran to suspend all nuclear enrichment activities without any threats of sanctions (UNSC Resolution No. 1737, 2006). The Bushehr project was the main point of contention between Russia and the US. The completion of the reactor was delayed repeatedly mainly because of US pressure on Russia. Ignoring strong US criticism, Putin signed the final agreement in February 2005 for the supply of nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor (Peterson, 2005). As a minimum requirement, the US called for the repatriation of the reactor's spent fuel to Russia (Kerr, 2005). Russia complied with this US request despite Iranian opposition. Ahmadinezhad's surprising announcement about Iran's success in enriching uranium (Moscow Times, 2006) fueled the crisis. Russia called it "a step in the wrong direction" (Turkish Times, 2006) but continued to promote a diplomatic solution and opposed sanctions (Saradzhyan, 2006). In November 2009 and June 2010 Moscow agreed to limited sanctions against Iran. It voted for UNSC Resolution 1929, which effectively prohibited heavy weapons exports to Iran. On November 15, 2009, after meeting with President Obama in Singapore, President Medvedev stated that, "We are prepared to work further to ensure that Iran's nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes" (U.S. Fed News, 2009). Lavrov reiterated Russia's views that concerns about Iran's nuclear program should be resolved through negotiations and that Iran had the right to pursue a peaceful nuclear program (CEDR, 2011).

The US pressured Russia several times to discontinue its relations with Tehran through a carrot-and-stick approach, sometimes threatening and sometimes offering aid, while Russia has tried to balance its relationship with Washington and Tehran. Russia does not want to alienate Iran, the EU or the US, nor does it want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Russia has sought to draw a middle path between Iran and the West, seeking to minimize the damage to its relations with Iran, and at the same time seeking to respond to pressure from the US. Russia wants to develop its relation with Iran but reduce its negative effects on US-Russia relations. Russia has also used Iran as an instrument to pressure the US.

Russia's relations with NATO and the EU and the Iranian issue

Russia views NATO as a US tool to expand its influence and suspects its long-term intentions. Russia also sees NATO's enlargements to former Soviet states as a serious affront to its prestige.⁹ NATO and US airbases in Central

⁹ The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary joined the alliance in March 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined in March 2004.

Asia and the US decision to establish military facilities in Bulgaria and Romania after NATO's 2004 enlargement were viewed by some in Moscow as evidence of the NATO and US encirclement of Russia. The formation of the CSTO and the SCO, and Russian proposals for alternative European security architecture, have mainly been aimed at undermining NATO. While in recent years cooperation between NATO and Russia has developed on some common issues such as terrorism, the proliferation of WMD, piracy, supporting the Afghan government and exchanging classified information, disagreements between NATO and Russia persist on some core issues. This unpleasant relationship with NATO has influenced Russia in developing a strategic relationship with Iran to counter NATO's eastward expansion (Freedman, 2000).

The EU has lacked a comprehensive strategic approach towards Russia: some EU members like Germany, France and Italy believe in maintaining good ties with Russia, while others like Poland and the Baltic States view Russia as a potential threat. Russia is an important energy source which supplies more than one quarter of EU countries' total energy. The EU is an important business partner for Russia, accounting for more than half of Russia's trade (European Commission, n.d.). Russia is the EU's 3rd largest partner in trade, which amounted to some €245 billion (approximately \$343 billion) in 2010 (Eurostat press release, 2011). Although Russia views EU enlargement as less hostile than NATO, it does not fully trust its security policies. Russia expressed displeasure with the EU's eastern partnership initiative, which seeks to deepen ties with 6 former Soviet countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The EU has also sought to pressure Russia on governance and human rights issues. At the May 2009 EU-Russia summit, President Medvedev stated that the eastern partnership was directed against Russia. At the May – June 2010 summit, EU leaders repeated their concerns about human rights, political pluralism and the rule of law in Russia (Council of the European Union, 2010). Thus distrust between the EU and Russia has not provided any incentives for Russia to alienate Iran and has rather helped develop strong ties between the two.

The development of Moscow's image as a superpower

Following World War II, the Soviet Union and the US were generally regarded as the only two superpowers, and they confronted each other in the Cold War. Today Russia sees the US as its main hostile force to its great revival. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 which ended the Cold War, only the US appeared as a world superpower. But in the 21st century Russia has been trying to come back as superpower. After the turmoil of the Yeltsin period, the Putin era began with the ambition of reestablishing Russia's global prestige

as a superpower, which was believed to be Russia's rightful place. Moscow is promoting its own network of alliances, mainly with countries which have strained relations with the US, ostensibly to offset US unilateralism. Putin reinforced "strategic relationships" with China through the SCO and with the former Soviet states and Central Asian countries through CSTO. Following the 9/11 attacks, Putin initially supported the US 'war on terror', but subsequent US military build-ups in the Caspian and Central Asian region were strongly opposed by Russia and viewed as a US attempt to encircle Russia. Russia sees NATO's eastward expansion as being motivated by the same US interests. Russia is also developing relations with almost all the major countries in the Middle East. According to the noted security analyst Aleksei Arbatov, "Russia wants to win global clout by acting as a mediator amid growing tensions between the West and the Islamic world" (AP World Stream, 2006).

In this context, Iran is emerging as a model for Russia's global positioning. Russia has tried to establish itself as a mediator between Iran and the West on the nuclear issue. Western powers are increasingly turning to Russia for assistance to isolate Iran due to Moscow's good relations with Teheran. This has ultimately boosted Russia's bargaining position in the global arena. The Russian Security Council head Igor Ivanov emphasized that "Russia will do whatever possible to make negotiations work" (Moscow News, 2006). Russia wants at all costs to prevent a US-led war against Iran. Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Duma, noted that success would give Russia "considerable additional advantages in terms of its position in the world" (BBC, 2006). Thus the Iranian issue is considered in Russia to be a way of developing its prestige as a superpower with a voice in major international issues.

Concluding remarks

From the above discussion, it is evident that Russia has maintained strong geopolitical, strategic, economic and military relationships with Iran and has supported Iran's nuclear program, ignoring severe criticism from the US and the West. Several factors are part of Russian considerations in persuading it to support Iran's nuclear program. Despite political and ideological differences, both countries historically have a good neighborly relationship based on regional cooperation and anti-imperialism. Both Russia and Iran believe that the US policy towards them is based on hostility and a desire to establish its own 'hegemony' and keep them subordinate. Hence, Russian-Iranian relations are bound by what is called a 'kinship of nationalisms'. Both countries share a common regional interest in the Caspian and Central Asian regions. Russia

believes that Iran, as a member of the NPT, has the legal right to develop nuclear power for civilian use. Iran has reiterated that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes and that it has adhered to all the obligations of the NPT and IAEA. While the West has insisted that Iran has a hidden nuclear weapons program, they have not been able to present any definitive proof to support this claim. On this matter, Russia believes in the legal right of Iran and views its nuclear cooperation with Iran as fully legal.

Russia's historical experiences and perceptions of threat have shaped its views towards Iran. The US military presence in Central Asia and NATO's eastward expansion are viewed in Russia as a direct security threat. Russia also believes that many insurgent groups in Russia are unofficially supported by the US. Russian experiences with Iran have shown peaceful intentions towards Russia and played a positive role in solving different regional disputes. Their strong stance to US hegemony has made them closer to each other. The US military presence in Central Asia has helped strengthen Russian-Iranian relations. Russia sees its nuclear cooperation with Iran as purely economic. The Bushehr reactor and the Russian factories which supply it employ a large number of Russian engineers and thus help keep Russia's nuclear industry alive. Iran has desired to purchase additional reactors. This will help Russia not only earn hard currency, but also aid the technological development of the Russian economy. Russia inherited an enormous military industry and has used it as a means of generating revenue. In this matter, Iran is a lucrative market for Russian arms.

While the breakup of the USSR carved up an empire, Russia has been struggling to regain its position as a superpower in the world; therefore its relationship with Iran is important because of its geopolitical and strategic importance. Russia has hoped to negotiate between the West and Iran and thus develop its image in the international community as a responsible stakeholder. As a member of the UNSC and an important source of nuclear technologies, Russia has the ability to exert pressure on Iran. Russia has taken advantage of this in balancing its relationship with the US and Iran. While it opposed UN sanctions against Tehran, at the same time it agreed to limited UN sanctions in the face of US pressure, which reduced the threat of a US attack on Iran.

In such an overall context, we can say that Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran stands out as a telling symbol of Russian foreign policy. In Moscow Iran is considered to be a major supporter of Russia's role at a regional and international level. Russia also considers it possible that if it turns away from cooperating with Iran's nuclear program, then another country, possibly the US, might fill the vacuum, just as it did during the Cold War. Therefore Russia has many geopolitical, strategic and economic concerns and interests in maintaining its relations with Iran.

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