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Russia won't like it if Iran friends the U.S.

Aug 14, 2013 | Yulia Sveshnikova

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The delay of Vladimir Putin's visit to Iran has some wondering whether the future of Russian-Iranian relations is in limbo.



Will Iranian President Hasan Rouhani (center) improve Tehran's relations with the West? Photo: AP

At a time when speculation about Iran's future under its eleventh president is running rampant, Russian-Iranian relations have taken on particular significance.

At the heart of Sheikh Hassan Rouhani's election campaign was the promise to defuse the situation surrounding the nuclear program, which was intended as a way to strengthen international relations and show greater transparency in the nuclear field. It is reasonable, therefore, that the question of Iran's readiness to hold direct talks with the United States on the matter were brought up.

The candidates for the Head of the Presidential Administration (Mohammad Nahavandian) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (Mohammad Javad Zarif) – both graduates of American universities – reiterated the need to establish friendlier relations with the West in order to eliminate 'crippling' sanctions and improve the economic situation in the country.

For his part, Zarif was able to build a good network of contacts with his American colleagues during his time at the United Nations, while Nahavandian has a wealth of experience dealing with economic issues.

Is Russia interested in the improvement of U.S.-Iran relations?

For Russia, however, there is a far more pressing question: What will happen to its privileged relationship with Iran if the sanctions are suddenly lifted and Iran is welcomed by the United States and the European Union?

Conspiracy theories have already started to appear among Iranian commentators that Russia might try to discredit the new president in order to maintain the status quo.

So what grounds does Russia have to be wary of the new Iranian President?

Rivalry at gas market

To begin with, in May 2009 it was Rouhani himself – as a representative of the spiritual leader of the Supreme National Security Council – who stated at a round table discussion entitled 'Iran, Russia and the West' that Iran was a potential rival for Russia in the war for the European natural gas market. What's more, according to the latest data from BP, Iran has overtaken Russia as the world leader in proven gas reserves.

The Nabucco pipeline project, in which Iran was initially involved as a gas supplier, was rejected by the developers of the Shah Deniz gas field, leaving Iran alone with its pipeline project to deliver gas to Europe through Iraq and Syria.

However, the political situation in the region means that the idea is unlikely to be put into practice in the near future. This is especially true since Iran doesn't have the necessary means for the development of downstream and upstream processes.

The situation in the gas sector could change drastically if Iran makes peace with the West. So, in this respect, Russia should be content with Iran's current predicament. Racing tensions in the Persian Gulf amid threats from the United States to attack Iranian nuclear facilities and counter-threats from Iran to block the Strait of Hormuz have contributed to oil price fluctuations, which is beneficial for Russia.

But conspiracy theorists seem largely uninterested in the possible consequences for Russia of military intervention in Iran, which would cancel out all possible benefits from the current delimitation of Iran's access to foreign markets.

If Iran and the West patch things up, then lifting the ban on the purchase of Iranian gas and the subsequent influx of money into the country may not only push Russia back in the pecking order of countries offering competitive gas field and infrastructure development projects in Iran, but may also leave it on the outside altogether. This is the opinion of one anonymous writer for the Iranian analytical website *Tabnak*.

Changing the format of the meeting with Russia

Another sticking point in the early days of Rouhani's presidency was the news surrounding President Vladimir Putin's postponed visit to Iran. According to Russian reports, Putin was to visit cities on the Caspian Sea and meet with the leaders of the coastal countries.

Rouhani declined the Russian president's invitation to meet at the Iranian port town of Bandar-e Anzali, suggesting instead that they should convene in Tehran so that Putin could make the acquaintance of both the president and the Supreme Leader of Iran, His Eminence Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Despite the fact that Rouhani is a seasoned politician in Iran, he is still searching for the right moment to initiate the necessary reforms.

Consequently, he needs to tread very carefully when dealing with the country's Supreme Leader. Right now, it is far more important for Rouhani to justify the trust the people have placed in him to usher in change and win the confidence of Ali Khamenei – the person who formulates domestic and foreign policy in Iran, and can therefore sanction a more flexible position on the country's nuclear program – than it is for him to be respectful towards President Putin.

That's why it was necessary in this case to either change the format of the meeting so that Putin could meet the president and Supreme Leader at the same time, or to move the meeting to a more appropriate time, which is what happened in the end.

The problems with the missile contracts

The meeting will now take place in September at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where talks may be resumed regarding the possible withdrawal of Iran's \$4 billion lawsuit against Russian Defense Export (Rosboronexport) for breaking the terms of its contract for the delivery of S-300 missiles to Iran and the possibility of replacing them with an Antey-2500 system.

Incidentally, the problems with the missile contracts may turn out to be a convenient excuse for Iran to shy away from cooperation with Russia if relations with the West improve; it was, after all, the Russian Presidential Decree to cancel the missile deliveries that sparked distrust in the first place. Iran still remembers the strained relations it had with the Soviet Union, which even went so far as to support Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.

And the failure of the Russian-American 'reset' (<http://russia-direct.org/content/%E2%80%98reset%E2%80%99-button-broken>), along with Russia's renewed orientation towards the East following Vladimir Putin's election for a third term in office, have only just begun to elicit feelings of optimism in Iran.

But these fragile bonds only exist as long as there is a common enemy: the uncomfortable shadow of the Cold War and an expanding NATO for one; and the image of a Great Satan for the other. If this factor were to be removed – and it would take long-term work on many fronts to do so – then the suspension of the missile contract could become an excuse for Iran to be reluctant to enter into serious agreements with Russia in the future.

But Rouhani has already proved himself to be a skilled negotiator on nuclear issues. It is thus possible that he has every chance of successfully shifting Russia's role to that of an intermediary. The missile issue has led Iranian political commentators to accuse Russia of international political opportunism, treating the actions of the Russian government with suspicion and holding it accountable for allowing Russian-Iranian relations to develop in the shadow of the United States.

Conspiracy theories are out of place

This notwithstanding, Rouhani gave an inspired speech four years ago at the 'Iran, Russia and the West' round table meeting about the prospects for Russian-Iranian relations; about the fact that Iran and Russia are far more than neighbors on the Caspian Sea – they also share similar views with regard to the unacceptability of a unipolar world, the forced imposition of democracy and interference in the affairs of other states. And since Syria (<http://russia-direct.org/tags/syria>) is on the agenda, they should also work together to solve the issue of Afghanistan (<http://russia-direct.org/content/afghan-endgame-stable-afghanistan-possible>).

Rouhani believes the theory about Russia playing the Iranian card in order to improve relations with the West, including the United States, is too simplistic, as both countries are neighboring superpowers and have more compelling reasons to work together than to engage in short-term political games. He also dismissed idle speculation that, if relations between the United States and one of Russia or Iran were to thaw, then the two countries would unite against the third.

"Both countries are capable of pursuing independent policy," Rouhani said. "So there is no need to worry."

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