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## **Russia's Foreign Policy Toward Iran: A Critical Geopolitics Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

Russia's foreign policy stance on nuclear Iran has been a subject of debate. Why has Moscow oscillated between resistance to sanctions and support for punitive measures against Iran in the meantime supplying Tehran with new arms technologies, despite the protestations from the US? This study engages with this question. It argues that the conventional approaches linking Russia's foreign policy to either geostrategic calculations or considerations of economic efficiency are insufficient because they do not take into consideration the changing conceptions of geopolitics held by Russia. This study shows that a pragmatic application of critical geopolitics, which calls for the examination of Russia's foreign policy through the lens of its own "geopolitics code" can substantially enhance our understanding of Moscow's foreign policy.

## **Russia's Foreign Policy Toward Iran: A Critical Geopolitics Perspective**

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*Russia's foreign policy stance on nuclear Iran has been a subject of debate. Why has Moscow oscillated between resistance to sanctions and support for punitive measures against Iran in the meantime supplying Tehran with new arms technologies, despite the protestations from the US? This study engages with this question. It argues that the conventional approaches linking Russia's foreign policy to either geostrategic calculations or considerations of economic efficiency are insufficient because they do not take into consideration the changing conceptions of geopolitics held by Russia. This study shows that a pragmatic application of critical geopolitics, which calls for the examination of Russia's foreign policy through the lens of its own "geopolitics code" can substantially enhance our understanding of Moscow's foreign policy.*

Iran's nuclear program is one of the most polarizing and rapidly escalating issues in contemporary international politics. The United States, Russia, China, and European countries have been drawn into a heated debate among themselves and with Iran over its nuclear ambitions. The US and Russia, in particular, have not seen eye to eye on the appropriate and effective ways of dealing with Iranian nuclear program. The US administration has accused Tehran in a malicious intent to build nuclear weapons and have supported a variety of diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran to pressure it into the renouncement of its nuclear aspirations. Russia has traditionally objected to using

force and sanctions for resolving the issues with nuclear and continued insisting that Iranian nuclear aspirations were peaceful in nature.<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, however, the Russian government had the change of heart in its foreign policy stance on nuclear Iran. In a reversal to the earlier staunch opposition to any punitive measures against Iran, Moscow agreed to refer Tehran to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), a measure that the US and Europe had been insisting for a long time. The same year, Russia joined Security Council Resolution 1696 that called for the suspension of all nuclear enrichment and plutonium processing activities in Iran by August 2006 or face further Security Council's measures.<sup>2</sup> In 2007-2008, Russia supported three subsequent resolutions imposing progressive sanctions on Iran for its failure to comply with Resolution 1696, despite protestations and harsh criticism from its Middle Eastern ally.<sup>3</sup>

In September 2008, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report stating that Iran not only failed to cease its uranium enrichment activities but also made significant progress with regard to those activities.<sup>4</sup> This report as well as the successful launch of a space rocket by Iran earlier the same year exacerbated concerns

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<sup>1</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Putin, Ahmadinejad and the Iranian nuclear crisis", *Middle East Policy*, v.13, n.4, Winter 2006, pp. 125-131.

<sup>2</sup> Cole Harvey and Richard Sabatini, "Russia's lukewarm support for international sanctions against Iran: history and motivations", 15 April, 2010, <[http://www.nti.org/e\\_research/e3\\_russia\\_lukewarm\\_sanctions\\_against\\_iran.html](http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_russia_lukewarm_sanctions_against_iran.html) 2010>.

<sup>3</sup> Those resolutions are: UNSC Resolution 1737 adopted on 23 December 2006; Resolution 1747 adopted on 24 March 2007; and Resolution 1803 passed on 3 March 2008. The first Resolution demanded all states to abstain from the transfer of "materials, equipment, goods and technology" that could contribute to Iranian efforts at acquiring capabilities to enrich uranium. An exception was made for materials intended for light-water reactors of the kind that Russia was building in Bushehr. The second Resolution froze financial assets of a number of Iranian politicians and businesses involved in the Iranian nuclear and missile programs, and also appealed to states to impose travel restrictions on certain Iranian representatives. Resolution 1803 expanded the list of individuals and organizations already targeted by previous measures.

<sup>4</sup> IAEA Board of Governors, Report on the implementation of the NPT safeguards agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council Resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007) and 1803 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran. GOV/2008/38, 15 September, 2008, <[http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeairan/iaea\\_reports.shtml](http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iaeairan/iaea_reports.shtml)>.

with the military dimension of the Tehran nuclear program. The same month, the Security Council unanimously adopted another Resolution 1835, which, although did not impose new sanctions, reaffirmed its members' resolve in bringing Iranian uranium enrichment-related activities to a halt. The US administration began advocating for a new round of sanctions on Iran, but the new government of President Medvedev in Russia demonstrated the usual reluctance toward the imposition of further punishments on Tehran.

In 2009, Russia took part in the so-called "P5+1" group (the US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany) negotiating a proposal that would have opened Iranian nuclear facility to inspection by the IAEA and allowed for the export of Iran's low-enriched uranium (LIU) to Russia and France for processing into higher-enriched rods for the Iranian reactor.<sup>5</sup> Once the negotiations reached an impasse in April 2010, the Obama cabinet intensified its efforts at pushing through multilateral sanctions against Iran. On June 9, 2010, the UNSC passed another Resolution 1929, which strengthened the sanctions on Iran by including a ban on arms sales and sales of any items, which could contribute to Iran's enrichment of uranium, among other stipulations. Russia sided with the resolution, despite the initial reluctance to support tougher sanctions against Iran and to much chagrin of President Ahmadinejad who called the Russian President "a messenger for Iranian enemies".<sup>6</sup> The downturn in Russian/Iranian relations that followed what Tehran perceived as Russia's treacherous act had not lasted long. The Russian/Iranian bilateral relations thawed in the summer of 2011 when the two countries

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Katz, "Russian-Iranian relations in the Obama era", *Middle East Policy*, v.17, no.2), Winter 2010, pp. 62-69.

<sup>6</sup> Pyotr Iskenderov, "Iran criticizes Russia", *Vremya Novostei*, 26 July, 2010, p. 4; Alexander Reutov, "The President of Iran said who was not a friend for him in Russia", *Kommersant*, 26 July, 2010, p.6.

held a series of meetings and discussions of a proposal for the establishment of a united anti-missile defense system, which will also include China.<sup>7</sup>

What explains Russia's foreign policy toward Iran? Why has Moscow oscillated between resistance to sanctions and support for punitive measures against Iran in the meantime supplying Iran with arms and continuing the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, despite the protestations from the US and European nations? Why have the arduous efforts of the US administration to lure, threaten, and persuade Russia to stop its nuclear and military cooperation with Tehran been largely futile? This study engages with these questions and, through the examination of the underlying motives of Russia's foreign policy decisions on nuclear Iran, this paper also aims to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of current foreign policy of the Russian Federation

I begin with an overview of the existing explanations of Russia's foreign policy toward Iran stressing Russia's geopolitical and economic considerations. While recognizing the utility of these approaches in explaining some aspects of Russian foreign policy decisions and actions, this paper argues that they are still limited because of their materialist foundations. I put forth a critical geopolitics perspective, which calls for the interrogation of ways, in which actors have come to think about power and define their interests in certain ways. The alternative frameworks of Russian foreign policy are examined in light of the available evidence in section three. This study shows that a pragmatic application of critical geopolitics, which necessitates the examination of Russia's foreign policy through the lens of its own "geopolitics code" rather than the

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<sup>7</sup> Georgy Filin, "Russia, Iran and China will create a counterbalance to the US?" *Versiya*, no.38, 3-9 October, 2011, p. 4.

“realist” or other pre-determined lens, can substantially enhance our understanding of Moscow’s foreign policy decisions, in general, and with regard to Iran, in particular.

### **What Motivates Russia’s Foreign Policy toward Iran? A Review and Analysis of Alternative Explanations**

For analytical purposes, all explanations of Russia’s foreign policy toward Iran can be classified into two groups. One cluster of explanations underscores geopolitical considerations, while another - highlights economic expediency.<sup>8</sup> The geopolitical explanations rely on the logic derived from political realism, according to which in the absence of central authority regulating international relations states must rely on themselves for accomplishing their national aims. Although, there can be a wide range of objectives pursued by a state, interests in national security are always preeminent. Given the permanent scarcity of this resource, states find themselves in the incessant competition for power and influence vis-à-vis other states to maximize their chances for survival. States, therefore, are said to have mutually incompatible interests. The differences in states’ behavior follow the differences in their relative power position determined by the availability of resources and the number of power poles competing for influence in the international system. In this conception, Russia’s foreign policy toward Iran has been shaped by the Russian relations with the Western states, particularly, the US, whose global hegemony the Russian government has vehemently resisted. By patronizing Iran, Russia has sought to contain the spread of the US influence and strengthen its own standing in the Middle East. Moscow has also hoped to use the Iranian

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey and Sabatini, op. cit. There is also another set of explanations connecting Russian-Iranian cooperation to their ability to meet each other’s identity needs (see, for example, Mahmood Shoori, “Iran & Russia: from balance of power to identity analysis”, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*. v.2, n. 2, Summer 2011, pp. q05-125). Due to space constraints and limited efforts at applying the constructivist lens to the analysis of Russian/Iranian relations, I omit the discussion of this research current.

nuclear issue as a chip in its relations with Washington over a number of other contentious problems.

Another groups of explanations stress the importance of economic considerations in Russia's foreign policy relations with Iran. These perspectives are premised on the assumption of a goal-oriented and utility-maximizing behavior of a rational actor, who performs an action if the costs associated with enacting it do not exceed the expected benefits from the action. In this conception, Russia's opposition to sanctions on Iran can be explained by the greater utility that Moscow expects to receive from cooperation with Tehran compared to the costs of defiance of the Western disapproval of Russia's measures. As long as Russia is able to reap significant economic benefits from its cooperation with Iran, and those benefits exceed the costs of non-cooperation with the West, including possible sanctions on the Russian companies engaged in Iran and foregone opportunities of cooperation with Western businesses and organizations, the Russian government can be expected to oppose sanctions on this Middle East country. Any changes to the Kremlin's position on sanctions should follow from either the diminished expected utility of partnership with Iran or higher costs from non-cooperation with the West on the Iranian issue.

Because of their materialist ontology, both political realism and economic pragmatism are limited in their ability to offer a comprehensive account of fluctuations in the Russian position on nuclear Iran. To attain a deeper understanding of Russian foreign policy, in general, and toward Iran, in particular, I propose to combine the traditional approaches with the insights of the critical geopolitics perspective.<sup>9</sup> Instead of

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<sup>9</sup> An important caveat is that this work does not do critical geopolitics in the same way as the diverse group of scholars in the fields of geography, international relations, and sociology practices it (for further

conceptualizing politics as an incessant struggle for land and resources carried out by the territorial units interested in the maximization of power and wealth, the critical geopolitics approach views it as a social, cultural, discursive, and political practice of “construction of ontological claims.”<sup>10</sup> States are continuously engaged in constructing, defending, and experiencing the alternative claims about the “truths” of global politics. They, therefore, have distinctive geopolitical “codes” or visions of international life. The critical geopolitics perspective calls for investigating these shifting images about world affairs as well as their sources. It is concerned with not only the “why questions” about the ways, in which material forces shape policies and political events, but also the “how questions” about the ways actors have come to think and define their power and interests in certain ways. In this way, the critical geopolitics perspective foregrounds the intangible aspects of world politics, i.e., the mental, cognitive, and discursive constructions of the geopolitical spaces. It does not assume the discreteness of different logics of power - geopolitical, geo-economic, or others - but asks how they have become to be viewed as elements of power and what brought about the shifts in the conceptualization of power resources. Neither does it limit state security to considerations of physical security, but also draws attention to the significance and practices of safeguarding security and continuity of states’ identity structures.<sup>11</sup>

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discussion, see Merje Kuus, “Critical geopolitics”, in R. Denmark (ed), *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, Vol. II, Blackwell, 2010, pp. 683-701; Gerard Toal Tuathail, “Towards conceptual clarity in the critical study of geopolitics”, in Lasha Tchantouridze (ed) *Geopolitics: Global Problems and Regional Concerns*, Bison Paper 4. Winnipeg, Manitoba 2004, pp. 75-102). The former approach would necessitate the adoption of different epistemological standards informed by the post-structuralist strands of social theory. My goal is more modest. I aim to borrow the critical geopolitics insight about discursive and social construction of geopolitical spaces, inquire into the Russian tradition of “geopolitics,” and place Russian foreign policy within the context of its “geopolitics” code.

<sup>10</sup> Kuus 2010, op.cit.

<sup>11</sup> Seyed Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi, “Ontological security and the foreign policy analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, v.2, n.2, Summer 2011. pp. 31-60.



Russia's Iranian policy can be better understood in the context of its geopolitical codes and its quest for identity of a great power state, which underwrites its perspectives on world politics. Russia's views on the international system and its place in it have often been examined through the "realist" lens and presented as "given" and stable. Although, the Russian foreign policy establishment continues viewing international relations as an uncompromising battle of interests and struggle for dominance, the risks to Russia's security as well as its image of "Self" have changed since the country's independence. Compared to security documents published in the 1990s, the current security doctrine of the Russian Federation is devoid of heavy sentiments of conspiracy and encirclements by unfriendly nations. It does not make direct references to the US as a security threat.<sup>12</sup> Even the 2010 Russian Military Doctrine refers to NATO and the US as "dangers," but not "threats," thus implying that their activities can potentially escalate into a military threat, but they do not constitute an omnipresent threat to Russia.<sup>13</sup> The level of Russia's confidence about its resurgence in global affairs has also increased in the last decade.<sup>14</sup> This happened not only because of Russia's economic recovery spurred by the high energy prices in global markets, but also due to the Kremlin's efforts at forging a novel understanding of the Russian external greatness. While Russia's "great power" identity has retained its imperial, territorial, and other geopolitical connotations, it has also acquired new functional aspects informed by the shifting understanding of state power.

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<sup>12</sup> National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020. Approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, 12 May 2009, No. 537, <<http://rustrans.wikidot.com/russia-s-national-security-strategy-to-2020>>.

<sup>13</sup> The 2010 Russian Military Doctrine. Approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, 5 February 2010, <<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/documents/show/133>>.

<sup>14</sup> See National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020, op. cit.; The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Official portal of the President of Russia, 2 July, 2008, <<http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>>.

The latter's meaning has changed from being viewed in exclusively military terms to embracing economic, financial, technological, and intellectual instruments of influence.<sup>15</sup>

Russia has developed a functional and synthetic approach to its identity, which allows it to advance "great power" claims on the basis of Russian preeminence in selected areas of global politics, in which it has a comparative advantage, such as gas and oil, energy transportation infrastructure, nuclear sector, and even counterterrorism.

The Kremlin's doctrine of "sovereign democracy" has provided an ideological foundation for Russia's renewed perception of Self, whereas the "multi-vektorism" has become a practical manifestation of the new identity in Russia's foreign policy. The meaning of sovereign democracy has not been limited to demands for non-interference in the Russian affairs by Western states and international organizations. It also denotes Russia's claims to an immutable right to have its own distinct values and perspectives on foreign policy and international relations.<sup>16</sup> Together with the principle of "multi-vektor" foreign policy, "sovereign democracy" implies Russia's desire to be recognized and treated as an equal participant of the decision-making processes in global affairs, where no single perspective, actor, strategic interest, or geographical area prevails.

Translated into foreign policy, Russia's identity as a sovereign great power furnishes legitimate global and regional interests, bestows strategic independence, and imparts shared responsibility for maintaining security at global and regional levels.<sup>17</sup> The functional and synthetic approach to this identity has enabled the diversification of

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<sup>15</sup> Stanislav Secieru, "Russia's quest for strategic identity", NATO Defense College Occasional Paper. Rome, Italy, 2006, p.19.

<sup>16</sup> Ambrosio 2008 Thomas Ambrosio, "Catching the 'Shanghai spirit': how the Shanghai cooperation organization promotes authoritarian norms in Central Asia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, v.60, n.8, October 2008, 1321-1344.

<sup>17</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, op.cit.

Russia's foreign policy instruments and justified the need for a strategic oscillation between integrationist and protectionist approaches in its foreign policy behavior. It is important to note that different foreign policy instruments, particularly, geo-political and geo-economic tools, are not set in opposition to each other, but informed by the same overarching political and ideological agenda. According to the concept of "Energy Super State," for example, the pursuit of economic interests, in the context of Russia, serves more than the narrow goal of profit making. The concept encourages Russia to take advantage of its abundant energy, pipelines, and nuclear resources to become richer and, at the same time, use economic instruments to project itself as a great power in international affairs.<sup>18</sup> The identity of a sovereign great power also underwrites the principle of "multi-vektorism," i.e., Russia's own uncontested and utterly pragmatic "third way" of foreign policy behavior grounded in its desire to avoid confrontation with the West and retain its strategic independence. For the Russian leadership, it is only using such a pragmatic approach, which allows making decision on a case-by-case basis in light of the Russian immediate interests and context, Moscow can selectively cooperate with, distance itself from, or resist to other international players.<sup>19</sup>

## **Assessing Russia's Foreign Policy Decisions on Nuclear Iran through the Lens of Alternative Perspectives**

### ***Political Realism***

When looked through the lens of political realism, Russia's strategic cooperation with Iran stems from its desire to contain and balance the US, which Russia perceives as its

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<sup>18</sup> Andrey Kazantsev, "The crisis of Gazprom as the crisis of Russia's 'energy super-state' policy towards Europe and the former Soviet Union", *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, v. 4, n.3, Summer 2010, pp. 271-284.

<sup>19</sup> Secieru 2006, op.cit.

existential threat. At the beginning of Putin's presidency, the Bush administration made a unilateral decision to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. Even before the commencement of the military operation in Iraq, the US military bombed anti-aircraft installations in Iraq threatening Russia's business interests in the Iraqi lucrative oil sector. These and other American actions overseas angered and threatened the representatives of Russian political elite, especially their nationalist wing, who called for Moscow's strategic partnership with Tehran to offset the US global hegemony.

It was on the background of an initial decline in Russia/US relations that the Iranian President Mohammed Khatami came to Moscow in early 2001, a noteworthy event in and of itself because it was the first visit of an Iranian leader to Russia's capital since the Shah's visit 27 years before. The Russian and Iranian presidents renewed negotiations over a million-dollar arms sale package and agreed to a bi-lateral treaty, which articles called on these states to not abet to their aggressors in case of an attack on either one. In other words, the treaty imposed an obligation on Moscow to not support the US in any shape or form if the latter attacks Iran.<sup>20</sup> Putin also pledged the resumption of work on the Bushehr nuclear reactor and its timely completion. It comes to no surprise, therefore, that after the revelation of the Iranian secret nuclear program in 2002, the Putin government tried to assuage concerns of the Western partners about its militant nature.

A series of events that occurred in 2003-04 highlighted the weaknesses of Russia's foreign policy and its ineptitude to resist and contain American unilateralism. In 2004, three Baltic states backed by the US and other European countries became members of NATO, and two Russian neighbors, Georgia and Ukraine, which had long

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<sup>20</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the nuclear question: the Putin record", Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006, <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub737.pdf>>.

sought to escape political influence of the Kremlin, witnessed the transfer of political power to pro-Western leaning cabinets. Washington's backing was indispensable to the success of these transformations. It was particularly important for the Kremlin leadership to demonstrate the continued relevance of Russia in the world affairs. Unable to confront the US preponderance directly, Russia sought other methods of resisting and undermining what it perceived as aggressive unilateral actions of the US in international relations. Asserting Russia's presence in the Middle East, including through the strengthened alliance with Iran, was one of the ways to do so.<sup>21</sup> Not only did Russia reinforce its objections to any proposals of sanctions on Iran, it also invited Tehran to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an observer.

Russia's resistance to punitive measures against Iran in 2000-2006 seems to conform to the Realist expectations. Moscow's support for several rounds of sanctions against Iran is, however, still in question. Russia's relations with the US did not improve in 2006-2008. As a matter of fact, Russia and the US were in the midst of tensions over American missile defense system in 2008.<sup>22</sup> It was during the first two years of the Obama administration that the Russian government reversed its position on Iran's sanctions, despite the extensive concessions made by the US to eliminate the sources of perceived threat to Russia. President Obama scrapped the Bush administration's nuclear missile defense plan, made some changes to the START agreement favoring the Russian

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<sup>21</sup> Freedman 2006, op.cit.; D. Shlapentokh, "Russian elite image of Iran: from the late Soviet era to the present", Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Nikola Sokov, "Missile defence: towards practical cooperation with Russia", *Survival*, v. 52, n. 4, August-September 2010, pp. 121-130.

side, and distanced the US from Russia's neighbors – Ukraine and Georgia – that were the bone of contention with Russia during the Bush terms.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, it is also unclear why the US foreign policies have blinded the Russian administration to the risks associated with a nuclear-armed Iran and other threats posed by this Middle East country to Russia. Russia competes with Iran as an energy provider in the natural gas market. Iran's policies on Islam have been a source of concern for Russia's relations with its Muslim neighbors in South Caucasus and Central Asian states, where Iran has recently stepped up its activities, particularly in Armenia and Tajikistan, thus narrowing Russia's capabilities in these countries. Russia and Iran continue to differ in their positions on the Caspian Sea.<sup>24</sup> Thanks to Russia's sales of intermediate range ballistic missiles to Iran, the latter has acquired a capability of hitting targets throughout the Middle East, thus, posing a nontrivial threat to stability in the region with immediate bearing on Russia. Some Russian politicians and arms experts expressed alarm over the growing military cooperation with Iran, which can backfire at Russia. It has also been argued that Russia's arms and technology may get into the hands of radical Islamic groups or used for modernizing Iranian, Algerian, Saudi, Egyptian, and Libyan missiles aimed at Russia itself.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Economic Pragmatism***

From the standpoint of economic pragmatism, opposition to sanctions on Iran served economic interests of cash-starved Russia, which domestic procurements of nuclear and military technologies, equipment and machinery have been too low to keep its defense

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<sup>23</sup> Herman Pirchner, "The Russian mind today: a geopolitical guide", *The American Spectator*, December 2010/January 2011, pp. 70-75.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Sazhin, "What kind of Iran is beneficial for Russia?" *Vremya Novostey*, 5 March 2010, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Sokov 2010, op.cit.

and nuclear industries afloat. Russia has certainly profited from its nuclear cooperation and military-industrial ties with Iran, which paid Moscow around \$800 million - \$1 billion for the sale and construction of the nuclear reactor at Bushehr and enabled the employment of thousands of Russian workers for this project. Iran also indicated its interest in purchasing 3 to 5 more nuclear reactors from Russia and building nuclear facilities for them with the estimated total cost of around \$3.2 billion. Furthermore, during the Putin terms as a president, Iran became Russia's third largest weapons customer. Moscow sold Iran several intermediate-range ballistic missiles and air defense systems and satellites for developing its missiles and space programs.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, by supporting sanctions on Iran Russia risked losing a solvent international customer in Iran.

Economic pragmatism, however, does not explain why Russia sided with the UNSC resolutions imposing progressive sanctions on Iran in 2006-2008 and, again, in 2010. The last round of multi-lateral sanctions agreed to by Russia is particularly puzzling as even unilateral sanctions imposed by the US on Iran earlier and renewed in 2006 prevented Russia's oil and gas firms, such as Lukoil and Gazprom, from entering into the lucrative business ventures in the Iranian fields of under-utilized hydrocarbon resources. Confronted with the multi-lateral sanction, Russian companies have become more cautious with regard to the prospects of engagement in the development of Iran's oil and gas reserves.<sup>27</sup>

Some analysts argue that economic interests have not been pivotal in shaping Russia's foreign policy toward Iran. Although, the absolute figures of bi-lateral trade

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander V. Nemets and Robert W. Kurz, "The Iranian space program and Russian assistance", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, v. 22, n. 1, January 2009, pp. 87-96; Steffany Trofino and Alexandr Nemets, "Russia: tipping the balance in the Middle East", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, v. 22, n. 3, August 2009, pp. 367-382.

<sup>27</sup> Andrei Diev, "Trevoshnaia vesna Irana", *Kranaia Zvezda*. 7 April 2010, n.59, p.17.

between Russia and Iran are impressive, Russia's exports to Iran constitute only a modicum of its total exports. Profits from commercial relations with Iran have contributed negligibly to accomplishing Moscow's strategic economic objectives, such as modernization of the Russian economy, revitalization of its military-industrial complex, and integration into the global market. International sanctions have certainly had some bearing on individual business projects in Iran, but they have had only minimal impact on Russia's fiscal health.<sup>28</sup> The Russian government, recently, retracted from a deal with Iran for the supply of five battalions of the advanced S-300 air defense missile systems, subject to the fourth round of the UNSC sanctions, and returned to Iran the advanced payment of \$167 million, even after the US government agreed to a waiver of sanctions for this deal. A representative of Rosoboronexport, Russia's official weapons' exporter, was cited as saying that "this is not a very big amount but nonetheless this is a loss"<sup>29</sup>, thus attesting that economic pragmatism has been important in Russia's relations with Iran, but only up to a certain point.

### ***Critical Geopolitics Perspective***

According to the critical geopolitics perspective, Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East has not followed neatly some pre-determined geo-political or geo-economic logic. Like other states, Russia has developed its own "geopolitics code" grounded in its domestic and international experiences and interwoven with Russia's identity as a "great power" state. Throughout the 1990s, Russia faced the uncomfortable realities of the

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<sup>28</sup> Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, "Russia's policies toward the axis of evil: money and geopolitics in Iraq and Iran", hearing before the Committee, 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 26 February 2003, Serial No. 108-6, <[http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa85339.000/hfa85339\\_0f.htm](http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa85339.000/hfa85339_0f.htm)>, Harvey and Sabatini 2010, op.cit.

<sup>29</sup> Defense & Security. "Russia returned the advanced payment of \$167 million for air defense missile systems S-300 to Iran", n. 252, 26 September 2011.



“great power” decline both domestically and its international relations. Its inability to sustain a “great power” self-conception, which has endured in Russia’s national history for a long time, posited a different from “security dilemma”, but nonetheless considerable threat to Russia’s identity and its agency responsible for Russia’s capacity to act in international relations. Once in power, the Putin government’s primary task was to close the gap between Russia’s ambitious self-image and how it had been perceived and treated by other states and international organizations. The Russian government began experimenting with the traditional geo-political and geo-economic considerations in its foreign policy relations at the same time trying to consolidate power and resources inside the state.

The conflict between the US and Iran was beneficial to Moscow, which capitalized on these antagonisms for pursuing its broad political, economic, and ideological agendas. The Bush administration stonewalled all attempts to use Iran as a passageway for transporting Caspian oil and gas to the European markets. As a result, Moscow benefitted directly from the increased revenues received from the higher volumes of Azeri and Central Asian oil and gas transported through Russian pipelines to the European customers. It also benefited indirectly from the enhanced political influence over the exporters and importers of natural energy resources dependent on Russia’s pipelines.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, moderate Iranian/American hostility and Russia’s partnership with Iran served to resist Washington’s monopolization of international influence in the Middle East at the time of Russia’s political and economic weakness.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Katz 2010, op.cit.

<sup>31</sup> Julien Mercille and Alun Jones, “Practicing radical geopolitics: logics of power and the Iranian nuclear ‘crisis’”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, v. 99, n.5, November 2009, pp.856- 862.

The Russian government also decided that its foreign policy would be used as a tool for resolving Russia's economic problems.<sup>32</sup> The profitable commercial ventures of Russia's businesses in the Iranian nuclear, space, and defense sectors were, therefore, consistent with the envisioned extension of Russian foreign policy into its domestic economic relations. However, it was also during the early 2000s that the decision-making process on Russia's foreign policy was seized by a number of powerful domestic players, who capitalized on the weaknesses of the central administration for promoting their particularistic interests. Russia's Atomic Energy Ministry (Minatom), its natural gas monopoly, Gazprom, Rosoboronexport, and a number of oil companies gained unprecedented power in Russian foreign affairs during the Yeltsin epoch.<sup>33</sup> Russia's military-industrial and nuclear sectors, in particular, were strongly motivated in keeping an important international customer supplying them with a steady stream of income for keeping their industries afloat. Therefore, both agencies lobbied the Russian government for new arms and nuclear contracts with Iran.

Russia's fiscal health significantly improved during Putin's first presidential term boosted by financial infusions from the sales of hydrocarbons, which world market prices skyrocketed at the century's turn. The building of the "vertical of power" strengthened the Russian government's administrative capacity and control over its strategic resources. It was also around that time that Russia's thinking about its sources and balance of power and strategic space began to shift as it was learning to reap political and strategic benefits from the pursuit of economic goals. This shift was institutionalized in the new concept of Russia as "Energy Super State" introduced by Putin in 2005, which was later broadened

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<sup>32</sup> Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives 2003, op.cit.

<sup>33</sup> Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives 2003, op.cit.

to encompass all Russian strategic resources, including nuclear energy and technologies, which could be used as a bridge between Russia's political/strategic considerations and economic rationality. In other words, it was decided to take advantage of Russia's existing strengths for simultaneously enriching the country, improving its geopolitical standing, and enhancing its international "great power" status.

From this point on, Russia's foreign policy toward Iran has become a series of discrete decisions balancing Russia's economic priorities, geostrategic interests, and also considerations of Russia's leadership over the management of nuclear non-proliferation, which had its own geostrategic spin-offs. Prior to siding with sanctions on Iran in 2006-2008 and, then, again in 2010, Moscow took part in negotiations with Iran over the uranium enrichment plan. Those negotiations were important to Russia on several accounts. First, a successful resolution of the standoff with Iran over its uranium enrichment activities would have elevated Russia's international status as a negotiator causing a blow to the US "soft-power" and its threats of sanctions. Second, by consenting to Russia's proposal of enriching uranium on its territory, Iran would have assisted Moscow in becoming a first Iranian LEU bank, of sorts, which would have imparted Russia with significant leverage over this Middle East country. The successful implementation of the proposal would have given credentials to the Russian idea of creating the first LEU bank on its territory. The latter would have confirmed Russia's leadership role in the area of nuclear proliferation. It would have also served Russia's geostrategic interests. By hosting a world LEU bank, Russia would have been able to prevent other countries from using nuclear fuel supply cutoffs for political purposes, while preserving this right to itself. The recalcitrant behavior of Tehran wrecked havoc

on the Russian plans. After the Iranian government took a hard line against Russia's proposal of enriching uranium for Iran's nuclear reactor at its LEU reserve created in the Russian city Angarsk, Moscow agreed to the IAEA decision to refer Tehran to the UN Security Council and subsequent UNSC sanctions. In 2009-2010, Iran agreed and, then, reneged on the draft plan of the international uranium enrichment plan, which included Russia and France, prompting Moscow to vote in favor of sanctions on Iran.<sup>34</sup>

Several other developments in 2008-2010 contributed to Russia's decision in support of the multilateral sanctions. In 2008, President Obama promised a swift reversal of US foreign policy toward Iran from confrontation to diplomacy and engagement grounded in mutual respect.<sup>35</sup> In 2009, the Obama administration made significant progress in pushing through an international uranium enrichment proposal, thus souring Russia's prospects for the leadership role in this realm, and also threatening Russia with a major breakthrough in the US/Iranian relations at the time when the government of President Ahmadinejad was at its weakest point facing a crisis of political legitimacy and widespread popular discontent at home. In March 2010, Russia's Minatom and IAEA reached a formal agreement on establishing the world's first nuclear fuel bank of LEU in Russia. This agreement was an essential step in reaching Prime Minister Putin's top economic priority of strengthening Russia's nuclear power sector. It was also to the satisfaction of the Russian ambitions to dominate certain sectors of the global energy industry and meeting its geostrategic goal of becoming an "energy hegemon" even without an agreement to serve as a LEU reserve for Iran. Therefore, by siding with US-

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<sup>34</sup> Mohamed El-Khawass, "Obama's engagement strategy with Iran: limited results", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, v. 22, n. 10, Winter 2011, pp. 93-113.

<sup>35</sup> El-Khawass 2011, op.cit; Katz 2010, op.cit.

backed sanctions in 2010 Russia did not feel that its leadership position in the nuclear energy sector was in question. By supporting the multilateral sanctions, Russia not only benefitted from the renewed confrontation between the US and Iran, but also from significant concessions made by the Obama administration to Moscow. In exchange for Russia's vote on the UNSC resolution, the Obama administration lifted its 1999 sanctions on several Russian companies exporting arms from Russia and waived the application of the earlier sanctions for Russia's sale of S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran.<sup>36</sup>

It is also important to note that having Iran as one of the members of the nuclear club has never been in Russia's interests. Moscow's ability to influence developments in the Middle East region would have been severely curtailed had Iran acquired a nuclear warhead. Moscow's support for the last round of the UNSC sanctions was party driven by the realization of these prospects by the Russian government, especially after the discovery of the secret uranium enrichment facility near Qom. Before siding with other members of the Security Council on the UNSC Resolution 1929 in June 2010, Russia made sure that sanctions were sufficiently weak to cause any rupture of economic relations between Tehran and Moscow and did not carry the automatic threat of future sanctions.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, sanctions became beneficial to Moscow in, yet, another way. In an unprincipled manner, Russia turned sanctions to its advantage by championing a new approach toward Iran calling for the gradual reduction of sanctions every time Tehran meets some of the IAEA's demands. The Russian solution stressing the principles of

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> John C. Shenna, "The case against the case against Iran: regionalism as the West's last frontier", *The Middle East Journal*, v. 64m n.3, Summer 2010, pp. 341-363. Russia, for example, sided with China in pressing the US to remove from the sanctions any restrictions on Iran's oil and energy sector or Tehran's Central Bank (El-Khawas 2011, *op.cit.*).

“reciprocity and gradualism” received initial support from the Iranian government, which appeared welcoming the new plan as of September 2011.<sup>38</sup> As with the earlier decisions, Russia has sought to simultaneously accomplish geostrategic and economic objectives and boost its international standing with the new plan. The Russian government wants to avoid losing Iran, which, pushed to the limit by escalating sanctions and growing US threats, may initiate conflict or proceed with its nuclear program without Russia onboard. Iran continues providing Russia with some economic incentives. Russia, for example, informed Iran that two large shipbuilding companies from Russia were ready to build transport and production ships and marine equipment in Iran, despite international sanctions on the country. Since there are political risks involved not only with regard to these companies, but also for the realization of a joint project with France for the construction of French Mistral Class amphibious assault ships, Russia is naturally interested in dropping certain provisions of sanctions on Iran.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Russia has reclaimed its status of an intermediary between Iran and the rest of the world and hopes to own the successful resolution of Iran’s nuclear problem for consolidating its international standing.<sup>40</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Thus study was motivated by the question of Russia’s seemingly inconsistent position on the Iranian nuclear program and multilateral sanctions on Tehran. It argued that the conventional approaches linking Russia’s foreign policy decisions to either geostrategic calculations or considerations of economic efficiency are insufficient because they do not

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<sup>38</sup> Nikolai Surkov, “Russian initiative provides hope for compromise with Iran”, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 August 2011, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> Egor Popov, “OSK vsplyla v Irane”, *Kommersant*. Daily, n. 197, 20 October 2011, p.1.

Reutov, Alexander. 2010. The President of Iran Said Who Was Not A Friend for Him in Russia.

<sup>40</sup> Yelena Chernenko, “Russia radiates nuclear resolution”, *Kommersant*, 17 August 2011, p.6.

take into consideration the impact of non-material forces, particularly changing and unique conceptions of geopolitics held by the Russian state. To account for Russia's Iranian position this work resorted to the critical geopolitics perspective and tried to approach Russia's foreign policy decisions from the standpoint of its own "rules of logic" and Russia's own understanding of its geopolitics code.

Russia's thinking about its strategic setting has evolved over time, just like its beliefs about its own place in international relations. Russia's self-perceptions have changed from a frustrated "great power," which aspirations to greatness could not pass the reality check throughout the 1990s, to the strengthened "great power" position in the early 2000s. Today, Russia views itself as a "sovereign great power," which has fully rebounded after the hardships of transition and entered a new epoch of Russia's "substantial influence upon the development of a new architecture of international relations."<sup>41</sup> The sources of Russia's influence and its "great power" identity have also been diversified and creatively redefined as leadership in the sectors of Russia's strategic preeminence. Russia's strategic independence has become prioritized and sought under the pretext of "multi-vektor" foreign policy allowing the Russian government to use a very elastic, opportunistic, and pragmatic approach in its relations with other nations.

Russia's dominant geopolitical principle has become the one rejecting permanent commitments or alliances, friendships or rivalries, but pursuing its short-term and strategic interests informed by its identity of a sovereign great power state. Russia's interests and approaches to its foreign policy do not, however, remain intact. As the meaning of the Russian identity and its sources gets re-defined in light of the changing

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<sup>41</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, op.cit.

domestic and international circumstances, so the understandings of its interests will undergo some changes.

The current pragmatic approach to Russia's foreign relations has manifested itself most clearly at the regional level, including in the Middle East, where it has allowed the Kremlin to build a nuclear reactor in Iran, reap the benefits of the trade in arms and space technologies with Tehran while simultaneously launching a satellite for Israel to pry into the Iranian nuclear program<sup>42</sup> and, at the end, default on the contractual promise of a delivery of S-330 long range surface-to-air missile systems to Iran after years of postponing the sale of missile systems. All in all, Russia has learned to make prudent (from the standpoint of its "geopolitics code") and calculated decisions based on the immediate circumstances and interests, but also with the view of accomplishing its broad geostrategic, economic, and ideological agendas, including the establishment of a favorable international environment, where no single state or perspective prevails, safeguarding and expanding its shares in the sale markets of strategic resources, and increasing Russia's international profile and its world reputation as an architect of international relations.

Moscow's relations with Tehran have become something of a hallmark of the new Russian geopolitical logic and its "multi-vektor" foreign policy. Despite the latter's evident opportunism, Russia has, so far, been able to get what it wants on this dimension of its foreign policy relations. It has been able avoid alienating Iran completely, no least so by making sure that the UNSC resolutions do not carry the automatic threat of sanctions and by signaling its unwillingness to support the imposition of further sanctions on Tehran. It has also allowed Russia to not estrange the US and European states. On the

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<sup>42</sup> Secrieru 2006, op.cit.



contrary, it has prevented the US from gaining greater footing in the Middle East and pushed the Obama administration toward extensive concession to Russia. Neither has it allowed Iran to acquire nuclear weapons so far. All in all, it has become a test and a symbol of Russia's strategic independence in its foreign policy and its ability to stand up to Western and other international pressures, something it has aspired for a long time.

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