

Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Dispute

Ahmad Soltaninejad*

Mahdi Shapouri**

Abstract

Russia has been involved in the dispute over Iran's nuclear program since its inception. The main argument of this essay is that the Russians see Iran's nuclear dispute in the context of their interests. In fact, Russian leaders - within their own country's national interests - have linked Iran's nuclear dispute with some of the most important issues related to Moscow's foreign policy and national security, including the issues of NATO's missile defense shield in Eastern Europe, Moscow's energy and economic security as well as regional security matters. In this situation, it seems that the continuity of Iran's nuclear dispute is in the interest of Russia, because it is an opportunity for Russians to resolve some of the most important issues relating to their national interests.

Keywords: Iran's Nuclear Dispute, Russian Foreign Policy, NATO's Missile Defense Shield, Russian Energy and Economic Security, Regional Security

* Assistant Prof. of International Relations, Tarbiat Modares University (soltaninejad@ut.ac.ir)

** MA in International Relations, Tarbiat Modares University
(Received: 20 October 2012 Accepted: 30 January 2013)

Introduction

Since the beginning of Iran's nuclear dispute, Russia has undoubtedly been one of the most influential actors in developments related to it. For this reason, understanding its policies regarding this dispute and factors shaping Russia's policies are considered important for all parties involved. Among many views and opinions expressed on factors shaping Russia's policies on Iran's nuclear dispute, there are four general ideas: some believe that Russia's cooperation with countries like Iran is based on the logic of geopolitical opposition between the U.S. and Russia which necessitates protecting their respective opponents all over the world (Gardiner, 2009, Simpson, 2010, Cohen, 2010, Nazemroaya, 2012, Karaganov, 2009:25). This argument is consistent with ideas related to the Cold War. Others believe that Russia exploits Iran and its nuclear program as a bargaining chip in its geopolitical games against the West. They believe that Russia is bypassing Iran and using its anti-western orientation to get concessions from the West (Frdorov, 2007, Kozharov, 2012).

Some other experts believe that Russia is playing a double game regarding Iran's nuclear dispute. Based on this argument, Russia continues its nuclear cooperation with Iran, on the one hand, and pretends that it shares concerns expressed by international community over the alleged violation of international law and norms (Aras & Ozbay, 2006). Many Iranians also believe that the current behavior of Russian leaders regarding Iran's nuclear dispute is not much different from that of the Russian Tsars in the 18th and 19th



centuries and Russian communist leaders in the 20th century. This article does not intend to prove or refuse any of these four views. Instead, by leaving aside negative and positive views on Russia's policy towards Iran's nuclear dispute, it tries to present a scientific and value-free analysis of factors shaping Moscow's policy on Iran's nuclear dispute after studying Russia's political, security and economic considerations and priorities at the regional and international levels.

Along these lines, we pose two questions: Which kind of foreign policy does Russia pursue in dealing with Iran's nuclear dispute? And which factors are shaping its behavior regarding Iran's nuclear dispute? To answer them, our hypothesis is that Russia's policy on Iran's nuclear dispute aims at the continuation of the dispute and factors shaping Russia's policy on Iran's nuclear dispute is based on Russia's attitude towards the U.S. defense missile shield in Eastern Europe, NATO's expansion to the East, regional security as well as energy and the Russian economy in the framework of considerations related to Russia's national security. In fact, we argue that Russia does not regard Iran's nuclear dispute as an independent issue in its foreign policy. From this perspective, Moscow has linked Iran's nuclear dispute to some important issues related to its national security. The importance of this article is that while addressing Russia's policy on Iran's nuclear dispute and factors shaping it, it makes the reader familiar with the matter of why Russia, despite its differences with the West, does not fully support Iran in its nuclear dossier and why Russia behaves in a contradictory manner. This article is organized as follows: first, a conceptual framework for Russia's new foreign policy approach is proposed. Then, the status of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its nuclear issue in Russia's priorities are explained. In the next section, Moscow's considerations and reservations regarding the nuclear dispute are studied. After that, the future of Moscow's policy on Iran's nuclear policy is explored and finally, the authors present their conclusions.



I- Pragmatism in Russia's Foreign Policy

Russia's foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union has undergone vast developments. Hence, an understanding of it is not possible without taking a contextual view. Perhaps, from chaos to pragmatism is the best general title fitting this period of Moscow's foreign policy. During the 1990s, under Yeltsin's leadership, Russia's foreign policy suffered from ambiguity in principles and confusion in action. The Yeltsin government tried to show a new image of Moscow to the international system. The price paid for this expectation or ideal was Russia's humiliation as a failed state in the international system. In fact, the West and especially Moscow's previous rival, that is the U.S., regarded itself the winning party looking arrogantly at the situation and expecting Moscow's submission to Washington's demands as was the case with American attitudes towards Japan and Germany in the post-Second World War era (Simes, 2007). With the expansion of NATO towards the East and NATO's intervention in Kosovo and conducting of military operations against the Serbs outside the framework of the United Nations Security Council, Russians became aware of their mistakes. Russia's military intervention in Chechnya in 1999 was the first warning of the new Russia addressed to the West against the West's expectation that Russia should always move along the Western policies.

Russians who were humiliated during the 1990s when West-oriented politicians were in power, elected Putin in 2000 as their president; a man with nationalist tendencies who was more similar to the older generation of Russian politicians. Putin hated his country's humiliation at the hands of the West during the 1990s. Putin certainly was well aware of Russia's weaknesses and backwardness. He knew that there was no possibility to turn back time for Moscow and that the Russians were forced to come to terms with the existing international system, which was unipolar, and its governing principles



until the time that Russia could rehabilitate itself and be able to act once again as a great power in the international system. Pursuing this goal required a pragmatic approach and use of all existing opportunities. Putin managed to save Russia from chaos reigning in the country during the 1990s in his first term of presidency and consolidated Russia's internal structures. Also, Putin who faced two choices, i.e. compliance with the West's imposed principles and acceptance of isolation, selected a realist and not an idealist approach and opted for not opposing the West (Koulai & Nouri, 2010: 212). Putin's success resulted from his abovementioned actions which made him a hero among the Russian people. In 2004, Putin was elected for the second time as Russian president.

This time, Putin began his work with much more self-confidence and put aside his previous defensive pragmatic policy in the realm of foreign policy. Higher oil prices led to a reinvigoration of the Russian economy. After that, Putin was no longer ready to be a mere spectator of the developments of the international politics. In 2007, during the Munich Security Conference, he showed himself and his real demands by harshly criticizing the U.S. unilateralism in the international affairs (Koulai & Nouri, 2010:213). In 2008, Russia's attack on Georgia revealed some other parts of the puzzle envisaged by the new Russia. Military intervention in Georgia and actions such as deployment of new missile systems in Saint-Petersburg, strong opposition to the deployment of missile defense systems in Eastern Europe, holding a military parade in Moscow's Red Square in March 2008 (for the first time after the collapse of the Soviet Union) (Koulai & Nouri, 2010: 213) were a serious warning addressed to the West, especially the U.S., regarding the conducting of adventurist actions in Moscow's security environment. Of course, all of these do not mean the end of Moscow's cooperation as well as confrontation with the West. The adoption of the "reset" policy by the U.S. in 2009 towards Russia helped foster warmer relations between Russia and the U.S. between 2009 and 2011. Moreover, increasing tensions



between these two countries since 2011 over issues such as the missile defense shield, internal events in Russia following elections in 2012 and Russia's position on the Arab revolutions are advanced as evidence for the abovementioned fact.

This brief study of Russia's behavior and policy following the Soviet Union's collapse suggests that in the new Russia's pragmatic foreign policy, the goal justifies the means. In fact, the main goal of Russian leaders today is ensuring Russia's interests and transforming Russia into a great power. The means to reach these goals can be everything available. Moscow's approach to Iran's nuclear dispute is no exception to this rule. Russia's contradictory behavior in dealing with Iran's nuclear issue and its position on not fully supporting Iran can be explained in the framework of this pragmatic foreign policy.

II- Dynamism of Iranian-Russian Relations

There is no doubt that Moscow has been the biggest supporter of the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially regarding military and nuclear cooperation since the advent of the Islamic Revolution. During the later period of Iraq's imposed war on Iran, Michail Gorbachev clearly shifted his position towards Iran. The visit made by former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani to Moscow in June 1989 was a watershed in relations between Tehran and Moscow. During this visit, several agreements including a military cooperation contract between Tehran and Moscow were signed. This contract allowed Iran to buy sophisticated military planes including Mig-29s and Sokhoi-24s from Moscow. Iran urgently needed these planes, because its air force had been weakened during the war with Iraq and the U.S. refrained from delivering military equipment to Iran (Freedman, 2006: 5-6). During Yeltsin's presidency, despite his West-oriented policy, relations between Moscow and Tehran in military and nuclear affairs continued. Of course, Yeltsin and his foreign minister, Kozyrev pursued their cooperation with Tehran to achieve their internal political goals. They wanted to show nationalist representatives in the



Duma that they acted independently from the U.S.

In January 1995, a contract amounting to 800 million dollars was concluded between the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (Amrollahi) and his Russian counterpart (Victor Mikhailov) in order to complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant (with a 1000 mega-watt reactor) (Wheling, 1999:136). Increasing ties between Moscow and Tehran in the field of military and nuclear affairs made Washington worried. Therefore, the U.S. put Russian officials under pressure to limit the selling of military and nuclear equipment to Iran. Yeltsin, who attached priority to relations with the West and especially to the U.S. in foreign policy, avoided expanding relations with Tehran under the U.S. pressure and complied with the Gore-Chernomerdin agreement. According to this agreement, Moscow pledged to halt selling military equipment to Iran and in return, Washington promised to allocate a share for Russian weapons in the world market of weapons (Hanelik, 2006). However, the warm relations between the Yeltsin government and Washington did not last long. Developments such as the U.S. missile defense, NATO's expansion and bombing of Serbia - Russia's ally during the Kosovo crisis - created the feeling among Russians that Washington did not attach any importance to Russia's vital interests and did not consider Moscow an important global actor (Katz, 2002).

Although Yeltsin became aware of his miscalculation as a result of the emergence of these differences in Moscow-Washington ties, he did not make any revision in his policy towards Iran. Iran's non-interference in the first round of clashes in Chechnya and Tehran's cooperation with Russia in confronting the Taliban made Iran a more valuable asset in the view of Russian leaders, and especially nationalist ones. One of these nationalists was Vladimir Putin who entered Kremlin in 2000 with the slogan of the revival of Russia's grandeur. The continuation of the Islamic Republic of Iran's pragmatic policies towards the Chechnya dispute and issues related to its northern neighbors encouraged Russian officials to develop their cooperation



(especially in the military field) with Iran. In 2000, Putin publicly declared that he would not accept the secret Gore-Chernomerdin agreement and ordered the resumption of weapons sales to Iran and completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant. Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami's visit to Moscow in March 2001 had a great impact on rapprochement between the two countries. Some Russian authorities considered the visit the most important event in the history of Iran-Russia relations. Putin and Khatami emphasized the construction of the Bushehr power plant in their meeting. They also agreed that after the completion of this power plant, a new contract for constructing another power plant would be concluded. In the same year, the September 11 events took place. After that, Moscow became closer to the U.S. and agreed to allow the presence of the U.S. operational and logistical forces in Central Asia (in the former Soviet bases) to have access to military operations in Afghanistan (Flegenhauser, 2002). From Tehran's perspective, Russia's behavior stemmed from its weakness vis-à-vis the U.S. However, this move by Moscow was not pleasant for Iranian officials. The other issue that affected Iran-Russia relations was that of the Caspian Sea. Following the failure of the Caspian Sea States Summit in April 2002, Putin tried to create a situation leading to the consolidation of Russia's power in the Caspian Sea. Agreement with Kazakhstan for joint development of oil fields in disputed waters, holding of joint naval maneuvers with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea (with deploying 60 battle ships and 10000 troops) and reaching a deal with Azerbaijan on the division of seabed resources within their common waters were among Kremlin's actions along these lines (Freedman, 2006:16).

But these attempts by Moscow did not mean animosity towards Tehran, because a few days before holding the maneuvers by Russians, Kazaks and Azeris, Putin had declared that Russia not only would complete the Bushehr power plant, but also would construct five other nuclear power plants in Iran. At the same time that



Moscow supported Iran, Washington resorted to a carrot and stick policy towards Russia to convince this country to halt its cooperation with Iran. The Americans threatened Moscow's officials by stating that they would stop their financial aid (which amounted to 20 billion dollars) allocated for dismantling the old Soviet arsenal while promising 10 billion in additional aid on the condition that Moscow would meet their demand regarding Iran (Freedman, 2006: 16-17). The Russians did not accept the proposal. Also, in January 2002, an American delegation headed by John Wolf, then a U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, visited Moscow to persuade Russian authorities to cease cooperation with Tehran. They proposed that if Russia changed its policy on cooperating with Tehran, Washington would give some concessions to Russia (Felgenhauser, 2002). Moscow rejected this proposal and continued its cooperation with the U.S. in the framework of the 'War on Terror'.

In January 2002, when George W. Bush placed Iran in his "Axis of Evil", the Russians did not show any special reaction. They had not yet forgotten the event on July 23, 2001 when Iranian gunboats attacked a research vessel at the disposal of Azerbaijan (which in fact belonged to British Petroleum Company) in disputed waters in the Caspian Sea, and exploited this opportunity to act against Iran's demands regarding disputed regions in the Caspian Sea. Along these lines, Moscow ignored Iran's interests and by getting the agreement of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and to some extent Turkmenistan, established a new criterion called modified median line to exploit disputed regions in the Caspian Sea. Use of this criterion limited Iran's share of the Caspian Sea to a mere 13%. In response to these actions, the Islamic Republic of Iran launched the "Paykan" missile boat and then the "Joshan" ship in the Caspian Sea to protect its national interests. However, problems related to the Caspian Sea and its division has not been transformed into a factor creating tension in Tehran-Moscow relations.

In the wake of the escalation of Iran's nuclear dispute in 2003,



Putin in his joint press conference with Bush declared that Russia did not welcome the proliferation of nuclear weapons by any country or in any region of the world (Joint Press Conference with Bush, 2003). In an interview with American TV channels on September 20, 2003, Putin said that Iran was going to sign the Additional Protocol and maintained that "if Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons, it has nothing to conceal; therefore it has no reason for not signing the Additional Protocol" (Interview with American Television Channels, 2003). The Russian president and his American counterpart in another press conference on June 1, 2003 expressed their concerns over Iran's nuclear advances and urged Iran to comply with its commitments under the NPT (Joint Press Conference with Bush, 2003). However, expansion of Moscow-Washington relations, which could not have good consequences for Iran, began its falling trend very soon with the U.S. attack on Iraq.

Also, the scandalous failure of the hostage-taking in Beslan and killing of several hundred civilians including about 170 primary students by Russian troops intending to end this hostage-taking showed that despite Putin's claims, Chechnya was not yet under the control of the Russian central government. In addition, the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004 during which Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian candidate ceded power to pro-western Viktor Yushenko through a peaceful power transfer process, made Putin suspicious of the intentions of the West and strengthened his Eurasian approach. The Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" alerted the remarking nomenclature against the presence of the West. Following these events and the re-emergence of differences between Russia and the U.S., Iran's status was elevated in Moscow's foreign policy agenda. In 2005, Iran could join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an observer; the two countries agreed to begin planning for a North-South transportation corridor; Russians launched a satellite for Iran and discussed the possible sale of submarine-launched missiles with a range of 200 kilometers (Freedman, 2006: 27-28).



In 2005, Moscow put forward an offer to Iran to produce enriched uranium in Russia which was rejected by Iran. One year later, Russia despite its initial resistance (Aras & Ozbay, 2006 :140) agreed to send Iran's nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council due to Iran's hard line foreign policy. But in November 2006, when Moscow felt that the U.S. and Israel intended to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, signed a billion dollar contract to supply Iran with 29 Tor-M1 surface-to-air missile systems to protect its nuclear facilities and a consignment of military boats and to upgrade Iran's Soviet-made bombers and fighter jets (Hmelik, 2006). From 2007 to 2010, Tehran-Moscow relations - despite Moscow's occasionally contradictory stances towards Iran's nuclear dispute – continued without any serious tension. In 2010, the Tehran Declaration was issued by Iran, Brazil and Turkey as a substitute to the Geneva-3 deal (between Iran and P5+1 in 2009).

Russia not only failed to welcome this declaration, but its deputy prime minister, Sergei Ivanov, in response said that "we expect that a new sanctions resolution to be voted on in the near future" (Sanger & Slackman, 2010). 23 days after the Tehran Declaration, Moscow voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1929 (June 9, 2010) against Iran. Immediately after the approval of this resolution, Moscow declared that it had unilaterally decided to cancel its contract with Iran for selling the S-300 missile system. Tehran was shocked by this move. The Iranian president made a harsh criticism of Kremlin officials. Russians also responded to these criticisms. All these events strained relations between the two countries. In 2011 and 2012, some efforts were made to reduce tensions between the two parties. Finally, Tehran and Moscow once again agreed on opposing the West. Russia's presidential election in 2012 and its subsequent events made Moscow suspicious about the West's intentions.

In addition, the different approaches of Russia and the West to the events taking place in the Middle East and North Africa have faced the "reset" policy, which was regarded as a glimpse of hope for



removing old differences and feuds between Moscow and the West, with serious difficulties. Under these conditions, a kind of coordination or natural alliance is seen in some international policies adopted by Tehran and Moscow. Certainly this coordination will not be forever, because in Moscow's pragmatic policy, the goal always justifies the means. This brief historical study on relations between Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran suggests that Moscow on some occasions and some issues regards Iran as a country with policies in line with its interests. But, this does not mean that Kremlin is ready to support Iran's interests at any price. Moscow well knows that Iran has an important weight in regional and even international relations, given its strategic, geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural situation. For this reason, Kremlin officials try to adopt a pragmatic policy towards Iran to ensure the maximum possible interests for their country. Moscow has its own national interests and priorities. Russians intend to revive their previous power and influence that they enjoyed under the Soviet rule, but this time not through ideology and military ambitions but rather by adopting a pragmatic policy necessitating the use of any instrument and opportunity for acquiring, maintaining and increasing their power. Kremlin's approach to Iran and its nuclear dispute could be interpreted in this framework. But which considerations does Moscow envision in dealing with Iran's nuclear dispute?

III- Russian Behavior

There is an essential and rather historical principle in relations between the great powers that their most important interests lay not so much in the sphere of their bilateral relations, but rather in their relations with third countries (Karaganov et al, 2009). Iran's nuclear issue is no exception to this rule. But is Russia willing to create tensions with Washington over its nuclear dispute with Iran? If no, why? All evidence suggests that at the present time, the vital interests of Russia and the U.S. are not in contradiction with each other. The



U.S. priorities lie in fighting terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, creating stability in Afghanistan and Iraq, dealing with Iraq's nuclear program and establishing security in the Middle East. Russia's priorities are ensuring stability in its domestic scene and preserving its influence in the former Soviet Union and especially in Ukraine, as well as enhancing the role of Russia in Europe's security arrangements. Under these circumstances, it seems that Moscow cannot and does not want to create tension in its relations with the U.S. It cannot do this, because Russia is a one-dimensional power while the U.S. is a four-dimensional super power. It does not want to do this, because Russian foreign policy's modern-day motives are completely dissimilar to those of the recent Soviet and the more distant Tsarist past. Whereas the Tsarist Empire was predominantly about Eurasian geopolitics and the Soviet Union promoted a global ideological as well as political project backed up by military power, Russia's business is Russia itself (Trenin, 2007: 95). Currently, the relative superiority of American power in the equations of the international system is undeniable.

Also, it seems that until a foreseeable future, the U.S. will remain as the most influential actor in international relations. Moscow understands this very well. In fact, although Russia as a great nuclear power enjoys an extraordinary nuclear deterrence, its current leaders know that in the existing equations related to the international system, military power is not a prevalent dimension of power. The Russian nomenclature knows well that the U.S. is able to punish Russia wherever it deems necessary. For example, in 2001, the Russian parliament (Duma) passed a law allowing the import and storing of foreign nuclear waste. Taiwan was viewed as the first major radioactive import source. However, the Taiwan reactors are U.S.-made and Washington has veto power over any future use of the spent nuclear fuel. Washington did not allow Russia to import nuclear waste from Taiwan. Along these lines, American officials said that it's a good idea for Russia to take nuclear waste and store it somewhere in



its vast wilderness and earn billions of dollars, but we will not allow Moscow to earn the money while it continues to build the nuclear reactor in Bushehr (Felgenhauser, 2002). Irrespective of Moscow's fear of anti-Russian efforts made by Washington, it sees that with the coming to power of Obama in the U.S, a new look to world affairs has been reigning in Washington which has been so far in line with Russia's interests or at least not posed a danger for Moscow's vital interests. There is some evidence that the U.S. government under the new leadership of the Democratic Party felt the danger that policies pursued by neo-conservatives had led other global powers to form a balance of threat against the U.S. At the same time, it realized that the U.S. was not yet a hegemon but a dominant power. As a result, the Obama administration changed the U.S. orientation towards the structure of the international system and the role structure of the international system and the role of regional and extra-regional powers in this structure. It seems that Obama has adopted a "concert diplomacy" to find an exit from this dangerous situation; an approach evocating the order established after the Napoleonic wars.

In the framework of concert diplomacy, there is no superpower, or if it exists, it restrains itself to foster stability to pave the way for groupings of great powers to work together to enforce international norms (Kissinger, 2009). In fact, Obama in his new strategy is aware of the U.S. limitations and for this reasons he recognizes the redistribution and dispersion of power in the world (Zakaria, 2012). Along these lines, the Obama administration adopted the strategy of "reset" in relation to Russia. The first step to implement this strategy was taken during the first visit of Obama to Russia in 2009 and the formation of the Bilateral Presidential Commission of U.S.-Russia. The two main pillars of the reset strategy are: 1- Making efforts for adopting a new mutual agreement for the reduction and elimination of aggressive weapons to replace START-1 (expiring on September 1, 2009); 2- The U.S. halts establishing and expanding missile defense bases in the Czech Republic and Poland if Russia agrees to cooperate



with the U.S. on convincing or forcing Iran to halt its nuclear program; that is Russia should abandon its diplomatic and political cooperation with Iran, stop supporting Iran in the IAEA, agree to impose further sanctions against Iran and put this country under more diplomatic pressure (Karaganov et al, 2009).

During a meeting on April 8, 2009, Obama and Medvedev signed the New START agreement. Obama said: "the missile defense system envisioned is not aimed at changing the strategic balance with Russia but rather as a way to counter launches from other countries." Medvedev replied that he was optimistic about reaching a compromise on the matter (Washington Times, 2010). In this meeting, Medvedev stated that it's regrettable that Iran has not responded to many constructive proposals the international community has offered and it's possible that the United Nations Security Council will have to take up the issue. Also, Obama said that the U.S. will not tolerate any actions by Iran that risk an arms race in the Middle East or threaten the credibility of the international community.

The simultaneous presence of U.S. and Russian leaders for the first time in NATO Summit Conference in Lisbon (2010), not including Russia on the list of countries threatening NATO in the document of NATO's new strategic concept (Strategic Concept, 2010), calling the NATO-Russia meeting a historic event by Medvedev and Rasmussen (NATO's Secretary General) (natomission.ru, 2012), Russia's agreement to resolution 1929 against Iran only a few days after the Tehran Declaration, Russia's refusal to deliver the S-300 missile system to Iran, and other actions of this kind led some to the conclusion that Iran has a less important status in Russia's regional and economic priorities compared to the past (Pikayev, 2010). But this does not reveal the whole truth. These perceptions only result from the misunderstanding of the status of Iran's nuclear dispute in Moscow's foreign policy calculations. In fact, analysts working on Iran's nuclear program have usually forgotten an



essential point which makes many of their analyses about the role of Russia in Iran's nuclear dispute invalid. The point is that Moscow doesn't regard Iran's nuclear dispute as an independent issue in its foreign relations.

Russia has not a particular red line regarding Iran's nuclear dispute for this reason. The Russians exploit easily and without any doubt the dispute along the lines of their national interests and priorities. Contrary to some views on the confusion of Russian policy on Iran's nuclear program, it seems that Russia has a calculated plan in this matter. Existing evidence suggests that the Russians believe that the key for solving Iran's nuclear problem does not lie in diplomacy and multilateral negotiations but is rather related to issues such as the U.S. missile defense shield, NATO's expansion to the East, energy exports to Europe, and Russia's economic considerations. Therefore, we believe that Russia does not regard Iran's nuclear dispute as an independent issue, rather it is an issue related to Russia's interactions with other great powers including the U.S. and the European Union.

Current Russian leaders are not only politicians, but they also want to be powerful and wealthy. They appreciate individuals or groups who can ensure their interests. As a writer says, from their perspective, everyone can be a partner and equally anyone can become an adversary (Trenin, 2007: 96). In addition to personal interests, Russian leaders have not forgotten the fact that the Soviet Union survived World War II, but it could not survive a collapse of world oil prices. For this reason, they have learned that the vagaries of the modern global economy can pose as great a threat to a nation's existence as do military threats (Gaddy & Kuchins, 2008:127). Despite this awareness, Russian authorities are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, the logic of their economic-political system (patrimonial authoritarianism) isolation, on the other hand, sustaining power requires the wealth generated by participation in globalization (Wallander, 2007:117). How they want to solve this dilemma may not



concern the present discussion, but what relates this to our topic is that some experts believe that (Felgenhauser, 2002) Russian politicians in their deals with anti-American regimes obtain kickbacks.

However, irrespective of those issues, at the present time, the Russian economy is highly dependent on trade with the West, and especially the EU. The total value of Russia's trade in 2010 was 443919 million euros of which 306627.1 million was trade with the EU (as the strategic ally and the first trade partner of the U.S.) (DG for trade of the European Commission, 2012). With this volume of trade, Moscow is the third trade partner of the EU. According to the same statistics, in 2010, the U.S accounted for 3.7% of Russia's total foreign trade and became Russia's fifth trade partner. Therefore, about 51% of Russia's total foreign trade is carried out with the EU and the U.S. (DG for trade of the European Commission, 2013). The matter of which country is more dependent on the other does not concern us. What is important is that the current leaders in the Kremlin need stability in the domestic economy of Russia to keep their authoritarian political system. Under these circumstances, they certainly won't sacrifice their 51% foreign trade with Europe and the U.S. for their 0.6% trade with Iran.

Of course, this does not mean that Moscow-Tehran economic relations have no importance for Kremlin. Russians view the Iranian market from a competitive standpoint. They do not want to sacrifice their economic benefits resulting from their ties with Tehran for sanctions and pressures imposed by the West. In this regard, Putin, Russia's most powerful man said during an interview in June 2003: "Iran is our neighbor and traditional partner. There is a systemic and high level relation between our countries. We do not want to lose our position in Iran. We know that some Western countries are in contact with Iran on the nuclear issue and want to sell nuclear equipment. We will strongly oppose the attempts to oust Russian companies from the Iranian market with the pretext of Iran's possible production of nuclear weapons "(Aras & Ozbay, 2006: 135).



Energy plays an important role in contemporary Russian foreign policy, on a level similar to that of military ties during the Soviet era. At the present time, energy is an essential key in Moscow's relations with important regions and countries such as Europe, China, Iran and Russia's new neighbors (former Soviet Republics). A writer believes that buoyed by high oil prices, Russians now feel powerful and their level of self-confidence can only be compared to the early 1970s when the Soviet Union achieved strategic nuclear parity with the U.S. (Trenin, 2007: 97). There is an essential reason for this; Russia never hesitates in using energy leverage for increasing its political influence. So far, Russian authorities have prevented issues related to energy from getting out of the control of the Russian government. They have tried to keep control of a major part of energy flows in the world to be able to influence economies in Europe and neighboring countries by using this leverage. By doing this, they can achieve two major goals: first, expanding the phenomenon of rent-seeking beyond their borders, and second, blackmailing countries dependent on Moscow's energy.

The link between Iran's nuclear program and Moscow's energy considerations is the fact that Kremlin officials do not want to lose their control over the export of oil and gas to Europe by allowing Iran, a country possessing the second largest gas and the fourth largest oil reserves in the world, to enter this market. The fact is that Russia is not willing to allow Iran to enter Europe's energy equations. Also, given Western sanctions against Iran in the energy field, a unique opportunity is provided for Russian companies to obtain considerable profits from Iran or their clients and brokers. Gazprom has become the biggest exporter of gas in the world because there is no other competitor in this field. Under these circumstances, if Iran's nuclear dispute is settled and Iran starts exporting its own gas to Europe, without any doubt, not only Gazprom but the entire gas reserves of Russia and thus the Russian economy would be exposed to a great risk (Mabrook, 2012). Therefore if Iranians expect



Moscow's policies to pursue a reduction of tensions between Iran and the West and opposing sanctions against Iran, their expectations are irrational. The fact that Russia despite its declared policy has so far voted for six resolutions against Iran could be understandable to a great extent in this framework.

In October 2007, Vladimir Putin said at a meeting in Moscow with members of the European Jewish Congress that nuclear weapons in Iranian hands was a strategic threat to Russia and that Israel and Russia have a common position on this matter (Galili, 2007). Irrespective of whether this statement was diplomatic rhetoric or the real policy of Russia regarding Iran's nuclear dispute, it should be said that Russia's perception of Iran is completely different from that of Washington. According to Ariel Cohen, one of the senior advisors of Putin and Medvedev, "Russia would be the last state Iran would target even if it gets a nuclear weapon (and intends to use it)" (Cohen, 2010:5). However, it seems that a nuclear Iran in the region is not a pleasant development for Russia. Putin in an interview with the CNN in September 2003 affirmed this point. He emphasized that "the emergence of a new nuclear power to our south is not something desirable from the perspective of our national interests." (Aras & Ozbay, 2006:134).

The experience of Russians from the Islamic Republic of Iran's response to security crises in the periphery of Russia such as the crises in Karabakh, Tajikistan and Chechnya as well as the issue of the Taliban in the 1990s contrast with their experience of the West, and especially the U.S. behavior towards these crises and also other crises such as those which occurred in Kosovo and Georgia in 2008. During the occurrence of such crises, Iran has so far acted in line with Moscow's national and security interests or has taken a neutral position. But, on the other hand, the West, and especially the U.S., has opposed Moscow in most of the crises that have occurred since the 1990s in the security environment of Russia. Under these circumstances, abandoning Iran would not be a rational choice for



Kremlin's leaders.

Russia's support for the Syrian government during the past two years shows that Moscow is not ready to allow the West and pro-Western governments to conquer its geopolitical bulwarks in sensitive regions such as the Middle East without obtaining a greater share of the cake. Therefore, Russia's support of countries like Syria and Iran does not mean that Moscow wants to do a favor to these countries, but to ensure the national interests of Russia. Russians do not like to see a powerful Iran equipped with a nuclear weapon. At the present time, Russians want an Iran that has no close relationship with the West and does not make trouble for Russia's national interests in the region. This requires that Iran as a regional middle power be kept and indirectly controlled. An isolated Iran that is a friend of Russia and an enemy of the West is an appropriate option for Russians.

When the Soviet Union, as the last empire in history, approached its disintegration and saw the separation of its offshoots, it tried to get them together once again and play the role of supporter for them (in the framework of the CIS). NATO, led by the U.S., had other plans for them. In fact, after the emergence of the signs denoting the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO was ready to embrace the new countries emerging. Along these lines, NATO began its practical efforts in 1991 and has so far succeeded to encourage 12 countries which were formerly in the Eastern bloc to become a NATO member (they are Austria, Czech Republic, Romania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Croatia, Albania and Slovenia). However, the West's efforts to penetrate the former Soviet territory are not confined to this. Aiding the color revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan to undermine Moscow's influence in these countries and to encourage them to join the Western camp are among other Western efforts led by the U.S.

Russia, which had taken a submissive position towards the West under Yeltsin, who was a pro-Western politician, chose a different course with the coming to power of Putin, who is a nationalist



statesman. Putin said in one of his speech in April 2005 that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." (Mendelson & Gerber, 2008:132). Certainly, Putin did not intend to provoke the nostalgic feeling of Russia's young generation to pave the way for the rival of Russia as a world power (Brzezinski, 2010:97). Brzezinski believes that Putin's current domestic situation and his behavior in the realm of foreign policy suggest that the leader of the new Russia is seeking the consolidation of authoritarianism in domestic politics as well as enhancing the role of the state in ceremony and revisionism in international politics (Brzezinski, 2010). This prominent U.S. politician believes that all of these policies would lead to failure. He recommends that it would be better if Putin moves along the current trend of affairs in the world instead of countering it. Irrespective of Brzezinski's analysis and to what extent it could be correct, we should not forget that Putin and his colleagues believe that Russia under the Gorbachev and Yeltsin rule in the late 1980s and the 1990s lost its sovereignty and they should no longer allow others to determine the fate of Russia.

In February 2007, Putin criticized the U.S. foreign policy and NATO's actions, and accused Washington of imperialistic behavior in world affairs. He said in part of his speech that "the United States has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations" (Gaddy & Kuchins, 2006: 126). It seems that these statements and behavior of Moscow, contrary to the realist view of Brzezinski, results from the extensive interventions of the West and NATO led by the U.S. in the internal affairs of the former Soviet republics and the violation of Moscow's red lines. If we pay attention to Putin's statements during Russia's attack on Georgia, we can verify the abovementioned argument. Putin said at that time that "nobody was listening and this is the result, we have finally come to it. However, Russia will of course carry out its peacekeeping mission to



its logical end." (timesonline.co.uk, 2008) Russians used a preemptive attack initiated by Bush's neo-conservative team to eliminate the U.S. opponents in the world as an excuse for their action. Putin said "Georgians were ready to attack". But this was not true. In fact, one of the important goals of Russia's foreign policy is to regain its influence among its neighbors and to reduce the presence of Americans and Europeans in Eurasia" (Rumer & Stent, 2009:94).

Also, the missile defense shield is one of the most important security concerns of Moscow. The Americans have frequently declared that Russia is not the target of this system. But there is a simple argument that even if Russia is not the target of this plan, deploying NATO's missile defense systems in Eastern Europe automatically puts Russia's deterrence and offensive capabilities under question.

For this reason, Moscow will not accept such a plan under any circumstances. Although Obama and Medvedev signed the "New START" agreement on April 8, 2009, and Medvedev expressed his optimism about reaching a compromise with Washington and had called the NATO-Russia Conference held in Lisbon in 2010 somewhat reluctantly a historic event (natomission.ru, 2010), it did not mean that Russia accepted the missile defense shield plan. Senior Russian officials' frequent mentioning of the possibility of a nuclear war with NATO amid a plan to deploy a global missile defense system with the cooperation of Iran and China (Kosyrev, 2011), Medvedev's order to destroy missile defense systems in case of their operationalization (Herszenhorn, 2011) and threats of a preemptive attack against these systems in case of their deployment (Fox news, 2012) prove that Russia will not come to terms with the missile defense shield plan in Eastern Europe.

The fact is that from the Russian perspective, Iran's nuclear dispute is inseparable from issues such as the U.S. missile defense shield in Eastern Europe, NATO's expansion to the East, energy security and thereby Russian's economic security (Kozhanov, 2012).



Kremlin considers all these subjects as related to each other. For this reason so far, despite Russia's declared policies, this country has in practice behaved in a contradictory manner regarding Iran's nuclear dispute in the eyes of most observers. However, this is not a contradiction, but rather a delicate game played by the Russians in this regard. Under these circumstances, what future could be imagined for Moscow's policy on Iran's nuclear dispute?

As indicated in different parts of this article, Russia does not look to Iran's nuclear dispute as an independent issue in its foreign policy. In fact, Moscow has linked this dispute to its important problems in the sphere of its national security. Under these circumstances, it can be said that until the time that a clear solution is found to issues such as the U.S. missile defense shield in Eastern Europe, NATO's expansion to the East, regional security, energy security and Russia's economy, Kremlin will continue its delicate game despite its declared policy. The continuation of Iran's nuclear dispute could entail many advantages for Russia. Some of them are: keeping Iran as a regional middle power; using Iran's anti-American policies to counter the U.S. unilateralism in the region and international affairs; tactical rapprochement with the West and using its technological and economic achievements for its economic reconstruction - exploiting Iran's nuclear dispute for solving some of its political and security differences with the West; preventing any military attack on Iran or regime change by channeling the nuclear dispute from military to sanctions and diplomatic phase; exploiting Iran's influence and potentials for solving eventual crises in Central Asia and the Caucasus as well as its Muslim-inhabited regions; exploiting its influence zone into the energy-rich region of the Middle East as the heart of the industrialized world; preventing the reduction of the EU's dependence on Russia's energy resources; and, creating barriers in the way of construction of new energy pipelines such as Nabuco, etc.

Finally, an important point that should be mentioned here is



that the Islamic Republic of Iran should lay aside optimistic and pessimistic views on the role and behavior of Russia regarding its nuclear dispute and engage Russia based on strategic principles and not ethical considerations. Iran should not expect a miracle on the behalf of Moscow and attach hope to occasional differences between Russia and the West. In Dimitri Simes word, although Russians are disappointed with the behavior of the U.S. and Europe towards themselves, they do not have any willingness to enter into a new grouping against the West, because the Russian people do not want to endanger their new achievements, and the Russian elites are not interested in foregoing their accounts in the banks of Switzerland, their palaces in London and their Mediterranean holidays" (Simes, 2007: 51).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to understand Russia's foreign policy and factors influencing its behavior in dealing with Iran's nuclear dispute. Along these lines, first, a conceptual framework for understanding the new Russia's foreign policy was presented and it was argued that the current priority of Russian's foreign policy is Russia itself. Under these circumstances, every instrument which could make Russia a powerful country is important for Russia and this means a completely pragmatic policy in which goals justify means. Then by a historical study, the Islamic Republic's status and its nuclear dispute were examined within Russia's pragmatic foreign policy. After that, we addressed Moscow's most important considerations regarding Iran's nuclear dispute, Moscow-Washington ties, issues related to energy security and Russia's economy as well as Kremlin's regional and extra-regional considerations including NATO's missile defense shield plan in Eastern Europe, NATO's expansion to the East and Russians' security experiences following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Also, the link Moscow has established between Iran's nuclear dispute and abovementioned considerations was studied separately. In



sum, we concluded that the continuation of Iran's nuclear dispute does not pose any threat to the Russians; rather it is in line with their interests in many respects. In fact, Moscow has increased its bargaining power against the main parties of the nuclear dispute, i.e. Tehran and Washington, in different bilateral issues with them by creating a linkage between some of its most important security considerations and Iran's nuclear dispute. In addition, through agreeing with sanctions resolutions against Ira, Kremlin both prevents a reduction in energy security and thereby its economic security and thinks about an exclusive market (particularly in military and nuclear equipment) in Iran. Therefore, under such conditions, the expectation that Moscow's policy reduces tensions between Iran and the West and opposes sanctions against Iran seems unreasonable.

References

- Koulaci, Elahe & Nouti, Alireza. 2010. "Putin's Pragmatism and Change in Russia's Foreign Policy Approaches", *Politics Quarterly*, Vol.40, No.2.
- Aras, Bulent & Ozbay, Fatih. 2006. "Dances with Wolves: Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Issue", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIII, No. 4.
- Blank, Stephen J. 2011. "Russian Military Politics and Russia's 2010 Defense Doctrine", *Strategic Studies Institute (SSI)*.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. 2008. "Putin's Choice", *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2.
- Cohen, Ariel. 2010. "Russia's Iran Policy: A Curveball for Obama", *The Heritage Foundation*, No. 2359, January 15, www.heritage.org/Research/Iran/bg2359.cfm.
- DG (Directorate General) for trade of the European Commission. 2012. available in: <http://ebookbrowse.com/tradoc-113440-pdf-d48156707>.
- Fedorov, Yury .2007. "Russian Policy on Iran: Trump and Trap", <http://www.ar15.com>.
- Felgenhauer, Pavel. 2002. "Who Will Be Russia's Best Friend in the Future: The US or Iran and Other Undesirables?" *Russia Weekly*, available in: <http://www.cdi.org/russia/224-4.cfm>.
- Foxnews. 2012. "Russia's military threatens pre-emptive strike if NATO goes ahead with missile plan", May 03, <http://www.foxnews.com>.
- Friedman, George. 2008. "The Medvedev Doctrine and American Strategy", September 2. http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/medvedev_doctrine_and_american_strategy.
- Gaddy, Clifford G. & Kuchins, Andrew C. 2008. "Putin's Plan", *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2.
- Gardiner, Sam. 2009. "Russia and the Future of Nuclear Talks", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Jan 27.
- Herszenhorn, David M. 2011. "Russia Elevates Warning about U.S. Missile-Defense Plan in Europe", November 23, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/24>.
- Hmelik, Natalya. 2006. "Russia's Special Relationship with Iran's Mullahs", <http://www.globalpolitician.com/21690-russia-iran>.
- Interview with American Television Channels. 2003. Novo-Ogaryovo, September 20, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2003/09/20/2359_type82916_52663.shtml.
- Joint Press Conference with US President George W. Bush. 2003. Camp David, Maryland, USA, September 27, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2003/09/27/>.



- Joint Press Conference with President of the United States George W. Bush. 2003. St Petersburg, June 1, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2003/06/01>.
- Karaganov et al., Reconfiguration. 2009. Not Just a Reset: Russia's Interests in Relations with the United States of America, report for meeting of the Russian-U.S. section of the valdai international discussion club, Moscow.
- Katz, Mark N. 2002. "Russian-Iranian relations in the Putin era", *Demokratizatsiya*; 10, 1.
- Kissinger, Henry. April 22, 2009. "Obama's Foreign Policy Challenge", *Washington Post*, Wednesday.
- Kozhanov, Nikolay. 2012. "Russia's Position on Iran's Nuclear Program", April 19, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-position-on-irans-nuclear-program>.
- Kosyrev, Dmitry. 24 November 2011. Medvedev and Obama move from reset to threats, RIA Novosti, <http://en.ria.ru/analysis/20111124/169008952.html>.
- Lily Galili. 11 October 2007. "Putin: Nuclear Iran is strategic threat to Russia", Haaretz, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/911627.html>.
- Mabrouk, Mostafa, 2010. "Why does Russia support Iran sanctions?", *Egypt oil and gas newspaper*, Issue 46, P.19.
- Mendelson, Sarah E. & Gerber. Theodore P. 2008. "Us and Them: Anti-American Views of the Putin Generation", *The Washington Quarterly*, 31:2.
- Natomi.ru. November 23, 2010. Dmitry Medvedev's News Conference following NATO-Russia Council Meeting, <http://natomi.ru/en/cooperation/current/show/120>.
- Pikayev, Alexander A. June, 2010. "Why Russia Supported Sanctions against Iran?" http://cns.miis.edu/stories/100623_russia_iran_pikayev.htm.
- Rumer, Eugene and Stent, Angela. April–May 2009. *Russia and the West, Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 2.
- Sanger, David E. & Slackman, Michael. May 17, 2010. "U.S. Is Skeptical on Iranian Deal for Nuclear Fuel", <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- Simes, Dimitri K. November / December 2007. "Losing Russia: The Costs of Renewed Confrontation," *Foreign Affairs*.
- Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" Adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon.
- timesonline.co.uk. August 11, 2008. Russian troops invade Georgia and 'take the town of Gori', <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4507980.ece>.
- Wallander, Celeste A. 2007. "Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications", *The Washington Quarterly*, 30:2.
- Washington Times. April 8, 2010. Obama, Medvedev sign 'New START' treaty at: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/08>.
- Zakaria, Fareed. February 2, 2012. "The World has changed, Mr. Romney", *Washington Post*.