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The Kremlin's Iran Problem

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On Monday and Tuesday, all eyes will be on Russia as it hosts the third round in the troubled international negotiations now under way between Iran and the West over the former's nuclear program.

The stakes in the parlay are exceedingly high. Previous negotiations in Turkey and Baghdad failed to generate any substantive progress in resolving the long-running impasse over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In Baghdad, Iranian officials flirted with the idea of suspending their enrichment of uranium to 20 percent, a key Western demand, only to reject the notion resoundingly shortly thereafter. The Iranian regime also walked back its initial promises to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency greater latitude in inspecting its nuclear facilities, including Parchin, a site believed to be linked to the regime's work on nuclear weapons.

This leaves the upcoming Moscow round as a make-or-break moment for international diplomacy. Officials in Washington have already said that, absent substantive progress in the negotiations in Russia, Iran will face new — and potentially severe — financial sanctions. Yet

neither the United States, now in the heat of presidential campaign season, nor Europe, weathering a broad and protracted financial crisis, is eager to abandon negotiations with Iran, at least for the moment. And as a result, both are hoping that the Kremlin can help coax Iran's ayatollahs into some sort of compromise.

Iran, for its part, is preparing for the opposite. Officials in Tehran clearly expect to receive sympathetic treatment from the Kremlin when talks open in Moscow. They have good reason to believe they will. After all, the 25-year-old strategic partnership between Russia and Iran has proved exceedingly durable.

Since the early 1990s in particular, Russia has become a major supplier of conventional weaponry and later of nuclear assistance to Iran. In the process, it has emerged as a principal enabler of Tehran's atomic ambitions and geopolitical expansion in the greater Middle East. Moreover, despite mounting global concern about Iran's nuclear effort, Moscow has doubled down on this strategic partnership with Iran over the past decade, greatly complicating Western efforts to curb Iran's nuclear menace in the process.

The reasons for Russia's intransigence are understandable. Iran has become a valuable strategic asset for the Kremlin and a lucrative one as well. Iran initially served as a lifeline for Russia's struggling post-Soviet defense industry in the early 1990s. In the 2000s, it became a dependable customer of nuclear technology and assistance. The Russian-built nuclear plant in Bushehr became the showpiece of Moscow's contributions to the Iranian national nuclear project.

Iran's strategic advances, in turn, have led skittish neighbors to scramble for both conventional weapons and nuclear know-how, with Russia reaping much of the profit. Indeed, over the past two years, Russia's weapons industry has experienced major expansion into the Middle East, capitalizing on surging demand from neighboring countries living in the shadow of a rapidly nuclearizing Iran.

Perhaps most significantly, Iran's rise to regional prominence has greatly helped to advance one of Russia's largest geopolitical priorities: increased influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus to counter attempts by the United States and NATO to expand in these regions. After all, a West preoccupied with containing and managing a crisis in the Middle East is far less likely to meddle in Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

To be sure, there is no shortage of trepidation across the Russian political spectrum regarding the potential perils of partnership with Iran's ayatollahs. But for the Kremlin, cooperation with Iran clearly remains a net benefit, at least in the short term. Although Moscow, to its credit, agreed in 2010 not to sell the S-300 air defense system to Iran, this appears to be a one-off accommodation under Western pressure and clearly did not represent a change in Russian policy toward Iran. On the contrary, Russia has undermined the fragile global consensus that now exists in favor of Iran's economic isolation.

As the West contemplates additional pressure against Iran, Russian officials are busy doing the opposite. For example, Nikolai Spassky, the deputy head of Rosatom, recently announced that Russia is ready to build another nuclear plant at Bushehr.

But this business-as-usual approach toward Iran is increasingly risky for Russia. With

diplomatic efforts to regulate the Iranian nuclear problem on their last legs, the specter of a unilateral Israeli strike is looming in the background. Thus, a failure by Moscow to lead on Iran could have catastrophic consequences, including a breakdown of negotiations, new economic penalties on the Iranian regime or a direct military confrontation over Iran's nuclear program.

Any of these eventualities could easily jeopardize the significant economic stake that Moscow now enjoys with Iran. Meanwhile, the alternative — an emboldened, radicalized Iranian regime armed with nuclear weapons — would represent a direct threat to Russia's national security and lead to greater instability in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Kremlin now has more incentive than ever to align with the West in pressuring Iran. But if it fails to harness the political capital and influence that it has built up with Tehran over the years to help peacefully curtail Iran's nuclear program, Russia will certainly be among those held responsible for the consequences.

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