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RUSSIA AND IRAN: A TACTICAL ALLIANCE

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Russia's Foreign Policy-Making Processes and Priorities / Discordant Voices in Russian Foreign Policy-Making / Regionalization of Russian Foreign Policy Priorities / The Development of Russian-Iranian Relations / A Strategic Relationship / Afghanistan and Tajikistan / Problems in the Russian-Iranian Relationship / Conclusions

Of all the states in the Middle East, perhaps none is more important to Russia than Iran. One of the most striking changes in Russian foreign policy, as compared to the policy of the former Soviet Union, was in the revision of its regional priorities. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states of Central Asia and the Transcaucuses became a central focus of Russian policy-makers. Given the ties of the states of both subregions to Turkey and Iran, as well as to other Middle Eastern states, Moscow has tended to view its policies toward Iran and Turkey through the lens of their policies toward Central Asia and the Transcaucuses, particularly as Russia, with mixed success, has sought to regain control over both regions. Of additional critical importance to Moscow is Iran's position as an important trading partner, as well as its strategic location on the Persian Gulf.

Despite misgivings over the call in some Iranian circles for the spread of Islamic radicalism, and Iran's offer of alternative transportation routes for the states of Central Asia and the Transcaucuses,

the Yeltsin regime has found Iran to be an important market for Russian arms and nuclear reactors, a country with which Russia can demonstrate its independence of the U.S., and an ally in curbing Azerbaijan's drive to escape Moscow's control. Iran is also useful in checking Turkish influence in Central Asia and the Transcaucuses, and in opposing Taliban forces in Afghanistan. For its part, Iran finds in Russia a secure source of arms at a time when it is threatened on many sides, an important diplomatic link at a time when the U.S. is trying to isolate it, and an ally both in containing the Azerbaijani irredentist threat against Iran's Azeri population, and in combating the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Russia's Foreign Policy-Making Processes and Priorities

The impact of domestic politics on Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East is clearly illustrated by the shift of Russian policy from an initially strong pro-Western tilt to a highly national-

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ist thrust by 1997. In part, this was in reaction to challenges to President Boris Yeltsin in the Russian Parliament, where three main groups vied for power. One group of legislators supported Yeltsin's pro-Western foreign policy including good ties with Israel, sanctions against Iraq, and cooperative relations with the countries of the "near abroad" — the other countries of the former Soviet Union where 25 million Russians live — along with Yeltsin's efforts to reform and privatize the Russian economy. A second group of legislators advocated a "Eurasian" emphasis in foreign policy, one which would not be exclusively focused on the United States and Western Europe, but which called for good ties with the Middle East (including both Israel and Iran), China, and other areas of the world as well. This group also wanted much closer ties with the "near abroad," with Russia in a dominant position there. On domestic policy, while still in favor of reform, the Eurasianists advocated a far slower process of privatization. The third group comprised a combination of old-line communists and ultranationalists. Though differing on economic policy, they all wanted a powerful, highly centralized Russia that would 1) actively protect Russians living in the "near abroad"; 2) act like a major world power, as the Soviet Union had done; 3) adopt a confrontational approach toward the United States, which they saw as Russia's main enemy, as well as toward Israel; and 4) renew close ties with Moscow's former Middle East allies such as Iraq. Finally, both communists and ultranationalists advocated the reestablishment of Moscow's domination over the "near abroad."

Discordant Voices in Russian Foreign Policy-Making

While Yeltsin sets the overall tone for Russian foreign policy toward Iran as well as toward other Middle East countries, there are a number of other autonomous or semi-autonomous actors that are also assertive in Russian policy toward the Middle East. This has tended to complicate Russian foreign policy-making, particularly when a direct clash occurs between the independent actor and the Russian Foreign Ministry. The seven key actors in Russian foreign policy appear to be: a) Yeltsin himself and the Presidential office; b) the Foreign Ministry; c) Lukoil, Gazprom, Transneft, and the other energy conglomerates that have close ties to the Russian business and banking communities; d) the Defense Ministry; e) the Atomic Energy Ministry; f) the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations; and g) the Rosvooruzheniye state-owned arms exporting company.

Perhaps the leading example of independent foreign

policy-making in Russia is Lukoil. Owned in part (8 percent) by the American oil company ARCO (which has been seeking to compensate for declining oil output in Alaska), Lukoil in 1994 came into direct conflict with the Russian Foreign Ministry which claimed that none of the five Caspian Sea littoral states (Russia, Azerbaizhan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) could act independently in developing the oil resources in the Caspian Sea. When Lukoil signed an agreement with the Azerbaizhan International Operating Company to develop oil resources in the Caspian Sea, it explicitly recognized Azerbaizhan's right to extract oil in its sector of the Caspian. In March 1996 Lukoil joined with Chevron and Mobil in a consortium to build an oil pipeline from the Tenghis Field in Kazakhstan to the Russian oil port of Novorossisk. Kazakhstan, like Azerbaizhan, claims the right to independently extract oil from its sector of the Caspian Sea, and previously its efforts to market its oil had been stymied by Russian limits on oil transshipment through Russian pipelines.

In commenting rather caustically on the lack of order in Russian foreign policy-making, the Russian periodical *Kommersant* (23 August 1995) noted:

It is impossible to pursue an integrated foreign and foreign economic policy today [in part] because Russia's political and economic elite, including its ruling elite, not only is not consolidated, but has split into competing, hostile factions, groups and groupings that are openly battling each other. It would be simply foolish for our foreign partners not to take advantage of this circumstance at any talks with Moscow.

Another example of an independent foreign policy actor is the Russian Defense Ministry. In both Chechnya and Tajikistan, at least when Pavel Grachev was Defense Minister, it appears that the Defense Ministry made its own policy, often at cross purposes to that of the Foreign Ministry and the office of the President.

An additional major independent actor affecting Russian policy toward the Middle East has been the Russian Atomic Energy Ministry led by Viktor Mikhailov. According to the available evidence, Mikhailov, now a member of the Russian Security Council, wanted to go considerably farther than Yeltsin in selling nuclear reactors to Iran, including, in a preliminary agreement, a gas centrifuge system that had the clear capability of enabling Iran to produce nuclear weapons. On Iranian policy, however, it is not only Yeltsin and Mikhailov who appear to differ. In December 1996, just as Foreign Minister Primakov was making a very successful visit to Iran and hailing Russian-Iranian cooperation,

Russia's then Defense Minister, Igor Radionov, was warning that Iran (along with other countries) was a potential military threat to Russia.

In sum, these discordant voices and actions of quasi-independent Russian policy-makers have seriously complicated Russian policy in the "near abroad" and in the Middle East, and may have raised questions in Teheran as well as to who is running Russian foreign policy.

Regionalization of Russian Foreign Policy Priorities

Russian relations with Turkey and Iran are of prime importance, particularly in view of the influence of these two countries in the Central Asia and Transcaucasian republics of the former Soviet Union. Russia sees a threat to the restoration of its control over both regions coming from the two Middle Eastern states.

The next region in importance to Russia is the Persian Gulf. In this oil-rich and strategically important region, Moscow has sought, not always successfully, to balance its policy among Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, whose relations among themselves have usually been marked by deep hostility.

The third priority of importance is the central Arab-Israeli zone composed of Israel, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian entity. During most of the Soviet period this region was of primary importance to Moscow, as the Soviet leaders sought to construct an anti-imperialist Arab unity based on Arab hostility to what the USSR called the "linchpin" of Western imperialism — Israel. In one of the major transformations of policy, Moscow now sees Israel as its closest collaborator in the region. Israel is Russia's major trading partner among these states and the 700,000 Israeli citizens originating in the former Soviet Union create a major cultural bond between Russia and Israel. In addition, a close Russian-Israeli tie enables Russia to play at least a symbolically, if not substantively, important role in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Finally, Turkey plays a special role in Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East. Not only is it Russia's major trading partner in the entire Middle East, and increasingly a key actor in Middle Eastern politics, it is also seen as a challenger to Russia's position in the Transcaucuses and Central Asia.

In sum, Russia's regional priorities have shifted dramatically since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the Russian-Iranian relationship receiving heightened importance since 1991, given Iran's critical geographical position which enables it to play a role

in both Central Asia and the Caucasus as well as in the Persian Gulf.

The Development of Russian-Iranian Relations

The rapprochement between Russia and Iran began in the latter part of the Gorbachev era. After alternatively supporting first Iran and then Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, by July 1987 Gorbachev had clearly tilted toward Iran. The relationship between the two countries was solidified in June 1989 with Rafsanjani's visit to Moscow where a number of major agreements, including one on military cooperation, were signed. The military agreement permitted Iran to purchase highly sophisticated military aircraft from Moscow, including MIG-29s and SU-24s. At a time when its own air force had been badly eroded by the 8-year-long Iran-Iraq War, and by the refusal of the United States to supply spare parts, let alone new planes to replace losses in the F-14s and other aircraft which the United States had sold to the Shah's regime, Soviet military equipment was badly needed.

Iran's military dependence on Moscow grew as a result of the 1990-91 Gulf War. Not only did the United States, Iran's main enemy, become the primary military power in the Gulf, with defensive agreements with a number of GCC states — which included prepositioning arrangements for U.S. military equipment — but also Saudi Arabia, Iran's most important Islamic challenger, acquired massive amounts of U.S. weaponry. In addition, while Iraq, another major enemy of Iran, was badly damaged by the war, its oil wealth held out the possibility of a major military recovery if sanctions were lifted. To Iran's northeast, the war in Afghanistan continued despite the Soviet military withdrawal, with the Shi'a forces backed by Iran often getting the worst of the fighting. Finally, to the north, the collapse of the Soviet Union held out both opportunity and danger for Iran. The opportunity came in the form of the six new Muslim states that emerged (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan) in which Iran might exercise influence. The danger lay in the fact that one of the most important political forces in Azerbaijan, the Popular Front which ruled the country from June 1992 to June 1993, called for the unification of newly independent ex-Soviet Azerbaijan with Iranian Azerbaijan, a development which, if consummated, could lead to the dismemberment of Iran. (Iran faces a similar, if far less serious problem, with Turkmenistan which, if it were to become a wealthy and powerful state as a result of the development of its natural gas

resources, could present an irredentist attraction to the Turkmen living in northeastern Iran.)

Given Iran's need for sophisticated arms, Iranian President Rafsanjani was careful not to alienate either the Soviet Union or Russia. Thus, when Azerbaijan declared its independence from the Soviet Union in November 1991, Iran, unlike Turkey, did not recognize its independence until after the USSR collapsed. Similarly, despite occasional rhetoric from Iranian officials, Rafsanjani ensured that Iran kept a relatively low Islamic profile in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, emphasizing cultural and economic ties rather than Islam as the centerpiece of their relations. This was due in part to the fact that after more than seventy years of Soviet rule, Islam was in a weak state in the countries of the former Soviet Union; the leaders of the Muslim successor states were all secular Muslims, and the chances for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution were very low. Indeed, some skeptics argued that Iran was simply waiting for mosques to be built and Islam to mature before trying to bring about Islamic revolutions. Nonetheless, the Russian leadership basically saw Iran as acting very responsibly in Central Asia and Transcaucasia, and this was one of the factors which encouraged it to continue supplying Iran with modern weaponry — including submarines — despite strong protests from the United States. Iran's low key reaction toward the Muslim insurgency in Chechnya and toward Russia's anti-Muslim policy in Bosnia helped to further cement relations.

During 1992, Yeltsin's honeymoon year with the United States when he was in agreement with Washington on virtually all other Middle Eastern foreign policy issues, the two countries clashed over Russian arms shipments to Iran. Unlike Iraq and Libya, which were under UN sanctions, or Syria which did not have the hard currency to pay for weapons and which already owed Russia some \$10 billion, Iran could supply Russia with badly needed hard currency. In addition, despite Yeltsin's cultivation of the United States, there were a number of influential people in the Yeltsin regime such as Yevgeny Primakov, then chief of one of Russia's intelligence branches, who advocated a more independent policy for Russia in the Middle East. Given the fact that the United States had relations with neither Iran nor Iraq, Russia was given the opportunity to play a diplomatic role in both countries where the U.S. was incapable of exercising diplomatic influence. Furthermore, unlike Iraq or Libya — which were pariah states — even America's NATO allies maintained extensive economic ties with Iran, although the Salman

Rushdie affair and the murder of Iranian exiles in Western Europe did tend to damage political relations.

Thus, Russia had a certain amount of diplomatic cover for its dealings with Iran, because the U.S. also quarreled with its NATO allies and Japan over their ties with Iran, a process which became even more pronounced when Bill Clinton took over as U.S. President in 1993. Thus, as Yeltsin came under fire from increasingly vocal members of Parliament on the center and right of the Russian political spectrum in 1993 and 1994 for being too subservient to the United States, he could point to American criticism of his policy toward Iran — which by 1993 included the promise to sell nuclear reactors — to demonstrate his independence. Indeed, one of the central issues of contention in the May 1995 Moscow summit between Clinton and Yeltsin was the Russian decision in January 1995 to sell the nuclear reactors which the U.S. claimed would speed Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Yeltsin refused to back down on the reactor issue as he had done — under U.S. pressure — with a missile technology sale to India in 1993. Indeed, Yeltsin's submission of the issue to the Gore-Chernomyrdin committee seemed more of a face-saving gesture to Clinton than a real concession. But Yeltsin did agree to cancel a proposed gas centrifuge sale to Iran, initially agreed to by Russia's Ministry of Atomic Energy, which might have contributed to Iran's more rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons — something very few Russians, including Yeltsin, wanted. Nonetheless, the Russians regularly asserted that U.S. opposition to the sale of nuclear reactors was due to commercial jealousy, not to any genuine fear of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

A Strategic Relationship

By the summer of 1995, Russian-Iranian relations had reached the stage of what the Russian Ambassador had begun to call a strategic relationship. With the war raging in Chechnya and the U.S. now calling for the expansion of NATO, Russian nationalists looked to a closer relationship with Iran as a counterbalance. As an article in the newspaper *Segodnia* (26 May 1995) noted:

Cooperation with Iran is more than just a question of money and orders for the Russian atomic industry. Today a hostile Teheran could cause a great deal of unpleasantness for Russia in the North Caucasus and in Tajikistan if it were to really set its mind to supporting the Muslim insurgents with weapons, money and volunteers. On the other hand, a friendly Iran could become

an important strategic ally in the future.

NATO's expansion eastward is making Russia look around hurriedly for at least some kind of strategic allies. In this situation, the anti-Western and anti-American regime in Iran would be a natural and very important partner. Armed with Russian weapons, including the latest types of sea mines, torpedoes and anti-ship missiles, Iran could, if necessary, completely halt the passage of tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, thereby dealing a serious blow to the haughty West in a very sensitive spot. If, in such a crisis, Russian fighter planes and anti-aircraft missile complexes were to shield Iran from retaliatory strikes by American carrier-based aircraft and cruise missiles, it would be extremely difficult to "open" the Gulf without getting into a large-scale and very costly ground war.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Moscow in March 1996 where he stated that Iranian-Russian relations were "at their highest level in contemporary history." While in Moscow he joined Primakov in opposing the eastward expansion of NATO, while also emphasizing that Iran was interested in prolonging the recently concluded truce in Tajikistan and developing cooperation in the Caspian oil shelf zone.

Russian-Iranian economic and military relations continued to develop with reports of Russian plans to sell Iran \$4 billion in military and other equipment between 1997 and 2007, if Iran met its financial obligations. In sum, by 1997, in addition to growing economic and military cooperation between them, Russia and Iran were also actively cooperating diplomatically in a series of important conflict areas in the Middle East and the "near abroad."

Afghanistan and Tajikistan

The surprisingly swift military victories of Taliban forces in Afghanistan in September 1996 spurred even closer Russian-Iranian cooperation. Given the fact that the Sunni Taliban were enemies of the Iranian-backed Shi'a forces in Afghanistan, and that the obscurantist nature of Taliban Islam embarrassed even the Iranian leadership which saw itself as the world leader of Islam, Iran sought to build a coalition to stop the Taliban offensive and organized a regional conference in Teheran, which Russia attended, to deal with the situation. For its part, the Russian leadership, which feared the consequences of Taliban control over all of Afghanistan as something that could lead to the penetra-

tion of Taliban influence into Central Asia or even into Russia itself, had an equal interest in blocking the Taliban. Consequently, the situation in Afghanistan was high on the agenda when Primakov visited Teheran in December 1996.

The issue of Afghanistan also influenced discussions on Tajikistan. The threat from the Taliban against Tajik forces in Afghanistan convinced both Moscow and Teheran to push for a negotiated settlement in Tajikistan, with Moscow pressuring the Tajik government and Iran the Tajik Islamic opposition into an accommodation. Less than two months after the Primakov visit to Teheran, an agreement was reached which created a National Reconciliation Commission with an equal number of representatives from the Tajik government and from the Islamic opposition.

Tajikistan exemplified for Russia the threat of Islamic radicalism which some in Moscow saw as a formidable problem, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR. Ironically, the civil war in Tajikistan did not begin with a radical Islamic attempt to seize power, but rather with a loose alignment of Western-style democrats and moderate Islamists, primarily from the eastern provinces of Garm and Pamir, ousting an old-line communist leader. When the communists came back into power, with the help of Uzbek and Soviet military forces, many of the Islamists fled across the border into Afghanistan where they became radicalized and then mounted attacks back across the border into Tajikistan. In the process they killed a number of Russian soldiers guarding the Tajik border and drew Moscow into the heart of the fighting. This posed a serious problem for the Russian leaders who had no desire to get too deeply involved in another Afghanistan-type war. Under these circumstances, a diplomatic settlement of the war in Tajikistan — a country which, unlike the rest of Central Asia, has a Persian rather than Turkic language and culture — became an important objective for Yeltsin, although some elements in the Russian Defense Ministry appeared to have their own objectives in Tajikistan, including getting revenge for Russia's defeat at the hands of Islamists in Afghanistan.

In any case, given the fact that many of the leaders of the Islamic opposition, including Akbar Turajanzode, had taken refuge in Iran, it became necessary to bring Iran into the diplomatic process. By the spring of 1994, with the aid of Iran, Russia managed to get talks started between the opposing sides, although Russian troops continued to suffer casualties in the fighting along the Tajik-Afghan border. As noted, with Iran's

help Russia managed to broker an agreement in February 1997. Thus, for the time being at least, the Russian-Iranian relationship has been reinforced, although distrust remains high between the Tajik government and opposition forces and the agreement may yet break down, even with the ongoing Taliban threat. In such an eventuality Moscow may again need Iran's aid to deal with the situation.

Problems in the Russian-Iranian Relationship

The Russian-Iranian relationship is not without its problems. As the Iranian economy deteriorated, in part under U.S. pressure to curb foreign investment in the country and in part due to the Islamic leaders' economic mismanagement, Iran had increasing problems repaying its debt to Moscow, which led to a drop in Russian military and civilian exports to Iran in 1995 to \$276 million. While at the end of 1995 Moscow agreed to reschedule the Iranian debt, given the limitations on the Iranian economy, it remains to be seen whether Iran can ever develop into the type of economic partner Russia might like in the region, although Gasprom has recently made a major investment in Iran, risking U.S. sanctions in the process.

Another problem in Russian-Iranian relations involves Iranian offers to provide transportation links to the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan for the export of their raw materials, particularly oil and natural gas. Since in its efforts to regain political control over the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan, Russia has been exploiting its control over oil pipelines and railroad systems, Iran's offer of alternatives to these states was not welcome in Moscow. So far, one rail link has been created, the Mashad-Tedzhen railroad between Iran and Turkmenistan which opened in March 1996, and there has been an increase in truck traffic through Iran into Central Asia. In addition, a gas pipeline between Turkmenistan and Iran is being constructed. The danger to Moscow of these developments was reflected in an article in the Teheran newspaper *Etellat* (23 January 1997), which noted: "The completion will be the first new gas export pipeline from the Caspian to bypass Russia and holds tremendous implications for future sales of Iranian and Turkmen gas to Turkey and into Europe."

To be sure, in the short run at least, Iran's offer of alternate transportation links for the oil and natural gas of Central Asia and the Transcaucuses is more of a problem for the future than for the present. In part, this is due to the weakness of the Iranian economy, which is suffering from high inflation (58.8 percent in

June 1995 by the Iranian government's own figures) as well as a heavy burden of foreign debt, although Iran was able to use the temporary oil price increase of late 1996 to pay off part of its debt to European creditors. Nonetheless, it still appears unlikely that Iran can provide the funds for pipeline construction out of its own resources, unless there is an unexpectedly sharp and prolonged rise in oil prices. Given the opposition of the United States, Iran is unlikely to be able to raise the funds for additional pipeline construction in international capital markets.

The United States has, de facto, aided Yeltsin in his efforts to regain control over Central Asia by publicly discouraging Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbayev from exporting its oil via Iran, although a minor oil swap agreement was agreed to in May 1996. The United States has also pressured the Azeri regime of Haidar Aliyev to eliminate a promised 5 percent offer of participation to Iran in Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea oil consortium. While the United States has encouraged alternate transportation routes for Central Asian and Azeri oil through Turkey, the continued conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the continuing unsettled condition in Georgia (Armenia and Georgia are the two possible routes to Turkey) initially made the Russian route somewhat more attractive for the oil consortium. Perhaps concerned about the fighting then taking place in Chechnya, the Azerbaijani international operating company decided in October 1995 to authorize two alternate pipelines for Baku's "early oil," one from Baku through Georgia to the Black Sea and the other from Baku to Grozny in Chechnya and then to Novorossisk, which began to ship oil in November 1997.

U.S. pressure on Azerbaijan to drop Iran from the consortium led Iran to initially join Russia in claiming that no oil could be developed and shipped without the agreement of all the Caspian littoral states, thus further strengthening Russian influence in both the Transcaucuses and Central Asia. Clearly, a rich and powerful Azerbaijan is not in the Iranian interest, whether under Popular Front leader Abulfaz Elchibey or ex-communist Haidar Aliyev. Nonetheless, in a deft diplomatic move Aliyev subsequently got Iran to agree to develop another sector of the Azerbaijani oil holdings, an action that weakened Russian efforts to limit development of the Caspian Sea.

To be sure, the Iranian leaders, while promoting their country as an alternate route for Central Asian trade, have been careful to assuage the feelings of the leadership in Moscow. For example, despite their

railroad and natural gas pipeline arrangements with Turkmenistan, the Iranians have sought to include Russia, where possible, in triangular economic arrangements with Turkmenistan including the formation of a tripartite Iranian-Russian-Turkmen company to explore for natural resources in the Caspian Sea. Nonetheless, the leadership in Moscow cannot be pleased with the long-term prospect of Iran de facto weakening the Russian hold on Central Asia and the Transcaucuses.

Conclusions

Despite some areas of friction, the Russian-Iranian relationship has so far been basically beneficial to both sides. For Russia, Iran is an excellent arms market, an area where a newly assertive Russia can demonstrate its role in world affairs, and a tactical ally in curbing Azerbaijan and confronting the Taliban. Especially at a time when Russia is weak, as demonstrated by its disastrous war in Chechnya, with the weaknesses of its army and its serious financial crisis, having an ally in Iran makes excellent diplomatic sense. Iran can help Russia defuse crises, as in Tajikistan, and prevent the U.S. from dominating the Persian Gulf which Moscow considers an important region for its own national interests.

For Iran, Russia is a secure source of arms, a diplomatic ally at a time when the United States is seeking to isolate it, and a tactical ally in curbing both

the independent aspirations of Azerbaijan and the offensive threat of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yet one can foresee limits to the relationship. First, the weakness of the Iranian economy may well limit its ability to purchase both military and civilian goods from Russia. Second, should Iran ever acquire the capability of providing extensive oil and natural gas pipelines to Central Asia and the Transcaucuses, Russia's hold over the two regions would be weakened. Similarly, as Iran develops its trade with Russian provinces such as Dagestan, centrifugal forces within the Russian federation may be reinforced.

In sum, the current Russian-Iranian relationship is of considerable tactical importance to both countries. How far it can be preserved into the future is an open question.

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