The limits of the Russian–Iranian strategic alliance: its history and geopolitics, and the nuclear issue

Bulent Aras* and Fatih Ozbay

*Department of International Relations, Işık University, Istanbul, Turkey; Bilgesam (Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies), Istanbul, Turkey

The Russian and Iranian governments define their relations as “very close” and “strategic” in many areas. The frontiers of this cooperation, in geopolitical terms, include the south Caucasus, central Asia, Afghanistan, and the oil- and natural gas-rich Caspian basin, while, at the issue level, the cooperation includes the nuclear issue, disarmament, the struggle against terrorism, the Iraqi quagmire, the Palestinian problem, and the U.S. military expansion into Eurasia. The signs of cooperation in these areas are, among others, regular political dialogue and similar attitudes in refusing to include the Lebanese Hizballah on terrorist lists, pursuing political relations with Hamas, maintaining a pro-Arab position on the Arab–Israeli question, objecting to foreign military engagement in Eurasia, and having a common voice during the Israeli–Lebanese conflict in 2006. However, we need to discover the nature of these relations in order to decide whether the close Russian–Iranian relations can be described as a strategic alliance. What is the strategic depth of Russian–Iranian relations? Do the relations consist merely of the conjectural necessities of the post-Cold War period? What are the “red lines” in Russian–Iranian relations? This article analyzes the relations between these two countries from a broader perspective, to examine the meaning of the relations in bilateral, regional and international contexts.

Introduction

There is serious concern in the international community that Iran aims to develop nuclear weapons while using its peaceful nuclear program as a smokescreen. The discussions on the Iranian nuclear issue have been dominated by the worries of the United States, which is attempting large-scale restructuring in the Middle East through military and political means. The U.S. government has invaded Afghanistan and Iraq and has initiated a political reform project in the Middle East. In such an environment, the U.S. government considers the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran to be a mortal blow to all these activities and projects. Toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this concern is not limited to the United States and Israel, but now extends to the Western world in general. It is interesting to observe that Russia and China share these worries, since they voted for the UN Security Council resolutions against Iran. These two countries have been more patient and tolerant on the Iranian nuclear issue than the United States and the EU-3 (Germany, France and the UK).

*Corresponding author. Email: abulent@isikun.edu.tr

ISSN 1016-3271 print/ISSN 1941-4641 online
© 2008 Korea Institute for Defense Analyses
DOI: 10.1080/10163270802006321
http://www.informaworld.com
Of these two, Russia has been the more active partner of Iran on the nuclear issue despite continuing criticism that this partnership serves Iran's alleged attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. Eyes turn to Russia whenever the Iranian nuclear issue comes to the fore in the form of an escalation of tension between the United States and Iran or in any other way. Russia holds an important position in the Iranian nuclear issue in the international arena and in bilateral terms with Iran. Russia is helping Iran build nuclear reactors, despite the concerns of the international community, led by the United States, that Russia does not pay enough attention to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. The change of Russian attitudes in the Security Council is an interesting development and should be carefully analyzed in bilateral, regional and international contexts, especially considering its long-term partnership with Iran on the nuclear issue.

Although the nuclear issue has played a considerable role in Russian–Iranian cooperation, it is not the only factor contributing to this relationship. If we look at the issue from a broader perspective, there seems to be a complex web of relations in a multilateral framework. The Russian and Iranian governments define their relations as “very close” and “strategic” in many areas. The frontiers of this cooperation, in geopolitical terms, include the south Caucasus, central Asia, Afghanistan, and the oil- and natural gas-rich Caspian basin. At the issue level, the cooperation includes disarmament, the struggle against terrorism, the Iraqi quagmire, the Palestinian problem, and the U.S. military expansion into Eurasia. The signs of cooperation in these areas are, among others, regular political dialogue and similar attitudes in refusing to include the Lebanese Hizballah on terrorist lists, pursuing political relations with Hamas, maintaining a pro-Arab position on the Arab–Israeli question, objecting to foreign military engagement in Eurasia, and having a common voice during the Israeli–Lebanese conflict in 2006. There is no doubt that overlapping interests in some of these issues foster cooperation in other areas.

There are numerous reasons in the background for this Russian–Iranian rapprochement and pragmatic convergence of specific interests in the previously mentioned realms. However, we need to discover the nature of these relations in order to decide whether the close Russian–Iranian relations can be called a strategic alliance. What is the strategic depth of Russian–Iranian relations? Do the relations consist merely of the conjectural necessities of the post-Cold War period? What are the “red lines” in Russian–Iranian relations? We will analyze the relations between these two countries from a broader point of view to examine the meaning of the relations in bilateral, regional and international contexts.

**Historical background**

The history of Russian–Iranian relations consists of a complex web of relations shaped by *realpolitik*, pragmatism and national interests. These relations go back to the sixteenth century and have not been positive for most of this time, in particular from the Iranian side. The common areas in relations between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were trade and the Ottoman threat. The following two centuries witnessed a new era in the relations between Russia and Iran, in particular with the Russian inclination toward eastern territories. As a result, Iran was no