

# An Attack on the Iranian Nuclear Programme – some possible Russian considerations

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Russia's relations with Iran are both important and difficult and present Moscow with an unappetizing choice. If it did not support Iran, Russia might gradually lose influence in Iran and in the wider Middle East region. Too close a cooperation with Tehran, on the other hand, would anger Washington. One decisive factor shaping Moscow's relations with Iran is how they affect its relations with the US.

Another key factor is the potential for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon and the means to deliver it. An Iranian nuclear weapons capability is not in Moscow's interest. Nevertheless, the consequences of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would be unpredictable for the Persian Gulf region and beyond, and Russia is therefore opposed to any such attack. Furthermore, if the scope of an attack were to be widened – affecting the Iranian regime – it is likely that Russia would have even less regional influence afterwards.

Russia's primary interest regarding Iran is the maintenance of the status quo, for several reasons. First, the regional instability after an attack could come near or across Russia's borders. Russia's significant military and police resources are already seemingly insufficient to calm the volatile North Caucasus. The Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, an international prestige project for the Kremlin, are less than two years away. Armenia, Russia's ally in the South Caucasus, is likely to be affected by a wider conflict in which Russia's ability to assist it with military means would be limited.

Second, scepticism about Western intentions is common in Russian foreign policy circles, not least after the intervention in Libya that toppled the Qaddafi regime. Potential concerns for Moscow include Georgia and Azerbaijan perhaps letting their territories or airspace be used

for an attack against Iran. This would imply direct competition for military influence in a region which Russia sees as its back yard. Russia may also fear that attacks could in time lead to a more pro-Western Iranian regime. This, in turn, could facilitate the distribution of oil and gas from the Caspian Basin and Central Asia to Europe through pipelines bypassing Russian territory. Reduced political influence over energy distribution could be problematic, since Russia's economy is, and will remain, dependent on energy exports. Furthermore, keeping the US and other Western countries busy with Iran reduces their ability to counter Russian moves for influence in areas such as Central Asia, the Baltic and the Arctic.

Third, an attack on Iran would reduce the Kremlin's influence in the Middle East through Shiite Iran and Syria. With Syria looking shaky, Iran remains Moscow's last bridgehead in the Middle East. If its influence were lost it would be hard to regain, especially as the current Russian policy is alienating other, mainly Sunni Muslim, countries.

Fourth, if attacks were to affect the regime in Tehran, and a power vacuum ensued in Iran, powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia could increase their influence in the region at the expense of Russia. Moscow may also wonder how the increasing influence of an economically, militarily and demographically strong Turkey would affect Turkic people in Russia and in Central Asia. And, how would a stronger Saudi Arabia, a pivotal country in Islam, influence people in Russia's North Caucasus, who increasingly look to the Middle East for both spiritual and political guidance?

Finally, Russia is likely to want to keep its current cooperation with Iran going in fields such as fighting ter-

rorism, combating drug smuggling, and coordinating policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Today, Russia's conventional military options to influence developments outside former Soviet republics seem limited. Its Southern Military District (covering the Russian territory nearest to the Caucasus and Iran) is being prioritised, receiving much of the new equipment introduced under the current military reform. But Russia's conventional forces are likely to be more of a defensive cordon than an offensive posture for external intervention. Russian Ground Forces would have to pass two mountain ranges in the Caucasus and two countries unlikely to let them pass through (Georgia and Azerbaijan). Its naval assets are limited in the Black Sea and the Caspian. The Air Force would have difficulties to operate outside Russian radar coverage (unlikely to stretch far outside the territories of Russia and its allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO).

In the South Caucasus, Russia's Military Base in Armenia is well equipped and manned by today's Russian Army standards. The likely aim of the base is to support Russia's ally in CSTO, the Orthodox Christian Armenia, whose military strength has not grown as rapidly as that of its Muslim neighbour, Azerbaijan. The Russian General Staff is likely to be concerned about the base's relative isolation. Russia can only access it by land either via difficult detours through Iran or Turkey or with the consent of either pro-Western Georgia or Azerbaijan, which is unlikely to allow reinforcements to Armenia. Air lift is expensive and would require Russian air superiority, which is unlikely in the event of extended air strikes on Iran. One remaining option, however, is that Russian troops in Georgian Abkhazia and South Ossetia could be used for a push to reinforce the Russian base in Armenia or for sabre-rattling to deter US or Israeli deployments in Georgia.

With limited military means at its disposal in the event of an air campaign against Iran, Russia is likely to prefer political approaches through multilateral forums and in bilateral relations. At the United Nations it is possible that

Russia will continue to stall stronger resolutions against Iran in order to prolong the status quo. Bearing the Libya intervention in mind, and fearing a repetition in Iran (and possibly Syria), Russia wants to avoid the UN being used to pressure regimes with weak democratic credentials. Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities would be troublesome for Russia. Moscow is likely to try to counter them politically, although they would not necessarily threaten the Iranian regime and hence not the regional balance and Russia's current influence. Russia's opposition is reinforced by the fact that nobody can guarantee that Israeli strikes do not lead to a widened conflict such as US strikes or ground intervention, possibly affecting the Iranian regime in a more fundamental way.

Some observers argue that Orthodox Christian Russia share with many Muslim countries a scepticism about the West's intentions. Despite paying a high political price in Western and Arab eyes, Russia's support to regimes such as those of Iran and Syria continues. This support may also signal to allies and potential buyers of Russian weapons that Moscow is steadfast even when the going gets tough.

Russia understands Iranian politics and society well, but its clout is likely to be limited. Despite possibly having better access to the highest Iranian leadership than many Western countries, Russia is unlikely to make Iran halt its nuclear ambitions, although it may be able to coax Iran into smaller concessions. Finally, with increasing tension around Iran, Russia could possibly be a voice of reason reducing the risk of misunderstandings between the key players leading to war by accident.

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