

**THE RUSSIAN FACTOR
IN CENTRAL ASIAN GEOPOLITICS
IN THE CONTEXT OF
IRANIAN-AMERICAN CONTRADICTIONS**

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Russia's Central Asian policy is one of the most debatable and pertinent issues that have been in the center of attention for some time now. In fact, it has acquired additional overtones in the context of the continued Iranian-American confrontation, which affects Central

Asian geopolitics and the Eurasian approach dominating Russia's foreign policy (which presupposes Russia-IRI partnership in Central Asia). It is absolutely clear that the nature, content, and pace of

Russia's involvement in the region, as well as cooperation between the two countries, directly depend on the state and level of Iranian-American relations.

The U.S. in Russia's Geopolitics in Central Asia

Russia's devotion to the idea of multi-polar approaches to international relations is well known.¹ In this context, its access to Central Asia's energy resources and control over the transportation and communication corridors make it one of the leading centers of power of Eurasia. Its Central Asian geostrategy presupposes:

- maintaining stability in all spheres—political, military, economic, humanitarian, and legal;
- reintegrating the region on the basis of a new system of energy transportation and water communication across the Eurasian expanse;
- developing a single economic zone, of which Central Asia will be a part;
- moving Russian companies to key positions in the Caspian;
- strengthening its leadership in the emerging system of interstate political and economic relations in Central Asia, etc.

E. Kozhokin, Director of the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, has written in this connection: "Russia needs political, economic, and social stability in the Central Asian region" and pointed out that Central Asia has an important role to play in Russia's economy.² Russia treats opposition to the radical extremism that threatens its stability, southern borders, and territorial integrity as a priority. For this reason, and to ensure its geopolitical interests, Moscow is striving to play an important role in Afghanistan's post-conflict stabilization.

Russia's intention to establish control over the Central Asian energy routes in order to promote its political and economic interests has already clashed with America's energy-related plans.

The counterterrorist operation and the intricacies of the emerging system of international relations demand that Washington devise a more balanced and more flexible approach to its relations with Moscow.

For example, relatively recently, certain American experts argued in private that Russia needed stability in Central Asia and would play a certain role in the region, but would never develop into the key foreign factor because of its economic weakness. They added that Moscow treated its economic cooperation with Europe as a priority, which meant that it would never develop into a foreign policy obstacle for the Central Asian states. It was believed that the problem of Russia's military-political partnership with Iran could be dismissed as unimportant, since the two countries would find it hard to agree over the Caspian issue.

¹ See: E. Primakov, "Mir bez sverkhderzhav. Mnogopoliarnyi mir i shansy SShA," *Izvestia*, 22 August, 2003.

² See: E.M. Kozhokin, "Rossia krovno zainteresovana v stabil'nosti v Tsentral'no-Aziatskom regione," *Analytic. Analiticheskoe obozrenie* (Astana), No. 2, 2002, pp. 3, 4.

Today, however, when the U.S.-Russian rivalry has been accelerating, while the U.S.-Iranian contradictions remain unsettled, the cooperation between Russia and Iran looks like a counterweight to America's geopolitical and economic interests in the region. In January 2007, Tehran received Top-M1 anti-aircraft missile systems under an agreement signed back in December 2005,³ which added to Iran's ability to oppose the United States in a possible armed clash.

On the other hand, Western experts tend to ignore the disagreements between Russia and the European Union intensified by Russia's policies in the energy sphere,⁴ as well as their contradictions over the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and the American anti-missile plans in Europe.

The EU leaders are calling on Moscow to side with the international community over Iran's nuclear issue: "It is in Moscow's own best interests to join the international community in trying to resolve the nuclear standoff with Iran... its rapidly advancing missile program [threatens] not only the Middle East; [it also poses] great danger to Europe—and to Russia."⁵

In its dealings with Moscow, Washington is guided by the threat of international terrorism emanating from the Middle East, which America treats as its absolute priority. American experts say time and again: "The United States has an interest in a Russia that is prosperous, stable, and can be an international partner in dealing with very serious problems like nuclear proliferation, terrorism, the future of energy, and global warming. The U.S. and Europe, Japan, and for that matter, China, need a Russia that is secure internally and politically capable of cooperating."⁶

In this context, continued Russian-American cooperation in Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction and in liquidation of other potential seats of instability in Central Asia is regarded as a priority, which calls for a continued constructive dialog and partnership between the two countries, while the U.S. should take into account Moscow's long history of cooperation with Central Asia and its leading role in the already established regional security systems—the CSTO and SCO.

Constructive cooperation may allow the United States to cut short Moscow's attempts to set up a multi-sided anti-American coalition. There is the opinion⁷ that the official visit of the RF foreign minister to Iran in March 2003 and Russia's more active diplomatic efforts in Asia (Central Asia included) can be interpreted as the first steps toward such a coalition. The strategic alliance with Russia consolidated in 2001 allowed the American administration not only to neutralize the Iranian-Russian defense cooperation spearheaded against America's interests, but also caused very logical shifts in Russia's Caspian policy (it started looking for possible involvement in the BTC project).⁸ American experts are convinced that Russia is developing into one of America's key partners in the energy sphere.

In recent years, Moscow too has come to a conclusion that "anti-Americanism and anti-NATO feelings might reduce Russia's national interests to a political zero by depriving it of a possibly stronger position in the West-East and North-South system of relations."⁹ For the same reason, America's

³ See: D. Zhuikov, "Iran poluchil shchit/Kupiv u Rossii zenitno-raketnye kompleksy piatogo pokolenia 'Top-M1'," *RBK-Daily*, 26 January, 2007.

⁴ See: Yi. Schleifer, "Questions Cloud Turkish-EU Energy Cooperation," available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>], 12 June, 2007; B. Yunanov, "Evropa poluchit odnu trubu. Glavnaia kollizia otnosheniy Rossia-ES reshena v Tsentrazii," *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 19, 19 May, 2007.

⁵ E. von Klaeden, "Russia's Interests are not with Tehran," *The International Herald Tribune*, 8 March, 2007.

⁶ *Washington ProFile*, 7 February, 2007-23 June, 2007 (see also: *Washington ProFile*, 14 June, 2007).

⁷ See: J. Bransten, "Russia: Ivanov in Iran Amid Warming Bilateral Ties," *RFE/RL*, 11 March, 2003.

⁸ See: "Rossia mozhet prisoedinit'sia k realizatsii proekta stroitel'stva nefteprovoda iz Azerbaidzhana v Turtsiiu 'Baku-Ceyhan'," *Strana.Ru*, 25 January, 2002; C. Marjorie, "The Deadly Pipeline War. US Afghan Policy Driven by Oil Interests," *Jurist*, 8 December, 2001, available at [<http://www.jurist.law.pitt.edu>].

⁹ A. Ulunian, "'Moskva-Pekin' v Tsentral'noy Azii: novaia stadia regional'nogo sopernichestva," *Rossiyskie vesti*, No. 23, 23-29 June, 2004 [<http://www.CentrAsia.Ru/newsA>] (see also: S. Blank, "Russia Mulls Measures to Check Chinese Influence in Central Asia," available at [<http://www.CentrAsia.Ru/newsA>] 29.07.2004).

presence in Central Asia, which keeps extremist Islam away and serves as a potential counterweight to China's mounting influence, is in Russia's interests. In addition, strange as it may seem, America's control over local oil resources fortifies Russia's position as an independent supplier of fuel to Europe.¹⁰

However, the new level of Russia-American relations does not mean that the elements of confrontational thinking will disappear; the same applies to the sides' rivalry over control of energy resources and transportation routes in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This is largely conditioned by America's continued military presence in Turkey, Georgia, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan. Today Washington is putting pressure on the Iranian and Iraqi oil sectors, which means that it can push the regional economy in the desired direction.

The political changes in the Caspian zone and Moscow's stronger position there forced the United States to readjust its Caspian policy: today it is seeking decentralized pipeline networks with numerous alternatives and diversified import of energy fuels. Its economic and geopolitical interests, however, remain the same: it wants the oil companies to bypass Russia and the IRI when moving oil to the world markets. It is precisely for this reason that the pipelines which cross Azerbaijan and Georgia before reaching Turkey, and the BTC gas pipeline are still the main instruments of geopolitical rivalry with Moscow.¹¹ The future of these projects depends on the extent Kazakhstan is prepared to use these lines. Today, both lines are used for Azeri-produced fuels—Russia's energetic efforts turned away the oil and gas flows originating in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Washington, which placed its stakes on Turkey in its Central Asian policy, has to admit that Ankara and Tehran are drawing closer to a certain extent.¹² In an effort to make his country the main energy corridor to Europe through the trans-Caspian gas pipeline, Erdoğan's Cabinet is not excluding the possibility of Iran's involvement.¹³ Ankara is also actively involved in the project for moving Iranian and Turkmenian gas to Europe across Turkey, which, it is convinced,¹⁴ will allow Europe to become independent of alternative gas suppliers. These geo-economic trends might come to the fore in Washington's Central Asian strategy if its relations with Tehran improve. Meanwhile, the United States is no longer looking at Turkey as a reliable and acceptable partner when it comes to transporting energy resources to Europe.

In an effort to tip the balance of interests in its favor, the United States is trying to re-orientate Central Asia toward Southern Asia through a new electrical grid that will connect Central and Southern Asia. With these plans in view, the U.S. State Department acquired the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

The constructive cooperation between the United States and Moscow on several mutually interesting problems started by the counterterrorist campaign did not alleviate Moscow's concern over the mounting American presence in the region. In Russia there are two predominant approaches to the issue:

- (a) the Eurasian-anti-American, which reflects the prevailing moods and
- (b) the Western-oriented.¹⁵

¹⁰ See: S. Lopatnikov, "SShA ochen' neobkhodima kaspiskaya nefi'," *Argumenty i fakty*, 18 August, 2004.

¹¹ See: J. Burke, "The United States is III-Prepared to Wage a New Cold War," available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>], 8 May, 2006.

¹² See: G. Yuldasheva, "Ankara's Geopolitical Interests in Central Asia in the Context of Iranian-American Contradictions," *Khalkaro munosabatlar* (Tashkent), No. 3, 2005, pp. 28-32 (in Uzbek).

¹³ See: N. Birch, "Turkey Acts to Expand Caspian Basin Energy Presence," *Eurasianet*, 2 March, 2007.

¹⁴ See: "Iran i Turkmenia dogovorilis' o postavkakh v Evropu po gazoprovodu Nabucco 30 milliardov kub m gaza v god," *RBC*, 16 July, 2007.

¹⁵ See: N. Kuzmin, «Central Asia after the Operation in Afghanistan,» *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (19), 2003, p. 130.

In recent times, the number of Russian experts¹⁶ who resolutely object to confrontation with Washington has been steadily growing; they suggest that joint American-Russian bases should be set up in Central Asia under the Russia-NATO Council as the most effective anti-terrorist lever.

Today, however, President Putin's Cabinet is resolved to protect its interests in Central Asia, and Russian politicians are convinced that their country can undermine America's influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. They hope that Russia's increasing economic influence there might help to promote its geopolitical interests in these regions. It is often said that the protracted crisis in Iraq is distracting America's attention away from Central Asia, while Russia, according to certain assessments, has become much more purposeful and much more active in the region.

Moscow is very concerned about America's possible invasion of Iran scheduled for 2006-2007. Russian experts¹⁷ hoped that new European investors in the Caspian might decrease the military threat to Iran. But so far this has not happened.

Russia has thrown all of its political and economic advantages into the game to fortify its regional position and to play the key role in transporting Kazakh oil. The EurAsEC, which after the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan events in Uzbekistan got its second wind, is Moscow's most powerful political resource. There is the opinion¹⁸ that the EurAsEC summit of 15-17 August, 2006 may change the course of geopolitical rivalry for control over the local energy resources. It initiated a customs union and a common energy market in order to prevent Central Asia's American-inspired reorientation toward Southern Asia. In this context, the future of the relations inside the EurAsEC will prove decisive for global energy security.

Iran is still the main stumbling block in the Russian-American relations even though both countries are seeking compromises. The main condition for the U.S.-RF partnership is discontinuation of Russian-Iranian military-technical cooperation (including supplies of nuclear equipment).

Moscow insists on its continued cooperation with Iran in Bushehr. Experts emphasized that a decision from Moscow to withdraw from this project, which is under the rigid control of the International Atomic Energy Agency, might provoke Iran to acquire possession of nuclear weapons. Russia's assistance has been checking this tendency and demonstrating the possibility of Iran using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Moscow is obviously convinced that Iran's relations with Russia are objectively strengthening the pragmatists' position on the Iranian domestic scene and neutralizing the radical Islamist approaches.¹⁹ In the context of the counterterrorist struggle, however, Iran's nuclear status contradicts Russia's security interests. In fact, it is not the Iranian-Russian nuclear partnership that is the issue: Iran's geostrategically key location in the very center of the emerging Eurasian network of transportation and pipeline routes originating in Central Asia is the main attraction. Any country, be it the United States or the Russian Federation, that can draw Iran into its sphere of influence will simultaneously acquire control over the energy sources and transportation corridors of the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia. This will mean global superiority in the new system of international relations.

This is why, besides trying to preserve its geopolitical domination over Washington in the zone of its interests, Moscow is saving its friendly relations with Tehran as a counterweight to America's policy and a chance of channeling the Caspian policy in the right direction.

¹⁶ See: I. Torbakov, "Rossia-SShA-Tsentral'naia Azia: uzel zaviazyvaetsia. Mnenia rossiyskikh ekspertov," available at [<http://www.CentrAsia.Ru/newsA>], 1 September, 2004.

¹⁷ See: Blizhaishie 730 dney stanut perelomnymi dlia iuzhnoy strategii Rossii," *Analiticheskaia gruppa ANN*, Moscow, 13 December, 2005, available at [<http://www.iran.ru>].

¹⁸ See: S. Blagov, I. Torbakov, "V tsentre vnimania na sammite EvrAzES byli voprosy energetiki, bezopasnosti i svobodnoy trgovli," *Eurasianet*, 18 August, 2006.

¹⁹ See: E. Primakov, "Iran: What's in Store? Situation Analysis," *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 2, April-June 2003, available at [<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/3/481.html>].

The Iranian Factor in Russia's Central Asian Geopolitics

Iran and Russia, two regional powers, are primarily brought closer by their geopolitical priorities in Central Asia, their historical, scientific, cultural, defense, and economic ties contributing to their cooperation. Russia's and Iran's desire to stand opposed to Washington's attempts to keep them away from the Caspian oil projects is no less important.

On the whole, as is said in Tehran,²⁰ Russia's "relations with Iran are playing the central role in the basin of the 'Greater Middle East' (the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean). Iran may prove instrumental in ensuring stability and security in the CIS countries to the south of Russia" and in its Muslim regions. In this context, Tehran is not excluding the possibility of a cooperation structure with Russia in the gas sphere.²¹

Most of the expert community believes that Iran has its own long-term geopolitical designs in the Middle East, which have nothing to do with Moscow. This can be judged from the diversification of Tehran's foreign policy and economic preferences. "Four big oil companies purchased the tender documents of 17 oil blocks in Iran, said National Iranian Oil Company's (NIOC) exploration manager here on Friday. ... The whole blocks attract investments worth at least €46 million."²²

In addition to the above-mentioned TCG partnership with Ankara, Tehran is looking into possible deliveries of natural gas to Syria via Turkey and Iraq.²³ The continued efforts of Iran and the United States to set up a bilateral dialog²⁴ belong to the same sphere: there is the opinion that a dialog may start cooperation between Washington and Tehran in the sphere of regional security in the Middle East and in Iraq in particular.

As soon as Russia and the United States signed the Strategic Partnership Treaty, the Iranian parliament voiced the opinion that Russia would alter its Mid-Eastern policy and that it was actively pursuing its own interests.²⁵ On the other hand, the RF and IRI remain rivals in the Caspian—they have not yet agreed on the sea's division into national sectors, or on the main oil route from the region.²⁶

At the same time, Iran doubts that Russian-American cooperation is viable, there is the opinion that two possible scenarios of this cooperation are not in Russia's interests: either an alliance between Russia and America, or confrontation between Moscow and the Washington-led West. "Under the first scenario, Russia will no longer be a regional force, while the United States will consistently weaken it. Under the second scenario, Russia will have not enough potential to stand opposed to the West and will be pestered by grave economic and political problems."²⁷ Moscow obviously thinks the same, which is amply testified by the recent geopolitical trends in Central Asia.

The Iranian-American confrontation in the post-Iraq period and Iran's isolation on the Caspian issue are forcing the country's leaders to demonstrate more flexibility in regional policy and remain

²⁰ See: N. Sagafi-Ameri, "Politika bezopasnosti Rossii," *Amu-Darya* (Tehran), No. 6, Fall 2000, pp. 17-18.

²¹ See: "Ali Hamanei: Iran i Rossia mogut sozdat' svoi 'gazovyi' OPEC," *RIA Novosti*, 29 January, 2007.

²² "Four Oil Giants Purchase Tender Documents of Iran's 17 Blocks," *Mehr News Agency*, 16 March, 2007.

²³ See: Tegeran planiruet postavliat' prirodnyi gaz v Siriiu cherez territorii Turtsii i Iraka, available at [<http://www.iran.ru>], 14 March, 2007.

²⁴ See: J. Hughes, "The Possibility of Easing Tension between the US and Iran," available at [<http://www.csmonitor.com>], 14 March, 2007.

²⁵ See: S. Blagov, "Vostok-Zapad: Rossia v poiskakh energeticheskoy fortuny," *Eurasianet*, 8 June, 2002.

²⁶ See: D.H. Bavand, "Pravovoy rezhim Kaspiyskogo moria: obzor masshtabov ekologii i bezopasnosti," *Amu-Darya* (Tehran), No. 11, Winter-Spring 2002, pp. 5-41.

²⁷ M.A. Vahidi, "Voennoe prisutstvie SShA v Tsentral'noy Azii: reaktzia Rossii," *Amu-Darya* (Tehran), No. 12, Summer 2002, pp. 98-100.

loyal to their alliance with Russia in the interests of their own security and as a possible counterweight to America's Central Asian policy.

Any unbiased observer will agree that in the context of bitter geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry with the United States in Central Asia and the Middle East, cooperation with Iran, even at the expense of a compromise in the Caspian and Bushehr, is Moscow's only option. The sides are fully aware that they should join forces to pull the Central Asian states onto their side: "Such cooperation will neutralize interference of supra-regional forces in the region."²⁸ This obviously means the United States. It explains, to a certain extent, the noticeable acceleration of such mutually advantageous regional projects as the international transport North-South corridor, the Astara-Gazvin-Anzali-Bandar Abbas railway, and the North-South fiber-optic communication line, which in future might promote economic integration of the Central Asian countries.

In the summer of 2004, both sides confirmed their readiness to strengthen their partnership up to and including contacts and consultations on Iran's peaceful nuclear program, which allowed the Russian Federation to act as an intermediary between the IRI and the West.²⁹ Today, aside from all the debatable issues in the continued Iranian-Russian dialog on Bushehr, Tehran insists³⁰ that it is still willing to continue its strategic partnership with Moscow in many spheres, the nuclear sphere included.

Russia's intention to join the OIC is a practical step toward stronger relations with Iran as one of the OIC's influential members and as an OPEC leader. Moscow intends to use its OIC membership as a counterweight to America's influence in the Islamic world in general and in the Muslim oil and gas exporters in particular.

The two partners are working toward neutralizing China, another of Moscow's rivals. Since the mid-1990s, Russia and China have been talking about building, together with Iran, the so-called pan-Asian continental oil bridge, a network of pipelines that will connect the Russian and Central Asian fuel energy producers with Chinese, and possibly also Korean and Japanese, customers. In fact, closer cooperation between Moscow, Beijing, and the Central Asian capitals within the SCO and potentially Tehran will increase Central Asian security.

After a series of unproductive talks with Iran, the Russian Federation decided to move the Iranian nuclear file to the U.N. Security Council and try to alleviate its potentially harsh decisions: strict anti-Iranian sanctions will also cripple Russia's interests. Analysts believe³¹ that the Russian diplomats were merely trying to delay a too harsh resolution and to convince Iran to resume the moratorium on uranium enrichment and to return to the negotiation table. Moscow is doing its best to remove the Bushehr and other related projects (such as nuclear fuel deliveries for the Bushehr nuclear power station) from any additional anti-Iranian sanctions. According to Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov, this does not mean that "Russia has abandoned Iran,"³² it merely wants to avoid an armed conflict and preserve its geostrategic long-term partner relations with Iran.

²⁸ "Sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Irana 'neytralizuet vmeshatel'stvo nadregional'nykh sil v etom regione," *RIA Novosti*, 22 July, 2003.

²⁹ See: "Rossiiskiy ekspert o probleme 'iadernogo dos'ce Irana,'" *Golos Rossii*, 1 August, 2005, available at [<http://www.vor.ru>]; "Lavrov: peregovory s Iranom ne sorvany. Fragmenty stenogrammy vystupleniya i otvetov na voprosy SMI ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova po itogam peregovorov s ministrom inostrannykh del Palestinskoy natsional'noy administratsii N. Kudvoy," Moscow, 25 August, 2005, available at [<http://iranatom.ru/news>].

³⁰ See: "Iran i Rossia uregulirovali vopros o finansirovanii stroitel'stva AES 'Bushehr,'" *IRNA*, 9 March, 2007, available at [www.iran.ru]; "Iran to Offer Russia New Financial Proposal on Bushehr Nuclear Plant," *Mehr News Agency*, 10 March, 2007; "Iran Denies Russia's Claim on Debt for Bushehr Plant Completion," *IRNA*, 15 March, 2007.

³¹ See: M. Zygar', I. Safronov, K. Lantratov, "Moskva gotovit plan evakuatsii svoikh spetsialistov iz Irana," *Kommersant*, 13 January, 2006.

³² A. Samigullina, "Rossia ostavit Iran naedine s OON," *Gazeta.Ru*, 13 January, 2006.

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This means that in the near future the international situation in Central Asia will be shaped by the interaction among the three main regional actors—the United States, Russia, and Iran.

Moscow needs time to complete its geopolitically highly advantageous transportation and pipeline strategy and fortify its regional position. Therefore, it is profiting from the slack American-Iranian confrontation, a military clash being highly unwelcome.

Continued international tension around the Iranian “nuclear file” and America’s possible military actions against Iran will not only undermine Russia’s Caucasian-Caspian and Central Asian strategy, but will also destabilize the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation. This is forcing Moscow to support the Euro-Atlantic community in its efforts to put pressure on Iran. The Russian Federation, however, is not prepared to abandon its Iranian strategy, the results of which will depend to a certain extent on the Central Asian countries’ harmonized position on this issue.

Central Asia, in turn, appreciates Russia’s military-political and scientific-cultural potential, economic infrastructure, and material and technical possibilities, which can be used to protect Central Asian economic and political interests and move Central Asian products to European and Asian markets. In the interests of regional stability, most of the Central Asian countries will support all measures designed to prevent a war against Iran. The Central Asian states are inclined to promote their own interests when dealing with each of the sides in the conflicting triangle (Russia, Iran, and the U.S.). Russia’s initiatives in the energy-transportation sphere are best suited to the local countries’ interests; however, alternative projects in which Iran can be involved, but in which Russia will have no role to play are not excluded.

It should be borne in mind that continued Iranian-American confrontation will produce direct and indirect, yet undesirable, consequences: regional interstate conflict potential, militarization of the Caspian, meager foreign investments, the slackening pace of economic integration, slower social-economic transformations, and greater instability in Central Asia.