

Russia plays the Iran card with the USA

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In recent weeks there has been a course correction of Russia's policy towards Iran. A key sign of this was Moscow's agreement to a draft of a UN Security Council resolution imposing further sanctions on Iran. By this gesture Russia has shown its readiness to work constructively with the USA on this matter. Moscow's actions during the Iran crisis are a sign of its efforts to provide political support to Barack Obama's administration. Moscow recognises that Obama's policy can bring it specific benefits (including in the CIS area, and in the matter of strategic nuclear balance), and so it is endeavouring to ensure the policy's continuation in expectation of further political and economic gains.

Russia's position on the Iranian nuclear crisis

Since 2006, when the question of Iran's nuclear programme first was put on the agenda of the UN Security Council, Moscow's policy has to a great extent led to it defending Iran against excessive sanctions, and positioning itself as a key intermediary in the process of resolving the crisis. Admittedly Russia did support the imposition of sanctions on Iran three times (in the period from 2006 to 2008), but on each occasion it delayed and weakened them. The sanctions led to the limitation of the sale to Iran of technology which would assist the development of a nuclear programme; the freezing of the financial assets of selected Iranian institutions; and the imposition of a visa ban on certain individuals. Despite the lack of progress in resolving crisis, Moscow has admitted the possibility that further sanctions may be imposed (many speeches by President Medvedev since the second half of 2009 have mentioned this). In practice, however, the Russian government has exploited every pretext to postpone them.

A sign of the evolution of the Russian approach to the Iran crisis was the agreement on 18 May by the 'Six' (the UN Security Council's permanent members, plus Germany) to a preliminary plan for a resolution imposing sanctions on Iran. This project goes further than previous resolutions, and provides for actions including sanctions on further Iranian institutions (including the Revolutionary Guard, who form the basis of the regime) as well as a ban on selling specific categories of weapons to Iran. Moreover, in contrast to previous practice, Moscow has not taken advantage of this occasion to postpone sanctions, and has received the agreement signed on 17 May by Brazil, Turkey and Iran with some scepticism. This agreement states that Iran would transfer 1200 kg of uranium enriched to 4% (around 60% of Iran's resources) to Turkey, receiving 120 kg of uranium enriched to 20% in exchange.

Why is Russia investing in Obama?

The change in Russia's position on the Iran question, which is one of the most important elements of US policy, is an attempt to support the administration of Barack Obama, whose 'reset' policy of improving relations with Moscow is seen as advantageous for Russian interests.

The signing of the nuclear arms reduction treaty, the so-called 'new START', must be counted among the most beneficial gains which Russia has recently won, together with the US's withdrawal from its previous plans to locate elements of its strategic anti-missile defence in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the effective lack of any opposition from Washington to Russian activity within the CIS. Moreover, on 13 May, President Obama convinced the US Congress to ratify the so-called 123 Agreement on cooperation in the field of peaceful uses of nuclear energy. This may bring great economic benefits to Russian nuclear energy, allowing it to expand its access to the US market and increasing opportunities for cooperation with American companies in third countries. George W Bush withdrew this bill from Congress in reaction to the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008; President Obama has justified its resubmission by saying that Georgia is no longer a problem in bilateral relations. The USA's withdrawal from unilateral sanctions against four Russian businesses including Rosoboronekспорт, the state monopolist for exporting arms, was also a symbolic gesture.

Currently for Russia, the USA's ratification of the new START treaty and the 123 Agreement is of key importance. By its constructive attitude to the Iranian question, Moscow is making an effort to provide the American administration with arguments for the ratification; however, there is no guarantee that it will pass, because of the opposition to it in Congress from the Republican Party, which is critical of Obama's policy towards Russia. Moreover, November's mid-term elections in the USA could weaken the Obama administration's position, and thus harm Russian interests. Meanwhile, Moscow's attitude towards Iran is one of the key criteria by which the American elite evaluates Russia. It thus seems likely that Moscow will agree to a final version of the Iran resolution, especially as President Medvedev will visit the USA in mid-June.

This limited change of course in Russia's policy towards Iran is even easier for Moscow to introduce, as the new sanctions will not affect Russian interests directly. For example, they do not forbid the export of the S-300 missile systems to Iran. Additionally, Russia has demonstrated its dissatisfaction with attempts to play down the role it has played so far in the crisis; Iran's agreement with Brazil and Turkey was very close to the agreement from October 2009 concluded by the 'Six', in which Moscow was to have played a key role, but which Tehran rejected.