

Russian diplomatic offensive in the Middle East: the American context

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Recent Western and Russian media reports about a forthcoming deal providing for Russia's import of Iranian oil and an increase in Russian deliveries of military equipment to Syria confirm that Russia is seeking to demonstrate that the most important problems in the Middle East cannot be resolved without its participation. However, the Kremlin is not seeking to build a sphere of influence in the region, but rather to bolster its position towards the United States, with the aim of forcing it into strategic bargaining over issues such as missile defence in Europe, the Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area, and Washington's alleged attempts to influence Russia's domestic politics.

A special relationship with Iran

According to unconfirmed reports, the deal currently being negotiated between Moscow and Tehran would provide for Russia importing half a million barrels of Iranian oil per day, or about 25 million tonnes per year at a value of approximately US\$18 billion. This deal should be seen in the context of the recent *détente* between Washington and Tehran, thanks to which last November Iran was able to sign an agreement with the so-called 'P5+1' group; this launched the process of bringing its nuclear programme under international supervision, thus raising the prospect of Western economic sanctions being lifted, as well as the resumption of US/Iranian diplomatic relations.

Iran's isolation on the international stage and the ostracism to which it had been subjected by Western countries because of its nuclear ambitions has brought Russia significant benefits. Firstly, Russia could – without competition from Western companies – sell Iran nuclear technology (the Bushehr nuclear power plant) and weapons (until the adoption of UN sanctions). Secondly, it made Russia an extremely valuable and privileged partner for Iran, as it acted to limit the sanctions introduced by the UN Security Council at the initiative of the Western powers. At the same time, Russia could use its ability to block and shape UN sanctions as part of its political bargaining with the US on issues the Kremlin considered important (such as the deployment of the anti-missile system in Central Europe).

The oil deal would allow Iran to significantly alleviate the effects of Western sanctions by increasing its oil exports by 50% over the current level; this would reduce Iran's incentive to come to a full and final agreement with the West over its nuclear programme. At the same time, the deal would protect Russian economic interests in Iran if Western sanctions were lifted. The agreement presupposes that Russia would pay for the crude oil imports (at least

partially) with supplies of its manufactured goods.

The Syrian settlement

Moscow has officially proclaimed that the Syrian crisis must be resolved peacefully by means of direct talks between the Assad regime and the moderate part of the Syrian opposition. Indeed, Russia has consistently supported the Assad regime since the beginning of the crisis, both diplomatically and militarily. Contrary to the statements made by the Russian diplomacy, however, Moscow's actions indicate that its aim is for Assad to remain in power. Above all, Russia wants to avoid a repetition of the Libyan precedent, namely Western military intervention in a civil war under the banner of human rights. Secondly, it sees Assad's secular dictatorship as the best guarantee of preventing a takeover by Sunni extremists linked to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Thirdly, it fears that yet another successful rebellion against an authoritarian regime in the context of the Arab Spring might foster another wave of Western-inspired regime changes, especially in the post-Soviet space. Fourthly, Russia wishes to demonstrate that – as befits a great power – it can effectively protect its political client.

Last summer, Russia was instrumental in preventing Western military intervention in Syria. By bringing about an agreement to liquidate Syria's chemical arsenal, Moscow removed any formal pretext for intervention, gave President Barack Obama the opportunity to opt out of intervention while saving face, and strengthened the international legitimacy of Assad's regime.

Throughout the conflict Russia assisted Assad, providing him with military equipment, as well as launching and canvassing international support for a conference that would end the civil war through a negotiated agreement between Assad and part of the opposition (excluding Islamic extremists). At the same time, Russia has consistently refused to accept that any compromise agreement would require Assad to step down. Russian diplomacy seems to be working to end the internal conflict in Syria according to a similar formula that it successfully applied in the Tajik conflict in the mid-1990s: embedding part of the opposition into the existing system of power as a junior partner, and perhaps leaving some parts of the country under opposition control, with Damascus exercising merely nominal authority. In this context, Russia's increasing military support for Assad is intended to strengthen his bargaining position at the start of the ongoing international conference in Geneva which is supposed to bring a political end to the internal conflict in Syria.

The Middle East and the United States

In both cases – by increasing the supply of arms to Syria and offering to import Iranian oil – Russia's moves are undermining Washington's goals in the region. In the case of the oil deal, the White House has publicly expressed its disapproval, and has even threatened that the deal might trigger US sanctions, while the Secretary of State John Kerry has intervened in the matter in talks with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. However, the Russian side has rejected the American protests.

The Kremlin has ignored Washington's position so ostentatiously because it sees President Obama as a weak and hesitant leader who is unable to take decisive retaliation against the United States' adversaries and competitors. The Russian elites also assume that the US's international position is so weak that Washington simply cannot afford to abandon attempts to involve Russia in resolving global and regional problems.

This situation offers Russia the temptation to seize the moment to strengthen its position as a great power, and particularly to get Washington to acknowledge Russia's status as an 'equal' in the international order; in practice, this means removing issues such as Russia's domestic policy (democratisation, human rights) from the agenda of bilateral relations, and recognising its rights to build a zone of 'privileged interests' in the post-Soviet area. In particular, Moscow seems to be making its policy towards Iran conditional on the United States withdrawing from the deployment of its missile defence system in Europe.