

Three Russian Myths About Iran

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The arrival of new Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has sparked a new round of speculations concerning the future of Iran's nuclear program and Tehran's ability to find common ground with the international community. Russian authorities tend to be of the opinion that the main challenge in dealing with Iran lie in overcoming the United States' failure to understand what Iran really seeks through its nuclear program. However, Russia's understanding of Iran has its own snags, and this is because it is based on three myths.

Myth 1: Iran is developing its nuclear program because it wants security guarantees, not nuclear weapons.

Moscow-based nonproliferation expert Vladimir Orlov recently quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying that "...under the guise of fighting to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, [the West] is undertaking different kinds of efforts concerning Iran for a different purpose—regime change."¹ Accordingly, Iran seeks unambiguous and credible security guarantees from the United States, which, once received, "will remove the nuclear issue from the agenda."

But what kind of guarantees could the West even theoretically provide to satisfy Iran to the point that it would agree to refrain from seeking nuclear weapons capability? Would these be unconditional, or include some red lines in regard to Iran's nuclear behavior?

Russian nuclear expert Alexei Arbatov has written that the most constructive form of guarantee would be one that affirms that Iran will not be attacked unless it attacks Israel or any of the Gulf States. This type of guarantee, however, would hardly be sufficient to prevent Iran from going nuclear. Moreover, such a guarantee would not require a nuclear Iran to abstain from throwing its weight around the Middle East, even if it did not directly attack another state. Even without starting a war, Iran might

¹ Vladimir Orlov, "Vibory v Irane, Vybor SShA," *PIR Center*, May 29, 2013 (<http://pircenter.org/blog/view/id/116>).

provoke others, in particular Israel, into aggression. Such a security guarantee can therefore even be potentially damaging.

Of course, the idea of providing guarantees is viable only if Tehran really is focused on security. It is not a secret that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei associates Iran's nuclear program with the country's independence and scientific development. Why should Iran freeze uranium enrichment or limit its nuclear program if it is a symbol of the state's future greatness and prosperity? This situation is somewhat analogous to that of India, which has also tied its nuclear weapons program to national goals. In the words of India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, nuclear tests "have given India *Shakti* [empowerment], they have given strength, they have given India self-confidence," even as new security concerns were emerging at the time of India's nuclear testing in 1998.²

If security concerns are also not Iran's main concern and instead just a pretext to justify the development of its nuclear program, this pretext has been generously supported by Russian experts and politicians. Recall that in 2008, Iran made a public statement that it does not need any international security guarantees that would deny it the development of its nuclear program. In particular, then-Iranian Ambassador to Russia, Gholamreza Ansari, said, "When they tell us about security guarantees to Iran, we don't understand anything in this, as we don't need this."³ This was a statement Moscow preferred to ignore.

Myth 2: Iran is Russia's potential ally.

This myth is quite popular in Russia, coming from a range of experts, journalists, and bloggers. Iran is often depicted as Russia's natural ally, with common interests and values and ready to counterbalance American influence. This idea has gained even more traction with the crisis in Syria, in which Russians and Americans are politically supporting opposing camps. There is even a special "community group" on the social media website *Vkontakte* with the label "Iran is our main ally in the struggle with the United States."

When Russia's permanent representative to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, said that "Russia regards any military actions against Iran as a threat to its interests," some Russian journalists interpreted this as a demonstration of Moscow's intent to support Iran in case of a major conflict in the Middle East.⁴

Tehran is aware of the Russian mood. Analyzing relations between Russia and the United States, Iranian experts predicted that the Russian leadership would soon get tired of the "reset" policy and would not permit Washington to act unilaterally in the Middle East, especially on Iranian and Syrian issues.

² George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

³ "Posol Irana: garantii bezopasnosti nuzhny ne nam a SShA," May 16, 2008 (<http://top.rbc.ru/politics/16/05/2008/167680.shtml>).

⁴ "I Kitay i Rossiya yavliayutsia silnimi soyuznikami Irana," *Newsland*, January 18, 2012 (<http://newsland.com/news/detail/id/868447/>).

This myth is largely built on wishful and ideological Cold War-type thinking. Iran's leadership has been highly adept at maintaining a geopolitical balance, often exploiting Russian sentiment in order to block any comprehensive UN Security Council resolution opposed to the development of Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, Iran often supports ideas and values that are contradictory to Russian interests. For example, in official Iranian mass media, Chechnya is often presented as an Islamic state integrated into Russia by force and struggling for its independence. And even as Iran is happy to have Russia as its advocate in the UN Security Council, it refuses to rely on Moscow on central issues like uranium enrichment.

Myth 3: After the Iranian presidential elections of 2013, we could see a breakthrough in negotiations.

President Rouhani has a reputation as a moderate and a critic of his predecessor's excessive aggressiveness and inability to find a common language with the West. Some Russian experts even consider that the change of president from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Rouhani will be damaging for Russian interests. Rouhani is regarded as someone who aims at building a better dialogue with the West which, de facto, means having a negative impact on relations with Russia. Moreover, at the beginning of the 2000s, Rouhani was Iran's chief negotiator on nuclear issues and eventually agreed to suspend the uranium enrichment program and allow tougher IAEA inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities. In his first post-election press conference, Rouhani said, "[o]ur nuclear programs are completely transparent. But we are ready to show greater transparency and make clear for the whole world that the steps of the Islamic Republic of Iran are completely within international frameworks."⁵

Such a statement can be interpreted in different ways, however. It might mean that Rouhani is prepared to make certain concessions concerning Iran's nuclear program, but it could also mean that he will concentrate his efforts on establishing the legal grounds for Iran's nuclear rights. Either way, Tehran will try to exploit the "constructive" and "flexible" image of its new leader to weaken international sanctions without any major shift in its nuclear program like limiting uranium enrichment or providing full access to the IAEA. Also, even by the most optimistic estimates of the Iranian weapons program, according to which it was halted in 2003, Rouhani would still have been part of the team that actively pursued its development. It is also important to remember that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has led Iran for almost twenty-five years – with both conservative and more liberal presidential administrations that have shepherded the state's nuclear program through periods of confrontation and détente up to the creation of the full fuel nuclear cycle. Iranian presidents might be responsible for the state's tactics with the international community, but Khamenei is the one who sets the state's strategy.

⁵ "Rohani says Iran is ready to show 'greater transparency' on nuclear program," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 17, 2013 (<http://www.jpost.com/Iranian-Threat/News/Rohani-says-Iran-is-ready-to-show-greater-transparency-on-nuclear-program-316823>).

If Rouhani's presidency affects nuclear negotiations, it might do so only at a tactical level, easing dialogue with Iran's counterparts and perhaps preparing the international community for the notion that Iran is ready for a compromise. But changing how Iran discusses its goals (like unrestricted uranium enrichment) is not the same thing as changing the goals themselves.

Conclusion

According to popular myths circulating in Russia, Iran tries to enhance its security by demanding security guarantees from the West; Iran is a potential Russian ally on major political issues; and the world (if not all Russian experts) will be inspired by a new president looking to develop a constructive dialogue with the United Nations. This is the Iran that Moscow defends in the Security Council. Moreover, Rouhani's Iran might be able to get even more political and economic favors from Moscow, as the latter seeks to keep Iran in its sphere of influence.

However, this picture does not coincide with another one, whereby Iran is determined to increase its power and influence not only in the region but in the wider international arena. Iran's nuclear program is an important sign of Iran's rising potential, a symbol of its prosperity, independence, and national pride. Nuclear weapons may be regarded as the highest stage of Iran's national progress—a means to secure Tehran's ambitions and a symbol of the country's return to the greatness of ancient empire. No matter who is in power, warrior or diplomat, Iran's main aim will be the same, just pursued in different ways. Allies are necessary for Iran to reach its goals, but it is not so important who they are. Whether Russia or the West, they are all temporary in the greater scheme of things. Embedded in Iran's culture of international relations is the idea that the country is destined to fight for greatness with minimal trust in—or dependence on—anyone else. If Iran were to become nuclear-weapons capable, it would pursue its interests in the Middle East more aggressively, which could result in conflicts with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States and also aggravate the situation in neighboring states. In the end, Russians should realize that the emergence of an unpredictable, powerful, nationalistic, and determined nuclear neighbor on its southern periphery will do little to increase their own security.

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