

Russia-US-Iran: Nuclear juggling

Written by Eric Walberg

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Relations between Russia and Iran highlight the intractable problems of nuclear diplomacy, reflects Eric Walberg

Brazil accused the US of double standards, and Turkey insisted Thursday that rejecting the deal with Iran, which calls for Tehran to ship around half its stock of low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for enriched uranium suitable for research and medical use, would be “unreasonable” and said that a US push for fresh sanctions on Tehran was creating an “absurd situation”. “Those who speak to this issue should [eliminate nuclear weapons from their own country](#) and they should bear the good news to all mankind by doing that,” Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan said while attending a UN conference in Rio de Janeiro.

Now it is the turn of Iran to accuse Russia, ever so politely, of double standards.

Iran’s Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani said on Saturday, “Russia has always tried to ensure that events particularly nuclear issues will be fashioned based on its own interests.” He added, “regarding Russia, we should take into account two issues that first it is our neighbour and second, definitely it shares some interests with Iran.”

The Iranian government is “surprised” Russia signed on to a US proposal for a tighter embargo to punish the Islamic republic for its nuclear programme, Special Ambassador Mahmoud Reza Sajjadi told reporters in Moscow last week. Indeed, Iran’s sensational last-minute agreement to a proposal by Turkey and Brazil – virtually identical to one proposed seven months ago by the US and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – was intended to forestall just such an eventuality.

And yet at the same time Obama’s senior director for Russian affairs, Michael McFaul, smugly told reporters in Moscow last Thursday that Moscow’s support for Iran sanctions was still on track. “We believe that’s a concrete achievement of resetting relations with Russia,” attributing the “success” to Obama’s move to start afresh with Russia after rocky relations during the Bush presidency.

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Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki phoned his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, who told him Russia was always ready to “advance Iran’s nuclear talks and help resolve the standoff with the West” in search of a “viable diplomatic and political solution” and assured him that “Russia will actively support the scheme proposed by Brazil and Turkey.”

So who are we to believe? Is it a “da” or a “niet”? It’s far more complicated than that. Both sides have their gripes. The Russians wonder why Iran didn’t agree to the IAEA proposal last year, avoiding all the subsequent brinkmanship.

As for Iran, it is angry over the delay in commissioning Iran’s nuclear power stations and fulfilling its contract on the S-300 anti-aircraft system, essential to Iran’s defence against an Israeli-US attack.

The reason for this is clear: very strong US pressure on Russia. But lo and behold, once Russia agreed to the new sanctions last week, the US said they would not forbid the sale of the S-300. The other carrot for Russia is the State Department’s announcement, in conjunction with McFaul’s visit to Moscow, that it has lifted sanctions against Russia’s state arms trader and three other Russian companies it had accused of helping Iran try to develop nuclear weapons.

This is the meaning of Larijani’s crack about self interest on Russia’s part. But the fact remains that Russian companies were being penalised for providing nuclear technology precisely to Iran and for contemplating providing Iran with a high tech anti-aircraft defence system. Surely these are very much Iran’s interest as well.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad was clearly fed up when he warned Moscow to refrain from “creating a situation that could make the Iranian people place Russia within the ranks of their historic enemies.” However, before he burns any bridges, he should consider that, even if the sanctions go into effect, Washington’s nod-and-wink for Russia’s S-300 sale and the lifting of sanctions against Russian companies working with Iran is actually a bit of good news, as it indicates that Washington is not really interested in bombing Iran after all.

“It’s irrational for Russia not to fulfill its obligations,” Sajjadi said impatiently in Moscow. Russia is losing “economic and political dividends” as well as the trust of other arms clients. Russian

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Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko assured him that the Bushehr nuclear plant will start up this summer. Nuclear cooperation with Russia has a “bright future” and Russian companies will have priority if more reactors are contracted at Bushehr, Sajjadi promised. “I don’t have this kind of optimism concerning military cooperation,” he said tersely, as the issue of the delayed S-300 systems “negatively affected” Iranian public opinion. Iran will be “more cautious” when making arms deals with Russia, according to the ambassador.

But if the Brazil-Turkey-Iran deal is legit, Russia will back it and proceed with the S-300 sale, even if the sanctions go ahead. That is Russia’s carrot to Iran, as delivered by Lavrov. Yes, Russia is trying to best serve its own interests in all this, but the bottom line with regards Iran is that a US-Israeli attack will not be accepted by Moscow. And – [thanks to Russia](#) ? – is no longer in the cards for Washington. In any case, the sanctions – which are dismissed by former secretary of state Colin Powell as useless in any case – will fall apart if the B-T-I plan is implemented.

This is no doubt what Lavrov told Mottaki, who on Monday was even able to poke fun at the US: “We have to allow them some time to recover from the initial shock,” and expressed hope that the Vienna Group – US, France, Russia and the IAEA – would come to a “rational” decision on Iran’s civilian nuclear programme.

Richard Falk argues that the purpose of “this attempt to supersede and nullify the Iran deal is banishing the Brazilian and Turkish intruders from the geopolitical playing field.” He is pointing the finger primarily at the US but the prevarication by Russia makes it look like it too is protecting its role as one of the big guns. The true test of its intentions will be if it can balance its desire to placate Washington without jeopardising the B-T-I breakthrough, which Falk calls “[a new geopolitical landscape](#) in which the countries of the global South are now beginning to act as subjects, and no longer content to be mere objects in scenarios devised in the North”.

The US-Iranian standoff is indeed evidence of real conflict – between empire and national sovereignty. So is the US-Russia standoff over NATO expansion and bases on its borders. But the fight against Washington’s “new world order” is still a MAD dance of death, in the first place, between the US and Russia, full of pratfalls, and keeps us on the edge of our seats.

What is important is to bring the gruesome dance to a peaceful end and move on to what Falk heralds as “a real new world order”.

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