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Before and after: Nuclear deal and its implications for Russia-Iran relations

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Perhaps the most restless region in the world right now is the Middle East. Even though Islam sets the cornerstone religion in the region and the countries embrace the same faith (with the exception of Israel) they are in conflict. Civil wars, conflicts between different countries are increasing rapidly and third parties partake in the conflicts via their respective proxies. Iran, one

of the strongest states in the region, has scored a diplomatic coup by signing the nuclear deal with the P5+1 countries they have been negotiating with for the last few years. This positive development will certainly affect other countries in many ways.

Despite the fact that Russia is a Eurasian country and not located within the Middle East, it is very much affected with the ongoing incidents in the region since it has economic, political and energy relations with the region's key players. Being a member state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Iran and supporting the Assad regime in the long-standing Syrian Civil War - owing to Russia's naval base situated in Tartus - makes Russia a significant actor in the Middle East.

Russia, being an effective ally and easily the biggest partner of Iran in terms of its energy program, has actively partaken in Iran's nuclear energy program for decades. We generally see Russia and Iran embracing joint positions in finding solutions to the region's many issues. Thus, this nuclear accord is considered by many as a net gain for both countries, both of which have crippled economies due to the economic sanctions of the US and EU. Additionally, Russia and Iran clinched a deal for the construction of two more nuclear plants in Bushehr at the end of 2014. Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, who signed the deal with the CEO of Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation, Sergei Kiriyyenko, considered the deal as a milestone of the mutual relations of the two allies. As specified by the agreement, Russia will be providing the fuel for the plants and the waste will be sent back to Russia to be utilized and stored. This new plant will be audited by the IAEA and will be processed in accordance with the terms of the NPT.

There may be some negative outcomes for Russia after the sanctions are lifted in Iran. For example, the recent dramatic plunge in oil prices have already dealt a huge blow to oil exporting countries: Iran being included in the same market would lower oil prices even further, as the oil supply will increase. The oil supply that is already in surplus within the market will allow Iran to take part more comfortably as there won't be new sanctions at stake. This development would likely devalue the Russian ruble against the US dollar further, as Russia's economy is mostly based on oil and natural gas exports. Against all odds, President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov welcomed the nuclear deal with a good deal of admiration. The contribution of Russia during these prolonged nuclear talks cannot be underestimated; some Russian diplomats believe that with this nuclear deal, a new Middle East nuclear arms race by the Gulf countries has been prevented.

There are of course other analysts who do not agree with this and suspect the general weapons proliferation in the region would increase given the conflicts that seem to break out somewhere new almost everyday. Another important issue Mr. Lavrov touched upon during his press

statement following the clinching of the Iran nuclear deal was the offer of the US to develop a missile defense system in Europe, which Russian officials consider as a threat to Russian security by saying, "We all probably remember how in April 2009, giving a speech in Prague, the U.S. president, Barack Obama, said that if Iran's nuclear program is successfully regulated, then the aim of the European segment of the missile defense will be dropped. This is why today we drew the attention of our American colleagues to this fact. We will expect a reaction." However, NATO declared that the P5+1 nuclear accord would not change the European Missile Project and insisted that it is obligatory for the security of its European allies and the proposed missile shield's purpose is to deal with threats coming from outside Europe. We will see which direction this new discussion will lead, since it is unlikely the parties will come to terms with each other unless one party withdraws from it or gives a satisfactory answer.

Russia will have many strategic, political and economic benefits from the P5+1 agreement. In addition to the contributions it has made before and during the negotiations, it will also play a major role in the aftermath. Additionally, Russian-Iranian relations will allow Russia to move ahead of its rivals, all of who also want to partake in Iran's energy market; it is estimated that Russia will gain some two billion dollars in the first year following the implementation of the accord.

Both Russia and Iran were weakened in 2011-2013 due to the various sanctions imposed on both states and the volume of trade shrank accordingly. The latest developments, the November 2014 nuclear accord and the January 2015 military cooperation agreement, opened a new door in their long-standing relations; Russia's Secretary of Defense's visit to Iran after a 15-year hiatus is a clear indication of this process. With a sanctions-free Iran, Russia will likely enjoy wider trade relations. Even though some claim that Iran will be a new competitor for Russia, as it has the largest natural gas reserves worldwide, it is wrong to evaluate their mutual relations only in terms of national interests. These two countries have been partners in many matters for quite some time and they have worked together in a spirit of cooperation during times of hardship.

It is clear that a strong cooperation and unity among countries within the region, including Russia, would be very beneficial for the well-being of the Middle East. Imposing sanctions to handicap economic relations between countries inevitably harms the ordinary people and their purchasing power. When the people are not satisfied with the lives they are living, then they would expect some innovations from their current governments. With the help of a powerful union in the region, the governments would be able to present better living standards for their people which, in turn, will lead them to have peaceful and happier lives. Lending a helping hand to each other and not imposing any restrictions upon one another increases trade volume and allows for a blossoming of new friendships among countries. A policy encouraging mutual

economic, political and strategic relations would be beneficial for all the countries in the region.

In such a union, the countries in the region would prefer supporting each other and working together rather than being harsh competitors. Love and respect have always won out and being a strong ally, protecting the other rather than trying to defeat it, will eventually work in our own favor. Such a unity in the region will be of the utmost importance if they use their respective powers to influence one another to bring the peace, love and tranquility the Middle East has been longing for.