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Russia and Iran join hands

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
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The [United States](#) may think of Russia as a strategic partner when it comes to Iran. In reality, the geostrategic tensions between [Washington](#) and Moscow are still powerful enough to warrant a common approach by Russia and its eastern neighbor Iran with respect to a deterrent strategy towards the intrusive Western superpower.

This week, a small but significant clue is on full display with joint Russia-Iran military exercises in the Caspian Sea involving some 30 vessels. This is partially disguised by a benign environmental cause.

The maneuver, dubbed "Regional Collaboration for a Secure and Clean Caspian", combines security and maritime objectives in the Caspian Sea, the world's largest lake and also a main energy hub that is now the scene of competing alternatives for energy transfer. It signals a new trend in Iran-Russia military cooperation that will most likely increase in the near and intermediate future in light of Iran's observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The continuing standoff over Iran's nuclear program should affect this warming of relations.

Iran's willingness to join this exercise represents a complete about-face from seven years ago. In May 2002, [Tehran](#) reacted sharply to a Russian military exercise in the Caspian - held in the aftermath of a failed summit on the issue - by refusing to even send a military observer to the maneuver.

Despite all the ups and downs of Iran-Russia relations since then, the weight of geopolitical and geo-economic considerations on both countries has increasingly switched towards greater cooperation, much to the chagrin of Washington, which is keen on isolating "nuclearizing Iran".

At a time when Russia feels undermined by US-backed pipeline projects in the region, as well as dismayed by the absence of any compromise by the Barack Obama administration on

its planned installation of an anti-missile shield in [Eastern Europe](#), Moscow's intention to upgrade its military connections with Tehran is calculated. The signal to Washington is that Russia does not tolerate any direct or indirect "regime change" scenario with respect to Iran, a major pillar of anti-US sentiment in the region.

The two-day military exercises are being closely watched by the region's other littoral states - Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan - as well as neighboring states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, some of which are aligned with the West and are wary of a new level of Russia-Iran military ties.

Should Russia make good on its promise to put into operation the much-delayed Bushehr power plant that it is building in Iran, a good deal of present Iranian misgivings about Russia will disappear. After all, Russia is Iran's sole nuclear partner and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev openly rebuffed Obama's attempt, in his recent Moscow visit, to link a new arms limitation treaty with the issue of new sanctions on Iran.

Not surprisingly, on the eve of the Russia-Iran military exercise, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed the US's toughening approach toward Iran, by stating categorically that the US was opposed to Iran's possession of a "full enrichment" program, even though this is allowed under the articles of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to which Iran is a signatory. Clinton's statement on Sunday is in sharp contrast with Obama's statement during his [tour](#) of Prague, when he hinted that the US was willing to accept Iran's enrichment program as long as it was fully monitored by the United Nations' atomic watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

A widening gap between Moscow and Washington over Iran is indisputable and will likely impact the Obama administration's plans for tough new sanctions later this year. Tehran has already been slapped with several rounds of UN sanctions, as well as those imposed unilaterally by the US over its nuclear program.

United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates, visiting [Israel](#) this week, told his hosts that he would remain "hopeful" about the administration's engagement with Iran for the next few months, hinting about an emerging deadline for the "engagement" that has unnerved Israel and some moderate Arab states as well.

Compared with the hypothetical US-Iran engagement, relations between Russia and Iran are progressing toward a honeymoon born of geostrategic considerations. The joint maneuver in the Caspian may prove a starting point for more comprehensive military collaboration between the Russian and Iranian navies, particularly if Moscow sets aside its previous refusal to allow new Iranian naval vessels to enter the Caspian through the Volga channel.

Russia's Caspian neighbors - above all Azerbaijan - may not like it, given the dispute between Tehran and Baku over a Caspian oil field. Still, the imperative of closer Russia-Iran cooperation to fend off Western influence dictates the need to beef up Iran's naval presence in the Caspian.

An important question deals with the possible ramifications of closer Russia-Iran military cooperation on the stalemate over the ownership of the Caspian Sea. Most of the Caspian is already portioned out by bilateral and trilateral agreements, involving Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Iran remains unhappy over Russia's lack of cooperation on this matter. This has

been somewhat compensated by both countries agreeing on the common use of Caspian surface water, going back to the 1921 Iran-Russia friendship agreement. The earlier pact is the legal foundation for today's naval cooperation between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the predominant sentiment in Iran is that Moscow must make some concessions to Iran on the thorny issue of the Caspian's legal authority in order to gain Tehran's full confidence. Even Iranian officials in charge of Caspian affairs are unclear about what exactly Russia can do about a situation that is partially controlled by the other Caspian littoral states.

Blaming Russia for the stalemate over Caspian legal rights is a favorite pastime of some of Iran's reformists, who despise Moscow's early embrace of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad after the June 12 presidential elections. Such criticisms must be tempered by a cold calculation of Russia's limits of influence on the other Caspian states which have carved up the inland sea among themselves.

Another question raised by the maneuvers pertains to the Persian Gulf, considered a de facto "American lake", where [France](#) has entered the scene via a deal with the United Arab Emirates for a permanent military base. Iran's weak response to France's arrival, inexcusable by Iran's foreign policy standards, may be balanced by similar Iran-Russia military exercise in the Persian Gulf.

As such, the Caspian joint maneuver may well turn out to be the harbinger of a broader agenda that includes the concept of a gas cartel.