

Strategic case for U.S.-Iran rapprochement

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The recent Russian intervention in Georgia has made an American rapprochement with Iran highly desirable both for the United States and for the West as a whole. Israel has long opposed such a rapprochement, but this would also serve its interests too. Here's why:

Europe has become increasingly dependent on Russia for natural gas supplies, and this dependence is only likely to increase. This would not be undesirable, except that Moscow has shown a proclivity for cutting back or halting gas shipments to states with which it has disagreements. To prevent Russia from acquiring leverage over Europe through greater control over its gas imports, the United States and many European governments have sought alternative gas supplies from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan through pipeline routes bypassing Russia.

Iran has enormous natural gas reserves. Iran could also serve as an alternative pipeline route for Azeri and Turkmen gas for transshipment through Turkey to reach Europe. But Iranian-American hostility has resulted in Washington acting to block American and discourage other Western investment in this Iranian gas pipeline option in favor of a route through the South Caucasus.

Continued Azeri-Armenian hostility over Nagorno-Karabakh, though, prevents pipelines being constructed from Azerbaijan through Armenia to Turkey. This has left Georgia as the sole available route for a gas pipeline from Azerbaijan (and possibly Turkmenistan) to Turkey and Europe that bypasses both Russia and Iran. (An oil pipeline is already carrying Azeri oil through Georgia to the Black Sea, while another carries it through Georgia all the way through Turkey to the Mediterranean.)

But Russia's successful intervention in Georgia casts doubt on whether Georgia can serve as an alternative to Russia as a pipeline route. The ease with which Russian forces took control of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as pushed into Georgia proper, demonstrated how readily Moscow could disrupt pipelines through Georgia. There is also the possibility that Moscow could wait until a gas pipeline through Georgia is built, and then take over both the country and all pipelines through it. This would not just frustrate Europe's efforts to reduce dependence on Russia for gas, but actually increase it. Just the possibility that this could occur may prevent the proposed gas pipeline from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey from being built.

How is Europe going to react to the problem of pipeline routes through Georgia being so vulnerable to disruption or takeover by Russia? Will Europe see dependence on Russia for its gas imports as inevitable and henceforward adjust its behavior so as not to antagonize Moscow? Or will Europe attempt to limit its dependence on Russia through seeking yet other suppliers and supply routes?

Past West European behavior suggests that Europe will do the latter. During the Cold War, when growing West European economies needed more gas but North Africa was seen as an unreliable supplier, Western Europe began to import gas from the Soviet Union. Further, it did this despite American objections at a time when Western Europe was dependent on the United States for protection against a possible Soviet attack.

Europe is now less dependent on the United States for security but increasingly dependent on the importation of gas. Europe, then, can be expected to do now what it did during the Cold War when it needed more gas and doubted the reliability of its existing suppliers: find alternative suppliers. Europe is now, in fact, attempting to increase its imports of gas via pipelines from North Africa as well as of liquefied natural gas (in both of which, by the way, Russia is trying to gain a stake).

Sooner or later, though, Europe is likely to seek to import gas from Iran, especially since: 1) the Iranians have already indicated their willingness to sell it to Europe; 2) Russia cannot interfere as easily in Iran as it can in Georgia; and 3) Iran can also serve as a transit route for gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

As Western Europe's behavior with regard to gas imports from the Soviet Union during the Cold War demonstrated, Europe is likely to buy gas from Iran despite opposition from America (and, of course, Israel). If Europe is determined to buy Iranian gas, then the United States will face two choices: either it can attempt to prevent Europe from doing so, or it can work with Europe by attempting to normalize Iranian-American relations.

Attempting to prevent Europe from buying Iranian gas is highly inadvisable since not only are such efforts likely to fail, but will only result in worsening European-American relations. Nor will doing this result in Iran moderating its behavior toward Israel, since it is doubtful that Europe is going to let Israeli opposition stand in the way of furthering its efforts to reduce dependence on Russia for gas. Further, an American effort to prevent Europe from buying Iranian gas would prevent the United States from being able to exploit the increasing differences between Russia and Iran that can be expected to emerge, especially if Tehran is willing to serve as a transit corridor for Azeri and Turkmen gas.

An Iranian-American rapprochement, by contrast, would help preserve European-American relations as well as allow the United States to benefit from the Russian-Iranian differences that would arise from this. But would Iran moderate its behavior toward Israel for the sake of rapprochement with the United States, especially if an Iranian-European rapprochement seems likely even if Iranian-American hostility remains?

There is reason to believe that it would. For while Europe can provide Iran with much needed cash, Europe is neither willing nor able to provide Iran with help on its security problems to the extent that America can. And Iran has some very serious security problems, including:

1. an increasingly active Sunni opposition inside Iran to the Shi'a government there;
2. the likelihood that a resurgent Taliban will renew its hostility toward Iran, which it actively pursued prior to 9/11;
3. the possible spillover into Iran from the renewed sectarian conflict in Iraq that may well result as the American presence there declines; and
4. the growing Russian hostility toward Iran that can be expected to result from Tehran competing with it as a gas exporter as well as pipeline route for Azeri and Turkmen gas.

Tehran has little incentive to change its behavior toward Israel if Iranian-American hostility continues at a time when American intervention in Iran appears highly unlikely. By contrast, the United States has a far better chance of moderating Iranian behavior toward Israel as a condition for providing Tehran with assistance against the very real threats Iran faces than if the United States remains hostile toward Iran.

Where America's interests lie, then, should be clear: Opposing European gas purchases from Iran will worsen European-American relations, give Russia further opportunity to exploit European-American differences, and do nothing to moderate Iranian behavior toward Israel. An American rapprochement with Iran, by contrast, would promote European-American cooperation, assist Europe in avoiding over-dependence on Russian gas and Russian-controlled pipelines from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, and offer a better opportunity to moderate Iran's behavior toward Israel.

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http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/11/strategic_case_for_us_iran_approchement/