

Policy Watch: Russia, Iran, and the U.N.

Published: Sept. 25, 2006 at 1:06 PM

MARK N. KATZ

It is increasingly clear that Russia will not only block a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iran, but also one that imposes serious economic sanctions against it. Here's why:

Putin cannot stop the United States from using force against Iran without U.N. Security Council authorization, nor will he defend Iran if the United States takes this course. The greatest risk for Russia if the United States does use force is that an American intervention will succeed in replacing the present Iranian regime with a pro-Western one that drastically curtails economic cooperation with Russia. But given the difficulties American forces are experiencing in pacifying two less populous countries on either side of Iran (Iraq and Afghanistan), it is much more likely that any unilateral American military action against Iran would be a more limited one aimed at destroying its nuclear capability that would leave the Islamic Republic intact.

If America attacked Iran without Security Council approval and despite Russian objections, Tehran would not cancel or curtail economic cooperation with Russia as it might if Moscow approved Security Council authorization for the use of force against Iran. Putin might also regard the increased hostility toward the United States that would result from unilateral American military action against Iran as serving to increase the willingness of Iran and other countries (including West European ones) to cooperate with Russia. Thus, Putin will not approve any U.N. Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force against Iran, especially if there is any ambiguity (something Tehran excels at creating) about its nuclear intentions.

Even Russian support for Security Council economic sanctions against Iran risks Tehran curtailing or canceling Russian-Iranian economic cooperation in the atomic energy, weapons, and natural gas spheres. The United States has long applied its own economic sanctions to Iran, and thus has nothing to lose through the Security Council imposing them. Russia, however, has important economic stakes in Iran that would be damaged by the imposition of U.N. sanctions. Nor does Putin see the United States as willing to offer Russia anything close to what Moscow would consider adequate recompense for supporting the imposition of such sanctions against Iran.

The deals that Moscow has with Tehran are not worth much in Western terms; potential ones that are face important obstacles. Completing the nuclear reactor Russia is building for Iran at Bushehr is said to be worth \$1 billion. Additional reactors Russia may build could be worth \$1 billion to \$2 billion apiece. The 2005 sale of Russian air defense systems to Tehran was worth about \$1 billion. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit this past June, Ahmadinejad proposed to Putin that Moscow and Tehran agree not to compete with each other for natural gas exports. While such an agreement could be worth much more money for Russia, an Iranian retraction of Ahmadinejad's offer cannot hurt Russia unless and until Iran and other nations develop the expensive infrastructure needed for Iran to export natural gas to Europe.

The atomic energy, weapons, and natural gas industries are all politically powerful in Russia. Iran is one of the Russian atomic energy industry's only customers. While not the biggest customer for Russian weapons, Iran is an important one that Moscow does not want to lose. Gazprom has plenty of customers for Russian natural gas, but it does not like (to put it mildly) having to compete with other gas suppliers for export markets. Putin undoubtedly understands that annoying Ahmadinejad could harm the interests of all three of these important Russian

industries. Putin, then, is not likely to support even U.N. economic sanctions against Iran.

Putin cannot control what either Tehran or Washington will do about the Iranian nuclear crisis. Either may act to escalate the conflict, ameliorate it, prolong it in its current state, or some combination of these options. But while Putin has very little ability to determine what course of action the United States or Iran will take, Putin can at least avoid the damage to Russian economic interests in Iran that Moscow would incur if it supported either U.N. Security Council authorization for the use of force or the imposition of economic sanctions against Tehran.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

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