

Iran and the Balkans: Russia Risks Making the Same Mistakes

by Pyotr Iskenderov via dragan - Strategic Culture Foundation *Saturday, Jun 12 2010, 8:39pm*
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The recent UN Security Council resolution slapping new sanctions on Iran is likely to become the worst defeat suffered by the Russian diplomacy over the past years. Its negative impact may be persistent and more serious than that of the proclamation of Kosovo's independence to which Russia continues objecting. What we are witnessing seems to be an unexpected recurrence of the syndrome of unilateral concessions to the West which eroded Russia's international politics, especially its Balkan part, in the 90's. Following the Western lead in dealing with Iran, Russia is risking to lose both its positions in a region much more extensive than the Balkans and its hard-earned key role in the raising multipolar world.

Commenting on the vote in the UN Security Council (where Russia's BRIC peer Brazil and NATO member Turkey voted against the sanctions), the influential Tehran Times wrote: "The fact that Turkey and Brazil, two U.S. allies, voted against the resolution provides further proof that the actions against Iran and the latest decision of the Security Council are based on secret deals struck by the major powers. Thus, those who say the U.S. abandoned its Eastern European missile shield plan in order to win the support of Russia were probably correct".

In 2009, the Russian foreign ministry was on a number of occasions forced to deny that — as Western media kept suggesting — there existed a 'missile defense for Iran' swap deal. Indeed, it probably did not exist as a formalized agreement, but the truth is that at a certain moment Russia adopted a much tougher stance on Iran and froze its arms transactions with the country (suspending the supply of the S-300 air defense systems) as well as that currently Moscow risks losing its strategic partner in the Middle East without any visible reasons for such sacrifice. Can the invisible reason be an obscure deal with US President B. Obama?

Recent developments signal a complicated array of shifts in the region and outside of it. The mediation successfully undertaken by Turkey and Brazil in the talks over the enrichment of Iran's uranium stockpile outside of the country, the escalation in the Middle East, the tensions between Turkey and Israel, new geopolitical maneuvers around the Karabakh settlement and related energy projects (in which Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan, the country with a special position, are to play the key roles) altogether confront the US with the threat of isolation and loss of leadership. As for Iran, it is no secret that the three rounds of sanctions imposed on the country in 2006-2008 failed to undermine its capability to implement a nuclear program, which has become an element of the Iranian national identity. There are no indications that the situation is going to change from Iran's perspective this time.

The situation is going to change from Russia's perspective, though, and certainly for the worse. Loosing Iran, demonstratively distancing itself from the Turkish-Brazilian mediation (for which President Medvedev expressed support previously), and siding with the US Moscow put in jeopardy the political gains of the recent years such as independence and assertiveness in international politics and the clarity of geopolitical priorities. Voting for new sanctions and constructing the nuclear power plant in Bushehr at the same time is an example of the very double standards that Moscow justly rebelled against whenever it encountered them in Western policies.

Russia evidently tried to recoup some of its geopolitical losses immediately after the vote in the UN Security Council. Russia's foreign ministry promptly posted an extensive comment saying: "However, we can't ignore the signals indicating that some partners intend, almost immediately after the decision in New York, to move to considering additional sanctions against Iran, more stringent than those provided by the UNSC resolution. We regard this as the manifestation of a policy that runs counter to the principles of joint work within the Six and the UNSC format. Unacceptable to us are attempts in such a way to place oneself "above" the Security Council. We also categorically reject any national decisions on the imposition of "extraterritorial sanctions," i.e., restrictive measures under one's own legislation with regard to individuals and legal entities in third countries. Such decisions, should they affect Russian legal entities or individuals, would entail retaliatory response by us.

The new resolution leaves extensive room for further cooperation with Iran in the trade and economic field and on energy, transport and peaceful space exploration. As applied to Russian-Iranian bilateral ties, all of these areas have significant potential and growth opportunities. Of fundamental importance for us is the further development of cooperation with Iran in the construction of light water reactors".

The arguments seem OK but still reek of an attempt to save face. It is unlikely that the US and the EU, overwhelmed with gratitude to Russia, will in the future show greater respect for its interests or adapt to the Russian foreign ministry's position on Iran. The Russian diplomacy's pledges to go on cooperating with Iran would have been more credible if Russia at least abstained during the UN Security Council vote, as, for example, did Lebanon.

Washington pursued its own interests without exceptions throughout the Russian-US debates over Iran. Obama's decision against deploying missile defense infrastructures in Poland and the Czech Republic was predictable due to purely economic regards and did not take Russia's consent to sanctions against Iran. In fact, the missile defense program is still on but will employ more advanced technologies ensuring radar surveillance over a greater area. In the foreseeable future Russia will be confronted with an evasive network of mobile systems instead of two undisguised stationary installations. The Persian Gulf zone and the Black Sea region will be given key roles in the framework of the initiative. It did not go unnoticed that the US Administration carefully avoided linking any of the provisions of the New Start treaty with the state of the US missile defense program.

The most alarming aspect of the current situation is the analogy it invokes with the 90's and early 2000's Balkan developments. In that epoch Russia also demanded on the formal level that all sides in the Balkan conflicts equally abide by the international law, called for compromises, and voted for sanctions in the UN Security Council, holding that this was the only way to stop escalations. The overall result was progressing imbalance in the Balkan and broader European security architecture. The norms declared were supposed to be mandatory for all nations, but the Serbs invariably ended up disadvantaged. The format of the international contact group which handled Balkan crises is frighteningly similar to that currently employed in dealing with Iran (the six-party talks). Russia was defeated in the five-party talks on Kosovo when it consented to the so-called three principles, one of them being that the situation should not revert to the 1999 condition. The provision was eventually used by the proponents of Kosovo independence to justify its unilateral declaration.

Now Russian envoys quite reasonably blame the UN and its Secretary General for being either reluctant or unable to address the Kosovo problem and charge the EU and the US with bias and unilateralism. But isn't the West demonstrating bias and acting unilaterally when it consents to the nuclear statuses of India and Pakistan, shields Israel from criticism over its nuclear program, but

keeps pushing for ever tighter sanctions to be imposed on Iran?

The Balkan settlement has shown the inadequacy of international negotiating formats like five-party or six-party talks and the pointless character of UN discussions. In practice, the West relies entirely on its own mechanisms to promote its own geopolitical interests. Russia chose to be on the side of the US and the EU instead of strengthening its commercial ties with Iran (including the Caspian Sea delimitation and the energy projects), involving countries with unbiased positions in the talks over the Iranian nuclear dossier, and supporting the independent and successful mediation contributed by Turkey and Brazil. Will the US and the EU return the favor — for example, in the form of concessions in Kosovo, Caucasus, or energy politics? Based on the Balkan experience, it is clear that they will not.

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