

Russian Roulette and the War on Iran

Ultior Motives of a Potential Iran War Profiteer—and Its Risks

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A war on Iran would be catastrophic. That is certainly not a far-fetched estimation expressed by Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, on April 11. But Moscow's former Defense Minister is not the only one in his country suggesting an imminent U.S. nuclear strike on Iran as the scenery for war has already been set. Announcements made by leading Russian political and military officials as well as experts and commentators during the last days on the high probability of an American assault on Iran are, besides being disturbing for Western ears, perfectly reflecting the highly critical crossroads we are currently at. But is that 'talk of war' made in the noble intention to prevent our world from a terrible, almost unique, disaster—or are their tangible interests behind that?

Signs of a Russian Turnaround?

It is general belief that Iran and Russia form a stable strategic alliance predominantly directed against U.S. global influence. Despite UN sanctions put upon Tehran, Moscow insisted on continuing cooperation with that country, especially in the much-disputed nuclear area. In January 1995, Iran signed an \$800 million contract with the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy (MinAtom) to complete nuclear reactors at its Bushehr power-plant under IAEA safeguards. While the reactor's completion was scheduled for July 1999, countless postponements have fixed the finalizing date to the end of this year. But despite comprehensible frustration from the Iranian side as to this issue, efforts directed at maintaining the Russo-Iranian partnership are have not broken off.

While Moscow was the only major global power condemning the kidnapping of Iranian diplomats early this year in Northern Iraq, it sharpened the tone as it considered Iran's seizure of British spies and its subsequent pursuit of its nuclear research activities despite the latest Security Council resolution a 'provocation.' A major commentator from Russia's state news agency, *RIA Novosti*, even concluded that it is Iran that is 'provoking' a war. A couple of days later, the same praises to the skies Tehran's adroit release of London's soldiers, thus preventing a possible U.S. attack on April 6. Moscow's state-run news agency was also the very first one to report the immediate danger of a U.S. nuclear assault on Iran for this month. But in recent days, it seems to backpedal while citing sources assessing an American strike on Iran is not going to happen. But what can we conclude from this potpourri of messages and reports echoing from Moscow?

A lot of evidence points to the fact that in the case of an Iran War, Russia is most probably the only strategic beneficiary of such a scenario. Of course, the United States' decisive hold on the world's fossil energy center is destined to provide it with the most powerful strategic leverage enabling Washington to prolong its global supremacy. But assuming the continuity of the neoconservatives' false—if not amateurish—calculations of the outcomes of their foreign policy initiatives and the evanescent probability of the U.S. remaining the master of an unpredictable situation of a Middle East going up in flames, the profiteer of such a bloody quagmire can be sought elsewhere.

The world's great powers—i.e. the European Union, India, China, and Japan—have nothing to gain, but much to lose from a war on Iran, as all-time record oil prices will blatantly undermine their highly oil-dependent economies. But Russia, an important oil-producing nation itself, would not be disinclined when such a case turns real. Being a major energy supplier for China and Europe, Moscow disposes one-fourth of the world's proved reserves of natural gas (before Iran and Qatar) and six percent of petroleum. Therefore Russia's role as an indispensable energy supplier will be strengthened as a result of war, moreover benefitting from increased world market prices for both petroleum and gas.

What is more, the recent Russian sales of military defense systems to Iran, in particular, 29 TOR-M1 surface-to-air missiles for alleged \$700 million to \$1 billion as well as Russian Navy torpedoes of the type VA-111 Shkval ('Squall'), should enable Tehran to considerably harm the U.S. when attacked—an outcome much desired by Moscow as it would revive its superpower ambitions. And also during the war, Russia could speed up its military exports to the Middle East. The recent UN arms embargo on Iran could hardly prevent its military industry from huge war-time profits. Besides these multi-billion dollar businesses, Moscow can speculate about a geostrategic gain of tremendous proportions.

As it can be expected, an Iran War will considerably weaken the aggressed (as a regional great power), but also the aggressor (as the global superpower). The power vacuum then produced in the whole Middle East region would be gladly filled by Russia. Thus it could gain highly significant terrain in the much-disputed Eurasian grand chessboard and pay back the geostrategic losses it had to suffer in its 'immediate neighborhood'—i.e. Central Asia—in the wake of 9/11 through heavy U.S. militarization of former Soviet nations.

Risky Roulette

But all this does not mean that Russia will be able to occupy a calm seat while making major economic and strategic gains from such a grueling fight. As an all-out war is highly probable, Russia could hardly remain for a long time a mere observer of a theater of war erupting at its Southern flank. As Caspian Sea abutters (above all, Azerbaijan and Georgia) might be roped in a war as they harbor U.S. military bases from where strikes could be carried out, amalgamation with other regional security issues in that geostrategically indispensable part of the world involving Russia cannot be ruled out. In this light, Russia's interests in Transcaucasia and Central Asia can be jeopardized by U.S. military actions emanating from there. There are signs that American allies will get the green light to go for their interests in the region, which are predominantly in contrast to Russian ones. Washington, along with NATO, might seize the opportunity to further reduce Russian influence in that region—a momentous blow to Moscow's global status. Briefly put, the enormous destabilizing effects

from an Iran War are not expected to halt on Iran's Northern borders. With Tehran under assault, Moscow will miss a reliable and stable status-quo power on its Southern flank. The global consequences of an Iran War will not exclude Russia. Moscow, too, will lose a promising power to cooperate with in all perceivable economic fields and further pave the way for extinguishing the unipolar world order. The ambitious plan to create a gas cartel—unthinkable without the participation of the Persian Gulf countries including Iran, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (who express opposition to a 'military option' against Iran realizing that they, too, might be targeted)—will also be harmed. While it is true that Moscow does not wish a nuclear Iran, the prospect of a total U.S. control over that region is more dangerous for its interests in Eurasia.

As Russia's leading strategic thinker, General Leonid Ivashov, holds, "it is hard to imagine a quiet heaven where one might hide from the coming doom." The far-ranging consequences of an Iran War cannot be calculated, therefore there are good reasons for Moscow not to surrender to the blurred dream to come off as sole winner. It is clear that by waging a nuclear war on Iran, Washington will bear in mind its overall strategic goal to avoid any global rival, of course paying special attention to the Eurasian heavyweight Russia. And it has every means to do that, as its military is well anchored in parts critical to Moscow.

After all, it remains to Russia's strategic reflections whether to engage with or distance itself from Iran. The latter, coupled with the belief that war profits will exceed peace-time opportunities, can decisively lower the international hurdle to wage a war on Iran. However, one certitude remains: "After the very first nuclear blast, mankind will find itself in an entirely new world, an absolutely inhumane one." (L. Ivashov)

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Notes

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2 Goncharov, Pyotr (2007), "Bravo, Iran!," *RIA Novosti*, April 6. [URL](#)

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5 Russian President Putin expects \$7.5 billion from military exports for the next year. In 2006, his country made arms sales worth of \$6 billion with India and China being its top customers. (*Deutschlandfunk*, April 20, 2007)

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