



## **Policy Memo**

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The dynamics of changes in Iran's regional role in the last twenty years is obvious: Tehran has been strengthening its positions and increasing its weight. The disappearance of the Soviet Union broadened Iran's opportunities in the Caspian region, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The growth of terrorist threats from radical Sunni organizations and movements overshadowed accusations against Iran of sponsoring terrorism, which were widespread in the West until the end of the 1990s. The U.S. policy, especially the invasion of Iraq and the execution of Saddam Hussein, destroyed the system of regional balances and let Iran extend its influence to Iraq and step up ties with Shia communities throughout the Middle East. The Arab Spring took major foreign players unawares, who increasingly often have to take their lead from regional forces, and activated the factor of confessional confrontation between the two branches of Islam, thus promoting the consolidation of Shias under Iran's auspices.

It is noteworthy that the consolidation of Tehran's positions is going on regardless of the political conditions in Iran and the situation around it. The swinging of the socio-political pendulum in Iran (from reformist Khatami to ultra-conservative Ahmadinejad and back to moderate Rouhani), as well as various methods of exerting pressure on Tehran (from attempts of negotiations and flirtation to threats of war and sanctions, and back to dialogue) do not affect the consistent growth of Iran as a regional power. This growth is objective and is in line with the long-term logic of the development of the Middle East and the behavior of external powers in the region.

The Syrian conflict, in which Iran had no other choice (for reasons of security and regional positioning) but to fully and irrevocably support the Bashar al-Assad regime,

which is close to Tehran, was another factor behind the strengthening of Iran. Firstly, the Syrian regime demonstrated a much higher degree of stability than anyone had expected. So, the hopes of some countries in the region, above all Turkey and Saudi Arabia, for an early collapse of the power of the Alawites, have not come true. Today there is no talk of an unconditional victory of the opposition.

Secondly, the Syrian issue has brought Iran and Russia much closer together. Earlier, relations between the two countries were rather sore. It was widely believed in Iran that Russia does oppose the policies of the U.S. and the West in general but that it does not go the whole way and always recedes at the very last moment in order not to upset its relations with Washington. Moscow's principled and immutable approach to the Syrian crisis came as a surprise to Tehran and compensated for the discontent that had been growing during the previous years, especially after Russia banned the delivery of S-300 missile systems to Iran in 2010 following UN Security Council sanctions against this country.

The points of view of Russia and Iran on the events in Syria have coincided, although Moscow and Tehran are guided by different logic and different interests. For Iran, this is a matter of immediate security and even geopolitical survival. For Russia, this is, above all, a matter of general principles of the world order and inadmissibility of external interference as a way to settle internal conflicts. Anyway, Russia and Iran now operate in tandem, albeit at the tactical level, and their interaction is very effective. The two countries' mutual understanding on Syria causes them to seek to broaden other ties, as well, especially as the parallel diplomatic process of resolving the nuclear problem bids fair to end Iran's international isolation in the medium term.

Another important factor is that in the last two years the "nuclear" process, which previously was a separate issue of global importance, has proved to be closely intertwined with a set of regional issues, primarily the Syrian one. In other words, the regional alignment of forces, the geopolitical landscape and prospects of its development are a key factor for developing a relevant approach to Iran. It cannot be viewed in isolation from the processes unfolding increasingly faster in the Middle

East.

This creates space for interaction between Russia and the United States. Moscow will benefit from the end of Iran's isolation, even though many people in Russia think otherwise. Indeed, the lifting of the sanctions will give Tehran a choice, and Russian exporters will have to compete with producers from other countries. However, pinning hopes on continued isolation of Iran is counterproductive anyway, because Tehran seeks to broaden its opportunities and will not be always content with relations based on the absence of choice. Russian-Iranian relations are strong enough to give Russia a first-priority advantage over other countries when Iran enters the world scene. Fears that Iran may make a U-turn and adopt an openly pro-American policy, which can be heard in Russia now, are most likely unfounded. Firstly, Iran is too ambitious a state to take the lead from the U.S. Secondly, a pro-American policy in the Middle East today will not necessarily result in the strengthening of one's positions, rather to the contrary.

But balanced U.S.-Iranian relations built on a stage-by-stage solution of the Iranian nuclear problem are advantageous to Russia because Moscow is not interested in a nuclear Iran, and because the end of its isolation will mean a growing role in the region for a country with which Russia has rich and constructive, albeit complicated, relations. In addition, the growth of Iran's influence in the Middle East will rather make it active there than in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, unlike other countries in the region, Iran has so far not been a source of problems for Russia's policy in Central Asia or the Caucasus.

The United States will benefit from appeasement with Iran for other reasons. The Arab Spring has rocked the structural stability of the Middle East, on which the U.S. policy was based for decades. Giving sole preference to the Sunnis, as has been the practice since the Islamic revolution in Iran, does not work today. On the one hand, the Sunni world has come into motion and is very unstable. On the other hand, the forces that seem to be taking the upper hand there are very anti-American, and this sentiment will likely increase. The inability to lean on the second "foot", that is, the

Shia community led by Iran, greatly restricts America's room for maneuver. And no matter how firmly and how long America plans to stay in the Middle East (it is now fashionable to say that the United States can leave the region in the next two decades), maintaining a balanced system of relations there is better than an all-out withdrawal.

The solution of the nuclear problem is also possible only in the context of a general change in relations between Iran and the United States. It is impossible to force Iran to disarm while there is highly hostile superpower with an experience of replacing regimes and occupying countries in the region.

Of course, there is also a much larger problem related to the Iranian nuclear issue: this is the future of nuclear non-proliferation as such in the 21st century. The experience of Russian-U.S. cooperation in the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons and in the development of a model for resolving the Iranian nuclear problem should be used as the basis for a major joint project. The Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed almost half a century ago in basically different political conditions. The openly discriminatory document, which gave different rights to different countries, was made possible by the world order that existed in those years. In the 21st century, this is hardly possible: the international environment is moving towards democracy, with more and more countries insisting on their rights. Russia and the United States, as the two nuclear superpowers, must take the lead in discussing the future of the NPT and looking for ways to amend the treaty so that it could be implemented in this century. And this should be a holistic approach – trying to solve individual problems with individual countries will not work.