



Kremlin Coalition-Building

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By all indications, U.S.-Russian relations have undergone a sea of change since Sept. 11.

Prompted by solidarity with the American tragedy and their own experiences with religious radicalism, Russia has emerged as a key player in America's anti-terror coalition. And Moscow could well prove a valuable ally for Washington. With its large military presence and deep diplomatic influence, the Kremlin's assistance is crucial to any sustained American military campaign in Central Asia.

But Russia's support is not likely to come at the expense of its own long-term interests. Even now, Moscow is hard at work on a coalition of its own -- one that could very well undermine American strategy in the region.

Hence the recent, and very public, October meeting between Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, which yielded not only a far-reaching accord on security and arms, but also a common Russo-Iranian strategy for Afghanistan, designed to forestall the creation of an American-backed government in Kabul.

The four-day summit was only the latest in a series of military pacts between Moscow and Tehran. Plagued by a bloody, protracted conflict in the breakaway republic of Chechnya, Russia has long viewed cooperation as a means to squelch Iran's troublemaking tendencies in the Caucasus. And its position as a viable transit route for Caspian oil has made Tehran an integral part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's energy plans. The Kremlin has thus taken great pains to secure Iran's strategic alignment through arms sales, nuclear cooperation and diplomatic backing.

In turn, Tehran has become an active broker of Moscow's ambitious foreign policy agenda. In a recent statement tracking closely Putin's plans for the region, Gen. Mohammed Salimi, the commander in chief of the Iranian armed forces, publicly warned that the Islamic Republic stands ready to respond militarily to Western interference in Caspian affairs. Salimi's words were not just bluster. This August, in a blatant display of gunboat diplomacy, Iran menaced neighboring pro-Western Azerbaijan over disputed energy sources, reinforcing worries about Iranian -- and Russian -- hegemony over the Caspian.

With Russia's backing, Iran has also been hard at work cobbling together an anti-Western regional grouping in its back yard. As far back as 1999, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi floated the idea of enhanced bilateral relations between the two countries under the umbrella of a Russia-led anti-NATO coalition.

This July, on a visit to Armenia, Iranian National Security Council Secretary Hojatolislam Rowhani successfully pressed for a stronger Russia-Armenia alliance to cement the "north-south" axis that Iran is attempting to build with its massive neighbor in the north.

Iran's lobbying efforts in Turkmenistan have also yielded concrete results. Through its recent courtship of Turkmen President Saparmurad Niyazov, Tehran has managed to throw a wrench in European plans for a trans-Caspian pipeline free of Russian control. What's more, in perhaps its most signal strategic accomplishment, Iran has even managed to revive a trilateral Iran-Armenia-Turkmenistan axis, much to the detriment of Western interests in Central Asia.

Not coincidentally, the Kremlin itself has been busy wooing Armenia into alignment with its policies. Just days after the Sept. 11 terror attacks in Washington and New York, a state visit by President Putin, yielded a new level of military, political and economic cooperation between the two countries.

Subsequently, in an elaborate ceremony attended by General Anatoly Kvashnin, the Chief of the Russian General Staff, Yerevan officially inaugurated the unified air defense system it has begun constructing with Moscow. Talk has even surfaced about the possible expansion of Russia's military presence in the former Soviet republic, ostensibly to guard against mounting regional instability. All this has led to an alarming tilt toward Moscow on the part of the government in Yerevan.

The end result of these maneuvers is a rapidly-emerging axis in Central Asia, one which the mullahs in Tehran and the Cold Warriors in the Kremlin clearly see as a counterweight to American influence in the region.

The White House should take care -- it is an alliance that could define not only the scope of America's war on terrorism, but long-term U.S. policy in Central Asia as well.