



Dreaming Of A Deal With Russia Over Iran

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During its first half-year in office, the Trump administration actively flirted with the idea that it might be possible, under the proper conditions, to “flip” the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin and get it to support American attempts to pressure Tehran. That effort, however, fizzled over time, derailed by the longstanding nature of the strategic ties between Moscow and Tehran, as well as by their close joint military cooperation in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, as a result of which both have become deeply entrenched on Syrian soil.

Today, however, the idea seems to be resurfacing once more.

The White House appears to believe that – now that the Syrian civil war is effectively over – Moscow might be more inclined to help Washington curtail Iran’s malign regional activities and roll back its strategic footprint in Syria and elsewhere. Administration officials are reportedly planning to reopen the conversation during trilateral meetings in Israel later this month, where they will use discussions over Syria to talk about the larger Russo-Iranian relationship.

This thinking has no doubt been fueled by new signs of friction in Russo-Iranian ties. Late last month, in a highly symbolic move, Russia rejected Iran’s request to purchase S-400 air defenses, apparently worried that Iran’s acquisition of the advanced system would upset the geopolitical balance in the Middle East and prompt greater conflict. The Kremlin’s decision, experts say, is pragmatic. “Any real or imaginary strengthening of Iran can lead to escalation – if Russia really refused Iran such a request, it would mean that Russia wants to keep working on relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel and keep a chance for negotiations with Trump,” noted Ruslan Pukhov of the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.

Other signs of a potential Russian pivot are present as well. In recent weeks, speculation has grown about an unfolding geopolitical tug-of-war between Moscow and Tehran over the future of Syria, which Russia sees as a major client and Iran views as an important strategic partner. Indeed, Russian forces there are said to have recently expelled pro-Iranian Shi’a militias from the vicinity of the port city of Tartus, where Moscow maintains its main naval presence. The development is being read by observers as part of an escalating struggle for position now taking place between the two countries.

All of which might make the Kremlin more amenable to accommodation with the White House over Iran. That, at least, is what the White House seems to be hoping.

But getting to “yes” with Putin over Russo-Iranian ties is likely to be exceedingly difficult. Moscow and Tehran, after all, have been strategic partners for decades. Political ties between the two date back to the Soviet era, and have been reinforced in the last quarter-century by a burgeoning defense-industrial relationship, a shared interest in curbing Sunni radicalism in the Middle East and Central Asia, and joint efforts to oppose America’s perceived hegemony on the world stage. These bonds will be exceedingly difficult to break, notwithstanding any tactical disagreements currently on display in Syria.

Even so, it’s apparent that Russia – now more deeply involved in the Middle East than at any time since the height of the Cold War – is making greater efforts to balance its historic strategic partnership with Iran with its expanding political, economic and strategic contacts with other regional states, all of whom see the Islamic Republic as a mortal threat. And that, U.S. officials hope, might just be enough to get the Kremlin to begin rethinking its relationship with the Iranian regime.

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