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Caspian Summit a Triumph for Iran and a Victory for Russia

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While the Western press branded the Caspian summit a failure for its inability to agree on how to divide the Caspian or to endorse Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal that no pipelines be built in the region in the absence of approval by all nations bordering the sea, Iranian analyst Kaveh L Afrasiabi points to the summit's achievement for Iran and Russia and the setback for the United States bent on isolating Iran. Japan Focus

Few regional summits have drawn closer attention, by both the media and world governments, than this week's summit of leaders of Caspian littoral states in Tehran.



The two day summit, coinciding with twin nuclear crises and escalating US-Iran tensions relating to Iraq and the Middle East, is bound to be regarded as a milestone in regional cooperation, with serious ramifications for a broad array of issues transcending the Caspian Sea region.

Billed as a "great leap toward progress" by Mehdi Safari, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister in charge of Iran's Caspian affairs, the summit has been a great success for Iran as well as Russia and the other participants (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), and Tehran is likely to capitalize on it as a stepping stone for full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), considered a security counterweight to NATO and US "hegemony".



Summit leaders: From left: Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Mamoud Ahmadinejad

Indeed, it is as much shared interests as common worries and concerns, eg, the US's unbounded interventionist policies, that have now brought Iran and Russia closer together and to the verge of a new strategic relationship. After all, both Iran and Russia are today objects of American coercion, their national security interests and objectives imperiled by the US's post-9/11 militarism and its feudalistic ossification of the international order.

The upshot of the Caspian summit is, in fact, a prominent message about the need to democratize the international order by erecting effective barriers to the American "leviathan", as shown by specific agreements reached at the summit, including prohibiting other countries from using the littoral states for attacks on one another "under any circumstances", and disallowing any ship not flying the national flag of a littoral state on Caspian waters.



Caspian shoreline

How did this summit come about? The answer is, first and foremost, by astute diplomatic efforts on Iran's part and, equally, by a strategic evolution of Russia's foreign policy that is no longer self-handicapped by prioritizing tactical or conjunctural interests above strategic ones.

Having reached this level, Moscow is now poised to enter into a new strategic relationship with Iran that will serve the geostrategic, security, and other shared interests of both nations.

"Iran is an important regional and global power," President Vladimir Putin said after his initial meeting with Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who has been much vilified in the West and yet is respected in the Third World and beyond as an assertive leader of a developing nation standing up to world-dominating policies.

A major achievement for Iran's diplomacy and particularly for Ahmadinejad's embattled foreign policy team, the "good news" summit will likely serve as the hinge that opens new breathing space for Iran's diplomacy, and not just toward the Caspian, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Iran's Persian Gulf policy is also bound to benefit from the improved image of Iran in the Middle East, making more attractive Iran's role as a corridor to Central Asia which the Arab world in general and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in particular can take advantage of in their external trade and energy policies.

Iran's summit diplomacy

The most salient feature of Iran's summit diplomacy has been its multifaceted complexity, seeking to enhance regional cooperation among the five Caspian littoral states by, for instance, initiating the idea of a Caspian regional organization to promote inter-region trade, and, simultaneously, pushing bilateral cooperation alongside multilateral cooperation. The net of bilateral and multilateral agreements signed at this summit is quite extensive and a detailed examination belongs elsewhere.

Suffice to say, however, that from Iran's vantage point the summit has been a complete turnaround from the rather disastrous Caspian Sea summit of leaders in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in 2002, when Putin prioritized the issue of Caspian delimitation and division, a divisive issue. In comparison, at this summit, the thorny subject of Caspian ownership and "legal regime" was relegated to the background, with the attending leaders focusing on areas of shared interests, transboundary issues, and trade, hoping that in subsequent meetings the goodwill generated at this summit will carry over to those more divisive issues.

Various expert-level meetings of the Caspian states have so far failed to resolve the ownership question and, from Iran's vantage point, given the relatively minor energy interests at stake in Iran's sector of the Caspian Sea, it made more sense to draw the right lesson from the Ashgabat failure and adopt a long-term view of things.



Iranian oil terminal Mazandar on the Caspian

That approach by Iran has paid off handsomely, resulting in a sudden shift in the geostrategic climate in Iran's favor, in light of the joint communique of the other Caspian states regarding their refusal to allow their territory to be used for any military aggression against Iran, cemented by Putin's forceful statement against any such gambit.

Putin's other comment, regarding Russia's commitment to complete Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, represents yet another significant development for Iran, which has defied the UN Security Council's resolutions calling for a suspension of uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities. By stating on record that there is no evidence to support the allegations of a nuclear weapon ambition on Iran's part, Putin looks to have provoked Washington's fury, as seen in Condoleezza Rice's instant counterpunch that Iran has been "lying" about its nuclear program. Yet more importantly Putin has signalled the beginning of the end of Rice-crafted "diplomatic consensus" vis-a-vis Iran.

As expected, the US government and mainstream media, unable to show any signs of adjustment to Russia's, and even China's, new line of thought toward Iran, have stepped up their Iran-bashing, with both the Washington Times and Wall Street Journal dedicating more of their opinion pages to the ritual anti-Iran commentaries.

Surely, the Tehran summit and its results represent a serious setback for Washington's Iran diplomacy, but they also show the defects of its Russia diplomacy and the fact that Moscow and Washington have reached a dead end. Putin has held his ground against his Washington detractors, wooing various European leaders such as Germany's Angela Merkel and snubbing the pro-US Nicolas Sarkozy, while working on a new model of Russia-EU relations that is not dominated by US prerogatives. There is undoubtedly an element of risk here and Putin's new Iran policy may backfire, particularly if he does not generate more Iranian cooperation on the nuclear issue.

Regarding the latter, Iran is apt to reciprocate Putin's gestures by accommodating itself to more IAEA demands, and next week's meeting of Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, with the EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, is an important occasion for Iran to appease Putin and his foreign policy circle, some of

whom are openly worried about a parallel corrosion of US-Russia relations because of the new Iran-Russia developments.

Yet this is not a "zero-sum game" and US policy makers can draw the right impression about Iran's good neighborly policies benefiting regional and global peace, presently deepened in part thanks to Russia's singular influence on Iran. That is highly unlikely, however, and the continuation of the one-dimensional coercive policy toward Iran, so deeply entrenched in Washington, is the more likely scenario, no matter how out of sync with the rest of the world community.

The "lonely superpower" that Samuel Huntington once wrote about now appears dangerously on the verge of losing its "coalition of the willing" against Iran, both inside and outside the United Nations. The only choice is either stubborn refusal to make the necessary policy adjustments toward Iran, along the lines of a non-threatening civil diplomacy, or to face what is certain to be a diplomatic defeat in the global arena.

Iran's soft-power diplomacy should be given much credit for both the summit's success and the related frustration of the US's coercive diplomacy.

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