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THE RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS: PRESENT STATUS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

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Russia regards maintenance of friendly relations with the countries bordering on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as one of the important trends in its foreign policy. Among these countries, Iran, as a major regional power, having a substantial influence on the situation on Central Asia and Transcaucasia, occupies one of the first places.

EURASIAN DIMENSION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Russia actively develops both economic and political relations with Iran. Politically, it can balance Russian relations with the West; help to contain other regional powers; neutralise possible attempts of Iran itself to dominate Central Asia (or at least some of its regions); allow to retain and even to extend its influence in the Middle East; deprive the anti-Yeltsin opposition of the trump card of accusing the government of a pro-Western bias; strengthen its positions in the solution of the problem of the legal status of the Caspian Sea.

Economically, Iran is one of the countries that can serve as a market for Russian industry, including the machine-building industry. This is a country rich in oil resources. Of immense importance is the prospect of the creation of transportation routes across Iran. Of great importance is also the economic role of co-operation within the Caspian Sea.

For Iran, development of relations with Russia cannot only make up for the lack of co-operation with the West but also help to solve a number of problems of an economic and political nature (e.g.. influence in the Central Asian and Transcaucasian region). Tehran follows the principle of not taking regional action capable of arousing a sharply negative reaction from Russia. Iranian leaders in 1995-1997 were advancing the idea of a strategic partnership with Moscow, which they were trying to persuade of the identity of dangers both countries encounter, and to link in one way or another relations with Russia to the anti-American rhetoric that was prevailing in Iran during this period.

So, development of ties with Iran corresponds with the concept of a multi-polar world that has been frequently stressed by the Foreign Minister of Russia, Yevgeny Primakov. Under him, the foreign policy of Russia is based on a balance between co-operation with Russia's key partners in the Western world and those in Asia. While integrating into Europe, Russia simultaneously creates a basis for normal and vigorous interaction with the countries of the Southern Tier. The Eurasian character of the Russian state itself also spurs it to an integrative impulse in two directions—Western and Eastern (southern). Here inevitably arises the question of the role of a geopolitical factor.

For Russian-Iranian relations today this role is greater than ever before. There are quite a few coinciding long-term interests of a strategic character in the macro-region of Eurasia and the Middle East, predetermining the proximity of Russia and Iran. The ones being the following:

- Maintenance of regional stability and the atmosphere of good-neighbourly relations and co-operation in Eurasia and the Middle East

- Realisation of mutually advantageous trade between them and the other countries of the region, including Central Asia and Transcaucasia
- Settlement of the existing regional and inter-ethnic conflicts and prevention of the outbreak of new ones; prevention of our two countries being involved in conflicting situations
- Combating drug trafficking
- Solution of the refugees problem and elimination of the causes of uncontrolled and destabilising migration of masses of people in the region
- Assurance of an effective development of the natural resources of the region, the resources of the Caspian Sea included
- Creation in the region of such a network of communications as would best guarantee the two countries' contacts with the rest of the world, and unrestricted movement of commodities and people.

To this can be added quite a number of other, less sizeable interests. Besides the coinciding interests of Russia and Iran, the two countries also have asymmetrical (but not necessarily clashing) interests.

For Iran, these are interests in the field of Islam, Islamic culture, Islamic education, etc. For Russia, there are its special interests in Central Asia, among them those in the military-strategic sphere (external frontiers of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the need of a single air-defence system, a single road system, the long common border with Kazakhstan—about 7000kms), and also such as are connected with the residence there of almost ten million Russians.

Each of the two states is interested in using its territory for new oil and gas pipelines, that will be constructed in the region. Under certain conditions, there might be a competition over this issue between them.

The existence of asymmetrical interests will not create serious problems in bilateral relations, but the most important condition for that is understanding and mutual recognition of each other's interests. Apparently, Russia's and Iran's sympathies in the inter-Tadjik conflict go to its different participants, but this did not impede their successful co-operation in its resolution.

RUSSIA AND IRAN IN THE WORLD

The systems of the two states' foreign political contacts also contain non-coinciding parameters, for instance, tension in relations between Iran and the USA and between Iran and Iraq, on the one hand, and the normal Russian-American and Russian-Iraqi relations, on the other. But these differing parameters in the systems of contacts and orientations have not caused serious collisions in bilateral relations either.

Some Russian experts mention a similarity of many circumstances in the international circumstances of Russia and Iran. One cannot but agree that both Russia and Iran have to counter the attempts to put them outside, though for different reasons, the regional and international structures, in disregard of or even restriction of their lawful interests. Quite an important regional and international problem is security in the Persian Gulf area. No effectively operating system of collective regional security in the future can be created here without the participation of Iran—the big regional power and which has vitally important interests here. Along with other powers, Russia could apparently play at least a limited role in guaranteeing the collective security of the Persian Gulf states. Confidence-building measures are needed today between these states, just as actual steps towards creating such a system.

During the last years, attempts have been made to influence Russia to cancel its nuclear-power deal

with Iran. Russian official representatives pointed out that Moscow was in no way interested in actions intended to isolate Iran, to restrict its entry into world markets, and to limit its chances of development. Russian officials have expressed the opinion that the methods of sanctions and dictate do not lead to the results expected by those who use them.

Russia is bound to be interested in the regional influence of Iran, playing quite an important part in the system of checks and balances in the macro-region in which the interests of many world powers intersect. On the whole, the more states with their own unique features the world community incorporates, the better. That corresponds with the concept of a multi-polar world, that Russian diplomacy is presently advocating.

There is no ignoring, of course, the differences in Russia and Iran's approaches to some issues concerning, for instance, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or the peace process in the Middle East. These differences are compensated by similar positions and joint interests; although it should be mentioned that some Russian politicians and experts are not fully confident that Iran's intentions towards Russia are absolutely friendly, in regional politics above all; suspicions do sometimes arise as to the desire to export Islamic revolution to the CIS.

Moscow and Tehran demonstrated similar approaches, for instance, toward events in Afghanistan. Both sides do not accept separatism and foreign interference in Afghan internal affairs. Both expressed belief that neither the Taliban nor any other grouping is capable of establishing full control over that country, and a solution can only be found in a compromise with account taken of the interests of the principal military-political groupings, the main mediating role being played by the UN.

Tehran believed in a strong inter-connection between the situations in Afghanistan and in Tadjikistan, arguing sometimes that it would be difficult to find a final solution for the inter-Tadjik conflict without any improvement of the internal situation in Afghanistan.

In the autumn of 1996, Iran made proposals for the resolution of the inter-Tadjik conflict, some of which were implemented in 1997.

The general principles of peaceful settlement in Tadjikistan as seen by Iran were as follows: Emomali Rakhmonov retains his post of President; the sides renounce their extreme positions; for a transitional period there will be created a Provisional Council, in which the government and the opposition will be represented in such a way as to ensure the opposition's participation in decision making; the government is reorganised to include representatives of the opposition and of the regions; free activities of the political parties are permitted; adherence of the sides to cease-fire agreements is confirmed and its term is prolonged up to the next round of talks. The talks should be held by turns in Tehran and Moscow. As a confidence-building measure, exchange of war prisoners and forcibly detained persons will be made between the rounds of negotiations. There would be worked out, with foreign participation, a plan of rehabilitation for Tadjikistan. The Iranians also proposed appointing Russia and Iran as 'curators' of the peace process and they would control and promote it.

As one of the observers of the progress of intra-Tadjik talks, Iran was for preserving their existing framework and against attempts to extend them beyond the bounds of the region. Iran was making persistent efforts to persuade the leaders of the Movement of Islamic Revival of Tadjikistan (MIRT) to make Tehran the centre of negotiation activities.

This official Iranian line, as some analysts believed, coexisted during that period with another line, with some Iranian radical clerics standing behind it, of an anti-Dushanbe and anti-Russian character. The clerical-controlled mass media were making attacks on Russian policy in Tadjikistan.

They justified the military activity of the Islamic opposition, which was, they alleged, deprived of the possibility to express its will by political means.

Moscow believed that one of the Departments of the “Kods” Headquarters—the Corps of Guards of the Islamic Revolution (CGIR), in charge of the CIS Moslem States—gave financial and advisory aid to MIRT, delivered arms to the Afghan-Tadjik border, provided communication between the MIRT headquarters in Tehran and field commanders in the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA), and also trained fighters for their subsequent dispatch to Tadjikistan.

FACTORS INFLUENCING BILATERAL RELATIONS

In the course of surveying the intersection of interests of Russia and Iran in a large macro-region, it is important to have an idea of how its configuration will change in the near and distant future. In other words, what new structures, alliances and lines will appear in it.

Such a forecast can apparently result from a detailed joint analysis of the situation. Within the framework of this paper, it is necessary only to state that relations between our two countries in this respect will be substantially influenced by the developments in:

- the CIS
- the republics of Central Asia and Transcaucasia
- the states of the Middle East
- the Arab-Israeli conflict
- Iranian-Iraqi relations (as well as Iran’s relations with its other Arab neighbours)
- Russian-American relations (and, more broadly, Russia’s relations with the Western structures, including NATO)
- Iranian-American relations
- inter-ethnic conflicts in Central Asia and Transcaucasia
- regional infrastructure (including the system of oil-and gas pipelines)
- the exploitation of the Caspian Sea
- Afghanistan and Turkey and relations of Russia and Iran with them
- the Kurdish problem, etc.

It is hardly worth-while to indulge in guesswork; therefore let’s indicate some elements of scenarios worked out by politologists and experts with regard to the region.

For the CIS, for instance, besides the scenarios of universal integration or break-up, consideration is given to the alternative of a multi-level, asymmetrical development with differing speed (partly already in operation), i.e.. the emergence within the CIS, which remains a regional market organisation, of multi-level groups of different degrees of integration (when one and the same state may be a member of more than one group or structure). Can a union of the Central-Asian states take shape within this process (or outside it)? A union of Transcaucasian states (just recall the current idea of a common Caucasian home)? Further advance of Russia and Kazakhstan to closer integration (possibly, together with Ukraine and Belarus)?

These and many other questions inevitably arise for the experts trying to predict the CIS states’ further development. The present model of their progress includes several levels. One of them is the

level of the Two—Russia and Belarus; another, of the Four—Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; a third, other CIS states, possible outsiders being those individual states which for various reasons are not inclined to attach much importance to their membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States. There are, moreover, other sub-regional associations within the CIS, for instance, the union of three Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan), that might be joined by the remaining two of them. A kind of union was also formed between other four states: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova. There are also several types of relationships in the CIS: at the general, multilateral, and bilateral levels. Some of the states are oriented primarily to bilateral relations, others to multilateral, and still others more willingly participate in some or other general projects and initiatives. Thus far, not all CIS states take part in most of the major joint projects (collective defence, peacekeeping, the guarding of external frontiers, customs union, etc.). Some states acquire a special status, excluding their actual participation in many projects (Turkmenistan, for instance, has obtained for itself international recognition of the status of neutrality; it claims, moreover, the role of the peacekeeping regional centre). There are forming here, too, a sort of axes and systems of special relations (along a number of parameters) between some or other states on a bilateral basis (Uzbekistan-Tadjikistan, the Ukraine-Turkmenistan, Russia-Turkmenistan, etc.). Obviously, no progress of the Commonwealth of Independent States is possible without a substantial advance in relations between Russia and the Ukraine.

Other questions also suggest themselves. Can changes take place in the structure of a number of CIS states (this refers, in part, to Georgia and Azerbaijan; unfortunately, the Chechen problem in Russia is not completely solved)? Can there be a revision of borders between the states (naturally, based on an agreement between the states concerned)? Experts regard the possibility of the federalisation of Georgia and Azerbaijan as the only feasible method of solving the Karabakh, Abkhazian and South-Ossetian problems.

Finally, the possibility is examined of a closer alliance between some of the CIS states and another state, outside the CIS; and, if this occurs, how it will influence the situation. The probability of more active contacts between Azerbaijan and Turkey is considered, in part.

SOME FORECASTS

Another forecast can be found in the strategic analysts' studies: the possible emergence in the Caspian Sea region of a zone of US vital interests owing to the American and other Western companies' investments in Caspian oil, which in the coming century will flow in huge amounts to Western countries.

One of the existing forecasts reveals the possibility of new inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts flaring up, with the use arms. It would hardly be correct to name particular spots which, in the opinion of my colleagues, can become 'hot'; but the appraisal of conflicting potential in the region makes it possible to indicate several dangerous areas.

The pessimistic scenarios offered by experts concerning Afghanistan include the disintegration of the single state. I refuse to share such a gloomy prediction, which has a poor chance (to my mind) of becoming a reality. I would remark that reflection on the ways of settling the intra-Afghan conflict leads to suggest several models of the state system of the future Afghanistan. These are: the formation of a centralised unitary state (possibly with a coalition republican government, monarchical rule, etc.); the preservation of the status quo; the creation of a federal state; the already mentioned alternative of disintegration de facto or de jure into several states.

Besides the concept of threats, it is customary to use also the concept of challenges, which may include, in particular, some of the objective indicators of the situation in a country and around it. Many of the states in the macro-region of Eurasia and the Near and Middle East are distinguished by their multinational populations; the existence of ethnic minorities as well as areas of their compact residence; the existence of separatist movements or centrifugal tendencies.

Our two countries, Iran and Russia, are not free of these challenges. In Iran apprehensions are expressed concerning the future of the Russian federal statehood, arising, above all, from the bitter experience of the Chechen conflict. Yet one should dare to say that Russia is not threatened by a break-up and the centrifugal inertia will be overcome. But the above mentioned challenges do exist both for Russia (although Russians make up more than 80 per cent of the country's population) and for Iran (where ethnic Persians total probably a little more than 50 per cent of the population).

Russia has a common feature with Iran in that it is not only a Christian but also a Moslem country: no less than 12 or 14 million Moslems live here. The proximity of our civilisations is also determined by historical and ethnic factors: there is a certain mutual understanding between Russia and the Persian-speaking world. These circumstances do not, of course, operate of themselves, but they can facilitate the accomplishment by politicians of their tasks of furthering closer relations between our two countries. Some experts in Russia believe that there exists a certain attraction within the triangle: Russia-India-Iran. Arguments are offered in favour of activating the multilateral co-operation: Russia-Iran-China. Russian public opinion as a whole is positive to a more profound development of Russian-Iranian relations.

It was important for Moscow that Russia and Iran have been able to bring their positions on the Caspian problem closer to one another. As was stated at a meeting in Tehran by a high-placed representative of the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, "Neither Russia nor Iran want this unique sea, the depository of enormous mineral and biological resources, to become a zone of acute rivalry. We decidedly oppose its barbarous plunder in a legal vacuum and insist on drafting its status on the basis of consensus of all the five Caspian states".

STATE OF BILATERAL TRADE AND ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION

The two states face a discrepancy between the level of commercial and economic relations and the level of political contacts: in 1993-1996, trade between the two countries declined (from \$723m to \$200m), they also express their dissatisfaction with the structure of exports and imports, as well as with the delay in the problem of settling mutual accounts.

Only in 1997 was an end put to the process of decline of mutual trade, and even some growth was observed. The value of trade in 1997 amounted \$450m dollars.

It is true that by 1996 the solution of the last problem was found, in principle, although was not realised. The Russian side also raises the question of opening Russian banks in Iran, which is forbidden by Iranian legislation. The Iranian Bank-e-Melli received a license to establish a branch on a representation basis in Moscow.

The Russian side likewise accentuated the beneficial principle of compensating the expenses of Russian machines and technical devices manufacturers with the deliveries of Iranian oil, mentioning the possibility of using this scheme in the realisation of future projects. The priority sphere of Russian investment is considered to be power, including nuclear, industry, oil-and-gas complexes, and the mining industry.

Now that the goods traffic across Transcaucasia has come to an end, Russia makes it its aim to improve the technical base of freight traffic with Iran via the Caspian Sea, and also to arrange railway communication using the Meshhed-Serahs line.

One of the peculiarities of Russian-Iranian relations are contacts among regions, the Astrakhan region and the Guilyan and Mazendaran provinces in particular. Iran also maintains contacts with Russia's national regions (Tatarstan and Udmurtia).

Economic co-operation between the two has made progress as the result of the first meeting, in December 1996, of the Permanent Russian-Iranian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Co-operation headed by Vice-Premier of the Russian Government and Minister of the Economy and

Finances of Iran.

According to the agreement reached, the most important project of Russian-Iranian co-operation will be the construction, with the help of Russian specialists, of a works producing alumina from petrolene, with a capacity of 200,000 tons per annum. The cost of this petrolene complex is estimated at \$1bn. The Iranian side intends using the alumina for its own aluminium industry.

Realisation of the documents, signed in September 1997, on the Russian Joint Stock Company Gazprom's participation in the development of the Southern Pars gas field, as well as in other projects whose value totals billions of dollars, will make it possible for Russia and Iran to increase considerably the volume of their bilateral contacts. According to press reports, the total value of the Iranian-French-Malaysian-Russian gas contract reaches two billion dollars.

The Russian side has of late been paying much attention to improvement of the contractual and legal basis of our trade and economic co-operation. Steps were taken to co-ordinate draft agreements on the elimination of double taxation, on mutual protection and encouragement of capital investments, co-operation and mutual aid in customs affairs, co-operation in postal and electronic communication, etc. The signing of these documents was planned to be done in the course of the second meeting of the joint commission in Tehran (the end of February 1998).

Russian-Iranian trade and economic relations have been hampered by a number of difficulties, including the non-observance by the Iranian side of the dates and terms of payments. Some of the agreements remain on paper, or their realisation proceeds with an appreciable delay. For example, the contract to deliver 42 coaches for the Tehran subway by the beginning of 1998, signed back at the beginning of 1997, has not yet started being executed. Little use is made of the potential of non-governmental participants in foreign economic endeavours. The situation can be improved by developing direct contacts between the various subjects of the Russian Federation and Iran's provinces. The Enzeli-Astrakhan ferry line has been made ready to be put in operation, and a consulate of Iran is to be opened in Astrakhan.

Iran shows a special interest in continuing military-equipment co-operation with Russia. The Iranians stress that they could become permanent partners of the Russian Federation in this field, making a radical re-orientation of their army to the Russian arms systems (so far the army is mostly trained to use Western weapons and is oriented to them), but Tehran will make such a decision if Russia agrees to it and gives appropriate guarantees.

Russian military-industrial circles would like to continue supplying Iran with armaments, regarding the Iranian market as of high capacity and promising; moreover, Russia can now easily take advantage of the moment when its principal Western competitors are not ready to deliver weapons to Iran. But co-operation in this field is restricted by the promise given by President Yeltsin to President Clinton during the Russian President's visit to Washington at the end of 1994, that was mentioned in mass media, not to make in the future new deals to deliver weapons to Iran.

In 1997, the Los Angeles Times accused Russia of selling the technology for the production of the SS-4, a Russian middle-range missile. The official representative of Rozvooruzhenie stated that the company had not transferred this technology to Iran. Some American journalists said that this problem was discussed during one of Gore-Chernomyrdin meetings and that the Russian Prime Minister denied any Russian missile deal with Iran.

There were also rumours that such a deal could be made by Iranians not with Russia, but with Northern Korea, Belarus, Ukraine or Kazakhstan. But the only producer of this type of missile in the former USSR was Jankel's Bureau in Dnepropetrovsk (Ukraine) and this was eliminated several years ago.

Recent years have also seen growing co-operation between Russia and Iran in the cultural and educational spheres. Iran, in part, has been giving active assistance in the study of the Farsi language and Persian culture in Russia.

Here it is necessary to tackle in brief the issue of the present state of relations between Iran and some Central Asian states, that have their impact on Russian-Iranian relations.

RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

Of all the countries of Central Asia Tehran maintains the closest contacts with Turkmenistan both in the economic and political spheres. This is largely due to the factor of both geographical and ethnic proximity (quite a large number of ethnic Turkmen live in the Iranian province of Khorasan). Relations with Uzbekistan are rather cool: this is the only CIS country that has agreed to join the American sanctions against Iran and openly accuses it of exporting Islamic extremism.

Iran's relations with Kazakhstan are developing quite dynamically. It should be specially mentioned that, after several years of negotiations, Kazakhstan and Iran have reached at last an agreement on the exchange of oil credits. At present the sides are preparing to make a contract for a term of ten years with the right of further prolongation. The US administration has not been able to frustrate the plans for Tenghiz oil, produced by the Chevron company, and West-Kazakhstan oil has recently gone south. It will be transported by Azeri tankers across the Caspian Sea and refined in northern Iran. Iran, in its turn, will be supplying adequate quantities of feed stock from its terminals in the Persian Gulf, on the Khark island in particular, to the export partners in Kazakhstan. As was stated by Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, Iran will be ready to receive annually over six million tonnes of Kazakhstan's oil and to export the same quantity, but the amount intended to be exported this year is only two million tonnes.

According to Kazakh officials, during his visit to the USA as far back as the autumn of 1995, President Nazarbayev received from US Vice-President Gore consent for the realisation of the 'southern version' of sale of oil. The Clinton administration regards this right, granted to Chevron despite the sanctions against Iran, as an exceptional and temporary measure, until another way out for oil transportation is found. Such a way out will be in part, the construction by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) of the Tenghiz-Novorossiysk line with the participation of Russia, whose completion is scheduled for the end of 1999.

Kazakhstan expects that within the next three years, over 15 million tons of Tenghiz oil will be sold through the southern direction. Later this oil can follow the CPC pipeline. The Kazakh authorities, however, want to continue co-operation with Iran. As was mentioned by the Minister of Oil and Gas Industry of Kazakhstan, Nurlan Balgimbayev, the southern direction can subsequently be used also for the export of oil to be extracted in the Kazakhstan section of the Caspian shelf. It is believed in Almaty that the United States' resistance can be overcome in this case as well.

GROWING POLITICAL LINKS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND IRAN

At the end of 1996, a visit of Primakov to Iran also took place. Mention should be made of the following officially declared results of the visit.

The ministers exchanged views concerning the situation developing in Afghanistan and made a joint statement on the state of affairs in that country.

There was initialled a memorandum on export controls, according to which the sides undertook not to proliferate mass destruction weapons and its manufacturing methods. This document is especially important for Moscow, which wants to convince the USA that the reactor which is now being built at the atomic power plant in Buser with its aid cannot be used for military purposes. At present Moscow announces again that both itself and Tehran adhere to the international standards of control over the export of military know-how.

An agreement was signed regarding consular services, which envisages an easier procedure of granting visas to citizens of the two countries.

Both Russian officials and independent analysts stress that Russia's co-operation with Iran is not

directed against any third country. A certain number of experts believe that, on the basis of adequate identification of the threats and consideration of the positions of each of the two countries, they can co-ordinate their efforts to prevent such activities of third countries as are detrimental to their interests or are directed towards the establishment of those third countries' hegemony in certain parts of the macro region. It is also important that the two countries mutually recognise the realities that exist in the region, among them the traditional role of Russia in Central Asia and Transcaucasia.

The significance of relations with Iran for Russia was demonstrated during the official visit of Nateq-Nouri to Russia in April 1997 at the invitation of State Duma. This visit coincided with an anti-Iranian campaign in Western Europe, and Moscow clearly let the other world know that it not only doesn't share this campaign, but on the contrary intends to develop deep friendly relations with Tehran.

This visit exceeded the habitual bounds of such events. During the visit, there were signed quite a number of inter-governmental and inter-departmental documents to extend bilateral co-operation, in the economic field most of all.

There has also started Russia's co-operation with Iran in the law-enforcing sphere. In December 1997, a visit to Iran was made by Anatoly Kulikov, Minister for Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation and Vice-Premier. An agreement was signed on co-operation of the two countries Ministries of Internal Affairs, and the ways were discussed of jointly combating crime, and illegal drug trafficking above all.

Since the end of 1997, Iranian leaders have been demonstrating the desire to normalise relations with the USA, the latter making some moves in reply. The escape of Iran from isolation, far from reducing its co-operation with Russia, will give it a new impulse.

Russia's relations with Iran are on the rise. In the eyes of the Russians, they represent a model of good-neighbourliness and co-operation between peoples of different historical-cultural traditions and beliefs.