



Will Iran Pivot to the East?

OE Watch Commentary: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s 1979 Islamic Revolution was meant to set Iran on a radically different course. For more than 150 years, Iran—or Persia as it had been known before 1935—was the subject of great power competition between the United Kingdom and first Russia and then the Soviet Union. Such history left an indelible mark on the Iranian consciousness: the accompanying excerpted article makes clear the continued sense of Iranian grievance surrounding the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, in which Russia forced Iran to cede the Caucasus. For a quarter century before the Islamic Revolution, the United States dominated Iran’s foreign relations. Khomeini’s revolutionary slogan “Neither East nor West but Islamic Republic” was meant as a declaration of independence for a new system and foreign policy. The Islamic Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis might have ended Iran’s close Cold War partnership with the United States, but Khomeini wanted to make clear to the Soviet Union that Washington’s loss would not be Moscow’s gain.



“Neither East nor West: Islamic Republic” graffiti in Tehran.
Source: Young Journalists Club, yjc.ir
https://cdn.yjc.ir/files/fa/news/1394/11/20/4125005_766.jpg

The article from *Jomhuri Eslami*, a broadsheet close the intelligence ministry, examines an ongoing debate about whether Iran should continue a strict “Neither East nor West” policy or align more closely and formally with Russia. The article argues that those celebrating Iran’s recent rapprochement with Russia (See “Iran-Russia Relations,” *OE Watch*, July 2016) is a mistake. The main argument is that Russia can still not be trusted. It quotes Hossein Ala’i, former head of Aseman Airlines, as relating that the Russian ambassador to Tehran informed him that Russia would not allow the Iranian government to purchase three Super Jet-100s as had previously been negotiated, because 10 percent of the parts were US-manufactured, and uses that anecdote to suggest that the Kremlin is not loyal in their partnership or truly a supervisor as they are afraid to defy the United States. That Russia also supported the nuclear sanctions in the run-up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is seen as further evidence that an alliance with Russia is unwise. The article also seeks to dismiss those who say Russia has changed, pointing out (without naming President Vladimir Putin) that senior Russian officials began their careers in the KGB and only changed uniforms or titles out of convenience.

The essay concludes that Khomeini’s vision and policy was wise. While it notes that Khomeini himself subsequently reached out to Soviet chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, it warns that Iran must continue to prioritize its independence rather than rely too much on Russia. While that does not mean severing relationships, it seems to send a shot across the bow of those who seek to develop Russo-Iranian ties further. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“There is no difference between the former Soviet Union and the current Russia as far as its broader policies are concerned.”

Source: “Taghsir-e Sahih Siyasat ‘Neh Sharghi, neh Gharbi’ (The Correct Interpretation of the Politics of ‘Neither East nor West’),” *Jomhuri Eslami*, 21 July 2018. <http://jomhourieslami.net/index.php?newsid=177913>

With the comings and goings of Russian and Iranian envoys to Moscow, discussion of the permissibility of the relationship with the East and its comparison with the West once again is circulating in political and media circles and especially in cyberspace. Some people condemn the “Look to the East” policy because the Russians have never proved faithful to their promises and, in addition to imposing some treaties such as Turkmenchai and supporting the Shah during the [Constitutional] Revolution [of 1906-1911].

In the course of the imposed war [the Iraq-Iran War], they also supported Saddam and cooperated with the United States in the outrageous sanctions before the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action....

Referring to these issues and other actions of the Russians, whether during the period of the Tsars or the Soviet Union, those who are opposed to strengthening our relations to Russia say that Russia cannot be trusted and so say we should not be moving toward a policy of “looking to the East.” It is also possible to see the same argument for denying the strengthening of relations with China in the remarks and writings of the opponents of the “Look to the East” policy....

Some of those people [urging outreach to Russia] even see some differences between today’s Russia and the Soviet Union, and based on that insight they say that the issue of East and West now does not apply to Russia. Therefore, we should not rely on the strategic principle of “neither East, nor West” that Imam Khomeini initiated, because the time of that policy has come to an end, and at the moment we have to confront America and the Western bloc.

But if these people look at the background of the current Russian rulers and study their files, they will see that nearly all of them were the members of the KGB in the former Soviet Union, and today too they approach their macro-management of their country and their foreign policy with the same outlook. Therefore, there is no difference between the former Soviet Union and the current Russia as far as its broader policies are concerned.