



Artículos y entrevistas

'Azerbaijan will turn into the infrastructure hub between Russia and Iran'

Paulo Botta

Early this week (on March 27th and 28th) Iranian President Hassan Rouhani paid an official state visit to Russia. Even though Vladimir Putin and Rouhani met several times in the last three years, those previous visits took place during multilateral meetings so this was the first bilateral visit.

The final statement (“Moving towards Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation”) is very clear about the shared regional and global interests of Iran and Russia. Not only about Syria, but also about Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, nuclear deal, economic and financial sanctions and global oil and gas markets. During the final press conference both presidents highlighted their determination to expand cooperation and, quite interesting, Rouhani stressed that “the development of our relations is not directed against other countries”.

Needless to say that the growing cooperation between those two countries is becoming an important geopolitical development in Eurasia. Nowadays Russia is very active in the greater Middle East, an engagement only comparable to the Soviet times. A good example is the political and military intervention in Syria where Moscow, Tehran and Ankara are cooperating as guarantors of the cease fire.

It is interesting to note that the recent diplomatic developments made Russia into an international diplomatic hub of the region. Turkey approached Russia at the same time that the problems with the European countries grow. Iran did the same in order to counter balance a harder (at least from the rhetoric point of view) position of the United States’ new administration. The Syrian peace process (besides Geneva) is taking place in Astana, Kazakhstan a close Russian partner. Even the Israeli Prime Minister visited two weeks ago Russia to try to convince Putin of the need to consider Israel perceptions on the situation in Syria.

President Rouhani framed this visit as an important one not only for strategic and foreign policy considerations but also due to domestic and economic considerations as well. On May 19th the upcoming presidential elections in Iran appear to be not so easy for the current president who wants to be re-elected for a second term of 4 years. It is mandatory for Rouhani to secure some economic improvement to the Iranian voters and there is where Russian oil and gas companies can play an important role since European companies are not so eager to invest in Iran in order to avoid United States reactions. Bilateral cooperation on the Gas Exporting Countries Forum has also proved to be very positive for the first (Russia) and third (Iran) countries with the largest gas reserves in the world.

Trade turnover between Iran and Russia is about 2 billion US dollars, which is not as important as two border countries could expect. This is the main reason of the common interest to develop economic cooperation in order to increase it in the next years. But this economic cooperation will not be focused on bilateral trade only, this trip paved the way for developing interbank ties, investments on infrastructure projects and even considering the possibility of a Free Trade area between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Regarding nuclear cooperation, President Putin emphasized that the current developments: the full operational reactor in Bushehr plant and the two other reactor that will be build will be done according to IAEA requirements and provisions.

At the same time the release of the S-300 system to Iran (it was purchased in 2007) it is a milestone on the military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. We should not forget that the most important part of Iranian military arsenal is still based on western technology. Iran has showed interest on other Russian equipment as S-30 aircraft and T-90 tanks.

On the security field we should mention that Iran and Russia share the perception that terrorism, mainly groups based on Salafist jihadist Sunni ideology, are the most important regional threat. This common perception facilitated the cooperation in Syria and it will improve the possibilities in Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen.

No doubt that the pivotal role of Russia and Iran (and Turkey as well) on the Astana talks between the representatives of the armed opposition and the Syrian government will have a great impact in the future of Syria and the relations of Moscow and Tehran with Damascus with regional consequences.

From the Iranian point of view, Russia is filling the vacuum of the great power willing to cooperate with Tehran which is something new on the Iranian foreign policy strategy, based in the last three decades on the idea of non-alignment. On the other hand, Russia is taking advantage of this situation to overcome what we can call a historical mistrust and a regional approach to one of the most important countries in the Middle East.

For Azerbaijan this Iranian-Russian approach is very positive since it will secure the development of the North-South transport corridor that was discussed in Baku by President Aliyev, Putin and Rouhani and it will turn Azerbaijan into the infrastructure hub between Russia and Iran.

Finally we should say that Iranian decision-makers are not so naïve as to not recognize that Russia is a global player and that the essential asymmetry must not be overlooked. Anyway both countries know that there would be many difficulties on this new road they are beginning to walk through.

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