

Khatami Visit to Russia Causes Nightmares for Geopoliticians

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The visit of Iranian President Seyyed Mohammed Khatami to Russia on March 12-15, was Samuel Huntington's nightmare come true.

The British-schooled geopolitician Huntington, became infamous for his launching the thesis, dubbed the "clash of civilizations," according to which, the 21st Century would be characterized by wars among civilizations. Thus, Islam would fight Christianity, Orthodox Christianity would counter Rome, Confucianism and Islam would together confront the Christian West; it would be Hindu against Muslim, Buddhist against Hindu, Muslim against Jew, and so on and so forth. Huntington, who comes from the same school as Bernard Lewis, has seen his geopolitical madness further elaborated in the recent works of Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his projections of the breakup of the Russian Federation, and the re-drawing of the map across the Caucasus and Central Asia. It was Brzezinski, one should remember, who masterminded the Afghansi operation in the 1980s, which exploited Islamic guerrillas in Afghanistan, against the Soviet Union. The aim then, was to use the "Islamic card" to break up the Soviet Union; today, the name of the game played by Brzezinski, Huntington, et al., is to break up Russia, China, India, and other leading nation-states in Eurasia, by manipulating and fuelling so-called ethnic/religious insurgencies.

What this historic visit has signalled, is the consolidation of new arrangements across cultural and political lines in Eurasia, which will be capable of tearing up Huntington's strategic blueprints. What Khatami achieved can be summed up in the documents signed by him and Russian President Vladimir Putin, on a series of crucial matters. But, the significance of the visit goes beyond the treaties per se.

Khatami is the first Iranian President to visit Russia since the 1979 Iranian revolution; moreover, he is the first Iranian head of state to visit Moscow in three decades, the last such visit having been undertaken in 1974 by the Shah of Iran. Khatami was accompanied by several government members, including Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, and Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani.

From the outset, the visit was hailed in Russia as great event. Khatami met President Putin, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, Minister of Atomic Energy Yevgeni Adamov,

Presidential Advisor for Caspian Sea affairs Viktor Kalyuzhny, Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, and other officials. He visited industrial sites near Moscow, and toured the Space Control Center at Korolyov near Moscow. He also addressed the State Duma (the lower house of parliament), visited St. Petersburg (which has a cultural agreement with the Islamic renaissance city of Isfahan), and met with the Muslim community in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan republic. He met Patriarch Aleksii II, supreme leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the leader of the Muslim community, Ravil Gaynutdin.

According to Danish press reports, Presidents Putin and Khatami conversed in German, which they both speak fluently. (Putin had served the Soviet Union in East Germany for many years, while Khatami led the Islamic Center in Hamburg, in the 1970s, up to the time of the revolution.)

Space Technology and Arms

The documents which were signed on the first day, spoke volumes about the vastly upgraded relations between the two nations. The Treaty on the Fundamentals of Mutual Relations and principles of cooperation pointed out "that each of the sides pledges not to use force or threats of force in mutual relations, not to use its territory for committing aggression, subversive and separatist actions against the other side," according to the Russian wire service Strana.ru. Furthermore, if either side is subjected to aggression, the other side "shall not render any aid to the aggressors," and should seek negotiated solution to the conflict. This treaty is to last ten years, and be automatically prolonged for five years, unless cancelled in writing.

The second document was a joint statement on the Caspian Sea, in which the sides "openly state their non-acceptance of the laying on the sea-bed of any Trans-Caspian oil and gas pipelines." It stated, furthermore, that the two sides want the Caspian to be used only for peaceful purposes, and hold that "the presence in the Caspian area of armed forces of non-Caspian states is inadmissible." As Putin said in a joint press conference, the two sides agreed to set up experts meetings, to take place before the April summit of the Caspian littoral states.

Furthermore, Putin and Khatami signed joint statements, "on strategic stability, on combatting of terrorism and on the



Iranian President Seyyed Mohammed Khatami (left) was the first Iranian head of state to visit Moscow since 1974. His meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) was given great importance by both sides; London and Washington reactions were hostile.

maintenance of international security, and expressed a similar approach to the non-proliferation of nuclear arms, to observance of the 1972 ABM treaty, to NATO's eastward expansion, to the role of NATO on the international scene, and also to urgent regional issues," according to Strana.ru.

Finally, following meetings between the defense ministers of the two governments, the two sides were to sign agreements, for a wide range of Russian military equipment to be sold to Iran. Putin signalled his intention to do so, on the day of Khatami's arrival, March 12. According to the Russian news agency RIA, which quoted Russian Defense Ministry sources, plans for military sales included more than 540 T72-C tanks, and more than 1,000 armored vehicles, based on a contract that had been signed, but de facto frozen by the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement, which banned such sales. Further equipment to be sold to Iran, includes parts and components for Soviet-made MiG-29 and Sukhoi-24MK fighters. Klebanov stated that Iran was interested also in purchasing Russia's advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, according to Interfax.

In addition to the military hardware, Putin pledged to finish the Bushehr nuclear plant in Iran, and the two discussed plans for Russia to help construct three or four more such plants. Finally, Russia is reportedly leading the bidders for manufacture of Iran's first satellite. As the director of the Russian Aerospace Agency Yuri Koptev said, while accompanying Khatami on his tour of the Russian space mission control center, "Iran is a developing country planning to advance along different avenues of technical progress, including the development of high-tech and space technology."

Bush White House Opposed

The response from London and Washington was vitriolic. The London *Times* of March 13, blared out, "Moscow Defies Bush With Iran Arms Deal." It complained that the arms deal were "in breach of an agreement with the United States that

has underpinned regional security for the past five years," referring to the Gore-Chernomyrdin accord. It went on to assert that this deal "is the latest sign of an increasingly hostile relationship with the United States" on the part of Putin.

In reality, President Putin had said the arms deliveries would in no way contravene international law, and stressed the purely defensive nature of the items to be sold. The same message was delivered in person by Russian National Security Adviser Sergei Ivanov, in meetings with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington on March 14. That same day, Powell, in testimony before the Senate Budget Committee, lashed out at Moscow, saying, "We have to be concerned when we see suggestions that they may be investing in weapons sales in countries such as Iran." Powell said Moscow's policy was repeating errors of the Soviet era. "The old Soviet Union wasted decades of treasure investing in regimes that had no future. It's a lesson they should have learned—that it would not be wise to invest in regimes that are not following accepted standards of international behavior."

One day earlier, White House spokesperson Mary Ellen Countryman announced that President Bush had renewed the sanctions, which prohibit trade and investment with Iran.

What prompted such a violent response, even before any concrete arms deal had been announced, was not any serious concern of a military nature on the part of the Bush Administration. Any fool knows—including the many that populate the current cabinet—that the so-called "rogue state" Iran does not constitute a strategic threat to the United States, at least, from a military standpoint. The perceived "threat" emanating from Iran, and particularly from its growing cooperation with Russia, is of another sort entirely.

Infrastructure Diplomacy

The facts of the matter are the following. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and, increasingly, since President Khatami was swept to power in 1997 elections,

Iran's foreign and strategic policy has been shaped by its commitment to building the Eurasian Land-Bridge, reconstructing the ancient Silk Road, through modern, advanced transportation infrastructure. Given its geographical location, Iran is the natural bridge for all of Asia into Europe, and Africa. For the newly independent, landlocked countries of Central Asia, Iran represents access to markets reachable by sea. Along with the rail transportation lines which Iran has been building, to complete its part of this transcontinental bridge, the country has also been negotiating vast gas and oil deals, primarily with Central Asian producers, to allow them either access through Iran, to ports and markets, or to swap Iranian gas or oil, for theirs, on the same international markets. In this context, Iran has sealed numerous important pipeline agreements, to transport resources from the Central Asian republics, overland across Iran, into Turkey, for example, and thence, to Europe. It has been pursuing the same kind of pipeline diplomacy eastwards, to provide markets in India and China.

At the same time, since Vladimir Putin has assumed the Presidency in Moscow, Russia has shifted its orientation towards Asia, seeking closer economic, political and strategic ties with China, as well as India, and Iran, in a manner which is coherent with Russia's role in the Eurasian Land-Bridge perspective. It is the foreign visits of Putin, and others in the Russian leadership, to these countries, as well as the visits by Khatami to places like China, and now Russia, which are the *casus belli* behind the threatening tones coming out of Washington.

The geopolitical establishment in London and Washington, reinforced in the new Bush Administration by the presence of the big oil interests associated with Bush, Cheney et al., is determined to smash any perspective for fruitful cooperation among China, Russia, India, and Iran, along the lines of the New Silk Road. It is as determined to prevent any pipeline construction which will threaten their firm control over access to the rich raw materials in the region. Thus, for example, the renewed talk of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project, from Turkmenistan, under the Caspian Sea into Azerbaijan, and thence to Turkey. It has become a cliché, that the only reason why the Baku-Ceyhan project has been pushed at all, is that it neatly outflanks both Russia and Iran.

The friends of Huntington and Brzezinski in London and Washington, are committed thus to thwarting any and all Russian and/or Iranian pipeline projects, and asserting claims to the raw materials resources in the region. To attain their goals, they are prepared to buy off political figures, with rich promises of pipeline deals. They are just as prepared, to destabilize the still-centralized governments in Central Asia.

Against the backdrop of these geostrategic policy objectives, the deeper significance of the Khatami visit to Russia emerges. In all official statements on the visit, what was stressed by both sides, was that enhanced economic, political and military cooperation, would increase regional stability

and security. The document outlining principles for cooperation, very clearly indicates that this is a step in the direction of establishing an actual strategic partnership. In the case of the joint statement on the Caspian, the key feature, is their agreement against any such underwater pipeline project, and their commitment to defining a legal regime for the Caspian Sea resources. This very complicated issue, is to be straightened out at an April summit of the five littoral states (Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakstan, and Iran). The agreement between Russia and Iran at this point is important, in that they are the signators to the only existing treaties on the sea, which will be superseded by the new agreement. The other crucial feature to the joint statement on the Caspian, is their commitment to preventing any military presence of "non-Caspian states" to be deployed. This, together with their other joint statement mentioning identical views on the eastward expansion of NATO; makes clear their opposition to allowing NATO forces, under whatever guise, to penetrate the region.

Furthermore, Russian-Iranian cooperation in the fight against drug-trafficking and terrorism, is directed against the Afghan-based Taliban insurgency. Iran, which is an Islamic republic, has maintained a principled stance against the Taliban, rightly denying it any "Islamic" legitimacy. Both Russia and Iran are directly threatened by the Taliban, both militarily (as the Chechen insurgents are an emanation of the Afghans phenomenon), and through the spreading drug plague. Former Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov, who characterized the visit as "the biggest event in the history of Tehran-Moscow relations," which "will have a large impact on Iran-Russia relations and the regional peace and stability," added that "the Iran-Russia alliance has been instrumental in the Caucasian region and for bringing peace to Tajikistan."

Dialogue Among Civilizations

Huntington presented his thesis—or more precisely his project—as the Clash of Civilizations. President Khatami, is the person who first proposed to the United Nations, that the year 2001, be designated the year of the Dialogue Among Civilizations, in direct juxtaposition to the geopolitical conflict idea. Not only has the United Nations General Assembly adopted the proposal, but Iran has been aggressively conducting this dialogue, at different levels, since Khatami's entering office in 1997.

The result has been a refreshing redefinition of international politics, at least among those statesmen, and religious leaders, who have grasped the significance of the idea. Among them, appears to be Putin. In greeting his guest, he presented him with a gift, a Russian translation of *Khatami's View of Civilizations*, which, he said, had become popular not only among Russian Muslims, but generally. The Russian President praised the book as a philosophical interpretation of communications among civilizations and relations between East and West.