

NEWYORKPOST

Why Iran is falling into Russia's arms

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Last Updated: 3:09 AM, February 14, 2013

Posted: 10:59 PM, February 13, 2013

‘A strategic partnership’: So Iran and Russia describe the series of security, economic and cultural agreements they’ve signed together in the past few weeks.

Iran's Foreign Minister Ai-Akbar Salehi arrived in Moscow this week to co-chair the first annual session of the "partnership" with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. Days earlier, a group of officers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard arrived in the Russian capital for a crash course in crowd control and civil unrest.

They're expected to return to Iran by May and be "operational" in time for the June presidential election.

Iranian authorities are nervous about expected unrest during the elections, and so have called on Russia to help prevent an Iranian version of the "Arab Spring." But Russia made its support conditional on signing a security treaty with Iran; Tehran complied last month.

The agreement represents a break with an old principle in Iran's defense and security doctrines.

Russia has been a source of fear and fascination for its Iranian neighbors since the 18th century. Several wars of varying magnitude proved Russia to be a threat, as successive czars dreamed of winning control of a port on the Indian Ocean — which meant annexing or dominating Iran.

In Iranian political folklore, Russia has long been depicted as a bear whose embrace, even if friendly, could smother you.

The dynamic persisted despite multiple changes of regime in both nations. Even after the fall of the shah and of the USSR, the Iranian tradition of keeping the Russian bear at arm's length continued under the Khomeinist regime.

It's clear that a different fear has moved Tehran to abandon that tradition.

The new security pact provides for cooperation in intelligence gathering and the fight "against terrorism, people-trafficking, and drug-smuggling." But it more significant is that it commits Russia to training and equipping Iranian security forces to deal with civil unrest.

Tehran and Moscow are nervous about being hit by Arab Spring-style uprisings. Under the agreement, Moscow will help Tehran create special police units patterned on the 500,000-strong "internal army" controlled by the Russian Interior Ministry.

There are other signs of change in Moscow-Tehran relations. Last week, Iran played host to Russian warships visiting Bandar Abbas on the Strait of Hormuz in what looks like the opening gambit for a Russian naval presence in the strategic waterway.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has always seemed keen on drawing the Islamic Republic closer to Moscow as part of his dream of a Tehran-Moscow-Beijing axis. But Russia has long played hard to get — mostly because Boris Yeltsin and then Vladimir Putin hoped to strike a deal with the United States, declining repeated invitations by the mullahs to pay a state visit to Tehran.

Days after the Irano-Russian pact was signed, Putin announced that he had terminated security cooperation with the United States on the fight against drug trafficking, people-smuggling and piracy.

Observers in Tehran say the change in relations is caused by several factors. Both regimes are involved in the Syrian civil war on the side of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Both believe that the "Arab Spring" is the result of "plots" hatched by Washington under the Bush administration. Both fear that the "velvet revolution" recipe for regime change could be used against them.

And both Moscow and Tehran regard what they see as an US strategic retreat under President Obama as an opportunity. They think that, with the United States out, no other power has the capacity to check their regional ambitions.

Yet hugging the bear is unpopular in Iran. Many Iranians still regard Russia with suspicion — while many Russians would rather see their country as part of the Western world and not an ally of an Islamist regime.

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