

Comparative Hegemony: Tsarist and Communist Approaches towards Iran

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts Russian policy towards Iran in the early years of 20th century which led to the Anglo-Russia convention of 1907 with the Soviet Union's policy towards Iran during Iran-Iraq war in 1980s. It will explain Russia's involvement in the Great Game with British Empire in regard to expansion of its sphere of influences in Persia. With this in mind, this paper will address both internal and external factors in this period which turned Russia and Britain's competition into an alliance – the Anglo-Russia entente. The Soviet policy towards Iran will also be discussed from the time of the overthrow of the Shah's regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic up to mid-1987 when the Iran –Iraq war ended. Based on this study, we will conclude that the Russian/Soviet policy towards Iran was constant and the spirit of expansionism lied at the very nature of their foreign policy. They were aggressive when they were a hegemonic power in the region and they compromised with rivals when they were weak.

Keywords: Russia, USSR, Iran, Persia, Great Britain, Anglo-Russia Convention

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Introduction

The history of Iran in the twentieth century is a history of the rivalry of big powers. In the beginning of 20th century, a great struggle ensued between two forces, Russia and Britain, for influence in Iran. In 1907, the competition shifted to an alliance which resulted in the Anglo-Russia Agreement.⁽¹⁾ During the 1980s, the major problem in Iran, as everywhere else in the world, resulted from the rivalry between two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. While the former promised the peasants and workers of Iran a utopia under Communism, the latter offered the country an opportunity for gradual democratic improvement under modernization programs. The United States might have conceivably had no territorial or imperialistic ambitions in Iran. The American government wanted Iran to be strong enough to maintain its independence and integrity against its northern neighbor, the Soviet Union.⁽²⁾

In this essay, from an historical-analytical approach, we will compare Iran--Russia relations in 1907 with that of the 1980s, based on information derived from two main sources: (1) original documents such as treaties and legal documents, and (2) existing literature covering various aspects of this period in English and Persian. We will review the internal situation of Iran and external circumstances during both periods. Then, we will review the relations between the two countries during these times; the beginning of 20th century as well as from the time of the overthrow of the Shah's regime and the establishment of Islamic Republic up to mid-1987 when the Iran -Iraq war ended. In light of my findings, we will



describe the spirit of aggressiveness and expansionism in the Russian and then Soviet diplomacy more generally. In regard to Methodology for analysis of foreign policy, two schools of thought emerge. The first, called the micro-analytic approach, focuses on domestic factors, such as economic and political systems, ideology, and perceptions of political elites. The second school of thought, entitled the macro-analytic approach, examines the influence of the external or international environment, such as the international structure and the role of other great powers.⁽⁹⁾

Indeed, both schools have something to offer. It would be difficult to completely ignore the domestic structure--the nature of the political system and political forces operating internally--and focus exclusively on external factors. Conversely, it would be unwise to see foreign policy as a reflection of internal pressures and pay no attention to the structure of world systems or threats posed by other countries. Therefore, I believe that both schools provide necessary perspectives to assess Russia/Soviet relations towards Iran.

I - Persia-Russia Relations In 1907

At the beginning of twentieth century, as earlier, monarchy was the basic internal feature of Iran and the most structured unit of decision making (Ramazani, 1966:33). However, the divided loyalties and the problem of succession to the throne continued as the Shah of Persia was an absolute monarch and his character was supremely important in decision-making; he could do what he pleased. His word was law and his decisions final (Abrahamian, 1982:9; Sykes, 1951:381). The country suffered if "he was unwise and capricious or profited if he was prudent and realistic," but the latter was seldom the case during this period (Ramazani, 1966: 35-36).

The early 1900s also witnessed the intensification of Iranian nationalism, due to a variety of reasons resulting from contact between British workers and officials with Iranians in some projects like the telegraph line project, the establishment of a European



education system in Persia, and most significantly, western penetration, especially economic as well as political, that threatened the security and integrity of Persia (Sykes, 1951: 394). Nationalism symbolized a departure from traditional foreign policy making and reduced the role of the Shah in the process of decision making; yet some elements of traditional foreign policy continued until the First World War (Ramazani, 1966:81). The impact of nationalistic beliefs on the process of policy making was important because of two factors: 1) the nationalization objective of foreign policy, and 2) the emergence of new policy makers. But this pattern of politics was also influenced by traditional factors such as “Shii’a fanaticism, ignorance, and forcible seclusion” (Ramazani, 1966: 35).

The “Great Reforms” in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century--the elimination of serfdom and the rise of the middle class, in particular industrialists, businessmen, and technicians --favored industrial expansion. The growth of industrialization continued and reached eight percent a year in the 1890s (Riasanovsky, 1963: 471). Count Serge Witte, who became Minister of Finance in 1892, believed that national strength was directly related to industrial capacity and, consequently developed the system of transportation -- the railroad. He used government resources to build railroads that increased in length by some 40 percent between 1881 and 1894 and doubled between 1895 and 1905 (Brace, 1955: 576). The ambitious railway projects relied extensively on foreign loans. To encourage foreign investors, Witte attempted to balance Russia’s budget, accumulate gold reserves, assume a favorable balance of trade, and increase government revenue. In 1897, Witte put Russia on the gold standard to assure foreign investors of the stability of Russian finance (Thaden, 1971: 317).

In some instances, these policies furthered industrialization and set foreign policy. By the 1890s the production of coal rose three times and that of pig iron almost sevenfold; and the production of oil at Baku grew from 226 to 600 million PUDs (Thaden, 1971: 318). In



spite of these unquestionable achievements, Witte's economic policies were criticized because of the gold standard, high tariffs, high taxes, and foreign loans depressed the living standard of peasants and workers (Brace, 1955: 576).

The great Russian industrialization stopped with the depression of 1900, especially because the Russian peasant population became depleted; the depression recurred several times and even coincided with the Revolution of 1905 when it had significant effects: 1) the cities grew, 2) the bourgeoisie challenged the nobility, 3) the captains of industry demanded political influence, and 4) reformed wage earning claimed its rights. The workers protested long hours, low pay, and poor working conditions, which resulted in the labor movement. For example, by 1903 they called for more than 500 strikes. Later, when students joined them, socialist propagandists gave it a political nature (Brace, 1955: 576).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately ninety million Russians (75 percent of the total population) were peasants, but the amount of land available to them did not increase as much as the population increased. Therefore, the peasants on average had less land in this period than they had in the middle of the nineteenth century. Consequently, not only was production low, but Russia also had difficulties adapting to new methods of production because of ancient customs, ignorance, and lack of capital (Brace, 1955: 574).

Both the 1892 famine and external pressures produced an agrarian crisis in Russia. American and Canadian production lowered the price of grain, and the German tariff on agricultural produce closed an important market to Russia. A great number of farmers migrated to town and increased the working class. Although the condition of the peasantry in the north (where population was lower than other areas) was better, the peasant class lost hope and no longer considered the Tsar the protector of the peasant. During this period, the Tsar became the common enemy of both the peasantry and the workers (Brace, 1955: 575).



Russia consisted of native groups in Finland and other Baltic states, Poland, and the Ukraine. These nations undermined the unity of the empire and contended against the policy of cultural Russification. In Finland, a strong liberal democratic movement denounced autocracy. In Poland, too, nationalism dreamed of the great past. Both Finish and Polish nationalist movements desired independence. Ukrainians, who were about 32 million people with different languages and customs, protested the Russian overlord. All these nationalistic aspirations could not be controlled by Imperial Russia (Brace, 1955: 576).

Persia occupied an important strategic position for European powers, Britain, and Russia, who from the beginning of the nineteenth century, sought to establish their domination over that land. Russian motivations stemmed from a desire to gain access to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, while the British tried to contain Russian designs and save trade roads through India. In this respect, Persia worked as a geographical belt at which the dynamics of Russian expansionism and British expansionism met. Both great powers could have gained and solidified control over the region but only by risking a major war. Because neither power could afford an expensive, lengthy occupation, their competitions moved from military issue into the economic and political arenas (MacLean, 1979: 17).

When the Constitutional Revolution broke out in Iran, that country became the focal point of Anglo-Russian competition for economic concession, as well as for influence over individual Iranians whose positions or potential positions could be utilized (Cottam, 1979: 160). For example, Russia's great economic concessions included: 1) establishment of a powerful bank; 2) ownership of communication concessions; 3) control of the sugar and fishing industries; and 4) receipt of a major share of revenue from customs and customs administration. The British, too, attached great importance to controlling the customs revenues of the ports of the Persian Gulf. Revenues were derived largely from British trade, the most regular



source of income for the central regime. Later, the British gained assurance from the Shah that no foreign management of customs revenues of the Gulf ports would be allowed (McLean, 1979: 12).⁴⁾

The diplomatic missions of both powers were also well aware of the value of prestige in Persia, and each attempted to promote its own. Russian diplomacy, with its strong-arm tactics, gained heavily against the more patient and conciliatory attitude that the British tended to adopt (McLean, 1979: 9). The Russians exercised considerable pressure on officials in the Persian government by bribery and by supporting and managing local governors in provinces via the same methods. The line between bribery and finance could be vague and loans meant substantial influence on the system; indeed, economic and political matters became inseparable in Persia. The power over the government in Tehran was consolidated through financial assistance (McLean, 1979: 12). Generally speaking, the greater either power's investment in Persia, the greater their influence over the future of the country. However, nationalistic movements in Iran threatened British and Russian interests, and their control of Iran was depended to these movements, which could also upset at any time the Anglo-Russia balance of power in Iran of. Anglo- Russia loans provided political authority in Persia, but clashed with their diplomacy in the country (Cottam, 1979: 15).

Origins of the Anglo-Russia Agreement may be traced back to discussions in the 1890s, but the first real attempt at negotiation came in 1903 in connection with the German activity in the Persian Gulf⁵⁾, the British financial situation⁶⁾, and later the defeat of Russia by Japan in the Russo-Japanese war.⁷⁾ At that time, the response had not been favorable and nothing developed; however, the Russian defeat led to improvement in Anglo-Russian relations. In October 1905, negotiations resumed and produced the 1907 Anglo- Russia Convention (Busch, 1967: 375).

In the 1900s, the German Empire was added to the circle of European powers and became interested in Persian Gulf affairs. The



concession of the Baghdad Railway (from Konia in Asia Minor to the Persian Gulf) was signed by the Germans in 1899. The idea of the project was to bring the line down to the Bay of Kuwait, but it was stopped by British opposition because its interests were threatened by growth of foreign commerce in Gulf waters (Busch, 1976: 345-346). After 1902, Germany pushed ahead and developed trade in the region. For example, the value of German exports to the area rose fivefold, and the total value of German trade with Persia multiplied by three times and by 1903 took a political dimension (McLean, 1976: 19).

The defeat of Russia in the Far East produced significant consequences in that country by first directing Russian aspirations and thoughts from Asia towards Europe. They became concerned over competition with the Triple Alliance with Balkan countries and Constantinople (Middleton, 1971: 86). Russia neither turned its eyes once again to the Middle East nor planned to possess the warm water port of Tsarist dreams on the Persian Gulf. Second, the war put the country in turmoil and the government lost authority which it regained at the cost of constitutional reform. Additionally, Russia relied on foreign financial support, especially from France, and needed loans to build its domestic economy. Both domestic as well as foreign considerations justified strengthening alliances with France and later with Britain (Middleton, 1971: 86-87).

The maintaining of Persia as a buffer state depended on the willingness of the British government to provide finances. Only by providing money to the Persian government or by helping private financiers to lend money could the British exercise any diplomatic influence in Iran. Some officials in London, like Curzon, advised the British government to protest Russian loans to Iran and provide Persia with enough loans to cover other foreign loans. But Britain's military and financial resources were already strained by the Boar War and by the Boxer Rebellion in China (McLean, 1979: 29).

The agreement between the two countries stated that Britain and Russia would mutually respect the integrity and independence of Persia.



Both desired the preservation of order throughout Persia, for its peaceful development on the one hand and the permanent establishment of equal advantages for trade and industry of all other nations.⁽⁸⁾

According to the agreement, Iran was divided into British and Russia spheres of influence, with a neutral zone between. Britain was not allowed to seek favors or support beyond the line from Qasir-e-Shirin, passing through Isfahan, and Yazd ending at a point on the Iranian frontier at the intersection of the Russian and Afghanistan frontier. Mutually, Russia was not allowed to seek political and economic favor beyond a line going from the Afghan frontier by way of Birjand, Kerman, and ending at Bandar Abbas. In the Neutral Zone, Great Britain and Russia agreed not to seek favors

The convention was criticized both in Russia and in Britain. Count Witte believed that, in the division of Persia, Russia received what it already possessed and renounced all claims to the southern parts of Persia, in other words, Persia had slipped out of Russia's hands. From the British perspective, the Russian sphere of influence came in fact under full Russian control and was only nominally ruled by the Shah of Iran. Since the capitol and centers of power were in the Russian sphere, the Persian government, as well as the whole country, was effectively dominated by Russia. According to Lord Korzon, the Britain foreign minister, the agreement was advantageous to Russia, and Britain hoped Iran would not come entirely under Russian influence (Sykes, 1988: 412-415).

II - Soviet Policy towards Iran in the 1980s

The Islamic worldview was the basis of the Iranian government. A religiously-inspired, ideological-psychological complex of factors influenced Iranian behavior in both internal and external arenas. There were two important concepts forming the basis of Imam Khomeini's powerful eminence. The first was *Vilayat-e-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) and the second was "neither East nor West, only the Islamic Republic".⁽⁹⁾



To understand the diplomatic strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is necessary to understand Imam Khomeini's concept of Islamic world order: the idea of *Vilayat-e-Faqih*. To him, the concept of government remains rooted in *Vilayat* (guardianship), that belongs to God, the prophet Muhammad, and the twelve Imams, and passed to the *Faqih* (Islamic Jurist) in their absence. The *Faqih* has temporal as well as spiritual authority, as long as the twelfth Imam "Mahdi" (Messiah) is absent (Ramazani, 1988: 20).

The rule of *Faqih*, before the appearance of Mahdi, prepares the situation for the ultimate establishment of Islamic world government by Mahdi. *Faqih* attempts to create a just and equitable government to open the way for the world government of "Imam Mahdi." After the revolution, Imam Khomeini claimed that only in Iran had the government of God been established (Rainazani, 1988: 20). As Prime Minister Mir Hussein Mussavi mentioned, Iran aspires to spread justice throughout the world to liberate mankind (Ramazani, 1988: 21). Based on *Vilayat Faqih*, the *Faqih* and in this period Imam Khomeini, had the responsibility of political leadership, formation of the Islamic government, as well as to serve as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

The Khomeini view of the international system conflicted with the role superpowers envisioned for themselves in world affairs. Based on the slogan "Neither East, nor West, only the Islamic Republic," Iran set out to settle its account with superpowers and to show that it could take on the world ideologically; however, this created a problem. Imam Khomeini believed a conflict existed between the Islamic Republic on the one side and western and eastern powers on the other side because they have allocated all worldly powers to themselves at the expense of the masses in less developed countries (Ramazani, 1988: 21).

The Islamic Republic rejected the role of the superpowers, but not to balance or play off one power against the other. Iran insisted on Islamic self-reliance and establishment of the Islamic world order.



According to Prime Minister Mousavi, the Islamic Republic would not under any circumstances side with the East or with the West. Generally speaking, the Islamic Republic had a new system of values, independent of East and West and based on Islamic ideology which would set the country on a different path and define its relations with other countries and national movements (Ramazani, 1988: 21).

In the early years, Russians/Soviets achieved important economic successes. The main aim in Stalin's plan was to transform the Soviet Union into an industrial power. Production in the conventional sectors of industry--coal, oil, iron, steel, and cement--had increased tremendously at the expense of inflicting great hardship on the population and using millions of prisoners. Industrialization in this period took place and was spearheaded by an absolute bureaucratic-centralist system (Leonhard, 1984: 40).

The Soviet system of the 1980s still bore considerable resemblance to the system Stalin created in the 1930s; absolute bureaucratic-centralism controlled the Soviet economy. The system was structured vertically, with orders coming from the top. These orders were issued from various sources--local, republican, or union--and often with different priorities. In Soviet Russia, a large number of officials were responsible to propagate the system and justify inconsistency in governmental decisions. On the other hand, directors of enterprises could not deal with all the varied demands of the levels of bureaucracy (Leonhard, 1984: 41).

Soviet enterprises focused more on quantity at the expense of quality. However, there were official "state norms," and the "department for technical control" checked standards of quality. People who worked in these departments were employees of the plant; therefore, it was not in their interest to jeopardize plans by exerting effective quality control (Leonhard, 1984: 42).

Moscow was well aware of the importance of innovation in the system as well as the necessity of introducing new technology into the production process. There were various administrations to deal with



invention and discovery, but a new project required a long process of coordination as well as many signatures to become operational. In this bureaucratic-centralist economic system there was little accountability. The industrial manager was also reluctant to accept an innovation because he would need to reorganize the firm, which might temporarily lessen output and jeopardize production schedules (Leonhard, 1984: 43-45).

The Soviet Union faced a variety of problems in its economic sectors especially agriculture.⁽⁹⁾ The shortfall in production obligated the country to import millions of tons of grain from abroad in order to prevent a serious food crisis. Officials in Moscow believed the problem and root of the shortfall laid in the bureaucracy that administered it. In the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Agriculture, as well as a several other ministers, dealt with agriculture at various levels of organization--party, state, and union. These departments in charge of different branches of agriculture overlapped in both authority and responsibility (Leonhard, 1984: 45-46).

These different administrations promoted and supervised the collective and state-owned farms, Kolkhozi and Sovkhozi. Administrators used all means, such as threats, promises, competitions, medals, directions, and control, but the farmers' wages were dependent on their fulfillment. The policy justified the precedence of quantity over quality to the farmers, yet wages were not substantial enough to support personal initiatives and thus the economy of the country suffered (Leonhard, 1984: 46).

Private farms in the Soviet Union were more productive and yielded bountiful harvests; however, they were limited to half a hectare per family,. Farmers could have only one milk cow, one beef cow, one sow, and up to ten sheep and goats. In sum, 34.8 million families worked in private farms, covering a total area of 8.3 million hectares. They had 13.2 million cows, 14 million pigs, 30.2 million sheep and goats, and 387 million fowl. At one point these families produce 25 percent of all potatoes, vegetables, fruits, eggs, and milk,



despite working only 1.7 percent of all usable agricultural land. However, official attitudes towards them are not favorable, especially when they felt safely entrenched and harvests were relatively good (Leonhard, 1984: 47-49).

Indeed, the non-Russian populations of the country did not join the Russian state voluntarily but were the result of the expansionist and annexationist policies of conquest by the Tsars. In the years of Lenin, they were encouraged to develop their own written languages and cultures. But with the rise of Stalinism, all of those positive efforts came to an end and were replaced by Russification policies increasing the influence of Russians and curbing that of non-Russians in all measures taken by the party and state. Based on this policy, key positions in the party and state, the army, and the secret police were filled by Russians (Leonhard, 1984: 50-51).

These Russification policies of the Soviet government heightened the national consciousness of the non-Russian people. Their search progressed for a national identity and more autonomy in the Ukraine, Catholic Lithuania, Protestant Estonia, Georgia, and Armenia. Demonstrators in Estonia carried the old outlawed flag of independent Estonia, and in Lithuania they demanded national independence. However, the position in the Muslim Republics of Central Asia was not as strong because Moscow was aware of its vulnerability in this area and provides them a higher standard of living (Leonhard, 1984: 53).

In reality, one of the most important aspects of the nationality problem was the varying birthrates among the different nationalities. Since the end of WWI, the birth rate of Russians has fallen, while that of the Muslim peoples had risen rapidly. This issue had important political, economic, and psychological consequences in a multi-national state such as the Soviet Union. According to some reports, the population of Russians had fallen to 44.3 percent, while other European nationalities had become 20.5 percent of the overall population. The nationalities of the Caucasus and central Asia, by



contrast were 80 million, or about 25 percent of the total population (Leonhard, 1986: 52).

The invasion of Afghanistan was unusually significant in the diplomacy of Soviet Union.⁽⁴⁾ It was the first time since the end of World War II that Soviet troops became involved in combat outside the Warsaw Pact and in military involvement within an internal politics of a third-world country. The invasion provided Moscow the following opportunities to: 1) improve its geostrategic position, particularly with regard to the oil-rich Persian Gulf; 2) move much closer to the Strait of Hormuz; 3) acquired military experience in fighting against rebellions and test many new weapons in their process of production; and 4) guarantee Soviet access to valuable minerals, especially natural gas in Afghanistan (Hammond, 1984: 177-179).

On the other hand, the invasion of Afghanistan had cost the Soviets politically by the time they began to withdraw. The most obvious losses had been: 1) the deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations, known as the end of detent in diplomatic circles; 2) the establishment of an American embargo on grain and advance technology that hurt the Soviet economy; and 3) the stoppage of SALT II negotiations. Also, the U.S. sped up its acquisition of armament, increased its defense spending, and intensified the arms race, which compromised the process of arms control. The greatest loss in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was its effect on Soviet credibility around the world, not only in the West but almost everywhere. At a session of the United Nations General Assembly in January 1980, 104 countries voted for immediate withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, while only 18 voted against. Moreover, the Conference of Islamic Nations repeatedly condemned the Soviet invasion and several of these states--Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, as well as Iran-- helped Afghan rebels with arms and money. Soviet prestige in the Third World suffered, and in the future these states would view the Soviets as aggressors (Misra, 1981: 62-63).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also worsened its relations



with neighbors in the Far East. China stated that improvement in Sino-Soviet relations and an end to conflict was not possible as long as Soviet armed forces were in Afghanistan. The Japanese were cautious about the Soviets and their relations with the U.S. improved. Aside from the deterioration of Soviet relations with the world, the invasion also cost a great deal of money and manpower, resources that the Soviets could have better used to improve their economy and reduce internal problems (Hammond, 1984: 177).

The Persian Gulf is the focal point of East and West competition. America and its allies were well aware of their vital interest in the region and were ready to respond to any aggressive action from the Soviets. The U.S. and Western reactions must be considered for three reasons. First and more obvious, U.S. and Western influence in Iran and the Persian Gulf remain extensive, though reduced from the Shah's period. America and the West attempted to counter Soviet policies within the states in the region where their sphere of influence exists (Hosmer, 1983: 175).

Second, the United States presented credible and direct military threats to Soviet policies in the Persian Gulf that manifested in RDF (Rapid Deployment Forces) by President Jimmy Carter and CENTCOM by President Ronald Reagan. The Soviets claimed that the West and the United States cannot intimidate the USSR nor force the Kremlin to withdraw support from the Afghan government, but Soviet leaders preferred to avoid armed confrontations with the United States and the West over Iran and the Persian Gulf (Hosmer, 1983: 176).

Third, America and the West chose economic and nonmilitary responses, which the Soviets undoubtedly took into account when formulating and implementing policies towards the developing world. Even though Western economic and nonmilitary responses were lessened in comparison to those during the 1980s, it would still be a potential threat to any given Soviet expansionist policy towards Third World countries close to the American sphere of influence (Hosmer, 1983: 176-177).



The Soviet leadership was aware of the significance of Iran to its interests, and had learned from the Tsarists' wide array of techniques for manipulating Iranian affairs, including inducement through formal diplomatic channels, economic deals, encouragement of forces hostile to the central government to gain advantage, and military intervention. These were some aspects of Tsarist foreign policy that the Soviet Union drew upon and applied in dealing with Iran.⁽¹²⁾

The Soviets welcomed the victory of the revolution and declared support for the Islamic Government in Tehran, although they criticized some individuals and political groups associated with the government which they denounced as liberals. The Soviets frequently referred to the revolution as: 1) anti-imperialist, as well as 2) democratic and anti-monarchical. The term "anti-imperialist" refers to the belief that Tehran's foreign policy was aligned with Soviet preferences. The anti-Western character remained the most important issue for the Soviets. Iran broke ties with Israel and South Africa, as well as withdrew from CENTO, while revolutionary Iran improved relations with Soviet allies such as Syria, Libya, South Yemen, North Korea, and Cuba and joined the Non-Aligned Movement. Iran also maintained relations with the Soviet bloc states in Eastern Europe (Yodfat, 1984: 54-55 Atkin, 1981: 111).

Soviets titled the revolution "Democratic" because they believed that the new government was supported by the public and that the revolution provided reforms and improved the standard of living of workers and peasants. The new government also allowed the Tudeh party, banned during the Shah period, to operate with some restrictions (Kauppi, 1983: 232-233)

The Soviets supported revolutionary Iran in its confrontation with the United States, beginning with the Brezhnev speech in November 1978 which warned that any foreign intervention in Iran would be noted as a threat to Soviet security. Later, Moscow supported Tehran in the seizure of the U.S. embassy and the ensuing hostage crisis. To the Soviets, this action did not violate international



law because they blamed the U.S. for its engagement in anti-revolutionary activity in Iran. When the United States brought the issue to the United Nations, the Soviets rejected the American proposal and vetoed the trade embargo of Iran (Sicker, 1988:110 and Yodfat, 1984: 78).

The political leadership in Iran was divided on Soviet policy. For instance, some who held government office, such as Banisadr, the first President, Bazargan, the first Prime Minister, and Qotbzadeh, the former Foreign Minister were hostile towards Moscow. The Islamic Republic Party (IRP) and Islamic clergy assumed different attitudes to take advantage of interests in Iran, their own party, or themselves (Sicker, 1988: 112-17). Many officials in Tehran appreciated Soviet support but did not want as much of it as the United States had shown during the Shah's regime. In fact, Iran's distrust of Soviet intentions was indicated in Iran's unilateral abrogation in November 1979 of two articles of the 1921 treaty between Iran and the Soviets. Based on these articles, Soviets were allowed military intervention in Iran when a third party posed a threat to Soviet security at the southern border and Iran could/would not eliminate it. Moscow used this article to justify military intervention in Iran during WWII and threatened to apply it again during the Islamic revolution. The decision to abrogate this agreement, declared by the Bazargan government and supported by his successors, was not recognized by Moscow (Yodfat, 1984: 68-73 Sicker, 1988: 116 and Chubin, 1983: 940).

The Soviets were concerned on economic grounds with Iran as a principle way to continue diplomacy by other means. After the revolution, both countries were willing to pursue economic agreements, regardless of problems in their diplomatic relations. They focused on the completion or expansion of treaties made in the Shah's time for dams, power plants, machinery, silos, and the Isfahan steel mills. Iran also had a commercial agreement with most of the East European countries negotiated during the period of the Shah (Kauppi, 1983: 227).



The revolution in Iran greatly diminished economic activity between Iran and Soviet Union. Trade fell off considerably; exports of natural gas were reduced because of disagreement on prices; and low production of oil decreased gas production as well. In July 1979, Iran cancelled the second gasoline project and demanded five times more for gas delivered to the Soviets; by March 1980, the Soviets offered about one-third below the Iranian demand. Iran did not accept and cancelled all gas sales to Russia. But the USSR did not retaliate, and important transit routes passing through the Soviet Union were kept open for Iranian trade with Europe. This Soviet policy helped Iran and minimized the damage done by the American boycott initiated in response to the embassy seizure (Atkin, 1981:116; Kauppi, 1983: 227; Yodfat, 1984: 73-74). However, the trade relationship between the two countries worsened in 1982 when Iran expelled Soviet diplomats on charges of spying and then arrested the leadership of the Tudeh party. In response, the USSR withdrew experts from the Isfahan steel mill, the Ahvaz power plant, and other installations. This action was very disruptive to those facilities (Yodfat, 1984: 73).

The key issue that profoundly affected Iran-Soviet relations was the Iran-Iraq war. Although there were several issues that created friction between Moscow and Teheran among them: 1) the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; 2) the Soviet interpretation and description of the Iranian revolution, and 3) the Soviet connection with the Communist Tudeh Party, though the Iran-Iraq war remained the major barrier to better relations (Kauppi, 1983: 227-236). The Soviet Union officially claimed neutrality in the war that began in September 1980 when Iraqi Troops invaded Iranian territory (Szaz, 1986: 41; Alxader, 1986:85). Moscow and Baghdad had signed a treaty of friendship in 1972, and the Iraqi military was armed by the USSR. This proclamation of neutrality was interpreted as a swing in favor of Iran (Chubin, 1983: 934; Wells, 1987: 131). Indeed, Moscow was more interested in wooing Iranian trust than reinforcing Iraq. In



Moscow's view, strategic gains seem to be greater in Iran, and Moscow distrusted Iraq with good reason. First, Iraq had sought better relations with the conservative monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. Second, Iraq signed major industrial and military contracts with the West, for example the United States, France, and Britain. Moreover, Iraq suppressed the Iraqi Communist party (Whelan, 1986: 153). The Soviets were involved in a balancing act, but they did not want to sacrifice their partnership with Iraq. Moscow further undermined its neutrality by refusing to supply Iran with arms and spare parts (Helms, 1984: 177).

Soviet-Iranian relations changed dramatically when Iran's victories in the Persian Gulf War began in 1982. In March, the tide of warfare shifted in favor of Iran; by May, Iran recaptured the important port city of Khorramshahr. Then Iraqi forces were driven out of southern Iran. By July of 1982, Iran was on the offensive, ready to invade Iraq and institute an Islamic government. The Iranian invasion became a major point of conflict between Iran and the Soviet Union (Whelan, 196: 152).

The Soviets gave up trying to push Iran to end the Persian Gulf War and saw no prospects for better relations with Tehran. The Soviets decided to resume arms supplies to Iraq, thus jeopardizing relations with Iran. With tension growing, Iranians expelled certain espionage personnel in the Soviet embassy (Sick, 1987:710; Sicker, 1988:125; Malik, 1987: 261). Apparently, a Soviet intelligence officer who had defected provided key information on Soviet activities in Iran to the British, who in turn communicated it to Iranian officials. As a result, the pro-Soviet Tudeh party was disbanded because its leadership was charged with attempting to orchestrate a coup d'état against the Islamic Republic in Iran (Kidde, 1987:201; Sick, 1987: 710; Sicker, 1988:125).

Soviets criticized the crackdown on the Tudeh party, but not the Islamic orientation of the Government. They also sought alternative allies within Iran and carefully monitored the course of politics in the



country. The geo-political significance of Iran was far greater than Iraq; hence, Soviet interests would not be served by openly siding with Iraq in the war. Soviets supported Iran, indirectly aiding their allies such as North Korea, Syria, Libya, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, with arms shipment to Iran (Gawad, 1983: 159; Katz, 1988: 580). Although the Soviets sold arms to both Iran and Iraq, either directly or indirectly, the Soviet position in the area has been eroded rather than advanced by the war. This fact forces the Soviets to push for an end to war without victory for either side.

The Soviet Union broadcasted into Iran mainly through the medium of radio stations in Moscow and Baku (the capital of Soviet Azerbaijan) in Persian and Azeri Turkish. Much of the propaganda was devoted to Soviet policy in Iran after the 1917 revolution. Moscow called itself a consistent friend of Iranian national interest and the best friend of the Islamic Revolution (Atkin, 1981: 118 and Kuppei, 1983: 241).

Moscow justified its invasion of Iran after WWII as containment diplomacy against Western aggressiveness towards Iran. They also claimed that the Afghanistan invasion was an internal matter that happened at the request of the anti-imperialist and respectful Islamic regime in Afghanistan. With regard to the U.S., they presented this country as the first enemy of Islamic revolution and the utmost significant threat towards Iran (Sicker, 1988: 113). Generally speaking, propaganda activity did not have a significant impact on Iranian attitudes. Iranians were hostile towards the East as much as towards the West. In spite of the Soviet effort, Iranians condemned the Soviet presence in Afghanistan (Yoclfat, 1983: 112).

The Soviet Union paid considerable attention to the Tudeh Party; its position and activities. One objective of the Soviet policy in supporting the pro-Moscow Tudeh party was for it to act as a political force within Iran while the revolution unfolds. Soviet leaders hoped that when the present government collapses, the left would gain power, placing the Tudeh Party in a position to shape the course of



events in Iran to Soviet advantage. The Soviets believed Tudeh could influence internal politics in Iran. The Tudeh party was small in number, but organizational discipline and Soviet assistance gave it an advantage, even though the common wisdom was that the Tudeh had little chance to take power. However, the Soviets hoped that this party could have a major role in the process of decision-making in the post-Khomeini government, so they were careful not to be viewed as supporters of Khomeini's opposition (Yodfat, 1984: 55-57).

Under the Shah, the Tudeh party was banned, but after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, until February 1983, the party was reactivated because of strong support to the Islamic Republic. The party's secretary, Nouredin Kianouri, promised to aid the government while it is progressive as well as anti-imperialism. The Tudeh Party rejected overt armed violence as a political tool, which had helped it survive for some years (Atkin, 1981: 64). In February 1983, the government turned against the Tudeh and arrested the leadership of the party under charges of espionage and efforts to overthrow the Islamic Republic. This policy worsened Iran-Soviet relations. Later, the Iranian government ordered the expulsion of eighteen Soviet diplomats, after which Moscow quickly launched a campaign against the arrests and banning of the Tudeh (Yodfat, 1984: 142-144).

The Soviets used some of Iran's ethnic minorities to put pressure on the central government and interfere in Iran's internal affairs. This activity occurred among the Azeris of Azerbaijan, the Kurds, the Turkmen, the Baluchis, the Arabs, and among the tribes. Later, the Soviet Union encouraged separatism or autonomism as it had done in 1945-1946 when it established the puppet Kurdish and Azerbaijan Republics. The Soviets did not actively seek to encourage nationalism in Iran, because they identified it with American and anti-revolutionary interests in the country.⁽¹³⁾

Soviet leadership stated a belief in ethnic rights but also suggested that the progressive character of the Islamic revolution provided nationalistic rights. Indeed, the Soviets did not push the nationalist



movement in Iran in order to prevent the sabotage of the revolution. But if at any given time their interests were threatened or compromised, the USSR would play the ethnic card and support separatist movements as had done after WWII (Kuppei, 1983:242-243).

Finally, the Tudeh party was the first party, and the Soviets were the first country who supported the seizure of US embassy (Yodfat, 1984: 77-79). The Soviets also had considered military intervention in Iran, Iran likely could not have contained such action. Moscow did not do so because of concern for its deteriorating credibility in other Third World countries after its invasion of Afghanistan. Also, it might have led to a Western military reaction in the Persian Gulf and the Soviets were reluctant to have a military confrontation with west in the Persian Gulf (Kuppei, 1983: 243).

Conclusion

Iran's geographic position has always been a major factor in her history. Nature made Iran an effective land bridge between the Middle East and Southern and Eastern Asia, as well as between Russia, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf. Since the nineteenth century, Iran's decline made it an object of conquest or control by other expanding empires that desired to improve their strategic position. The major rival powers of Europe in the Persian Gulf and Iran sought to compete for dominance in the region. Since that time, Iran has gained a strategic importance, particularly for Russia.

But Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 made the Kremlin reconsider better Russia-Britain relations. Domestic instability, limited resources, and increasing German influence in the Near East were also contributing factors. Britain and Russia, thus, moved closer together and defined their two spheres of influence in Persia. This rapprochement reached its peak with the signing of the convention of the 31st of August, 1907 between the Britain and Russia.

In the 1980s, the former Soviet Union and the United States were two great powers structurally bound to compete with each



other. Both have different global interests, global visions, as well as global objectives. Indeed, the Soviet-U.S. rivalry could not be resolved but only managed, a continuous drama in world history in which one looked from one challenge to another and after each success, always encountered a new setback. Here, Iran was no exception.

The creation of the Islamic Republic in Iran brought the Soviet Union an opportunity to expand influences in Tehran. Moscow sought an immediate strategic position in this relationship. The Soviet's more immediate concern was to secure an accommodation similar to the one that existed with the Shah. In terms of strategic view, they developed the possibility that a pro- Soviet Communist government might be installed at some time in the future. Towards these ends, Moscow used the same tactics that Russia applied in Iran in the late nineteenth century. These policies fell into two broad categories: the first, official contacts between states, including diplomacy, economic agreements, and other formal contacts between the two countries; the second category, unofficial contacts, such as propaganda, activities through Tudeh party, and activity among minorities. Finally, the Soviets used the clandestine and military activities to promote their influence.

But there were some constraints in developing Soviet activities in Iran. The doctrine of Imam Khomeini in foreign policy--Neither East nor West, only the Islamic Republic (distrust of both superpowers), the Iran-Iraq war, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan all handicapped the Soviets in Iran. Since 1983, the pro-Soviet Tudeh party has been banned and its activity controlled by government. In terms of military activity and direct intervention in Iran, Soviet domestic problems and its military defeat in support of pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, as well as American containment policies made it difficult if not impossible. Moscow instead focused on supporting and strengthening the position of pro-Soviet groups in Tehran due to the limited ability of America to interfere with such efforts.

Notes

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3. The different approaches in analysis of foreign policy are discussed by Martin Schwartz,



- The Foreign Policy of the USSR: Domestic Factors (Encino, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1974), pp. 1-4. Other key sources include Erik P. Hoffmann, *The Conduct of Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 1-90; John Spanier, *Games Nations Play: Analyzing International Politics* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972); Joseph Frankel, *International Relations in a Changing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Keith R. Legg and James F. Marrison, *Politics and the international system: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1971); P.A. Reynolds, *An Introduction to International Relations* (Massachusetts: Longman Publishing Company, Inc., 1994); Robert L. Wendzel, *International Relations - A Policymaker Focus* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980); and James N. Rosenau, *International Politics and Foreign Policy: A Reader in Research and Theory* (New York: The Free Press, 1961).
4. On great reform in Russia, see Edward Acton, *Russia* (New York: Longman, 1986), pp. 68-95; Sergei Pushkarev, *The Emergence of Modern Russia 1801-1917* (New York: Pica Pica Press, 1984), pp. 125-177; Lionel Kochan, *The Making of Modern Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 180-219; Dietrich Geyer, *Russian Imperialism-The Interaction of Domestic and Foreign Policy 1860- 1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 17-32; and Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).
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 6. For more information, see David Mclean, *Britain and Her Buffer State: The Collapse of Persian Empire. 1890-1914* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1979).
 7. Discussion of the Russo-Japanese war is concerned in: Edward C. Thaden *Russia Since 1801-The Making of a New Society* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1971), pp. 359-373; Donald W. Treadgold, *Twentieth Century Russia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), pp. 48-60; Sergei Pushkarev, *The Emergence of Modern Russia 1801-1917* (New York: Pica Pica Press, 1984), pp. 253- 358; and Lionel Kochan, *The Making of Modern Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 276-280.
 8. The subject of Anglo-Russia agreement has been treated by: Abbas Adharin, *Anglo-Russia Rivalry in Persia and Afghanistan* (Tehran: Sh.e.e.f. Printing House, 1985); Ahmad Ishtiag, *Aglo-Iranian Relations: 1905-1919* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1974); Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1951); George Lenczowski, *Russia and the West in Iran 1918-1948: A Study in BiPower Rivalry* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1949); and Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain In Persia, 1864-1914: A Study in Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968)
 9. See Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-state Relations*



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10. In addition to the sources listed in the previous notes, see Archie Brown and Michael Kaser, *Soviet Policy for the 1980s* (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1983), pp. 170-185, and James Cracraft, *The Soviet Union Today* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 198-209.
11. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is analyzed in Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984); K.P. Misra, *Afghanistan in Crisis* (New York: Advent Books, Inc., 1981); Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985); Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988); Alfred L. Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1981); Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1984); Stephen T. Hosmer, *Soviet Policy and Practice Toward Third World Conflict* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1983), pp. 109-180; Marshall I. Goldman, "What is the Soviet Union Up to in the Middle East? The Unfortunate Case of Afghanistan," *Middle East Review* (Spring 1980), 5-8; and Robert O. Freedman, *Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East Since 1970* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987), pp. 377-432.
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