

Russia's Strategic Communications on an Iran Nuclear Agreement?

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Key Points

- Russia has been very consistent on messaging the following four key messages on an Iran nuclear agreement: return to negotiations; sanctions against Iran should be lifted; the original JCPOA is the only deal possible; and no other conditions should be included.
- Russia finds itself in a rare situation by siding with European countries and being seen as a reasonable party.
- Russia's strategic communications goals center on being recognized as a superpower.
- With strategic communications and the possibility of an Iran nuclear deal, Russia supports its own strategy in the Middle East.
- Russian messaging about Iran nuclear agreement also serves to deflect its negatively viewed actions in Ukraine and Syria.

Introduction

Russia has been very consistent about its messaging on the possibility of the re-establishment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA). Russia is supporting narrative about Iran's willingness to return to the nuclear deal. In this case, Russia uncommonly shares the views with the US, Europe and Chinese, but the need to return to negotiations. When a situation presents opportunities that suits Russian interests, it can side with countries that are in fact its opponents, and this is one of those situations.

As early as March 2021, the Russian Foreign Minister said: "The first issue is that Iran wants all sanctions to be lifted first and then return to its obligations. But the United States has stated that Iran must first implement its obligations under JCPOA, and then Washington will decide on its obligations." The minister added that "the second issue is the so-called JCPOA Plus, which is suggests including Iran's missile program changes should be made to the original JCPOA, including the issue of Iran's missile program. We believe that such an approach would lead to a stalemate, Russia wants the revival of JCPOA without any changes."¹ These statements demonstrate how Russia presents itself as the rational and reasonable mediator for the Vienna talks, and at the same time supporting Iran to bolster its strategic aims in the region.

Key messages and the audiences

¹ Russia: Biden sends hopeful messages about JCPOA, March 31, 2021, [Russia: Biden sends hopeful messages about JCPOA \(iranpress.com\)](https://iranpress.com) (accessed on Dec 15, 2021)

There have been many occasions when Russian officials have pushed Russian narrative and the key messages related to Iran nuclear deal. For example, on December 13th, 2021, Iran and Russia shared a statement; “Both parties [Russia and Iran] affirmed the common determination to revive the nuclear deal in its original, balanced form, which was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Iranian colleague Amir-Abdollahian, stressed that “this is the only correct way to ensure that the rights and interests of all parties participating in the comprehensive agreements are taken care of.”² The Russian diplomat said, “the proposals put forward by Iran at the Vienna talks on the removal of sanctions demonstrate Tehran’s utmost seriousness about restoring the nuclear deal.”³ Earlier on October 31 Russian foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “any change to the JCPOA or any interpretation of the deal differing from the original form will be unacceptable.”⁴ Such examples of Russian messaging repeat these key points:

- 1) Original parties should return to the negotiations especially the U.S.
- 2) Sanctions against Iran should be lifted
- 3) The original JCPOA is the only kind of nuclear agreement that is possible
- 4) No further conditions should be included in the agreement, especially Iran’s tactical ballistic missiles and/or proxies.

As for Russian strategic communications’ target audiences, the Russian people must be taken as the primary one. All strategic communications, directly or indirectly, support President Putin’s efforts to keep control and hold power. The current regime needs foreign adversary to legitimize actions inside and outside Russia and domestic news agencies repeat all the messages Kremlin pushes forward. The second and third audiences are the leadership and citizenry of the U.S. and European countries.

Assessment

By promoting these messages, Russia presents itself as a reasonable party that complies with the rules-based order. Although Russia shares the rational views of many regarding the negotiations of JCPOA, this is not a sign of sudden change of attitude or change to being righteous, rather it is a part of Russian strategic communications. Russia wants to be where the deals are made, and their strategic communications is a part of the efforts of Russia being recognized as superpower.

Russian messaging supports their efforts to lessen detrimental effects of other actions such as the situation ongoing in Ukraine. By pushing parties to negotiate the new nuclear deal, Russia becomes a mediator, and gains opportunities to accuse U.S. and other adversaries if the deal is not reached. Russia will be seen as the one who made real efforts towards the nuclear agreement, but despite their efforts, other nations will be labeled as unreasonable. Beyond the messaging game, it is important to remember that Russia as an original member of the JCPOA. Therefore, like other countries, it too does not want Iran to have a nuclear weapon. By emphasizing that the sanctions against Iran should be lifted, Russia tries to show that sanctions are not the correct course of action for neither Iran nor itself. If just sanctions against Iran were lifted, a third order effect may be the lifting of sanctions against Russia.

² Iran, Russia reaffirm determination to restore nuclear deal in its original version, December 13, 2021, [Iran, Russia reaffirm determination to restore nuclear deal in its original version \(presstv.ir\)](#) (accessed on Dec 15, 2021)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Russia: Moscow accepts no change to JCPOA, October 31, 2021, [Russia: Moscow accepts no change to JCPOA - Iran Front Page \(ifpnews.com\)](#) (accessed on Dec 16, 2021)

Russia wants to secure its own interests in the Middle East. Now when the U.S. has less influence in the region, Russia is taking advantage to expand its influence through strategic communications. Russia wants to secure its interests in the area and control access to Black Sea through Russian bases in Syria. By showing support to Iran regarding JCPOA, it expects Iran to moderate its action in Syria. For not to escalate the military situation in Syria, Iranian forces need to be warded off against threats emanating from and around Syria. Thus, Russia collaborates with Iran's forces in Syria to provide control and stability in Syria as it is – to certain extent – dependent on Iran on this regard.⁵ The message that the original JCPOA without any other conditions is the only possible one, Russia supports its marriage of convenience with Iran. Russia works with Iran because it is necessary for Russian interests while they also have competing aims in the region.

Lastly, Russia most likely estimates that if proxies and tactical ballistic missiles are tied to the agreement, there will be no deal. New agreement or not, either way Russia can be seen as the winner, but for Russia the deal would be more beneficial.

Conclusion

To be fair, Russian messages do support the efforts for negotiations, but by repeating the key messages as part of their strategic communications, it most certainly does it to foster its own strategic goals rather than out of pure sincerity. In this situation, Russia has a rare opportunity for a diplomatic victory. If the agreement is not reached, Russia can be seen as the sound party who was reasonable and who firmly supported collective efforts. On the other hand, if the negotiations lead to "JCPOA 2.0," Russia can take its diplomatic winnings, enforce its stand in the Middle East, and reduce its perception of being an irrational actor. It seems that Russia has an uncommon position of being viewed as positively by the west on this issue, and a win-win situation regardless of the outcome.

⁵ Why Russia Wants the Iran Nuclear Deal (Op-ed), May 8, 2018, [Why Russia Wants the Iran Nuclear Deal \(Op-ed\) \(themoscowtimes.com\)](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/05/08/why-russia-wants-the-iran-nuclear-deal-op-ed) (accessed on Dec 16, 2021)