



## Nuclear Iran From Confrontation to Cooperation?

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The international community is looking at Iran, waiting for its decision on the nuclear fuel deal offered by the West. The five permanent members of the Security Council, plus Germany would allow Iran to attain nuclear fuel for medical isotopes. However, Iran seemed to be delaying its decision deliberately so as not to lose its "bargaining chip" which could enable it to achieve further offers and better conditions from the West. Although US President Barack Obama was cited as stating during his China visit that the present situation represents an opportunity for Iran to demonstrate its peaceful intentions with regard to its nuclear programme, there will also be consequences if Iran fails to realize this opportunity.

This essay discusses Iran's nuclear strategy and the assessments of the international community which is trying to halt the problem of Iran's ambiguous nuclear programme. To understand this issue it is crucial to look at actions that have already been taken and the positions of the different parties involved. Considering earlier sanctions which have been imposed on Iran and moreover taking a look at Iran's relationships with the United States, Russia and China – the last two in particular because they tend to support Iran with their veto right on the international platform.

### I IRAN: RECENT NEGOTIATIONS

The current nuclear deal negotiations between the P5+Germany and Tehran do not appear to be yielding fruit as yet. After failing to meet the deadline of the offered deal, which involves Tehran shipping about 1,200kg (2,600lb), or 70 per cent, of its low-enriched uranium to Russia by the end of 2009 and France converting the uranium into fuel rods for Tehran's use in a reactor that produces medical isotopes, the international community is still waiting for a concrete answer from Iran. A response addressing western concerns whether Iran's nuclear programme is peaceful or if it is being used in order to create nuclear warheads is urgently needed, in view of

the fact that negotiations with Iran have been going on for more than 7 years. Tehran's reaction does not evoke optimism, due to the fact that a final decision on the deal has been delayed repeatedly. It seems as though Iran would like to hold on to this strategy until it is capable of creating the feared nuclear warhead. The latest statement by Iran's Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, was that Iran will not send its 3.5 per cent enriched fuel to Russia, but would consider a swap of its nuclear fuel for other uranium if it takes place on its territory. This underlines Iran's position that it has a right to proceed with the nuclear programme, which according to Tehran is solely for peaceful purposes, such as medical research. However, the international community is still critical of Iran's nuclear programme which is strengthened by its postponement of a definite answer to the UN-offered fuel deal. Therefore, US President Barack Obama began talks with his international partners on the consequences of Iran's failure to respond to a proposed deal. While the IAEA alleged last month that the main problem in arranging the fuel deal was the lack of trust between Iran and the US, the P5+Germany initiated negotiations in Brussels on 20 November, discussing Iran's nuclear programme as the "threat of more punitive sanctions hangs over the dispute." Moreover, President Obama recently renewed long-standing US sanctions against Iran for another year, while its relations with Iran have until now failed to "returned to normal." This resulted in strong criticism from the Iranian Parliament, expressed by the Speaker Ali Larijani, who accused Obama of failing to change US policy toward Tehran and stated that the US president's actions were the same as his predecessor's. Larijani reiterated Iran's stance of rejecting the West's proposal to resolve questions about its nuclear programme, dismissing it as "unimportant and irrational."

### II POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In response to this unwavering position, the IAEA has censured Iran for its nuclear programme, with 25 nations out of the 35 member states voting in

favour of the censure motion on 27 November. The IAEA has called on Iran to halt its construction of the recently disclosed uranium enrichment plant next to the holy city of Qom. There were only 3 votes against the resolution. These came from Cuba, Malaysia and Venezuela. Six other countries— Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey, abstained. The only country which missed the ballot was Azerbaijan. The vote represents the first action against Iran since 2006 and may effectively hurt the country's cooperation with the IAEA. Therefore the Iranian reaction shows great discontent about the resolution as Iran's IAEA ambassador Ali-Asghar Soltanieh described the resolution as "hasty and undue" and warned that it will "jeopardize the spirit of cooperation" which is necessary for the talks.

Even though the IAEA and the Security Council are considering the possibility of stricter sanctions, which would be implemented as a consequence of this uncooperative behaviour, they will not pose a threat to the Iranian government as the sanctions seem to paradoxically enhance its position. First and foremost, sanctions usually hurt the society the most. In the Iranian case much of the people's anger has been directed towards the United States rather than changing the government's position on its nuclear programme. Furthermore, the "sanctions economy" which develops wherever these are imposed, has until now only benefited the Iranian government, having "strengthened the hard line elements' control over the economy, which in turn has strengthened their grip on power." In addition, entities such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which are connected to the government, "have profited from their involvement in the smuggling trade that has emerged, further benefiting from Iran's economic isolation." Lastly, economic sanctions have also influenced the political environment in Tehran, namely in weakening Iranian civil society and therefore, undermining its pro-democracy movement, which is even more important after the disputed elections of June 2009.

Moreover, trying to achieve cooperation with Iran by means of pressure and maybe an embargo on its oil trade would, according to Karim Sajadpour from the International Crisis Group, backfire in causing the price at the global market to climb up in endless spheres which in turn would affect European society

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as well. This lack of alternatives causes Israel and the United States to consider the option of a military strike against Iran, as Israel did in 1981, attacking the Iraqi nuclear reactor, Osirak. However, due to the fact that Iran has spread its nuclear reactors all over the country and some are reported to be located in underground facilities, Sadjadpour goes on to state that this would not be a good idea because it would be difficult to reach all the reactors at once or even decide which would be the right ones to attack.

### III ROAD BLOCKS

China and Russia are playing an important role in the decision making process on Iran's nuclear programme, not only because they became major suppliers of nuclear know-how to Tehran after its war with Iraq (1980-98), but because both countries have tight economic relations with Iran and are therefore opposing further sanctions as proposed by the P5+Germany. Although Russian President Dmitry Medvedev seemed more open-minded to further sanctions on Iran in September, stating that sanctions normally do not cause "productive results" but are "inevitable" in some cases, and China also supported some of the sanctions against Iran in the past, it remains to be seen if both of the countries are going to risk their close bilateral ties with Iran to achieve a step in the direction of Obama's vision of "global zero."

After supporting Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, China has again agreed to some of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions against Iran's nuclear programme. China, as well as Russia, kept back from voting in the IAEA Board of Governors in 2005 and voted in favour of sending the issue to the UNSC in 2006. China voted for UNSC resolution 1696 from 2006, which urged Iran to "suspend all activities related to enrichment and reprocessing, including research and development as demanded by the IAEA" and UNSC resolution 1835 from 2008, referring "to previous Security Council resolutions and the NPT Agreement, as well as to the latest IAEA reports and the lack of Iranian cooperation with the Agency's investigators. Despite supporting these resolutions, China has always reiterated its concern that the resolution should not result in further sanctions on Iran because they are seen as unhelpful. Due to their sale of dual-use chemicals to Iran, the Chinese also have to face US sanctions, which with the support of some European countries have accused China of proliferating weapons, including long-range nuclear missiles. Those accusations were denied by the Chinese government in January 2009, when a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman insisted that China did not breach the UN limits on trade with Iran. However, this cannot dampen concerns about Chinese support for Iran's nuclear technology, because Beijing can also bypass the prohibition while providing tungsten copper in the form of powder,

rather than in ingot form, which would be regarded as legal vis-à-vis the UN limitations.

Considering China's close economic and political connections with Iran, the Chinese perspective in defending Iran's nuclear programme is very important. Iran and China used to cooperate in a variety of sectors, such as energy, construction, trade and tourism – with China helping Iran to construct dams, shipyards, ports, airports, mine-development, and oil and gas infrastructure. Beijing is momentarily developing its presence in the Iranian market with more than 100 Chinese state companies operating in Iran and bilateral trade which had already surpassed the US\$27 billion mark in 2008, with Iran exporting 408,000 barrels of oil a day in 2008, valued at US\$158 billion. These bilateral trade figures were made possible because Western countries reduced their trade and investment with the Iranian republic, implementing the agreed economic sanctions on Iran. And China realized its chance to enlarge its influence in the Middle-East, turning into Iran's major trade partner in Asia.

Based on economic and regional relations, the political relationship between Iran and China also grew. At their joint trade conference in May 2009, Chinese Vice Minister of Commerce Chen Jian expressed Chinese willingness to increase non-energy trade as well as developing bilateral interaction and communication. This resulted in China's support for Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear programme and support for the "One-China policy," rejecting the aim of a separate or independent Taiwan. All in all Chinese President Hu Jintao stated at a meeting of SCO that "Tehran and Beijing" are helping "each other to manage global developments in favour of their nations." This apparently means that Chinese support for Iran's nuclear programme will last, which at the same time will ensure that Sino-Iranian trade and bilateral relations continue to increase in the years to come.

In addition to Chinese trade with Iran shielding Tehran's nuclear programme, Russia is trying to avoid further sanctions on Iran. Since Russia is supplying Tehran weapons, such as the surface-to-air system TOR-M1, the Russian short range air missile system, Western concerns have been rising since 2005. Furthermore, Russia started constructing a nuclear power plant in Bushehr in 2002 under an US\$8.5 billion contract with Iran also including the construction of six nuclear reactors all over the country. Russia-Iran relations are not just limited to know-how and weapons supply, but also include transfer of expertise, advancing Iran's nuclear research since 1995. Despite the concerns of the West, the former Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted in 2001, that Iran has the right to maintain its security and defence capability, while Russia has "economic reasons" for supplying weapons to Tehran. Russia has been delaying its delivery of a missile-defence system to Iran which, as Alaedin Borujurdi, the Head of the

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Iranian Parliament's National Security Committee has stated, could "seriously damage" Tehran's bilateral relations with Russia. According to Meir Javendafar, manager of the Tel Aviv MEEPAS Center, Russia would lose the most if its deal with Tehran fails. It would be faced with the decision to "choose between its business interests with Iran and its relations with the West." In the 20 November 2009 press announcement of RIA Novosti, after a meeting between Atoms troy expert chief Dan Belenky and a senior official of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) Ahmed Fayazbaksh, for discussing the progress of start-up work at the Bushehr plant, confirmed that the work to launch the power plant was "going as scheduled." The threat of "serious damage" to its bilateral relations with Iran seems to have arrived in Russia and led to its quick reaction for preventing such damage.

Even though Iran appears to be encircled by the international community and should be the country which is put under pressure for reactions, Tehran even succeeds in pushing Russia to finalize work on its first nuclear power plant. The question remains as to how far Iran sees itself as being in "the mangle" of the international regime (represented nowadays by the P5 + Germany and the UN nuclear watchdog, IAEA) while President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dismisses the year end deadline for the nuclear deal and stating that the United States is in no position in setting a deadline for Iran and should "change their attitude". In response Tehran is ruling out a deadline itself for nuclear fuel at the Iranian Kish Island to secure fuel supply for the Tehran medical research reactor. Judging by its arrogant behaviour with respect to the fuel deal offered by the West and its current successful air defence manoeuvres for "following purely defensive military doctrine," it seems as though Iran does not fear additional sanctions or isolation by the international community and is still relying on its strong ties with China and Russia. The supreme leader's representative in the Revolutionary Guards, Mojtaba Zolnoor, even announced that "if the enemy [US/Israel] attacks Iran... missiles will strike Tel Aviv," reiterating the statement of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of 2005, to "wipe off [Israel] of the map."

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

Iran does not appear to be considering acceptance of the deal in the foreseeable future due to its close relationships with China and Russia, who have been backing Tehran well during the last few years. It will be interesting to see where these relationships will lead to in future after the two countries also supported the IAEA resolution in calling Tehran to stop its uranium enrichment process and the current construction of the uranium enrichment plant near Qom, which is falling on deaf ears in Iran. Even the option of storing its enriched uranium in a neutral country like Turkey has until now been left as an open issue. Iran did not respond at all. The matter which was discussed by IAEA chief ElBaradei and the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu on 12 November demonstrated Turkey's aspirations to ease international concerns about Iran's nuclear programme. Having established good relations with Iran during the last month, Davutoglu announced that Turkey would "continue contacts with the IAEA and Iran, seeking diplomatic solutions to issues of crucial importance to the region." In this statement he did not mention Iran's nuclear programme in particular, but being involved in the issue because of its offer, it will also be in Turkey's interest to find a quick and comforting solution to the Iranian problem for all of the key actors.

The Iranian reaction to the latest UN resolution which includes the announcement that it will produce its own uranium fuel within its 10 newly built nuclear sites, which should be built within a period of 2 months for the production of 20 per cent enriched uranium, underlines Iran's relentlessness with regard to its nuclear programme.

If there is no change in policy from the Iranian side to make a move to open up to negotiations, it seems unlikely that a diplomatic solution will be successful. The P5+Germany and the IAEA will be forced to implement stricter sanctions on Iran which will lead to the opposite of the hoped reaction. The result will be a firm reaction from Tehran in refusing further cooperation with the IAEA which will take the situation to a more complicated level than before.

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