



***The New Multi-Prong American Iran policy and the US' Russian Gamble***

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As was anticipated, the November 24 meeting of the Board of Directors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) “delayed” taking any action on Iran’s nuclear program to allow for reopening of negotiations with Europe, mediated by the Russian Federation, based on an unpublished “Russian proposal” that first surfaced early in November 2005. Anticipated to begin in early December, the negotiations are expected to conclude by the next IAEA Board meeting in March 2006. Iran has indicated that it would welcome negotiations based on the Russian proposal, but would not accept its preconditions.

According to scattered reports on the proposal, Iran could convert uranium into gas at home (at the Uranium Conversion Facility plant in Isfahan) but would have to move the uranium enrichment operations to Russia and permanently shutdown the Natanz enrichment plant. Iran can take shares, up to 35 percent, in the plants in Russia that enrich its homemade gasified uranium. Iran would then import the enriched uranium as fuel for its nuclear power plant in Bushehr, which the Russians are building with no completion time in sight. Iran would return the spent fuel from the plant to Russia, as per an existing agreement, so that it will not be able to use it for producing bomb-grade plutonium.

A *New York Times* report revealed early in November that the US and its European allies helped devise the Russian proposal. However, as I wrote in a previous *AIC Update*, the US has denied that it is a party to any proposal for negotiation with Iran on the nuclear issue. Nevertheless, Secretary Condoleezza Rice, who spoke for the US on the matter, reiterated her support for Europe and Russia in any negotiations with Iran. While the US may not wish to directly negotiate with Iran, it has been an indirect party to the negotiations that the EU troika (Britain, France and Germany) has conducted with Iran since October 2003. It will also be an indirect party to the EU-Russian-Iran tripartite negotiations.

Despite denial, I suspect that the US is the originator of the so-called Russian proposal, because, as we shall see, it has the potential to further isolate Iran, and firmly place Russia, and China by extension, on the EU-US side. Indeed, days before the Russian proposal surfaced, the Director-General of IAEA, Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, was in Washington for consultation with American officials. The fact that the US did not push for the IAEA Board on November 24 to report Iran to the United Nations is a further affirmation of the proposition that the US is the main instigator of the Russian proposal. Indeed, the US did not even criticize Iran regarding an Iranian document that the British delegate described as “disturbing” to Europe.

Iran itself had turned over the said document to the IAEA days before the meeting of its Board. The document, not yet publicly available, describes the casting and machining of enriched uranium metal into hemispherical form, a process that the British delegate said “has no other



application other than the production of nuclear warheads.” If this document is disturbing to Europe, it must be even more disturbing to the US. Yet, the American delegation preferred to stay silent, I believe, because it did not wish to jeopardize the Russian proposal. Besides, as I wrote in a previous *AIC Update*, the US has, by design, delegated the public leadership on Iran’s nuclear matter to Britain.

Apparently, the US wants to use the Russian influence on Iran to mutilate its nuclear fuel cycle. Ideally, however, Americans hope to see the Russians, like the Europeans, also converted into Iran’s nuclear adversary. According to *The New York Times*, “The decision not to go immediately to the Security Council was also aimed at giving Russia and, perhaps, China, time eventually to support the Europeans and the United States on the Iranian matter.” They have high hope that this will be the case, as Americans do not believe that Iran will agree to give up its uranium-enrichment activities at home. Besides, as we shall shortly see, Russians have their own worries about a nuclear Iran.

As I wrote in the last issue of the *AIC Update*, since September 11, 2001, the US has consistently outmaneuvered Iran on the nuclear issue, incrementally making it an international issue that could soon involve the United Nations. Still, even if the US had a majority vote at the last IAEA Board meeting to report Iran to the UN, it also knew that the Russians as well as Chinese and many other states were not yet ready for the premature move. However, the US remained assured that the IAEA resolution last September placed Iran into a trap in which Tehran could not extract itself easily. Significantly, and as I wrote in a previous *AIC Update*, the conditions set in the resolution would make sure that Iran is increasingly isolated as time goes by.

Thus, the Americans see no need to hurry as time is on their side regarding Iran’s nuclear matter. Intelligence reports indicate that Iran is years away from developing a nuclear device. Accordingly, and as I wrote in the previous *AIC Update*, the US has adopted a quite patient diplomacy to further isolate Iran. The US has further complemented this policy with a parallel move: tasking Britain with leadership in an anti-Iran crusade, and tasking Israel with trumpeting the “immediate use of force” demand. The Israelis themselves have been increasingly open and adamant about the immediate use of force against Iran’s nuclear sites. The Bush Administration, which is not at this time ready to directly confront Iran, would move in to “helping a friend” in case of a conflict between Iran and Britain, or Iran and Israel.

Interestingly, the new American Iran policy has two more legs: financial and propaganda support for the “Iranian people’s democratic movement,” and “direct negotiations” with Iran on problems involving Iraq. Significantly, President George W. Bush has authorized Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Ambassador in Iraq, to meet its Iranian counterparts and discuss ways Iran might help reduce terrorist attacks on American forces there. Unfortunately, Dr. Khalilzad has indicated that he has no authority to discuss any other issues with the Iranians. While Iraq has become an issue for US-Iran tension, it was not originally a part of the concerns the US used to



raise regarding Iran: nuclear technology, terrorism, Middle East peace, and human rights. Besides, Iran has no influence over the terrorists who are bombing Americans and Iraqis.

The new American Iran patience policy is thus a multifaceted process. First, it involves isolating Iran with the aim of reporting it to the UN. The US support for the Russian proposal is aimed at achieving this goal. Second, it involves talking tough to Iran through Britain and Israel with the purpose of making Iran react in ways that would make it look unreasonable or even dangerous. Third, it involves negotiating with Iran over Iraq with the goal of showing to the Americans and the world that the Islamic Republic of Iran is indeed a troublemaker in Iraq! Finally, it involves talking about helping the Iranian people to achieve democracy and human rights with the goal of winning the public support in Iran and create additional pressure on Tehran.

However, the main thrust of the new policy is the first, the Russian front, while the other three are auxiliary processes. The greatest problem with this new US policy toward Iran is that it involves a huge gamble with the Russians over Iran. Two possible outcomes are imaginable for the EU-Russia-Iran (tripartite) negotiations. First, Iran will accept the Russian proposal, a remote possibility, in which case the US solves a part of one its problems with Iran, namely, the nuclear enrichment part of the nuclear fuel cycle. In that case, however, the US would be creating an even larger problem for its foreign policy. It will firmly place Iran into the Russian orbit, making them two strategic allies on the very foundation of the enrichment technology. Winning Iran to their side is what the Russians have been working for in the last one hundred or so years!

Clearly, this outcome will not serve the American long-term interests. Iran is a pivotal country in the global power game over the world leadership in the next two to three decades. It sits on the fourth largest oil reserves and on the second largest gas reserves. It has a large population and market, and its geography, at the center of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea energy regions, is of vital interest to the US. An Iran-Russia strategic partnership would lead to the creation of a bloc in the landmass Eurasia that could ultimately extend Russian influence into the Greater Middle East and beyond. An eastward Iranian tilt will also disadvantage the US relative to China whose growing energy needs can only be met by the hydrocarbons in the Persian Gulf region. However, the US does not believe that Iran will ever forego enrichment activities at home. If so, then there should be no concern about this first outcome.

The second possibility is that Iran and Russia will not reach an agreement and the tri-partite negotiations will collapse. There are good reasons to believe that this outcome is more likely, and the one the US is set to achieve using the same tactic it used vis-à-vis the EU troika-Iran negotiations: hard behind the scene and soft in public. Although Russia has a lot at stake in Iran, it would most likely be a tough negotiator as were the Europeans. Iran has repeatedly said it will never give up its right to enrich uranium at home for peaceful purposes, and there is no indication that it will change its position. Nor there is any indication that the US will accept anything less than the elimination of Iran's enrichment part of the nuclear-fuel-cycle production.



In case the tripartite negotiations collapsed, the Russians will join the US and EU to report Iran to the UN.

To better understand why the insertion of Russia in the nuclear negotiations with Iran is a step in the direction of reporting it to the UN, one must consider a few important facts about Iran-Russia relations. Over the last 20 years, Russians have developed extensive economic relations with Iran in a wide range of areas. However, because of Iran's suspicious view of Russia, for largely historical reasons, the magnitude of such relations, even in the nuclear field, remains limited. After years, Russians still need to complete Bushehr nuclear plant and no completion date is in sight! In energy fields and in the use of resources of the Caspian Sea, Russia competes with Iran. To check Iran's relations with India, Russia is currently trying to invest in a proposed \$7.4 billion natural gas pipeline that will transport the fuel from Iran to India through Pakistan.

For their part, Russians also suspect Iran's intentions, and in the nuclear technology field, even when they are working with Iran, their suspicion goes deep though they have been able to maintain a nuanced and equivocal position. Ostensibly, Russians have tried to be the voice of reason; in reality, however, they are interested in gaining from the conflict. Meanwhile, for geographic and strategic reasons, and by design, Russians have made themselves a key player in Iran's nuclear crisis. Indeed, given that they are building the Bushehr plant and would provide fuel for its operation and remove the spent fuels, they are internal to Iran's nuclear system. The EU-US coalition realizes Russia's strategic position, suspicions, interests and the game it is playing, and plans to exploit them to end Iran's nuclear technology ambitions even for civilian use.

In a recent article, the right wing *Resaalat Daily* in Tehran summarized Russians' conflicting view of Iran's nuclear programs, and correctly implied that Iran cannot and should not put all its eggs in the Russian basket. Unlike Americans and Europeans, Russians do not think that Iran has violated any major part of its obligations to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and agree with Iranians that the conflict is largely political rather than legal. Unlike the West, Russians think that Iran needs to develop nuclear energy for its future needs even if it has tremendous reserves of oil and gas, but like the West, it insists that producing enriched uranium at home will not be economically advisable for Iran. Russia wants to become the sole nuclear fuel provider for Iran.

Significantly, Russians are not fully convinced that Iran has no intention of acquiring a nuclear-bomb-making capability. Their suspicion is rooted in the fact that Iran lives in a dangerous nuclear neighborhood, Iran insists to develop its own enrichment fuel cycle, and Iran wants to build a planned Heavy Water plant in Arak that would produce plutonium, which has no use for nuclear energy production. Iran's recent nuclear nationalism (and prestige) has become a new source of worry for the Russians. Indeed, Russians predict that, unless stopped, in 3 to 5 years, Iran could develop a nuclear device. Given Iran's significant advances in missile technology, they consider such development as a direct threat to their national security and interests.



Russians also believe that the US will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear-bomb-making capability and for that purpose, Americans are determined to stop the current Iranian regime from enriching uranium at home, and would even enter into a military conflict with Iran for the purpose if needed. Russians also believe that the Americans will ultimately force the IAEA into a position to take Iran to the UN Security Council for imposition of multilateral sanctions. Russians believe that such sanctions would not work given Iran's multi-billion dollar foreign reserves, in which case, Americans would insist on the provision and authorization of a use-of-force option from the UN as in the case of Iraq. However, in Russia's view, Iran's nuclear ambition has no military solution.

Russians do not wish to see Iran prematurely taken to the UN and are not in favor of a military solution. Yet, they are not in a position to eventually stop such developments. One serious problem is that Russians themselves suspect the Islamic regime in Tehran, and are not in favor of a nuclear Iran. They are also concerned that any unqualified support for Iran would be at some point in the future embarrassing given that the Americans are not telling the world all the information that they might have about Iran's nuclear projects. Indeed, it has been an American strategy to reveal such information in pieces and at critical moments. In the past, Russians have been alarmed by the fact that the Americans had better information about Iran's nuclear programs than Russians had!

In sum, it appears that it is only a matter of time for the Russians to join the EU-US coalition to report Iran to the UN Security Council. There is only a slight chance for the tripartite negotiations to succeed. Russians will take a tough position, Iran will not accept to forego its uranium enrichment program, Europe's leverage for or against Iran is limited, and the US does not wish to see the negotiations succeed. Yet, and as I wrote in a previous *AIC Update*, it is not clear if the US would ultimately benefit from its "success," unless it stops at an advantageous point. The logical progression of the US advances against Iran would lead to a disastrous conflict that would be antithetical to its interests and prestige.

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