

Iran and Russia – U.S. Non-Proliferation Dialogue

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The war waged by the United States and Great Britain against Iraq this spring has played a nasty trick on the global nonproliferation architecture, which can cause real drama when it wants to. On the one hand, the acronym “WMD” is now widely disseminated in the mass media, and the long and cumbersome word “nonproliferation,” thanks to ubiquitous television coverage of Iraq, has become commonplace in every household. Now, it seems, every household must be concerned about, or at least aware of, such an acute problem as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation. On the other hand, the concept of proliferation is closely associated in the mass consciousness with Saddam Hussein. But there is a hitch: after Saddam’s overthrow and the U.S.-British occupation of Iraq, no WMD arsenals have been found in Iraq. Playing host to British prime minister Tony Blair in Moscow, Russian president Vladimir Putin asked him jokingly where he thought Saddam had hidden his deadly arsenals. Putin’s irony during the Russian-British dialogue reflected the sentiments of the average man in the street, not only in Russia but also, and to an even greater extent, throughout Europe: the Americans and the British are trying to catch a black cat in a dark room, even if there is no cat present.

After Iraq

Obviously, the war in Iraq did not commence because of proliferation; nevertheless, the ongoing struggle against WMD proliferation was chosen as a convenient pretext for the war. As a result of the Iraqi operation, the term nonproliferation has become hackneyed, while the traditional mechanisms for preventing WMD proliferation are being ignored; the established nonproliferation architecture is deliberately being jeopardized.

Hans Blix, former head of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), was ridiculed by the U.S. administration. However, the inspections conducted by the IAEA and UNMOVIC in Iraq during the pre-war months should be considered a success of the international community. The inspections, held in compliance with Security Council Resolution 1441, proved an effective mechanism for investigating Iraq’s alleged WMD programs, while preventing their further development.

The military example displayed in Iraq has sent to other countries in the Middle East and beyond the wrong message: if you do not lose time, if you keep your doors closed to international inspectors and obtain nuclear weapons as soon as possible, you can guard

yourself against a preemptive military attack, and bargain with the Americans instead. Having attacked Iraq under the nonproliferation slogan, the United States has not intimidated other countries about possessing WMD of their own but, on the contrary, prompted them to take moves in exactly that direction. Syria, for example, may see it as an advantage to have chemical and biological weapons arsenals; furthermore, it may now be considering ways of obtaining nuclear weapons, which it has never planned before. Saudi Arabia, instead of spending money and resources for developing its own nuclear weapons, may consider simply obtaining them, together with experts, from Pakistan.

Nuclear Iran or Nuclear-Weapon Iran?

IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei's June and August 2003 reports on Iran can be interpreted in different ways. One thing seems indisputable, however: Iran's nuclear program is more advanced than was suspected earlier.

The situation concerning Iran and the question of nonproliferation is not only about the current Iran- IAEA dialogue, but, perhaps more importantly, about forecasting Iran's nuclear capabilities over the next three to seven years. During this period, Iran will probably be able to shift its ambitious civilian nuclear power program toward military purposes, if its leadership decides to take such a political decision. This probability must not be allowed: if Iran possessed nuclear weapons, together with modern delivery vehicles, it would constitute a threat to Russia's national security and international stability.

Few question the fact that Iran has a military nuclear program. In 1993, Russia's foreign intelligence reported that Iran "has a program for military applied research in the nuclear field." The report went on to state, however, that without outside technological and research assistance, the appearance of nuclear weapons in Iran before 2001 was unlikely; and even if Iran invested some 1.5 billion U.S. dollars in its nuclear program every year, it would be able to develop nuclear weapons no earlier than 2003.

An assessment from the PIR Center's Gen. Vassily Lata and Mr. Anton Khlopkov, having evaluated all of the new information concerning Iran's advanced nuclear program received in the last few months, arrives at the following conclusion. Factors that may have caused Iran to accelerate its nuclear program include its wish to: "... obtain technical capabilities for developing nuclear weapons. In this case, Iran can go very far, while remaining within the frameworks of its international commitments ... According to such a scenario, Teheran can receive technical and material capabilities for developing nuclear weapons within months, as soon as it accumulates weapon-grade nuclear materials in the required amount. A political decision to use resources of nuclear materials for developing nuclear weapons can be made if Iranian-U.S. relations become aggravated and the United States starts preparing an operation to overthrow the incumbent regime in Iran, or if the United States or Israel bombs Iranian nuclear facilities..."

Interestingly, despite the frequent lack of coordination between the government agencies now controlling the defense industry, and despite the lack of necessary funding, Iran has been displaying an impressive ability to independently achieve its goals. In the first half of the 1990s, Russia declined Teheran's request to build a uranium enrichment

plant in Iran. Iran, though, has managed to build such a plant on its own, without Russian assistance, and much faster than one could have expected.

But there is still no reason for categorically stating, as some analysts now do, that Iran will decide to develop nuclear weapons. Nothing is predetermined in Teheran at the present time, and there is still time for working out a system of measures for reducing the risk of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons. The most important thing is to reduce or eliminate those incentives that are motivating Iran to possess WMD. Paradoxically, the U.S. operation against Iraq has already liquidated one such incentive, because the primary enemy of the Iranian military strategists was not Israel or the United States but Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Now the question arises: Does Tehran deliberately maintain uncertainty about its plans (the way its sworn enemy Israel has done, thus keeping its nuclear policy under a shroud of complete secrecy) in order to broaden its room for further bargaining? Or do the Iranians themselves not know what they should do next? The latter thesis seems more probable. In the continuing tug-of-war between the groups of Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei, President Mohammad Khatami, and ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran's elites seem to be divided over the question concerning the direction of their civilian nuclear program, and how it should be developed; with whom and how they should bargain (and whether they should bargain at all) over the possibility of Iran's giving up its nuclear weapons ambitions. Most importantly, what should they demand in return for their cooperation?

Judging by Teheran's rhetoric, its main concern is the presence of nuclear weapons in Israel. Double standards in the United States's Middle East policy are particularly manifest on the issue of Israel's nuclear weapons. Whereas Washington includes Iran in the list of countries that belong to the "axis of evil" merely for its intentions (never proved, though), Israel's nuclear arsenal is accepted as a reasonable matter of course. True, such double standards damage both the settlement process in the Middle East and adjacent regions, as well as the nonproliferation principles. And still, would Iran be ready for the mutual suspension of all nuclear fuel facilities in the region? (This refers to only two nuclear sites: at Israel's Dimona and Iran's Natanz.) I am not sure Teheran would find this proposal very tempting or practical.

The Iranian leadership obviously includes groups that hope for a strategic rapprochement with the United States. Washington displays less interest in such a scenario, yet some policymakers there seem interested. Both countries are now holding the most rigid positions so that they can later reduce the stakes, while leaving much room for bargaining and, ultimately, for a compromise. Teheran does not have a unified U.S. policy, nor does Washington have a unified Iran policy. This factor reduces the possibility for bargaining but does not rule it out. In this case, pro-U.S. forces in the Iranian leadership will hardly consider cooperation with Russia. On the contrary, Iran will possibly avenge itself on Russia for its inconsistency (real or imaginary) on the various issues of nuclear cooperation, for the delay in the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and the withdrawal from other contracts.

Presently, there are signs that the prevailing view in Teheran is that Iran will benefit from a long-term strategic partnership with Russia. Similarly, Russia will benefit from

such a partnership, too, above all for geopolitical reasons and then for economic ones. In a situation like this, Russia has much room for pursuing its foreign policy. Moscow is interested in a stable and technologically developed Iran that desires a stable level of cooperation with Russia. It wants Iran to be free of nuclear weapons, and other WMD, and not to be a haven for international terrorists. Finally, Russia is interested in a comprehensive settlement of the entire Middle East situation.

This is why Russia should not suspend or freeze its cooperation with Iran in the field of nuclear power engineering both in the construction of the first reactor at the Bushehr nuclear power plant and in the possible construction of other (up to six) reactors in that country, at least until Russia has direct proof that Iran is developing nuclear weapons of its own. When President Putin spoke in Britain in June 2003 about the “proximity” of the Western and Russian positions with regard to Iran (this “proximity,” he said, is much greater “than it seems”), he stressed that the nonproliferation campaign must not become a loophole for unfair competition on global markets. France, which occupies a similar position on Iran’s nuclear program, is also ready to compete for Iran’s nuclear markets.

Other types of cooperation with Iran in the field of nuclear energy (namely, the training of specialists and the introduction of other possible projects and supplies) should be made dependent on Iran signing and ratifying the IAEA’s Additional Protocol. Iran’s recent decision to cooperate with the IAEA, temporarily freeze its nuclear enrichment program, and sign the Additional Protocol by November 20, 2003, was a result of active secret diplomacy by France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia, and should be treated as a definite success of the carrot and stick approach. If Iran is not planning to develop nuclear weapons of its own, joining the protocol will not be an insurmountable problem (even though it may bring about some discomfort in its internal political environment).

Russia should abide by the position earlier expressed by Nuclear Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev on the return of spent fuel from the Bushehr nuclear power plant to Russia. Until Iran signs the Additional Protocol, Russia will not supply it with fresh fuel. It would also be wise to reduce the amount of time that the fuel is stored in the power plant’s cooling ponds. Efforts in this direction are already being made, but they should be stepped up.

Russia-United States, Ltd.

Russia is interested in a nuclear weapons–free Iran not because the United States and Israel are pressing it, but because of Russia’s independent and intelligible position based solely on the country’s national security interests.

During the second half of the 1990s, when the “Iranian issue” was a constant irritant in Russian-U.S. negotiations, Russia often took a defensive position, trying to prove its innocence. It took Russia many years to establish order within its economy, and create effective systems of export control at the national level as well as in hundreds of enterprises across the country; this is very critical from the point of view of nonproliferation. Now that the export regime has been brought under control, and Russia has established priorities in its foreign policy, it is time for it to pursue a more active policy on WMD nonproliferation and their means of delivery. Russia should take the

initiative and develop a package of proposals and subjects for discussion for its upcoming negotiations with the United States and the G-8. Jointly with the United States, Russia should assess potential international threats to security. Finally, the safety of the nuclear weapons and nuclear materials possessed by Pakistan must be determined; this is one of the most vulnerable spots in the world as far as nonproliferation is concerned.

Russia should also discuss the promise forwarded by the United States, although unofficially, following the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's indefinite extension in 1995, to persuade Israel to join the NPT in several intermediary stages. A definite answer should be provided concerning the future of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Russia is vitally interested in this document, which is now hanging in mid-air, although not through any fault of Russia's.

There are other serious issues which must be explored: ways need to be introduced for deblocking the current impasse in the Conference on Disarmament, for beginning work on a Convention on the Ban on the Production of Fissionable Materials, and finally, to prevent the deployment of nuclear weapons in outer space. In sharp contrast with the NPT and the decisions of the 2000 NPT Review Conference, the United States has announced plans to explore the development of low-yield nuclear weapons. This problem is no less serious than Iran's nuclear future. Or does it not concern Russia?

Of course, Russia should not conduct the bilateral dialogue with the United States, the multilateral dialogue within the G-8 framework, and discussions at the UN Security Council as ping-pong with the Americans. In the long run, Russian and U.S. views on nonproliferation still unite rather than disunite the two countries. Both states describe proliferation as the main threat to their national security. Bilateral exchanges of information and a joint assessment of the perceived threats are critically important.

No matter how important the ongoing dialogues with the United States are, Russia should not forget about the importance of multilateral diplomacy and multilateral mechanisms and institutions—a resource that has not been tapped to its full potential in recent years. The IAEA and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva could play a more active and constructive role in reducing the risks of proliferation. Skepticism about their excessive bureaucratization and sluggishness is partially justified. Nevertheless, events in Iraq have graphically demonstrated that it is international institutions that can become an alternative center for decisionmaking, which would greatly reduce the need for using military force for solving international crises. U.S. administrations come and go, and their priorities will change, but international institutions will always be with us.