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Nuclear Issue Instead of Iran Policy?

Europe's Difficult Position between Iran and the US

Johannes Reissner

In March 2005 the third round of negotiations between Europe and Iran on Iran's nuclear program took place. It is questionable whether the United States are prepared to support Europe's attempts to use political, economic, and technological incentives to make Iran fundamentally renounce its uranium enrichment program. It is also uncertain how long Iran will be able to keep up the temporary suspension of uranium enrichment on the domestic front. Mutual mistrust and Iran's poor image in Europe impair the atmosphere of the negotiations. Moreover, Europe's Iran policy is at risk of being reduced to the nuclear issue. The Europeans could thus run into the dilemma of having to choose between Iran and the US, which would restrict their political options vis-à-vis Iran and the region and also be detrimental to their long-term interests.

It seems that the negotiations between the European Three (Germany, France and Britain) and Iran are going better than expected. However, mutual mistrust spread by Iranian and Western media as well as politicians continues to mar the atmosphere, and predictions are that the outcome of the nuclear altercation will be negative. The Europeans' focus on the nuclear issue is understandable, but it ignores the actual breadth and diversity of European-Iranian relations and European policy on Iran. It would be wise for Europe not to lose sight of the overriding goals of its Iran policy, particularly if the negotiations happen to break down.

What is Europe's Interest?

The Europeans are interested in secure energy supplies (above all natural gas) and stability in the region; they want to encourage Iran's international and regional integration, of which security policy is an important aspect. Iran is not as isolated as it is often portrayed in the light of the difficulties with the West, non-existent relations with the US, and the antagonism with Israel—its relations with its neighbors and other states in Asia have improved considerably over the past decade—but further integration would certainly be of benefit for the region and Europe's relations with it.

Inside Iran it is often claimed that the country is not dependent on Europe, but despite the considerable diversification of

Iran's foreign trade since the 1990s the EU remains Iran's most important trading partner. Tehran is interested in European investments and also in the restarted negotiations on an EU-Iran trade and cooperation agreement. Iran's natural gas could make a decisive contribution to Europe's future security of energy supplies. There is also much more cultural exchange between Iran and Europe—and it is much more fruitful—than the widespread negative assessment of the Iranian regime in Europe would suggest.

In the nuclear issue the Europeans demand assurances from Iran that its nuclear program be used exclusively for peaceful purposes. Tehran is prepared to give guarantees but is not willing to forego uranium enrichment. Arms experts consider that only full relinquishment would provide an effective guarantee. There seems to be little room for flexibility on this issue.

The incentives that the Europeans are offering in exchange for Iran fundamentally renouncing its fuel-cycle program are by no means insubstantial. Iran is definitely interested in long-term European support, particularly for its technological development. But now a countdown has begun in the nuclear debate—only a convincing offer here and now can help bring about a workable compromise on the nuclear issue in the conflicts within Iran. A second complicating factor is that Europe can hardly make a convincing offer regarding regional security without the US.

What is Iran's Interest?

Despite occasional statements to the contrary, Iran has no interest in jeopardizing its relations with Europe over the nuclear issue. Nevertheless, it insists on its right to enrich uranium as attested by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This in itself does not prove that Iran wants to build the bomb. Possibly Iran has yet to reach its own consensus about whether or not nuclear energy should also be used for non-peaceful purposes. At any rate, Iran's improved

cooperation with the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency and its readiness to conduct the difficult negotiations with the EU-3 suggest indecision. The authoritative statement by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Khamenei, that Islam forbids weapons of mass destruction is also quite significant for the debate within Iran.

From the Iranian point of view, the right to enrich uranium is synonymous with the right to technological development. After the experience of being outplayed by the great powers in the last hundred years and more, Iran perceives the denial of this right as humiliation. Indignation at the idea has been harnessed by religious and nationalist forces who have managed to achieve virtual consensus on uranium enrichment throughout the Iranian political spectrum. When top cleric Hashemi Rafsanjani argued in a prayer sermon that France, a developed country, used nuclear energy to cover 70 percent of its energy requirements, while Iran was to be refused this option, he was above all voicing the desire that nuclear technology be put at the service of Iran's development.

Iran's obstinate clinging to its uranium enrichment program is rooted in a pronounced need for recognition—of the regime, the revolution, and Iran's basic national dignity. This need permeates Iran's entire foreign policy; it complicates dealings with the country because it is not politically negotiable but emerges all the more in debates on concrete political issues. The nuclear dispute brings these emotions into the sphere of security policy.

The need for recognition should be taken seriously. At the same time it cannot be overlooked that it is ideally suited to help maintain the regime, especially in connection with the nuclear issue: The regime can present itself as the guardian of the nation's honor and thus distract from its own dwindling legitimacy caused by ineffectiveness and the increasing restriction of individual and social freedoms. Public debate on the nuclear program has been

going on for two years now, a period in which effective governance was almost impossible. The ongoing dispute between reformers and conservatives paralyzed the government of President Mohammad Khatami, which lost its parliamentary foothold through the manipulated victory of the conservatives in the February 2004 elections. And since summer 2004 politics has essentially been dominated by preparations for the elections of president and prime minister in June 2005.

Decisions on the nuclear issue are made by the Supreme National Security Council; here the future president (candidates have not yet been finalized) will represent only the executive. The presidential elections are thus of no direct significance for the nuclear dispute. Following the elections, however, the issue of the efficiency of government is likely to return to the fore in domestic-policy debates, so that the distraction caused by the nuclear issue could lessen. This could enable a more flexible stance and weaken the consensus that uranium enrichment is the quintessence of the inalienable right to development. If, however, a president were elected who had the support of the conservatives—but not the hard-liners—the latter could use the nuclear issue to put pressure on the president and the new government. Too much international pressure and a lack of real benefits could then well lead to a hardening of Iran's position in the nuclear issue.

Mistrust and Disrepute

Many Europeans are not only skeptical about Iran's nuclear program, but share the American assumption that the Iranians are trying to acquire the bomb. The Iranians, on the other hand, suspect that the Europeans may ultimately be pursuing the same goal as the US—regime change. Conservatives and hard-liners in Iran point to this secret agenda and put their chief negotiators under great pressure, calling on the Europeans to deliver on their promises

immediately and demanding the resumption of Iran's uranium enrichment program. Western media play into their hands, as do statements by European politicians. Although the official line is that Europe—unlike the US—doesn't want regime change, but aims to influence Iran's political behavior, unofficially it is all too clear that Europe would also be glad to be rid of the "Mullah state." Iran does not fail to notice this. Iranian policy is shaped not so much by broad debate in the Iranian media about European and US strategies, but by the general image of the Islamic republic in the West.

The idea of a "rogue state," one which is thought to be capable only of evil doings, is again having a strong influence on Europe's perceptions of Iran. In particular the barring of reform-movement candidates from standing in the parliamentary elections in 2004 tarnished Iran's image and weakened the reform movement. But it is still alive, and even if Iran is not pro-Western, it still has more hard-won democracy to show than its neighbors. However, this is scarcely reflected in the popular assessment of Iran. The elections in Iraq, understandably, claim more attention than faltering efforts at democratization in Iran. Fixation on the nuclear issue and fantasies about regime change seem to block out the question of how to support the diffuse but definitely existing reform movement in current conditions; the significance of gradual generational change within Iran's conservative political elite is another issue that has been overshadowed.

The rogue state premiss evidently also makes it possible to accuse Iran of complete irrationality while pursuing the worst goals. The media speculate about an Iranian attack on Israel, which assumes that Iran represents the greatest threat to Israel—something not even all Israelis give credence to—and the Iranians are assumed to be so ideologically blinkered as to not even reckon with counterstrikes.

Tehran's virulent anti-Israeli rhetoric today is largely symbolic and serves to

shore up the regime. It creates the impression of unbroken revolutionary fervor, which the population is expected to support, thus recognizing the regime's line. But despite their clear sympathies for the Palestinian cause, the Iranians are well able to avoid demonstrative support of their government's policy on Israel. After all, there is an immense gulf between rhetoric and politics. Implicitly, at least, Iran has accepted the two-state solution. If there are signs of a lastingly positive development in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it will be interesting to see whether there is any change in Iran's policy on Israel.

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Iran and the US at the Crossroads

Iran's negative public image does not have the same disastrous consequences now as it did in the mid-1990s, when European public opinion contributed to the failure of "critical dialog," a rapprochement considered immoral. Obviously image and atmosphere are things whose effects cannot be measured, but it should come as no surprise that the Iranians are unsure about Europe's intentions and believe that the Europeans have no satisfactory incentives to offer, are puppets of the US, and despise the Iranians deep down.

The "rogue-state image" could further gain currency, especially if Iran sticks to its uranium enrichment program. This would negatively influence the atmosphere of negotiations, a bit like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is still very questionable whether the Bush government's declared interest in a diplomatic solution includes the willingness to make a substantial contribution to European assurances and incentives. Senator Biden's proposal of an American security guarantee for Iran is meaningful because it takes account of the issue of recognition of the regime, which is so central for Iran. But it is unlikely that the Bush government could bring itself to go that far. Even if Washington did make a positive contribution to European efforts

at the negotiating table, the time factor would still play a significant role.

A "diplomatic solution" could also mean forming an international front against Iran under US leadership in a much more circumspect manner than with the Iraq war, be it with the goal of imposing a comprehensive embargo or conducting military action acceptable to the Europeans. Fears to this effect are being voiced in Iran. Europe, in turn, is afraid of another transatlantic dispute like the one about the Iraq war. Given the mistrust toward Iran and the wholesale negative assessment of the country, this fear must not lead the Europeans to react rashly and get stuck in a quandary where they are forced to choose between the US and Iran. Europe's Iran policy goes far beyond the nuclear issue, and the Iran policy of the West as a whole relies on the myriad relations between Europe and Iran. These must not be undermined by the vagaries of sentiment.