

**Summary of the roundtable discussion “*Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Program – The role of Russia in the negotiation process*” at the Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 February 2008**

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The roundtable discussion at the Carnegie Moscow Center started with two speakers giving short input presentations followed by an open debate. In the introductory statements, the first speaker addressed four questions regarding the Iranian nuclear program. First, addressing why it is important to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the speaker pointed to its existential threat to Israel. Without a real second strike option, Israel will be inclined to attack Iran preemptively before being attacked itself. An Iranian nuclear weapons capability will not only increase the likelihood of an Israeli attack on Iran, but could trigger a regional nuclear arms race with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and NATO ally Turkey. Iran would become the test case for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as its credibility as an international treaty is on the line. In a Middle East without the NPT in place, there will be no oversight on new nuclear reactors by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in the region. The speaker moreover underlined that the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) legitimacy is at stake. If Iran continues its nuclear enrichment and acquires nuclear weapons while defying three UNSC resolutions, the Council – and all of its members – would lose significance.

Secondly, the speaker addressed the knowledge of the US and the IAEA about the current state of the Iranian nuclear program. According to the speaker, “the gun was smoking” at least until fall 2003 when the Iranians supposedly suspended their clandestine nuclear weaponization program. Currently, the IAEA and the US are uncertain whether the latter program has been stopped. Not only can Iran restart its program at any time – it actually comes closer to a nuclear weapons program every day with its continued enrichment, its heavy water reactors in use and the missile program.

On the third question about the nature of the Iranian intentions, the speaker emphasized the long and continuous history of the Iranian nuclear program. Iran had already pursued a nuclear program with a weapons option under the Shah in the 1970s with hope that it would become a dominant power in the region. After the Iranian revolution, the Mullahs were not interested in continuing the program. However, their position on the program changed when Iraq attacked Iran with chemical weapons in the course of the first Gulf War and when Saddam Hussein’s nuclear intentions became obvious. Iran consequently restarted its nuclear program under the lead of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani with extensive help from the Pakistani Khan network. The Iranian nuclear program even continued under the moderate President Khatami who insisted on Iran’s right to the peaceful use of nuclear technology. With the US invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan, some leaders in the Iranian regime decided that nuclear weapons would deter a US invasion – even though this option had received less attention in the US itself in past few years. After concluding his historical overview, the speaker pointed to two purposes of the Iranian nuclear weapons program: (1) to deter attacks from the US or Israel, and (2) to project power in the region. Unfortunately, the international community would thus be back at square one in terms of Iranian intentions to develop a nuclear weapon. However, although most Iranians perceive the current UNSC resolutions against enrichment to be discriminatory, they do not necessarily want their country to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, but rather to solve its economic problems. Most Iranians realize that the pursuit of nuclear weapons puts the country in danger.

Finally, the speaker discussed how the international community should proceed in regard to Iran. According to the speaker, the most important task is maintaining the international

coalition, including the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the UK) plus three (Russia, China, and the US). Their agreement on a text for a resolution in January 2008 in Berlin was crucial in that it prevents Iran from using the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report's conclusions to its advantage. The speaker highlighted the importance of determining the terms of negotiations with Iran. Talking to the country can not be an end in itself. If Iran did not suspend its nuclear fuel cycle first, the international community will send a signal of weakness to Iran and the region. Unfortunately, time is on Iran's side but avoiding the alternatives of appeasing or bombing Iran should be the international community's first priority.

The second speaker at the round table began by emphasizing the need to place the Iranian nuclear program in a regional and global context. Although no one wants an Iranian nuclear bomb or the demise of the NPT, many in Russia have considered allowing Iran to have a full nuclear fuel cycle under very strict international controls. There is uncertainty in Russia as to whether Iran will in the end want to produce nuclear weapons. However, the speaker pointed out, the Iranians will not suspend their program under any circumstances. The Iranians do not consider the West a trustworthy partner and believe that the West could change its mind on allowing enrichment under international control at any moment. Iran feels surrounded by enemies and discriminated against by the international community. Therefore, the Iranian regime wants the US to recognize its sovereignty before Iran recognizes the sovereignty of others. Since Iran does not care about international sanctions, rising oil prices and rising Iranian prominence in the region could pose a challenge to the international community.

With regard to Russia, the speaker highlighted its willingness to keep the coalition against Iran together. The Russian President-elect Medvedev will likely attempt to improve relations with the West as every Russian president has tried to do at the beginning of his tenure. However, Kosovo and US missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic constitute serious challenges to Russia's relationship with the West. Many Russians believe that for those reasons, it should not give in to Western demands, which would turn Iran into its enemy. Right now, a good relationship with Iran is a key part of Russia's foreign policy. Many experts believe that Russia will move even closer to Iran in the short run.

The speaker also pointed to the fact that instead of the nuclear program, the nature of the Iranian regime is the real problem for the West as the US support for a nuclear program under the Shah has shown. The characterization as a fundamentalist regime is not accurate since its leaders see themselves as reformists compared to Sunni extremists in other countries. Setting aside the rhetoric against Israel, one could see Iran as a country with more democratic elements and more press freedom than other countries in the region. Some in Russia thus question whether Iran is a real challenge to the region. In conclusion, one could ask why Iran should not be allowed to be a regional power never having attacked its neighbors.

On the question what the international community could do, the speaker stressed the importance of US-Iranian engagement. Iran has improved its cooperation with the IAEA but is unwilling to display full transparency because it fears to reveal its defensive capabilities. In addition, Russia will be unwilling to go further with a forceful UNSC resolution. From the Russian perspective, the sense of urgency is less pressing since its military experts believe that Iran will need no less than eight years to produce intercontinental missiles. During that time, Europe and the US will also improve their capabilities against missiles offsetting the Iranian challenge. Eventually, Iran will be stronger and more self confident but it will most likely undergo internal changes as well. The international community should thus not confine itself to the option of either bombing Iran or appeasing it but engage the country and a US recognition of Iran will be an important first step in that direction.

**Russia's Iran policy – strategy or tactics?**

At the beginning of the debate, the rationale for the recent changes in Russia's Iran policy became the center of the discussion. Only one year ago, one participant observed, Russia seemed to have lost its patience with Iran and had made its cooperation in Bushehr contingent on Iranian cooperation with the international community. Since then Russia has moved away from this position suggesting that it has already given up on the idea to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. This observation led some participants to question Russia's seriousness in this matter implying that a close relationship to Iran might be a strategic priority for Russia. Others took a different position, arguing that the Russian leadership after 9/11 considers its relationship with the US as tit-for-tat with the only question being what Russia can get out of it. Both viewpoints prompted immediate responses. A number of participants pointed to the fact that the current Russian administration does not have a real foreign policy strategy but is using the Iranian nuclear program as a tactical playing card against the West. Russia's guiding motive in its current foreign policy is to prevent another national crisis like in the 1990s. In this context, Iran is viewed as a major power on the Southern Russian border and more important to Russia than Pakistan and North Korea due to its role as a geopolitical partner against Islamic fundamentalists (i.e. Iran's support against Sunni jihadists in Chechnya).

However, one participant cautioned that Iran's importance for Russia as a strategic ally should not be overestimated. Only the current context of a new Cold War with the US could explain why Russian diplomacy has done everything to water down UNSC resolutions on Iran. According to Russian experts, the country's foreign policy elite has decided to support Iran to make friends in the Islamic world and with some European countries who do not prefer tough sanctions on Iran. Russia will weigh what it can get from the West in return for giving up its support for Iran. In addition to tactical considerations, economic motives could also play a role according to one participant who pointed to Russia's role as a major supplier of nuclear technology to Third World countries. Nevertheless, the current fatigue with the Iranian intransigence among many Russian policy makers might open the way for an agreement between the US and Russia.

**The Iranian nuclear program in the context of Russian relations to the West**

The argument about the allegedly tactical nature of Russia's Iran policy persisted throughout the debate. One participant emphasized that when the Russian leadership is talking about Iran, it is in fact talking about its relationship to the West, and the US missile defense system. Most participants agreed that the planned US missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic is perceived as being anti-Russian and undermining Russian security. Those perceptions need to be addressed, some participants maintained.

Regarding possible remedies to the troubled relationship between the US and Russia, a number of participants stressed that Russia longs to be treated as a great power, possibly the World's second power. Russian policy would change were the US to accept the country on an equal footing. The fact that both the Yeltsin and the Putin administration have tried to embrace the US but have not gotten anything in return has added to this behavior. From the Russian perspective, the NATO strike against Serbia has damaged the legitimacy of the UNSC more than a possible Iranian refusal to comply with UN resolutions will. To overcome this divide, the US would have to integrate Russia into its policies, for example by means of a common missile defense system. Since Russia has currently more important issues to deal with than the Iranian nuclear program, the US should give in to Russian priorities.

The call for giving in to Russian demands provoked a number of reactions. One participant suggested that the Russian leadership is in fact content with the status quo. It had never been interested to really test the proposition that sanctions can work by preventing serious efforts. Russia actually benefits from the status quo since the tensions about the Iranian nuclear

program create a high oil price and weaken the US role in the Middle East and in the UNSC. If Russia is interested in better relations with the US, it should be helpful with Iran. Cooperation on this issue would give Russia a lot of leverage with the US as Washington is desperately concerned about the Iranian nuclear program.

In addition to the different perceptions on US-Russian relations, a differing sense of urgency regarding the Iranian nuclear program became obvious within the debate. Some participants questioned the urgency of the Iranian nuclear program suggesting that the US is trying to sell a new threat to the world after its intelligence failure on Iraqi weapons of mass destructions. Objective and collective estimates such as the IAEA reports should be used to judge the Iranian nuclear program. Moreover, one participant reiterated the second speaker's claim that Iran will need seven to eight years until it has developed intercontinental missiles. Since the IAEA had cleared Iran – except for its past weaponization efforts – in one of its recent reports, the threat is less pressing than previously thought to be. This assessment was strongly questioned in the following debate. One participant cited from the same IAEA report that the agency is not in a position to verify the Iranian program and requires more clarifications which have not been provided by Iran. It is thus not in a position to determine the nature of the nuclear program.

### **What are the Iranian regime's intentions?**

Since the uncertainty about the nature of the Iranian nuclear program relates to the uncertainty of the nature of the Iranian regime, some participants made an effort to shed some light on its intentions. A number of participants stressed that on the one hand, Iran's position in the region had become stronger as a result of the US invasion into Iraq and the continued Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, the Iranian leadership feels threatened by being surrounded by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The nuclear program has in recent years developed into a matter of national pride and self-sustainability – any solution would have to ensure that the Iranian regime does not lose its face.

According to one participant, Iran's leadership is thus primarily interested in territorial and regime security. It tries to achieve these goals by two means: 1) through legitimate diplomatic and economic means and 2) through illegitimate military and aggressive means. However, illegitimate and aggressive the means, the Iranian regime is always calculating carefully. Even though the Iranian rhetoric towards Israel should be taken very seriously, the Iranian leadership has never said that they themselves will destroy Israel in fear of negative domestic repercussions. Since the Israelis have long accepted the Iranian leadership as a rational and calculating player, the international community should do so as well.

If Iran is a rational player, the international community should find a way to get in contact with the current regime and find out if it is possible to get guarantees for the peaceful character of the nuclear program. By assuming that the regimes intentions are to weaponize its nuclear program, the international community might destroy options and create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The vibrant domestic debates between different political factions and even within the Pashdaran about Iran's relationship to the US could point into a promising direction. Only recently, the Supreme Leader broke his own taboo by suggesting that US-Iranian relations could be useful for Iran at some point. A new US administration should take these signs very seriously as it is the only credible negotiation partner to the Iranians – as the EU-3 found out after its failed negotiations with Iran. Other participants added that according to recent polls, the Iranian population still views the US favorably hence a new US administration and a possible new Iranian administration in mid-2009 could seize a window of opportunity for negotiations. One participant cautioned that the international community should also be prepared for the possibility that the Iranian regime is not calculating in a cost-benefit manner.

### **Iran, Israel, and Russia in the Middle East**

With regarding to the regional dimension of the Iranian nuclear program, the majority of the participants agreed that it will have serious implications for Middle Eastern security. Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia will not accept Iranian nuclear weapons and will most likely start their own nuclear programs in response. Although Israel might not be afraid of a direct nuclear attack, it fears Iran's ability to use its nuclear weapons as a shield to continue low-intensity aggressions against itself and moderate Arab governments in the region. This aggressive Iranian behavior has become apparent only recently in the Persian Gulf region, when the French government announced plans to open a military base in the United Arab Emirates. With nuclear weapons, the Iranians will be even more assertive and aggressive and prevent the Gulf countries from forming independent alliances. However, the Iranian power in the region should not be overestimated. One participant pointed out that Iran's weak economy stands in stark contrast to the booming Gulf States and Saudi Arabia.

During the debate about the regional dimension of the Iranian nuclear program, the participants touched upon the recent conference in Annapolis and Israel's role in the conflict. One participant stressed that it was a mistake to frame Annapolis and the new peace efforts as an anti-Iranian alliance because it increased – if not inflated – Iran's importance.

Israel has undergone a change of tone with regard to the Iranian threat (from “we cannot live with an Iranian bomb” to “do not make it an entirely Israeli issue”). However, the Iranian threat is still politicized domestically making it hard for an Israeli Prime minister to stay in office once Iran goes nuclear. In order to decrease the Iranian influence in its vicinity, Israel should stop pushing Hamas into the Iranian orbit by isolating it and consider changing its policy against Syrian influence in Lebanon. Israel's goal should be to take itself out of the equation as the only object of resentment in the region and put the regional focus on Iran – as then-Prime Minister Rabin had once advocated.

The Russian role in the Middle East was subject to a debate among a number of participants. Some participants questioned Russia's importance as a strategic player in the region. According to these participants, Russia's diplomacy in the Middle East is based on bilateral relations rather than a strategic framework. Moreover, it is not seen as a leader in the region and often portrayed as unable to deliver as Putin's visit to Tehran has shown recently. Without a formalized security role in the region it will be unable to offer security guarantees. One participant objected to this assessment pointing to Russia's role as a provider of nuclear energy technology in the region. While Iran might not trust Russia to deliver, at least nine countries in the region would do so. Russia could thus still be a power player in the Middle East if it wanted to. The Russian position on the proliferation of nuclear technology in the region without IAEA oversight remained unclear.

### **US politics and the Iranian nuclear program**

Most participants agreed that the Iranian nuclear program will remain on top of the US foreign policy agenda and thus Iran will continue to take an important place in US-Russian relations. One participant emphasized that the Russian leadership is mistaken if it believes that the US will put aside everything to improve US-Russian relations. If Russia wanted a better relationship, it should start to work with the US on Iran. The participants were in agreement, however, that this will not happen during the remaining months of the Bush administration. It was also pointed out that US military strikes against Iran are unlikely over the remainder of Bush's term because of the NIE-report, and because of the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. While both Democratic Presidential candidates will most likely favor a diplomatic solution, the preferences of the Republican candidate are less obvious. However, one participant emphasized that Senator Obama is wrong to assume that talks with Iran are in itself a good thing. Taking into account that its leadership does not believe it is going to be attacked at the moment, offering security guarantees to Iran is unlikely to be a successful



strategy. The fact that everyone expects the US to talk to Iran is not necessarily increasing its leverage.

The scenario of an Israeli Prime Minister's phone call to the White House about his plan to preemptively attack Iran provoked a lively debate among the participants. One participant stressed that the US President would face a lose-lose situation: on the one hand, if the US does not help Israel in this situation, it loses credibility with one of its most important allies in the region and the US President will come under pressure from Congress – on the other hand, if the US attacked Iran together with Israel, it would let another country dictate its foreign policy.

### **What can be done?**

Looking ahead, the participants stressed the importance of rebuilding trust between the international community and Iran. While some participants pointed to Iran's historical mistrust of the West which needed to be addressed, others demanded from Iran to regain the international community's trust after years of hiding their nuclear facilities. Iran should thus suspend its enrichment program before meaningful negotiations can resume. The dilemma of differentiating between civilian and military use of nuclear technology suggests that one should rather focus on the political nature of the regime and its strategic intentions. To find out about these intentions, one participant recommended confronting Iran with a comprehensive diplomatic initiative. Such an initiative should include unconditional negotiations, addressing Iran's legitimate security interests, and offering a comprehensive economic package (lifting sanctions, energy cooperation). If Iran did not comply after a given period of time, the international community should confront it with tough sanctions. This scenario would increase the internal debate on the nuclear program within Iran. A number of participants supported such an initiative, but cautioned that the international community should not threaten Iran with sanctions at the outset. Others suggested that keeping the UNSC together was more important than agreeing on tougher UN sanctions. The current "shadow sanctions" are a better option and more effective. The majority also agreed that there will be a window of opportunity after mid-2009 for the US to negotiate with Iran since no other state matters to its leadership. These negotiations should include a discussion on how much Iranian regional dominance could be acceptable to the West (and to Iran's neighbors as one participant stressed).

With regard to Russia's role in the negotiation process, the participants asked what to offer Russia to be part of the solution. Others responded that Russian diplomacy had already suggested solutions which would save Iran's face such as facilitating an international nuclear fuel cycle under the auspices of the UN. One participant mentioned that Russia favors a North Korean solution to the Iranian nuclear program.

These suggestions prompted responses by other participants who questioned Russia's seriousness about Iran and whether it will be a party to a solution. Some participants disagreed, emphasizing the need for reviving the US-Russian partnership and for embedding it in a strategic framework. Finding a common ground on Iran could thus be a means to better US-Russian relations. One participant stressed that in order to find a deal on Iran, Russia and the US need a deal between themselves.

### **Summary**

The roundtable discussion on Russia's role in the negotiation process over the Iranian nuclear program revealed a number of recurring themes. According to the majority of participants, Russia's current Iran policy is guided mainly by tactical calculations. The Russian leadership views Iran as a bargaining chip in its troubled relationship with the US. Russia longs to be seen as a world power again after its humiliating demise in the 1990s. It does not view Iran as a threat but rather as a legitimate regional ally against Islamic fundamentalists. Russia's

foreign policy priorities differ from the US and Europe's in so far as it is focused on the planned US missile defense system in Eastern Europe and the situation in Kosovo. The lack of a foreign policy strategy in the Middle East is not only apparent to Russian foreign policy experts but to the countries in the region as well. Consequently, Russia is not seen as a credible player in the Middle East and might overestimate its own role. Overall, there seemed to be a willingness on the Russian side to be part of a solution involving a Russian role in providing nuclear fuel to Iran under the auspices of the UN. Due to the Iranian mistrust of the West, any solution should enable Iran to save its face.

An interesting aspect of the debate was that it focused almost entirely on the crisis of US-Russian relations and their importance for the Iranian nuclear crisis. Europe's role in negotiating the Iranian nuclear program remained unaddressed. The Russian desire to negotiate at eye-level with the US could be a possible explanation thereof.