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Rethinking Iran: From confrontation to cooperation

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Institute for Security Studies
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Union européenne

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Preface

Álvaro de Vasconcelos

Even as tensions in the Middle East show little sign of abating, fewer issues could be as decisive for global security as the course of action the UN and other international actors, namely the European Union and the United States, will choose to take towards Iran. Apart from the persistence of conflict and war, notably in Iran's vicinity, the international and the regional scene is further complicated by the fragmented response that has greeted the so-called energy crisis. These are reasons enough for the EUISS to devote more time and effort to Iran, and to publish in the coming months a number of studies designed to help the EU map out its policy options. Christoph Bertram's thought-provoking essay, which has previously been published in German, provides a good starting point to this urgent debate.

The major power in the Persian Gulf, Iran ranks second only to Saudi Arabia in oil exports and is among the world's top three holders of proven oil and gas reserves. Iran wields a great deal of regional influence, and its stakes in resolving crisis in two war-ravaged bordering neighbours, Iraq and Afghanistan, are high. Iran is a party to the NPT but has not ratified yet the additional protocol it had signed in 2003. Its nuclear programme, purportedly civilian but suspected of barely disguised military ambition (especially since uranium enrichment capability was allegedly achieved), is viewed by the United States and its regional allies and, increasingly, by EU Member States as well, as a potential threat to world peace.

There is scarcely a risk of overstating the importance of the EU's stance towards Iran. Suffice to say that Iran, prominent already in the American presidential campaign, will be close to the very top of the next US president's agenda from the start, and that under a new administration both Capitol Hill and the White House are more likely to lend a more sympathetic ear to European points of view.

There may be no easy answer to the question 'what is the best strategy to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions?' But there is little doubt that the Bush administration's confrontational policies, even if these have latterly been toned down somewhat, have resulted neither in Iran abandoning its determination to complete the nuclear fuel cycle nor in a full collaborative

commitment to the resolution of regional crises. Bertram argues that if, as now seems apparent and as the US administration has finally acknowledged, this strategy is leading nowhere, then it must be re-thought in line with the efforts at constructive engagement that have been pursued by the European Union. There is little doubt in Bertram's mind that the West (the EU and the United States) must now seek to engage with Iran through partnership, as they have done with China, in the knowledge that state and regime are not exactly synonymous.

In the event that partnership is not an available option due to a lack of consensus, then a détente *of sorts is in his view the best way to effectively prevent proliferation, and ultimately to support democratic reform and protect human rights. The benefits of a partnership or at least* détente *(putting an end to Iran's international isolation and, indeed, openly seeking its involvement in the resolution of regional crises along commonly agreed parameters) might be able to persuade Tehran of how much it stands to lose if it is believed to be pursuing nuclear power status. Cooperation with Iran would be built on the recognition of shared interests in bringing about peace on Iran's borders, wider Middle East security concerns, economic development and energy security. This obviously implies broadening the agenda with Tehran well beyond the nuclear issue, but does include assistance to Iran's civilian nuclear programme, an offer that has been on the table for quite a while.*

To persuade decision-makers that engagement will pay off whereas confrontation may lead to catastrophic consequences, a number of strategic issues must first be clarified. What if, as Bertram asks, Iran does become a nuclear power? How can containment be made to work? What would be the implications of a nuclear-capable Iran for the security of its neighbours, most notably Israel, and more widely European and world security? How far would it induce or have the potential to induce further proliferation? How dramatically would it change Iran's regional status?

These sets of issues must be examined through the prism of strategic analysis, free from preconceived notions and axis-of-evil-type ideological antagonism. When it comes to Iran, lucid analysis is often clouded by a marked, and rightly so, distaste for the theocratic nature of the regime, and by a mixture of a culturally-prejudiced attitude towards political Islam and

puzzlement in the face of the mysterious opacity and unpredictability of Iran's decision-making system.

Military confrontation, adding more war to ongoing wars on Iran's borders, cannot be seriously considered as a viable option to stop or delay Tehran's nuclear programme. US and EU efforts of engagement could obviously not survive an Israeli military strike, however 'surgical', as Bertram pertinently remarks.

Engagement, dialogue and persuasion on the part of the European Union, such as the European role in the initiative currently pursued by the permanent Security Council members plus Germany (P5+1) and SG/HR Javier Solana will not be credible, however, if not complemented by direct US engagement. This will hopefully be the course chosen by the new American administration, following in this sense the European approach. Tehran must also consider a change in its approach to relations with the international community, and would be well advised to end the lack of transparency, including with regard to the nuclear issue – ratification of the additional protocol allowing for snap inspections is one among other positive steps that should be taken – that gives rise to legitimate anxieties. These are hardly eased by Tehran's clamping down on those political forces that advocate engaging with the democratic world and the regime's systematic attempts at discrediting the reformist sectors internally.

A large part of the suspicion with which the international community views Iran is brought upon itself by the Iranian leadership, and notably President Ahmadinedjad's confrontational and inflammatory rhetoric. Denying the Holocaust and Israel's right to exist represents a degree of religious-ideological extremism that provokes as much revulsion as it spells isolation for the Iranian regime. It also fosters the horrified suspicion, where the nuclear issue is concerned, that if given the chance deeds may yet come to follow words. As a counterbalance to this, it must of course be borne in mind that the Supreme Leader, not President Ahmadinedjad, is the one who holds the reins of power in Tehran, particularly where national security and high politics are concerned.

The debacle in Iraq must have brought to their senses any remaining supporters of a military solution as a way of changing the nature of Iran's regime or the course of its suspected military nuclear programme. The

humanitarian consequences of renewed war in a region so severely ravaged by conflict would be too devastating to contemplate. The same applies to the potentially huge disruption to energy supplies. The only remaining option to induce a positive change on the part of the Iranians regarding their nuclear dossier is therefore diplomacy, with its full array of instruments ranging from dialogue to pressure, from trade and other incentives to targeted sanctions. Showing a clear preference for dialogue should not be mistaken for weakness or lack of resolve on either side. Dialogue and engagement is a two-way street, however. If it wants to avert further sanctions and pave the way towards a partnership-based approach on the part of the EU and, crucially, the United States, Tehran must do its share. Such a course of action would be highly beneficial to security in the Middle East, notably with respect to Iraq and Afghanistan, and most certainly to energy security as well.

Paris, August 2008

Introduction: partners, not adversaries

A more fanciful scenario would scarcely seem possible: Iran, of all countries, as a partner for the West? From speeches by politicians, articles by journalists and even supposedly balanced assessments by experts, the Islamic Republic emerges only as an adversary who will stop at nothing, seeking to dominate the Middle East and wipe Israel off the map with the help of a nuclear bomb, while at the same time undermining Western efforts towards stability in Iraq and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To the present government of the United States of America, the militarily backward Gulf country with a population of 70 million has come to be the major strategic challenge and possibly even the likely cause of a third world war. Elsewhere, too, strident warnings of war ring out, fuelled by fears not that Iran might be prevented by a Western military attack from acquiring nuclear weapons, but by the perception that such weapons in the Tehran regime's hands would apparently plunge the world into extreme danger. Rarely does the press publish an amply warranted criticism of the prophecy by Iran's President Ahmadinejad of Israel's disappearance from the pages of history, without also suggesting that Iran intends to help bring this about by means of a nuclear attack. The respected French strategist François Heisbourg even sees world peace as hinging on Iran's nuclear intentions: should the country obtain such weapons, widespread proliferation of nuclear means of destruction would become unstoppable and a nuclear war sooner or later inevitable.[1]

It is time to rub our eyes and ask ourselves whether this is sound analysis or collective confusion. Standing back and taking a fresh look is advisable not just because of the immoderate tone that prevails in the current debate, but also because only a perspective of objective detachment will allow us to explore how better to avert the true dangers posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. This exploration is the theme of the first chapter of this *Chaillot Paper*.

The second chapter is more ambitious and puts forward suggestions for a new orientation in the West's relations with Iran that

1. 'L'Iran et la bombe, la guerre ou la paix' ['Iran and the bomb, war or peace'], *Le Monde*, 11 September 2007.

some may regard as controversial. Not only is Iran the world's second richest country in fossil energy resources, but it is also the region's most densely populated country, with a long tradition of modernisation and a high level of education, and, for all its leadership's lack of democratic legitimacy, distinctly more signs of pluralism than is customary among its Arab neighbours. What is more, its cooperation is essential for the region's stability.

The West would therefore stand to gain considerably from ceasing to see Iran as an adversary and instead winning it over as a partner. Working towards such a partnership might also turn out to be the best way of curbing nuclear proliferation. This potential benefit must ultimately be taken into account when considering the best future policy to be conducted by the West towards Iran. Partnership may ultimately prove unachievable because of the incompatibility of our interests with those of the Iranian 'mullarchy' or a deficit of political courage. But if it were to be achieved it would be so significant that this option cannot reasonably be omitted from any consideration of Western policy towards Iran.

1

The nuclear controversy: the case for a new approach

Western attempts to constrain Iran's nuclear programme in such a way as to seriously hamper the scope for military development have so far proved unsuccessful. The reason for this is to be ascribed not just to Tehran's behaviour but also to serious Western, and in particular US, failings. Despite occasional promising initiatives, governments in Europe have in the end not managed to avoid being caught up in US policy. They are now mostly the willing prisoners of a 'non-policy' towards Iran, one which not only exaggerates the risk of Iran's nuclear development but also precludes the means of countering this more effectively.

How great is the risk?

A good deal is known about the Iranian nuclear programme, but unfortunately not everything. Above all, there are at most some indications, but no certainty, as to what purpose the leadership in Tehran is pursuing with it. They may themselves not yet have decided whether their aim is merely energy for civilian use, a military nuclear option to hold in reserve, or the bomb itself. Only one thing is clear: the present state of development does not pose any clear or immediate danger. Should Iran end up actually or putatively possessing a nuclear bomb, that would be highly undesirable but it would not plunge us into a nuclear war, nor would it be a strategic calamity for Europe and America, for the region or for the world.

The present state of development may lead to nuclear status for Iran, although that is by no means certain. Yet it is this uncertainty which generates mistrust. Two factors contribute to this. The first is the general fact which applies to any production of fissile material, i.e. that once enriched, it can also be used for military purposes. The second factor is Iran's specific behaviour. Iran has displayed so many inconsistencies that it is hard to believe Tehran's

assurances that it is not working towards the bomb. Any country striving for nuclear self-sufficiency lays itself open in theory to a suspicion of military intentions; Iran has in addition brought suspicion upon itself through its own behaviour.

It is true that the country is party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which allows it to have a non-military nuclear programme, and its leaders and negotiators constantly maintain that they have no other intentions. Yet for 18 years they withheld information about their activities from the NPT supervisory authority, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which the terms of the Treaty required them to reveal, and only owned up to them in 2002 when they had been leaked to the West.

Moreover, the restarting of the Iranian nuclear programme in the 1980s coincided with Iran's awareness of increased security threats at the time and therefore suggests underlying military motives. While the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, had previously closed down the Shah's US-aided nuclear programme as un-Islamic, it was resumed in response to the war unleashed by a missile-deploying, would-be nuclear Iraq in 1980. The Iranian authorities have since admitted that Iran cooperated with the network run by the Pakistani A.Q. Khan, a clandestine supplier of militarily-relevant nuclear technology.

Up until the autumn of 2003, according to the American secret services' latest consolidated assessment, the National Intelligence Estimate of 4 December 2007, 'Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities', Iranian military entities were working under government direction to develop nuclear weapons. This work was then probably stopped and is thought not to have been resumed at least until mid-2007. There is, however, no certainty on this point, nor can there be. The technical know-how acquired by Iran would not have been lost when the programme was closed down. And, although the IAEA, using an array of inspectors, makes regular checks, even at fairly short notice, on the installations declared by Iran, the government in Tehran will not allow it to carry out spot checks elsewhere in the country and rejects as forgeries documents suggesting that work on developing nuclear warheads has taken place at some stage.

The IAEA is thus left with incomplete knowledge of the Iranian nuclear programme, as its Director-General Mohamed El Baradei complained in his report of 15 November 2007 to its Board of Governors: Tehran's assertions as to the programme's exclusively

peaceful nature could not entirely be trusted. In late February 2008, despite Iran's increased willingness to supply information, he had to reaffirm the point: the IAEA remains unable to provide credible assurances regarding the absence of undeclared nuclear activities and material.[2]

There are other inconsistencies as well. Should nuclear enrichment be intended only for electricity generation in power stations, as Tehran claims, it would be necessary not only to enrich uranium but to produce the fuel elements for use in reactors. There is, however, no sign of that. Iran's ambitious efforts to develop longer-range ballistic missiles (the *Shabab-3*, currently still undergoing testing, is designed to hit targets up to 1,300 km away) also make military sense only if it is intended that the missiles be equipped with a nuclear warhead.

Yet while these are all factors arousing suspicion, they do not constitute proof. We are still in the realm of speculation. They do not provide proof of a renewed decision to produce the bomb, any more than they demonstrate the reverse. By its secretiveness, contradictions and persistent tendency not to clear up ambiguities until the IAEA has first received the relevant information from other sources, the Iranian leadership has heightened the ambivalence inherent in all nuclear programmes. Any analysis of Iranian intentions must therefore at least take account of the fact that, even though Iran may not be working towards the bomb, it is nevertheless allowing its nuclear programme to be developed in a way which does not technically preclude any subsequent military use.

Intentions are one thing, carrying them out is another. The existing programme has repeatedly been held up by technical difficulties and a lack of sufficient expertise. According to the fullest assessment of Iran's nuclear efforts to date, the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate referred to earlier, Iran will probably, should it set out to do so, not be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for military use until 2010 to 2015. It is even more uncertain when the considerable technical requirements for production of a usable bomb, known as 'weaponisation', would be mastered, let alone a test explosion carried out. There are as yet apparently no reliable indications of such work.

This then is the gist of the present state of affairs: there is cause to be concerned that Iranian efforts might aim at a nuclear weapons capability. But this is by no means certain, and even if pursued with great intensity, still another eight to ten years away.

2. IAEA Board of Governors, Report by the Director-General, 22 February 2008.

Yet, this by now fairly uncontroversial assessment has little bearing on Western political rhetoric which presents the Islamic Republic as being on the verge of becoming a nuclear power. And why, should Iran get its hands on a nuclear explosive device sooner than expected, would a nuclear-armed Iran, as Western politicians like to maintain, be 'unacceptable'?

What if?

Western political rhetoric bases its reasoning on the assumed outcome of Iran's nuclear development and not on its present state. Let us nevertheless assume that, in the worst-case scenario, Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapons capability in the near future. A credible capacity for building the bomb should be regarded as equivalent to actual possession, similar to the case of Israel whose nuclear status is not in any doubt although no tests have taken place and the existence of a nuclear arsenal is officially denied. This is also the most plausible of all possible Iranian scenarios. Were Tehran seriously believed to have a nuclear military capability, this would have practically the same strategic and political implications as actual physical possession of the bomb and, moreover, involve less political risk.

What would the implications be? Three are put forward in the present debate to support the argument of the 'Iranian threat': (i) potential use of an Iranian nuclear bomb against an adversary, in particular against Israel; (ii) a potential increase in Iranian influence throughout the Middle East following on from actual or putative nuclear status; and (iii) a possible encouragement for other nuclear wannabes in the region and beyond.

The bomb as a weapon for attack?

Nuclear weapons are nothing new; they were used for the first, and so far last, time at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. If there has since been a key lesson of the nuclear age, it is that they do not lend themselves to use as a weapon of military attack. Their usefulness is limited to their role of deterrence. Consideration has admittedly been given time and again, in nuclear strategy literature and in military planning, to ways of breaking out of the straitjacket imposed by that principle, e.g. by distinguishing between strategic

and tactical, large and small or merely deterrent as opposed to actually usable nuclear weapons. In practice, all these attempts failed because they could not get around the central fact of the nuclear age, namely that for any state to launch a nuclear bomb against another is to put its very existence in jeopardy.

In the Cold War decades, when the two nuclear giants, America and the Soviet Union, were engaged in a permanent standoff, the first to launch a nuclear attack would be the second to perish. Should an Iran still militarily incapable of effective defence of its own airspace[3] dispatch the bomb against the immeasurably better-armed Israel, or America and its allies, the first to shoot would be the first to die. France's ex-President Chirac is the only political leader so far to have dared say as much: 'The danger does not lie in the bomb it [Iran] will have, and which will be of no use to it ... Where will it drop it, this bomb? On Israel? It would not have gone 200 metres into the atmosphere before Tehran would be razed.'[4] He had to retract that comment soon afterwards for the sake of political correctness.

Some claim that this law of the nuclear age cannot apply to the Islamic Republic, on account of its religious revolutionary stance and its sponsorship of subversive groups, often lumped together as 'terrorists', such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Norman Podhoretz, mentor of the American neocons and former editor of *Commentary*, has argued that deterrence is ineffective in the case of 'a regime ruled by Islamofascist revolutionaries who not only are ready to die for their beliefs but care less about protecting their people than about the spread of their ideology and their power.'[5] Such assertions, however, correspond neither to the lessons of the nuclear age nor to those of the history of the Islamic Republic. While Tehran did in the past send hundreds of thousands of young men to their deaths against the aggressor Iraq, the survival of its own regime always took precedence, indeed was the very reason for sacrificing these lives. The Islamic Republic's leadership will not use nuclear weapons for purposes of attack as that would bring about its own certain demise. The fact that a state bases its leaders' legitimacy on religion does not mean it is suicidal.

Nor does reference to President Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli statements lead to any other conclusion, particularly since, in contrast to what is often claimed, he was by no means threatening to wipe Israel off the map, let alone launch a nuclear attack.

3. On this point, see Martin Van Creveld: 'Faut-il bombarder l'Iran?' ['Should Iran be bombed?'], *Le Monde*, 2 November 2007.

4. In an interview with *The New York Times*, 1 February 2007.

5. Norman Podhoretz, 'Stopping Iran: Why the Case for Military Action Still Stands', commentarymagazine.com, February 2008.

There is of course no excuse for the wording of his speech in Tehran to mark 'Jerusalem Day' on 26 October 2005, quoted verbatim here because it has been widely distorted: 'Imam [Khomeini] said: "The regime that is occupying Al-Qods [Jerusalem] must be eliminated from the pages of history." This sentence is very wise. The issue of Palestine is not an issue on which we can compromise. (...) Very soon, this stain of disgrace will be purged from the centre of the Islamic world – and this is attainable.' [6]The wording suggests that this is to be brought about by the force of history, not by means of a military attack, even if there is a perceptible readiness to lend history a helping hand. But the speech does not issue any military threat, let alone herald a new holocaust with a nuclear attack on Israel. In view of the vast military superiority enjoyed by Israel and its ally America, that would in any case be total folly.

No less wide of the mark is the assertion occasionally heard that the government of a nuclear-armed Iran might be prepared to provide terrorists with such a bomb. Every nuclear power up to now has attached the utmost importance to keeping its arsenal under its own strict, exclusive control; such lethal weapons are never entrusted to uncontrollable terrorists operating off their own bat. The state concerned could never be sure what might be done with them and would be the first to incur retaliation for any unauthorised or delegated use.

Far more convincing than any claim that the rules of deterrence do not apply for present-day Iran is the interpretation that Iran's alleged striving for the bomb stems from the desire to ensure its own security through deterrence, the usual prime incentive for nuclear proliferation elsewhere in the world.[7] Deterrence, not the substitution of state interest by terrorist ambition, is also the most likely chief motive for the support Iran provides to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, as well as for development of medium and long-range missiles.[8]

An instrument for regional dominance?

Is Iran seeking to dominate the region? And would actual or putative possession of an atomic bomb significantly advance that project? With a population of almost 70 million, Iran is by far the largest country in a region featuring many smaller states; even Saudi Arabia and Iraq each have a population of less than half that

6. Middle East Media Research Institute, Washington, *Special Dispatch* no. 1013, 28 October 2005. See: www.memri.org.

7. Ephraim Kaim, 'A Nuclear Iran: What it Means and What Could be Done', Tel Aviv, Institute for National Strategic Studies, February 2007, pp. 50-52.

8. As also argued in *Strategic Survey 2007*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, pp. 215-16.

size. Iran has the second largest oil and natural gas reserves in the world. It is also the prime strategic beneficiary of the American invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussein's regime, which posed a threat to Iran and the entire region and was only prevented from acquiring a nuclear weapon of its own by its defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, has been eliminated. Present-day Iraq is not only a weak state but also pervious to Iranian influence. Assistance for Hezbollah and support for Hamas ensure that Iran can pull the strings from behind the scenes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even without nuclear weapons, this makes Iran the most significant Muslim power in the Middle East, with a legitimate claim to being a major player in the region.

It would be simplistic, however, to infer from this that Iran has aspirations to regional hegemony. True, shortly after 1979 there were moves to export the Shiite revolution to similar communities in neighbouring countries. But the attempt was abandoned, as it stood little chance of success; since the early 1990s, Iran's leadership has instead been eagerly working at establishing good relations with all Muslim countries. As noted above, Iranian activities in Iraq or Lebanon reflect a strategy to counter American 'forward defence' or to exploit favourable opportunities rather than any striving for regional dominance.

There are those within the region and beyond who, like Robert D. Blackwill, a former deputy national security adviser to President Bush, draw on the history of ancient Persia, and see in Iran 'a centuries-long ambition to acquire the attributes of a great power and to reclaim Persia's ancient position as the hegemon of the region. (As one Middle East leader recently said to me, "Think Darius as well as the Mullahs.")'[9]

But such comments betray above all an ignorance of the history of Iran. Iran is not Persia, any more than modern-day Greece is the empire of Alexander the Great. What has shaped modern-day Iran and its people's political mentality is not some vague longing for historical greatness, but a sense of humiliation caused by a colonial experience spanning almost two centuries, when the Russians, the British and most recently the Americans were the country's *de facto* masters. Attempts by the last Shah, later toppled by Khomeini, to lend legitimacy to the monarchy founded by his father by setting it in the context of long-lost Persian dynasties, proved an abysmal failure. As Hamid Dabashi, Professor of Iranian Studies at America's Columbia University, notes with bitter-

9. Robert D. Blackwill, 'The Three R's: Rivalry, Russia, 'Ran', *The National Interest*, no. 93, January-February 2008, p. 69.

ness, 'the manufacture of a solitary national and nationalist historiography for Iran has been a principal product of a colonial and colonised imagination, falsely resting the pride of a people's place exclusively in the fabricated idea of a prolonged, uninterrupted, consistent and above all monarchical nation-state; but false premises provide no basis for pride.'[10]

From one perspective, however, Iran does seem to be a power steadfastly seeking regional dominance, namely as seen by the United States of America, for over half a century now the controlling – indeed, hegemonic – power in the Middle East, which under the Bush administration has declared Iran a dangerous rival doing its utmost to drive the US out of the region.[11] Since US ally Reza Shah Pahlavi was removed from power by the Islamic Republic, Iran has posed a constant challenge to Washington's strategy in the region, and the humiliation experienced through the protracted hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981 remains fresh in American minds to this day. Yet Iranian resistance to American notions of regional order does not imply an Iranian ambition for regional dominance, particularly since this resistance has often been shaped by having to stand up to American interventions against the country or its regime. And Tehran has occasionally worked hand in hand with the US, for example when it collaborated with Western efforts to undertake a new beginning in Afghanistan in 2001.

Would actual or putative possession of an atomic bomb considerably increase the Islamic Republic's influence or even elevate the country into the dominant power broker with which the other countries in the region would have to come to terms? Countries with nuclear ambitions like to think that possession of the bomb will provide major political dividends but usually in vain. Since nuclear weapons are not 'normal' weapons they are of limited value even as a military threat. Possession of nuclear weapons does not actually imply any increase in political influence. Can anyone seriously claim that France or the United Kingdom owe their international role to their nuclear deterrent rather than to their permanent seats on the UN Security Council or their alliance with the US and membership of the EU? India's international influence is due to its size and economic prowess, Israel's – apart from America's security guarantee – to the superiority of its conventional, i.e. usable, military power. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal has not enhanced the country's political or strategic position, but, if any-

10. Hamid Dabishi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: New Press, 2007), p. 24.

11. Peter Rudolf, 'Die Iran-Politik der Bush-Administration – Konfrontative Eindämmung und ihre Konsequenzen' ['The Bush administration's policy towards Iran – confrontational containment and its consequences'], *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, Berlin, SWP-Aktuell, 25 April 2007.

thing, confirmed its leading position among international problem countries.

True, actual or putative nuclear weapon status would raise Iran's standing as having successfully withstood pressure from the outside world, particularly the US, and would lend it greater credibility in being able to deter an attack and thus also better resist American military pressure. Given the position of influence already achieved by the Islamic Republic without a bomb, however, this would represent little more than a relative increase in standing.

There are those, such as Shahram Chubin, one of the leading authorities on the strategic situation in the Gulf, who nevertheless expect to see drastic changes should Iran acquire nuclear weapons status: according to this view, such a development would tilt the regional balance away from the Arabs, challenge and complicate US hegemony, if not end it, and sow doubts as to the advisability of over-reliance on the US in the region. Iran would try to intimidate pro-Western Arab countries, increase its influence over its immediate neighbourhood and thus in practice drive a wedge between the nearer Arab Gulf states and the more distant ones.[12]

That cannot be ruled out. But the Gulf states' governments are already aware of the significance of their big neighbour, long before it might take the step of becoming a nuclear-weapons state. Iran's strength stems from its difference in size and weight compared to the other Gulf countries, a difference which an America weakened by its Iraq adventure can no longer compensate. Even a non-nuclear Iran has so far resisted American pressure. It has no need for actual or potential nuclear status in order to play a major and growing role in the region. That may be regrettable. But the fact hardly constitutes a further argument for the special danger posed by an Iranian bomb.

On the contrary, the smaller, mostly Sunni, Gulf states' latent mistrust of the far bigger, Shia-dominated Iran could be stirred up by Iran getting its hands on the bomb, despite any barriers to Iran's influence which neighbouring Russia, a weakened America and even a slow-to-act Europe might still be able to erect. Instead of leading to Iranian dominance, the bomb might produce counter-alliances that would curtail Iran's political reach in the region.

12. Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 2006, p. 128.

Opening the floodgates to regional nuclear proliferation?

Will a nuclear-armed Iran open the way for nuclear proliferation, at least throughout the Middle East? Will Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Turkey, or perhaps even any of the smaller Gulf states, respond by trying to develop a bomb of their own, to acquire one in secret or at least to engage in a civilian nuclear programme with the intention of subsequently being able to convert it for military purposes? And, if international pressure and UN Security Council decisions are not sufficient to dissuade Iran from plans to build a bomb of its own, will not nuclear wannabes all over the world be encouraged to emulate it?

In all official pronouncements by Western governments, this is the major stated concern, the stuff of which Heisbourg-style disaster scenarios are made. But how warranted is that concern in reality? Three lessons taken from the nuclear past make it seem a bit premature, to say the least.

The first lesson is that the decision to engage in the arduous, costly and hazardous path of building a national nuclear bomb is not taken lightly. It never springs from mere opportunism, but rather from a thorough weighing up of the pros and cons in a situation typically marked by an extreme concern for the nation's security, sometimes underpinned by the fear of a considerable loss of international status, and by a lack of other options. That was also how the Islamic Republic, under pressure from Iraq at the time, started its military nuclear programme in the first place.

The other Gulf states, along with Egypt and Turkey, would not feel any more threatened by a nuclear Iran than they do at present. Moreover, if they did, there would be better options available to them than a bomb of their own, namely to turn to the US for protection, as they have in fact so far chosen to do. How else can we explain the fact that far fewer countries have actually sought to procure nuclear arms of their own than was originally feared and this despite many having the technological capabilities to acquire them? That in the Middle East none of the Arab countries, with the possible exception of Libya, has responded to Israel's nuclear armament with any nuclear efforts of its own? Even Libya clearly did not consider its security situation sufficiently perilous to continue with its programme in the face of international pressure.

Of course, any civilian nuclear programme in theory includes the option of possible military use, and there are a number of Gulf

states interested in acquiring such facilities, which as parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty they cannot formally be prevented from doing. However, there is no compelling or obvious reason to assume that such interest comes in response to the Iranian programme's ambivalence or springs from a desire to match Iran. Even if the spread of civilian nuclear technology implies such ambivalence, the prime conclusion to be drawn is that all such new projects should be subject to additional international safeguards, not that they stem from ulterior military motives, let alone signal plans to act on them.

The second lesson is that acquisition of the bomb has been made more difficult in practice, albeit not technically. France, the United Kingdom and Israel and probably also Pakistan and North Korea were in the past able to develop their programmes with the help of other nuclear-weapon states. That no longer applies. International checks on transfers have been tightened up, not least in order to put a stop to nuclear mail-order businesses like the one run by the Pakistani A.Q. Khan. Checks have been further stepped up to prevent terrorists from acquiring fissile material and nuclear technology. None of these measures, alone or combined, of course, create absolute barriers, since one of the core conditions for nuclear armament, uranium enrichment, is, as has been pointed out, allowed under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Yet the requirements for developing an independent nuclear arms programme remain so demanding that the decision to embark on such a course will hardly be made lightly and the step cannot be taken without great risk.

The third lesson is that the political costs of any proliferation decision have also risen considerably, a point brought home not least by the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty does not constitute an absolute barrier, but it does remain an obstacle. Even North Korea does not want to be accused of breaching the Treaty, since it could then expect to come under huge political pressure. Nuclear projects may, as in North Korea's case, serve as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from the international community. But anyone who refuses to negotiate and persists with their plan can easily become an international pariah and, if perceived to be acting suspiciously, faces unpleasant reactions, even a formal condemnation by the UN Security Council. However unsuccessful the coalition of the US, Russia, China and the EU has so far been in persuading Iran to

discontinue uranium enrichment, it has nevertheless greatly raised the external and internal political price payable by any country even appearing to be pursuing a military objective with its nuclear programme. There are a great many countries, not just in the Middle East, which will be unwilling to pay that price.

What is the conclusion that emerges from this assessment? An actually or putatively nuclear-armed Iran would of course pose a problem for security and stability in the region and beyond. It would introduce a further element of insecurity and uncertainty into a part of the world where stability is already fragile, the potential for conflict high and which sits on a wealth of fossil energy sources that make it a theatre of strategic rivalry. What is more, any new nuclear-weapons state anywhere undermines the already weakened authority of the non-proliferation regime.

However, the analysis also shows that many of the arguments put forward in the present debate will not pass the plausibility test that should be required in matters of international security. There is no convincing reason to believe that the Islamic Republic would use nuclear weapons for any purpose other than to deter external threats. Anyone claiming that nuclear status would turn Iran into the dominant force in the region needs to explain convincingly and not just speculatively what further clout this would give this already important and influential country. And anyone seeing in an Iranian bomb a key factor which might prompt Saudi Arabia, Egypt or other countries to obtain one as well needs to show why for 40 years the Israeli bomb has not had that effect.

Passing plausibility tests does not, of course, offer any guarantee that the implausible will not happen. It does, however, provide the basis for a reasoned and sober assessment of threats, their possible repercussions and suitable courses of action. It is highly desirable that Iran gives up any military nuclear plans it might be pursuing and, at the same time, agrees to arrangements circumscribing the ambivalence inherent in civilian nuclear work. It is therefore the obvious and necessary task of international diplomacy to persuade the government in Tehran to do so.

In this, intensive international efforts, however, have so far remained fruitless. It is thus expedient to analyse why the various forms of pressure brought to bear on Iran have not worked, so that the ineffective ones can be discarded and the ones that stand some chance of success developed further. Even then, there is no guarantee of success. But this would at least increase the chance of

Western governments discarding a policy whose ineffectiveness is by now obvious, except to the politically blind.

What should be done?

The dispute over Iran's nuclear programme has been going on for nearly six years. Every available means of containing the conflict, apart from military intervention, has so far been tried: military pressure, sanctions, inspections and negotiations. How useful have they proved? Which of them now still hold out any hope of success?

Military pressure

It is one thing to dissuade an established nuclear power from making use of its potential, by threatening it with military retaliation. Iran has not yet reached that stage and will in all likelihood not do so for at least a further decade. It is another thing to persuade a country to abandon an as yet uncompleted nuclear weapons project, under threat of military countermeasures. These could, for instance, involve making it clear to Iran straightaway that it stands to gain little benefit from nuclear weapon status and instead is liable to suffer a great deal of harm. There is, however, also a difficulty here in that, welcome though this may be in itself, the government in Tehran constantly maintains that it has no interest in the bomb. Whenever Western representatives try, in occasional talks, to make clear how hard to achieve, how militarily questionable and how politically counterproductive nuclear weapon status would be for Iran, their Iranian discussion partners merely shrug their shoulders, assure their counterparts that they have realised as much themselves and for that very reason are not interested in seeking such a status.

In 2004 Hassan Rohani, then Secretary of the Islamic Republic's Supreme National Security Council and chief negotiator in early talks with the EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany), publicly summed up why Iran did not want weapons of mass destruction: 'We decided against it for strategic reasons, because we are convinced that such weapons would not bring Iran security. On the contrary, they would create serious problems. In recent years, Iran has made enormous efforts to build bridges of trust with coun-

tries in the region; the last thing we want is to demolish them by harnessing our resources to produce weapons of mass destruction. We are convinced that we would otherwise force those countries to turn to major powers for protection; regional security would thus be impaired and that would not serve our national security interests.'[13]

However, if the US National Intelligence Estimate is correct in its assessment that Iran did not stop work on a military nuclear programme, and then perhaps only temporarily, until 2003, there must be strong voices in the Iranian leadership which advocate at least the option of a nuclear weapon. They are not heard publicly, though, and no-one can say whether there is any kind of debate taking place behind the scenes in Tehran as to the strategic implications of an Iranian nuclear weapon. It is quite possible that the advocates confine themselves to the simple view that it would be better to pursue the bomb option than not to do so.

How then can the advocates of a nuclear bomb in Iran be made aware of the disadvantages that embarking on this course would entail for their country? For one thing, no doubt, by presenting the potential countermeasures that would eliminate any military gains to be obtained from the use of an atomic bomb. This is once again the old, tried and tested tactic of deterrence, clearly sending Iran the message that nuclear weapons are not to be played around with. It would therefore be desirable for governments in Israel, the US and Europe to state in no uncertain terms that, if it were to launch a nuclear attack, Iran would face massive, possibly even nuclear retaliation in the way alluded to by Jacques Chirac. This would make any possible use of the bomb so problematic as to seem less tempting and perhaps create uneasiness in Iranian public opinion. And, should all efforts to divert Iran from the nuclear path fail, deterrence would be the last, but also the most effective, way of preventing it from using such weapons, by means of a credible counter-threat.

Can deterrence also be used to stop Iran from acquiring the bomb in the first place? There has been no shortage of attempts to do so, such as when the American president, by constantly stating that all options are open, includes the possibility of a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Or warns that anyone wanting to avoid a third world war must have an interest in stopping Iran from obtaining the know-how to make an atomic bomb.[14] The French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, also no

13. In an interview with Al-Jazeera, 19 June 2004, BBC Monitoring, 22 June 2004, quoted in Chubin, op. cit. in note 12, p. 57.

14. In an interview with Fox TV, 18 October 2007.

doubt hoped through his warning 'we have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war'[15] to deter not just the use but the development of an Iranian bomb.

As borne out by the National Intelligence Estimate referred to previously, military threats perceived as credible have indeed been capable of changing the minds of Iran's leaders. When faced with the ostentatious US military deployment against neighbouring Iraq in early 2003, the Iranian leadership seriously feared that their country might come under attack next, as part of what Bush had branded the 'axis of evil', enough for the military part of the country's nuclear programme to be halted. At present, however, any such threat against Tehran lacks sufficient credibility. The threat of going to war with a country because it is developing the know-how to make an atomic bomb lacks such credibility simply because of the objective impossibility of erasing the technical know-how in question. With all claims of supposed weapons of mass destruction in neighbouring Iraq having been revealed to be untrue, it is hard to imagine an American president being authorised by Congress to attack a country which steadfastly maintains that it neither has such weapons and nor wants any, and which the US intelligence services confirm would take a long while to develop the bomb, should it secretly wish to do so.

Military action against Iran still cannot be ruled out altogether; it would be quite feasible, practically speaking. Admittedly, America has been weakened by the Iraq campaign and senior US military figures are warning increasingly openly against any such plan. Yet America's or even Israel's capabilities would be more than adequate for limited air strikes against known nuclear facilities: the US air force could easily attack 400 different targets within Iran in a single night.[16] While this would not stop the entire programme, let alone the relevant research, it would dramatically bring home to the leadership in Tehran the risk of continued nuclear weapons development.

However, this type of direct coercion, while militarily feasible, remains politically risky in the extreme, not just because of the likely international outcry, possible uprisings against US-allied Gulf rulers and retaliatory terrorist acts, but above all, crucially, because of the effect on the Iranian leadership. Why, following such an attack and its demonstration of Iranian impotence and vulnerability, should they drop any future plans to develop nuclear weapons? The reverse is more likely: a fervent resolve

15. On 17 September 2007, see BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6997935.stm.

16. See Barry Posen, 'A Nuclear-Armed Iran? A Difficult But Not Impossible Policy Problem', The Century Foundation, Washington, 2006, p. 7.

henceforth to acquire the bomb at any cost and, even more, to hide the relevant facilities at protected underground sites, as Saddam Hussein did after the Israelis bombed Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981.

Even mere threats of military coercion are now likely to be counterproductive. Implausible threats do not dissuade those to whom they are addressed from their plans but serve rather to strengthen their resolve. Thoughtless sabre-rattling and rhetorical brandishing of the possibility of an increasingly unlikely military attack has, if anything, emboldened the hardliners in Tehran in whom it was supposed to bring about a change of mind. Anyone among the leadership who over the last few years advocated backing down on the nuclear programme in order to avert the risk of an enemy attack is now instead left looking like someone without the nerve to stand up to the US.

To sum up, military coercion is no longer an option. Deterrence can serve to prevent use, if not acquisition, of the bomb. It should therefore now be made clear to the Iranian leadership by America, Russia and their allies that any nuclear attack would meet with devastating retaliation. Here, too, though, moderation is advisable. To a country whose leadership has time and again given solemn assurances that it means to develop nuclear technology solely for civilian energy production purposes, constant warnings can easily degenerate into hysterical overkill and thus cease to have any effect whatsoever.

Economic coercion

Punitive sanctions have played a predominant role in US policy towards Iran and a growing role in that of other, particularly European, countries. In contrast to the US, however, most other governments have retained a sceptical view of the instrument. This holds especially true for Germany, with its wide-ranging economic interests. Not until the Bush administration was finally, in early 2005, ready to lend at least passive support to European attempts to negotiate with Iran did the Federal Republic of Germany also agree to have the UN Security Council impose sanctions in the event of unsuccessful negotiations. A desire in this way to patch up the transatlantic relationship damaged by the rift over Iraq, along with relief that Washington was no longer counteracting European moves, led in the end to falling in with the

American line of first bringing Iran to 'see reason' by means of economic pressure.

In late 2006 the UN Security Council called for immediate suspension of Iranian enrichment activities and, for the first time with the agreement of Russia and China as well, prohibited all member countries from exporting nuclear equipment or technical information of potential relevance to nuclear enrichment, heavy-water reactors or nuclear weapons delivery systems. In March 2007 it banned Iran from engaging in arms-related procurement and recommended UN members to exercise 'vigilance' regarding arms exports from their countries and to carefully scrutinise applications for entry by individuals associated with the Iranian nuclear programme. In the spring of 2008 a third resolution further tightened up entry restrictions and again called on countries to maintain heightened vigilance as regards financial transfers to or from Iran. Iran has nevertheless up to now not heeded the Security Council's call for suspension of uranium enrichment, but has on the contrary stepped up its activities in this domain. Attempts by the US and some of its European allies to secure more stringent resolutions by the Security Council have so far proved unsuccessful. A number of Western governments, led by the US and France, are therefore calling for the imposition of further economic sanctions outside the UN framework. American pressure has already considerably cut back European trading and financial relations with Iran. Further sanctions would also primarily affect European trade with Iran, as American business has long since broken off all such direct dealings.

The resulting restrictions have become quite noticeable in Iran. But they have not been able to persuade a country rich in fossil energy sources, for which purchasers are ready to pay increasing prices, to give way on the nuclear issue. The economic sacrifices, including the considerable drawbacks for the Iranian energy industry of a lack of Western technical know-how, count for nothing as far as Iran's government is concerned. As the US Government Accountability Office noted in January 2008, the Tehran government has since 2003 signed contracts worth USD 20 billion with foreign firms for the development of Iranian energy resources. Iranian banks can conduct their business in currencies other than the dollar. 'Iran's global trade ties and leading role in energy production make it difficult for the United States to isolate Iran and pressure it to reduce proliferation and support for terror-

ism.'[17] Discontinuation of trade by European countries has long since been offset, in quantitative terms at least, by increased trade with others, not least China.

At most, the unanimity with which the UN Security Council ordered suspension of uranium enrichment in the resolutions referred to above may have had some influence on the leadership and on public opinion in Iran. The fact that China and Russia joined in came as a surprise to Tehran and fuelled criticism of the Ahmadinejad government. To what extent this has any effect on the Iranian decision-making process, however, remains uncertain. For the laborious efforts required each time in order to find the necessary support within the UN for even the mildest of new sanctions also reveal just how fragile that unanimity really is.

Even were that not the case and were the Security Council to decide on tougher sanctions, the instrument remains highly questionable, not just because of its doubtful impact but also because of its inherent escalatory implications. Governments tend all too easily to attribute the ineffectiveness of sanctions not to their limited usefulness in principle but to their relative mildness. Yet sanctions more comprehensive than those that have been unilaterally imposed on Iran by the US for years now would be hard to imagine. In the end, failed attempts to apply ever-tougher economic punishment might eventually come to serve as a justification for taking the next step, namely military action.

Economic sanctions should therefore be discarded as an instrument in dealing with Iran. Carrying on with them demonstrates not the firmness of Western policy, but its futility.

Inspections

Wherever compliance with contractual obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is in any doubt, it specifically provides for inspections by its supervisory agency, the IAEA. Despite coming in for a good deal of criticism, particularly from Israel and the US,[18] the Vienna-based Agency has fully discharged its task with regard to Iran.

Inspectors have carried out regular checks at facilities declared by Iran, as a party to the NPT, have investigated a number of previously concealed nuclear activities and have duly reported any NPT breaches to the Board of Governors. In August 2007 the Agency, led by Director-General El Baradei, agreed with the Tehran gov-

17. US Government Accountability Office (GAO), 'Iran Sanctions: Impact in Furthering US Objectives Is Unclear and Should Be Reviewed', 16 January 2008.

18. See Ephraim Asculai, *Can We Rely on the IAEA?*, INSS Policy Brief no. 9, 28 December 2007, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv.

ernment on a detailed timetable for clarification of various suspicious factors revealed by inspections. It regularly briefs the Board of Governors on progress, including measurement of enrichment levels at the Natanz centrifuge plant (at 3.8 % of U-235 in February 2008, well below the requirement for a bomb) and on the Iranian authorities' replies to its enquiries.

The Director-General's reports of 15 November 2007 and 22 February 2008[19] provide a detailed picture of that intensive process. There have admittedly been repeated Iranian attempts to restrict the work of the Vienna-based Agency, which has on a number of occasions had reason to complain that it has thus not been fully able to carry out all of the requisite checks. Yet contact between the IAEA and the Iranian authorities has never been broken off and, since the negotiations begun by the EU in 2003 came to a halt, this has provided the only continuing international framework for direct dialogue on the Iranian nuclear programme.[20]

Criticism of the Agency stems firstly from the objective fact that it is limited in its checks to the facilities declared by member countries. That is also why it could not itself detect the activities kept secret by Iran, but only raise them once they had become known. Checks were then possible only for so long as Iran, from late 2003 to late 2005, complied with requirements under the relevant Additional Protocol to the NPT, without having ratified it.[21] Such criticism is thus directed not so much against the Vienna-based authority as against loopholes in the present monitoring system. The Additional Protocol, so far ratified by 85 out of 144 parties to the NPT, is designed to plug precisely those gaps, even though it cannot ensure perfect oversight either.

The other, subjective component of criticism of the Agency's work springs from the reproach that it is insufficiently suspicious of Iran and attaches far greater weight to the largely smooth sharing of technical information than to the considerable factors that continue to arouse suspicion as to Iran's intentions. The IAEA, so the argument goes, should more clearly highlight the factors pointing to potential military use of Iranian activities. This criticism is unwarranted, as political and strategic assessments are not a matter for the Agency's staff but for its Board of Governors. Inspectors can carry out their work in an often difficult environment only if they confine themselves to compiling facts and leave the interpretation of any ulterior intentions to

19. Available for consultation at www.iaea.org.

20. As an example of the practical conduct and scale of inspections, see also the account given by the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the IAEA, 27 January 2006, at www.iaea.org.

21. Iran has now again been allowing inspections in accordance with the Additional Protocol on an *ad hoc* basis; see the Report by the Director-General of the IAEA, 22 February 2008, referred to above.

others. That is just what they have consistently done in their reports on Iran's activities.

The key weakness in the NPT monitoring system is objective in nature. Even where the Additional Protocol is applied, there can be no absolute certainty that a member country is not diverting nuclear material for non-peaceful purposes, at any rate if it has a uranium enrichment capability. While the NPT does not prohibit any party to it from engaging in nuclear enrichment for peaceful purposes, as the Islamic Republic rightly points out, there is as yet no known way of distinguishing with sufficient confidence between low-level civilian and high-level military enrichment. Designed to prevent nuclear proliferation, the NPT thus actually encourages it.

Uranium enrichment lies therefore at the heart of the nuclear dispute with Iran. However useful the IAEA's monitoring work, it cannot provide an absolute barrier to any reorientation of the programme towards military development. Any additional reporting requirements for parties to the NPT, any additional inspection rights for the IAEA, would nevertheless be beneficial. Bringing that about, not only for Iran's nuclear programme, by making the Additional Protocol generally binding and backing it up with further inspection rights, must form part of the West's overall non-proliferation strategy. But this cannot be imposed on Iran; it has to result from negotiation.

Negotiations

There is thus no alternative to negotiations, going beyond the IAEA-Iran dialogue, between Tehran and its international counterparts. They are the only way of reaching agreement on the actual scale of the Iranian programme, alternative arrangements and improved monitoring.

The first step towards such negotiations was originally taken by Iran itself. After President Bush had included the country, along with North Korea and Iraq, in the 'axis of evil' in his January 2002 State of the Union address, reports of a clandestine Iranian military nuclear programme were surfacing and a US attack on Saddam Hussein's Iraq was looking increasingly likely. In early 2003 the Iranian leadership feared the worst. Not only was the military nuclear project then halted, as since confirmed by the December 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate, but Tehran

also proposed direct negotiations with the US. Had this proposal been taken seriously and accepted at the time, many of the current reasons for concern could have been averted.

In early May 2003, with the approval of the entire leadership, the Iranian Foreign Ministry sent the US, via the Swiss ambassador in Tehran (with Switzerland representing US consular interests there in the absence of diplomatic relations), a document proposing comprehensive settlement of all outstanding problems. On the nuclear issue, Tehran was prepared, in return for 'full access to peaceful nuclear technology', to accept tight controls by the IAEA, including those under the Additional Protocol, so as to provide 'full transparency (assurance) that there are no Iranian endeavours to develop or possess WMD' (referring to weapons of mass destruction which include nuclear arms). As to Israel, it held out the prospect of acceptance of the Saudi-instigated 2002 Arab League Beirut declaration, implying recognition of Israel following a settlement of the Palestinian issue. It also offered to stop supporting Palestinian opposition groups and to bring pressure to bear on Hezbollah in Lebanon to confine itself to political activities.

However, anyone who had hoped that Washington would seize the opportunity of that offer, or at least give it thorough consideration, was in for a disappointment. In fact, it was quickly rejected within the administration on the grounds of alleged Iranian unwillingness to hand over Saudis suspected of al Qaeda membership. The Bush administration's only response was to reprimand the Swiss government for having passed on the message in the first place.[22]

Lest growing tension between Iran and the US develop into a military crisis, the initiative was then taken in the summer and autumn of 2003 by Britain, France and Germany, known as the EU-3 because of subsequent endorsement by all members of the European Union. Here, too, Iran initially gave an accommodating response. In October 2003 it expressed a willingness to accept additional IAEA checks and temporarily suspend its enrichment and reprocessing activities. That agreement was reaffirmed in November 2004. When Iran resumed uranium enrichment and ceased complying with the Additional Protocol the following year, the EU upped its offer. Should uranium enrichment be suspended, the EU would ensure the necessary fuel supplies from third parties (the EU and Russia) and held out the prospect of providing light-water reactors as well as establishing closer economic

22. Gareth Porter, 'Burnt Offering: How a 2003 Secret Overture from Teheran Might Have Led to a Deal on Iran's Nuclear Capacity - if the Bush Administration Had Not Rebuffed it', *The American Prospect*, 21 May 2006; Flynt Leveret, 'Dealing with Teheran: Assessing US Diplomatic Options Towards Iran', The Century Foundation, Washington DC, 2006, p. 13.

ties. Iran was also to be more extensively involved in discussion of regional security arrangements Security guarantees were formally considered and there were even hints at the possibility of a long-term special relationship with the EU.[23]

Those negotiations were, however, hampered from the outset by a twofold handicap. Firstly, both sides realised that they could at best serve as a prelude to direct talks between Iran and the US. But not only did the US take a disparaging view of European efforts and play no part in them, it also signalled no readiness to give Iran credit for its accommodating response to the Europeans. Secondly, Iran's willingness to make concessions hinged crucially on the strategic situation in the Gulf and on the power structure within Iran, both of which were set to change. In 2004 the Iranians elected a conservative parliamentary majority, which refused to ratify the Additional Protocol, and then in 2005 they elected as president the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who opted for confrontation with the West. At the same time, in view of the quagmire they had encountered in Iraq, the US ability to pose a serious threat to Iran was in steady decline. In 2005 Tehran withdrew all previous concessions. Enrichment resumed and IAEA checks were confined to the minimum allowed without the Additional Protocol.

Negotiations with the EU-3 have since been scaled down to occasional exploratory talks between the current Iranian chief negotiator and the EU High Representative, Javier Solana, who has tirelessly sought to keep the door of dialogue open. Yet he could only propose what the EU and US governments were willing to offer, and this has clearly been insufficient. The Iran dossier has been passed on by the IAEA to the UN Security Council. The US, its allies and UN veto-wielding Russia and China remain adamant that Iran should, as a precondition for negotiations, suspend uranium enrichment, at least for the duration of negotiations. This Iran remains unwilling to do. Even America's belated offer of direct talks if Iran would only meet the Security Council's demands has been unable to break the deadlock.

What might now be of further help? Certainly not increased American sabre-rattling. The Islamic Republic is admittedly still surrounded by US military bases to the west (Iraq) and to the east (Afghanistan), not to mention the American fleet standing off its shores. But the likelihood is now regarded as low in Tehran that continuing with the country's nuclear programme could under-

23. On this, see in more detail Chubin, op. cit. in note 12, p. 40.

mine Iran's security, or that there might even be any risk of military intervention. This has been reinforced by the latest US intelligence service reports and their implicit finding of no cause for alarm as regards the rapid development of an Iranian bomb. The Iranian leadership will not give way out of fear of America; at most, it will do so in return for significant economic and political benefits.

Could a shift of power in Iran cause the country to give way? A number of observers expect to see a rise of pragmatic forces in the country.[24] Even then, though, there is little reason to hope that Iran will go back on its refusal to suspend enrichment and reprocessing, if only for the duration of negotiations. Whatever the outcome of elections, any conceivable majority will fully back the present line, which also has the blessing of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

Former nuclear negotiator Rohani once stated that any Iranian government which tried to suspend enrichment would not survive.[25] The Nobel peace prize winner, Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi, has put it similarly: 'No Iranian government, regardless of its ideology or democratic credentials, would dare stop Iran's nuclear energy program.'[26] Even in early 2003, when concern for security was at its height and willingness to negotiate thus at a maximum under the presidency of the reformist Khatami, Iran was only prepared to give assurances as to the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme and to accept extensive checks, but not to forgo development of the nuclear fuel cycle. Nor is temporary suspension any longer an option for Iran. When in 2005 Tehran discontinued the suspension previously conceded to the Europeans, one reason was its fear that this would lead on to permanent abandonment. No such prior concession can be expected another time.

Negotiations will therefore not be able to offer a way out of the present dead end so long as the core negotiating goal for the EU and the US is full, permanent suspension of all Iranian enrichment and reprocessing activities. To be sure, many Washington observers expect to see a change in America's attitude with the end of the Bush presidency and the arrival of a new incumbent in the White House. The precondition that Iran desist from those activities, at least for the duration of negotiations, would probably be dropped and the new administration enter into direct talks with Tehran in which all outstanding issues should be raised.[27] Influential Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, in a letter to Presi-

24. On this, see Johannes Reissner: *Ahmadinejad und der Führer: Der Rücktritt Ali Larijanis im innerirani schen Kräftespiel vor den Parlamentswahlen* ['Ahmadinejad and the leader: the resignation of Ali Larijani in the interplay of forces within Iran ahead of parliamentary elections'], Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, SWP-Aktuell, November 2007.

25. Quoted in Chubin, op. cit. in note 12, p. 40.

26. Shirin Ebadi and Muhammad Sahimi, 'Link the nuclear program to human rights in Iran', *International Herald Tribune*, 19 January 2006.

27. As stated by the two Democratic Party candidates for the presidential nomination, Clinton und Obama; on this, see Ari Berman, 'The Democratic Foreign Policy Wars', *The Nation*, 21 January 2008. http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080121/berman.

dent Bush, had already urged the administration to do so back in October 2007.

Welcome though such a belated reassessment is, it remains unrealistic to expect any result from such talks so long as the West continues to set its sights primarily on denying Iran the basic right to have its own national nuclear fuel cycle. Even ideas such as relocating Iranian enrichment to Russia or transferring it to a joint facility in the Gulf states or to an international consortium operating on Iranian soil will not at present persuade Iran to suspend enrichment.[28] America, its European allies and the other permanent members of the UN Security Council must come to recognise this. And they will be unable to do so without American leadership.

A new effort in this direction also calls for a radical change in negotiating objective. Iran will have to be allowed to continue with its present nuclear programme for the time being. The *quid pro quo* would then have to be comprehensive, tight checks, as proposed by Iran itself in 2003. The main focus of negotiations should be to establish IAEA inspection rights that could ensure as far as possible that civilian use of the fuel obtained does not also allow military use. Such inspection arrangements would have to go beyond those provided for under the terms of the Additional Protocol.

A better outcome from specific negotiations is probably not achievable for the West and its partners. But would Iran agree to such a compromise? Initially, the leadership in Tehran would see any such yielding by its Western counterparts as a sign of resignation and weakness. Hardliners would feel their position strengthened; reformers would be branded weaklings lacking the guts to stand up to the US. There might be no willingness at all to deliver the required *quid pro quo* in the form of additional checks on the nuclear programme. Iran would carry on as before. The possibility of a bomb-making capability eventually being developed would not be precluded by any constraints.

Yet throughout the almost five-year-long dispute, Iranian representatives have constantly confirmed their willingness to accept checks and cooperate closely with the IAEA. Their leadership would suffer a loss of international credibility and respect if it were to go back on that once its demands were addressed. It would face fierce criticism, not least from countries such as Russia and China, to which Tehran was only too willing to turn for support in the cri-

28. On this, see Jason J. Blackstock and Manjana Milkoreit, 'Uranium Enrichment on Iranian Soil: Accepting Facts and Minimizing Risks', Briefing Paper, 16 October 2007, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Also William Luers, Thomas R. Pickering and Jim Walsh, 'A Solution for the US-Iran Nuclear Standoff', *New York Review of Books*, 20 March 2008.

sis, but which are united with the West in rejecting Iranian nuclear weapon status and in calling for thorough inspections.

Such a refusal would also meet with incomprehension and rejection among the Iranian public. It is true that the leadership has managed to hype up the right to national enrichment into a symbol of Iranian sovereignty and resistance to all international pressure on the programme into a struggle against foreign discrimination. Success in that struggle would now be perceived as a victory by the entire nation for whom the experience of colonial humiliation remains a bitter memory. But just as deep as sensitivity towards any foreign discrimination runs a longing for international respect. Iran is not North Korea; it does not want to end up as an international pariah state.[29]

There is thus good reason to think that this part of Tehran's 2003 offer may still be available, with Iran's nuclear programme being further opened up to international checks if the right to have its own nuclear fuel cycle is recognised. It remains open to question, however, to what extent Iran would now agree to inspections significantly increasing the scope for detecting unauthorised materials and developments in its programme.

The compromise suggested here, if achieved, would thus not in itself suffice to undermine attempts by any 'pro-bomb faction' within the Iranian leadership to continue pursuing the military option by means of enrichment and reprocessing. This cannot be resolved through a diplomatic focus on the nuclear issue. It can at most be achieved by means of a fundamental change in the relationship between Iran and the West, with growing trust and respect paving the way for Iran's ultimate recognition that the strengthening of that relationship is so beneficial that it must not be jeopardised by any nuclear ambivalence.

29. Chubin, op. cit. in note 12, p. 18.

Getting out of the dead end: from adversary to partner

Such a fundamental change in objectives and in the manner in which dialogue is conducted is not only needed on account of the nuclear issue. The dispute over Iran's nuclear activities and an uneasiness with a regime whose claim to legitimacy is based on religious rather than democratic principles have skewed Western perceptions of how unusual a country Iran is within the Middle East region and how much the West would stand to gain from a close relationship with that country.

Without Iran there can be no stability in the Middle East, and without Iran's assistance probably no lasting solution to the Palestinian problem. In Afghanistan, too, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to establish law and order on a robust footing should Iran wish to prevent that.

Despite being largely under clerical control Iran shows itself to be a country with aspects of a democratic pluralist modern society and thus represents an attractive peculiarity in a region that is otherwise backward in that respect. For Western countries moreover, with their strong interest in securing and diversifying their energy supplies, harmonious relations with Iran, the country with the second largest available fossil energy resources, would be of considerable strategic benefit. Were Iran a state with a democratic constitution and a transparent leadership structure, its suitability as a partner for the West would scarcely be in doubt.

There would of course, even then, still be considerable differences of interest, particularly in regional security matters. That would apply with regard to Israel, at least pending something resembling a fair Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution, and probably also to the nuclear issue; mere replacement of the 'mullarchy' by a democratically legitimate government would not automatically put a stop once and for all to any attempts there might be to put nuclear energy to military use. A democratic Iran's foreign policy would also be heavily influenced by national pride and its demands for international respect and regional recognition would be no less pronounced.

But the Islamic Republic is not a democracy. Ultimately, the question must be asked: are the West and the Islamic Republic at all suitable as partners for one another? And even if so, how likely is it that they would both be willing to enter into such a partnership?

Suitable partners?

The Islamic Republic would have political and tactical difficulties, but no conceptual difficulty in accepting as a partner a West, and in particular an America, which sought dialogue without preconditions, dropped all sanctions, recognised the regime, showed respect for Iran and opted for cooperation. The Iranian leadership has repeatedly expressed a willingness for such cooperation, if offered by the United States.

For the West, the answer appears less simple. In foreign policy it is, of course, common practice not to dismiss countries lacking democratic credentials as potential partners. The inflated use of a term once suggesting a relationship of closeness and warmth may be regrettable. But the relationships states maintain with one another are defined by interests, not cordiality. If the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation are desirable partners for the West, it is not because we find their internal conditions and external conduct appealing, but because good relations with them are in our interest and there is some prospect of partial coincidence or at least proximity of important interests.

Why should the case be any different with the Islamic Republic? Here, too, good relations would be in our interest. The question of the Islamic Republic's suitability as a partner is nevertheless open to two serious doubts: possible incompatibility of the West's interests with Iran's and the nature of the theocratic regime.

Incompatible interests?

At first sight – beyond which most Western governments do not at present look – Iran's foreign policy objectives do indeed appear diametrically opposed to the West's, especially if Iran really does intend to implement plans to acquire nuclear arms.

For the West, the existence of Israel forms an indispensable

part of any Middle East peace settlement. In the words of Iran's current brash president, who denies the Holocaust, the Islamic Republic wants to see 'this regime that is occupying Al Qods [Jerusalem] ... eliminated from the pages of history.' In Lebanon, Iran is supporting a political group – Hezbollah – that is not only actively combating Israel but also working against Western ideas of how to bring greater stability to that little country. The Hamas movement, which refuses to recognise Israel, can look to Iran for assistance. In Iraq, Iranian interference has repeatedly hampered American military operations as Shia militias are being supplied with financial assistance, training and arms from Iran.

Iran would not be a suitable partner for the West if those positions were so immutable as to rule out in advance making them more flexible and perhaps compatible with Western interests through better relations within a partnership. This is where closer examination shows a more complex, more hopeful picture.

Within the region itself, Iran has for some while now ceased to be an ideological troublemaker and established itself as a *status quo* power, not a rogue state.[30] Following the al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, Iran provided major support for American action against the Afghan Taliban. To suggest that Iran's behaviour in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine reflects a strategy of defence and deterrence in the face of American military superiority at its borders and persistent American pressure, i.e. that it results from the lack of any partnership relationship, is not outrageous. President Bush did, after all, in January 2002, despite the country's assistance in Afghanistan, rank it in the 'axis of evil', subsequently spurned Iranian offers to negotiate and instead constantly stepped up the military pressure brought to bear on Iran.

That does not eliminate the conflict between such behaviour and the West's interests. But it does open up the possibility that for the Iranian state this may be more a matter of situational tactics than of core strategic interests. This assumption is borne out by the spring 2003 Iranian negotiating proposal referred to above, which expressly placed support for Hamas and Hezbollah on the table. These would seem to be negotiable positions, given suitable concessions in return, and not absolute barriers to a partnership. The same applies to conflicting interests as regards Iraq. While Tehran does not want to see the establishment of a democracy along Western lines there, which is in any case unlikely, it does

30. Chubin, op. cit. in note 12, p. 136.

want to see 'a sufficiently stable Iraq, economically, politically and socially, within its existing borders.'[31]

Does the prospect of possible *rapprochement* also apply to the nuclear dispute? The Iranian enrichment programme has clearly not been halted in the face of threats, sanctions and ultimatums, but rather speeded up in spite of them. This at least suggests that, in the event of a partnership relationship, the arguments in favour of restricting the programme might find greater resonance in Tehran. The Iranian nuclear programme does not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to a partnership, any more than do Russia's or India's.

It is a different case with the conflict of interests over Israel. Here there are a 'cracks' between many Islamic countries, including some strategic partners, such as Saudi Arabia, and the West, cracks papered over by referring to the Arab League's 2002 Beirut Declaration. Arab League members at that time envisaged recognising Israel once a Palestinian state was established and Israel withdrew to behind its 1967 borders. In its 2003 negotiating proposal to Washington, the Islamic Republic also made reference to the Beirut Declaration, with the approval of the entire leadership, including the then (and now) Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Relations with Israel would thus be of no more significance as an obstacle to a partnership between the West and Iran than they would to one with many Arab countries in the region, particularly if Iran, as assumed above, has no vested interest in torpedoing the peace process by supporting its opponents.

Since President Ahmadinejad's rhetorical attacks on Israel, however, Iran finds itself in a special position among Muslim countries. The 2003 proposal did, of course, at the time evidently have the blessing of the entire leadership. Moreover, remarks like Ahmadinejad's comment that Israel should and would be eliminated from the pages of history are unfortunately not uncommon in the Middle East, although they do not herald a return to the Islamic Republic's early attempts to aggressively propagate the Islamic revolution throughout the region.[32] Yet it does make a crucial difference when such utterances emanate from Iran's senior secular political figure.

This would therefore be the one obstacle to Iran's suitability as a partner for the West which could be removed only by means of an Iranian prior concession. A partnership will not be possible until the Islamic Republic's leadership formally dissociates itself from

31. Johannes Reissner and Guido Steinberg: 'Joker im Machtpoker' [A joker in the power game], *Internationale Politik*, January 2008, pp. 33-4; similarly, as regards proximity of American and Iranian interests, Luers, Pickering and Walsh, op. cit. in note 28.

32. Ali M. Ansari, 'Iran under Ahmadinejad: The politics of confrontation', *Adelphi Paper* no. 393, IISS, London, 2007, p. 51.

Ahmadinejad's words. Indeed, it may be that they have been spoken and often repeated by him precisely with the aim of preventing any such partnership being formed.

Theocrats as partners?

In the unsentimental sphere of interest-driven foreign policy, partnership does not automatically go hand in hand with any liking for the partner's regime. Calling the potential partner's regime into question would from the outset be taken by the other side as a denial of partnership. To be sure, the legitimacy claimed for the Islamic Republic's theocratic system of government is incompatible with Western ideas of legitimate state authority. However, the situation is not so very different from the communist monopoly of power in the People's Republic of China or the sham democracy in Russia. Acceptance of the other side's form of government is the basis for any foreign policy partnership.

The same holds true for the form of government in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The situation would be different if this were a totalitarian dictatorship. Despite arbitrary use of power, gross and glaring human rights violations and a president with a taste for incendiary rhetoric, however, Iran is neither an out-and-out dictatorship nor a totalitarian police state. Neither term fits a system in which different groups vie for power, form alliances and obstruct one another and which in spite of everything does involve aspects of democratic participation.

For all the peculiarities pertaining to the present system of government, moreover, Iran shows many features of a modern polity. Its development as a society and as a state has been marked by interaction with European trends and culture, a development not entirely reversed by the Islamic revolution.

Not least as a result of the opening up of new educational opportunities for broad swathes of the population, the illiteracy rate among the population as a whole currently stands at less than 20%. Of around 2 million students at the country's universities, over half are women. Despite many forms of discrimination in terms of their rights and in everyday life, women play a much more prominent part in working, political and social life than in most neighbouring Arab countries. Despite censorship, there is lively intellectual debate and a film industry that enjoys an international reputation; despite control and intimidation, a vibrant civil

society exists in Iran, with the number of non-governmental organisations alone being put at 8,000.[33] With harassment of the press by the regime having increased again in recent years, public debate is shifting to the sphere of the internet and mobile phones. Almost 40 % of the population use the internet, the highest rate anywhere in the region. The number of internet bloggers is put at 70,000 to 100,000, with Farsi now ranking tenth in the world among blogging languages.[34]

The Islamic Republic is not a democracy, nor did its founders mean it to become one. Under Article 4 of the Constitution, the Supreme Leader derives his right to rule from God alone and is answerable to Him and not to the people. There are nevertheless deep-rooted democratic traditions in the country. Time and again over the last century, the citizenry have asserted their claim to political participation by rising up against autocratic and authoritarian rule. Nor has that tradition been eliminated by constitutional arrangements and practices stemming from the revolution.

The president and parliament are chosen in elections, even though the clerical leadership screens out those it does not like from the list of candidates, non-representative theocratic bodies determine whether parliament's laws are sufficiently Islamic to be put into effect and election-rigging is rife. Elections in Iran are therefore often portrayed by critics as a token event with no real force, a mere photo opportunity, for the people simply to confirm the regime's legitimacy.[35]

Yet, although individuals and groups winning elections stand no chance of pushing through political changes against the leadership's will, election results do have some influence over the political course of events: internally through the placing of supporters in key posts and externally through changes of tone and style, as in the nuclear dispute from greater engagement (President Khatami) to greater confrontation (President Ahmadinejad). Elections also have an indirect effect, as indicators of popular opinion, on the contending views jockeying for position within the leadership.

It would, however, be premature, to say the least, to expect those pluralistic aspects to become more pronounced any time soon in present-day Iran. Conservative forces within the political establishment seem rather to have concluded, from the reformers' earlier electoral success and the continuing considerable popularity of their standard-bearer, Khatami, that any recurrence is to be

33. Michael McFaul, Abbas Milani and Larry Diamond, 'A Win-Win U.S. Strategy for Dealing with Iran', *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2006-2007, p. 133.

34. Ali Afshari and H. Graham Underwood, 'Iran's Resilient Civil Society - The Student Movement's Struggle', *Journal of Democracy*, October 2007, p. 83; see also Ansari, op. cit. in note 32, p. 8.

35. Ladan Boroumand, 'Iran's Resilient Civil Society - The Untold Story of the Fight for Human Rights', *Journal of Democracy*, October 2007, p. 67.

avoided. There are those who fear that the Islamic Republic has since been moving from a theocracy to an authoritarian system.[36]

It is uncertain if this will in the long run allow the regime to cope with growing difficulties, such as increasing popular detachment from the official ideology as well as an economy distorted by powerful special interests, with high unemployment and inflation. Yet the Islamic state's authoritarian tendencies are encouraged by the regime's perception of both political and economic liberalisation as a threat. Repression of those with undesirable views, coupled with distribution of economic largesse from surging energy revenue (USD 120 billion for the first two years of Ahmadinejad's presidency alone[37] and rising since), will suffice to keep the regime in power for a long while to come.

It is therefore this system and none other which the West has to accept. Regime change, the American neo-conservatives' vision of the 'mullarchy' being replaced by a democratic revolution, remains – and is likely to long remain – a mirage which the West cannot afford to entertain if it is serious in seeking a partnership relationship with Iran. For partnership with the Islamic Republic to succeed, Western policy must under no circumstances arouse the suspicion in Tehran that it is in reality endeavouring to bring down the regime. The clerical leadership's deep distrust of the West, not just of the US, stems not least from its belief, in part justified, that this motive lies behind Western policy. After all, the US Congress has set aside, for the 2008 financial year, USD 60 million to foment protest against the country's religious leadership.[38] Anyone who now wants to win over Iran as a partner will also have to recognise its theocratic leadership. As we have already seen, this goes without saying in the case of China and Russia. The awareness that Iran is a country with an active civil society and pluralist forces may make the idea of a partnership appear more appealing and justified in the democratic West, even among those for whom partnership is more than just a dispassionate weighing up of interests.

Iran could thus be a suitable partner for the West, subject to the one condition that it expressly and officially endorses the Arab League's Beirut consensus on Israel and dissociates itself from its current president's statements concerning the Jewish state. Conflicting interests can otherwise be surmounted; even the authoritarian and theocratic nature of the Islamic regime would not be a major impediment to partnership.

36. Elliot Hen-Tov, 'Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism', *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2006-2007, p. 163.

37. Ansari, op. cit. in note 32, p. 81.

38. See *Iran Nuclear Watch*, 24 January 2008. Available at: http://www.irannuclearwatch.blogspot.com.

Willing partners?

Suitability as a partner is not the same as actual willingness to engage in partnership. For the Islamic Republic as for the West, first and foremost the US, willingness to engage in a serious partnership would entail a dramatic political U-turn with considerable implications. How likely is it that both the West and Iran could accomplish this?

In the West this depends entirely on the US. If the Europeans were the only ones willing to establish such a partnership, it could not come about. Europe would merely be used by Iran as a trump card to play against the US, without being able to exert any significant influence over Iranian positions. It is true that, in contrast to the US, the EU-3 have sought dialogue with Iran and are continuing this approach, albeit on a back burner. In so doing, though, they were seen both by themselves and by Iran as at best paving the way for a *rapprochement* between Tehran and Washington. Throughout, the Europeans have always kept in close touch with the Bush administration and in their offers never went beyond what was acceptable to it. If the US were willing to engage in a partnership with Iran, the Europeans could not refuse, however overenthusiastic one or two European governments are at present in demonising Iran.

So long as President Bush remains in the White House, there can be no reversal of the present policy towards Iran from confrontation to partnership. After the elections in November 2008, though, a new departure might be conceivable. It is all too clear that the present efforts to contain Iran's nuclear programme and regional influence have failed and all too logical to assume that only comprehensive direct talks between Washington and Tehran, covering all contentious issues and proposed without preconditions, can now offer any hope for progress. Such talks are increasingly being called for in public debate.[39] Both Democratic front-runners for the presidency have stated that they would be willing to open negotiations with Iran without preconditions.[40]

That is still a long way from offering Iran an inclusive partnership and remains focused primarily on the nuclear issue. But recognition is also dawning in the US that no progress can be expected here unless the other problems arising in the US-Iranian relationship are also discussed. Should such talks actually come

39. Among many examples, see MacFaul et al, op. cit. in note 33, Leverett, op. cit.in note 22, and Ray Takeyh and Susan Maloney, 'Time To Start Talking To Tehran', *Newsweek*, 18 January 2008.

40. Berman, op. cit. in note 27.

about, they could build the momentum for a US-Iranian partnership. Were such a scenario to materialise, European governments might soon find themselves left behind if they persisted in their present line of still making suspension of uranium enrichment a precondition for any negotiations.

Would the Islamic Republic be willing for a partnership with the US, once dubbed the 'Great White Satan', and with the West as a whole? In the past, apart from the 2003 Iranian negotiations initiative, there have repeatedly been rumours that the regime was sounding out the scope for direct talks with Washington. Such a step would be highly popular with the Iranian people: according to a poll published by the state news agency, IRNA, in September 2003 75 % of those questioned were in favour of better relations with the US.[41] All assessments of Iranians' attitudes towards the outside world concur that the Iranians definitely do not want to see their country become a pariah in the international community. They are looking rather for justice, recognition and respect as a sovereign, legitimate member of the family of nations. If they are denied that, the Iranian sense of national pride built up over lengthy periods of colonisation will be offended and the resulting solidarity will serve to prop up an unpopular leadership.

In the nuclear dispute with the West, the regime was able to make use of this phenomenon by managing to hype up nuclear enrichment as an essential step towards the technological progress which former colonial powers allegedly wished to withhold from it. Were the West formally to declare its willingness henceforth to recognise Iran as an equal partner, that would go a long way towards meeting the country's need for recognition. Should the US shelve all sanctions, that would also be of considerable economic benefit. The leadership in Tehran could present both outcomes as the West giving way and as justification for its past policy and for its willingness to respond in kind to a Western offer of partnership.

On the other hand, acceptance of such a partnership would not be without risks for the Islamic Republic. For it would remove the existing barriers to contact and interaction, up to now erected mainly by the West. Instead of relations with the Islamic Republic being dictated solely by the nuclear dispute, as hitherto, Western debate about Iran would come to focus on other aspects, such as respect for human rights or proper conduct of elections. This would also constitute a response to the concerns of Iranian

41. Human Rights Watch: *World Report 2003* – Iran. Available at: www.hrw.org/wr2k3/mideast3.html.Similar findings emerge from a telephone poll conducted by the Washington NGO Terror Free Tomorrow (www.TerrorFreeTomorrow.org) in June 2007: *Polling Iranian Public Opinion: An Unprecedented Nationwide Survey of Iran*, August 2007.

human rights campaigners, who have repeatedly complained that the West is so obsessed with the nuclear issue that it does not even notice the extent of human rights violations in Iran.[42] Europe's silence at the rigging of the 2004 *Majlis* elections, which resulted in a win for the conservative majority, was justified by the West at the time on the grounds that in negotiations you have to accept the partner that you have got.[43]

While an Iranian 'yes' to partnership with the West would bring Western recognition of the Islamic Republic's regime and sovereignty, it would also mean accepting interference in its internal affairs, just as the Helsinki Final Act in the 1970s and 1980s brought the Soviet Union recognition of its territorial war gains and its regime but also exposed internal conditions in the Soviet empire to Western attention and criticism. And such criticism could not be shrugged off lightly: as the Nobel peace prize winner Shirin Ebadi notes, Iran's religious leaders would certainly be affected by it: There has been tangible improvement in Iran's human rights record whenever it has been criticised at the United Nations.[44] The regime is well aware of many Iranians' growing detachment from the clerical system and would fear such side-effects of partnership with the West.

Another effect might be even more dangerous from the regime's point of view: the loss of an enemy. Since 1979, external pressure from the West has constantly strengthened the regime's hold on power internally. One reason for President Ahmadinejad deliberately opting for confrontation with the West is that this has now come to serve as a mainstay of the regime, diverting attention from the unsatisfactory state of the economy, justifying repression of dissidents and restraining reformist forces.[45] The more such confrontation can be presented within the country as defending national sovereignty against external foes, the greater the feeling of national solidarity and support for the government's authority. The Bush administration's policy especially, in proclaiming Iran America's greatest enemy, has done its best to boost that process, playing into the hands of hardliners in the Islamic Republic. Were the West instead to credibly offer Iran a comprehensive partnership, this would remove that useful prop for the regime, while also increasing the West's ability to influence the country's internal affairs indirectly.

A change of Western policy from antagonism to partnership would therefore initially tend to increase the already deep distrust

42. See, among others, Shirin Ebadi and Muhammad Sahimi, op. cit. in note 26.

43. Ansari, op. cit. in note 32, p. 32.

44. Ebadi, op. cit. in note 26.

45. Ansari, op. cit. in note 32, p. 67.

shown by the rulers in Tehran. However much they might celebrate the recognition of the regime, the dropping of Western preconditions, the agreement to remove all sanctions and the ending of ultimatums and threats, they would at the same time be aware of thereby being placed in a new, uncertain situation, one that might possibly put the survival of their regime in jeopardy. Advocates of a policy of confrontation in Iran, unlike those in the West, could after all claim to have been successful; they could point to the Iranian nuclear programme continuing, Western threats visibly losing their teeth, sanctions weakening, the regime being strengthened and Iranian influence growing throughout the region. Victory, hardliners could argue, was already within reach: a positive response to an offer of partnership from the West would throw it away.

They might in fact prevail, in which case there would be no Iranian willingness for partnership. On the other hand, the Iranian policy of confrontation has for so long and so insistently been put down to the West's hostility that it could not remain permanently immune to a *volte face* from Western antagonism to a willingness for partnership. The Islamic Republic has so strongly insisted on recognition, so stridently blamed Western policy for its own difficulties and so vociferously protested its willingness for cooperation, provided this is on equal terms, that it could not then withdraw in a sulk. Nor would that make any sense to its own population. To be sure, distrust would be slow to give way; antagonism would not turn into partnership overnight. But the more credibly a Western commitment to partnership was demonstrated in practical steps, the more difficult rejection and refusal would become for the regime's internal and external standing.

A roundabout route to nuclear compromise?

A mere expression of Western willingness to engage in partnership, coupled with the dropping of economic pressure, cannot be expected to bring a swift solution to the nuclear dispute. Any greater Iranian responsiveness than to the negotiated outcome outlined above is at present unlikely. It is quite possible, besides, that Iran would even then continue with its uranium enrichment and come ever closer to the point at which military usability is within reach.

There is no guarantee that a change in the West's policy towards Iran will also lead to a change in Iran's nuclear policy. Yet the past history of the long-running crisis has time and again shown such interaction. In 2003 the hope that the West (America) would give way led to Iran's compromise proposal at the time. Pressure and threats from the West, including UN Security Council resolutions, have not only not brought a halt to enrichment in Iran but instead have accelerated it. The present policy has not just failed in that aim: it has, if anything, further strengthened those forces in Tehran to which the security reassurance of a military option and perhaps even a usable bomb may appeal.

The turnaround from a policy of threats to one of cooperation will therefore also, albeit in the opposite way, influence the form and intensity of Iranian nuclear activities. This, however, requires that Tehran's inevitable initial doubts as to the West's serious willingness for partnership be removed by means of persistent confidence-building. Only in that way can the Iranian leadership's distrust be gradually worn down. If it were to see the offer of partnership as a mere tactical ploy, as it will initially be rather inclined to for the reasons given above, the desired effect might be difficult to attain.

Should the offer of partnership in time gain credibility, however, the results would be appreciable. Firstly, this would directly take the heat out of the nuclear issue, which would no longer be the crucial stumbling block in the mutual relationship. As Shahram Chubin has argued, because Iran's striving for nuclear status stems equally from the security threat that it perceives and from the regime's search for international recognition and domestic legitimacy, the response to that striving cannot be an isolated technical one but has to be fully comprehensive.[46]

For the West, hitherto obsessed with that one issue, the nuclear issue would not cease to be significant. But it would cease to be the sole focus of attention as other issues and problems in relations with the Islamic Republic would come into the equation. For Iran, the nuclear issue could no longer serve as a symbol of national sovereignty, in a way which has increasingly tied Iranian negotiators' hands in recent years. This might for the first time open the way for the serious, joint consideration of enrichment arrangements previously discussed but categorically rejected by Tehran as being incompatible with that sovereignty, such as relocation in Russia or in a neutral country like Switzerland, with guaranteed procurement of the necessary fuel.[47]

46. Chubin, op. cit.in note 12, p. 144.

47. On the latter proposal, see BBC News, 18 November 2007. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/7100793.stm; see also note 28.

The spirit of partnership would also make possible something that was previously out of the question given the prevailing climate of pressure and counter-pressure – a discussion of the security policy implications of a nuclear-armed Iran not just among Western prophets of doom but with Iranian and possibly regional involvement. That dialogue could in the first place be held not so much between governments as between think tanks on both sides, in informal talks not hampered by any official line. But it should also pave the way for intergovernmental talks. Partnership has to be demonstrated by taking the partner's security concerns seriously and discussing them openly.

What would be especially necessary and helpful would be a frank debate on the regional implications of Iranian nuclear armament. If at all, these are currently mentioned by Iran's neighbours off the record, in an atmosphere of mistrust, but never in a direct exchange of arguments, not least because Tehran denies having any military intentions. Yet only such exchange can prompt potential advocates of a military option in Iran to consider the consequences before a decision is taken. In the history of proliferation, sadly, states usually acquire the bomb without having fully thought out its implications. A partnership between the West and Iran could help reverse that sequence of events, to the benefit of both regional stability and of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

This need not necessarily, but could conceivably, lead on to the consideration of a regional security system, as occasionally suggested in the West. However, there is no particular pressing need for this, neither for the Islamic Republic nor for the partnership project. Not only would precipitate bilateral discussion of possible multilateral arrangements initially overstretch the partnership, but it would also arouse disquiet among the region's other countries, which would rightly demand a say in any such venture. Conversely, an attempt to establish such a regional security scheme in the first place without Iran would be perceived by Tehran as an affront to Iran and would thus impede any easing of the relationship.

The relationship between Iran and the West is such a minefield that it seems wiser first to clear the mines and ensure reciprocal communication. That will require the West to show a great deal of patience and understanding towards the Islamic Republic's sensitivities, together with an ability to put up with irritations and set-

backs, without losing sight of the enormous benefit a cooperative Iran could mean for the West. In resolving the nuclear issue, too, progress can at best be expected to be gradual. That is not much, but it is far more than would come from continuing with the West's present policy towards Iran, which holds out no prospect of progress at all.

A bridge too far?

What if the partnership plan fails to get off the ground, either because neither side is willing to go ahead with it or because one side's offer is rejected by the other? Unfortunately, that is an all too likely scenario.

For both sides, it is easier to shelter within their den of distrust or at any rate quickly take refuge there again if initial expectations are disappointed. For the Islamic Republic, any overtures towards the West will be accompanied by concern over the possible impact on the regime's continued existence. For the West, any offer of partnership will be encumbered by suspicion that accommodation may make an Iranian bomb more likely. For the US especially, willingness to embark upon and go through with the partnership plan requires such a fundamental change of mentality and behaviour as to make the expectation almost illusory. And, even should the next administration in Washington summon up the will and courage to do a *volte face* on the existing Iran policy, long supported by all political groups, and also win broad domestic support for doing so, it is by no means certain that Iran would go along with this. Anyone calling for a new policy towards Iran and a change from antagonism to partnership must be prepared to see that this at present far exceeds the political abilities of both sides

That does not invalidate the call to place the relationship with Iran on a footing offering a more promising future, nor the argument that this can best be done by means of a new partnership. Under no circumstances can there be any question of continuing with the present Iran policy, whose unsuitability for resolving the nuclear issue or for fostering regional peace is plain to see, merely for want of strength to draw the necessary conclusions. If it lacks the courage and resolve to take that big step, the West should instead follow another, more modest strategy, as successfully applied once before to another power whose internal constitutional arrangements it found suspect, its international influence

harmful and possible military intentions threatening: the ingenious strategy of *détente* and containment used with the Soviet Union. Why should such an approach not also work with Iran?

Partnership minus: *détente* and containment

The West's policy at present is one of containment and confrontation. Replacing the latter with *détente* requires a considerable turnaround in thinking and acting *vis-à-vis* Iran, with demonisation of the regime being superseded by recognition of it, confrontation by an offer of cooperation, sanctions by expansion of trading relations, accusations by dialogue, preconditions by direct negotiations and sabre-rattling by inspections.

Iran's leadership would rejoice in the West's giving way as a political victory at long last granting it its due. It would receive a boost in its domestic legitimacy and in its international standing, without having to make any significant concessions in return. Unlike partnership, which requires cooperative behaviour by both partners, *détente* amounts to no more than its name suggests. If it might nevertheless lead on to more, in a 'triple jump', once neatly described by Charles de Gaulle as *détente, entente, coopération*, this is because the removal of tension would also gradually blur conflicts of interests.

Détente between the West and Iran without preconditions would therefore involve a unilateral prior concession by the West. It would initially strengthen the regime in Tehran, but not immediately, or perhaps ever, prompt it to take the steps sought by the West, from limitation of its nuclear programme to discontinuation of support for Hezbollah and Hamas. Yet it is in the West's interest. Firstly, because the present policy, as is now amply evident, has proved unsuccessful. Secondly, because *détente* at least provides a chance of undermining Iran's policy of confrontation, with its internal and external hardening of attitudes, while also undermining the stance of those who advocate the military nuclear option for security reasons. Partnership would be more demanding to carry out and more promising in effect. But even a switch to a policy combining containment with *détente* in relation to Iran would be a first step in the right direction.

That was the original strategy of the EU-3, until they tied themselves down with the condition of prior suspension of the enrich-

ment programme and sold out to the sanctions approach in return for American support. It now largely tallies with the various points made by the growing number of voices in the US who are looking to the next administration for comprehensive bilateral negotiations between America and the Islamic Republic. If these continue to demand that negotiations must in any event result in Iran dropping its own uranium enrichment and reprocessing, that may be helpful in providing political cover in the US for *détente* with an Iran that has been for so long demonised as the arch-enemy, but it is not yet a guaranteed recipe for success.

For *détente*, as Cold War experience shows, is a gradual process. It cannot take effect until a readiness for it has been credibly established. That is the first thing to be done. There is no point in predetermining the outcome, if the *détente* process is not to be obstructed in advance on the other side. A swift solution to the nuclear dispute is therefore not to be hoped for either, any more than a reduction in human rights violations in Iran; significant improvements in this respect will at most emerge from cooperation engaged in over many years. If American analysts expect more from an offer of *détente*, this arises from their assessment that a relaxed relationship with the US is of such value to the Iranian leadership that it would be ready to make considerable concessions in return. That was true at the time of the crisis in 2003; whether it also applies today, in view of the decline in US power and the tougher line taken by the Iranian regime line internally and externally, is open to question, to say the least.

Most governments in the UN Security Council and in the EU would nevertheless welcome an American initiative along the above lines and even those which object now would in the end go along with it. However, considerable weight would attach to Israel's reaction. Many in Israel would no doubt accuse the West of a policy of appeasement, particularly as the West's offer of *détente*, unlike partnership, would not make prior withdrawal of Tehran's anti-Israeli statements a precondition; neither Soviet dreaming aloud about worldwide communist revolution nor Khrushchev's threat to 'bury' the West was allowed to invalidate the incipient policy of *détente* at the time.

The US and the EU would, however, have to make every effort to dissuade Israel from any plans for a military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Should Israel, as occasionally speculated, harbour any such plans and take armed action against Iran, any Amer-

ican willingness for *détente* would have lost all credibility at a stroke. An offer by the West to Iran, whether of partnership or of *détente*, will therefore have to be accompanied by the clear undertaking that it would respond to any Iranian attack on Israel by immediate and massive military reprisals. Although America's promise matters most to Israel for understandable reasons, it should be firmly and publicly endorsed by the governments of the EU-3 and, if possible, also by Russia.

Would the Islamic Republic, on the other hand, be willing to respond to the West's moves towards *détente* with accommodation of its own volition? That is by no means certain. Iran feels economically and politically discriminated against and militarily threatened by the West, especially the US. It considers itself entirely within its rights as regards its nuclear programme, denies any military intention and points to its willingness to cooperate with the IAEA. Should the West finally come to understand that confrontation will achieve nothing, whereas *détente* can achieve something, this would merely meet Iran's long-standing call for normal relations.

Yet that is no reason to make Western willingness for *détente* conditional upon Iranian responsiveness. Even a unilateral change of policy would bring considerable advantages. If the Iranian leadership is willing not only to negotiate but also to show greater mobility on contentious issues, the benefit is plain to see. If it rejects a fair-minded Western offer, this will weaken its position in the region, increase domestic unease over the stance of the hardliners and thus step up pressure for compromise.[48]

48. MacFaul et al., op. cit. in note 33, pp. 136-38, even describe this as a 'win-win strategy'.

The outlook: no certainty, but an opportunity?

However ambitious this analysis is in seeking to place the relationship between Iran and the West on a new basis of partnership and accordingly reverse Western governments' policy towards Iran, it still comes to a cautiously pessimistic conclusion as regards resolving the nuclear issue.

Unless considerably stepped up in scale and intensity, with Iran's agreement, IAEA inspections will be unable to ensure that the Iranian nuclear programme is confined to energy production for civilian purposes in a manner that can be fully monitored by the IAEA. Obtaining such further oversight rights in negotiations with Iran might have been possible in 2003, but is unlikely now.

A comprehensive partnership could, if adhered to by both sides, establish a new relationship between the West and Iran, which could also bring the Iranian nuclear programme into line with the requirements of non-proliferation. However, the political will for such a dramatic step cannot be expected at present, particularly from the key countries: the US and the Islamic Republic.

Unilateral *détente* by the West, while more modest than partnership, would still have the important advantage of discarding the instruments of pressure and coercion used so far, which have all proved not to work, with Western policy towards Iran instead addressing the overall relationship and no longer being fixated on the nuclear issue. There are also signs to be seen, most clearly and significantly in the US, of a rethink which could shape the new administration's policy after the presidential election in November 2008. But it is very doubtful, firstly, whether the Iranian leadership would be quick to respond favourably to such an offer of *détente* and, secondly, whether even if this were to occur, it would promptly bring about adequate voluntary constraints on the nuclear programme.

That does not, however, undermine the case for embarking on a different policy towards Iran. The justification for this stems not just from the negative reason that the present policy has failed and

carrying on with it will only deliver bad news: loss of Western influence, the further strengthening of hardliners in Tehran and ultimately the long-term alienation of a country which, despite everything, is akin to the West in many ways and whose assistance is as essential for cooperative solutions in the Middle East as it is desirable for global energy security.

A different policy towards Iran is also overdue for the positive reason that this is the only way of pursuing a long-term strategy commensurate with the country's significance. It is the only way of taking the heat out of the nuclear issue in Iranian domestic and foreign policy, removing the security motive for a military option within the Iranian leadership and at least indirectly increasing Western influence over Iranian domestic policy. There is no alternative to a different policy towards Iran, one prepared both to recognise the regime and to respect the country and engage in broad cooperation. And, remote as the idea of antagonism giving way to partnership may appear to many in the present obdurate Western debate, it is still important now to start taking that aim seriously. The necessary adjustments to Western policy will prove all the more credible, even if they initially fall short of partnership.

In putting this strategy into practice, as pointed out above, the attitude of the US will be crucial; even the mere resumption of diplomatic relations with Tehran would send out an important signal. But European governments can also help pave the way for the necessary Western rethink. Firstly, they should in future refrain from any public comment suggesting that they too see Iran, its nuclear programme and its policy in the region as the main international threat. Apart from unsettling public opinion, that not only helps drive the present Western policy towards Iran further and further into a dead end, but will also make the inevitable alignment on an impending shift in American attitudes look like no more than eagerly trailing along behind. Secondly, in confidential talks with other allies in the European Union and the US, the chief European countries should press for a clear-headed assessment of the present policy and consideration of alternative approaches, bearing in mind Winston Churchill's sage advice: 'However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.'

Clearly, the present policy has not brought any positive results and so it is high time for a rethink. There is little risk involved. The situation in the Gulf is not desperate, let alone explosive. The

International Atomic Energy Agency remains active in Iran. The Iranian military nuclear programme has been interrupted and, should it be resumed in the face of massive international disapproval, could at most be completed in ten years' time. The risk of a nuclear-armed Iran, should it come to that, would be, if not definitely avertable, at any rate manageable. Should the different policy towards Iran called for here also prove unsuccessful, there still remains the method, tried and tested in the Cold War, of deterrence, which would also bring home to Iran, like any other nuclear power before it, the double-edged nature of nuclear weapons, in that their use threatens the existence of the state or government that acquires them as well that of its adversary.

This provides opportunity and scope for a new start. Iran is too important for the West to be reduced to the nuclear issue. Recognising this is also the best, if not the only, way of resolving that issue. Time now needs to be put to good use. Should it pass by without a new constructive effort, the question in ten years' time will be: who weakened those forces in Iran which wanted nuclear energy but not the bomb? Who squandered the chance to bring the country into a cooperative security framework for the Middle East? Who lost Iran for the West? The accusing finger will then point not just at the US but also at Europe and her major governments.

Abbreviations

EU-3	Britain, France and Germany (negotiating on behalf of the EU)
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USD	US dollars

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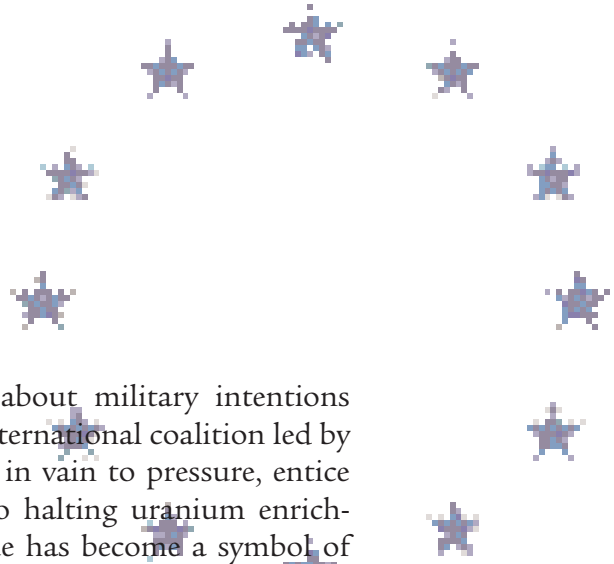

Since suspicions arose six years ago about military intentions behind Iran's nuclear programme, an international coalition led by the United States of America has tried in vain to pressure, entice and threaten the Islamic Republic into halting uranium enrichment and reprocessing. Today, the issue has become a symbol of national independence in Iran. And the Islamic Republic is not only further advanced in terms of its potential capability for developing a nuclear bomb. It has also acquired a pivotal position with regard to all the major conflicts in the region – from the future stability of Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Hence the need for an alternative strategy is obvious. It must start from the recognition that progress on the nuclear issue can only be made if the West ceases to focus on the nuclear problem alone. Instead Western governments must broaden their approach to take in the overall relationship, consider possible overlapping interests with Iran and offer cooperation, *détente* and even partnership as the basis on which to address the nuclear concerns. This will take courage as well as patience. Despite much hysteria in the media, there is time to try a fresh approach. Iran is still far from nuclear weapon status. Should it nevertheless obtain it, the West and its allies in the region should remember that deterrence, containment and *détente* have been effective before in dealing with a much more powerful and potentially much more dangerous opponent, the late Soviet Union.

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