



Comment on Iran-West Relations

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By Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Secretary General and Jayantha Dhanapala, President

Concern is growing about the recent deterioration of the relations between Iran and the West (and the USA in particular). The goal of the Western countries (led by the US) seems to be to further corner and isolate Iran from the rest of the "international community," to pressure Iran to give up its nuclear program and "surrender". In reality there is every indication that this will not be the case. In fact, a pressured Iran will likely be more determined than ever to develop its nuclear program, which it currently insists has exclusively peaceful civilian purposes.

Many recent events have increased the pressure on Iran, starting with the dubious claim that Iran was behind an attempted assassination of a Saudi envoy in the US and, more importantly, the November 8th IAEA report on nuclear activities in Iran (discussed further below). Furthermore, cyber attacks have been reported and a series of explosions happened near some key facilities in Iran that have been variously described as accidents or acts of sabotage. Most important of all, there are continuous hints that Iranian nuclear facilities could be militarily attacked.

In addition to pressuring Iran, it appears that this intensified campaign to isolate Iran is also designed to assure Israel that the international community opposes Iran and therefore Israel will not need to act solo and possibly in an imprudent way in order to attempt to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities. But the heightening of the rhetoric in order to avoid uncontrolled military actions is a risky business. It underestimates the role of rhetoric itself in compelling action. The Iranian nuclear program will go on unabated, and the recent ratcheting up of the rhetoric may well induce military action.

The recent IAEA report is full of references (particularly in the Annex) to information provided by "member states" that have not been necessarily independently verified by the agency itself. The role of the agency is not to collect intelligence information that has been gratuitously provided by member states. Little in the report seems to refer to recent information or data. The main accusation against Iran is the claim that Iran is studying the physics of nuclear explosive devices. These kinds of studies, when nuclear material is *not* involved and when the information does *not* come from other States, are possibly not prohibited by NPT. We say "possibly" since this is a grey area. The NPT forbids the manufacturing of nuclear weapons by non-nuclear weapons states and the transfer of design information, but not necessarily the "theoretical" studies of nuclear explosive devices.

A final important element in the campaign to isolate Iran has been the new wave of sanctions promoted by US, UK, Canada, and the EU. These sanctions will have a serious damaging effect on Iranian banking system (possibly also against Iranian Central Bank) that could make life harder for many Iranians and affect oil exports as well, with serious consequences on the global oil market.

Moreover a resolution approved by the US House of Representatives on Dec. 14, 2011 (H.R. 1905) contains an “anti-diplomacy” clause (section 601 c ^[1]) that, if it becomes law, could block contacts between anybody in the US government and Iran, cutting off communications when they are in fact most needed.

What has been and could be the reaction of Iran to this external pressure? The nuclear program is ongoing. The preposterous Iranian attack on the British Embassy, a clear violation of International law, caused a further flare in tensions. This attack was possibly supported by groups inside Iran that want to have further isolation of Iran from the West, with an approach of “the worse, the better.” But most serious are the Iranian discussions and rumors about Iran quitting the NPT.

Iranian withdrawal from the NPT would have serious impact on the Middle East, a complicated region where the treaties that ban and control weapons of mass destruction already have a difficult life. Israel is not a member of any of these treaties and possesses nuclear weapons, though it does not acknowledge its arsenal. If Iran leaves the NPT, then other states in the region may follow suit and also decide to pursue nuclear weapons, as for example, Saudi Arabia’s Prince Turki recently stated.

There is also a dangerous relation between the possibility of Iran exiting the NPT and a possible Western or Israeli decision to attack Iran. If an attack against Iranian nuclear facilities happens, then Iran will immediately exit the NPT. But also if the external pressures on and threats toward Iran become unbearable, or if a more hawkish attitude prevails in Iran, then Iran may decide to preemptively exit the NPT before absorbing a military attack. If for any reason Iran exits the NPT (thus deciding to work on nuclear weapons) then it will be difficult for the US and maybe Israel not to carry out or intensify (depending on the situation) a military action. In case of a war, many people will be killed, property will be destroyed, and the oil market will be devastated with possible dramatic worldwide economic consequences. The Gulf States could see a possible end of their economic development and the entire region from South Asia to North Africa (and also eastern Africa) will be under extremely severe instability.

Such a dramatic breakdown of the NPT could be the death knell for the NPT itself. But the good news is that we are not yet there. Keeping Iran in the NPT must be the primary goal of a responsible international community.

It is true that experience in civilian nuclear activities can help a country be prepared to build the bomb. However, Iran is not (yet) building nuclear weapons. It may be getting ready to do so, but most likely it will not build nuclear weapons while being a member of the NPT. To act differently would be at odds with Iran’s strong desire to extend its political influence in the Middle East (or South West Asia).

It is therefore of paramount importance to help things cool down. The campaign to corner and isolate Iran should be substituted with a more pragmatic and conciliatory approach that would bring about negotiated solutions.

A grand bargain cannot be based on special constraints on Iran. Iran should be granted the rights of every member of the NPT, but should also accept full and intensified oversight from the IAEA (at least of the additional protocol type). Then sanctions could be wound down and discussions on improving the situation regarding WMDs in the Middle East could progress (possibly in connection with the planned 2012 conference on a Middle East WMD Free Zone). In general the development of nuclear energy in the Middle East, as everywhere, should be based on an unbiased assessment of any economic and environmental advantages (if they exist), on the dangers and risks (Fukushima is a sober reminder), on the technical feasibility, and on the guarantees against nuclear proliferation. In the climate surrounding the Iranian

nuclear program, these common sense arguments currently fail to find a legitimate space for internal discussion within Iran.

We in Pugwash have been in the past and continue to be fully committed to helping with Track II (or Track 1 and a half) initiatives, fostering the development of dialogue between Iran and the West, as well as among Middle Eastern countries. We constantly promote dialogue in all possible ways. We are very much concerned that dialogue is no longer considered feasible by many of the relevant political actors and that key states are considering obstructing dialogue or at least showing a strong reluctance to being engaged. Despite the obstacles, we will keep trying anything that has even the slightest probability of working.

As the 1955 Russell-Einstein Manifesto, the founding document of Pugwash urged, “We have to learn to think in a new way. We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory to whatever group we prefer, for there no longer are such steps; the question we have to ask ourselves is: what steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?”

[1] No person employed with the United States Government may contact in an official or unofficial capacity any person that-- (1) is an agent, instrumentality, or official of, is affiliated with, or is serving as a representative of the Government of Iran; and (2) presents a threat to the United States or is affiliated with terrorist organizations.