

What Iran wants and what Iran should not be offered when its nuclear program is discussed again soon

1.

Iran's current leadership has *four sets of key interrelated strategic goals*, which it has been systematically solving, or trying to solve.

Set one is related with *internal political stability*. Until just recently Iran remained one of the most democratic states in the Middle East. Parliamentary and presidential elections, in combination with a complex multi-tier system of decision-making, make this system potentially vulnerable. The Iranian leadership has already passed the first vulnerability test, when the small but vocal Opposition tried to intercept initiative. These days the Opposition's opportunities are minimized. But the Iranian regime demonstrates an extremely painful reaction to attempts to feed the Opposition from outside.

The Iranian leadership is considering start of a full-scale dialogue with the United States. It is however very hesitant, if not reluctant, primarily because the ultimate aim of the latter (at least, the way Tehran sees it) is the dismantling of the ruling regime, while the fanning of tensions over the "nuclear issue" is just a method to replace the authorities. This is not the mullahs' paranoia. The Iranians have very serious reasons for concern. History has taught them the same lesson many a time – from the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh to support for the Shah. If Obama's administration provides assurances for the regime that it has no intention to change it, then it may be an important game changer.

Set two is related with *technological progress and self-sufficiency*. Iran wishes to play first fiddle in world affairs in the 21st century, and for that it believes crucial to have its own advanced technologies, because only these will give it independence,

self-sufficiency and a free hand (another history lesson the Iranians have learned well enough).

Iran is struggling its way into the world of advanced nuclear, space rocket and biotechnologies. True, technological breakthroughs consolidating the nation are a fact of life, but “independent work” costs Iran a whole lot more than its leaders are prepared to acknowledge. The leap forward in the nuclear sphere (to an extent owed to bad Pakistani technologies) is followed by the torment of failure and stagnation. The “forced self-sufficiency” as a result of sanctions is a brake. The Iranians lack their own knowledge. In contrast to Cuba, which, when caught in the grip of an economic blockade, raised its biotechnologies and health service to the world level, soaking up assistance from the Soviet Union to have eventually gone ahead of it, Iran has nobody to rely on. The Bushehr nuclear power plant is one of the few exceptions; and even it can hardly be called a triumph of engineering. It is rather a triumph of resourcefulness, displayed by Russian engineers, who managed to crossbreed a reactor of Russian design with a semi-finished and half-ruined German-built frame.

Set three involves *maintenance of external security and minimization of the risk of armed conflicts along the border perimeter and outside the country*. This is a third historical lesson that Tehran learned, when it experienced what it is like when a hostile neighbor (Saddam’s Iraq) is helped by all, while Iran has nobody to count on. It was then, in the mid-1980s, when Iraq repeatedly went unpunished for using weapons of mass destruction (chemical) against Iran, that the Iranian military and political leadership for the first time had an idea of developing nuclear arms.

Oddly, Iran saw the problem with Iraq settled for it by the Americans. Now their relations are quite neighborly and do not require any WMD arguments. But the Iranian diplomacy has failed to establish as neighborly relations with all countries in the Persian Gulf (probably, except for Oman and Dubai in the UAE). Anyhow, the Iranians believe their main neighbor today is the United States, as represented by the 5th Fleet and military bases, let alone the troops in Afghanistan and drones in

Pakistan. In other words, for Tehran the solution of any foreign security issues is tightly pegged to relations with Washington.

Lastly, the *fourth set* of goals – the *expansion of Iran's influence in the region*, the assertion of its status as a regional superpower and a magnet attracting all Muslims in the Middle East, irrespective of whether they are Sunnis or Shiites. Tensions are simmering in the whole region, and it is too early to say whether Iran has lost or gained as a result of what has been called the Arab Spring. Iran's "gains" which many in Tehran like to make meaningful hints at look very slim. The protesters in the streets of Cairo, who just recently, under Mubarak, were casting envious looks at Tehran and heeding its opinion, despite the religious differences, these days are focused on building their own statehood. Iran's influence on Arab countries of the Middle East is still there, but it is far more moderate than that of Turkey. The dropout of Assad's Syria from the zone of Iranian influence will not spell disaster for Tehran, but a very sensitive blow it will certainly be. The Iranian leadership prefers to put up a bold front.

Iran should not be hindered in addressing the first three sets of goals. On the contrary, it is worth promoting a situation in which it would be able to address them calmly. This will stabilize the situation in the region and make it more predictable.

As for the fourth set of goals, the Iranian regional ambitions should be blended into the real Middle East context (and not the one Tehran may have devised itself), but they should not be encouraged, because that would rock the regional boat still worse.

2.

Iran at the moment has neither only nuclear weapons (this is common knowledge) nor a definitive political decision to make them (most international experts in the field of non-proliferation adhere to this point of view, although it is not an absolute truth). Nor does Iran work covertly and consistently on nuclear weapons (this is my personal opinion, but many experts, in particular, Israeli and American ones will be arguing

with me). The Iranian leadership *does not need* nuclear weapons to achieve its strategic goals. Among these one will not find an attack on the United States or Israel and, what is still more important, the regime has no intention to commit suicide.

Indeed, Iran has for more than two decades considered various applied scientific aspects of making nuclear weapons (it started doing so still earlier, under the Shah and with the Americans keeping a close watch on this work). I cannot rule out that 25 years ago the Iranian leadership considered the feasibility of secretly creating its own nuclear arsenal. Possibly, certain quarters brought focus on this project later. I would speculate that the arguments might have been varied and kept changing depending on the regional trends. Rivalry with Saddam Hussein might have been involved there, for he had chemical and biological warfare agents and was working on nuclear weapons. Then, when Saddam fell: “Are we, Persians, worse than Pakistan?” Or at a certain moment: “Are we, Persians, less smart than North Koreans?”

Whatever the case, it has not gone much farther than that.

True, Iran has a long trail of slyness or outright lies in relations with the IAEA. However long Tehran may be grumbling about the IAEA and its Director-General Yukiya Amano (even for a good reason), it will have to cooperate with the agency to lift all doubts and, in some respects, to confess and repent some sins of the past (however harshly this may hurt the Iranians’ inflated feeling of self-dignity).

I suggest taking several steps to settle the Iranian nuclear issue.

Step one must be Iran’s cooperation with the IAEA, extensive and without any wrangling. Iran has from time to time taken half-steps. Those were steps in the right direction, but surely not enough to make the world community, including Russia, believe that all of Iran’s transgressions are gone. Iran must ratify the additional protocol, and for that it will have to volunteer to comply with its provisions, as if it has already been ratified. Incidentally, the Iranians have been acting this way, partially and selectively, though. Such selectivity must be brought to an end.

My Iranian counterparts have been complaining – in public, and in particular, in private conversations, that the IAEA “strips them naked” in front of U.S. and British intelligence services, and that eventually all information is leaked to Israel. Tehran finds this humiliating. But, apart from the negative emotions, one has to acknowledge that at a time when Israel declares outright it may attack Iranian nuclear facilities, this sort of “stripping” is very risky for Iran.

Many reproach Iran for building nuclear facilities first and notifying the IAEA only afterwards. I believe the reasons Iran does that are quite clear.

Is there a way out of this impasse? Yes, there is. And Russia can play a leading role here.

Step two is to lift the demand that Iran give up the enrichment of uranium. This demand is unrealistic and unnecessary. As long as Tehran complies with its NPT obligations (all of the doubts that there can be are retrospective ones), it is no use pressing it for what is not an international norm now and will not be a norm in the foreseeable future. Economically, Iran may be acting not very rationally, but politically its striving for self-sufficiency cannot but be respected. I have heard this from many counterparts in developing countries, Egypt in the first place. Self-imposed restrictions on uranium enrichment might be an appropriate and important step, in my opinion, but this can only be voluntary.

Step three must be the adoption by the UN Security Council of a statement on the impermissibility of the use of force or threats to use force (including cyber attacks) against any nuclear facilities in the Middle East falling under the guarantees of the IAEA or shown to IAEA inspectors at their request – those already built or under construction, as well as against these facilities’ personnel. Indeed, is it normal to put up with a situation where you are invited to the negotiating table at a time when your nuclear industry and your scientists are at gunpoint and under the threat of an attack?

As the fourth step Iran should impose a temporary freeze on the level of uranium enrichment and on the number of centrifuges, and pledge to refrain from adding new centrifuges to the existing cascades, from creating more cascades and from launching rotating centrifuges (without gas). Such a step would work as a confidence-building measure, but not a legally binding rule.

Step five suggests that the UN Security Council suspend sanctions against Iran, subject to satisfactory cooperation between Iran and the IAEA (this approach has been proposed by some European experts). If the IAEA closes “the Iranian file,” all sanctions should be lifted.

Step six should be the creation of an atmosphere of confidence in the region in nuclear security matters. My counterparts in Kuwait and other states in the Persian Gulf told me that they are worried over the reliability and security of the Bushehr nuclear power plant which Russia has built for Iran. They suggest conducting stress tests there, attended by observers from the adjoining countries concerned. Iran and Russia should respond to such requests positively and good-naturedly.

And, finally, *as step seven I suggest beginning a regional Middle East dialogue on the entire range of nuclear issues:* from forming a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East (with the participation of all Arab States, Iran and Israel) to forming a Middle East equivalent of the IAEA, identical to Euratom. The forthcoming WMD-free zone conference in Helsinki has good chances of becoming an overture to that process – of course, if it is not considered as a one-time gathering, but as a long-term process of restoring confidence, openness and dialogue.

It would be pointless to hinder Iran in its efforts to develop nuclear power. Tehran would create the full fuel cycle no matter what, even after Israeli bombardments and the destruction of a couple of its nuclear facilities. The sole difference would be that after such bombardments it would surely make changes to its strategic calculations. As Bill Keller remarked once in response to Mathew Kroening’s article in *Foreign*

Affairs, “bombing Iran is the best way to guarantee exactly what we are trying to prevent.”

It is worth taking into account and trying to respect the strategic tasks of Iran: three of the four create no problems either for the region or for the international community in general.

If Iran’s strategic tasks – at least some of them – were taken into account and respected, Tehran would have no motives to put its nuclear fuel cycle on the military track. All of Iran’s neighbors, including Russia, should get used to living next to that country’s nuclear fuel cycle; after all, all of us have been able to live next to the Japanese nuclear fuel cycle, some without even having a peace treaty. And if there is something to be afraid of, it is another Fukushima, and not nuclear bombs.

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