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Working group «Iran in Regional and Global Perspective» at the Strategic Studies Summit,
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Policy memo

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From Azerbaijani perspective, even with all traditional tensions and jealousy between Azerbaijan and Iran, conditioned by historical context, it would be naive to consider that nuclear Iran will become a direct threat upon security in the Middle East, the South Caucasus and the Central Asia. I would rather agree with the late American neorealist Kenneth Waltz that portraying Iranian regime as innately irrational and ruled by "mad mullahs" is either hammer-like propaganda or serious mistake.

Iran's policy is almost perfect in terms of pragmatism and understanding of its rationale for survival. In current geopolitical context of the Middle East, it seems that Iran's desire to develop nuclear weapons has nothing to do with its aggressive rhetoric, like former president Mahmud Ahmadinejad's, but rather seeks a) to provide its long-term security, and b) demonstrate the regime's capacity to engage and achieve long-term goals in finance, human resource, effort and time consuming scientific and industrial programs. Nevertheless, there is something more than just these two goals. Although, nuclear Iran doesn't mean direct existential threat neither to Israel and the US allies in the Gulf, nor to Azerbaijan, nuclear Iran means new and different Iran. It means new and different balance of power in the Middle East, the South Caucasus and the Central Asia, with too high deterrence price for the US and their allies. In my opinion, concerning the South Caucasus, nuclear Iran will be Iran demanding more participation in resolution of the frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus, articulating

stronger its position on marine borders in the Caspian sea, and adding up nuclear element to its Shia soft power in the Middle East, the South Caucasus and the Central Asia. And at the same time, I think new balance of power in the Middle East and the South Caucasus and the Central Asia and with Iran possessing nuclear weapons. others, like Saudi Arabia and may be even Turkey, will be triggered to launch their own military nuclear programs.

Iranian president Hassan Rouhani promised to end the nuclear impasse with the West and he seems to fulfill the promise. Late 2013 and early 2014 were full of events and November 2013 Geneva interim deal was the core. But opinions are controversial on the major issue around this core event. Although number of analysts are optimistic, there are many issues making the whole construction of the US - Iranian reload fragile.

The first issue is current geopolitical context in the Middle East and civil war in Syria. There are many questions towards the US diplomacy and one of them is the timing. Unexpected turns in Civil war in Syria where Iran is involved through its proxies can easily stop the whole process. There is a broader agenda as well. I was very attentive in analysis of Russian media analysts commenting Geneva deal and the detente, and my assumption is that in current context detente is not in Russia's interest, some Russian analysts even go as far as fearing that there is a red line in detente behind which Russia can lose Iran as its strategic partner in the region.

Israel is another issue. I think Israel at the moment has mobilized fully all means to torpedo the Geneva process. Middle East is the region where only one unbalanced nuclear power exists and it is Israel. And emergence of a balance in the form of theocratic regime in Tehran presents an existential threat to Israelis, which fear that this interim agreement can in fact become a permanent one, what causes conflicting rhetoric and tensions in the US - Israeli relations. Being both the US and Israel's strategic partner in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan watches attentively these tensions.

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These tensions increased after February 1, 2014, when US Secretary of State John Kerry was asked on a press conference whether he believed that he could "actually nail this [the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations] down". Rather than respond directly to the question, Kerry answered "there's an increasing de-legitimization campaign that has been building up. People are very sensitive to it. There are talk of boycotts and other kinds of things. Are we all going to be better with all of that?". This added up to Israelis negativity on the Geneva process and anti-US rhetoric in Israeli media.

Also, some senior US diplomats and intelligence officials are not positive about Israel's intensified strategic military and intelligence cooperation with Azerbaijan, which, as they think, complicates the Geneva process. This has been underlined in one of reports of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Israel later in 2013. The second issue is Iran's sincerity. Since 2010 Iranian economy was suffering under Washington's tough measures. Observation of realities of Iran's economy are very easy in Azerbaijan, where many business people have commercial ties with partners in Iran. The most observable things were hyperinflation and shortage of some products. In her short article for Foreign Affairs magazine on November 27, 2013, on the peak of optimistic sentiments three days after the Geneva deal had been agreed, Suzanne Maloney from Brookings Institute wrote that all that had happened - from Iranian president Hassan Rouhani's unprecedented outreach to Barak Obama to the deal itself had been in fact a carefully orchestrated strategy by the regime, undoubtedly endorsed by ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran has suspended its nuclear program temporarily with no promise to abandon it permanently, and agreed to convert part of enriched uranium stockpile to fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect its nuclear facilities in Natanz and Fardow. In exchange for this promises, Tehran got access to cash it was desperate for. The US has decided to unfreeze \$ 550 million of the Iranian frozen oil revenues, and there is more to come, together with guaranties of no additional sanctions to be imposed. Thus, there can be some truth in sceptics' questioning value of the deal for the US, because in their opinion Iran is better off.

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And there is no guaranty that once the US continues to call of the sanctions and the process of detente goes far enough, there will be no surprises inside the "known unknowns" of Iran's nuclear program, as the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once said. I mean that chances are very high that having devoted so much resources and effort to its nuclear program, Iran will open all its nuclear facilities to IAEA, without keeping at least some little portion, but the most important, military one, to transparency. I would like to see faces of senior American diplomats is one day, after the detente goes as far as reestablishment of embassies, they will get news on Iran's first nuke. What then?

The third issue is Iran's domestic politics. Parallels are brought often between Hassan Rouhani and Michail Gorbachev, these parallels are far from thorough political analysis. Hassan Rouhani is not Michail Gorbachev. Everything Gorbachev did was in the name of renewing the system, Rouhani cannot afford it, his role in Iran is different, as well as the internal structure of Iran's political establishment and society. Gorbachev was a master political tactician and has considerable space for maneuver in domestic politics, Rouhani doesn't. At the same time, contextual framework of the US - Soviet detente in late 1989 was very different from current contextual framework of the Middle Eastern geopolitics in 2013. Although cash inflow and guaranties of no additional sanctions create some space for domestic maneuver for Rouhani, Iran's domestic politics is still a black box, much lesser than USSR was, and it is much more complicated than just two camps like liberals and conservatives.

Frankly speaking, I have made a bet with one of my colleagues on the issue. My forecast is that the Geneva process will be disrupted. And I am sure than sooner or later Iran will produce its first nuke. If I am mistaken it is going to cost me \$ 150. But costs for the region and for the whole world can be much higher and these are not costs of dealing with nuclear Iran, these are costs of unpreparedness to potential evolution of the regional and global balance of power.

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I believe in Tehran's first class pragmatism in foreign policy and I also believe that from this very pragmatic viewpoint, and taking into account the Iraqi, Libyan and Syrian experience and with the North Korean example on the background, Iran in theory has a right for military nuclear might. And in case Tehran successfully accomplishes the national program of military nuclear might and takes new place in the new balance of power in the Middle East, the South Caucasus and the Central Asia, it has to reevaluate its foreign policy, especially towards its immediate neighbors and Israel, because big strength brings big responsibilities.

And whatever the future of the Geneva process is, and whatever the level of traditional tensions and jealousy between Azerbaijan and Iran is, I believe that these tensions will evaporate through time, when both states, 5000 year old one and 20 year old one, get used to live side by side. We just have too many things common and if Turkey is the closest to Azerbaijan in terms of ethnicity, Iran is in terms of Shia Islam, let alone that 23 million Azeris live there. And by no chance can I imagine any military scenario on preventing Iran from becoming nuclear. Thanks God, leadership of Azerbaijan many times declared from many tribunes that despite all partnership with the US and Israel, there is no chance to use Azerbaijan's territory in hypothetical strikes on Iran.