



Sergey Ryabkov

FURTHER SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN POINTLESS

***The Iranian nuclear program: is it a threat, and can it trigger an arms race in the Middle East? Or are rumors about its dangers much exaggerated? What are the main problems with the approaches being used by the international community to address the issue? What are the steps Iran itself is prepared to take? Finally, what is the Russian strategy and tactics in resolving the Iranian nuclear problem?***

**The Security Index Editor-in-Chief, Vladimir Orlov, has put these questions to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov.<sup>1</sup>**

**SECURITY INDEX:** The situation with the Iranian nuclear program has defied resolution for several years now. What is your assessment of the international community's efforts in this area? What steps should be taken to find a way out of the impasse?

**RYABKOV:** The Iranian nuclear problem is a multi-faceted issue, which is tightly interlinked with many other problems on the international agenda. For more than a decade we have been facing a paradoxical situation; all our attempts to find a resolution to the problems related to the Iranian nuclear program are not yielding any results, even though these efforts have included elements of pressure as well as elements of dialogue, i.e. attempts at political engagement of the Iranian side to discuss the problem. Whatever we call this combination of pressure and engagement used over these years, the nature of the situation remains the same: as Iran continues to make progress on its nuclear program, the international community employs ever bigger sticks and ever sweeter carrots.

The ongoing international debate, including the discussion in the "Europe plus three" format [known as P5 + 1 format.—Ed.], focuses not so much on the final goals of the process as on the tactics which are supposed to make that goal closer. We believe that some clear room for improvement has remained over all these years in terms of *real political investment* in this dialogue and in efforts aimed at engaging Iran itself into searching for a workable compromise.

We are hearing counterarguments to the effect that Iran will never comply with the international community's demands, and that the only way to persuade the decision-makers in Tehran (and by the way, it is not at all clear who makes these decisions, and how) is to ramp up the pressure of sanctions.

Well, let us look at these arguments. In the past four years alone the UN Security Council has adopted six resolutions on Iran, four of them introducing new sanctions. We believe that these resolutions have completely sealed off any loopholes that may have existed for Iran to receive external assistance in the development of its nuclear program. The same applies to a very large extent to the Iranian missile program. What is more, the United States, the EU, Canada, Australia, South Korea, Japan and many other countries are introducing ever more biting and comprehensive sanctions against Iran, imposing travel restrictions on Iranian officials, freezing Iranian assets in foreign banks, and cutting off relations with Iran in various other areas, from banking to transport. For now let us put aside the question of whether this policy of unilateral sanctions bypassing the UN Security Council is in line with international norms and customs, let alone international law. Let us put aside the question of whether this is in the spirit of partnership with



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this or another country. Let us focus instead on the far more important fact—namely, the fact that these sanctions have yielded practically no results whatsoever. We are now at the crossroads. What are the conclusions that should be drawn from this situation, which is causing political frustration in many capitals, and which is giving rise to internal political problems for a whole number of governments that are coming under mounting pressure from lobbyists, politicians, and parliaments?

One of the answers is to keep ramping up the pressure by introducing even more sanctions. You see, this is no longer a question of practical politics or practical diplomacy. This is now a question of beliefs and fortune-telling. Some believe in Buddha, some in Jesus Christ, some believe in sanctions, others don't believe—that is essentially the level to which our discussion has degenerated.

Jokes aside, theoretically it may be possible to just keep ramping up the sanctions until the regime in Tehran breaks. But, given the experience of the past several months, the unfortunate and grim experience of international norms being violated by the international coalition during Operation Unified Protector in Libya, we can absolutely rule out Russia's participation in such sanctions aimed at achieving a regime change in Tehran. Some might say that the current situation represents a window of opportunity; some might pursue the cynical path of trying to topple the government in Tehran so as to resolve a whole number of problems in one fell swoop. But Russia will never join such actions, and it will not in any way share the political or legal responsibility for any such steps.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Do you believe that there is a workable alternative to sanctions?

**RYABKOV:** Yes there is. The alternative is to pursue serious negotiations with Iran, with a clear commitment by everyone involved in the dialogue to find a compromise and to identify a solution that can be acceptable to the Iranian side.

The Iranian diplomats and politicians who are involved in the negotiations with the international community over their nuclear program are using the same tactics which are always used at the Iranian bazaar. When the buyer and the seller haggle over the price of something expensive, such as a beautiful rug which took many years and a lot of skill to make, the seller always starts off with a completely exorbitant price. But if the seller feels that the buyer is really interested in this rug, that he is not just looking around—that is when the real bargaining begins. The seller will never give the rug away for free, especially if the buyer tries to just take it by pulling out a big stick or a gun. Unfortunately, these things are very difficult to explain. Strangely enough, our partners are often willing to pay a fair price for a real rug at the bazaar—but when it comes to the Iranian nuclear problem they start off by demanding unilateral concessions from Iran.

We could of course leave all these paradoxes to political scientists and scholars of diplomacy—but the issue at stake is too serious, and the danger is too great.

It is true that Iran is making progress on its nuclear program, and that it has limited its cooperation with the IAEA strictly to the minimum that is required under its safeguards agreement with the agency.

For Russia this situation is probably even more worrying than for many other countries. Geographically, Iran is our close neighbor, and a nuclear-armed Iran is not an option for Russia. At the same time, we have to say that the policy now being pursued by Tehran does not offer any firm or unambiguous evidence that the Iranian nuclear program has a military component.

Suspected research is also a deadlock, an impasse within an impasse. What is the problem with suspected research? To make a long story short, the Iranians don't want to respond to these charges. Their official position is that they do not want to respond to the accusations because they have not seen the original documents on which these accusations are based. Meanwhile, the original documents cannot be disclosed because those who have obtained these documents don't want to compromise their intelligence sources. As a result, no one is prepared to take the first step; no one has the required political will. Essentially, the entire problem with the Iranian nuclear program, the entire international debate boils down to the question of who takes the first step, who makes a concession, who loses face, and who doesn't.

I think this is wrong. If politicians are genuinely worried about the situation, if they don't want it to degenerate into a new crisis, including the use of force, they must admit to themselves that they need to show courage and make the necessary decisions.

Russian representatives expound this logic and this approach, using much the same wording, to our partners in the “Europe plus three,” as well as to our Iranian partners, with whom we maintain—and will continue to maintain—very close dialogue.

There is no point explaining the details of that dialogue, and that is not really the point. The point is that as the Iranian nuclear program continues to make progress Iran is gradually losing interest in discussing any possible deals which offer it only a cosmetic improvement of its situation in return for some steps to limit or suspend various nuclear program components.

In other words, the price of the rug, the offer that needs to be made in order to initiate a serious discussion, is, unfortunately, becoming more expensive. Nevertheless, the buyer still has enough money to buy. In fact, we have tried to count this money in someone else’s pocket by proposing the so-called Lavrov Plan. This is a plan for resolving the Iranian nuclear problem based on a step-by-step and reciprocity approach.

**SECURITY INDEX:** What is the essence of that plan?

**RYABKOV:** It is based on the notion that the level of trust between the two sides, between the P5 + 1 group and Iran, is not just zero, it is somewhere below zero. In order to begin gradually rebuilding that trust, in order to make some progress towards a mutually acceptable solution, we need to start from something fairly simple. Again, all is relative, so what is simple, and what is complex?

In this system of coordinates one simple step Iran could make is, for example, to freeze the number of its centrifuges at the current level and desist from adding new centrifuges to the existing cascades, from creating new cascades, and from putting the centrifuges that are already spinning, but without gas, into operational mode, etc.

In return, the P5 + 1 could undertake a commitment that once the IAEA confirms that such steps have indeed been made by Iran—and such a confirmation is very important—the P5 + 1 will desist from any further, additional, unilateral sanctions.

We can begin by a commitment not to introduce unilateral sanctions. Then, as we make progress from simple to more complex steps we could move towards a comprehensive resolution whereby the international community undertakes certain measures to satisfy Iran’s security requirements, up to and including military and naval confidence-building measures in the adjacent waters. The necessary steps are outlined in the four stages which make up the core of our plan. We believe that such a plan is entirely feasible.

We discussed this mechanism with our partners in the Group of Six in November 2010. Unfortunately, they were unable to work out a single approach to the mechanism we proposed; they did, however, confirm that they agree with the principles, i.e. step-by-step and reciprocity. We are happy that these principles are now reflected in the documents of the P5 + 1 group, including a statement by Catherine Ashton (of September 21, 2011, New York), and Catherine Ashton’s letter of October 21, 2011 to Dr Jalili, which reiterate that the P5 + 1 group is prepared to continue the dialogue.

As for the Iranians, we submitted our proposals to them officially, in writing, on August 17, 2011, during a visit to Moscow by Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi. The Iranians showed interest;

## LEAFING THROUGH THE OLD PAGES

**ROBERT J. EINHORN, GARY SAMORE:** Despite years of high-level U.S.-Russian engagement, Russian entities continue to provide assistance to Iran’s nuclear and missile programs. The approach suggested here - distinguishing between more sensitive and less sensitive nuclear cooperation with Iran and then rigorously enforcing that distinction - may provide a way out of the frustrating pattern of charges and denials, assurances and backsliding. But adopting such an approach will not be easy for either side. For Washington, it may be difficult to abandon its longstanding “zero tolerance” for cooperation with Iran, even in relatively non-sensitive areas. For Moscow, it may be difficult to insist that Iran accept tighter restrictions on its nuclear activities, especially restrictions that go beyond Iran’s international treaty commitments.

“**Heading Off Iran’s Bomb: the Need for Renewed U.S.-Russian Cooperation**”, *Yaderny Kontrol*, 2002, No 3, P. 24.



they always take their time, but we have not received any signals to suggest that they are inclined to reject our proposal. We believe that we have something to work with, and we will continue our efforts to demonstrate the advantages of our proposal. Of course, the Iranians have also criticized some of its aspects, but let me say this: both sides are equally unhappy and equally dissatisfied, and that is a clear sign that we are close to identifying a mechanism that could actually work.

We hope that the talks will resume. We are working with the Iranian side in order to secure a positive answer to the aforementioned letter from the EU High Representative.

**SECURITY INDEX:** You have discussed the Lavrov Plan with the Iranian side. Based on these discussions, have you got a feeling that Iran might be willing to end uranium enrichment, and if so, on what terms? On the other hand, if Iran turns down all the proposals and rejects all the initiatives, would it perhaps be useful to brandish a somewhat bigger stick?

**RYABKOV:** I am not aware of any evidence to suggest that at this time Iran is ready to forego its uranium enrichment program. The Iranians' precondition for any further talks with the P5 + 1 group is to recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium.

We cannot accept that. First and foremost, there must be no preconditions for any negotiations, especially for negotiations on such a complex problem. But we are ready to confirm and to reiterate Iran's right to peaceful use of nuclear energy in accordance with the provisions of the NPT, of which Iran is a member.

As for making the stick even bigger, that is essentially what is already going on. New and increasingly painful sanctions are being introduced in various areas almost every day. The trouble is that at the beginning, when UN Security Council Resolution 1696 was being drafted—the resolution which was meant to serve as a warning and which threatened sanctions unless Iran took some specific steps—our firm agreement was (and we are sticking to it) that any sanctions must pursue the sole purpose of strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

After a whole series of resolutions that followed, including Resolutions 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929, we have exhausted the entire arsenal of all possible sanctions which pursue that particular purpose. In other words, there is nothing more that can be done to strengthen the nuclear nonproliferation regime by adopting UN Security Council resolutions.

Having said that, I am not arguing that there should be no more sanctions because there are no more punitive measures left. Of course we can come up with all sorts of sanctions; there are plenty of examples of sanctions being imposed on some corporate entities which have nothing whatsoever to do with Iran's nuclear or missile program. Calls have been made to ban the Iranian space launches, to block the development of the Iranian oil industry, etc. But what does all this have to do with the nuclear nonproliferation regime?

The real objective of all such measures is to change the behavior of another country's government, to stoke up internal tensions, and ideally to bring about a change of government. But that is an entirely different article of the Penal Code, if you forgive my language. I have seen nothing in the UN Charter to justify such measures. I have read that charter forwards and backwards, upside down and the right way up—but I could find nothing to justify these measures. There is no such article in the UN Charter—although there probably is in the Penal Code.

**SECURITY INDEX:** Do you believe that even if Russia's most idealistic intentions come to pass, Iran will abandon the military components of its nuclear program? Because the behavior of the Western countries only serves to persuade Iran—and not just Iran—that it is better to have weapons than not to have them.

**RYABKOV:** Based on the facts at our disposal, based on the bureaucratic platform on which the official discussion rests, I can only reiterate that there is no smoking gun to prove that the Iranian nuclear program has a military component. There was some research conducted mainly prior to 2003—but, according to a whole number of reports by the IAEA Director-General, that research was then ended, for reasons which are not entirely clear to the Director-General. The research I am talking about focused on high explosives, the so-called Green Salt, metalizing uranium for the uranium sphere in warheads, and some other areas.

The nature of the deadlock is this: claims are being made that there is evidence, that all of this is real. But the documents cannot be passed on to the Iranians so as not to compromise the intelligence sources. And without seeing these documents first the Iranians refuse to comment on

the 100 pages or so which the IAEA handed over to them two or two and a half years ago. That is one reason for the current deadlock.

The other reason has to do with the latest report by the IAEA Director-General, which contains nothing new on this subject. The IAEA Director-General has found nothing to fundamentally alter the picture. Some are asking questions about the Iranians' intentions to complete the construction of a heavy-water reactor. Critics argue that such a reactor would be completely at odds with Iran's declared goal of producing nuclear energy. Heavy-water reactors work on plutonium, etc. All these technical details are well known. But the Iranians say without any hesitation that they need a heavy-water reactor to produce targets, for medical purposes, etc. That is the second reason for the current deadlock.

The third area of discussion has to do with the general political situation. Amid the ongoing turbulence in the region, as the whole international system as we have known it for many decades since the foundation of the UN starts to look wobbly, there is growing temptation in some capitals to acquire WMD, which are seen as an ironclad insurance policy against any foreign meddling. But in order to acquire nuclear weapons it is not enough merely to develop the technology. A nuclear device then needs to be tested; it also needs a delivery system, and I don't mean the kind of system we usually see in blockbusters, i.e. "put the bomb on a barge and then blow it up." All these things require testing facilities, and it is impossible to keep them under wraps, especially given that Iran is the focus of extraordinary and unprecedented attention by the entire world and of every nation's intelligence service.

This may sound as though I am not taking the real threats seriously; some might accuse me of inconsistency, in view of my previous statement that Russia is worried by the possibility of Iran going nuclear. So I don't want to be misunderstood: we are worried by the fact that the distance which separates Iran from a hypothetical acquisition of nuclear weapons technologies is becoming shorter. And that is exactly why we believe that a negotiated solution should be sought.

We need bold and innovative approaches to the problem in order to remove these concerns. But I do not believe that Iran has already reached the point where it needs only to make the political decision, and that it will need only a short period of time to build a primary nuclear explosive device once that political decision has been made. That is not our assessment of the current situation.

The fourth area of discussion is as follows. An Iran that is approaching the acquisition of nuclear weapons is a stimulus for its neighbors, especially those dominated by Sunni Muslims, also to take the nuclear path and at some point to launch nuclear weapons programs.

I believe that we should simply reject this as an argument, because the United States and those countries in Europe which see such a scenario as realistic must use all their resources and bring all their huge influence to bear in order to prevent such a turn of events. Otherwise it will become obvious to us that bringing about a regime change in Tehran is far more important to these countries than strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

**SECURITY INDEX:** The Iranian nuclear program is increasingly causing concern all over the world. Based on the existing experience of resolving problems in different parts of the world, would it be fair to say that the Iranian colleagues must realize that by pursuing their current policies they are playing with fire?

**RYABKOV:** One of the difficulties in dealing with the Iranians is that it is not entirely clear who is responsible for what in Iran. We are not always sure who reports what, and to whom, or what decision-making mechanisms are at work in different areas of Iranian policies. Based on everything we have seen in the country, both in the cities and in the far provinces, the impression is quite ambiguous. The economic situation has deteriorated; there are fewer products to choose from on the shelves of Iranian shops; inflation is on the rise; it is becoming more difficult to build or repair things owing to the restrictions on the supplies of technology and equipment to Iran.

On the other hand, the Iranian government has successfully implemented a program of monetization of many welfare policies; the Iranian experience in this area is quite impressive, given the difficult international environment. There are no obvious signs of any strong social or political tensions in the country, at least for the moment. Over the past 12 or 18 months I have seen nothing to suggest that some kind of explosion is imminent.



It is difficult to say how events in North Africa and the Middle East are affecting the mood of the Iranian government. The official political rhetoric coming out of Tehran is that the West has deeply and fundamentally miscalculated by hoping that a change of government in a whole number of countries will make them pro-Western, even in the medium time frame.

It is also being said that Iran in fact also wanted the authoritarian ruler of Libya to go, and that Iran now supports democratic transformations in a whole number of other countries because Iran itself is a democratic country. It is democratic, but it is also Islamic. So, the argument goes, just give the political movements in these countries some freedom and you'll see that Islamic fundamentalists will come to power by democratic means. In other words, the Iranians believe that the social engineering strategies used by the EU and the United States, their attempts at transplantation—all of that may work to some extent. But you can't make a pear tree bear apples.

A pear tree will always bear pears. Only time will tell whether this is just wishful thinking on the part of the Iranians—or perhaps, with their thousands of years of experience, they are in a better position than some newcomers to judge the mood in neighboring countries.

#### SECURITY INDEX:

What is the long-term outlook for the region if we manage to resolve the Iranian problem? The Middle East is moving

towards developing nuclear energy. Do you believe that a regional nuclear center can potentially be set up in Iran based on the facilities and technologies the Iranians already have? I realize that it's difficult to imagine the Arabs and the Iranians working together following the assassination attempt on the Saudi ambassador. So I am asking about the long-term prospect rather than the near or medium time frame. Or do you believe that such a scenario, i.e. setting up an international center under international controls in Iran, is completely unrealistic?

**RYABKOV:** I think this is a very productive idea, and I believe it was the PIR Center who came up with it. On the whole, we are very appreciative of the PIR Center's work, including the *Russia Confidential* bulletin, which we in the Foreign Ministry call the *PIR Yellow Papers*. It really stimulates the intellectual debate, and it often goes several steps ahead of what officials and diplomats can afford to say out loud.

As for whether Iran can position itself, over time, as an attractive location to host such a center or facility will

largely depend on Tehran's own policies. If things start to improve this would be entirely realistic by, say, the middle of the next decade, barring some major new crises.

#### LEAFING THROUGH THE OLD PAGES

**VLADIMIR NOVIKOV:** If we assume that the United States is intentionally pushing Iran towards activities which would create the preconditions for building nuclear weapons, such steps, which only serve to stoke up tensions, can be easily explained. The U.S. may be trying for a repeat of the Iraqi scenario, whereby "the outraged international community" gives Washington the go-ahead for a large-scale military action, either unilaterally or as part of a "broad coalition". As a result the U.S. would establish complete control over Iran. It would install a new loyal "democratic majority" government in Tehran. If that really is the strategy the United States is pursuing, things will not be so easy. Such a strategy can be described as chasing a rat into a corner. As a rule, in such situations the rat turns around and attacks, even if the one chasing it is much stronger. The authors of the strategy should keep that in mind.

**"Nuclear and Missile Nonproliferation: the Iranian Issue",  
Yaderny Kontrol (Russian Edition), 2002, No 5, P. 53.**

For more information on Iran, please, visit the section "Resources by Region – Iran" of the PIR Center website:  
<http://www.pircenter.org/view/iran/eng>



#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> This interview is based on Sergey Ryabkov's speech at a meeting of the Trialogue Club International organized by the PIR Center in Moscow on October 27, 2011. The text was updated by the author in January 2012 ahead of this publication.