



Changing the Frame of the International Debate over Iran's Nuclear Programme:

Iran's Role in Moving Towards a Nuclear Weapon Free World ¹

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¹ This is a paper presented at a conference on Iran's nuclear programme in Tehran on 9th March, hosted by the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), a think-tank closely associated with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic. BASIC believes fundamentally in dialogue and the importance of exploring with others mutually-beneficial solutions to apparently intractable problems. The international dispute over Iran's nuclear programme is exactly the sort of problem that demands an understanding from all sides of the perspectives of others, an effort to speak in a 'language' that it understood, whether or not there is agreement between these perspectives; this paper and BASIC's involvement in this conference is in this spirit. This version of the paper lacks many of the footnote references that will appear in the final version.



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Summary

This last year there has been a renewed Western interest in the vision of a nuclear-weapon free world. This has included the majority of former Secretaries of State and Defense in the US, and in UK government speeches. This is remarkable not because it is a new idea - many diplomats in international fora have referred to the legal commitment to negotiate towards this objective under Article 6 of the NPT - but who is saying it, and the urgency of their call for action. It arises largely from a recognition that the current discriminatory practices are unsustainable: the nuclear haves are realising their monopoly will not last forever, and they view the prospect of nuclear proliferation and the increasing dangers of nuclear terrorism with alarm.

Iran's nuclear programme has been the focus of complex international diplomacy and public awareness of the possibility of proliferation ever since 2002. The debate has been framed in the context of rights - in particular Iran's rights under Article 4 of the NPT to develop civil nuclear technologies. While this may have strengthened domestic support for Iran's position, it has also alienated potential allies abroad, worried about Iran's acquisition of a dual-use technology, even if the intention is not to develop a nuclear arsenal at this stage. In an age of global communications, domestic and international debates cannot be separated.

If Iran were to reframe its position in terms of its contribution to building the frameworks necessary to move towards a nuclear weapon free world this would indirectly protect its rights, and develop sympathy abroad. The US movers of the vision point to the central need for verification measures. Iran's nuclear programme has involved an intense inspections process by the IAEA, enabling them to develop their systems significantly. If the IAEA were given adequate resources by the international community and full cooperation by Iran to a degree that respected its legitimate security concerns, in further developing the IAEA's confidence-building verification methods Iran could become the ideal ground-breaking non-proliferation laboratory needed to develop global confidence in a nuclear weapon free world. Only then, by playing its part and in coordination with the majority world, could Iran have a chance to turn the international discourse around, focusing attention on the existing arsenals within countries possessing nuclear weapons.

Introduction

This paper seeks to reframe the debate over Iran's nuclear programme. Currently both sides are locked in a zero-sum argument over rights and security – the Iranians claim the right under the NPT's article IV to develop under safeguards nuclear technologies appropriate to a civil programme and that there has been no proof of any military intentions in their programme, whilst the UN Security Council has been invoking

Chapter VII rights to apply sanctions demanding Iran stop the enrichment programme on the basis that safeguards arrangements were broken and the development of enrichment technologies threaten international peace and security. Unfortunately, there appears to be deadlock, with both sides playing a waiting game; there is little prospect of this changing until one side or the other changes its game or looks afresh at its objectives and strategy.

The Problems behind Iran's Current Position

Recent Security Council Resolutions over Iran's nuclear programme have referred to the nuclear programme as a threat to peace and security, and have issued instructions to Iran to suspend its enrichment programme and all related activities, under Chapter VII authority.² Iranian representatives respond with righteous indignation as a victim oppressed by those with greater power over it, and stand by its rights to freedom of action. They point to the hypocrisy of states standing as their judge bristling with their own nuclear weapons and embarking on a renewed push for nuclear power expansion. They point to the lack of evidence of any military component in the Iranian nuclear programme, apparently confirmed in the publication of the US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran summary in December 2007.

This paper does not judge the rights or wrongs of the situation. Indeed, the focus on rights in this dispute has only served to heighten the conflict and perceptions of threat as a result. Iran's choice to so strongly assert its declared rights as a first principal has strengthened the spin of those seeking to portray Iran as a principal threat to international peace and security. Each side has focused on its own red line – for the Iranians that their right to enrich the fuel for their civil reactors is recognized – for the P5+1 that this enrichment is suspended and safeguards strengthened sufficiently for the international community to have confidence in the programme. The strategies pursued by all sides have harmed Iranian interests, but have also encouraged Iran to stand firm and continue the very enrichment activities that are perceived by others to be a threat to the international community. Contrary to the zero-sum perceptions of many involved in the struggle, this is actually a lose-lose outcome, particularly damaging when mutual benefits are possible.

It may be that this is inevitable given the history of distrust and menace both Iran and the United States have shown towards one another – actions and reactions have been interpreted consistently in the worst possible light, and opportunities for reconciliation or joint action have been squandered. It is as if key actors have hyped the threat and deliberately spiked the chances of reconciliation for their own purposes.

Iran is a convenient bogeyman for those resistant to the idea of multilateral disarmament. Iran's missile development and its nuclear programme is cited as justification for the establishment of US missile interceptors in Europe, poisoning the relationship between the US and Russia. Iran's transparency failure prior to 2003 shook confidence in IAEA safeguards and the Agency itself. The possibility of the development of a nuclear weapon capability by Iran was used extensively by the British government to justify to its population the decision in 2007 to start the process of replacing its Trident nuclear submarines. Unless Iran can shake off this image many

² UN Security Council Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747 and 1803

states will continue to isolate the country and use it to justify actions that undermine global security.

The regional dimension – a struggle for power and influence – has a powerful grip over the issues, thwarting many solutions that have been offered. This paper does not ignore those dynamics, but sees them as the context within which the proposals within the paper are developed. Iran, as a large and powerful state within the region, has a right to exert its legitimate interests beyond its own borders. Equally, as a member of the international community and specifically the United Nations, Iran has a responsibility to abide by the UN Charter and generally by international law, and to participate in the evolution of international law and norms that lead to greater stability and reduced conflict. This does not mean simply accepting the existing power structures, nor indeed the extensive presence of US forces in the region. As an open economy in an increasingly globalised world, Iran's interests clearly lie in integration within the international community on terms that are respectful to its position.

It is not the concern that Iran is currently engaged in actual weaponisation of nuclear material that has motivated action in the Security Council (ignoring perhaps the latest revelations involving intelligence from key western states submitted recently to the IAEA), but rather the acquisition of dual-use technologies by Iran that could be used for rapid break-out in the future. The fact is, many key states within the international community do not trust the Iranians with enrichment or heavy-water technologies, whether or not they use them for military purposes. And it seems unlikely they ever will without some radical change in the situation.

This presents a problem that goes beyond the specific relationship between Iran and the wider international community, namely

Is it possible to devise rigorous schemes that build international confidence in a country's nuclear programme without being prohibitively expensive or intrusive, and are there direct benefits to Iran of engaging in this project?

If so, given its current standing with the IAEA and the United Nations Iran is in an ideal position to develop these schemes with IAEA inspectors. There are added benefits to this approach that could have globally-important spin-off implications. However, we must be alive to the possibility that it is in fact impossible to achieve international confidence in an Iranian programme. Are we then doomed to see a protracted conflict with an uncertain outcome that will harm everyone's interests?

Are there other routes for the international community and for Iran to take that will deliver Iranian needs and objectives without creating a kick-back that undermines their interests?

These two questions form the heart of this paper, in an attempt to reframe the debate, and the image of Iran, transforming it from pariah to leader of the pack in moving towards global norms and procedures that respond to energy insecurity and global proliferation.

Iran: intelligent Use of the IAEA Inspectors

Since the outbreak of the current nuclear stand-off Iranian diplomatic strategy appears to have been to cooperate with the IAEA just to the extent that this holds off international action, perhaps in the belief that cooperation is a bargaining chip, and

that to give too much too soon would be to overplay their hand for too little in return. In each of its reports the IAEA Secretariat has always pointed to the need for Iran to cooperate more fully and proactively if confidence is to be fully established. The Iranian task of judging the necessary level of cooperation has been challenging, made all the more so by the entrenched positions taken by the United States and European officials. The problem is that this strategy also gives the impression to the 'opposition' in the negotiations that playing harder ball achieves results.

Iranian spokespeople have talked up references to the levels of cooperation between Iranian technicians and inspectors when IAEA Reports to the Board of Governors have been published, and Western diplomats have pointed to the holes in the evidence. In sum, we have a situation where the international community, the IAEA and Iran are inadvertently developing an IAEA inspections model of containment towards a state displaying resistance. This resistance creates a feedback loop of suspicion, whether founded or baseless.

Iran succeeded in making a breakthrough with the IAEA by agreeing a 'modalities of resolution of the outstanding issues' and published these on 27 August 2007.³ In a diplomatic coup it changed the game overnight – by agreeing what the key outstanding questions were and setting a timetable for resolving them. This set back efforts by the United States to isolate Iran, giving Russia and China solid ground for resisting further sanctions, at least temporarily. Early efforts by the United States to criticize the agreement were quickly abandoned when it was clear that they were not going to receive sufficient international support.

There is perhaps a hint here of a more extensive alternative strategy for Iran that could further break the dominant story within the international media. The modalities plan was seen by many governments as a success for the strategy of pressurizing Iran into movement. Iran could puncture this view by voluntarily entering into talks with the IAEA to establish and develop the nature of a rigorous, robust inspections and verification regime that would give strong and reasonable confidence that its technology was secure and not being used for military purposes, while protecting Iran's legitimate sovereignty concerns. Why should it do this? Would this not be giving in to the West and opening Iran up for further demands? Has Iran not put effort into building confidence by voluntarily suspending enrichment in 2003 and then again in the Paris Agreement of 2004, only to have its good faith abused?

By establishing this process Iran could take the logic of the modalities study to the next stage. Not only could it cut through the current demands of the UN Security Council, but it could establish general protocols appropriate for objective and reasonable verification with IAEA staff. It would in practical terms take the initiative and control out of the hands of the Security Council. In short it would transform its position from a reluctant participant perceived as a recalcitrant, to a proactive architect of a framework necessary for the international community.

If Iran could complete the modalities process and clear up the key questions that pointed a suspicious finger of blame, it could then place the framework on the negotiating table as a very real, transparent and negotiable 'carrot' in return for the file being returned from the Security Council and Iran given recognition of its rights to

³ IAEA Infcirc 711, available <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infcircs/2007/infcirc711.pdf>

retain the enrichment programme in which it has sunk so much political and financial capital. This may not be wholly acceptable as a final outcome of negotiations for the Security Council, but it would go a long way to reassuring those states with an open mind, and create the space necessary to allow negotiations to progress.

Proposals to move towards a nuclear weapon free world

Iranians are generally alive to the idea that developments in the United States have a big impact on their own freedom of action. And in the United States change is in the air. Barack Obama is a personification of a phenomenon in the United States today centred around a desire for change, in recognition that the 'old ways' are no longer sustainable. His rhetoric centred around urgency of the 'now' has resonated across the spectrum. The failure of the occupation of Iraq has led many Americans to question the policy of preventive intervention, or even peace through overwhelming military superiority; the economic and monetary insecurity experienced by many in the US has led to a disillusionment with unbridled consumption; and a growing perception of nuclear proliferation, along with the fear of nuclear terrorism has led to an important renaissance in demands that the US lead in moves towards global nuclear disarmament – only this time those demands are coming from hard-nosed realists from the very heart of previous US regimes. The motives are varied, the message the same. George Shultz and Henry Kissinger are not known as doves in the United States, but their call, alongside a majority of former Secretaries of State and Defense, that the US engage seriously with other nuclear weapon states to build trust and move towards a nuclear weapon free world, is expressed with urgency. If the nuclear weapon states fail to respond, the NPT bargain will continue to fray at the edges, technologies leak (and not just to Iran), and the probability of the use of nuclear weapons rise, along with the possibilities that terrorists might yet get their hands on a warhead. The key concern for many of these individuals, formerly at the top of the US security and nuclear weapon decision-making structures, is that the likelihood of use has started to stack heavily against the United States and its allies.

The advocates have started a movement involving elite individuals, NGOs, and governments, to promote the vision, along with the steps necessary to get there. Some may dismiss this as a publicity stunt. Even if this were the case, it clearly demonstrates a recognition that nuclear weapon states cannot simply go on ignoring the calls from the majority world to engage in nuclear disarmament, as they have done up to now. But it's more than simply a wish vision – it also involves the establishment of very real steps to move in the right direction, steps like a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, further deep cuts to arsenals, reduced notice-to-fire, and other confidence-building measures, that reduce the likelihood of use and bring us closer to the eventual goal.

It also demands tight and intrusive verification measures to prove the disarmament steps states claim to have made. The British government itself has engaged with the movement. The UK has teamed up with the Norwegian government and the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), and in the words of its Foreign Minister at

the time, Margaret Beckett, is attempting to become a 'disarmament laboratory'.⁴ It has also proposed a transparent P5 technical conference involving nuclear laboratories to discuss verification measures. While these measures can only be the start of the process, they mark a departure from the established P5 policies, a recognition that if non-proliferation objectives are to be realized, they can only go hand-in-hand with disarmament.

Non-proliferation Laboratory – the Global Context

This movement opens up a crucial opportunity for Iran to transform its image in the international community, and hands it an opportunity to play a positive leadership role in the moves towards a nuclear weapon free world. Just as the British government has described itself as a 'disarmament laboratory' in creating a pilot study into the processes necessary for a verification process to establish the disarmament of warheads in the nuclear weapon state, so Iran could establish itself as a 'non-proliferation laboratory'. This would make explicit the grand bargain between non-proliferation and disarmament. Indeed, Iran could actively draw the links between the two in a progressive manner – strengthening further its safeguards and inspections processes as the nuclear weapon states got closer to their own disarmament. This would enable Iran to canvass international support for its position and to apply real (not simply rhetorical) pressure on the nuclear weapon states to move forward towards disarmament. A confidence in both non-proliferation and disarmament is necessary to establish the steps towards a nuclear weapon free world. By taking a leadership role in this endeavour with clear common global advantage Iran would achieve a dramatic diplomatic benefit and under-cut hostility towards it. It would also greatly strengthen its hand in international non-proliferation and disarmament negotiations – its position at the 2010 NPT Review Conference would be unassailable. It would also weaken the hand of its opponents in this current dispute, and shift global attention to their failures to observe their disarmament obligations. In a time of shifting power – between states and non-state actors, as well as between states themselves – it would be those governments that seek to abuse their formal positions and attempt to cling to the past that would be seen as the real enemies of peace and stability.

⁴ Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett, in a speech to a conference at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington DC, see:
<http://www.fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/BECKETT%20Carnegie%20Statement%2025.06.07.pdf>