

RUSSIA'S IRAN POLICY AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF TEHRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

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On June 27 this year, when demonstrators took to the streets of Tehran to vent their fury at the official result of the recent parliamentary elections, the foreign secretaries of NATO and their Russian counterpart, Mr Lavrov, decided to resume work in the NATO-Russia Council. NATO's leaders have come to appreciate by now that suspending activities was a mistake; it has become clear that solving security-policy problems is impossible without involving the Russian side.

The West's insecure relations with Russia form part of the heritage of the Cold War. However, the arrival of president Obama opened the door for a new American/Western policy towards Russia. Steps must now be taken through that door; after all, two decades after the fall of the wall the time is more than ripe for analyzing the global threat scenario together and for closing ranks determinedly.

One of the prime concerns of the foreign ministers' meeting in Corfu was the organization of supplies for the 61,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan. At the same time, it is a known fact that the situation in Afghanistan and the Middle East will not calm down before relations between the West and Iran have returned to normal. On the other hand, relations between Russia and Iran are predictable for five reasons: first, Russia has in Iran a stable market for arms, commodities, and nuclear technology. Second, the two countries share regional interests in the Caspian Sea. Third, Moscow views Tehran as a responsible partner in central Asia. Fourth, Russia is anxious to prevent a resurgence of the former American influence in Iran. And fifth, Moscow's Iran policy forms part of its endeavour to recover its role as a world power.

The basic assumption that underlies Russia's strategy is that Iran is entitled to claim a role as a leading regional power. Consequently, Russia does not oppose Iran's programme to utilise nuclear energy. On the other hand, Moscow would never stand idly by as Iran develops its own nuclear weapons. Although Russia's position is unambiguous, a common Russian-American-European policy towards Iran never stood a chance in the past because Moscow had its own interests in Iran and Washington traditionally refused to negotiate with Tehran directly.

Today, Russia demands that all open questions be resolved at the negotiating table, rejecting any threat of military force. At the same time, the Kremlin is aware that influencing Iran's policy is well-nigh impossible without di-

rect involvement of the USA. Consequently, Moscow did welcome the intention of the new leadership in Washington to join in the talks with Tehran.

It is a virtual certainty that Russia is not interested in another Islamic nuclear power. Early in June 2009, foreign secretary Lavrov declared that the world would have to be sure that Iran's nuclear programme was peaceful without ifs or buts, and that a constructive response by the Iranian leadership was expected. Shortly afterwards, the head of Russia's atomic energy agency stated that it would be inadmissible to have another Islamic nuclear power next to Pakistan, a view which appears to reflect the opinion of the vast majority of the Russian population. Yet Moscow is also aware that it was its own former support of Iran's civilian nuclear programme that helped open Pandora's box. Now, Russia is anxious to cooperate closely with the USA on the Iran question. Having taken stock of the situation, the Russians and the Americans presented a detailed and differentiated report in May of this year in which they described the possible military implications of Tehran's nuclear programme in a manner that does not agree at all with current public speculations.

In concrete terms, the following was established: first, Iran has acquired a stock of enriched uranium since 2008 which, after another enrichment, would probably suffice to construct a nuclear device. Second, there is nothing to indicate at the moment that Iran has already produced and stored weapons-capable material. Third, the country will shortly reach a level of technological capacity that would enable it to manufacture a nuclear warhead. Fourth, Iran has not carried out a nuclear test so far. Fifth, it may be capable of producing a primitive nuclear device within two or three years. And sixth, it would require at least another five years to produce a warhead that could be launched on a rocket. In summary, Russian and American experts agree that Tehran might have a primitive nuclear device by 2010 and a more developed atomic bomb by 2015.

Russia's attitude has changed. As late as the autumn of 2005, the head of Russia's atomic energy agency Rosatom, Mr. Rumyantsev, said that his country understood the attitude of Iran which, as one of the signatory states of the non-proliferation treaty, was perfectly entitled to initiate a nuclear fuel cycle. Russia is more cautious now. When president Ahmadinejad travelled to Yekaterinburg on June 16, i.e. shortly after his controversial re-election, to attend the summit meeting of the Shanghai Organisation for Cooperation (SOC), Russia's president Medvedyev refused to meet him face to face. Instead, the deputy head of the Kremlin administration, Mr. Prikhodko, let it be known that the SOC supported the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Russia's patience appears to be limited whenever higher-priority security interests are at stake.

Russia's policy aims to avoid pushing Tehran into a corner from which the only way out it can see is to build the bomb. At the same time, the Kremlin expects Iran to demonstrate convincingly that the country does not pursue military objectives with its nuclear programme. In concrete terms, Moscow wants the government in Tehran to change its views on sensitive areas like enriching uranium, recycling nuclear fuel, and commissioning a heavy-water reactor. Apparently, the Kremlin is ready to adapt its cooperation projects with Iran to the current situation, excluding any sensitive aspects.

Russia's current top priority is to initiate negotiations between the 5+1 group and Iran. As late as June 21 this year, the Russian foreign ministry declared that it expected Tehran to respond without delay to the proposals on the commencement of negotiations that were made by the group of six, which includes the standing members of the UN Security Council as well as Germany. Basically, the Russians want to return to the status before 2003 when the UN had not yet made any relevant resolutions on Iran. The intention is to let Iran go on with its nuclear programme, uranium enrichment included, while expecting it in return to agree to having its nuclear activities inspected comprehensively by the IAEA. Besides, it is hoped that president Obama's publicly stated readiness to enter into a dialogue with Tehran will not remain wholly without effect.

Russia's Iran policy is now at a crossroads. However, the group of six is similarly under pressure to succeed: should it prove impossible to persuade Iran to climb down any time soon, escalation may be the result. It is well known that in an emergency, Israel would destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, and Washington would not leave its ally in the lurch. If such a situation should come about, the consequences for the Middle East as well as for the order of the entire world would be disastrous.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 5-6/2009, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p. 153-156