

## **The EU Needs a U.S. Input on Iran**

*By Volker Perthes*

Cooperation between the European Union and the United States to resolve the nuclear threat posed by Iran is unusual in that Europe has for once adopted a proactive approach, rather than limiting itself to supporting or criticizing American policies, and that Washington has accepted that Europeans define their own approach. One reason why Transatlantic collaboration on Iran is easier than in other policy areas is that the United States and the European Union share a common goal, namely to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, an aim also approved by the United Nations and its nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna.

Another factor is wide agreement within the European Union over the best course to follow with regard to Iran, in contrast, for example, to the rifts between EU governments over Iraq. In dealing with Iran, the other EU member states have accepted that the so-called EU-3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) should take the initiative, working together with Javier Solana, High Representative for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. The early involvement of Mr. Solana, on behalf of the Union as a whole, has made it easier for the other member states to endorse diplomatic activity by the EU-3, as has the more general view in European capitals that the approach is constructive and reflects the broader EU viewpoint.

At first, however, the United States was skeptical of the European approach, and only belatedly decided to support the EU initiative publicly in the spring of

2005. That may have been too late. The Europeans could arguably have made much more progress with Iran if they had had the wholehearted, open support of the Bush administration at an earlier stage. Although there have recently been attempts to revive them, the negotiations were suspended in August 2005, when the Iranian government rejected a European proposal and decided to re-start uranium conversion (a precursor to enrichment) at a plant in Isfahan.

The European Union began direct negotiations with Tehran in 2003, offering economic and technological cooperation if Iran gave up nuclear enrichment and other activities aimed at closing the nuclear fuel cycle. In October 2003, Iran agreed to suspend such programs as long as serious negotiations were under way for a final agreement. The Europeans acknowledged Iran's right, as a sovereign state and a signatory of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to operate peaceful nuclear programs. Given, however, 18 years of concealed nuclear activities by the Iranian government, the Europeans made clear that without a voluntary decision to abandon enrichment they could not trust Iran to refrain from using its nuclear program for military purposes in the future.

In Iran, European negotiators have had to deal with a quite self-confident counterpart. The regime in Tehran owes its stability to a degree of pluralism that may be small by Western standards, but is greater than that of a number of other regimes in the region. European and American experts thought that Iran was on a straight course towards liberalization after the unexpected victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential elections of May 1997. That, however, was followed by a backlash when Iranian "neo-conservatives" (as they describe

themselves) won the parliamentary elections of 2004 and the presidential election of 2005.

There is perhaps only one positive spin that can be put on the performance of President Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad during his first months in office, not least his unacceptable utterances on Israel. This is that he is as little in charge of foreign and security policies as was his predecessor, President Khatami. While Western commentators regretted that "unelected officials" blocked President Khatami's freedom of maneuver, they may now be quite happy that the same also applies to his successor.

In approaching the international community, the Iranian elite agree on three goals. First, they want to achieve economic and technical progress, and they clearly want to master nuclear energy as other advanced nations have done. Second, they want Iran to be accepted as a regional great power. Whether that desire stems from national pride, or a quest for influence and prestige, it is certainly not limited to the country's leadership. Many Iranians share the same ambition. Third, Iran wants security, which, for the political elite, includes the security of the regime as well as that of the nation.

Iranian leaders certainly do not want to be international pariahs. President Ahmadi-Nejad may toy with the idea that it is better to have many enemies than only a few, but not even Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, seems to share this view. The Iranian leadership also does not want the country to be dragged before the UN Security Council, as the United States and other Western countries have threatened. Iranian leaders were shocked that, during the IAEA meeting in Vienna in September 2005, only Venezuela stood up for them.

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India voted for a European-drafted resolution condemning Iran for non-compliance with the NPT. China abstained, in a gesture that was rightly understood as a polite Chinese way of telling the Iranians that they will not be able to rely on Beijing's support if they do not seek an internationally acceptable agreement with the Europeans. Whoever the country's president may be, Iran does not want to stand alone in the world, and thus has a strong interest in resuming the talks with the EU-3.

From a European perspective, it is also clear that the talks will have to begin again at some point. The Bush administration shares this view, if only because Washington has realized that what has been accomplished so far is not so bad compared to the alternatives. The Iranian enrichment program has in practice been frozen over the last two years; IAEA inspectors are in place, with better access to facilities in Iran than they ever had in the past; and estimates of the time it would take Iran to acquire the bomb if it resumed its nuclear program now extend to at least ten years, rather than three or five years previously.

It would be of little use, however, simply to repeat previous negotiations. To achieve success, we may have to adapt the negotiating format and put forward new ideas to entice an Iranian elite that is so focused on technology and prestige.

As for the format, it might be wise to associate Russia and perhaps South Africa with the talks. Both states have credibility with Iran. South Africa voluntarily decided to give up the option of a military nuclear capability, and Russia is the main international partner in Iran's civilian nuclear program. The EU-3 plus Russia, and perhaps South Africa, could constitute a contact group for Iran with broad international support. It might

even be possible to arrange a UN Security Council mandate for Iran and such a contact group to work together to resolve the issue.

On the technological front, the Europeans could suggest a multilateral approach under which Iran would be a partner in nuclear research and production, but enrichment and the closure of the fuel cycle would not take place under exclusive Iranian sovereignty or on Iranian soil. A recent proposal by Russia and the EU-3, which has also been approved by the Bush administration, is a step in this direction. The proposal concedes Iran the right to restricted nuclear activities, but implies a "voluntary" shift of Iranian enrichment to Russian territory. Despite Iran's initial rejection of the idea, it may well serve as a basis for further talks.

Europe has the means to respond to Iran's first two goals: economic and technological progress, and recognition as a major player in the Middle East. The European Union can make creative offers allowing Iranian scientists to participate in international research programs, enter serious negotiations on a trade and cooperation agreement and conduct an enhanced political dialogue with Tehran. But the European Union has no response to Iran's third objective, the quest for security.

The negotiations will not, therefore, achieve any sustainable result unless the United States participates directly or indirectly in resolving the security question. The EU-3 made a good try, in their offer of August 2005, by declaring their readiness to guarantee that Iran would not be attacked by French or British nuclear weapons. Iran, however, is worried not by European but by American arms. Those concerns are heightened by fears that Washington's

agenda might still include forced regime change in Tehran and by the fact that Iran is surrounded by U.S. troops and American allies.

The prospect of some form of explicit or implicit American security guarantees would greatly help to bring a new round of EU-Iranian negotiations to a successful conclusion. Washington would not be asked to promise or guarantee more than it did to North Korea, which was assured in writing in September that the United States had no intention of attacking or invading North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons. The Iranian government is certainly not more of a rogue regime than that of North Korea.

Finally, there is a strong need to work toward some form of regional security arrangement for the Gulf area. This could start with a series of informal talks and gradually develop into a forum involving countries of the region as well as those that have troops or strong stakes there. Ideally, something like a Persian Gulf Stability Pact would emerge – a multilateral arrangement built on the experience of the largely EU-sponsored Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. If regional security issues, including proliferation, are not tackled in a multilateral framework, there will soon be more challenges to deal with than just the nuclear problem of Iran.

As for the European Union, the activities of the EU-3 show that member states have succeeded in learning some lessons from the foreign policy crisis that

split the Union over the Iraq war. It is now clear that, if the stakes are high, any consensual European approach must at least include the UK and France. The EU-3 countries have no intention of forming a European *directoire*, a leading group of only a limited number of countries. Nor is the practice of involving only a few governments in conflict resolution particularly new. In the enlarged 25-nation European Union, it is even more likely that specific combinations of countries will take on tasks in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, particularly in areas where they have special interests, expertise, and contacts. Poland and Lithuania, for instance, in coordination with Mr. Solana, played a lead role in defusing the crisis in Ukraine in the fall of 2004.

Such flexible, issue-specific leadership can pool the resources and comparative advantages of individual EU countries to create a more effective European policy. International partners, such as Iran and the United States, may be comfortable with such a format – so long as there is no doubt that the task group concerned speaks for the Union as a whole. This supple format will certainly be adapted, but not disappear, if and when an EU foreign minister and a European diplomatic service come into being. □

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