

The case for a different policy on Iran

by Paul Schäfer and Jerry Sommer

“In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed.”¹

Jay Rockefeller, Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, speaking at the unveiling of an inquiry report on pre-war Iraq intelligence on 5 June 2008

Barack Obama has now been in office for more than a year, and yet, as far as his policy on Iran is concerned, there is much to remind one of his predecessor. Opportunities for diplomatic compromise are still being insufficiently explored because of the desire to enforce maximalist positions. This applies not only to the proposal that Iran swap its low-enriched uranium for fuel rods to be used in the Tehran research reactor, where isotopes are manufactured for medical purposes, but also to the far more critical issue of Iran’s uranium enrichment in general. Instead, tougher sanctions are on the agenda, and attempts are made to have them implemented, either through the UN Security Council or through the ‘coalition of the willing’ – and the military option is being kept explicitly open. The advocates of such a military attack are starting to beat their drums more loudly again.

Sadly, all of this was foreseeable, because neither the Obama Administration nor the international community has effected a real change of strategy. There has been a different rhetoric but not a different policy. That is not enough to offer a way out of the impasse in the dispute over Iran’s nuclear policy. Moreover, the continuation of the previous policy of sanctions and threats of military strikes is not only prolonging the deadlock; it is also heightening tensions with Iran and throughout the wider Middle East. At the same time, it is threatening to damage the democratic opposition in Iran, which is speaking out against the suppression of free speech and freedom of assembly and against government despotism.

What is needed is a policy based not on ideological obsession but on reality.

1. New negotiations: fuel rods for the Tehran research reactor

In February, Iran started to upgrade its low-enriched 3.5% uranium to an enrichment of 19.75% at its pilot fuel-enrichment plant in Natanz. This enrichment level is required for the manufacture of fuel rods for the small research reactor in Tehran, where medical isotopes are manufactured for the treatment of 850,000 Iranian cancer patients. Uranium enriched to a level of 19.75% is still far from weapons-grade uranium, for which more than 90% enrichment is required. It does provide a basis, however, for Iran to obtain the know-how to achieve higher enrichment levels. Besides, should Iran choose not to convert its 19.75%-enriched uranium into fuel rods for the research reactor, it would also have better raw material for the production of a nuclear bomb.

In order to preclude the potential acquisition of these capabilities and thereby allay widespread concerns about the possible existence of an Iranian nuclear weapons

¹ Quoted from CNN, 5 June 2008: [Senate report slams Bush over prewar intelligence](#)

programme, it would be best if Iran did not enrich any uranium to 19.75% or discontinued any such enrichment activity as soon as possible.

High-ranking representatives of Iran have repeatedly declared that they are prepared to purchase fuel rods or, alternatively, to swap the fuel rods required by Iran for its own 3.5%-enriched uranium. On 16 February 2010, for example, the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, stated that “We are prepared to do a fuel exchange in a fair framework”.

Iran’s readiness to do this should elicit an immediate response, and negotiations should be conducted flexibly and in good faith to find a compromise. Any attempt, on the other hand, simply to force Iran to toe the line and accept the swap plan proposed by the Secretary-General of the IAEA and devised by Russia, France and the United States would be counterproductive. While US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stated that “The door is open for negotiation. We never slammed it shut”,² the United States and its Western allies have been refusing for months even to discuss Iran’s wishes for amendments to the IAEA swap plan. This is tantamount to a neo-colonialist-style attempt by the West to force Iran to bow to its dictates. Barack Obama’s statement that the United States is “willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect”³ is diametrically opposed to such a stubborn stance. Such a stance, moreover, is unrealistic as well as being unwarranted in the light of the facts.

In Geneva on 1 October 2009, at the first talks to be held for some considerable time between Iran and the group known as P5+1, comprising the United States, Russia, China, France and Britain as well as Germany, the exchange of low-enriched (3.5%) uranium from Iran for the fuel rods needed for the research reactor was agreed ‘in principle’.

At the subsequent detailed negotiations held under the auspices of the IAEA between Iran on the one hand and Russia, France and the United States on the other, however, no agreement was reached. The IAEA presented a plan prepared by Russia, France and the United States under which Iran would first export 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium to Russia. Russia would then supply France with 19.75%-enriched uranium for the fabrication of fuel rods. These fuel rods would then be taken to Tehran, about nine to twelve months after Iran had exported its low-enriched uranium from Iran.

At the Geneva negotiations, the Iranian representative had called for the simultaneous exchange of low-enriched uranium and fuel rods, presumably without entirely rejecting the IAEA plan. Thereafter, the Iranian Government came under heavy political pressure at home for its allegedly ‘soft’ stance. Leading reformist politicians like Mir Hossein Mousavi and President Ahmadinejad’s critics from the conservative camp both condemned what they saw as the Government’s willingness to agree to the IAEA plan. Mousavi, for example, declared emotionally that the IAEA plan would cast aside all the efforts of thousands of Iranian scientists.

The reformers were no doubt concerned that an agreement between Iran and the international community which defused the tense global situation could serve President Ahmadinejad’s political purposes domestically and therefore harm the opposition. At the same time, however, the critics objected that the IAEA plan, by

² Hillary Clinton in Brazil, quoted in AP News on 3 March 2010: [Brazil rebuffs US, says it will go own way on Iran](#)

³ [Barack Obama, speech in Cairo on 3 June 2009](#)

requiring Iran to make the first move, offered absolutely no guarantees that the fuel rods would actually be delivered. This concern was shared by the Government, and indeed not without good reason, for neither France nor the United States had fulfilled their previous obligations to supply nuclear material. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton only recently spoke out once more against the commissioning of the Russian-built nuclear power station in Bushehr. Moreover, even before October and again during that month, both the United States and France were pressing for tough new sanctions against Iran. This raised fears in Tehran that the supply of fuel rods could fall victim to future sanctions. Another source of suspicion was Russia's conduct in connection with the building of the Bushehr nuclear power station, the commissioning of which has been repeatedly postponed, presumably for political reasons too.

In the meantime, Iran's leaders have managed to adopt – or return to – a line that seems to be politically acceptable within the country. The condition they are stipulating for swapping low-enriched uranium for fuel rods is that the exchange be made “simultaneously in one package or several packages in the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran”.⁴ They also propose that the IAEA could take control of 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium then seal it and monitor it 24 hours a day.⁵

The reason given by the United States – and France and Germany too – for their rejection of this proposal is that the 1,200 kg of low-enriched uranium would not be initially exported out of Iran. This would give Iran the opportunity to produce highly enriched uranium for a nuclear bomb at any time, an opportunity it was supposed to be denied, at least temporarily. The fact is that the payload of single nuclear warhead requires about 1,400 kg of low-enriched uranium as raw material. Iran possessed about 1,800 kg of low-enriched uranium last October and about 2,050 kg in February of this year.

The IAEA plan undoubtedly has the advantage that Iran would not have enough enriched uranium available for a certain period, should it actually wish to enrich it to weapons grade. First of all, however, the period in question is relatively short – it would not take more than three to six months for Tehran to reach the 1,400-kg threshold again. Secondly, even assuming that Iran really does want a nuclear bomb, it is extremely unlikely that it would take such a step with a volume of fissile material that only sufficed for one to two warheads. It is far more likely that Iran would wait until it had much more enriched uranium available for a nuclear breakout.

The perceived benefits of the IAEA plan to which the United States is clinging stubbornly are far outweighed by the disadvantage that, in the absence of a swap deal, Iran will carry out its own enrichment to 19.75%, thereby taking another technological step towards the bomb. This is why negotiations with Iran should be initiated immediately, particularly if there is genuine concern about an Iranian desire to possess nuclear weapons. Russia and China also believe that diplomatic means of resolving this issue have not yet been fully exhausted. Even acceptance of the Iranian swap plan would be better than continuing to let matters drift. The community of nations should make but one condition, namely that the 19.75%-enriched uranium which has been produced in Iran since the start of February should be included in its

⁴ [Letter of 18 February 2010 to the Director-General of the IAEA from the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the IAEA in Vienna](#)

⁵ See [Remarks made by Ali Akbar Salehi, head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Authority, on 17 March 2010, as quoted in the *Tehran Times* of 18 March 2010](#)

entirety in the swap. It is already under constant IAEA supervision in any case, just like the low-enriched uranium.

2. Sanctions: at best ineffectual, at worst destructive

The UN sanctions against Iran to date have chiefly prohibited exports to Iran of goods that are needed for activities relating to nuclear weapons and to the development of missiles. It is for this reason that a number of individuals and companies involved in such activities have been banned from travelling abroad and have had their bank accounts frozen. The United States, backed by Britain, France and Germany, is now planning to have more extensive sanctions against Iran adopted by the UN Security Council or agreed by a 'coalition of the willing'. "I think it's only after we pass sanctions in the Security Council that Iran will negotiate in good faith"⁶ was how Hillary Clinton explained this position.

The first question to be asked is what Mrs Clinton would regard as proof of Iranian good faith. On the issue of the exchange of Iran's low-enriched uranium for fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor, the criterion appears to be whether Iran adopts the IAEA proposal unconditionally. With regard to the far more crucial issue of uranium enrichment in Iran, Mrs Clinton also seems to have set the bar very high. In this case, her test of good faith is probably whether Iran is prepared to halt its enrichment of uranium as the UN Security Council resolutions demand.

Are these objectives achievable by means of additional sanctions, whatever these may be? That seems extremely unlikely, especially as regards the basic demand that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment. The internal resistance last October to the IAEA plan for a nuclear swap is sufficiently clear evidence. The overwhelming majority of the Iranian elite, including reformist politicians like Mir Hossein Mousavi, reject any suspension of uranium enrichment. The enrichment has become a symbol of Iran's technological progress, international prestige and national independence. In polls, an overwhelming majority of Iranians expresses support for uranium enrichment. For that reason alone, the hopes cherished by some Western politicians that more sanctions could encourage a change of government and thus put an end to the nuclear dispute are entirely unrealistic. On the contrary, new sanctions could probably be put to good effect by members of the government in Tehran to strengthen their own position by alluding to external attacks and by curtailing the freedom of the democratic opposition.

Another point to consider is that the reform movement in Iran has spoken out clearly against further sanctions and against a military attack on Iran. Back in September of last year, opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi condemned sanctions because they would "impose agonies on a nation who suffers enough from miserable statesmen".⁷ Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi also warned against sanctions, saying "We oppose military attack on Iran or economic sanctions because that's to the detriment of the people".⁸ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, the first President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

⁶ Hillary Clinton in Brazil, quoted in AP News on 3 March 2010: [Brazil rebuffs US, says it will go own way on Iran](#)

⁷ As quoted at <http://wonkroom.thinkprogress.org/2010/02/16/gas-sanctions-would-hurt-goal-of-targeting-irans-revolutionary-guards/>

⁸ Quoted in the BBC News of 4 March 2010; http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/8549183.stm

after the 1979 revolution, who now lives in exile near Paris, assessed the situation as follows: “Sanctions will be counterproductive because the threat of international crisis is the Iranian regime’s only remaining resource for legitimizing its despotic power”.⁹

Moreover, the advocates of sanctions in the Western countries are in disagreement among themselves. At the beginning of last year, Hillary Clinton called for ‘crippling’ sanctions if Iran did not halt its enrichment of uranium. While the Israeli Government and conservative hardliners in the West adhere to this goal, the US Administration, at least in its public statements, has long switched over – or back – to ‘smart’ sanctions, which it is trying to have adopted by the UN. These would allegedly spare the population and be targeted primarily at the Revolutionary Guards, as the latter are blamed for both the nuclear programme and the repression of the opposition. However, since the Revolutionary Guard Corps, with numerous enterprises under its ownership – ranging from the company building the Tehran metro to the operators of airports and seaports, accounts for a large slice of the Iranian economy, sanctions against the Revolutionary Guards which do not affect the population are scarcely conceivable.

In any case, it is extremely doubtful whether the sanctions currently under discussion would have any significant impact. For example, travel bans and the freezing of bank deposits of more leading members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps are envisaged, but no one knows whether these individuals actually have foreign bank accounts and, if so, under what names the accounts are held. Similarly, the mooted prohibition of transactions with certain Iranian banks or measures making it more difficult to obtain transport and insurance for Iran’s exports and imports are likely to have a marginal economic impact at best. The more difficult procurement conditions would certainly make imported goods and services more expensive for Iran, but the country’s strategic position, its large oil and gas reserves and its intensive and expanding trade contacts in the Middle East and with Pakistan, India, Malaysia, China and Russia make it impossible to isolate.

Accordingly, and thanks to several decades’ experience of embargoes, Iran has ample means of circumventing or counterbalancing sanctions. This scope will be all the wider if the sanctions are not imposed globally by the UN but by a ‘coalition of the willing’.

The chances of tough sanctions being adopted in the UN Security Council are every bit as slim as the prospects of bringing Iran to heel with new sanctions. China and Russia are sceptical as to whether sanctions can be effective at all. Although Russia’s President has not rejected additional sanctions in principle if Iran fails to cooperate with the IAEA, his support was conditional. “The sanctions must be balanced and wise”, he said; “they should not be aimed against civilians”.¹⁰ His Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, was more specific, expressing clear opposition to ‘crippling’ sanctions. “If we approve sanctions, we shall not go beyond our aim of defending the non-proliferation regime. We do not want measures to be taken using the pretext of violating the non-proliferation regime that are aimed at other kinds of

⁹ Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, ‘To bash them is to help them’ in the *International Herald Tribune* of 10 March 2010

¹⁰ Quoted by RIA Novosti on 1 March 2010: ‘Iran sanctions possible, should be wise, balanced – Medvedev’; <http://en.rian.ru/world/20100301/158056916.html>

goals, including the goal of 'strangling Iran,' measures that would really worsen the humanitarian situation, the state of the population".¹¹

Brazil, currently a member of the UN Security Council, has also been voicing opposition to sanctions. "It is not prudent to push Iran against a wall", declared President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. His Foreign Minister, Celso Amorim, added that, in Brazil's view, sanctions were generally counterproductive.¹²

In view of these comments, if the UN approves further sanctions at all, they are likely to be primarily symbolic, like the present ones. Tougher sanctions imposed by a 'coalition of the willing', as some have advocated, including German politicians such as Philipp Missfelder, foreign-policy spokesman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag,¹³ will probably hit industry in the countries applying the sanctions too but will likewise fail to have a major economic effect or indeed make any political waves in Tehran. At best they would be no more than a policy of symbolism, designed chiefly to create the impression of a hard line against Iran for domestic consumption.

At the same time, further UN or unilateral sanctions will also close off opportunities for a diplomatic agreement and enhance the domestic standing of hardliners in both Tehran and Washington. The fact is that the predictable failure of such sanctions will inevitably be used by the hawks in the United States as an argument to press home the case for a military strike against Iran. The conclusion to be drawn from all these points is that it would be best to refrain from further sanctions against Iran.

3. The Iranian threat and the danger of exaggeration and misreporting

"Iran wants a nuclear bomb", Western politicians are quoted as saying almost daily, and the mass media strike the same tone. The evidence, however, is by no means so clear-cut. Experience of the false and sometimes falsified justifications for the US invasion of Iraq shows that it would be wrong to make another rash judgement.

The possibility that Iran's leaders have been striving to obtain nuclear weapons for many years cannot, of course, be discounted. In view of the fact that the United States, which is the dominant military power in the wider Middle East and indeed the world, regards Iran as an enemy and constantly threatens it with a military strike, it is certainly possible to find security reasons for Iran to aspire to the possession of nuclear arms. This is made all the more plausible by the different ways in which the United States deals with other hostile nations – waging war on Iraq and Afghanistan, which have no nuclear weapons material, but no attacks or threats of attack against North Korea, which possesses weapons-grade material. There are some among the radical conservatives in Iran who support an Iranian nuclear bomb as the best protection against the United States.¹⁴ Likewise, opinion polls indicate that about

¹¹ Cf. RIA Novosti, 25 February 2010: *Russia's Lavrov says no proof Iran working on nuclear weapons*, at <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100225/158000894.html>

¹² Quoted from AP News of 3 March 2010: *Brazil rebuffs US, says it will go own way on Iran*; see footnote 2 above

¹³ Quoted in the *Rheinische Merkur* of 25 March 2010

¹⁴ For example, on 12 February 2010, the arch-conservative newspaper *Keyhan* suggested that it would be advisable "to plan for acquiring the knowledge and the ability to produce nuclear weapons

50% of Iranians regard the development of a nuclear bomb as an ‘important’ or ‘very important’ long-term goal for Iran.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Iranian leaders have repeatedly stated that they do not aspire to possess nuclear weapons, citing some cogent reasons which should at least be acknowledged. One reason is that nuclear weapons are incompatible with Islam because they kill masses of innocent people. This is why, back in 2004, the Supreme Spiritual Leader and head of state, Ayatollah Khamenei, proclaimed a *fatwa* against nuclear arms. Reasons of political strategy are also advanced. The security of Iran would not be increased by its possession of nuclear weapons, because “If we possessed nuclear weapons, an arms race would begin in the region”, to quote Ali Larijani, then Secretary of the Iranian National Security Council and now Speaker of the Iranian Parliament.¹⁶

It is also possible to find reasons for many of the specific measures taken by the Iranian Government with regard to the nuclear programme other than that of a desire to obtain nuclear weapons. For example, the aim of establishing an independent national uranium-enrichment capacity to supply 20 planned nuclear power stations seems entirely rational in the light of years of successful efforts on the part of the United States to prevent other countries from engaging in nuclear cooperation with Iran and of the chequered history of Tehran’s nuclear partnership with Russia. The fact that Iran spent a long time concealing nuclear activities which were perfectly legal under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as in the period prior to the commissioning of the uranium-enrichment facility in Natanz, has aroused justifiable suspicion, yet such secrecy could be rooted in the fact that Iran saw no other way to develop civilian nuclear technology in view of US policy and US sanctions.

The so-called facts that are often used as evidence for an Iranian desire to obtain nuclear weapons turn out on closer inspection to be far less conclusive than they are portrayed. For example, US President Barack Obama, together with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, presented the construction of an underground uranium-enrichment facility near Qom, which Iran had not disclosed publicly until last September, as unequivocal evidence of Iran’s intention to build nuclear weapons. In the words of President Obama, “The size and configuration of this facility is inconsistent with a peaceful programme”.¹⁷ The Iranian Government contradicted this assertion, stating that the facility had been built in order to enable Iran to safeguard its technological capacity for uranium enrichment in the event of a military attack on the enrichment installations in Natanz. Five months later, US Director of Intelligence Dennis Blair distanced himself from the apodictic certainty of Obama’s statement, declaring before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that “It is unclear to us whether Iran’s motivations for building this facility go beyond its publicly claimed intent to preserve enrichment know-how if attacked”.¹⁸

which are necessary for the preparation of the next phase in the future battlefield.” Quoted in Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran*, New York, 2006, p. 150

¹⁵ See the [results of a new nationwide public opinion survey of Iran before the presidential elections of 12 June 2009](#); the survey was conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow – the Center for Public Opinion (TFT), the New America Foundation, and KA Europe SPRL

¹⁶ Ali Larijani, interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of 12 February 2007

¹⁷ [Statements by Obama, Sarkozy and Brown on Iran’s Nuclear Facility](#), Pittsburgh, 25 September 2009

¹⁸ Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, 2 February 2010: [Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#), p. 13

The report presented in February 2010 by the new Director General of the IAEA, Yukiya Amano and often hyped up by the media¹⁹ contains no evidence, and most certainly no fresh evidence – contrary to frequent media assertions – of Iranian work on nuclear warheads. In fact, the report, like the IAEA reports of previous years, raises questions that the IAEA has long been asking Iran regarding possible military implications of Iranian activities. The only new feature, apart from the new man at the helm of the IAEA, is the formula that some of the activities which had been giving the IAEA cause for concern “seem to have continued beyond 2004”.²⁰

Neither the IAEA nor the media have presented evidence for this assumption, which contradicts the assessment made by the US intelligence services 2007 and never retracted that Iran had discontinued its specific nuclear weapons-related activities in 2003.

This assumption could be partly based on information and ‘analyses’ from the German Federal Intelligence Service BND, which expressed the view back in 2008, in connection with judicial proceedings in Frankfurt am Main concerning illegal exports to Iran, that the Iranians were continuing their activities relating specifically to nuclear weapons. The Higher Administrative Court in Frankfurt, it must be said, found the remarks of the Federal Intelligence Service “extremely vague”.²¹ The secret papers that were subsequently submitted to the court by the BND, in so far as their substance was communicated by the judiciary, seem to have contained no more than circumstantial evidence of supposed nuclear-related Iranian procurements of dual-use goods beyond 2003 and comparisons of Iran’s procurement activities with those of Pakistan and North Korea.²² One indication of the extent to which this alleged evidence is open to interpretation or challenge is the fact that the US intelligence services have never confirmed it.

Most indications of Iranian activities relating specifically to nuclear weapons are derived from what are known as the ‘alleged studies’. These are documents that were reportedly leaked to the BND by an Iranian nuclear scientist and were then passed on to the IAEA through the United States. Iran describes all of these ‘studies’, which relate only to the period up to 2003, as fakes. Whether or not this is true is impossible to judge. Be that as it may, there would seem to be good reason for scepticism about the authenticity of these ‘studies’. For years, the US Administration asserted that it had received a laptop containing these studies but never produced the laptop for an authenticity check. The laptop story has subsequently been exposed as misinformation. The tale is now that the ‘studies’ were smuggled out of Iran by the wife of an Iranian nuclear scientist and BND agent, who has since died, and were passed on to the US intelligence services through the BND.²³ Although the fact that the CIA and BND misled the international public for years is not conclusive proof that the documents are fakes, it certainly undermines their credibility. There are

¹⁹ Some commentators have been critical of the media in analyses such as Peter Casey, [Read the IAEA Reports on Iran](#), 28 February 2010, and Walter van Rossum, *Die Politik des Verdachts* (‘The politics of suspicion’) on the *Politikum* programme of 1 March 2010 on WDR-5 radio

²⁰ IAEA, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1835 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, [Report by the Director General, GOV/2010/10, 18 February 2010](#), p. 9

²¹ Quoted from Oliver Meier, 29 July 2009: [Iran Weaponization Intel: A Cautionary Note](#)

²² *ibid.*

²³ See ISIS report of 2 October 2009: [Excerpts from Internal IAEA Document on Alleged Iranian Nuclear Weaponization](#)

also numerous logical inconsistencies in these 'studies', inasmuch as their content has entered the public domain.²⁴

There can be no doubt that a number of questions about Iranian activities relating specifically to nuclear weapons remain unanswered. Iran should improve its cooperation with the IAEA on these questions as a matter of urgency. None the less, it is essential to be wary of one-sided interpretations and exaggerated risk assessments.

It should be borne in mind that all declared nuclear facilities in Iran – the uranium-enrichment installations in Natanz, the Bushehr reactor, etc. – are under the supervision of the IAEA. Nowhere has there been any reference to undeclared facilities in which activities such as uranium enrichment could take place. In view of the satellite-based reconnaissance capabilities of Western intelligence services, their existence surely could not remain undetected. Should Iran want to produce highly enriched, weapons-grade uranium, it could not do so without being immediately found out or attracting suspicion beforehand by expelling the IAEA inspectors. Even if Iran were now to take a decision to that effect, according to comments made in February 2010 by US Director of Intelligence Dennis Blair, it would take some time to implement. "Iran", he said, "is technically capable of producing enough HEU for a weapon in the next few years".²⁵

In order to arrive at a realistic picture, it is essential to take account of the following assessments, which contradict the alarmist interpretations:

- The threat perception in Russia and China differs from that in the United States. As recently as February 2010, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated the view that "There is no evidence that Iran has taken a decision to produce nuclear weapons".²⁶

- In October 2009, when he was still Director General of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei made the following assessment: "We have no evidence that Iran is actually working to build a bomb. [...] In my opinion, the threat from the Iranian nuclear programme has been overdramatised. I do not believe that we shall wake up tomorrow and notice that Iran possesses a nuclear weapon".²⁷

- Dennis Blair, the US Director of Intelligence, also assumes that Iran has not yet taken a decision in favour of nuclear weapons. In February 2010, he said that "We continue to assess Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons in part by developing various nuclear capabilities that bring it closer to being able to produce such weapons [...]. We do not know, however, if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons. [...] We continue to judge Iran's nuclear decision making

²⁴ See Gareth Porter, [Documents linking Iran to nuclear weapons push may have been fabricated](#), 10 November 2008

²⁵ Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, 2 February 2010, [Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#), p. 13

²⁶ Cf. RIA Novosti, 25 February 2010: [Russia's Lavrov says no proof Iran working on nuclear weapons](#)

²⁷ Interview with Mohamed ElBaradei in *Die Presse*: [ElBaradei: "Gefahr einer Atomexplosion wurde größer"](#), long version, 17 October 2009

is guided by a cost-benefit approach, which offers the international community opportunities to influence Tehran".²⁸

It is possible that Iran, while striving to acquire the technological basis for the construction of a nuclear bomb, particularly the capacity to enrich uranium, does not have the intention of crossing the 'red line' and actually manufacturing nuclear weapons. In this case, the art of politics, in the words of Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University, who served as Assistant Secretary of Defence in the Clinton Administration, would consist in persuading the Iranians "that they would be better off following the example of Japan. The Japanese have the technology to build a nuclear weapon. But they decided it is too costly to be a nuclear power and not very useful for enhancing prosperity".²⁹

4. A military strike, deterrence or containment and the dangers lurking in each

In the United States, the number of voices arguing for a military strike against Iran is on the increase again. Officially, moreover, the Obama Administration stresses time and again that all options are 'on the table'. Yet it seems that there are no serious attempts, at least for the time being, on the part of either the US Administration and military or the United States' Western allies to pursue the option of a military strike, which Russia, China and other countries flatly reject in any case.

The underlying reason is not only the fact that the United States is currently involved in two wars and has no wish to open another military – and political – front, at least for the duration of these wars; there has also been a widespread realisation that an attack on Iran or on the Iranian nuclear facilities would bring only minimal gains and would have major adverse repercussions.

The Iranian nuclear programme could no doubt be delayed for a few years, but it is fair to assume that forces would then come to the fore in Iran who craved an Iranian nuclear bomb in double-quick time. By the same token, Iran could be expected to launch military counterstrikes in the region against US installations and against Israel and to close the Straits of Hormuz. Hundreds of thousands of casualties would be the direct result. But the world economy would also suffer, because the price of oil could rise and perhaps even double. The international prestige of the United States and of those countries that supported an attack on Iran in breach of international law would sustain deep and lasting damage, especially in the Muslim world. It would complicate any subsequent peace settlement in the Middle East as well as stabilisation processes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even if the attack emanated from Israel alone, it could not be executed without the explicit support of the United States and its allies, which control the region's airspace. To persuade the Israeli Government not to go it alone, the United States need only signal that it would shoot down any Israeli aircraft overflying Iraq or Turkey towards

²⁸ Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence; 2 February 2010: "[Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#)", S. 13.

²⁹ Joseph Nye interview in *Der Spiegel* of 17 August 2010: English version: "[It Is Pointless to Talk to Al-Qaida](#)'

Iran. It would also be politically useful, of course, if the EU or EU Member States were to warn Israel clearly and publicly against an illegal attack on Iran.

In view of the evident 'drawbacks' of a military strike against Iran, deterrence and containment strategies are being discussed more widely as possible 'alternatives' and are already being put into practice to some extent.³⁰

It is undoubtedly true to say that, even if Iran did possess a nuclear bomb, there would be no reason to assume that it would use its bomb for any purpose other than to deter potential aggressors. It is absurd to believe that Tehran would then attack Tel Aviv or even Berlin or Washington with that weapon, for such an attack would be nothing more than suicide. The leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran are not bent on suicide; on the contrary, their supreme goal is to preserve their system. Even Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, who is not regarded by any means as a dove, has reached the same conclusion. "I don't think the Iranians, even if they got the bomb, would drop it in the neighbourhood," said Barak. "They fully understand what might follow. They are radical but not totally crazy. They have a quite sophisticated decision-making process, and they understand reality".³¹

Zbigniew Brzezinski, elder statesman of foreign affairs and former US National Security Adviser, agrees. The Iranians, he says, "may be dangerous, assertive and duplicitous, but there is nothing in their history to suggest they are suicidal".³²

The deterrent effect of both the Israeli and the American nuclear weapons would also apply to a nuclear-armed Iran, just as the US nuclear arsenal deterred far stronger perceived adversaries like the Soviet Union and China. Assertions of a threat to the existence of Israel and the security of the world from an Iranian nuclear bomb are gross exaggerations which are completely divorced from reality. To quote General John Abizaid, commander of US forces in the wider Middle East from 2003 to 2007, "It's my military belief that Iran can be deterred".³³

An equally spurious argument is that a nuclear-armed Iran would necessarily trigger a domino effect in the region in terms of driving other countries to seek their own nuclear weapons. Turkey, often cited as a country that would strive to obtain nuclear weapons in this scenario, although no Turkish voices are known to have expressed such nuclear aspirations, is not only a neighbour maintaining good relations with Iran but is also covered by the US nuclear umbrella as a member of NATO.

Neither Turkey nor the Arab countries of Saudi Arabia and Egypt have launched nuclear-weapons programmes themselves in response to the threat from Israeli nuclear bombs. It is by no means a foregone conclusion that they would perceive an Iranian nuclear bomb as a threat which compelled them to acquire their own nuclear

³⁰ See, for example, James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, ['After Iran Gets the Bomb'](#), in *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2010

³¹ Quoted in AP News on 26 February 2010; Robert Burns, *Israeli defense chief doubts Iran would use a nuclear weapon against Israel*

³² Quoted in the *International Herald Tribune* of 15 March 2010; David E. Sanger, [Containing Tehran in a new nuclear age](#)

³³ Quoted in AP News on 27 October 2009; Robert Burns, [Analysis: US making plans for Iran nuke strategy](#); see also Christoph Bertram, *Partner, nicht Gegner. Für eine andere Iran-Politik*. Edition Körber-Stiftung, Hamburg, 2008

arms. Even if they did feel threatened, they could choose the far cheaper and simpler option of placing themselves under the nuclear umbrella of the United States.

Lastly, the developments in South-East Asia also demonstrate that nuclear proliferation is not inevitable. In that region, North Korea has possessed weapons-grade fissile material for several years without a race to obtain nuclear arms having started in countries such as South Korea and Japan.

For all that, the regional and global political consequences of an Iranian nuclear bomb would, of course, be detrimental, because it would further destabilise an already volatile region. Nevertheless, the disaster scenarios that are frequently painted have no foundation in fact. Their proponents do, however, divert attention with them from a real and realistic search for peaceful solutions.

Nuclear deterrence as a strategic option against a nuclear-armed Iran is still a theoretical flight of fancy at the present time. The fact is that Iran does not possess nuclear weapons and would take years to produce them, even if the Iranian leaders were to take such a decision today. Measures of *conventional* deterrence, on the other hand, have long been under way in the region, with the United States providing state-of-the-art conventional armaments. The modernisation package dates from decisions taken by the Bush Administration to sell 20 billion dollars' worth of weapons systems to Saudi Arabia and the smaller neighbouring Gulf States in the period up to 2017. At the same time, the United States is planning to give Egypt 13 billion dollars' worth of arms and Israel no less than 30 billion dollars' worth in the same period.

The reason given for this arms build-up is the need to respond militarily to a supposedly expansionist Iran. In this way the Arab States could be persuaded not to develop nuclear weapons themselves, and Israel could be 'reassured' and dissuaded from a military strike against Iran.³⁴ To this end, the United States is currently installing weapons systems such as two Patriot anti-missile batteries in each of four countries – Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. There are already US Patriot missiles in Saudi Arabia and Israel. According to US General David Petraeus, United States Aegis cruisers are already being kept on permanent patrol in the Persian Gulf too.³⁵

This military containment strategy against Iran must be perceived in Tehran as proof of aggressive intentions on the part of the United States, because the new US anti-missile systems in the wider Middle East are not designed exclusively for defensive uses. These systems would also be useful if the United States wanted to attack Iran. In that case, they could try to neutralise the counterstrikes that Iran could be expected to launch. Just like the repeated US statement that all options are on the table, the arms build-up in the region must be fuelling Iranian suspicions about the intentions of the United States. It is undermining President Obama's offer of dialogue and seriously harming the prospects of a compromise in the dispute over the nuclear programme.

5. Western policy on Iran and the development of democracy in Iran

The policies of the US Administration and the other Western governments is influenced by their assessment and perception of internal developments in Iran. For

³⁴ See the New York Times of 30 January 2010: David Sanger und Eric Schmitt, [U.S. Speeding Up Missile Defenses in Persian Gulf](#)

³⁵ *ibid.*

decades the United States has been advocating regime change. Events during and after the last Iranian presidential elections in June 2009 made it clear that part of the population in the form of the 'Green Opposition' supports the democratisation of the country. It would be wrong, however, to overlook the fact that overwhelming majority of this opposition are not challenging the principle of an Islamic Republic. Another fact which must not be neglected is that President Ahmadinejad also represents a considerable percentage of the population. Although the Government and the power structure seemed to have been temporarily weakened in the aftermath of the elections in June 2009, and although there are differences of opinion, as was the case before, among the conservatives, Iran is obviously not on the brink of revolution. Ahmadinejad's popular support is too strong, the power structure too close-knit and the opposition too weak for that to happen.³⁶

The restriction and suppression of free speech and freedom of assembly, arbitrary arrests of critics, brutality against demonstrators and the pronouncement of death sentences in Iran must be condemned. It should, however, be the Iranians who decide on the future of their country. The initiation or orchestration of regime change by the United States or other countries, whether by civil or military means, would be neither morally defensible nor effective. By the same token, every measure of overt or covert support for the Iranian opposition will help to strengthen the position of the present rulers in Tehran.

Anyone with an interest in the democratisation of Iran must do everything possible to relax the tension in relations between Iran and the rest of the world. Any deterioration in the country's international relations is liable to result in more anti-democratic measures within Iran and a weakening of the democratic opposition.

US programmes of covert operations, threats of military strikes and further economic sanctions that directly or indirectly affect the population are a gift to the rulers in Tehran and a slap in the face to the democratic opposition. This is precisely why representatives of the Green Opposition movement have flatly rejected sanctions and military strikes.³⁷ Rather than opting for isolation and confrontation, the best way to achieve a political solution to the conflict over the nuclear programme would be through a policy of détente and genuine willingness to engage in dialogue and compromise, especially on the part of the United States. That would also be the best way to support the democratisation of Iran in the medium and long term.

6. Setting realistic goals for nuclear negotiations

- The aim of the community of nations to date has been to have Iran suspend its enrichment of uranium in general. That is what the UN Security Council resolutions demand. It is also reflected in the terms of the 'offer' made to Iran by the six powers – the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany. A suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment has even been imposed as a condition for the opening of negotiations. In spite of Barack Obama's declared willingness to engage in dialogue without prior conditions, nothing has changed: suspension is still the aim of the international community and the prerequisite of negotiations.

³⁶ See Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, '[Another Iranian Revolution? Not Likely](#)', in the *New York Times* of 5 January 2010

³⁷ See chapter 2 above.

Despite many technical problems, on the other hand, the development of the uranium-enrichment facility is advancing. Uranium is being enriched there under the supervision of the IAEA. The Agency has always confirmed that no fissile material has gone missing from the facility or been used for anything but its proper purpose.

Even though it would be better, in view of potential proliferation risks, if no uranium-enrichment facilities and no nuclear reprocessing plants were operated in Iran and in the wider Middle East in general, that aim is no longer attainable. Iran will neither suspend nor abandon its uranium enrichment. It is essential to face up to this reality and to seek suitably realistic second-best solutions. These solutions could offer the international community a high degree of assurance that Iran was not producing any nuclear weapons while guaranteeing Iran the freedom to develop a civilian nuclear programme in accordance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty as well as freeing it from the threat of military attacks.

The *technical* side of this potential compromise could consist in the Iranian nuclear programme taking place under the most comprehensive possible international supervision. In addition to the present supervision of the nuclear facilities by the IAEA, this would certainly require Iran to ratify and apply the Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement, which would give the Agency far-reaching supplementary inspection rights. Iran applied this Additional Protocol voluntarily for a time and has repeatedly declared its willingness to ratify it when the political conditions are right.

In addition, there is a need to aim for a situation in which Iran operates its uranium-enrichment facilities in the framework of an international consortium rather than under purely national sovereignty as has hitherto been the case, because such a model would entail additional technical hurdles and/or longer warning times for the international community if Iran were to attempt a nuclear breakout. A proposal to this effect was presented by Thomas Pickering, who served as Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs at the State Department under the Clinton Administration, together with former US ambassador William Luers and scientist James Walsh.³⁸ Iran has also repeatedly declared that it is “prepared to implement its nuclear programme through consortium with other countries”.³⁹

As part of the negotiating process, steps should be taken to test the extent to which Iran actually means what it says when it offers to subject its nuclear activities to more comprehensive supervision. It would have to be borne in mind in this context that there are genuine divisions on this issue, both within the Iranian power structure and between the Establishment on the one hand and the Green Opposition and the population at large on the other. In point of fact, according to a survey conducted in 2009, 72% of Iranians would support “full inspections and a guarantee not to develop or possess nuclear weapons” if other countries provided technological assistance for the development of peaceful nuclear energy in return.⁴⁰

³⁸ Thomas Pickering, William Luers and James Walsh, [“A Solution for the US-Iran Nuclear Standoff”](#). *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 55, No. 4, 20 March 2008. See also James Walsh, “Multilateralizing Iran’s fuel cycle: The viable policy option”; in BICC Occasional paper [New Chances for a Compromise in the Nuclear Dispute with Iran?](#), March 2009

³⁹ Islamic Republic of Iran, 2006: [Islamic Republic of Iran’s Response to the Package Presented on 6 June 2006](#), p. 2.

⁴⁰ See the [results of a new nationwide public opinion survey of Iran before the presidential elections of 12 June 2009](#), question 13d; the survey was conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow – the Center for Public Opinion (TFT), the New America Foundation, and KA Europe SPRL

7. Taking Iran on board – détente, not isolation

Historically, the desire for nuclear weapons has always been rooted in a particular perceived threat. The political leaders who have taken the decision to acquire such weapons and the populations that have supported such decisions have been focused primarily on the security of their country, although it is a moot point whether the possession of nuclear weapons actually did or would enhance a country's security. In Iran too, those who advocate the possession of nuclear weapons – and these advocates are not yet to be found among the nation's leaders – cite the existence of a threat, first and foremost from the United States.⁴¹ Similar hopes and fears are probably shared by that half of the Iranian population which supports the idea of their country possessing nuclear weapons.⁴²

Grounds for concern about the security of the state or of the present system of government of the Islamic Republic of Iran are provided in more than ample measure by historical experience of US conduct (overthrow of the elected Iranian Government by the CIA in 1953, US support for Iraq during its war with Iran, the definition of Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil' by George B. Bush and the regime-change debate in the United States) as well as by the current arms build-up in the region and the threats of a military attack.

Against this backdrop, a change in Tehran's threat perception would be the best basis for efforts to counteract present ambitions regarding nuclear weapons and to ensure that such attitudes do not come to prevail in the longer term among Iran's elite and its political leaders. In order to dispel the perception of the threat facing Iran, a policy of détente should be initiated in place of confrontation and isolation. It is appropriate to recall the concept of 'peaceful coexistence', which Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proposed some years ago as a basis for relations with Iran.⁴³ Particular responsibility for such efforts falls on the United States, but a bit of pushing in that direction by its allies can only help.

Such a change of strategy towards a policy of détente with Iran would have to include the following elements:

- guarantees from the United States that it will not attack Iran;
- the development of a regional conference system for collective security and cooperation in the wider Middle East, with Iran as a full and equal partner;⁴⁴
- the normalisation of relations between the United States and Iran, which must mean first and foremost mutual diplomatic recognition and willingness to lift the comprehensive US economic sanctions against Iran that have been in place for several decades.
- On the basis of these three points, the proposal made to Iran by the six powers for the resolution of the dispute over its nuclear programme should be radically broadened so as to offer a genuine incentive for Iran to accept maximum international supervision of its nuclear programme in return.

⁴¹ See footnote 14 above

⁴² See footnote 15 above

⁴³ Sergei Lavrov, [speech delivered in Moscow at the 15th Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy](#), 17 March 2007.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Konstantin Kosten, '[Iran einbinden, nicht isolieren](#)', in *DGAP-Standpunkt*, November 2009

Needless to say, it takes two to tango, and the same applies to the pursuit of détente. It is also true, of course, that hardliners in Tehran could reject major offers of détente because they believe there is more to be gained domestically from a confrontational situation. A refusal on the part of the Iranian leaders to engage in a comprehensive pursuit of détente cannot be ruled out. No broad offer of détente has been made so far to Iran; Barack Obama's new words about dialogue and respect have not yet been matched by action. Yet a clear change of strategy would strengthen the pro-dialogue forces that are also present within the Iranian leadership. It is possible that even the hardliners in Tehran might see benefits in a relaxation of tension in their country's relations with the United States, hoping to use such a policy to broaden their internal power base and project their own prestige and influence more effectively in the region.

The West's present policy of confronting and isolating Iran has certainly resulted in deadlock. To continue it by means of new sanctions or indeed – in the face of all the evidence of its futility – a military attack on Iran in breach of international law would damage everyone's interests.

- It would harm the Iranian population, whose interests are served by peace, economic prosperity and the development of democracy. A policy of confrontation and sanctions, on the other hand, will strengthen the hardliners, provoke more anti-democratic measures and lead to the isolation of the forces of opposition in Iran.

- It would damage the interests of Iran's neighbours and the community of nations, including the United States. Without Iran, it would be impossible to guarantee stability in Afghanistan and Iraq and to resolve the Palestinian issue.

- It would damage the interests of the EU, whose economic and political presence in Iran – one of the markets of the future – is being jeopardised to an ever greater extent and whose interest in long-term energy security compels it to take account of Iran's deposits of oil and gas.⁴⁵

For these reasons, the time has come to effect a change of strategy. A policy of détente and even 'preventive concessions' on the part of the United States and its allies should be initiated without delay. The prospects of success of such a policy must surely be better than those of the policy currently being pursued.

⁴⁵ On the interests of the EU, see Walter Posch, 'Die Sanktionsspirale dreht sich', in *SWP-Aktuell* No 26, March 2010