



Obama's Search for Peace in Our Time

The West goes wobbly on Iran.

by Matthias Küntzel

12/07/2009, Volume 015, Issue 12

On November 18, Iran's foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki rejected a proposal that his country should export some 70 percent of its low-enriched uranium for further processing abroad. On November 20, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany met in Brussels and urged Iran to reconsider. "I continue to hold out the prospect that they may decide to walk through this door," explained Barack Obama, though he noted at the same time, "Over the next several weeks, we will be developing a package of potential steps . . . that would indicate our seriousness to Iran." Russia's foreign ministry, as usual, contradicted him: "There is currently no discussion on working out additional sanctions against Iran."

So was this merely the latest manifestation of the same fruitless maneuvering that has gone on every year since the struggle over Iran's nuclear weapons began in 2003? Not at all. It was not the ploys of the Iranians that provoked astonishment at the most recent negotiations in Geneva and Vienna, but rather the attitude of the United States.

Whereas in the past Washington sought to increase pressure on Iran, and Europe stepped on the brakes, today it is Obama who is stepping on the brakes while France and Great Britain push for sanctions. Whereas George W. Bush denounced the Islamism of the Iranian regime, his successor attempts to ingratiate himself by offering compliments and apologies. Whereas before it was the Europeans who packaged their failures as successful "dialogue," now it is Washington that does so.

The date that marked the high point of the *old* American Iran policy was December 23, 2006. On that day, the Bush administration obtained a unanimous resolution from the U.N. Security Council calling on the mullahs to cease all uranium enrichment and plutonium projects without delay. At the same time, sanctions were placed on Iran in order to back up these demands. The sanctions prohibit other countries from engaging in nuclear trade with Iran. The material effect of these sanctions is limited. But their legal importance remains considerable. In Resolution 1737, the Security Council classified Iran's nuclear program as a threat to international peace. In the event that Tehran failed to comply, the resolution for the first time threatened additional pressure under Article 41 of Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter. Article 41 lists nonmilitary measures that may be taken to enforce compliance with U.N. resolutions, including the complete or partial cessation of economic and political relations, the severing of all transport connections, and the interruption of postal, telegraphic, and other means of communication.

The date marking the arrival of the *new* American Iran policy is September 11, 2009. On that day, the Obama administration agreed to talks with Iran in which neither Iran's uranium enrichment activities nor its newly discovered and hitherto secret facility in Qom would be on the agenda. The talks would take place under conditions dictated exclusively by Tehran. This fact alone was tantamount to a form of defiance of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

The uranium enrichment facility being constructed in Qom is hidden deep under a mountain. It is designed for military purposes, and the Iranian ministry of defense is in charge of it. So it is all the more puzzling that the "5+1" powers (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States plus

Germany) have thus far refrained from referring the matter to the Security Council. It is even stranger that none of the powers has yet called for work on the facility to be stopped. Instead, they are valiantly demanding that the Iranian regime do what it in any case offered to do following the discovery of the facility: namely, submit it to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In this regard as well, the very purpose of Resolution 1737 is being foiled.

Obama, moreover, appears to have no problem offering Iran assistance for precisely those uranium enrichment activities that, per the decision of the international community, are supposed to be suspended. The context for Obama's offer is provided by a small research reactor at the University of Tehran that runs on 19.75 percent enriched uranium. Once uranium has been enriched to 20 percent, it is considered weaponizable.

In June 2009, Iran's government addressed a request to the IAEA. With the help of the IAEA, the Iranians wanted to import enriched uranium in order allegedly to refuel the research reactor. Of course, the Vienna-based agency could not agree to the request, given that the Security Council had prohibited the shipment of any and all nuclear material to Iran. From a legal perspective, the situation was and is clear: Only once Iran no longer represents a threat to international peace--only once it has suspended its uranium enrichment activities--can it again benefit from the assistance of other countries in the nuclear domain.

It is as if these legal facts simply did not exist for Obama. He is seeking a successful agreement with the Iranian regime and appears to consider its request for more enriched uranium a good opportunity. The deal that the Obama administration has proposed is as follows. The United States and its "5+1" partners implicitly recognize the legitimacy of Iran's uranium enrichment. They guarantee that Iran will receive the nearly 20 percent enriched uranium for its research reactor. In return, Iran has to part with some 1.2 tons of its now low-enriched uranium, since the more highly enriched uranium is supposed to be produced in Russia from precisely these stocks.

Tehran would have little to lose in agreeing to this deal. As the White House admits, the mullahs would be able to replace the 1.2 tons of low-enriched uranium in less than a year through Iran's own production. Nonetheless, the Obama administration defends the deal, maintaining that the export of the low-enriched uranium would delay Iran's progress toward the bomb. More time would be gained for negotiations, and, in particular, Israel could be held back from undertaking military strikes for another year. There is indeed a tactical advantage to be gained from such a delay. But it is more than offset by the strategic loss of the ability to pressure Iran to suspend its enrichment activities.

Up until September 2009, one could have the impression that Obama wanted to use patient diplomacy in order to convince the international community of the inevitability of massive sanctions. He appears now to have let the Islamist regime have its way on the decisive issue: the production of enriched uranium. Instead, of focusing on this issue, the Obama administration seems to focus now on secondary matters that actually presuppose that Iran's enrichment facilities will be active, such as tighter monitoring of the facilities and of the export and import of uranium.

Why is America easing the pressure on the despotic and crisis-ridden Iranian regime? Or, as the *Jerusalem Post* put it in a November 1 headline, "Why does the U.S. insist on playing Iran's game?"

A partial answer is provided by a look back at the European and German obstructionism that has prevented effective sanctions against Iran for many years. Already in the 1990s, Germany foiled American attempts to use economic pressure to dissuade Iran from pursuing its nuclear projects. Hossein Mousavian was then the Iranian ambassador to Berlin. In his memoirs, Mousavian writes that "Iranian decision-makers were well aware of Germany's significant role in breaking the economic chains with which the United States had surrounded Iran." Tehran, according to Mousavian, "viewed its dialogue and relations with Germany as an important means toward the circumvention of the anti-Iranian policies of the United States."

In 2003, it became known that Tehran had been running a secret nuclear program for some 18 years and had thus violated the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The United States pressed for the referral of the matter to the Security Council. Under the IAEA statute, the Iranian violation had indeed to be taken up by the U.N. Security Council by November 2003 at the latest. But Germany, France, and Great Britain delayed the referral until March 2006: 28 months that the Iranian regime used to rapidly develop its nuclear facilities. In September 2004, the German foreign minister Joschka Fischer captured the nature of the European assistance in a revealing remark. "We Europeans," he said, "have always advised our Iranian partners that it is in their considered self-interest to regard us as a protective shield."

Nonetheless, in December 2006, American diplomacy achieved its important success with the unanimous passage of Resolution 1737 by the Security Council. At this point, however, America's German ally again "ran from the flag," as the Washington correspondent of Germany's leading daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, put it. The Security Council had given the mullahs a deadline to comply with its demands. In February 2007, the deadline passed. Iran didn't budge. Everything depended on how the "5+1" would react to its intransigence. Would they back off, thus undermining the credibility of the U.N.? Or would they do what the U.N. Charter requires in such cases: continually tighten the sanctions until Tehran was forced to change its behavior? It was then that the German government broke ranks with France, Great Britain, and America in order to join Russia and China in preventing tougher sanctions. The "fateful friendship" between Germany and Iran again won out over the alliance with Washington.

The many years of obstructionism appear to have taken their toll and contributed to Washington's abandonment of its earlier determination to bring the Iranian nuclear program to a halt. But this alone is not sufficient to explain the conciliatory turn of the Obama administration's Iran policy.

Obviously, the new American president would like to be better loved by the global public than his predecessors. Obama sees himself as the anti-Bush. He personifies the attempt to placate anti-Americanism through concessions to America's enemies. He does not want to disappoint the hopes for peace that he repeatedly raises in his speeches and that won him his hollow Nobel Prize. Since Tehran will not change, he prefers to change his view of the Iranian regime. "This is not about singling out Iran," Obama insisted after the negotiations in Geneva. "This is not about creating double standards." The president sounded as if he were trying to convince himself and convince the world that the mullahs' regime is a government like any other.

The West is not deterring the mullahs. Instead, the mere prospect of their nuclear capability is deterring the West. Ahmadinejad and his friends sense their chance. They are putting pressure on the democratic nations to drop Israel in exchange for a tempering of Tehran's hostility. They are using the entire repertoire of intimidation, ridicule, and insult in an attempt to transform the Jewish state into what the Czech Sudetenland was for France and Great Britain in 1938: the price to be paid for "peace in our time."

Similar mechanisms led British prime minister Neville Chamberlain to acquiesce to the Munich Accord that ceded the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany. Chamberlain felt the pressure of the memory of the First World War, while today the memory of the (far less costly) Iraq war weighs on Obama. Chamberlain was well aware of the pacifist mood in Europe that would gain expression in the euphoric celebrations after the signing of the agreement. Of course, Chamberlain wanted to prevent a war. But his policy resulted in the opposite of what it aimed to accomplish. Obama does not want war either. But it is to war that his present approach is leading.

Whereas Chamberlain's policy led to a conventional war, the current policy of the Obama administration is conjuring up the threat of a nuclear war. Nobody can be sure that a nuclear-armed Iran will allow itself to be disarmed and deprived of its power without using its nuclear weapons. In that case, the world may be faced with the choice of either submitting to Islamism or defeating it--

albeit at an unimaginable price.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty provides no protection against such a scenario. In the first place, the treaty allows the parties to it to obtain the components for nuclear weapons while being monitored by the IAEA. Second, the inspections regime established by the treaty depends upon the good will of the monitored states. This good will is lacking in the case of Iran. Third, the treaty contains a clause that permits state parties legally to withdraw from it. Neither the tightening of IAEA inspections--which the Iranian regime can unilaterally renounce whenever it wants--nor Obama's assistance plan provides any form of assurance.

There is only one thing that can prevent the building of the Iranian bomb: the shutting down or destruction of the facilities that are producing the nuclear materials for it. But this will only be possible if the American administration revises its present course.

Matthias Küntzel, a Hamburg-based political scientist, is the author most recently of The Germans and Iran: The Past and Present of a Fateful Friendship (in German). John Rosenthal translated this article from German.