

Iran Opens War Avoidance Flank

By [Muriel Mirak-Weissbach](#)

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As threats of military action against Iran continue to issue from various spokesmen of the war party in the U.S., the Islamic Republic has launched an ambitious initiative aimed at preventing war, based on a comprehensive package of economic, political and security measures on a vast regional plane. The package includes proposals to settle remaining questions related to Iran's nuclear energy program, but is not limited to that.

It was Saeed Jalili, the new head of the Supreme National Security Council and chief nuclear negotiator, who first announced the initiative. As Acting Secretary of the Russian Security Council Valentin Sobolev arrived in Tehran, April 28, Jalili declared that his government was presenting the Russian delegation a package of proposals aimed at solving the problems of the world. "The package is about the great questions of the world," he said, "and the nuclear question could be the subject of discussion." While declining to give details, he added, "We spoke in detail with our Russian friend and we explained our vision. Our approach could be a good basis for negotiation between the influential powers of the world," according to AFP. Talks continued in the Iranian capital for three days, including with Gholamreza Aghazadeh, head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on return from his South Asian tour.

Although both sides said the package would not be made public yet, remarks made by Sobolev at a joint press conference April 28, indicated that Russia had listened to Iran's proposals with keen interest. He praised the expansion of relations with Iran "in all areas." After their second round of talks on April 29, Jalili said of the package that it "has provided a new opportunity for constructive cooperation for restoration of regional and international peace and stability and those who have adopted positive stands on the issue should welcome it." Ahmadinejad, following his talks with the Russian envoy, indicated that the discussions aimed at introducing a new international order. "The might of the United States and some other countries speaking the language of force that used to dictate international relations after the Second World War is now rapidly vanishing," The same day, the Iranian student news agency ISNA reported that, following that meeting, Sobolev, "said his country hails Iran's package of proposals covering a wide range of issues including Iran's nuclear program." TASS said Sobolev explicitly ruled out any Iranian weapons program. "We believe," he said, "that Iran is not engaged in any military nuclear research, but we are confident that not only Russia should think so but all countries that are involved in the settlement of the situation [revolving around the Iranian nuclear program]."

Further confirmation of Russia's positive response, came, albeit indirectly, from the top. Sobolev announced to RIA , "An oral message from Russian President Vladimir Putin was conveyed to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a meeting. The substance of it is that Russia confirms the principles of mutual relations (with Iran) and her policy will not

depend on who is in power," a reference to the new president Dmitry Medvedev.

While talks were going on with the Russian delegation, Jalili informed Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey of the initiative by telephone, saying it should be considered at the next meeting of the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany.

The Mystery Package

The content of the Iranian package has remained shrouded in secrecy, but certain features have emerged. Alaeddin Borujerdi, head of Iran's parliamentary commission on national security and foreign policy, spoke of the fact that it would guarantee the country's enrichment rights. According to well-informed Iranian sources, the initiative develops the idea of an international consortium for the enrichment of uranium, on Iranian territory. This idea had been floated by Tehran earlier, when the President issued an invitation to international partners to participate. Most important, it has also been under consideration by a group of U.S. figures opposed to the war policy of the administration, led by former diplomat Thomas R. Pickering. Together with William Luers and Jim Walsh, Pickering outlined the idea in an article, "A Solution for the US-Iran Nuclear Standoff," published in The New York Review of Books in its March 20 issue. (www.nybooks.com/articles/21112) The paper stated that the authors had been part of "a group of former American diplomats and regional experts" who "have been meeting directly and privately with a group of Iranian academics and policy advisers." The article stated: "We propose that Iran's efforts to produce enriched uranium and other related nuclear activities be conducted on a multilateral basis, that is to say jointly managed and operated on Iranian soil by a consortium including Iran and other governments." This approach reflected a similar idea worked out by the International Crisis Group, of which Pickering is a member, and presented to an international conference in Berlin in March 2006. (1) In a section entitled, "Turning Iran's Enrichment Activities into a Multilateral Program," the article goes on to suggest that "the Iranian government would allow two or more additional governments (for example, France and Germany) to participate in the management and operation of those activities within Iran." It notes that, of course, several Iranian officials, including Ahmadinejad, had "already publicly endorsed a multilateral solution."

However, as Iranian sources pointed out to this author, Tehran, significantly, did {not} address Paris or Berlin, but rather Moscow. Russia is considered the priority interlocutor due to the special relationship that exists between the two countries, epitomized by Russia's participation in building the Bushehr nuclear plant, but also because the Russians, unlike the Germans and French, have refused to let the nuclear issue become a *casus belli*. Russia and China have succeeded in blocking more hostile sanctions through the Security Council, and are both fully aware of the danger that the issue might be exploited by the war party in London and Washington, to justify military aggression. For this reason, the Russian government has been insisting that Iran return to the negotiating table with the 5+1 group. On March 31, Ambassador to the U.N. Vitaly Churkin urged Tehran to restart such talks. That was just prior to Sobolev's visit. And China had taken the unprecedented initiative of convening a meeting of the permanent five in Shanghai in mid-April, to seek a solution; although the meeting yielded no solution, it underlined Beijing's concern that war could be on the agenda otherwise.

Iran expressed its readiness to settle all remaining questions related to the controversial program, just a week prior to Sobolev's mission. On April 21-22, a delegation of the

International Atomic Energy Agency led by Oli Heinonen met with Iran's leading nuclear officials, including Mohammed Saeedi, Iran's IAEA envoy Ali-Asghar Soltanieh, and several AEOI and foreign ministry representatives. Iran announced it would cooperate in clarifying anything that had to be settled. IAEA chief Mohammad ElBaradei did not hesitate to praise the move. "That is certainly a milestone," he said, "and hopefully by the end of May we will be in a position to get the explanation and clarification from Iran as to these alleged studies," referring to studies that allegedly Iran had made regarding nuclear weapons. He said this was "the only remaining topic for us to investigate about past and present Iran nuclear activities."

But, the nuclear issue is merely one aspect of Tehran's global package. The rest is of a strategic nature.

As noted above, Ahmadinejad was visiting South Asia when Sobolev landed in Tehran, and his mission involved other components of the package. The main focus of his talks was the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project (IPI), which has been held up for various reasons, some more real than others. Aside from bickering about the price India would have to pay Pakistan, the main glitch was pressure that certain U.S. officials were placing on New Delhi, to sabotage the agreement.

Once it had been announced that Ahmadinejad would visit India, the Bush administration moved into high gear. Tom Casey, State Department spokesman, came out somewhat undiplomatically suggesting that India should "use its influence" with Iran, to persuade it to give up its uranium enrichment program. The Indian government was not amused. External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna was quoted by Tehran Times April 23, saying, "Neither country needs any guidance on the future conduct of bilateral relations as both countries believe that engagement and dialogue alone lead to peace." He went on to develop the concept, saying, "Both nations are perfectly capable of managing all aspects of their relationship with the appropriate degree of care and attention." The foreign ministry issued a statement which must have been somewhat embarrassing for youthful Washington: "India and Iran," it read, "are ancient civilizations whose relations span centuries."

Ahmadinejad's visit was a resounding success. In an April 29 press conference, he said that progress was being made on the IPI. "Ministers from the three countries," he was quoted by Arab News as saying, "hope to reach a tripartite agreement in the next 45 days." Construction on the pipeline is to begin in 2009, and should be completed by 2012. The 2,600 km pipeline is to transport Iranian gas to Pakistan and India. Prior to his visit to India, Ahmadinejad had been in Pakistan, where he fine-tuned details of the project with President Pervez Musharraf. He also committed Iran to providing 1,100 MW of electricity to Pakistan, to help it overcome energy shortages.

Talks between Pakistan and India had also taken place at the end of April, after which Indian Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Murli Deora announced that the deal would be "clinched soon." At an Islamabad press conference on April 25, IRNA reported that the oil ministers of the two countries said they had reached agreement on "fundamental issues," and that a final agreement could be signed in weeks, if not days. One factor which may have nudged India in the direction of a deal, is that China was showing interest in the project. In his meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, Ahmadinejad said that the IPI deal would soon be finalized "and my government will also welcome the inclusion of China in the project."

The crucial question of financing for the \$7.4 billion project, was being hammered out in the Asian Development Bank. According to sources in the Pakistani Petroleum Ministry cited by the Tehran Times on April 23, the ADB was ready to foot the bill. The ADB is also sponsoring the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project, in which Pakistan would import 3.2 billion cubic feet of gas, to be shared with India.

So much for pipelines. But Iran's "package" contains much more. As Iranian sources have indicated, India is also committed to invest in Iran's oil industry. And Sri Lanka, another stop on Ahmadinejad's Asian tour, is looking forward to Iranian participation in \$1.5 billion worth of infrastructure projects, including the \$450-million Uma Oya hydro power project slated to produce 100 MW electricity, and an upgrading of the country's oil refinery. In addition, Iran is ready to offer credits for military equipment to be brought in from China and Pakistan, as well as training.

Beyond energy agreements, the Iranian package also deals with developing transportation infrastructure. As reported in the Tehran Times April 16, Iran and India signed an MoU for starting work on the India-Iran-Russia railway line.

When one puts all these bits and pieces together, then a rather wonderful mosaic image emerges. As confirmed by Iranian sources, what the Iranians are proposing in their new package is nothing less than a blueprint for a new correlation of nations in Eurasia, whose collaboration in developing continental infrastructure—nuclear energy, gas and oil pipelines, and transportation—should establish the economic, and therefore political, basis for true independence. Iran's Foreign Minister Mottaki made clear, during his visit to Dushanbe on March 24, that his country wanted to become a full-fledged member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a grouping which includes Russia and China, along with the leading nations of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Not only: the Iranians are also moving in their more immediate regional environment, to erect this alternative economic, political and security structure. Most significant in this context, is the meeting that took place in Tehran April 30, between Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Pourmohamadi and Saudi Arabian Deputy Interior Minister for Security Affairs Ahmed bin Mohammad Al-Salem. The aim of this 2nd joint Iran-Saudi security committee meeting was to implement the agreements the two countries had reached in groundbreaking talks in October 2001, when they signed a joint security agreement. At the same time, Iran had been engaged in talks with Turkey on security. Iran's deputy interior minister for security and political affairs, Abbas Mohtaj, had said that Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia had reached some form of agreement on regional security. Add to this the ongoing process of discussions between Iran and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council for establishment of a free trade zone, as well as for a regional nuclear energy agreement, and it becomes clear that what is on the agenda is nothing less than a regional economic-security arrangement.

The Iranian leadership has understood that, in order to face the continuing threat of military aggression by the war party, it must not only mobilize its military capabilities, as a defensive measure, but, more importantly, that it must move in a positive direction, to build the economic-strategic alliances in the immediate Persian Gulf region, and in the broader regional context — Russia, Central Asia, India, China. This is precisely what Tehran is doing. This is the significance of the "package."

NOTE

1. The ICG proposal was the most far-reaching and detailed. The Iranian participants at the conference signalled their overall approval. See EIR, April 7,2006 for a report on the conference and interviews with the Iranian representatives as well as with Tim Guldemann, former Swiss ambassador to Tehran.

To contact the author: mirak.weissbach@googlemail.com

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