

Iran: The Politics of Non-Proliferation

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If there was a time when Iranian analysts and decision makers would question the benefits of continuing to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency, it would be now. The IAEA has allowed systematic US intervention in Iran's nuclear file paving the way to a third round of sanctions. But while US pressure on Iran with the knowledge that no evidence of a covert weapons programme exists, is perhaps [in the hope](#) that it will finally force Iran to leave the NPT in protest, Iran seems to be one step ahead and does exactly [the opposite](#).

On Monday March 3rd, the UN Security Council following months of political wrestling voted in favour of a [third sanctions resolution](#) against Iran, repeating previous demands to stop uranium enrichment but this time covering the country's entire banking sector as well as placing restrictions on air and sea cargo movements; thereby beginning a new phase in US efforts to isolate Iran.

Unlike the two previous resolutions and despite claims by China, Russia and other non-permanent members of the Security Council who [tried to justify](#) their unprincipled stance, this time sanctions are not merely 'a signal' but clearly punitive. They go beyond Iran's nuclear programme and for the first time they can potentially bring about physical confrontation leading to a full scale military attack on Iran.

Had history not had a habit of repeating itself, one would be surprised how this resolution could possibly come about against a backdrop of consistent and increased cooperation between Iran and the IAEA which has been reflected in consecutive reports by the agency's inspectors.

Back in August 2007, Iran and the IAEA agreed on a '[work-plan](#)' under which Iran would answer a number of outstanding questions and in return the IAEA would finally confirm publicly its findings to date regarding US allegations against Iran's nuclear activities. The report in summary gave a clean bill of health to Iran's nuclear programme in general; and in particular to its enrichment activities. It said "*The Agency has been able to verify the non-diversion of the declared nuclear materials at the enrichment facilities in Iran and has therefore concluded that it remains in peaceful use.*"

The work-plan and further reports by the IAEA, cleared Iran of all the issue referred to by the US as evidence of a covert weapons programme. Plutonium experiments, traces of highly enriched uranium, procurement of dual use technologies, research into polonium-210, Gchine mine and reprocessing activities in Tehran were all examined by the IAEA which found no evidence of any wrongdoing by Iran.

The only major outstanding point in the work-plan was the "alleged studies". On this

particular issue the document said “ *Iran reiterated that it considers the following alleged studies as politically motivated and baseless allegations. **The Agency will however provide Iran with access to the documentation it has in its possession regarding: the Green Salt Project, the high explosive testing and the missile re-entry vehicle.** As a sign of good will and cooperation with the Agency, upon receiving all related documents, Iran will review and inform the Agency of its assessment.*”

For five months, the IAEA despite this agreement failed to provide Iran with access to the documents on these alleged studies. Then early February for the first time, ahead of the report on 22 nd February, some documents were presented to Iran. After inspecting the material, Iran stated “*the documents were fabricated and that the information contained in those documents could easily be found in open sources.*” Then on 15 February, that’s 5 working days before the agency’s latest report on Iran , the US instructs the IAEA to present a few more documents to Iran. On this issue the IAEA’s report of 22 nd Feb said “*the Agency proposed a further meeting to show additional documentation on the alleged studies to Iran , after being authorized to do so by the countries which had provided it. Iran has not yet responded to the Agency’s proposal.*”

This single item, three lines long, in an 11 page report which is otherwise quite positive, became the basis of US and EU claims that Iran has failed to answer questions about its nuclear programme; and enabled them to justify pressuring other UNSC members who were not convinced of the need for harsher measures. Whether this vote too was the [result of coercion](#) or not, a number of key questions remain.

Why does the US release only bits and pieces of the information it claims to have and why only on very critical times? Why hasn’t there been a single US allegation against Iran’s nuclear programme that given time to evaluate has not proved false? In absence of any credible information from the US , isn’t it time that the IAEA begins to doubt US motivations?

The [famous laptop](#) that has now become a cornerstone of the US case against Iran was first made available to the IAEA in Nov. 2005 which means the US had access to it even earlier. It also means that the people who prepared the [NIE](#) two years later in Nov. 2007, knew a lot about this laptop; including whether or not it is fake. They must have assessed its content much more vigorously than the IAEA. What makes them conclude that Iran does not have a nuclear weapons programme, and yet the Bush administration still pushing for sanctions based on concerns that Iran may have a nuclear weapons programme? In short why is George W. Bush not listening to his own intelligence agencies? Does he know something they don’t? Or does he *want* something that they don’t? What makes the IAEA believe that the Bush administration given the opportunity will not use unreliable data against Iran ? or that the neo-cons perhaps months away from leaving office, having nothing to lose, will not engage directly into feeding disinformation into Iran’s nuclear file?

The US has already implemented measures to protect itself if the contents of the laptop are proved to be fake. First they claimed it came from an Iranian who fled the country, then it was a terrorist cult working to overthrow the Iranian government, then there was the German intelligence stealing it and finally the Israeli Mossad as usual claiming to have a hand in everything. Nobody knows fully where it first came from which is why all the parties can say they were misled by someone else.

Whereas on any suspected nuclear sites the IAEA can take samples of radiating particles

and physically confirm the nature of the material, drawings on paper and worse yet those in digital format are extremely easy to fabricate. "I can fabricate that data," [said](#) one diplomat at the IAEA after seeing excerpts from the laptop. "It looks beautiful, but is open to doubt."

On the other hand it is equally difficult for Iran to prove these allegations false. When the IAEA first presented Iran with some documents early February 2008, Iran's response was that these are fake. But the IAEA again on 8 th and 12 th February only a few days later wrote to Iran reiterating its *"request for additional clarifications."* Did the agency present new evidence to refute Iran's initial claim that the documents are fake? The answer is no. So what "additional clarifications" does the IAEA expect? Is it not up to the accusers to back their claims with verifiable evidence? Iran again responded on 14 th February *"reiterating its earlier statements and declaring that this was its final assessment on this point."*

The fact is if Iran had something to hide, it would think twice before immediately branding the documents as fake. In other words Iran would not risk its consistently positive record with the IAEA over something it could simply dismiss as "under investigation." So what is the agency or those pulling its strings really trying to achieve? Is it that difficult for its nuclear scientists to differentiate between a technical case and one which bears all the marks of an open-ended political circus? The answer perhaps lies deeper in the agency's latest report.

For the first time, the scope of the information that the IAEA is trying to obtain from Iran has gone beyond the agency's mandate which is limited to nuclear technology. Point 39 of the report is effectively asking Iran for details of its missile programme so that it may or may not be convinced that Iran's missiles are 'capable' to accommodate a nuclear warhead. This is what Iran's representative to the IAEA referred to as evidence that the UN's atomic watchdog is now acting as a proxy for Western intelligence agencies trying to determine the extent and the nature of Iran's conventional military capacity.

The day the governing board of the IAEA reported Iran's case to the UN Security Council, it started a process that many now believe may ultimately cause the collapse of the entire non-proliferation regime. The IAEA which until then had largely managed to keep itself away from politics by concentrating on technical issues, is now a battleground between political forces which have found a new platform and an excuse to settle old scores. A member-state, party to the NPT, which had voluntarily implemented its additional protocol and consistently voiced its opposition to weapons of mass destruction including atomic weapons, instead of receiving assistance on its fully verified civilian nuclear programme, was reported to the UNSC, vilified and bullied to the extent that many believed a military strike would be inevitable.

By allowing itself to be so blatantly manipulated by the United States , and by failing to defend the rights of a non-weapon state against a gang of nuclear weapon states, the IAEA has facilitated the first major cracks in the NPT which is one of the oldest and most respected pillars of international security. Suddenly being part of the NPT does not protect you anymore from harassments of nuclear weapon states. This situation may well lead to many nations quietly looking at nuclear weapons as a deterrent for the days to come when they may not necessarily share the same world view as the United States.

Fifteen months after the IAEA reported Iran to the UN Security Council, in June 2007 its director general [said](#) :

“The [NPT] regime is tattering in many ways. Today when we are talking here, for the last ten days the parties to the NPT can’t even agree on an agenda as what to discuss. That’s how dismal the state of affairs are.”

For about six years now Iran’s nuclear file has been subject to an unprecedented attention from all corners. Not only in rhetorical exchanges between US and Iranian officials which can serve both domestic and international purposes, but also in nearly every discussion regarding world security and the politics of power in the Middle East.

One thing that is clear throughout is that the players in this game are not simply reacting to one another or to random events, but are following detailed action-plans naturally designed to return maximum gains. Part of this gain for the US is denying Iran what it has declared as crucial to its future development. But another perhaps more immediate gain is using this case and everything associated with it as a catalyst for furthering other US interests.

From contracts between major US military corporations and the GCC states to Cold War-style [exchanges](#) between US and Russia on a missile defence system in Eastern Europe; from Israel crying out for support in face of an “existential threat” to France trying to cosy up to the US after Tony Blair; from India receiving US assistance in its unsupervised nuclear programme to South Africa signing nuclear contracts with France, hugely profitable deals are being facilitated in the name of preparing for an “emerging threat.” The beneficiaries of these deals are the very same people who advocate tougher measures against Iran and more often than not disregard Iran’s positive gestures, ignore the findings of the IAEA and instead engage in [smear campaigns](#) against anyone who attempts to deescalate the tension. These are the same people who take every opportunity to portray Iranians as irrational and incapable of reasoning and therefore deserving to be punished by any means possible.

Iran’s nuclear file, its referral to the UN Security Council and the subsequent votes of China and Russia in favour of sanctions cannot be viewed in isolation from these countries’ own interests. In other words the US is not the only beneficiary of an isolated Iran.

For so long as Iran’s nuclear file makes headlines, certain important issues can be swept under the carpet. Be it the IAEA’s failure to implement the ‘other half’ of the NPT which obliges nuclear weapons states to disarm, or the failures on the Middle East peace process, or perhaps Iran’s growing influence in Iraq. This was most evident a few days ago. While Iran’s president was touring Baghdad outside the green zone, the UNSC was voting on the third resolution on Iran’s nuclear programme. The Iraq story was almost completely boycotted in British media while the nuclear one got all the headlines.

The US has proved in more than one way that the concerns it has expressed regarding Iran’s nuclear programme do not have much to do with realities on the ground. For the past few years Iran’s nuclear file has been a platform from which the US has coordinated an agenda which goes far beyond Iran itself. We have long past the stage where this was a technical argument between Iran and the IAEA on a few “outstanding issues” This is not even a nuclear proliferation issue anymore. The UNSC passed the third resolution while it had on its table [a proposal](#) from Iran to implement the NPT’s additional protocol again if its file is returned to the IAEA. The US and the EU3 had another Iranian proposal from 2006 to jointly develop Iran’s uranium enrichment facilities so that they would have first hand insight into the programme; and therefore confidence that it remains peaceful. They [rejected](#) that too.

While Iran voluntarily suspended uranium enrichment for nearly two years when it was negotiating with the EU3, the US refused to even give security guarantees to Iran so that it would continue freezing enrichment, let alone any incentives to encourage more compromise. Recently in a House of Commons meeting I asked Ilan Berman from the American Foreign Policy Council who has consulted for both the CIA and the U.S. Department of Defense as an expert on regional security in the Middle East, why the US refused to support the EU3 initiative back then while now it sees the suspension of enrichment as a precondition of normalising Iran's nuclear file? His answer shocked the audience. He said *he did not know of any suspension of enrichment activities by Iran !* Given the options perhaps this was the best he could do.

Following Monday's UNSC vote, the IAEA's governing board rejected a proposal for an anti-Iran resolution. Iran shortly afterwards [announced](#) that from now on its nuclear programme will only be discussed with the UN's atomic energy agency; i.e. it will no longer "negotiate" on this issue with the EU's foreign policy chief who had been responsible to convey EU's demands and by extension those of the US to Iran.

This marks an important development which has come as a direct result of the latest Security Council resolution against Iran.

For the past six years while working with the IAEA at technical and legal levels, Iran had continued the political path with the EU3. Yet despite being betrayed more than once in these negotiations, until now Iran was [open to a deal](#) which could include the suspension of uranium enrichment activities. In return it was hoped the US would finally give some form of security guarantee that it would abandon its threats of pre-emptive strike.

This latest move can be seen as a sign that Iran is convinced the current US administration will not or cannot afford to provide such guarantees and that this in fact has nothing to do with the state of Iran's nuclear programme or its cooperation with the IAEA. Put simply Iran has said: "You know what? The deal's off. I'm not selling."

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