

The hidden stakes in the Iran crisis

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The confrontation between the big powers over Iran continues with antagonisms hidden from view. Since December 2002, the USA has accused Iran of seeking nuclear arms in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)

The seizure of Iran by the USA would mean them taking control of both the East bank of the Persian Gulf and the Southern Caspian, including their reserves of oil and gas estimated to be the second largest in the world.

Already the US have military control of part of the Caspian basin and of a corridor enabling them to link this area with the Indian Ocean (Afghanistan and Pakistan). They have also taken control of the key areas of the Gulf (Saudi Arabia and Iraq). At the end of this operation, Washington should have complete control over the world's main hydrocarbon production and reserves. It will control the world economy without the need to share power.

At the present stage in the conflict, the big powers are divided with regard to US strategy goals. The UK, France and Germany are convinced that Iran has a nuclear arms programme. They base this on briefing by the US intelligence services who have shown them secret documents asserting that Tehran is working on a Green Salt Project aimed at developing a missile system with nuclear warheads. On the other hand, Russia, China and India consider Iran's programme to be purely civilian in nature. They base themselves on the Fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeiny, decreeing that the production, possession and use of nuclear weapons is contrary to Islamic teaching.

Objectively, the NPT's distinction between legitimate civilian and prohibited military programmes is no longer pertinent given the techniques now available. Civilian know-how and facilities can easily be adapted to military use. A rigorous reading of NPT would lead to the prohibition of nuclear programmes for all states, whereas a more lax interpretation would open the door to generalized proliferation. Without dealing with this question it is impossible to resolve the Iranian case, and it is precisely this grey area which the US is exploiting in order to lead the way to war.

There is, however, perhaps one means of clarifying the situation . A special method of enriching uranium, not yet completely developed, would, once again, allow a clear distinction between civilian and military usage. Russia is endeavouring to perfect this method and proposes that it be used not only for Iran's benefit but for that of the international community as a whole. This is expected to be one of the three major proposals which President Putin will put forward at the G8 summit in St. Petersburg, this summer.

The feasibility of this project remains to be demonstrated. Russia would produce nuclear fuel on its own territory in factories constructed in partnership with the state in question under the control of the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA). Detailed procedures still have to be worked out to guarantee the interests of all the protagonists. If this project were to be fully realized international relations as a whole would be turned completely upside down. Russia, as the guarantor of energy provision throughout the world would eclipse the authority of the USA which today satisfies their own energy needs at the expense of the rest of the world.

Iran has made of its nuclear programme a symbol of its independence with regard to Anglo-Saxon colonialism from which it has suffered so much. Contrary to an idea put about for some time now in the atlanticist press, this ambition is not the reserve of a particular faction within Iran but is shared throughout Iranian society. In addition, if the Islamic Republic has abandoned its dream of expansion dating from the Khomeiny revolution, nowadays, it intends to play a leading role in the rejuvenated non-aligned movement.. It also intends to share its demands regarding nuclear power with other countries and reaffirm the right to a peaceful nuclear programme, not just for itself, but for everyone.

Far from being concerned exclusively with Iran, the present diplomatic game will impact on the international balance of power and the intention of the USA, reaffirmed yesterday in the State of the Union Address, to take on unilateral global leadership.

Throughout 2004 and 2005 the various powers have been making increasingly complicated moves. A European Troika was meant to play the role of honest broker between the USA and Iran; they demanded a halt in Iran's nuclear programme and then leant decisively towards the American camp. Iran, after accepting a two and a half year moratorium on its nuclear research, resumed them on the 10th January 2006, considering that they had waited long enough as a sign of good will without any serious response from the Europeans. The Russian position had become completely opaque, the foreign minister giving to understand that he shared the point of view of the Europeans until being put in his place by Putin who reaffirmed his commitment to a peaceful solution. Finally, a series of diplomatic missions have enabled Russia, China and Iran to develop a common strategy.

The whole question was given a kick-start when Britain organised, on 30th January, a « private ministerial dinner » bringing together the foreign ministers of Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the USA and China.. In the course of this meeting, Jack Straw, British foreign minister proposed that the IAEA refer the question to the Security Council, the first step on the way to war. His Russian and Chinese opposite numbers emphasized that such a decision would have no basis in international law. Confident in the viability of their uranium enrichment project, the Russian Federation wished simply to play for time, the time necessary to put together an agreement with Iran i.e. one or two months according to the experts. The dinner was concluded by setting out a timetable which each side presented as a victory: the IAEA Council of Governors will not be able to refer Iran to the UN Security Council next week because it lacks the power to do so, but will demand of the UNSC that it be given the powers to do so at a future date.

This compromise allows the Americans and Europeans to maintain the pressure and the Russians and Chinese to gain time. Working out who came out best depends on whether you consider the glass half-full or half-empty.

In practice, assuming that the Security Council gives the Council of Governors the requisite powers, the latter can only put them into effect at their next meeting on 9th March.

The Iranians make play of resenting this horse trading as a betrayal by their friends the Russians. But, it is quite possible that they have obtained a written guarantee from the Russians that they will veto any vote by the Security council authorizing war.

Whatever the case may be, the Iranians are appealing to their partners in the non-aligned movement for help. President Ahmadinejad received a phone call of support from Thabo Mbeki(South Africa, who had produced nuclear during the apartheid era, along with Israel, later renounced them). Indonesia has repeatedly called for peace, whilst Venezuela and Malaysia are soon to receive the Iranian president.

At the same time, Iran is preparing « a world without Israel and the USA ». Tehran is optimistic about putting in place an oil spot market which doesn't accept dollars. This is already working at an experimental stage. If no nation has officially announced its participation, many are encouraging participation through private companies acting as intermediaries. Now, the dollar is an overvalued currency whose value is maintained essentially by its role as a petro-currency. Such a spot market, once really up and running, would provoke a collapse of the dollar, comparable to that of 1939, even if its transactions only amounted to a tenth of the world turnover. US power would be undermined by the falling dollar and, in time, Israel would also find itself bankrupt

Washington is then obliged to apply all its force to ensure that the major world powers break with Tehran. Short of war, the US must at least succeed in imposing economic isolation on Iran. Paradoxically, neither option seems possible. The US and Tsahal can hardly bomb Iran's nuclear sites, since these are maintained by Russian advisers and technicians. Attacking Iran would imply declaring war against Russia. Furthermore, even if strikes were possible, Iran would not neglect to strike back at Israel with the devastating Thor-1 missiles sold to them by the Russians. The Shiites would make life even harder for the occupation forces in Iraq. If the US choose to use an economic blockade of Iran, this could easily be bypassed through Iran's special relationship with China. Meanwhile, Iran would deny the West part of its oil supply, bringing about a rise in prices of 300% per barrel and a huge economic crisis.

Quite clearly, the outcome of this confrontation depends on the ability of each protagonist to impose his own timetable on events. Meanwhile, the Bush administration stubbornly drives towards a confrontation which it lacks the means to carry through successfully and in which it risks losing its authority.

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