

Conflict Studies Research Centre



Iranian Nuclear Politics: The International Dimensions

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Key Points

* The nuclear policy of the Ahmadinezhad government should be analysed within the framework of the grand strategy of the Iranian state which is aimed at challenging the US in the Persian Gulf and south Asia in particular.

* Since the advent of the new government, cleavages within the Iranian state apparatus on the nuclear issue have also changed. The radical-conservative camp, most notably Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, would prefer Iran to pursue industrial-scale uranium enrichment within the framework of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. There are serious differences of opinion between advocates of nuclear opacity such as Ahmad Tavakkoli, who have called for the continuation of talks with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and those such as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani who seek to tighten Iran's relations with Russia, China, India and Pakistan. In the centre right and reformist camp, some still favour talks with the EU, although there have been calls for withdrawal from the NPT if the Iranian case is referred to the UN Security Council. The Majlis, particularly the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, is still playing an important role in the nuclear debate.

* There are serious differences of opinion over grand strategy within the radical and conservative camps, usually expressed in terms of the wisdom of Iranian efforts to bring Russia and China into the talks. A powerful current within the state apparatus, strongly believes in self-reliance, contending that neither Russia nor China will sacrifice their national interests for Iran.

* The grand strategy with which Larijani was associated collapsed with India's vote against Iran at the meeting of the IAEA's board of governors. However, in the short term it is

unlikely that this will lead to domestic political change because Larijani's critics are too far apart on other domestic issues.

* In the aftermath of the collapse of the government's grand strategy, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i increased the powers of the head of the Expediency Council, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. This is probably an effort to lock Rafsanjani into a radical position and to persuade him to endorse the government's grand strategy.

* The Iranian leadership rejected a Russian proposal supported by the EU which would enable Iran to carry out enrichment on Russian territory, almost certainly because it would have constrained Iran's ability to "break out" in the event of a decision by the leadership to do so.

* The Khamene'i-Ahmadinezhad coalition is likely to try to exploit the riots in France and embark upon nuclear cooperation with Venezuela to pressure the EU and the US.

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Question of Grand Strategy: Selective Balancing v Anti-US Alliance

In this paper, the term grand strategy refers to efforts to marshal the political, economic and cultural resources of the state in pursuit of a particular goal. That goal, which some authors refer to as "a desired outcome" or "an end-state", reflects the nature of the state's geostrategic environment. Medium and small powers can only be hopeful about shaping their immediate environments. As far as the grand strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is concerned, Iranian officials have been hopeful about influencing the behaviour of great powers through the use of such techniques as diplomacy, terrorism, economic statecraft, cultural diplomacy and propaganda. The concept of soft balancing has become rather popular among some security studies specialists.

Soft balancing involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms build up, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening.¹

Soft balancing is a relatively low cost way of checking great powers. The alternative, hard balancing, may be far more costly both politically and economically. Stephen Walt has provided one of the best explanations of the cost-effectiveness of soft balancing. "Soft balancing does not seek or expect to alter the overall distribution of capabilities. Instead, a strategy of soft balancing accepts the current balance of power but seeks to obtain better outcomes within it."²

During the Khatami presidency Iran adopted a strategy of soft balancing vis-à-vis the US because Iranian leaders feared that the US might resort to the use of force against their country. The policy of selective bandwagoning with the US on Iraq and Afghanistan was thus an important component of Iranian strategy.

What accelerated the collapse of the soft balancing strategy was the rejection of Iran's limited uranium enrichment option. The collapse of the Rafsanjani-Rowhani strategy, which was in no small measure due to the opposition of Iranian radicals and conservatives such as Manuchehr Mottaki and Ali Larijani, who now occupy key positions in the Ahmadinezhad government, led Iran to adopt a hard balancing strategy vis-à-vis the US. From December 2004 onwards, Iranian policy began to change and strategic non-cooperation dynamics began to occur even on the issue of Iraq, where Iranian officials sought to expand their country's relations with the

Ja'fari government, while claiming that the US was an obstacle to the establishment of true democracy.

Despite the fact that Iranian officials had said that there would be no change in Iranian nuclear strategy after the elections, there was indeed a tectonic shift. There were major changes in the country's nuclear policy, as well as in its approach to the question of US role in the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia. By late 2004, the Iranian leadership had come to the conclusion that the US was bogged down in Iraq and it would not be able to extricate itself easily. The head of the Expediency Council, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, was particularly keen on this policy; indeed he organized his presidential campaign around the theme of his ability to play a unique role in negotiating a grand bargain with the US.

Iran sought to cultivate members of the Non-Aligned Movement at the IAEA with a view to making it more difficult for the Board of Governors to issue resolutions critical of Iran. However, the main assumptions behind the Iranian approach had been that there was a rift between the EU and the US which Iran could exploit, and that Iran could also divide the EU by playing France and possibly Germany off against the UK. Moreover, Iranian negotiators seemed to be operating on the assumption that, ultimately, France would be able to persuade its EU partners, as well as the US, to permit Iran to pursue a limited indigenous enrichment programme.

However, Iran's decision to resume operations at the Esfahan installation and statements that the resumption of Natanz operations was the main issue could not have reassured the IAEA. Not surprisingly, the IAEA issued a report which was highly critical of Iran and expressed concern that after two and a half years of "intensive inspections" there were questions about the Iranian nuclear programme. It said that approximately four tons of yellowcake had been fed into the Esfahan conversion process. However, according to the report Iran had not engaged in the kind of uranium enrichment which would have led to the production of nuclear weapons.³ Significantly, the report concluded that the IAEA was "still not in a position to conclude that there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities in Iran". Moreover, there were important outstanding issues such as traces of enriched uranium contamination discovered at various sites and Iranian advanced centrifuge technology research programmes. The report emphasized that it was important that Iran be fully transparent about its nuclear activities and that this was "indispensable and overdue".⁴

The secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani contended that Iran had responded to many of the questions raised by the IAEA report. He said that Iran would continue to cooperate with the IAEA to resolve the remaining "minor" questions.⁵ After the new government's foreign policy team was formed, both Ali Larijani and Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki declared that Iran would put forward a new plan and increase the number of its "interlocutors".⁶ Mottaki said that confidence-building was a "two-way" process and that "Iran wants to give a full guarantee to its interlocutors, and secure their full pledge as well".⁷ However, shortly after this declaration, Larijani began to make efforts to implement the new strategy adopted by the Iranian leadership.

Elements of the New Iranian strategy

The old strategy sought the survival of an indigenous nuclear programme and the hope of gaining tacit US support for a limited level of enrichment in return for Iran's

good behaviour in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, Iran would also gain trade concessions from the EU and the US and move towards normalizing its relations with both countries. The Bush administration's strong opposition and the EU's refusal to agree to Iranian proposals led to the defeat of the Rowhani-Rafsanjani coalition in the nuclear dispute within the Iranian leadership.

The new strategy was far more ambitious in terms of its goals and it was also closely intertwined with Iranian efforts to form a countervailing coalition to check the US and ultimately inflict geopolitical defeat on it in the Persian Gulf and southwest Asia. After Ahmadinezhad's victory, Iranian conservative and radical commentators argued that Iran would be able to exploit the negative reaction to US foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere in order to further its own interests. An editorial in the daily Hamshahri, which belongs to Tehran Municipality and the managing-editor of which was Ahmadinezhad in his capacity as the mayor of Tehran, argued that Iran would pursue a policy of "mutual confidence-building", but not in "a one-sided" manner.⁸

The editorial argued that the international system was going through a period of transition in that the Cold War had come to an end but the US "had been unable to impose a unipolar order on the world". At the same time, "the world's other important poles" had also failed to establish themselves as hegemons. Iranian policy should be aimed at refraining from creating tensions in the international system while redrawing "the red lines in international relations in such a way as to be more in keeping with Iran's national interests".⁹

Hamshahri contended that as long as the West failed to address the issue of Palestine all Western plans in the Middle East would be "unlikely to succeed". Hamshahri argued that Iran attached great importance to the roles of Russia and China in the new international system and that the Ahmadinezhad government would focus on expanding Iran's political, economic and scientific relations with those countries.

Some radical and conservative media expected the Ahmadinezhad government to face internal and external crises immediately after taking over. The web site Sharif News expected the government to face a hostile EU and cited reports on Ahmadinezhad's involvement in the seizure of US hostage in 1979 as an example of efforts to "wage a massive psychological warfare campaign" against the new government.¹⁰ It also warned of America's new sanctions which had not been given the appropriate response inside the country. Sharif News also expected the internal situation to deteriorate because it believed that those who lost the presidential elections would seek to destabilize the government. It stressed that Khamene'i had talked of taking "conciliatory measures" after the elections but a number of groups had decided to institutionalize "partisanship and criticism".¹¹ Significantly, Sharif News warned that Ahmadinezhad would risk his popularity and, indeed, face "a crisis of popularity" if he sought to deal "with massive cultural and social promiscuity".¹²

At the same time, Sharif news expected Ahmadinezhad to "manoeuvre quickly and correctly" to deal with such problems as the people's multiple demands, "the unequal balance of power among the elites", "international pressures" and "economic promises".¹³ The conservative daily Resalat, which usually reflects the views of the Islamic Coalition Society, also argued that Ahmadinezhad faced serious foreign policy problems. A number of Iranian diplomats and ambassadors had said that they would not work with him. Resalat called on the new government to

launch an information campaign to gain support for its foreign policy at home and abroad.¹⁴

According to Resalat, the government would also face problems in its relations with Western countries because “the current atmosphere is completely different from that of the period when Mr Khatami started his term of office”.¹⁵ Iran significantly broadened its ties with Iraq during the transition period and indicated that it was interested in pursuing the nuclear talks with the EU provided that the latter recognized the country’s “right” to continue its uranium enrichment programme.

The point of departure for the new strategy was that Rowhani and his colleagues had been guilty of a serious miscalculation because they wrongly assumed that there was a difference over strategy between the EU-3 and the US. The radical daily Kayhan, which strongly supports the Ahmadinezhad government, had this to say:

The big question that has never been answered is why Iran chose those three countries when opening a political front at the IAEA?... Those three countries are on America’s side and are against Iran. They have the same objectives and the same strategies and no fundamental difference can be observed in their positions... It would have been possible to select a group of heterogeneous European countries for the nuclear negotiations in order to reduce the overwhelming pressure on Iran since the differences among them could have absorbed their energy.¹⁶

Kayhan called for forming a bloc comprising Iran, China, India and Pakistan and close cooperation with Russia to counter US regional strategy.¹⁷ The new Iranian government probably calculated that reducing diplomatic support for the US would considerably reduce the chances of an American attack on Iranian nuclear installations. Moreover, they probably believed that the duration of any attack would be considerably shortened due to lack of international support. The new strategy was based on the assumption that improving Sino-Russian relations could potentially lead to a new strategic alliance between the two countries. Despite the fact that Russian Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov declared that the Joint Russian-Chinese military exercises were not a prelude to the formation of a military alliance, Iranian leaders apparently pinned their hopes on President Putin’s declaration that members of the Shanghai group would be asked to join such exercises in the future.¹⁸

Bargaining Tactics or Major Shift?

Some prominent Western strategic analysts, such as Gary Samore and Francois Heisbourg, interpreted the new Iranian strategy in terms of the new government’s negotiating tactics, thereby ignoring the larger question of Iranian efforts to form de facto geopolitical alliances against the US.¹⁹

Neither Gary Samore²⁰ nor Francois Heisbourg²¹ analysed the new Iranian strategy in terms of the new government’s long-term plans to form a countervailing coalition against the US. Heisbourg, for example, merely focussed on the rather extreme option of blocking the Strait of Hormuz, thereby ignoring more subtle Iranian efforts to undermine the dollar as the international reserve currency.

Clearly, China had a central role in the new Iranian strategy because of its position on the UN Security Council, its rivalry with the US and its increasing dependence on Persian Gulf oil. Francois Heisbourg recognized this, arguing that unlike the

Iraqi crisis which had destroyed the old order without creating a new one, the Iranian crisis could be “the founding act of the future international system”.²² Heisbourg argued that Iran aspired to regional leadership and this aspiration was likely to be opposed by other countries in the region, which would try to acquire their own nuclear capabilities. Heisbourg argued that China had two choices: it could either pursue its selfish interests by seeking to gain preferential access to Iranian energy resources, or it could lend its weight to a UN initiative to curb the Iranian nuclear programme. Heisbourg contended that the collapse of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a result of Iranian and North Korean actions would trigger a nuclear arms race in China’s immediate strategic environment with South Korea, Taiwan and Japan trying to pursue their own nuclear options, and that the Iranian crisis offered China an opportunity to demonstrate that it was committed to the principle of China’s “peaceful emergence”.²³

Iranian strategy would be aimed at improving the country’s relations with Russia, China, India and Pakistan to the extent that they would be prepared to veto or abstain from voting for UN resolutions critical of Iran. At the same time, Iran would try to contribute to the further improvement of relations with India and Pakistan in an effort to prevent the deterioration of the situation on the Indian subcontinent, based on the assumption that conflict between the two countries would enable the US to improve its own position in the region. The policy of forming a regional bloc against the US was strongly supported by Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamene’i and President Ahmadinezhad, who calculated that the high price of oil and Iran’s energy reserves would enable the country to manoeuvre those countries to adopt anti-US, or at least neutral, positions on the Iranian nuclear issue. However, Iranian officials seemed to believe that Russia did not support Iran’s indigenous nuclear programme. Moreover, Russia had vast energy reserves and could not be easily blackmailed or cajoled by playing the energy card. Thus the new Iranian approach was to improve Iran’s relations with India, Pakistan and China and then approach Russia from a position of strength.

The Implementation of the New Strategy

The new strategy was also aimed at reducing the deleterious impact of any referral of the Iranian nuclear case to the UN Security Council. The first targets were India, China, Pakistan and Brazil. Brazil was chosen because of its resumption of its nuclear programme and its critical position in Latin America. Iran already enjoyed close relations with Cuba and Venezuela and it seems that the premise behind the approach to Brazil was that Iran could bring massive pressure to bear on the US in its own backyard. India was a member of the Board of Governors of the IAEA and the Iranians believed that India had been under pressure to declare its position on the Iranian nuclear programme.²⁴

Undoubtedly, it was also important for Iran to reach out to India because of the latter’s close relations with the US and Israel. Israel’s relations with India could be described as strategic. More significantly, the Bush administration had announced its readiness to build up India as a global power. The visit to Iran by India’s Minister of External Affairs, Natwar Singh, was considered to be extremely important by the Iranian leadership. The Iranians believed that “India had a narrow escape at the IAEA meeting” in July and that any voting on the Iranian nuclear programme at the IAEA would “put India in an uncomfortable situation”.²⁵ During his visit to Iran, Singh met and held wide-ranging talks with President Ahmadinezhad, Ali Larijani, Manuchehr Mottaki and Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad-Adel.²⁶ During the visit, India concluded a 7.4bn dollar gas pipeline project

for the supply of Iranian natural gas to India via Pakistan, thereby ignoring Washington's objections to the project.²⁷ Moreover, Iran approved the supply of 5m tonnes of liquefied natural gas to India for 25 years beginning in 2009. Iran also informed India that it would consider its request for the supply of an additional 2.5m tonnes per year.²⁸

Another problem as far as the Iranians were concerned was the issue of Security Council reform and this made it difficult for Iran to cultivate India. This issue was raised during the visit to India by the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani who was pursuing "quiet diplomacy".²⁹ Larijani had a meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and external Affairs Minister Natwar Singh. He called for a strategic partnership with India, contending that Iran had not violated any IAEA rules or any clauses of the NPT, adding that the Iranian programme was totally peaceful.³⁰ Significantly, during the meeting, Singh "pointedly asked" Larijani why Iran had not supported the G4 resolution on Security Council reforms. Larijani responded that Iran had not formulated a position on this matter and "broke the news" to Singh that Iran would support the resolution.³¹ This was undoubtedly aimed at gaining Indian support for Iran's nuclear diplomacy.

Upon returning to Iran, Larijani sought to give the impression that Iran was pursuing an even-handed policy towards India and Pakistan, declaring that "sensitive regional issues" had been discussed with Indian officials and that they all would also be discussed with Pakistani officials to demonstrate that "Iran is interested in dialogue and in shaping its moves within a peaceful channel".³² Iran had already established covert nuclear ties with Pakistan and purchased a significant amount of nuclear material from the A.Q. Khan network. However, the new Iranian strategy soon ran up against huge problems caused by a major improvement of Israeli-Pakistani relations. In press leaks, Pakistani officials who knew full well that Larijani had been trying to cultivate China and India, said that upon arrival in Pakistan Larijani would be told that Iran had to continue the talks with the EU-3 and "resolve the matter" peacefully.³³

Indeed, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said that Iranian officials had been "surprised" by the decision to improve Pakistan's relations with Israel because Pakistan "used to" adopt a "positive stance" on the issue of Palestine. "There is no justification for Pakistan's action. The Pakistanis should pay attention to the present situation in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The meeting between the Pakistani and Zionist regime officials has not only heightened our and regional countries' sensitivities but also that of the whole world."³⁴

Subsequently, it was announced that Larijani's visit to Pakistan had been postponed. It appears that Iranian officials decided to persuade Pakistan to support the Iranian strategy by promising better relations and permitting the smuggling of Iranian oil to Pakistan. Indeed, the volume of oil smuggled was so large that it led to political bickering in the Pakistani parliament.

Ahmadinezhad at the UN

Ahmadinezhad's presence at the UN was in itself a sort of political victory for him; there had been speculation about his being banned from the US due to his involvement in the occupation of the US embassy in 1979-1980. Ahmadinezhad and his closest advisers, Larijani and Mottaki, were operating on the basis of two key assumptions: (1) High oil prices would prevent the US from imposing oil sanctions

on Iran; (2) The US was overextended in Iraq and Afghanistan and would find it difficult to resort to the use of military force. Iranian officials believed that gaining the support of Asian oil consumers, particularly China, was the key to success in the nuclear negotiations. At the UN, Iranian officials threatened that they would refrain from supplying oil to Asian countries which supported the US position on the nuclear issue.

There was definitely a substantive change in Iranian policy and strategy. Even the choreography of Iranian diplomacy was distinctly different, with Ahmadinezhad sounding much more like the supreme leader Ali Khamene'i than his predecessor Mohammad Khatami. Ahmadinezhad declared that Iran would not give up its right to enrich uranium and he called upon foreign companies to participate in Iranian enrichment efforts. This was clearly aimed at legitimizing Iran's industrial-scale enrichment programme by involving other countries in it. In effect, Ahmadinezhad was proposing to get other countries involved in building Iran's nuclear deterrent.

EU and US officials were disappointed with Ahmadinezhad's speech and they said so publicly. Even France, which Iranian officials hoped they would be able to play off against the UK and Germany, were disappointed with Ahmadinezhad's proposal. French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said that the issue of referring the Iranian nuclear programme to the UN Security Council "is still on the agenda".³⁵ However, the Ahmadinezhad government did not take heed of such warnings, continuing to operate on the assumption that ties with Russia, China, India and Pakistan, as well as the Non-Aligned Movement, would enable Iran to make it diplomatically difficult for the US to use the UN against Iran on the nuclear issue. Upon returning from New York, Ahmadinezhad said that he did not think sanctions would be imposed on Iran. Asked what would happen if they were, Ahmadinezhad said:

Nothing special will happen. The Iranian nation would still have its rights. The Security Council is there to establish security. But if the council turns into a tool in the hands of a couple of power centres, it will be like those powers too. The Security Council will not be a very important body if it is used as a stick. It will become part of those powers. Those powers have always been there and have always been against us. We will be there too. And thankfully we are making progress.³⁶

Kayhan contended that the Iranian nuclear case would not be referred to the UN Security Council "at least at the next session of the IAEA Board of Governors on September". The radical daily called on MPs, which it criticized for being "on a long three-week holiday", to "immediately ratify a bill" compelling the government "to withdraw from the NPT and force the government to pull out from the NPT whenever Iran's dossier is sent to the UN Security Council".³⁷ Another radical daily, Siyasat-e Ruz, praised Ahmadinezhad for his speech at the UN, arguing that he had defended Iran's "legitimate rights" and "showed Iran's dominant logic to the world".³⁸

However, the issue of the referral divided Iranian officials. Ali Aqamohammadi, the head of the information dissemination committee of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, declared that if the EU "changed the rules of the game", and then Iran would "reciprocate". At the same time, he contended: "Iran does not consider it at all probable."³⁹

However, Aqamohammadi's statement was contradicted by Larijani, who gave a long presentation on the Iranian nuclear programme on the same day. On some issues Larijani's approach was similar to Rowhani's. The most important

commonality was the charge that the EU and the US were determined to keep Iran backward. Larijani charged that the pressure in Iran was being exerted by powers which were determined to ensure that the country would not be able to modernize. He declared that there would not be any disputes “if we have steam mills, produce tomato puree or acquire the technology to produce coolers”.⁴⁰

Larijani accused the EU of negotiating in bad faith, arguing that it had asked Iran to delay its nuclear programme and to provide objective guarantees that it would not seek a nuclear weapons capability. However, according to Larijani after several months of talks, the EU’s position was “the best objective guarantee is for you not to have this technology at all”.⁴¹

Larijani sought to justify the Iranian nuclear programme on the basis of the country’s need for technological development, adding that the IAEA had said that Iran had cooperated with it but it had to do more. He criticized those who had not welcomed Ahmadinezhad’s proposal at the UN, declaring that the Non-Aligned Movement had welcomed Ahmadinezhad’s initiative. He said that the IAEA must remain as the legal point of reference for the talks and that Iran was prepared to hold talks provided that they were held within “the proper framework”.⁴²

On the issue of the NPT, Larijani was very ambiguous indeed. On the one hand, he said that “we believe NPT regulations are useful for handling the world’s nuclear problems”. On the other hand, he said that Iran did not want to be treated like North Korea, because it had been “forced to ignore some of the IAEA’s regulations”. He also said that “if they use bullying language with Iran, it will undoubtedly reconsider its stance on the IAEA and the NPT”.⁴³

There was strong support in pro-Khamene’i circles for withdrawal from the NPT. The day after Larijani’s presentation, Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which usually reflects Khamene’i’s views on international politics, carried an editorial entitled “The first step is withdrawal from the NPT”. The editorial lambasted the EU-3 for their policy towards Iran and was particularly harsh on the UK. It accused Israel and the US of “using every opportunity to prod” the EU-3 to move against Iran and refer the nuclear case to the UN Security Council. The editorial accused the UK of following US policy: “Britain is more zealous than the other two, and British diplomats are making every effort to carry out the task America has given them and they are doing so most diligently in the hopes of getting their rewards elsewhere and a later date and in another place.” The daily said that the EU-3 were “not worthy” and they were not to be trusted.⁴⁴

Such commentaries spoke volumes about the mind-set of officials who made Iranian foreign policy. They were slow learners and they changed their tactics gradually. Not only did the IAEA issue a resolution which could lead to the referral of the Iranian case to the UN Security Council, but also India, a country which the new government had been cultivating, voted against Iran at the Board of Governors meeting, thereby dashing Iranian officials’ hopes of bringing India into an alliance with Russia, China and Pakistan. The Indian vote basically confirmed the collapse of the Iranian strategy. The vote was also controversial in India and there was a great deal of speculation about Indian officials’ motives. Some commentators argued that Indian officials feared that the US would stop peaceful nuclear cooperation with India if India did not support the US on the issue. The Iranian government’s ambivalence and uncertainty, if not utter confusion, was best expressed by President Ahmadinezhad himself. In an interview with Khaleej Times, he threatened to play the energy card and deny international inspectors access to Iranian installations if the UN Security Council was pressured by the US and its

allies to impose sanctions on Iran. However, almost immediately Ahmadinezhad backtracked and claimed that he had never spoken to Khaleej Times.⁴⁵

The Collapse of Iranian Strategy and Reformist and Radical Criticisms of the New Strategy

Iranian media covered the dispute over the choice of strategy in depth. The most significant shift was the increasing popularity of the idea of withdrawing from the NPT in the event of the referral of the Iranian nuclear case to the UN Security Council.

The strategy of consolidating ties with Russia and China and bringing them into the nuclear negotiations was sharply criticized by both reformist and radical circles. As in the past, the dispute was not between reformists and radicals, but between officials who represented rival policy currents. Some reformists did not believe that either Russia or China would support the Iranian nuclear programme.⁴⁶ For example, writing in the reformist daily Mardom Salari, Iranian commentator Reza Jalali argued that such countries were looking for an opportunity to “fish in troubled waters” and were not particularly interested in supporting the Iranian nuclear programme.

Iran should continue the talks and use new opportunities to take advantage of pragmatist currents and moves in America, to sow the seeds of discord in various groups and take advantage of partisan games in America and the EU and, ultimately, prevent the formation of a consensus of opinion on the issue of Iran.⁴⁷

Jalali also called for a “propaganda” campaign in America to take advantage of reports and research indicating “the lack of authentic evidence on Iranian and even Iraqi nuclear programmes”.⁴⁸

The policy of cultivating Russia and China was lambasted at the radical end of the spectrum by those who also opposed the continuation of the talks with the EU-3. The reformist daily E'temad argued that not only had India voted against Iran at the IAEA Board of Governors meeting, but the Indian prime minister had said that India would vote against Iran at the next meeting as well. The daily wrote that US-Indian cooperation was aimed at dissuading India from proceeding with the gas agreement with Iran.⁴⁹ Some reformists were gradually moving towards the unilateralist position and called for a strategy of self-reliance. Some Iranian commentators were particularly concerned about Russian policy towards Iran in the wake of the Indian decision. Significantly, the relatively moderate daily Iran News, which has often tried to gain the support of English-speaking peoples, reflected such concerns:

Pundits expect the British on behalf of the EU3 and America to put squeeze on Mr Putin regarding his country's nuclear cooperation with the Islamic Republic. Iran has learned that it cannot reliably count on the vote of any country when it comes to the nuclear issue. The officials in charge of Iran's nuclear policy should soberly, prudently and rationally take into account the political realities and carefully consider the adverse consequences and repercussions of any decision they make.⁵⁰

Moreover, the concept of “nuclear apartheid” which Ahmadinezhad had talked about was gradually gaining currency even among the government's reformist

critics. Some radical commentators, particularly those who were strongly supportive of Ahmadinezhad, blamed the reformists for all of Iran's problems in the nuclear case. For example, the daily, *Siyasat-e Ruz*, which is affiliated with the Society of the Devotees of the Islamic Revolution, contended that reformists were a group of "outcasts" who believed that nuclear technology was "unimportant" and that it was not a national issue. The daily lambasted the reformists for trying to "deprive Iran of scientific progress".⁵¹ However, *Siyasat-e Ruz*, also attacked Larijani's policy of relying upon India, Russia and China, accusing him of lacking analytical ability. It wrote: "Such things proved that we cannot solve our problems by smiling and giving gifts."⁵²

Larijani and His Allies Resort To Threats

At the same time, Larijani resorted to threatening the US and the UK in an effort to save the nuclear programme. The most obvious policy choice was to bring pressure to bear on the UK in southern Iraq and on the US in western Iraq to tie down UK and US forces and make it difficult for them to move against Iran.

Larijani used the Majlis to increase the pressure on the IAEA. Larijani appeared before a closed session of the Majlis on 28 September to explain Iran's nuclear policy. The atmosphere was quite hostile to the IAEA and the US prior to Larijani's appearance. In a pre-agenda speech, the MP from Khuzestan Naser Sudani lambasted the US:

Countries in the remotest regions of the world have been the target of America's maliciousness, and it is really ridiculous to see a country that bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki posing as the champion of global security and peace...Invading other countries does not necessarily mean occupying their lands. Monopolizing science, knowledge and technology and denying such achievements to other countries is another type of aggression.⁵³

The MP from Mashhad, Hojjat ol-Eslam Ali Asgari, said that Iran would continue to develop "peaceful nuclear technology" and accused the US, the UK and "the Zionist regime" of trying to "obstruct the development of the Islamic Republic". He contended that the "soft" war with "the enemy" continued.

During the closed session, seven MPs, Ali Abbaspur from Tehran, Qodratollah Alikhani from Bo'in Zahra, Hasan Kamran from Esfahan, Hoseyn Afarideh from Shirvan, Ebrahim Karkhane'i from Hamedan, Hamid Reza Katuzian from Tehran and Qorban Ali Ne'matzadeh from Qa'emshahr expressed their views on the nuclear issue.⁵⁴ Abbaspur and Afarideh lambasted the government's nuclear policy. Afarideh has a doctorate in nuclear physics from a British university and has served as the deputy director of the Atomic Energy Organization for research and was also chairman of the Majlis Energy Committee in the sixth Majlis. Abbaspur, who is the chairman of the Majlis Education and Research Committee, has a doctorate in nuclear physics from Berkeley University and is professor at Sharif University of Technology. Both were highly critical of the government and asked what point in the nuclear cycle Iran had reached. They wanted to know how much progress Iran had made in terms of achieving self-sufficiency in the production of nuclear fuel. Afarideh bluntly asserted that Iran had a long way to go before achieving self-sufficiency:

In view of the fact that I am a member of the group that studies nuclear issues and the fact that I have inspected various stages of the work, I must

say that the nuclear fuel cycle has four stages. At the moment, we are at the first level, which means mining. We are also facing certain problems. We do not have uranium mines with a high percentage of uranium. Since we do not have minerals [presumably uranium ore] we will not be able to build large factories and we will only be able to maintain small complexes.⁵⁵

Both Afarideh and Abbaspur said that some work had been done in the country, particularly with regard to the production of yellowcake and UCF. However, they sharply criticized the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization for misinforming the officials involved in formulating Iranian nuclear policy: “the truth is that due to the non-specialized nature of its work or due to the desire to withhold information, the Organization’s information is not correct or it has presented false reports to officials”.⁵⁶

Afarideh also lambasted President Ahmadinezhad for his nuclear proposal at the UN:

Who are the experts who have given the president the information that led him to emphatically announce in New York that we can sell fuel 30 per cent cheaper? As an expert on nuclear energy and in view of the fact that I know about Iran’s uranium mines, I must say that the quality of Iranian mines is below the world average and the president’s remarks, especially in a public forum will not serve the interests of the state. Even China, despite its vast nuclear programme, does not make such claims. Which expert study has produced that information?⁵⁷

After the closed session, MPs began to debate a motion calling for forcing the government to suspend the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the NPT. However, the discussion was postponed until the next day. Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad-Adel proposed holding an open session to vote, but MPs preferred a closed session.⁵⁸ This was significant because according to Larijani’s statement at a news conference after the closed session, he had informed the MPs of the talks with the EU-3, the discussions in New York during the UN General Assembly, and at Vienna during the IAEA meeting as well as the recent decisions made by the Supreme National Security Council.⁵⁹ The discussions in New York and Vienna had been widely publicized, but the decisions of the Supreme National Security Council had not. The evidence suggests that what led the MPs minds and led them to call for a closed session was the Supreme National Security Council’s decision.

The MPs’ disagreement with the Majlis Speaker suggested that they were not offering maximum support to the government on the issue, and that they were going to raise issues on which they did not want the media to report. Clearly, those MPs who wanted to hold the session in camera had been perturbed by certain aspects of Larijani’s presentation.

Larijani used the government’s close ties with the Majlis to ensure the passage of a motion facing the government to suspend cooperation with the IAEA on the Additional Protocol to the NPT. The government could then presumably claim that “the representatives of the people” had compelled it to stop such cooperation because of the popularity of the nuclear programme. Even before the motion was passed, Larijani declared that opinion polls indicated that the Iranian people supported Iran’s “peaceful nuclear programme”. “Many Iranian thinkers believe Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear technology are an important matter and resemble the movement for the nationalization of the oil industry”.⁶⁰

Larijani's remarks made it extremely difficult for the Majlis to do anything other than cast a large number of votes in favour of suspending the implementation of the Additional Protocol. Larijani accused the UK of duplicity, but was not as harsh on India, if only because his strategy relied heavily upon New Delhi. "Although we are not satisfied with India, we must not test friends by only one trial."⁶¹

Larijani also condemned the notion of dividing countries into "first class and second class nations". He said that Iran would soon run out of fossil fuels and would have to rely upon nuclear energy. However, there was no guarantee that other countries would supply nuclear fuel to Iran. "The Majlis has put forward the idea of constructing five more nuclear power plants. With what fuel do you want to run these plants? The Europeans say that they have talked to the Russians and that the Russians will provide nuclear fuel to us. However, there is no guarantee that the delivery will be made."⁶²

Majlis deputies voted in large numbers to ratify a motion which would, in effect, oblige the government to suspend cooperation with the IAEA on the Additional Protocol to the NPT. The number of votes cast was: 162 MPs in favour, 42 against and 125 abstentions.⁶³ The motion was put forward by 155 MPs in reaction to the IAEA resolution on Iran and it criticized the IAEA for ignoring Iran's "inalienable right" to gain access to nuclear technology. The motion contended that despite Iran's submission of a 1,300 page report on its nuclear activities and "daily inspections by 1,200 IAEA inspectors", which had provided the basis for a report by the IAEA director-general Muhammad Al-Baradi'i on the Iranian nuclear programme, the IAEA had ignored Iran's "right".

According to the motion: "The IAEA resolution was approved despite all measures taken to Tehran over the past two years and ignoring the views of other IAEA members such as those from the Non-Aligned movement along with the two member states which are also permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (Russia and China)".⁶⁴ The motion called on the government to stop its "voluntary" implementation of the Additional Protocol "in order to defend the indisputable right of the Iranian nation".⁶⁵ Moreover, the motion called on the government to "present a report on Iran's economic and commercial relations with the countries that played a key role in drawing up the recent resolution against Iran".⁶⁶

However, even the government's supporters were anxious to fine-tune Iranian threats. Majlis Speaker Gholamali Haddad-Adel issued a statement saying that "Approval of a single urgency plan at this juncture will not mean Iran is quitting the NPT or refusing to accept the Additional Protocol".⁶⁷

However, the chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis, Ala'eddin Borujerdi, later said that the government would not officially announce the cessation of the implementation of the Additional Protocol and that was why the Majlis had decided to act.⁶⁸ Borujerdi accused the EU-3 of breaching their agreement with Iran, arguing that former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Hasan Rowhani had warned the EU-3 that any proposal which rejected Iran's right to engage in uranium enrichment would be totally unacceptable.⁶⁹ Borujerdi also criticized the British ambassador for downplaying the significance of the demonstrations held in support of the nuclear programme, describing them as a reaction to British attempts to "impose" their will on Iran.⁷⁰ Borujerdi also said that 20 years of clandestine nuclear activities was not a good enough reason to refer Iran to the UN Security Council because at the time Iran was not supposed to adhere to the Additional Protocol. He criticized the British

ambassador for arguing that the IAEA had reached a consensus of opinion on the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme, contending that the IAEA was split and that 13 countries had refused to vote against Iran.⁷¹ Moreover, Borujerdi argued that Iran was quite prepared to engage in negotiations with the EU-3, adding that Iran was also willing to involve private European companies in its nuclear programme.⁷² This was clearly an attempt to play off European companies against their governments and it was in line with the government's policy of increasing the number of negotiators to undermine the EU-3 and the US.

Larijani continued his efforts to galvanize political support for his nuclear policy. Given the strong opposition even in the Majlis, which were dominated by radical and conservative supporters of the government, Larijani called upon the clergy to bring pressure to bear on opponents of the government's nuclear policy. The day after appearing before the Majlis, Larijani addressed a gathering of religious scholars in Qom, saying: "We are at a sensitive juncture and Tehran needs the guidance of religious scholars".⁷³ He accused great powers of trying to maintain their "monopoly" on nuclear technology and of dividing nations into central and peripheral ones.⁷⁴ Surprisingly, he also conceded that Western powers were "also concerned that if Iran acquires nuclear technology the situation in the region will be altered".⁷⁵

He accused Western countries of having gone further than the provisions enshrined in the NPT and have concocted new laws for Iran.⁷⁶ The most important aspect of Larijani's presentation to the clerics, however, concerned the relationship between Iran's nuclear policy and economic incentives offered by Western countries. On this issue, Larijani blamed the reformists for Western policy towards Iran. "In the last two years after erroneous interpretations of the domestic situation, they reckoned that Iran's condition calls for them to offer economic incentives to prevent Iran from having nuclear technology".⁷⁷ Larijani held the sixth Majlis responsible for this because it had "broached the issue" of the Additional Protocol which "became a pretext for economic proposals put forth by Western powers".⁷⁸

The Regional Plank of Iranian Nuclear Strategy

The government's radical supporters also called for increasing the pressure on the UK, which they saw as the mastermind of the IAEA resolution, and possibly severing diplomatic ties with it. Moreover, there were covert Iranian efforts to further destabilize southern Iraq to increase the pressure on the UK. The advent of the Ja'fari government and the presidency of Jalal Talabani brought to power individuals who had long-standing ties with the Iranian regime. However, no-one in the Iranian government wanted to see Iraq re-emerge as a regional power. The two countries never had close relations and they had often been involved in territorial disputes.

At the same time, Iranian officials were worried about the break-up of Iraq because it would set a precedent for all the ethnic groups in the region who might call for secession particularly, their own Kurdish people. Iranian officials thus had limited room for political manoeuvre. The best option was a decentralized Iraq, preferably governed by Tehran's close allies. However, after the deterioration of relations with the EU over the nuclear issue, Tehran seems to have increased its contacts with the insurgents and according to some reports even maintained contact with some Sunni groups in Iraq. The evidence suggests that some assistance was provided to Iraqi insurgents by the Lebanese Hizballah, which has extremely close ties with Iran.

The other plank of Iranian strategy, as far as Iraq was concerned, was close collaboration with Syria which had joined the Board of Governors of the IAEA. During a visit to Syria, Larijani discussed the Iranian nuclear programme with President Bashar al-Asad.

Iranian policy put Iran's friends in the Iraqi government, most notably President Talabani and Prime Minister Ja'fari, on the horns of a dilemma. If they acquiesced and did nothing they would be contributing to the destabilization of their own country. If they acted, they could lose Tehran's support for their government and the new Iranian government might also increase Iranian assistance to the insurgents.

So serious was the situation in Iraq that during a visit to the UK by Iraqi President Talabani, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared: "There is no justification for Iran or any other country interfering in Iraq". Blair warned that the UK would not be intimidated into changing its position on the Iranian nuclear programme. Blair said that new explosive devices had been used "not just against British troops but elsewhere in Iraq", adding that "the particular nature of those devices lead us either to Iranian elements or to Hezbollah, because they are similar to the devices used by Hezbollah".⁷⁹ Both Iranian officials and Hezbollah strongly denied that they were interfering in Iraq. Iranian ambassador to the UK, Mohammad Hoseyn Adeli, said that the charges "cannot be supported by either any political analyst or any concrete evidence". "We are against any kind of action which might jeopardize or destroy the stabilization process of Iraq".⁸⁰ Hezbollah issued a statement denying that it had been involved in destabilizing Iraq. "Hezbollah believes that the purpose of these British accusations is only to defend the inability of the occupation to face the growing resistance inside Iraq".⁸¹

Iranian policy in effect forced the Iraqi government to choose between its relationships with the UK and the US and Iran. Not surprisingly, Iraqi statesmen were cautious. President Talabani told correspondents that he was "very concerned" about reports of Iranian intervention in Iraq, adding that further investigations were needed. He told an audience at Chatham House: "The Iranians say they have no interest to make any trouble for Iraq." He also pointed out that Iran could not get a friendlier neighbour in Iraq than the current government.⁸² Talabani's comments summed up the dilemma facing Iranian strategists.

The goal of Iran's grand strategy was to form an alliance with states which opposed US "hegemony" and favoured the creation of a multipolar international system in the long run. However, the short-term results must have been disappointing. Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki toured the Gulf Cooperation Council states to reassure them about Iran's intentions and its nuclear programme. His visit to Saudi Arabia was postponed, almost certainly due to sharp differences between the two countries over Iraq.

Iran's ally, Syria, faced a far more serious problem if only because it was much weaker than Iran. In Washington, there was much talk about regime change in Syria. Syrian policy towards Lebanon and Syria's missile capability remained issues of grave concern in Washington. Thus any Syrian strategist thinking about coordinating regional strategy with Iran will need to take account of the global backlash against such efforts. By early October it seemed that Syrian efforts to maintain influence in Lebanon and destabilize Iraq had also run up against the law of diminishing returns. The UN report on the involvement of Syrian officials in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri will almost certainly

also influence Syrian policy in other areas, such as support for Iran at the Board of Governors of the IAEA. Indeed, Syrian strategists will also have to take account of the implications of support for Sunni insurgents, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for the security of their own regime. The long-term prospects of strengthening Islamist organizations could destabilize the Syrian regime later on.

Iran's Nuclear Policy and Grand Strategy Restarted

By mid October it was clear that the Ahmadinezhad government's grand strategy had collapsed. Indeed, the diplomatic pressure on Iran was such that the government came to the conclusion that it had little choice but to make certain concessions in order to preserve Iran's indigenous nuclear capability. The only success the government had was to persuade Russian decision-makers not to side with the US on the Iranian nuclear issue. This became clear during US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Iran was within its rights to pursue an enrichment programme. However, the extradition of former Russian Atomic Energy Minister Yevgeniy Adamov to the US may cause problems for Iran in the future. Russian Energy Minister Aleksandr Rumyantsev declared that Adamov had not had access to nuclear secrets since 2000. However, according to one Russian report Adamov was not afraid of disclosure of information regarding his financial activities in Russia. What he feared most were disclosures on his involvement in selling secret information to Iran which would enable that country to construct a deuterium reactor capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium. The same report said the US would probably use a low-yield nuclear weapon, Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, against Iran's heavy nuclear installations, some of which were buried 1,000 metres underground, in the second half of 2006.⁸³

The evidence strongly suggests that shortly after the Indian vote against Iran at the meeting of the Board of Governors of the IAEA, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamene'i became concerned about the developing opposition to the government. What must have been particularly worrying to him was the growing cooperation between Rafsanjani and the reformist camp and there was much talk of bringing some dissidents from the Iran Freedom Movement into a grand coalition with the reformists and Rafsanjani's Executives of Construction Party. As far as such coalition negotiations were concerned, the key figure was Sa'id Hajjarian, who argued that if the Iranian nuclear case was referred to the UN Security Council, the government would institute a crackdown.⁸⁴

Presumably in an effort to pre-empt the government, Hajjarian called for reaching out to the largest conservative organization in the country, the Islamic Coalition Party although the chances of forming such a coalition were remote.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the fact that the reformists were thinking about forming a broad anti-government coalition was significant in terms of Khamene'i's grip on power and his dominance of the policy-making process.

After the elections, there had been major changes in the Supreme National Security Council and the composition of the Iranian team of nuclear negotiators changed as well. Shortly after the Indian vote against Iran, Khamene'i expanded the Expediency Council's powers considerably. Henceforward Rafsanjani would have overall supervision of the policy-making process. This was a thinly veiled attempt to lock Rafsanjani into a radical position on nuclear and foreign policy issues. However, Rafsanjani responded by appointing former President Mohammad Khatami a member of the Strategic Studies Centre of the Expediency Council.⁸⁶

It is difficult to say whether Rafsanjani will be able to bring a wide coalition of reformists, Executives of Construction and conservatives from the Islamic Coalition Society into the nuclear policy-making process. The Islamic Coalition Society is unlikely to form a coalition with Rafsanjani given their past differences over a whole gamut of issues ranging from economic to domestic policy. However, the problems Larijani is facing in the Coordination Council of the Forces of the Revolution may undermine his position in the state apparatus. He has been widely criticized for his lack of knowledge of international affairs since taking up his post.

Larijani's failure to show anything for his diplomatic efforts has raised profound questions about the new government's foreign policy. Indeed, in late October, Iran made a number of concessions on the nuclear issue and announced that it was willing to grant the IAEA permission to inspect military sites.⁸⁷ However, it is important to note that there has not been any basic changes in Iranian nuclear policy as far as the quest for the fuel cycle is concerned. The only official who is capable of reversing course on that point is Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, and as of late October he was firmly stating that Iran was well within its rights to engage in nuclear activities. Khamene'i accused the US of trying to build an "empire" in the Middle East. Addressing worshippers at Tehran Friday-prayers on 21 October, Khamene'i said that Iran's "enemies" had always opposed its governments and that they were "clearly against" the Ahmadinezhad government. He declared that the Iranian nation was "a talented, cultured, great, capable, enthusiastic and young nation", adding: "Such a nation does not wait until others allow it to gain access to this or that scientific achievement or technology."⁸⁸

Khamene'i declared that Iranian officials unanimously supported Iran's nuclear policy. He accused US officials of pursuing duplicitous policies, and of neglecting the victims of hurricane Katrina because those affected "were blacks", adding that US behaviour in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, as well as in the rest of Iraq, had demonstrated that "the issue of human rights is a myth for Americans".⁸⁹ He accused the Bush administration of seeking to magnify small incidents in order to turn them into major crises. He declared that US administrations and "above all this war-mongering and extremist administration", had been trying to "create an empire and dominate the world...European countries know that after America dominates the Middle East, Central Asia and other sensitive regions of the world, it will not spare Europe."⁹⁰

Khamene'i said that the Iranian government was "explicitly" and "strongly" opposing US policies in the region. At the same time, he repeated that "our aim is categorically not related in any way to nuclear weapons or the diversion of this technology to manufacturing weapons. However, the Iranian nation will not forego this technology. This is our main aim."⁹¹

Khamene'i basically summed up the main contours of his country's grand strategy. Iranian strategy was formulated by officials who believed that the US was seeking primacy in Eurasia. They believed that the Iranian regime must try to undermine US policies in order to guarantee its survival. Khamene'i's declaration amounted to saying that Iran would not weaponize its indigenously produced nuclear material; i.e. a bomb in the basement capability. It indicated that Khamene'i had not given up on Iran's nuclear programme. Indeed, Khamene'i's support for Ahmadinezhad and opponents of Rowhani, who was trying to negotiate a limited enrichment agreement before the presidential elections, suggest that Iran's supreme leader favours industrial-scale enrichment which could enable Iran to produce a much

larger quantity of highly enriched uranium and weapons-grade material in the event of a decision to break out.

By early November, the Khamene'i-Ahmadinezhad coalition had concentrated its efforts on provoking a regional crisis, particularly in the Arab-Israeli arena, while making token concessions on the nuclear issue. Perhaps to make sure that their new policy, which was clearly aimed at increasing tensions in the Middle East and elsewhere, would be implemented, Ahmadinezhad carried out a major purge at the Foreign Ministry. According to Foreign Minister Mottaki as many as 40 ambassadors would be "coming home in the coming months".⁹² Between November and March a large number of Iranian ambassadors would be recalled or dismissed.⁹³ Particularly noteworthy was the departure of Iranian ambassadors to the UK, Mohammad Hoseyn Adeli; France, Sadeq Kharrazi; Germany, Shamseddin Kharqani; and the Iranian representative to the UN headquarters in Europe, Mohammad Reza Alborzi. They were involved in diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear issue.⁹⁴ According to Western diplomats, some of those recalled had also been involved in contacts with the US following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁹⁵ Reportedly, they had tendered their resignations, but their resignations had not been accepted. However, in late October, Ahmadinezhad instructed them to leave and to return to Iran within two weeks.⁹⁶ Clearly, the change of personnel was aimed at implementing a different policy, in the hopes of persuading European leaders to make concessions to Tehran on the nuclear issue.

The departure of Mohammad Reza Adeli was particularly significant. Adeli had only served for a year and was close to Rafsanjani. Relations between the UK and Iran had been deteriorating since before the advent of the Ahmadinezhad government. Two small explosive devices went off near the Tehran offices of two British companies, British Airways and British Petroleum.⁹⁷ Foreign Minister Mottaki declared that Iran wanted to "defuse" tensions with the UK.⁹⁸ Some of Ahmadinezhad's allies suggested that the UK's "multibillion dollar" interests in various sectors of the Iranian economy should give Iran a form of leverage.⁹⁹ Ahmadinezhad's allies in Iran's largest vigilante organization, Ansar-e Hezbollah, accused the UK of cooperating with Israel to eavesdrop on Iran from Basra.¹⁰⁰ According to Ansar-e Hezbollah; UK-Israeli eavesdropping operations had targeted Khorramshahr, Minu island, Abadan and Arvand Kenar. Iran's official position was expressed by the state news agency, IRNA, which charged that the UK was seeking a "foothold" in Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan Province.¹⁰¹ Iranian Intelligence Minister Gholamhoseyn Mohseni-Ezhe'i declared that Iran had proof that those who carried out bombings and were involved in riots in Khuzestan were "linked to foreign elements, including the British government".¹⁰² Ahmadinezhad was concerned about the situation in Khuzestan, and at a meeting with the representatives of the province, he promised to resolve the economic problems of the province and to hold a cabinet meeting there before the end of the current Iranian year (20 March 2006).¹⁰³

The evidence suggests that Ahmadinezhad had concluded that despite the threat of sanctions or military action by the US or Israel, the US was not in a position to overthrow the Iranian regime. Indeed, some of Ahmadinezhad's ardent supporters in the Ansar-e Hezbollah vigilante organization had come to the conclusion that the Bush administration had decided to pursue "a more balanced policy" towards Iran because of the low probability of regime change.¹⁰⁴

However, Iranian leaders were also well aware that their strategy of forming alliances with India, China and Pakistan had been a failure. Basically, faced with the collapse of their grand strategy as well as their nuclear policy, the Khamene'i-

Ahmadinezhad coalition switched to a modified policy of indigenous industrial scale enrichment, while dramatically increasing international tensions in an effort to persuade the EU and the US to agree to Iran's proposals. In fact, Larijani himself warned of the consequences of Washington's policy on the Iranian nuclear issue. Addressing the 13th conference on Central Asia and the Caucasus, Larijani referred to US nuclear "cooperation" with Israel and India, declaring: "American double standards regarding Iran's nuclear programme are threatening world security and peace". He stressed: "America and Europe should recognize Iran's inalienable right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes".¹⁰⁵

At the same time, by proposing to involve foreign companies in Iran's enrichment programme, the Iranian leadership was threatening to bring down the NPT as part of a collective effort. During Rowhani's tenure as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Iran had sought to obtain international cover for its uranium enrichment programme by negotiating with the EU and the IAEA. The Ahmadinezhad government tried a different approach by reaching out to other countries and attempting to involve them in Iran's nuclear programme. In the aftermath of the resumption of operations in Esfahan, the Natanz site was of critical importance to the Iranian leadership. The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Gholamreza Aqazadeh proposed that foreign firms could invest up to 35 per cent in Natanz nuclear facilities: "Such participation would be in the form of holding shares, participating in the management board and benefiting from the transfer of technology."¹⁰⁶

At the same time, the Iranian authorities agreed to the inspection of "sensitive" military sites previously excluded from inspections. There can be little doubt that such inspections could not have taken place unless Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, agreed to them. According to some diplomats initial results indicated that there were no signs of nuclear activity at the Iranian military base, Parchin.¹⁰⁷ However, Iranian leaders seem to have calculated that before the modified enrichment plan could be sold to the EU and the US, Iran had to change the choreography of the negotiations, so to speak. The assumption on which the new policy was based was that Iranian support for Palestinian terrorism would lead to an Israeli over-reaction and drive a wedge between the US and Arab countries, particularly conservative Arab states. This would make it more difficult for the US and its allies, particularly the UK, to wage a counter-insurgency campaign in Iraq. At the same time, Iranian officials sought to expand their country's economic relations with Iraq.

The Ahmadinezhad government's new pressure tactics

The opening salvo in the implementation of the new policy was President Ahmadinezhad's comment that Israel must be eliminated, which immediately brought international opprobrium upon Iran. He was even criticized at the UN for calling for the destruction of another member of the UN. Israel called for Iran's expulsion from the UN. Daniel Pipes described Ahmadinezhad's statement as "Iran's final solution plan".¹⁰⁸ However, Ahmadinezhad and top Iranian officials, including Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, defended his remarks. Both Larijani and Foreign Minister Mottaki sharply criticized Western reactions to Ahmadinezhad's remarks. Dismissing speculation that the remarks had been linked to the nuclear issue and criticizing Western observers for saying that Iran wanted to produce nuclear weapons, Larijani declared that Ahmadinezhad's position on Israel was the same as that of Ayatollah Khamene'i who had made such statements in the past. He also said that "all sorts of assistance should be provided to the Palestinians,"

adding that the "people of the world, be they Muslim or non-Muslim can no longer tolerate" Israel's "savagery" towards the Palestinians.¹⁰⁹ Larijani dismissed Western media's "interpretation" of the president's speech. Mottaki claimed that the "ratification of two recent resolutions" against the nuclear activities of "the Zionist regime" had led to Western countries' "extreme reaction" to Ahmadinezhad's speech.¹¹⁰ Foreign Minister Mottaki declared that Iran was "committed to its UN charter commitments" and that Iran had "never used force against a second country or threatened the use of force".¹¹¹ However, Hoseyn Shari'atmadari, Ayatollah Khamene'i's representative at Kayhan Institute and the managing-editor of the radical daily Kayhan, wrote that Ahmadinezhad had said "nothing new".¹¹² Such pressure tactics, in effect, were tantamount to a form of ambiguous warfare in that Iranian officials increased international tensions and then backtracked. They also linked the nuclear issue to the price of oil and threatened to bring about an international economic crisis. The secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani declared that the referral of Iran's case to the UN Security Council would raise the price of oil to 150 dollars per barrel.¹¹³

Larijani's "final offer" and Russian mediation

A few days after Iranian officials had raised international tensions, Larijani announced Iran's "final offer" to the EU. Larijani said that Iran would not give up its "right". "Iran cannot be intimidated by the Security Council. We do not take such threats seriously."¹¹⁴ Iranian policy was primarily aimed at gaining Russian support for Iran's enrichment programme. The change in Indian policy had prepared the ground for a different approach. In India, nationalist, Islamist and leftist opposition undoubtedly had an impact on the Indian government's decision to refrain from supporting the referral of the Iranian nuclear case to the UN Security Council.¹¹⁵ Indeed, Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh indicated that India might reverse its vote on the UN resolution on Iran if Tehran faced a harsher resolution at the upcoming IAEA meeting. The semi official Press Trust of India reported that Singh's comments "assumed significance" because of the leftist parties support for him on the issue of his alleged involvement in the Iraqi oil-for-food programme.¹¹⁶

At the same time, Russia and India did not have an interest in alienating Tehran for strategic and economic reasons. Thus both countries declared that they did not support the referral of the Iranian nuclear case to the UN Security Council.¹¹⁷ India needed energy and it did not have an interest in an Iranian tilt to Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, which would have been more than likely in the event of a confrontation with Tehran. Iran's expanding relations with China were also an important factor in Tehran-New Delhi relations. As far as Russia was concerned, Iran was a counterbalance to US political influence in the region and its leadership was willing to expand relations with Moscow. For example, speaking during a meeting with the head of the Iran-Russia parliamentary friendship group, Yuriy Savelyev, the chairman of the Majlis Energy Committee, Kamal Daneshyar, said that industrial contracts between Iran and Russia could be worth as much as 10 billion dollars per year if Russia agreed to participate in various oil and nuclear power plant projects in Iran.¹¹⁸ Indeed, a Russian proposal to the EU suggested that Iran could carry out some nuclear processing on Iranian territory, but that the most sensitive part of Iranian enrichment activities should continue on Russian territory to ensure that nuclear material would not be diverted for weapons production.¹¹⁹ Nikolai Shingaryov, spokesman for the Russian atomic energy agency, Rosatom said the proposal to partially enrich uranium on Iranian territory had first been made in June, but the Iranians had not replied to it. The head of the Russian

Security Council Igor Ivanov met Iranian officials on 12 November, but "dismissed speculation" that the meeting was aimed at discussing the nuclear proposal.¹²⁰ Ivanov's reaction was probably due to Ali Larijani's rejection of the EU proposal. However, at his meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki, Ivanov declared that Russia supported Iran's right to gain access to "peaceful nuclear technology" and that it was trying to ensure that the issue would not be further complicated.¹²¹

The Russian-EU proposal, however, would have made it far more difficult to break out. Although Larijani claimed that Iran would consider all proposals, he declared that Iran wanted to enrich uranium on its own territory.¹²² The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Gholamreza Aqazadeh and Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi also declared that Iran would not agree to the enrichment of uranium elsewhere. Aqazadeh, however, called for foreign investment in the Iranian nuclear industry.¹²³ Such Iranian statements should not have been at all surprising. Enrichment of uranium on Russian territory would have made Iran dependent on Russia. Indeed, as Larijani pointed out: "What matters to us is to preserve nuclear technology in Iranian hands."¹²⁴ Former Iranian envoy to the IAEA Khalil Musavi said that "there were no guarantees" regarding the transfer of part of the enrichment programme to other countries. He called for investment in the Iranian nuclear industry by other countries.¹²⁵

At the same time, the Ahmadinezhad government had, if anything, accentuated Iran's security dilemma. Although some observers have argued that Washington has changed its approach to "rogue states" and it is now dealing with the problems caused by such states on a case by case basis,¹²⁶ it is important to note that the Iranian threat to US interests had sharply increased since Ahmadinezhad's victory in the presidential elections. The draft US nuclear doctrine called for the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons against "rogue states" if necessary.¹²⁷

Two areas in which Iranian policy will have profound implications not just for EU-Iran relations but also for global stability are Iranian policy towards European Muslims and Iranian nuclear cooperation with Venezuela. Both policies are aimed at embroiling the EU and the US in regional crises to prevent them from exerting political or military pressure on Iran. The French position is particularly important given that Iranian officials had pinned their hopes on French opposition to US policy on the nuclear issue. However, there had been no change in the French position since early summer. After Ahmadinezhad's anti-Israel comments, French Foreign Ministry spokesman Jean Baptiste Mattei announced that the Iranian president's comments had introduced "a new and important element" into the situation and that France would consult with the UK and Germany on the possible "conclusions" to be drawn.¹²⁸ In early November French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy reiterated that France would support the referral of the Iranian nuclear case to the UN Security Council if Iran did not stop its enrichment programme.¹²⁹ The outbreak of rioting and unrest in France provided an opportunity to Iranian officials to exert leverage on Paris. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi announced that the French ambassador had been summoned to the Foreign Ministry and told that France had to "try harder" to resolve the issue.¹³⁰ Moreover, a senior Islamic Revolution Guards commander, General Jazayeri, argued that "street clashes in France reveal the crisis in Western democracies". He declared that "injustice and tyranny will lead to similar protests in other Western states, especially Britain".¹³¹

As far as Venezuela is concerned, it is not clear how far the Khamene'i-Ahmadinezhad-Larijani coalition is prepared to go to undermine the stability of Latin America. However, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's policy of nuclear

cooperation with Brazil, Argentina and possibly Iran had caused grave concern in Washington.¹³² It is too early to say whether the Iranian leadership will formulate an alternative grand strategy aimed at reducing US influence in Eurasia or whether it will seek to exacerbate various regional crises in the hopes of gaining concessions from Iran's interlocutors in the nuclear negotiations. What is clear is that the Iranian nuclear issue will have a major impact on the evolution of the post-Cold War international system.

Endnotes

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