

## NPT review conference: Iran on the diplomatic offensive

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The distance covered and the confidence gained by Iran – particularly in the contentious field of its nuclear programme – in the nearly five years since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad first got elected as president in June 2005, comes out graphically in the contrast between the tenor of his maiden speech at a major global forum, the sixtieth session of the United Nations General Assembly, later in the year of his having assumed the office,<sup>1</sup> and his recent address at the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference,<sup>2</sup> again under the U.N. auspices in New York.

It may be recalled that Iran, at the time of President Ahmadinejad's first victory at the hustings in the middle of 2005, had already voluntarily suspended its uranium enrichment process to prepare the ground for talks with three West European countries – Britain, France and Germany; the EU3 or EU-3 as the group then came to be known – aimed at reaching “an economic, nuclear and strategic deal”, to quote Flynt Leverett,<sup>3</sup> then a senior director at the U.S. National Security Council.

The internationally conciliatory but domestically unpopular move, leading to protests in Tehran, had in fact been made by the incumbent Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, as far back as in October 2003. But, much to their dismay, the Iranians had, after some two years of negotiations, come to the conclusion that the EU3 was taking them for a ride. The European trio continued to make increasing demands on Tehran, without in any way appearing to be prepared for the contemplated quid pro quo.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, therefore, even as the reputedly moderate President Khatami was still in office, the Iranian side had started expressing its dismay publicly at the protracted but counter-productive process of engagement with the EU3. Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary, Hojatoleslam Hassan Rohani, was reported to have stated in late April 2005 that his country was considering resumption of activities at the Isfahan uranium conversion facility (UCF). Iranian officials repeated next month that activities at the Isfahan UCF would resume “soon”.<sup>5</sup>

It was against such a backdrop that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidential election in June 2005, but, in accordance with the Iranian

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electoral process, assumed office in early August. It is therefore not possible to determine the extent to which his approach to the nuclear question may have influenced the relevant Iranian moves in the interregnum. At any rate, the outgoing President Khatami said on July 19 that his country would not forsake the right to produce nuclear fuel, and that the voluntary enrichment suspension was not to be permanent. He then stated on July 27 that activities at the Isfahan UCF could resume in days. "The system," he was reported to have said, "has already made its decision to resume Isfahan's activities."

What was still awaited by Iran was the outcome of the final EU3 "proposal" in a meeting scheduled for August 1. When the highly anticipated European package did come, Iran was left with no choice but to reject it outright. The same day, the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran presented to the Secretariat of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) a Verbal Note stating that the EU3 proposal, "fails to address Iran's rights for peaceful development of nuclear technology, [and] even falls far short of correcting the illegal and unjustified restrictions placed on Iran's economic and technological development...and firm commitments on security issues." The Iranian Mission further stated that the negotiations were not proceeding and that the EU3 goal was to keep the suspension in place.

In the light of the IAEA Board of Governors underlining the suspension as "a voluntary, non-legal binding confidence building measure," Iran announced it would resume the uranium conversion activities at the UCF. In came President Ahmadinejad two days later. It would also not be out of place here to recall that, regardless of the relentless Western media portrayal of the new Iranian head of government as a "hard-liner", he had entered office with a note of conciliation on his country's nuclear programme.

He conveyed to then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, on August 8 his willingness to continue cooperation with the IAEA in the framework of the latter's rules: "We are ready to continue the negotiations with the Europeans. I have initiatives and new propositions that I am going to announce after my government is formed...We want to continue the negotiations but we want to continue them in the framework of the rules" of the IAEA. Not only that, even such an Iran-baiter as President Bush had then felt obliged to acknowledge the willingness on the part of the new Iranian leader as a "positive sign".<sup>6</sup>

That brings us to President Ahmadinejad's first address at the U.N. General Assembly on September 17, 2005, referred to in the opening part

of this write-up. To begin with, he had chosen to utilise this global forum to outline the new initiative on the nuclear dispute he had alluded to in the statement cited in the foregoing. Before approaching that, however, what needs to be brought out are the most sharp points of contrast between that speech and his latest at the U.N. NPT review conference on May 4, 2010.

Back in 2005, although unsparing of the United States and Israel in his unmistakable references to the policies of both, his speech was still reserved in that he did not directly mention America even once throughout the presentation, and “the Zionist occupation regime” just once. Coming to 2010, the address was nothing but perhaps the strongest indictment of the United States by any head of government ever since the start of the so-called unipolar era and, given the global context of nuclear weapons and peaceful use of nuclear technology at the meeting, of America’s own track record in this regard.

These references included,

“The first atomic bomb was used by the United States. This inhuman act apparently gave the upper hand to the United States and its allies World War II.”

“The government of the United States has not only used nuclear weapons but also continues to officially threaten some countries including Iran to use such weapons against them.”

“There is not a single report of inspections by the IAEA experts on the nuclear facilities of the United States and its allies.”

“The government of the United States that is the biggest culprit in the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons or threat to use them insists on talking the lead in reforming the NPT through a series of propoganda moves.”

“The United States has never respected any of its commitments.”

“I should remind that in the past decades, the United States had most of its wars with its friends.”

“The United States has always diverted public attention from its illegitimate actions bring into focus misleading issues.”

“Major terrorist networks are supported by (America’s) intelligence agencies and the Zionist regime.”

The second point of departure in this speech from the one made by President Ahmadinejad in 2005 concerned the Iranian nuclear programme. As noted above, he had in his earlier speech delivered at the General Assembly soon after coming to power spelled out what he had called “the approach and initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the nuclear issue.” He had then gone on to spell out his country’s approach to the nuclear question in the contemporary global context before unveiling a new initiative specifically on Iran’s own nuclear programme. The latter was, in a word, aimed at confidence-building with the West in general and the United States in particular.

The four-point initiative had a number of assurances and guarantees, including the reiteration by Iran that, “in accordance with our religious principles, pursuit of nuclear weapons is prohibited.” However, the entirely new announcement made by the Iranian President on that occasion did amount to a major step toward reconciliation on his country’s nuclear programme. He stated in this regard:

“Therefore, as a further confidence-building measure and in order to provide the greatest degree of transparency, the Islamic Republic of Iran is prepared to engage in serious partnership with private and public sectors of other countries in the implementation of uranium enrichment programme in Iran. This represents the most far-reaching step, outside all requirements of the NPT, being proposed by Iran as a further confidence-building measure.”

However, it is also important to recall that, even as Iran was prepared to walk the extra mile to assuage the concerns of the West as also Israel by making this offer, Tehran was still not prepared to compromise on its inalienable right by virtue of Article IV of the NPT to continue enriching uranium on its own soil for peaceful applications. President Ahmadinejad had been emphatic on this score even in 2005:

“What needs our particular attention is the fact that peaceful use of nuclear energy without possession of nuclear fuel cycle is an empty proposition. Nuclear power plants can indeed lead to total dependence of countries and peoples if they need to rely for their fuel on coercive powers, who do not refrain from any measure in furtherance of their interests. No popularly elected and responsible government can consider such a situation in the interest of its people.”

All said and done, however, the reconciliatory stance of Iran continued to be ignored by the countries bitterly opposed to the country’s acquisition

of indigenous means to produce nuclear energy for peaceful uses. The issue kept on aggravating over the following years. That did not, however, come in the way of Iran's nuclear progress. The present is not an occasion to go into the details of all that. What does remain relevant to our given context is the manner in which President Ahmadinejad approached his country's nuclear programme at the May 2010 NPT review conference.

Simply put, the mention of his country's nuclear programme by the head of Iranian government at the latter occasion was conspicuous in its absence. That, as far as his country was concerned, was no longer an issue to be raised before the international community. The watershed in this regard had in fact been reached by Tehran as far back as in September 2008 when the country's representative to the IAEA at Vienna, Ali-Asghar Soltaniyeh, had informed the world about "the new realities" concerning Iran's nuclear programme: "The U.S. and Western countries have to cope with new realities: that Iran is the master of nuclear enrichment technology and at the same time Iran is cooperating with the agency [IAEA]."<sup>7</sup>

At no point since then has Iran given even the slightest indication of its willingness to engage with any international player on its nuclear question, except through the forum of the IAEA that, in would maintain, is the only appropriate channel for the purpose. We have in an earlier paper dealt with how the Western media has ceaselessly been occupied with misrepresenting the relevant facts.<sup>8</sup> Much the same way, it continued to fabricate Tehran's preparedness to enter into talks on the matter with the Western countries for long after Iran made public the said "new realities".

So much so that when, in May 2009, President Ahmadinejad took pains to remove the media distortion, the Western news outlets did not report his comments – they did not like it, it did not happen. At any rate, it remains important to cite his relevant statement, if only to keep the record straight:

"We have said this before and we are saying it right now, that we will not talk about the nuclear issue with those outside the IAEA,' he told journalists of international news organisations. 'The Iranian nation will not allow anyone outside the IAEA to discuss our nuclear issue,' said Ahmadinejad. 'The nuclear issue is over for us. The talks outside the IAEA will only be about participation in the management of the world and bringing peace to the world,' he said."<sup>9</sup>

And, true to his word, President Ahmadinejad's May 2010 speech at the NPT review conference, as seen above, was all about the nuclear question in the global context. In fact, even his last address at the United Nations

General Assembly delivered on September 25, 2009, had also made no mention of Iran's nuclear programme,<sup>10</sup> but then it had also not targeted the United States by name. The only reference to America that had come was with regard to his critique of the rampant global forces of capitalism in the given economic crisis, and again in regard to the effect they were exercising on "the people of the United States".<sup>11</sup>

## Notes & References

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- <sup>1</sup> "Full text of President Ahmadinejad's speech at General Assembly", *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, September 17, 2005, reproduced by Global Security on its website: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2005/iran-050918-irna02.htm>
  - <sup>2</sup> "Full text of the Iranian president's address at NPT Conference", carried by the website of the President of Iran on May 4, 2010: <http://www.president.ir/en/?ArtID=21656>
  - <sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/24/opinion/24leverett.html?n=Top%2FOpinion%2FEditorials%20and%20Op-Ed%2FOp-Ed%2FContributors>
  - <sup>4</sup> For details of that phase, see, Ghani Jafar, "Iran: Unravelling the Global Nuclear Order", *Regional Studies*, IRS, 24(4) Autumn 2006: 3-75
  - <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>7</sup> "U.S. must accept Iran's nuclear 'realities'", *Press TV*, September 18, 2008. [http://www.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=178152](http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=178152)
  - <sup>8</sup> Ghani Jafar, "Geneva talks: Iran, the West and 'media terrorism'", *Strategic Studies*, ISSI, 29(4) Winter 2009: 37-64.
  - <sup>9</sup> "Ahmadinejad rules out nuclear talks", *The Peninsula*, May 26, 2009. [http://www.gulfintimedia.com/index.php?id=471646&news\\_type=Top&lang=en](http://www.gulfintimedia.com/index.php?id=471646&news_type=Top&lang=en)
  - <sup>10</sup> "Full Text of the President's Address to the United Nations General Assembly", carried by the website of the President of Iran on September 25, 2009: <http://www.president.ir/en/?ArtID=17937>
  - <sup>11</sup> The directly relevant paragraph read: "No longer can a group of people define democracy and freedom in their preferred terms and consider themselves the criteria of such. They can no longer pose as judge and executioner while having shortcomings themselves and fight governments that truly adhere to the principles of democracy. Prevalence of freedom on a global level and the awakening of nations does not allow for consumption from such an indecent source and that is why most nations including the people of the United States are awaiting a type of change that is profound and true and they have and continue to embrace the slogan of change." Ibid.