

## **Attitudes of the International Community toward Iran's Nuclear Puzzle**

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*This article aims to interrogate the attitudes of the US, the EU/EU-3, Russia and China, on Iran's nuclear programme. The underlying question is whether there can be a consensus in the international community for a comprehensive settlement. In trying to provide answer to this question first, the article briefly reviews Iranian motives and foreign assistance in the development of Iran's nuclear programme. Secondly, focusing separately on the US, the EU/EU-3, Russia and China, a comparative analysis is employed for delineating similarities and differences in their attitudes and concerns since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This article arrived at a tentative conclusion on the basis that the debate is likely to continue, as there is no common attitude toward Iran's nuclear puzzle in the international community.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, nuclear programme, US-Iranian relations, EU-Iranian relations, Russian-Iranian relations, Chinese-Iranian relations, international community*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Iran's nuclear programme – which Iran has stated is for peaceful/non-military purposes, that is energy production, whereas the Western countries regard it to be driven by military ambitions, has been a subject of international concern. In fact, since 2002 the present and future capacity of Iran's nuclear programme has been questioned and evaluated by the international community. In this regard, considerable attention has been paid to Iran's nuclear programme in security and strategic studies in recent years.

Iran began investing in nuclear technology from the late 1950's. Under the Pahlavi monarchy, Western countries assisted Iran in acquiring a nuclear infrastructure. However, following the Islamic Revolution there was a sudden halt in assistance, which forced Iran to look for other suppliers such as China and the former Soviet Union. Thereafter, Iran's nuclear programme became a major issue for the US. After the discovery in August 2002 that Iran had hidden its nuclear activities for the last eighteen years, it became a serious issue for the European Union (EU) and the international community. From then on, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the United Nations (UN) conducted inspections to document whether Iran produced uranium sufficient enough for the development of nuclear weapons. As a result, the UN Security Council has approved three sets of sanctions against Iran in 2006, 2007 and 2008 to suspend uranium enrichment—a process that can provide fuel for a nuclear reactor or fissile material for a nuclear bomb.

The response of Iran is highly important in determining the nature and scope of the attitude of the international community. Iranian President Ahmadinejad claims that sanctions were based on false information, since Iran's nuclear programme seeks only to generate electricity.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad, particularly on Iran's

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<sup>1</sup> "Iran: Bush is Confrontational," *TIME*, 17 January 2008, accessed online at <http://www.time.com/>

nuclear programme and toward Israel – what US Secretary of State Nicholas Burns calls “the most abhorrent, irresponsible rhetoric of any global leader in many years,” has brought Iran closer to confrontation with the US. (MacLeod 2008a) Lately, State Radio of Iran reported that Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamani said on 18 February 2008, “God would punish Iranians if they do not support the country’s disputed nuclear programme.” Furthermore, he said, “They (the US) know that Iran is not pursuing a nuclear weapon, and they (the US) are just trying to block the Iranian nation from achieving advanced technology.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite Iran’s official position that seeks peaceful use of nuclear technology, the international community’s suspicion over Iran’s nuclear intentions has not changed since 2002. Especially in the West suspicions and anxiety are considerably significant. The US appears to be the main country concerned with Iran’s nuclear programme. While the EU states – notably France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK), abbreviated as the EU-3 – have engaged in an effort to resolve the confrontation through diplomacy. As noted in the *Economist* on 2<sup>nd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> February 2008,

The Americans and Europeans, supported by Russia and China, promised that halt to enrichment would win Iran improved political and economic ties, talks on regional security and help with advanced, but less suspect, nuclear technology.

Hitherto, we cannot talk about a common approach of the international community toward Iran’s nuclear programme. Thus, this article aims to examine the positions of the US, EU/EU-3, Russia and China on Iran’s nuclear programme. The underlying question is whether there can be a consensus for a comprehensive settlement that could bring about positive outcomes for regional peace. In trying to provide an answer to this question, the article begins by outlining the general Iranian motivations and then briefly reviews the history of foreign assistance in the development of Iran’s nuclear programme. Since there has been growing number of literature on the history of Iran’s nuclear programme (Kibaroglu 2007; Bahgat 2006), rather than analyzing at length, a brief review of the literature in this context is presented. The article proceeds by in depth analysis of the international community’s attitudes toward Iran’s nuclear programme since the Islamic Revolution. After focusing separately on the attitudes of US, EU/EU-3, Russia and China, a comparative analysis is employed for delineating similarities and differences.

This article arrives at a tentative conclusion regarding the strategic debate on Iran’s nuclear programme and what strategies should be chosen to deal with it. It is claimed that the debate is likely to continue, as there is no common comprehensive agreement whether Iran is capable of acquiring a nuclear capability that would endanger the peace in the Middle East as well as much of the rest of the globe. Yet, it seems that there is a common agreement in the West that Iran must not acquire nuclear weapons. (Fitzpatrick 2006: 20-6) As diplomacy became tougher, Western states agreed to a unified effort to force Iran to change its nuclear policy. Russia and China though have some concerns and thus have approved the three UN resolutions but they prefer to maintain closer links with Iran and favor dialogue

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time/world/article/0,8599,1704786,00.html on 4 February 2008.

<sup>2</sup> “Iran’s Supreme Leader: God will Reprimand Iranians if They Give up Nuclear Activity,” *International Herald Tribune*, 18 February 2008, accessed online at <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/02/17/news/Iran-Nuclear.php> on 5 February 2008.

rather than containment. Meanwhile, Iran consistently insists that its purposes are peaceful.

## 2. GENERAL ANALYSIS OF IRANIAN NUCLEAR MOTIVES

An analysis of the motivational aspect shows that there are several factors that led Iran to continue with its nuclear weapons programme. Firstly, Iran officially argues that its nuclear capability will be used as an alternative energy source. Thus, a major factor is avoiding international energy dependency. (Chubin 2006: 24-25; Ehteshami and Zweiri 2007: 128)

The second motive is domestic economic considerations. Iran has been facing severe economic problems due to a number of factors. Despite the fact that Iran is the second largest oil producer in OPEC, it imports nearly 40% of its gasoline, mainly from neighboring Gulf States. (Herman 2006: 30; Berman 2007: 46) In addition, Iran has failed to reinvest in its domestic economy over the last 20 years, (Pollack 2006: 73-74) and is not able to receive foreign direct investment. Indeed, it is considered that a weak Iran cannot act independently, whereas a stronger Iran can have more self-confidence to interact with regional and global actors in the unipolar structure of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A third motive is Iran's own consideration, as a signatory to the NPT it has a right to acquire nuclear technology and know-how for peaceful purposes in line with Article IV. (Ehteshami and Zweiri 2007: 125) Fourth, the quest for a nuclear programme has become a matter of prestige. As Chubin highlights, "nuclear power is said to give Iran entry into an exclusive club" (Chubin 2006: 26) and a means to become a major regional actor. Besides, possession of nuclear technology may lead to an increase in Iran's bargaining power vis-à-vis the international community as the examples of North Korea, Pakistan and India have demonstrated.

The fifth motive is domestic politics, which has two features. It is noted that the oil and natural gas revenues significantly support the Iranian economy and legitimize the regime. Also, the domestic situation shows that the Iranian public has given high support for Iran's right to search for nuclear technology.

The final motive is security, (Bahgat 2007; Chubin 2001) which is related with the deterrence of other states. (Takeyh 2004-05: 52-4) Yet, Iran's security considerations were much clearer in the pre-1979 nuclear programme. In fact, after the regime change in Iraq, Iran has placed more emphasis on the peaceful purpose of its programme for energy production. (Guldemann 2007: 169)

## 3. BRIEF HISTORY OF FOREIGN ASSISTANCE TO IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

Several characteristics can be identified about the foreign assistance to Iran's nuclear programme. First of all, during the Cold War containing Soviet expansionism and securing oil reserves were two main concerns of US foreign policy in the Middle East. In this regard, the US encouraged Iran to acquire nuclear energy during the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah. Therefore a nuclear programme was designed to give the Shah an option of assembling a nuclear bomb if his regional competitors moved in that direction. (Dueck and Takeyh 2007: 190) As stated by Amuzegar (2006: 91),

Iran's initial nuclear programme started in the mid-1950s, when Mohammad Reza Shah signed a civilian 'atoms for peace' agreement with the Eisenhower administration and later received an American research reactor for the Tehran Nuclear Research Center.

Consequently, following the civil nuclear cooperation agreement of 1957 between the US and Iran, the US provided Iran with technical assistance along with its first experimental nuclear reactor. (Zunes 2006) Also, the US set up a thermal reactor in 1967 at the Tehran Research Center and trained Iranian technicians. (Zuhur 2006: 54) Meanwhile, in 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which allowed Iran to develop research, concerning production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Accordingly, in the mid 1970s, the Ford administration continued to support Iran's nuclear programme considering Iran as a US ally. (Linzer 2005)

In addition to US assistance, France and Germany contributed in the development of Iran's nuclear infrastructure under the Pahlavi monarchy. For example, in 1974 the French company Framatome in Darkhovin initiated construction of two water reactors. In 1975, Iran purchased a 10 percent share in Eurodif, a joint venture uranium enrichment company of France, Belgium, Spain and Italy. In 1976, the German firm Siemens constructed two nuclear facilities in Bushehr. Furthermore, Iran signed nuclear fuel contracts with Germany in 1976 and France in 1977. (Kibaroglu 2007: 231)

However, at the beginning of the 1980's and during the war with Iraq, Iran did not continue with the nuclear programme. (Dueck and Takeyh 2007: 190) In the immediate aftermath of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of Iran, froze nuclear energy development, claiming that nuclear power was against the Islamic beliefs. Yet, with the recognition that modern military technology could make a difference in war with Iraq and due to the severe energy crisis in the post-revolutionary period, Iran renewed its intention to develop nuclear energy. (Kibaroglu 2007: 234) On the other hand, the US decided to end all the nuclear agreements with Iran in 1979. (Zuhur 2005: 54) US encouragement of Iran's nuclear policy under the Shah regime turned into a preventive policy. In the 1990's, the US imposed sanctions as Iran's efforts intensified to expand its nuclear programme. Yet, due to a lack of evidence, the Europeans had some hesitations until 2002.

Looking at the recent history, the year 2002 is an important turning point for Iran's nuclear programme. It was discovered that Iran possessed two undeclared nuclear facilities, which were located in Natanz and Arak. As a result, the US accused Iran of secretly seeking a nuclear weapons capability with foreign assistance. Following the discovery of the undeclared nuclear facilities, in 2003, the IAEA sent an inspection committee to Iran, (Chubin 2006: XV) which found out evidence pertaining to violation of the NPT. As a result of the negotiations carried out by the EU-3, Iran signed the Paris agreement in November 2004 -suspending uranium enrichment programme. However, following election of Ahmedinejad as the new president in August 2005, negotiations have become more complicated.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this brief review is that foreign assistance has played a crucial role in building Iran's nuclear programme. Yet, the attitude of the Western countries has changed toward Iran's quest for nuclear power following the Islamic Revolution. (Kibaroglu 2007) Due to this radical shift of Western attitude, Iran turned its interest to other potential states such as Pakistan, Argentina, Spain, Czechoslovakia, China and the former Soviet Union. For example, Iran signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with

Pakistan and Argentina in 1987. And the former Soviet Union and China emerged as main suppliers. But the Chinese assistance ended at the beginning of the 1990's due to US protests, and thus Russia has become the only potential supplier. (Kibaroglu 2007: 235; Bahgat 2006: 310) There are concerns over the future evolution of the nuclear supply arrangements due to Iran's active missile capabilities. As a result, this issue and its implications for global and regional security are likely to remain as a critical topic on the international agenda.

#### 4. ATTITUDES OF THE MAJOR COUNTRIES TOWARD IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME

In the following, we will examine the attitudes of US, EU/ EU-3, Russia and China towards Iran's nuclear programme. Firstly, we will focus on the US attitude. The history of the US-Iranian relations have deteriorated following the 1979 Embassy Hostage crisis in Tehran and have yet to normalize. In fact, since the Reagan administration, the US has tried to delay Iran's nuclear programme and to prevent substantial international cooperation with Iran's nuclear industry. For instance, President Reagan prevented German cooperation with Iran. (Dueck and Takeyh 2007: 190) During the 1990s, President Clinton banned US companies from investing in Iran's oil industry. (Bahgat 2001: 231-32) He signed the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act<sup>3</sup> to impose sanctions against foreign firms investing more than 20 million dollars in Iran's energy industry. In 1998, President Clinton waived sanctions against the French and Russian companies planning to develop Iran's south oil and gas fields. (Freedman 1999: 72) These sanctions were applied in order to remove financial resources to develop a nuclear weapons programme. Furthermore, similar to the former Bush administration, the Clinton administration applied a policy of 'dual containment' to control both Iran and Iraq until 1998. According to this strategy instead of attempting to play Iran and Iraq off against each other, the US contained both. Moreover, the US included Iran in the list of 'rouge states' and among the states sponsoring terrorism during the Clinton administration.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, with the election of reform-minded Iranian President Khatami in 1997, the US shifted its policy from 'dual containment' to 'limited rapprochement.' (Freedman 1999: 71; Katz 1998) Thus, there was more optimism about the improvement of relations between the US and Iran. Nonetheless, this optimism ended six years ago when US President George W. Bush labeled Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea as the 'axis of evil' – endangering peace in the globe. After 9/11 concerned with terrorism, proliferation and the availability of WMDs, organized crime and regional conflicts, President Bush changed US policy back to containment. (Dunn 2007)

Iran's nuclear programme became a more confrontational issue between the US and Iran with the 2005 Iranian presidential elections. The new President Ahmadinejad has given up President Khatami's 'dialogue of civilizations' for more confrontational rhetoric, particularly on the US and Israel. In his speeches President Ahmadinejad indicated that Iran supports Hizballah and Hamas in their confrontation with Israel, accused the US over the occupation

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<sup>3</sup> See Congressional Record on Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, accessed on line at [http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1996\\_cr/h960618b.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1996_cr/h960618b.htm) on 4 February 2008.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the Rouge State Doctrine see Foreign Policy Briefing No. 65 accessed online at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/fpbriefs/fpb65.pdf> on 8 February 2008.

of Iraq and teased the US on military action against Iran. Furthermore, President Ahmadinejad repeatedly said that Iran has the right and will not abandon uranium enrichment despite Western concerns. As a result, in the US National Security Strategy of 2006, Iran is considered as the main country challenging the US by seeking to develop nuclear weapons, refusing to provide the IAEA access to nuclear sites and also, from the aggressive statements of President Ahmadinejad. Furthermore, in the same document it is indicated that the US is concerned about Iran's violation of the NPT, sponsorship of terrorism, and its threat to Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, over the past few years, the Bush administration has argued for both 'regime change' and for the increase of economic sanctions (Guldemann 2007: 173) to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear programme. As the US does not have any diplomatic relations with Iran, it has allowed an alternative diplomatic track to be carried out by the EU-3. (Dueck and Takeyh 2007: 202) Nevertheless, the US and Iran held their first official direct talks in May 2007 to discuss the security situation in Iraq. (Anderson 2007) Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice offered Iran direct talks on the disputed nuclear programme in 2006, on condition that Iran suspends its nuclear enrichment, but it was rejected by Iran.

Secondly, we will focus on the EU/EU-3 attitude. The relationship between the EU and Iran from 1979 until the 2006 UN Resolution can be divided into three phases. The initial phase began with the Islamic Revolution and continued until the election of President Rafsanjani. Even though the EU Member States were still interested in Iranian natural resources and market, since the Islamic Revolution this relationship has deteriorated. Due to the support given by Western countries to the Shah, the new regime has developed a hostile attitude towards the West. Furthermore, the radical rhetoric of Khomeini against the West and Israel, and human rights abuses, contributed to a worsening of relations between Iran and the EU. Overall, throughout the initial phase, the EU had been critical about Iran's human rights record, support given to terrorist activities and its nuclear programme.

The second phase began in 1989 with the new Iranian President Rafsanjani. Some improvement in EU-Iranian relations occurred during Rafsanjani's Presidency (1989-1997), which was marked by economic pragmatism through the realization of a number of economic reforms. (Noi 2005: 85) At the European Council Meeting in December 1992, the EU Member States decided to follow a common approach toward Iran, called the 'Critical Dialogue.' Through the 'Critical Dialogue' the EU Member States, particularly France, Germany and the UK, aimed to moderate Iran through negotiations on issues such as its nuclear programme, human rights record and terrorism. However, the EU's official policy of 'Critical Dialogue' toward Iran ended with the Mykonos Case in 1997, which revealed the connection between the Iranian government and the assassination of political opponents to the Iranian regime in Germany. (ibid. p. 87)

Thirdly, the attitude of the EU-3 entered into a new phase with the election of President Khatami in 1997. During Khatami's Presidency, a number of political and economic reforms were implemented, which led to the declaration of 'Comprehensive Dialogue' by the EU-3. The EU-3 believed that comprehensive engagement would further curb any extremism in Iran's attitude on the nuclear issue. In fact, Iran's nuclear programme had not led to any serious concern for the EU-3 until 2002. Yet, following the IAEA's alarming findings, the EU-3 tried to persuade Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment programme and to sign the

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<sup>5</sup> The National Security Strategy of the US 2006, accessed online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/nss2006.pdf> on 25 May 2007.

Additional Protocol with the IAEA by offering Iran economic incentives. (Einhorn 2004: 22) Thus, the EU-3 intensively conducted negotiations with Iran to reach an agreement.

As a result, in November 2004, negotiations between Iran and the EU were concluded with the Paris Agreement. With this agreement the Iranian government agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment and reaffirmed its commitment to the NPT, as well as to full cooperation and transparency with the IAEA, while the EU-3 agreed to respect Iran's rights under the NPT. (Afrasiabi and Kibaroglu 2005: 260) However, the Paris Agreement was able to accomplish suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment programme only temporarily. In fact, Iran has restarted uranium enrichment at the Esfahan plant in August 2005.<sup>6</sup>

It was noted that in order to convince Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment programme permanently, the EU-3 would need to improve bilateral trade relations. Indeed, it is considered that through intensive cooperation in trade, the credibility of each side would gradually increase in the eyes of the other, thus enabling further negotiations on the nuclear issue to be more successful. Accordingly, the EU-3 has preferred diplomacy in order to convince Iran to act in a transparent manner in line with international treaties. Unlike the US, the EU-3 argued that sanctions would not be effective by themselves. Yet, following Iran's violation of the Paris Agreement, the EU issued a statement condemning in the strongest terms the comments made by President Ahmadinejad.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, in contrast to the expectations of the EU-3, with the election of President Ahmadinejad, negotiations between the two sides have been no more productive.

Third, we will now focus on the Russian attitude. Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran has followed the 'neither east, nor west' worldview, so no cooperation was took place with the former Soviet Union. Yet in 1986, as Iran decided to improve relations, they signed an economic protocol. Following this agreement, in 1989 President Rafsanjani visited Moscow, which resulted in a major arms deal. Additionally, several other arms trade agreements were signed (1990-1995) between Iran and Russia, even though there were US objections. Eventually, as US objections intensified, Russia decided not to sell military equipment to Iran and signed the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin Pact with the US. Nevertheless, the Russian approach has changed since 2000, when Russia announced that it would restart arms sales and technological cooperation with Iran. (Jalali 2001) Following President Khatami's visit to Moscow, an agreement was signed in October 2001, announcing an increase in Russian arms sales to Iran by up to 300 million dollars per year.

Furthermore, despite US objections, at the beginning of the post-Cold War period, Tehran and Moscow established an arms trade and cooperation agreement (1992) for construction of a nuclear power plant in Iran. As Orlov and Vinnikov (2005: 50) stated;

Nuclear cooperation would consist of constructing nuclear power plants for Iran, cycling nuclear fuel, supplying research reactors, reprocessing spent fuel, producing isotopes for use in scientific and medical research and training Iranian nuclear scientists at the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute.

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<sup>6</sup> "The EU's Relations with Iran," 5 February 2007, accessed online at [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/iran/intro/index.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/iran/intro/index.htm) on 25 February 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

construction of the Bushehr<sup>8</sup> nuclear power plant. (ibid. p. 50) The Bushehr nuclear plant has been separate from Iran's own enrichment facility at Natanz. It was initiated under the Shah and stopped following the Islamic Revolution. (Reynolds 2007) In the 1990s Russia has agreed to complete the project and to supply enriched uranium needed as fuel, recognizing that the Bushehr project, including the construction of two nuclear reactors, would grant a huge amount of money for the Russian economy.

There were several reasons for increasing cooperation between Iran and Russia. From Iran's vantage point, Russia has appeared to be the most appropriate partner in three areas. First of all, Russia has been one of the leading countries in nuclear energy technology and was seeking to "enhance its role as a global supplier." (Vakil 2006: 58) Secondly, since Iran was experiencing a deterioration in its relations with the US, Russia – concerned about a unipolar world system and hegemony of the US – might be more encouraging for Tehran's desire to have nuclear energy. Thirdly, as Russia is not worried about human rights issues, Tehran's poor human rights record might not concern Moscow, whereas the US and the EU have highly emphasized the issues of democracy and human rights. Lastly, unlike the US, Russia has not been worried about Iran's support for terrorism.

From the Russian vantage point, assistance of Iran's nuclear programme coincided with Russian economic interests. Over 300 Russian companies have taken part in the Bushehr project, thus activating the Russian industries in nuclear research that would in return offer a serious input into its economy. (Takeyh 2003: 26) Additionally, this project provided many Russians with divergent employment opportunities. Besides economic benefits, Russia has been also considering its political interests. Firstly, Russia has been able to avoid Iran's sponsorship of Islamist groups in the Commonwealth of Independent States, hence was able to preserve its influence over them. Accordingly, "Tehran has largely stayed out of the Islamist struggle in Chechnya." (Takeyh 2003: 26-27; Orlov and Vinnikov 2005: 57) Secondly, since Iran has a considerable influence in the Islamic world, Tehran has been able to defend Moscow against "hostile resolutions passed by the Organization of the Islamic Conference." (Orlov and Vinnikov 2005: 57) Thirdly, Russia has been Iran's main supplier of arms since 1989, although there was a break between the years 1995-2000 as indicated above. Thus, Russia has considered Iran as a valuable ally. Nevertheless, there are still some challenging issues such as the Caspian Sea energy resources. But, the two countries try to make sure that their different approaches on the challenging issues would not affect the continuity of their strategic partnership on the nuclear programme.

Meanwhile, the Western states have disapproved of Russian assistance on Iran's nuclear programme. Primarily, Russia has confronted the US. As it is pointed out by Orlov and Vinnikov (2005: 49);

Since the mid-1990s, Russia had featured in virtually every mention of Iran's nuclear programme. Indeed, Russia is the only state to have openly cooperated with Iran in the nuclear field and has spent the better part of the last decade at the receiving end of fierce US criticism for its efforts.

In order to prevent the Russian cooperation, both the Bush Senior and Clinton

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<sup>8</sup> Siemens, a German company, initially held construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, in the aftermath of the revolution, Germany had to abandon its cooperation with Iran due to Western pressures.



administrations employed a number of different deterrence strategies, including warnings to implement sanctions in trade. Furthermore, the Clinton administration exerted pressure on the Yeltsin administration to suspend its support for the Bushehr energy reactor. Yet, despite the pressure of Washington, throughout the 1990s Moscow resisted and maintained its cooperation with Tehran.

However, the year 2002 can be regarded as a decisive moment in the attitude of Russia, because Russia was really astonished to learn about Iran's secret nuclear programme. Moscow was deeply disappointed with the Iranian attitude of not revealing this information earlier. As a result, Russia decided to slow down the completion of the Bushehr project pointing out technical shortcomings. (ibid. p. 55) Nevertheless, it completed the Bushehr project in October 2004 (Afrasiabi and Kibaroglu 2005: 258), which is expected to provide electricity towards the end of 2008. Russia itself has enriched the uranium for Bushehr. Though the Western countries had hoped that Russia would delay the delivery of enriched uranium, it appears that there is less fear in Russia about Iran's nuclear intentions.<sup>9</sup> Yet, both the Western countries and Russia prefer to offer enriched uranium needed as a fuel rather than Iranian self-enrichment.

Finally, we will focus on the Chinese attitude. Chinese-Iranian relations have accelerated since the mid 1990s, owing to a significant increase in the Chinese need for energy resources. Consequently, the US accused China of assisting Iran's nuclear programme. Recently it has been discovered that China transferred sensitive materials to Iran in 1991 for enrichment without informing the IAEA, and trained Iranian nuclear technicians, but has canceled most of its assistance since 1997. (Bowen and Kidd 2004: 261-262; Cordesman and Al-Rodhan 2006: 12-13)

There are several factors determining China's attitude. The first factor is China's wish to secure a continuous flow of oil and gas from Iran. Thus, China's growing demand for energy security has a large impact in forming its foreign policy toward Iran. Iran has been a major energy supplier for China. (Vakil 2006: 54) Oil imports from Iran to China amounted to 2 billion dollars in 2003, representing more than 15 percent of its total oil imports, and it is expected that this amount would increase further. (Liangxiang 2005: 4) Bilateral economic relations are another factor determining the Chinese attitude. China is today Iran's top trade partner and has committed to invest more in Iran's oil and natural gas industry. (Zagorin 2008) There has been an intensive trade relationship between the two states that amounts to approximately 10 billion dollars per year. In addition, China has made a large amount of capital investment in Iran. Thus, maintaining economic relations with Iran has been a crucial concern for China. (Shen 2006)

On the other hand, maintaining cooperation with the US—as the main trade partner, has also been important for China. In this respect, it is rather difficult for China to keep both sides—Iran and the US as its partners, since it requires a delicate balance. The rapprochement policy of China toward Iran has been of concern for the US administration. China neither has wished to risk its trade relations with the US, nor to risk its energy and trade cooperation with Iran. Accordingly, there have been several instances in which China had to review its relations with both sides. One of these instances was observed when the Chinese company Sinopec-Chinese Petroleum and Chemical Corporation, decided to make an investment in

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<sup>9</sup> "Iran'da yerli nükleer santral" (National nuclear plant in Iran), *BBC News*, 30 December 2007, accessed online at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2007/12/071230\\_iran\\_nuclear.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2007/12/071230_iran_nuclear.shtml) on 15 February 2007.

Iran in 2004 for more than 20 million dollars, although the US declared that it would penalize foreign companies that invest more than 20 million dollars in Iran. (Ogutcu and Ma 2007: 111) What was more challenging is that, this investment was made at a time when tension has been dominating Washington-Tehran relations due to US efforts to address the Iranian nuclear issue in the UN Security Council.

On October 28, 2004 a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ was signed between China and Iran on oil and gas. (Shen 2006: 51) This agreement stated that China would purchase 10 million tons of oil from Iran annually in the next twenty-five years, in exchange for allowing Sinopec to develop Iran’s Yadavaran oil field. (Liangxiang 2005: 4-5) In the immediate aftermath of the ‘Memorandum of Understanding,’ China declared its opposition to addressing the issue of Iran’s nuclear programme in the UN Security Council. (Blumenthal 2005: 12) Consequently, China has opposed the draft resolution in 2005, arguing that a solution has to be found by the IAEA. (Shen 2006: 64) Nevertheless, to avoid from running into conflict with the US, China voted for the referral of Iran’s nuclear programme in the IAEA Meeting<sup>10</sup> on 4 February 2006, on the condition that the Council took no action before March.<sup>11</sup> Other than Washington’s continuous pressure on Beijing, China’s adherence to the NPT was also influential in its voting attitude on the IAEA’s meeting.<sup>12</sup>

It appears that China wishes to be perceived by the international community as a reliable state contributing to nuclear nonproliferation. Moreover, China wants to demonstrate itself as a powerful state contributing to international security. On the other hand, since China has been sensitive about external interference into its own internal affairs over human rights issues, it is thus more tolerable toward Iran’s claim on right to produce nuclear energy. (ibid. p. 58) China has then respected Iran’s right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purpose while remaining committed to regulations defined by the IAEA, based on the NPT.

## 5. COMPARISON OF THE MAJOR COUNTRIES’ ATTITUDES TOWARD IRAN’S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

In the following, the US policies will be compared with those of Europe, Russia and China. Due to complexities associated with the nuclear proliferation and the events of 9/11, the Bush administration has reformulated US strategy on WMD proliferation. The new strategy included preemptive and even preventive military action. Furthermore, it looks for an alliance but will not be constrained by an alliance. In fact, the US National Security Strategies of 2002 and of 2006 have shown the Bush administration’s willingness to act preemptively vis-à-vis imminent threats. This is in the wider context of US security strategy today. In light of the growing problems of nuclear proliferation, since 9/11 the Middle East has become the focus of US foreign policy. The Bush administration continues its dual policy of ‘War on Terror’ and democratization of the region.

Focusing specifically on Iran, the US has applied an ‘active containment’ policy. There are several characteristics of this policy. Firstly, the US has searched for the support of the

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<sup>10</sup> 35 Member Board of Governors of the IAEA voted 27 against 3 to report Iran to the UN Security Council.

<sup>11</sup> “Iran reported to Security Council,” *BBC News*, 4 February 2006, accessed online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4680294.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4680294.stm) 17 May 2007.

<sup>12</sup> China signed NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) in 1992.

other major powers to contain Iran. Secondly, the US has applied unilateral action, particularly in the international financial system to contain Iran. For instance, in mid 2007, the US prohibited transactions with three Iranian financial institutions; Bank Melli, Bank Mellat and Bank Saderat. To convince the European allies to intensify the UN sanctions on Iran, in October 2007, the US charged the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (*Pasdaran*) of providing material support for terrorist organizations. (Zagorin 2008) Furthermore, in October 2007, Burns, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, told in a briefing on Iran:

Now, we very much hope that the Security Council will take up its responsibilities and pass a third Security Council resolution on the nuclear issue in the shortest possible time. But the United States, of course, has always reserved the right to act independently.

Thirdly, the US has searched for the collaboration of Arab allies in the 'active containment' policy. In January 2008, President Bush visited the Middle East to get support from Arab allies. During the Middle East trip, he told that extremists supported by the Iranian regime are threatening the stability in the Middle East and blamed Iran of sponsoring the terrorists groups, intimidating its neighbors and refusing to be transparent about its nuclear programme and ambitions.<sup>13</sup>

However, in November 2007, the American National Intelligence Estimate stated that in 2003 Iran halted its nuclear weapons programme in response to foreign pressure, and as of mid 2007 had not resumed work. Regarding this report, it can be argued that Iran currently does not have a nuclear programme, thus is not an imminent threat. If Iran will restart the stalled programme, it will not be until before late 2009, and probably later, to be technically capable of producing enough nuclear material to construct a bomb.<sup>14</sup> This information contradicts the Bush administration's 'active containment' policy toward Iran (Hollis 2008: 5), and reduces the significance of the necessity for new sanctions. (Baer 2007) Nevertheless, on 8 February 2008 in the International Herald Tribune, it was reported that Iran has begun to deploy a new generation of machinery—centrifuges known as IR-2, to produce nuclear fuel. In this respect, despite the NIE findings, there are hesitations in the US about Iran's nuclear programme. Furthermore, US President Bush has stated his disagreement with the idea that the recent NIE lowered the threat coming from Iran. (Sanger and Sciolino 2005)

In fact, tension so far between Iran and the US remains high over Iran's nuclear activities. Whereas, Iran claims that the NPT permits Iran to enrich uranium for civilian use, the US insists that Iran's so-called 'peaceful' programme is in reality "a cover for the ultimate development of nuclear weapons and a threat to its interests in the region as well as Israel's security and survival."<sup>15</sup> The US is concerned that once technology has been mastered Iran might withdraw from the NPT. Thus, today, the US considers that heightened sanctions and increased isolation of Iran alongside diplomacy are required to stop Iran's quest for nuclear capability.<sup>16</sup> The Bush administration also keeps the military option—including air strikes on

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<sup>13</sup> "President Bush discusses Importance of Freedom in the Middle East," accessed online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080111-1.html> on 12 February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," National Intelligence Estimate, November 2007.

<sup>15</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States 2002, accessed online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html> on 28 January 2007.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on recent US policy toward Iran see: Nicholas Burns, "United States Foreign

nuclear facilities, on the table, and if necessary would act alone to defend its interests.

The increase of tensions between US and Iran has both political and economic consequences, which might negatively affect the interests of EU countries, such as the rise of petroleum prices and a regional security dilemma. The Europeans also want to avoid another war in the Middle East. Moreover, there are converging views between the US and the EU/EU-3 on the seriousness of Iran's nuclear ambitions. Both want to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. They agree that a unified effort is required to address the Iranian nuclear threat. In this regard, along with the US, the EU/EU-3 demands Iran to act in accordance with the decisions of the IAEA and the UN Security Council, and to continue to exert pressure on Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities permanently. However, unlike the US, which keeps sticks by the efficiency of tough sanctions and even military option, the EU/EU-3 has avoided a hot conflict believing that an isolated Iran would be radicalized. Thus, the EU has preferred diplomacy. This strategy of the EU has also been influenced by the attractiveness of "Iranian oil, the large market it offers, and its strategic location in the Persian Gulf and as a gateway for natural resources from Central Asian countries." (Simbar 2005: 65) In short, the EU has applied a policy of 'conditional engagement' or 'constructive engagement'. Though the EU has been critical about Iran's human rights record, support given to terrorist activities and its nuclear programme, it has aimed at improving Iranian behavior through diplomatic coercion. (Bowen and Kidd 2004: 268; Freedman 1999: 62)

Nevertheless, recognizing that the diplomatic option was far from helpful in building any cooperation between the international community and Iran, and worried by Iran's attitude, the EU has recently changed its attitude on imposing sanctions.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the EU acted along with the US and supported a UN resolution in November 2005 on the human rights situation in Iran.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the EU agreed with the US to impose economic sanctions on Iran in line with UN Resolution 1737<sup>19</sup> adopted on 23 December 2006, banning trade with Iran in all items, materials, equipment, goods and technology which could contribute to the country's enrichment activities. (Leopold 2006) Yet, with respect to the option of military action, the High Representative for CFSP, Javier Solana told that the EU is not considering military action.<sup>20</sup>

The second UN Security Council Resolution 1747 passed on 24 March 2007,<sup>21</sup> including a ban of Iranian arms sales and the freezing of assets of several Iranian revolutionary leaders. In March 2007, the Council of EU emphasized the fact that Iran had not complied with the

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Policy Toward Iran," 29 March 2007, accessed online at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2007/82374.htm> on 10 February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent detailed analysis of the EU policy vis-a-vis Iran's nuclear programme see: Sauer (2007).

<sup>18</sup> "UN resolution on the Human Rights situation in Iran," 21 November 2005, accessed online at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/gashc3841.doc.htm> on 12 December 2007

<sup>19</sup> Resolution 1737 called for the enforcement of sanctions mainly including measures to prevent the provision to Iran of technical assistance of training, financial assistance or other services and the transfer of financial resources or services related to Iran's nuclear program, while excluding any military action.

<sup>20</sup> "US, EU split on handling nuke defiance," *The Washington Times*, 30 April 2006, accessed online at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/world/2006...20513-3903r.htm> on 17 March 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Resolution 1747 aimed at imposing further sanctions on Iran and it reaffirmed that Iran must take the steps required by the IAEA Board.

terms of the UN Security Council Resolution 1737 and reasserted its support for the UN Security Council. At the same time, the Council of EU reaffirmed its continued support for efforts to find a negotiated long-term solution.<sup>22</sup> However, UN Resolution 1803,<sup>23</sup> which was approved on 3 March 2008, has reflected the international community's ongoing serious concerns about Iran's nuclear programme.

Despite concerns of the West, China and Russia have shown reluctance to implement sanctions against Iran. The Russians are claiming that there is no evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme. Yet, two contradictory positions are observed in Russia's attitude. On the one hand, Russia is Iran's main nuclear partner and accepts its rights provided by the NPT; even one might say that it defends Iran's nuclear programme in order to maximize its domestic interests. On the other hand, Russia has concerns about the intentions of Iran. Yet, it prefers negotiations since the mutual relationship has been economically and politically beneficial for them. Unlike the US, Russia argues that cooperation with Iran makes it easier to monitor its programme for the international community. In this regard, together with China, Russia voted for the referral of Iran's nuclear programme in the IAEA Meeting on 4 February 2006, on the condition that the Council took no action before March.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, when the pressure of the international community rose in the aftermath of the February 2006 IAEA meeting, Russia offered Iran to continue its nuclear programme on Russian territory, (Vakil 2006: 58) which was backed by the international community.<sup>25</sup> Iran has refused this proposal claiming that it is their right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes on its own territory, yet also appearing positive that some, but not all of its nuclear fuel can be produced outside Iran. (Bozorgmehr 2006)

On 16 October 2007, President Putin visited Tehran, the first visit to Tehran by a Russian president since World War II, to attend the Summit of the Caspian Sea. (Saralayeva 2007) During the Summit, President Putin said that, 'peaceful nuclear activities must be allowed and cautioned against using force to resolve the dispute over Iran.'<sup>26</sup> (Penketh and Sheikholeslami 2007) Yet, he refused to confirm whether Moscow would supply nuclear fuel to Iran's nuclear plant at Bushehr once it is completed.<sup>27</sup>

It is noted that although Russia has some concerns, despite growing US pressure, prefers to remain silent. Thus, it can be argued that Russia's policy is in pursuit of the most effective means of maximizing its national interest and establishing Russia as a respected international player, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In fact, Russia and China have insisted that everything provided to Iran has been for

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<sup>22</sup> 24 March 2007, accessed online at [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/declarations/93281.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/declarations/93281.pdf) on 18 March 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Resolution 1803 imposes a new round of sanctions against Iran that tightens restrictions on Iran's proliferation sensitive nuclear activities, increases vigilance over Iranian banks, urges to inspect cargo going into and out of the country and requests IAEA to report on whether Iran has complied with demand to suspend uranium enrichment.

<sup>24</sup> "Iran reported to Security Council," *BBC News*, 4 February 2006, accessed online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4680294.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4680294.stm) on 17 May 2007.

<sup>25</sup> "Is the international community behind Russia's plan?," Council on Foreign Relations, 28 February 2006, accessed online at [www.cfr.org/publication/9985/](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9985/) on 11 March 2007.

<sup>26</sup> "Russia backs Iran nuclear rights," *BBC News*, 16 October 2007, accessed online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7046258.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7046258.stm) on 20 November 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

peaceful purposes only. Yet, mainly due to American pressure China canceled most of its assistance to Iran. Today, China faces a serious dilemma with respect to Iran's nuclear programme. On the one hand, China's growing demand for energy and its economic interests makes Iran a strategic partner. Hence, China does not want to be a part of US-led pressure group to implement sanctions which would risk its national interests. On the other hand, maintaining good relations with Washington also carries vital importance for China, since the US has been China's key trading partner. Acting outside the US would challenge China's relations with Washington, which might also damage Chinese national interest. Thus, until now, China has abstained from using its veto power at the UN Security Council. (Vakil 2006: 56) To conclude, similar to Russia, China prefers diplomatic efforts and dialogue rather than sanctions. Overall, despite the international community's hesitations, China, similar to Russia, wants to counter US unilateralism and its global hegemonic intentions, by strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with Iran. (Gundzik 2005)

## 6. CONCLUSION

This analysis on the attitudes of US, EU/EU-3, Russia and China has shown that there is no common comprehensive agreement on the solution towards Iran's nuclear puzzle. The US sees a mature and serious Iranian nuclear threat to develop by the year 2010. Official US policy is to leave all the options on the table, as well as using diplomatic activity through the EU-3 and sanctions through the UN Security Council. Yet, the US in particular has problems in convincing the international community that Iran is a grave threat to the Middle East security as well as to global security, due to mistakes done in the Iraq case. The EU, though acknowledges the right of Iran to develop civil nuclear energy but also suspects that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. The EU has been the main international actor offering a coercive diplomatic approach to contain the Iran's nuclear programme, which has not succeeded yet. But this cannot be denounced as a complete failure. The EU is in a position to push the international community's attitudes on this issue towards more dialogue, even if it cannot impose its will in Tehran.

The EU's effort for 'critical dialogue' with Iran which aimed to solve the crisis through direct negotiations seemed to work well especially when Iran agreed to abandon its nuclear programme in early 2004. However after the election of President Ahmadinejad, Iran's nuclear programme has become more problematic. With a new approach, the EU acted with the US in taking the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council in order to have an approval for the imposition of a 'stick' policy through economic sanctions. Though their vantage point appears to become closer with the US, it is not identical. Since the 1990's the US has favored 'an active containment' policy, hoping to isolate the Iranian regime, thereby causing a 'regime change' in Iran. As part of its 'active containment' strategy, the US supported a number of sanctions ranging from political to economic and repeated references to military action. Yet, the US has little independent diplomatic or economic leverage over Iran, and needs the support of the international community to give meaning to any threat of economic lost. The EU has resisted the US calls to intensify the extent of sanctions against Iran, which would go beyond the resolution of the UN Security Council. The EU has preferred a 'constructive engagement' policy. It has acted more or less in a united fashion, but since it had lasted long, some internal divisions occur, as is already happening today with the declarations of the new French President Sarkozy. Though France has been rejecting US

efforts to isolate Iran, recently President Sarkozy has indicated that Iran's nuclear programme would be the cause of the biggest crisis on the international scene, and that they will work jointly with President Bush to convince Iran to give up its nuclear programme.<sup>28</sup>

Russia and China, on the other hand, do not see Iran as an existential threat. The Russian and Chinese approaches might be a sign of resisting US hegemony and control over the Middle East and Central Asia. This might be the reason for their strengthened economic, political and diplomatic relations with Iran in the post-Cold War period. Russia supports the IAEA's continued investigations and wants to take into account the progress achieved so far. China also favors diplomatic efforts.

For its part Iran has been emphasizing honesty and sincerity of its cooperation with the IAEA. President Ahmadinejad has repeatedly told that Iran would never abandon its purely peaceful programme. Yet, the nuclear issue has become highly politicized in Iran. There exists a widely shared national consensus and public belief that Iran has right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, if not for nuclear weapons. (Gheissari and Nasr 2005: 186) There is a divergence of opinion between hard-liners allied with President Ahmadinejad, who support Iran's search to become a nuclear power, and pragmatists who search for political benefits from the West and might accept limits on Iran's nuclear programme. (MacLeod 2007a) Hardliners are closely associated with the Supreme Leader Khamanei. They have enormous influence on national security planning through the command of key institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards, the judiciary and the Guardian Council. (Takeyh 2004-05: 55) Hardliners are not necessarily afraid of sanctions and coercion. In contrast, pragmatists accept certain restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme. Pragmatists do not call for the halt of the programme, but support work within guidelines of the NPT. In other words, pragmatists want to sustain Iran's nuclear programme while maintaining its international relations. (ibid. p. 56-57) In the last decade, opposition to Ahmadinejad has risen above the traditional split in Iranian politics between pragmatic conservatives and reformists. Opposition has evolved around Karroubi, a moderate cleric, and Rafsanjani, a former President. (MacLeod 2007a) Western diplomats say that the UN sanctions might challenge hardliners, and thus pragmatists might gain more support.<sup>29</sup> Yet, in October 2007, President Ahmadinejad has replaced Iran's pragmatic conservative top nuclear negotiator Larijani with his ally (MacLeod 2007b) though Larijani had been criticizing Ahmadinejad's more provocative position, but not nuclear programme itself. (Guldemann 2007: 171) Anyhow, Larijani was in favor of reviving talks with the EU. (MacLeod 2007a) Yet, as the possibility and need for compromise with the EU has become a part of Iranian discourse, voices of pragmatists might be more assertive in the future.

To conclude, this analysis demonstrates that the attitudes of the international community have not been monolithic. Yet after years of having different approaches, there has been a shift for a common position among the Western countries since 2006, though not a total one because the EU opposes the option of a military strike. This 'Western approach' can be differentiated from the Russian and Chinese approaches. Russia and China have supported diplomatic bargaining strategy of the EU-3 rather than imposing sanctions. Considering the overlapping issues of concern, this article puts forward an optimistic scenario that might lead

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<sup>28</sup> "Bush and Sarkozy Declare Iran Aim," *BBC News*, 7 November 2007, accessed online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7083339.stm> on 11 November 2007.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion on understanding effects of the international demands on Iranian domestic policies see Fahri 2005: 20-21; Farhi 2001: 35-55.

to a successful solution on Iran's nuclear puzzle, based on the EU's method of diplomacy. Nevertheless, no real solution is expected in the short term, but there can be an opportunity under a new American administration along with a new government in Iran after 2009, since the new US President will be elected in November 2008, and the new Iranian President will be elected in mid-2009. As discussion of relations with the US has become more specific in Iran in terms of open calls for direct relations, and as already some contact has begun on issues related to Iraq, there is more reason to be optimistic. After US elections, there might be reconsideration on the question of how to deal with Iran's nuclear puzzle. The optimistic scenario may be the next US administration's opt for staying on the diplomatic track and reestablishment of the European locomotive role in the short-run, and Washington's initiation of a strategy to engage Iran in a meaningful dialogue in the long-run.

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