

Iran—a Test Case for Transatlantic Relations

Transatlantic Strategy Group, Washington D. C., 2. – 5. May 2005

Between May 2 and May 5, the KAS Washington office held a meeting of the Transatlantic Strategy Group on the problem of Iran. German and French parliamentarians, diplomats, military officials and journalists came together with American experts on the Middle East, representatives of the administration as well as members of Congress to discuss possible solutions to the nuclear crisis in the Middle East.

I. The political situation in Washington

The political situation in the American capital is influenced by two fundamental changes, which penetrate all current questions - both in domestic and foreign policy sectors: the decline of the Democratic Party and the loss of ‘realists’ in both political camps.

The Democrats are faced with a fundamental problem. Simply put, their core issues (social security, minority rights, and a greater degree of government intervention) were already realized in the 1960s and early 1970s. Consequently, since the 1980s, their agenda has increasingly been pushed to the background. This decreasing relevance may lead in the future to a Republican-controlled government and Congress. In such an instance, an important element in the system of “checks and balances” is weakened. This is even more the case, since it appears to be a declared goal of the Republican Party strategy to permanently “crush” the Democrats.

Parallel to this development, over the last few years, the ‘realists’ in both parties have gradually lost their relevance and have not been able to fill their ranks with analogous new blood. Consequently, the groups of ideological and messianic-arguing personalities in both camps have become stronger.

The effect of both developments is a waning fundamental debate over central foreign policy (and domestic policy) questions. In the case of Iran, an intellectual, meaningful, and above all coherent discussion at the level of political decision-makers is not taking place. Instead, the parties try to best one another in their anti-Iran position, which is further fueled by the Israeli lobby in both camps. In the think tanks alone is the issue debated controversially and self-critically.

II. American positions on the Iran Question

There have been a series of developments over the last few months in the American position. Since the few advocates of a large military invasion in Iran (similar to the Iraq war) have virtually lost all weight, three additional positions have arisen in Washington since the beginning of 2005: first, there are those who believe that a regime change in

Tehran is needed urgently, and it must be advanced from the outside. This view, however, has recently, to a large extent lost support so that two positions remain.

The "hawks" assume that Iran intends to use its civil nuclear program to build an atomic weapon. Similar to North Korea, Tehran will give up the nuclear option neither through concessions nor through threats ("they will eat grass!"). Furthermore, the Europeans, regardless of their promises, would not in reality enact harsh measures against Iran. If diplomatic steps offer no real solution, the only option that remains, according to the hardliners, is military air strikes. Even if these strikes were unable to completely destroy the Iranian nuclear program (given the likelihood of still undiscovered facilities in Iran), the air strikes could cause major destruction to delay Iran's ability to get the bomb. Moreover, perhaps through the bombing, the domestic crisis would intensify and the collapse of the Mullah regime would be accelerated. The 'Neocons' have so far hoped in vain for the implosion of the government in Tehran and now take the view that air strikes could possibly accelerate this process. Although the Neocon contingency in the government has become smaller because of personnel changes, they are still found above all in the National Security Council (NSC).

The 'doves,' on the other hand, place the emphasis on diplomacy and believe that Iran, through a mixture of "carrots and sticks" can be enticed to giving up its nuclear ambitions. They support the attempts of the EU-3 (Germany, France, and Great Britain) to induce Iran into abandoning its nuclear capabilities through negotiations. The Russian offer to deliver fuel rods to Iran and to reprocess the spent fuel is widely regarded as a potential way out. The point is also made that there is no acute time pressure, as Iranian nuclear capabilities cannot be expected within the coming few months. The weaknesses of the diplomatic approach, however, are known, even to its own proponents. It is absolutely possible that Iran will regard its pursuit for nuclear weapons as a "win-win" situation: a nuclear Iran will almost be immune to external castigation or intervention - even in a severe crisis. It would also gain the national pride which comes with achieving nuclear status would reduce domestic pressure and unite the divided country. If this is the Iranian calculus, no incentives or concessions would effectually dissuade the Iranian leadership from striving for the bomb. Yet some interlocutors have pointed out, however that the "hawkish" position is not fully coherent either. A military operation - even if it would be selective air strikes - has incalculable effects. Moreover, the 'doves' stress that the attempt for a negotiated solution does not necessarily exclude the possibility for harder measures, should a diplomatic solution not be possible.

Both positions can be found in the Administration. While the State Department demonstratively supports the European negotiation path, the advisors in the NSC lean much more towards a harder line on Iran. The Pentagon has thus far been marginalized in this question because it is above all occupied with the situation in Iraq. In Congress, measured voices can be heard, which, in view of the complex situation for the USA, speak of no other possibility than at least initially supporting the European-led negotiations.

Thus - according to a Congressman - on the American side “a rhetorical moratorium” is needed.

Unity, however, can be found within the Administration with regard to the goal: neither an open negotiation process nor a partial reduction of the nuclear program are permissible (“This is not a bazaar.”). The goal is complete abandonment (cessation) of a full nuclear fuel cycle, or of uranium enrichment. Arguments that Iran is pursuing a nuclear program for energy production (in order to be able to place all available oil on the world market) are dismissed. Likewise rejected is the repeatedly asserted notion that Iran only wants to demonstrate its own power status and technological advancement with the civil nuclear program. The present oil production alone wastes more energy through the excess-gas burning than the nuclear plants of Busheer could ever produce. Also, the size and the structure of the Iranian nuclear program can only be explained through the intention of “breakout,” meaning the Iranian goal of abandoning the international nonproliferation regime, as soon as enough fissible material for atomic weapons has been produced.

It remains unclear though what significance the remaining goals of American policy on Iran - the establishment of a pro-Western regime and the prevention of an Iranian role as a “major player” in the region - will have.

III. Room For Transatlantic Tensions

Both the European and the American partners seem to recognize that the further course of the Iran problem is of existential importance for the transatlantic relationship. An imprudent surge ahead by the USA could lead to a catastrophic transatlantic break, as a lack of willingness by the Europeans to stick to their pledges of resolve vis a vis Iran could also do. It is not surprising that particularly Germany and France are viewed as the weak links in the front against Iran. On the other side, discreet voices can be heard on the advantages of transatlantic cooperation. The USA has had no relations with Iran for 26 years. Consequently, at present, an entire generation of American diplomats and military officials exist who have had no contact with Iran. Europe, instead, has maintained relations with Iran throughout the past decades and Washington can profit from this expertise. With its potentially positive, as well as negative consequences for the transatlantic relationship, the Iran question is even more explosive than the Iraq problem, where the (accepted) state of affairs is “we agree to disagree.”

Iranian policy aims to drive a wedge between Europe and America and to gain the support of the nonaligned movement. Tehran claims that uranium enrichment is acceptable under the terms of the Nonproliferation Treaty according to a country’s rights to furthering technological development. This is also the position taken by the moderate powers in Iran which both strive for a political transformation, but also cling to the right to a nuclear program. The goal of the European-American anti-Iran coalition must be to show the incongruity of these two goals to Iran. Which effect the election in Iran will have, still cannot be predicted. Presumably, the campaigning is responsible for the current, rhetorical accentuation of the Iranian position.

The 'wild card' both in the Middle East as well as in the transatlantic picture is Israel. There are hints that an Iranian nuclear program could never be accepted by Israel and would be handled unilaterally - if necessary. An Israeli military strike, however, would also include the USA, because Israeli fighter jets must fly over American-controlled air space. Consequently, a European-American consensus could be torpedoed with immeasurable consequences for the transatlantic relationship.

IV. Open Questions

Even in the very open debate among the representatives of think tanks it became clear, that both the American as well as the European strategy regarding Iran contain open questions and precarious presumptions:

1. Which 'carrots' exist for a negotiated solution?

There is a consensus that Iran – in light of the attractiveness of the nuclear option – expects extensive concessions in order to cease pursuing uranium enrichment (what in their view is a legal step). Also apparent is that truly significant 'carrots' like security guarantees or non-aggression promises, can only be given by the USA. Presently, there is no willingness to make such concessions. Allowing airplane replacement parts to be delivered via the USA is more of a gesture than a real concession.

The question of credibility of a substantial American concession also arises. Would an American security guarantee for Iran be upheld, if a conflict arose between Iran and Israel? Moreover, a rapprochement for both sides is only slightly imaginable. The USA categorically dismisses resuming diplomatic relations. At the same time Iran refused unofficial American approaches like those advances by the Clinton administration or the American offer of help after the earthquake catastrophe (Dole-Mission). In addition, the problem also exists for the USA considering that such concessions would mean accepting the existence of the Tehran regime. This stands in diametrical contrast to the American goal of 'regime change'.

2. What are the 'sticks'?

There are conceivable measures which would do damage to the Iranian regime, without necessarily leading to an escalation of crisis. The USA could cede security guarantees for Iran's neighboring states (the Gulf Cooperation Council). Also, Iran threatened to block the shipping traffic in the Strait Of Hormuz. The USA could carry out a demonstrative maneuver in the region to show Iran its limits.

However, such limited measures sanctions with regard to Iran are rather limited. The American threat to precipitate a 'regime change' comprises a grave danger. Indeed the moderate powers in Iran stress the push for such a regime change. However, they want to

achieve this through their own power, and not together with the USA. If Washington would actively try to topple the government, the Mullah-regime would be backed even by the pro-democratic forces in Iran.

Currently, the key American threat seems to be to take the issue to the United Nations. It is unclear, what can be achieved through it. If no unity can be achieved in the Security Council, there will be no UN sanctions against Iran. Moderate voices in Washington believe that this is precisely the goal of the American hawks. By showing that the UN is incapable of dealing with the situation, they can not only provide evidence for their prejudices against international organizations, but can also justify unilateral military action.

3. Is there a 'military card'?

The option of air strikes on nuclear facilities and against the entire military-industrial complex was again discussed very seriously in Washington over the last few days. Still, the Pentagon is constantly updating its contingency planning and further reconnaissance missions are flown over Iran to identify military targets. However, carrying out a military operation is difficult, even if there are only comparatively few number of targets to be destroyed. Due to the fact that each major military target consists of a number of sub-targets which must be hit in multiple ways, the entire targeting list quickly adds up to around 500 positions. Several targets are hardened or located in heavily populated regions. Therefore, the required military effort is enormous, particularly in light of the actual difficulties in Iran. In addition, there is currently no domestic political campaign in the USA to find public support for such action. There is just as little 'alliance management' to get the European partners on board. After all, a main ally is lacking, as Tony Blair has committed himself to a negotiated solution.

4. What comes after a military solution?

Leaving alone the practical problems of military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities - the long term the consequences of such a solution are not sufficiently thought through. What happens when the Mullah regime collapses? Is the US prepared for a longer engagement in the country in order to stabilize the region? Which lessons are to be taken from the serious problems in Iraq for a military mission in Iran? How can Tehran be prevented from reacting to air strikes by carrying out terrorist acts (eventually with chemical weapons) in Israel or other countries? How can the oil shortages be compensated for when the new regime in Iran no longer exports oil to Europe (and finds willing takers in China and India)? If it is foreseeable that a military strike – regardless of its practical feasibility – would damage American/Western interests in the long-run, then the credibility of such a threat is likely to suffer.

5. Would a nuclear Iran be acceptable?

In view of the weaknesses both of the diplomatic and military approach, the question arises whether a nuclear-armed Iran (similar to India and Pakistan) could be acceptable?

From the viewpoint of the American interlocutors the answer is "no", since Iran is regarded as a fundamentally evil regime which actively supports terrorist groups. Furthermore, in light of the short flight time of nuclear missiles, Israel could never resign itself to a nuclear Iran. Even a more or less democratic system in Tehran would cause the neighboring states in the region to likewise pursue nuclear weapons. The Non-Proliferation Treaty, which is already filled with contradictions, would be completely hollowed out and the security situation in the 'broader Middle East' would be clearly worse than today.

IV. Conclusion

Regardless of the extremely complex situation, some optimism is possible. Time is currently working against Iran because the transatlantic coalition has still no cracks and an Iranian nuclear capability is not directly impending. Europe and the USA are also aware of the transatlantic explosive force of this problem.

It is problematic that both sides exhibit no coherent answers for the Iran case and that regardless of all the 'carrots and sticks', Iran still clings to its desire for the bomb and its nuclear program is developing further.

A military procedure by the USA has great uncertainties. For President Bush, the question will arise, however, at the latest in the coming year, whether he wants to be remembered in the history books, as the one who curbed Iran. Together with the inestimable influence of the 'wild card' Israel, this could lead to air strikes against Iran - irrespective of the incalculable consequences (not at least for the elections in Germany).

