The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Iran in the Crosshairs as Russia and China Drift Toward US Position

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

[*With the United States and its European allies pressing for Security Council censure of Iran, resistance from China and Russia have provided the major obstacle to legitimizing a new Middle East war. Kaveh Afrasiabi, among the best informed of Middle East correspondents, here documents the weakening of the Chinese and Russian positions in the face of US pressures and the increasing isolation facing Iran.*]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has warned that the current US-led push for United Nations sanctions against Iran could turn out to be a "pretext for war", and yet both Russia and China, long thought to be opponents of any sanctions, are now inching toward the US strategy with regard to Iran.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov

It is China that has taken the lead, by putting its weight behind the yet-to-be-submitted set of European "conditional incentives" for Iran to give up its uranium-enrichment program, which has had the effect of forcing Moscow to follow suit.

There is, after all, a diplomatic minuet involved here, with Beijing and Moscow carefully crafting every step according to the ebbs and flows of a fluid crisis that features multiple players with distinct, shared, parallel and opposing interests.

The news of China's slow accommodation with the US-EU plan was broken by US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in his May 10 congressional testimony. He assured members that China "has agreed in principle" to play along. This was followed by a similar report by the Los Angeles Times that Tang Jiaxuan, a leading member of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, has called for an Iranian moratorium on all enrichment-related activities.

As expected, this has had the desired effect, from the US point of view, of mollifying Russia, which has been seething at the recent US criticisms of its human rights and energy policies. Thus at a press conference with his Chinese counterpart, Li Zhaoxing, Lavrov echoed China's backing of the European Union proposal by stating, "We will suggest this approach and will expect Iran to respond to it in a constructive way. We are firmly convinced that this is the only way to settle the situation."

The pertinent question, of course, is what will Moscow and Beijing do once the EU proposal is formally submitted and rejected by Iran, in light of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's preemptive "don't give a damn" reaction? Are they willing to set aside their opposition to UN sanctions? Another question is: How far are China and Russia willing to go to sacrifice their relations with Iran in order to maintain healthy relations with the United States?

The latter question touches on, among other things, the future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Unfortunately, contrary to the earlier official announcements, particularly by China's officials, the SCO is now on the verge of changing its mind about expanding its membership and accepting Iran, as well as Pakistan and India, as new members.

"There are no plans to fundamentally enlarge the SCO. I don't think the number of SCO members will greatly increase in the foreseeable future," Lavrov said at a press conference on Tuesday, exactly one month prior to the SCO summit in Shanghai, in reaction to the news that the US government has asked Russia for "explanation" about the news that Ahmadinejad plans to attend the June summit.

In turn, the Iranian press has reacted negatively to Russia's turnabout on Iran's membership in the SCO and has questioned the wisdom of Ahmadinejad's participation in the absence of full membership. Iran has only been given observer status so far. Without doubt, should Moscow keep firm on its present line against Iran's inclusion in SCO, this will be interpreted as a major diplomatic setback for Iran and will negatively influence the course of Iran-Russian relations.

EU's old proposal sold as new

Whereas a top US official has admitted that the EU's "new" package is actually a "dusting off" of the pre-existing proposals "on the table", the Western media have uniformly praised the "new European package of incentives", including the offer of a modern light-water reactor.

In fact, while the final package has yet to be unveiled, and there are reports of serious US misgivings about any EU pledge of nuclear assistance to Iran, awaiting the verdict of the upcoming London meeting of the Permanent Five plus Germany, it is worth remembering that in November 2004, the EU-3 (Germany, France and Britain) signed an agreement in Paris with Iran that called for "cooperation" on "nuclear issues".

The Paris Agreement is dead, long live the Paris Agreement. The agreement stated: "The E3/EU recognize Iran's rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty exercised in conformity with its obligations under the treaty, without discrimination." The agreement called for

Iran's suspension of its enrichment-related activities on a temporary basis. There is in fact no ambiguity about this aspect of the document that reads: "The E3/EU recognize that this suspension is a voluntary confidence-building measure and not a legal obligation."

Iranian Nuclear sites

By all indications, Iran faithfully implemented the terms of the Paris Agreement until January, when it resumed enrichment activities after the EU-3/EU's radical departure from their own agreement by calling for a permanent suspension, after the United States' blunt criticisms of the Paris Agreement. Turning history upside down, Western media pundits have now manufactured a consent about Iran's blameworthy behavior breaking the Paris Agreement, when in reality it was the surrogate Europe that caved in to US pressure and disregarded its own pledge to Iran - to respect Iran's nuclear rights "without discrimination".

Consequently, the EU is about to hurl an old package under new wraps, deemed as "generous" by the German negotiator, Michael Schaffer, in his recent communication to this author, without an iota of guilty conscience or moral qualm about its own pattern of misbehavior toward Iran. The irony that the EU has turned a completly blind eye to Brazil's simultaneous declaration of an ambitious new plan to accelerate its nuclear-fuel program, simply because the world "trusts Brazil" (but don't tell that to Brazil's neighbors!), has simply escaped the attention of Western media.

Jealous of Moscow's monopoly of Iran's nuclear market, the EU's latest proposal is partially aimed at preempting the recent Russian announcement of plans to build two new nuclear reactors in Iran, by potentially luring Iran away from such a deal and toward the more technologically advanced European nuclear market. Russian policymakers would indeed be remiss to overlook the purely self-interest elements of the latest European proposal.

Another clue to the EU's perceived hypocrisy, from Iran's point of view, is the recent joint EU/GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) statement expressing concerns about Iran's nuclear program, coinciding with new, and more energetic, efforts by the GCC with respect to the disputed islands of Abu Mussa, Little Tunb and Big Tunb. The EU's hidden tactic is, in other words, to lend support to the GCC over these Iran-controlled islands, to put additional pressure on the nuclear front.

The SCO historic bloc

Surely the SCO would be hobbled by new headaches caused by a significant expansion of membership that would, in turn, add to its qualitative weight and geopolitical significance. But to assume that the negative side effects will necessarily outweigh the advantages is to succumb to the seeds of doubt planted by the West, which is wary of the emergence of a formidable anti-North Atlantic Treaty Organization counterweight via the SCO. The SCO, now and in the prospective future, is not so much an anti-NATO coalition as a potential countervailing bloc to the United States' interventionist policies. But surely the time is ripe to take the SCO to the next level.

Certainly, this is not to fall into the naive analyses of an impending "new Cold War" favored by certain Russian politicians, given the complexities of the post-Cold War world order. Taking account of these complexities, including a certain lack of fit between the geo-economic and geopolitical considerations, China and Russia would be well advised to eschew their present drift against the SCO's expansion.

One potential advantage of Iran's membership in the SCO is that it would allow China and Russia to influence more positively Iran's foreign policy and, by implication, the Muslim World. The SCO's chief concerns about terrorism can clearly benefit from Iran's inclusion, as this would translate into greater regional cooperation against Islamist extremism in, among others, Russia's and China's Muslim-led regions as well as the entire Central Asia-Caspian basin.

The SCO calls for "force sharing", and this would also translate into enhanced military cooperation among the member states, which, if inclusive of Iran, would have net benefit vis-a-vis the common Russia-China concerns about the undue expansion of NATO in the East.

Concerning the latter, there is talk of a NATO "encirclement of Iran" in Washington these days, championed by certain leading Republican senators, such as Senator John Warner, who have praised NATO's decision to more than double its forces in Afghanistan and to expand ties with some of Iran's other neighbors such as Azerbaijan. This must resonate with Moscow, which has similarly complained of NATO expansion and "encirclement" post-September 11, 2001.

A point of no return

Both China and Russia are on record opposing the Security Council's recourse to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter declaring Iran a threat to peace, in which case the US would be justified, from the prism of international law, in taking unilateral military action against Iran's nuclear facilities. And yet instead of exploring the perfectly viable options of comprehensive international monitoring of Iran's limited, contained enrichment program, Russian and Chinese policymakers are slowly but surely adjusting to precisely such a scenario, whose net effect would be detrimental to their own geopolitical vested interests, particularly if war breaks out.

Chinese spokesman calls for diplomacy
and oversight of Iran's nuclear program

Already, Washington is awash with self-justifying arguments for war against Iran, the main one being that Iran is on the verge of reaching a "point of no return" in terms of nuclear know-how and technology. The other argument is that this situation resembles the pre-World War II period of appeasement, as if 2006 were 1938 again.

Indeed, it is fascinating how many prominent journalists, academics, and present and/or former officials in the US have lent their voices to the "never again" 1938 scenario. The long list includes the Washington Post's Charles Krauthammer, Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis, and former secretary of state Henry Kissinger. To his credit, Kissinger has, however, nuanced this alarmist view with a prudent call for US-inclusive multilateral talks with Iran.

Unfortunately, in the present debates in the US on Iran, the upper hand belongs to those nay sayers who have persuaded the administration of President George W. Bush to turn down Ahmadinejad's call for direct talks, arguing that the "UN is the best forum". Since when have the same neo-conservatives, who have hammered the UN for six consecutive years, become such big fans of the UN?

Iran's President Ahmedinejad announces
that Japan has nuclear weapons

As the heavyweights gear up for the next round, portending more serious initiatives against Iran at the Security Council, both China and Russia need seriously to re-examine the present drift of their policy, which will only strengthen the United States' "unipolar moment" and weaken their hoped-for multilateralist breakout. The stakes in the Iranian nuclear crisis transcend Iran.

Kaveh L Afrasiabi, PhD, is the author of After Khomeini: New Directions in Iran's Foreign Policy (Westview Press) and Iran's Nuclear Program: Debating Facts Versus Fiction.

This is an abbreviated version of an article that appeared in Asia Times on May 19, 2006. Published at Japan Focus on May 23, 2006.

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