



RUSSIA  
— in —  
GLOBAL  
AFFAIRS

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A FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE EAST

KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN, VLADIMIR A. ORLOV,  
PYOTR STEGNY, ILTER TURAN

20 YEARS OF THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

KIRILL KOKTYSH, MURAT LAUMULIN, VITALY VOROBYOV

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*Belarus: The Spiral of Independence*

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# RUSSIA in GLOBAL AFFAIRS

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# A Labyrinth with No Walls

Who Needs a War with Iran and Why

*Vladimir A. Orlov*

“The nuclear bomb is a fire against humanity rather than a weapon for defense. The possession of nuclear bombs is not a source of pride; it is rather disgusting and shameful. And even more shameful is the threat to use or to use such weapons, which is not even comparable to any crime committed throughout the history.”

Thus spoke not some European pacifist. Thus spoke Iran’s current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He uttered these words not in half-whisper over a cup of tea in Tehran, but in New York, at the United Nations NPT Review Conference in May 2010, in front of an audience representing more than 180 signatories to the treaty. He was the sole head of state at that conference, and for that reason under the rules of diplomatic protocol he was the first to take the floor, however ironic that might look to some.

The delegates were listening with half an ear, and many preferred to leave the room altogether. Iran has ever less credibility, even with those who have no prejudice against it. And there is growing suspicion around the world that the Iranian leadership has put its stake precisely on what it has been cursing from high rostrums — on the possession of nuclear weapons in the near future.

If so, Tehran must be stopped. At any cost. And the sooner, the better. Because a nuclear Iran (many say) is unacceptable from the standpoint of key actors of international relations.

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### SLIDING TOWARDS WAR

Of late I spent much time on the road in the hope of figuring out: Does the world really find Iran scaring? Does it really believe the rumors of its miraculous nuclear capability? And is it getting ready for war?

Tehran's firm supporters are scarce, if Cuba or Venezuela are not counted, of course. The net effect of "Iran's brilliant diplomacy" in the Non-Aligned Movement is meager. At best, it has scored a handful of points in its favor. As for Latin America, it is too far away from the zone of would-be combat operations.

Iran's neighbors in the Persian Gulf impressed me the most. There, in the first place in Saudi Arabia, anti-Iranian sentiment turned out to be even stronger than it looked from Moscow. "Down with it!" was the key message of what I heard from diplomats, military and political scientists. And although some experts of authority, first and foremost Prince Turki al-Faisal, claimed that military strikes against Iran would be counterproductive, one still has the impression that most of his fellow countrymen would be only glad to see precisely that march of events. Besides, the outcome of the war in Libya and the current turmoil in Syria contribute to their certainty that Iran — its nuclear infrastructure and its political regime — can and must be ruined.

On the other hand, the region is afraid of hostilities with Iran. Such a war, should it break out, would yield no gains for the United Arab Emirates, which, although it has an outstanding territorial dispute with Iran, benefits from trade with it. Nor will it benefit Oman, which has its own "controlling stake" in the Strait of Hormuz and which conducts an independent foreign policy. Bahrain finds it scaring, because its ruling family, leaning against Saudi and U.S. military might against the will of the Shiite majority, may fall the first victim to Iran's "asymmetric response." And it plays on the nerves of Qatar, usually arrogant, self-confident and boastful of the smart conversion of super-wealth into political investments — building stadiums for the World Soccer Cup under the cover of air defense missile systems would not be the most comfortable arrangement. But, I suspect, nobody in Doha would object to a blitzkrieg against Iran, fought by somebody else's army.

If there is a place where Tehran may count on sympathy, it is Europe. "Will European states today join in a war against Iran?" a for-



mer IAEA director-general, Hans Blix, of Sweden, asked at a Brussels conference in February. "In the Iraq war, several European countries joined to eradicate WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) that did not exist. Are European governments ready now to join in the eradication of Iranian WMD intentions that may or may not exist? [...] Iran has not launched an attack on anybody, nor does any attack seem imminent on their part, and nor will the Security Council authorize the use of armed force." The European audience responded to Blix's statement with applause. But his question "Who are you with, Europe?" was left unanswered. Another European expert, Erzsebet Rozsa, of Hungary, presented an excellent analysis exposing the counter-productiveness of EU sanctions against Iran. Another spate of applause followed. In the meantime, sanctions are already approved by the European Union.

Bogged down in economic problems, Europe stays reluctant to acknowledge that and is just simulating hustle and bustle. In fact it has distanced itself from addressing the Iranian issue. It keeps pointing to "wise" Brazil and Turkey. But Brazil, after President Lula stepped down, has been losing interest in the Iranian issue. Turkey – yes, but it is playing its own game, and it plays solo.

Washington. Here I hoped to hear at least something about joint scrupulous work that Russia and the United States might do together over the coming months, about a guideline mapped out in the "Lavrov plan"... Instead, there was the same old song and dance that Russia was not cooperating with the United States over Iran well enough. That it is obsessed with the idea of preventing more sanctions. That time is running out. That in the election year the Obama Administration will be unable to stop the "Israeli friends"... As if we were back in the 1990s, when Moscow was being taught how to pull chestnuts out of the fire for Washington to the accompaniment of speculations about a "common threat." None of the people I talked to in Washington wished war... Or, probably, some did have this secret wish, but, as employees of the current Administration, they were perfectly aware that Obama could not afford to fight a war with Iran.

Lastly, my Iranian interlocutors. I asked them why Iran was provoking its neighbors and the world community. Did it really wish to trigger



an armed conflict? But I heard in reply that Tehran would gain nothing from a military conflict, because it was unprepared for it and felt itself more confident while exercising influence by non-military means.

I returned to Moscow with an impression that few in the world really wish a war against Iran and, except for Riyadh, probably no one really wants it. Even in Israel trigger-happy Netanyahu is in the minority. Nobody is prepared for war, some, for economic reasons, others, for domestic political ones, but the growing turbulence over Iran will soon reach a point where the world will hopelessly slide into war.

The reason? The climate of total distrust. Even if we, in Russia, grin skeptically at the Iranian president's statements about the "shamefulness" of possessing nuclear weapons, what is to be expected of the Americans, whose memories of the hostage-taking nightmare at their embassy in Tehran are still green decades after? The Iranians have not the slightest reason to trust the Saudis, who are ready to "sell" them to the Israelis on the quiet. The Saudis keep having the nightmares of an onslaught by militant Shiite Persians on their customary domains. The fragile confidence that had existed between the Iranians and the Germans has been ruined; the French have been nurturing the Iranian Opposition; in response the Iranians become personal, without sparing the person of the French president's wife. Relations between Israel and Iran illustrate the highest degree of mutual distrust. Tehran questions Israel's right to exist, and Israel has in fact unleashed a covert war against Iran, including cyber attacks, explosions at missile silos and killings of nuclear scientists.

The climate of mutual distrust will make someone instinctively pull the trigger, when the one coming your way has just reached into the pocket for a hanky.

In a situation like this we, in Moscow, should answer three questions. Firstly, what is Iran really up to? Secondly, is there a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue? And thirdly, what Russia should do?

#### WHAT IS IRAN REALLY UP TO?

Iran's current leadership has *four sets of key interrelated strategic goals*, which it has been systematically solving, or trying to solve.

*Set one* is related with *internal political stability*. Until just recently Iran remained one of the most democratic states in the Middle East. Parlia-



mentary and presidential elections, in combination with a complex multi-tier system of decision-making, make this system potentially vulnerable. The Iranian leadership has already passed the first vulnerability test, when the small but vocal Opposition tried to intercept initiative. These days the Opposition's opportunities are minimized. But the Iranian regime demonstrates an extremely painful reaction to attempts to feed the Opposition from outside. The Iranian leadership has no reasons to start a full-scale dialogue with the United States, because the ultimate aim of the latter (at least, the way Tehran sees it) is the dismantling of the ruling regime, while the fanning of tensions over the "nuclear issue" is just a method to replace the authorities. This is not the mullahs' paranoia. The Iranians have very serious reasons for concern. History has taught them the same lesson many a time – from the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh to support for the Shah. Does Iran really care who is now in the White House? As Bill Keller remarked quite wittingly (in *The New York Times*), Washington's attitude towards Iran will continue to be determined by collective Obamney. Nuances may differ, but the overall course towards replacing the regime in Tehran will remain.

*Set two* is related with *technological progress and self-sufficiency*. Iran wishes to play first fiddle in world affairs in the 21st century, and for that it believes crucial to have its own advanced technologies, because only these will give it independence, self-sufficiency and a free hand (another history lesson the Iranians have learned well enough).

Iran is struggling its way into the world of advanced nuclear, space rocket and biotechnologies. True, technological breakthroughs consolidating the nation are a fact of life, but "independent work" costs Iran a whole lot more than its leaders are prepared to acknowledge. The leap forward in the nuclear sphere (to an extent owed to bad Pakistani technologies) is followed by the torment of failure and stagnation. The "forced self-sufficiency" as a result of sanctions is a brake. The Iranians lack their own knowledge. In contrast to Cuba, which, when caught in the grip of an economic blockade, raised its biotechnologies and health service to the world level, soaking up assistance from the Soviet Union to have eventually gone ahead of it, Iran has nobody to rely on. The Bushehr nuclear power plant is one of the few exceptions; and even it can hardly be called a triumph of engineering. It is rather a triumph of



resourcefulness, displayed by Russian engineers, who managed to cross-breed a reactor of Russian design with a semi-finished and half-ruined German-built frame.

*Set three* involves *maintenance of external security and minimization of the risk of armed conflicts along the border perimeter and outside the country*. This is a third historical lesson that Tehran learned, when it experienced what it is like when a hostile neighbor (Saddam's Iraq) is helped by all, while Iran has nobody to count on. It was then, in the mid-1980s, when Iraq repeatedly went unpunished for using weapons of mass destruction (chemical) against Iran, that the Iranian military and political leadership for the first time had an idea of developing nuclear arms.

Oddly, Iran saw the problem with Iraq settled for it by the Americans. Now their relations are quite neighborly and do not require any WMD arguments. But the Iranian diplomacy has failed to establish as neighborly relations with all countries in the Persian Gulf (probably, except for Oman and Dubai in the UAE). Anyhow, the Iranians believe their main neighbor today is the United States, as represented by the 5th Fleet and military bases, let alone the troops in Afghanistan and drones in Pakistan. In other words, for Tehran the solution of any foreign security issues is tightly pegged to relations with Washington.

Lastly, the *fourth set of goals* – the *expansion of Iran's influence in the region*, the assertion of its status as a regional superpower and a magnet attracting all Muslims in the Middle East, irrespective of whether they are Sunnis or Shiites. Tensions are simmering in the whole region, and it is too early to say whether Iran has lost or gained as a result of what has been called the Arab Spring. Iran's "gains" which many in Tehran like to make meaningful hints at look very slim. The protesters in the streets of Cairo, who just recently, under Mubarak, were casting envious looks at Tehran and heeding its opinion, despite the religious differences, these days are focused on building their own statehood. Iran's influence on Arab countries of the Middle East is still there, but it is far more moderate than that of Turkey. The dropout of Assad's Syria from the zone of Iranian influence will not spell disaster for Tehran, but a very sensitive blow it will certainly be. The Iranian leadership prefers to put up a bold front.

Iran should not be hindered in addressing the first three sets of goals.



On the contrary, it is worth promoting a situation in which it would be able to address them calmly. This will stabilize the situation in the region and make it more predictable.

As for the fourth set of goals, the Iranian regional ambitions should be blended into the real Middle East context (and not the one Tehran may have devised itself), but they should not be encouraged, because that would rock the regional boat still worse.

### IRANIAN NUCLEAR ISSUE SOLUTION

I suspect many readers stumbled over what I said about Iran's strategic task of further progress in engineering and of achieving self-sufficiency. "How about nuclear weapons? Even the IAEA is hinting that Iran has been working on them by stealth."

First and foremost, the wheat must be sorted from the chaff.

Iran at the moment has neither nuclear weapons (this is common knowledge) nor a definitive political decision to make them (most international experts in the field of non-proliferation adhere to this point of view, although it is not an absolute truth). Nor does Iran work covertly and consistently on nuclear weapons (this is my personal opinion, but many experts, in particular, Israeli and American ones will be arguing with me). The Iranian leadership *does not need* nuclear weapons to achieve its strategic goals. Among these one will not find an attack on the United States or Israel and, what is still more important, the regime has no intention to commit suicide.

Indeed, Iran has for more than two decades considered various applied scientific aspects of making nuclear weapons (it started doing so still earlier, under the Shah and with the Americans keeping a close watch on this work). I cannot rule out that 25 years ago the Iranian leadership considered the feasibility of secretly creating its own nuclear arsenal. Possibly, certain quarters brought focus on this project later. I would speculate that the arguments might have been varied and kept changing depending on the regional trends. Rivalry with Saddam Hussein might have been involved there, for he had chemical and biological warfare agents and was working on nuclear weapons. Then, when Saddam fell: "Are we, Persians, worse than Pakistan?" Or at a certain moment: "Are we, Persians, less smart than North Koreans?"



Whatever the case, it has not gone much farther than that.

True, Iran has a long trail of slyness or outright lies in relations with the IAEA. However long Tehran may be grumbling about the IAEA and its Director-General Yukiya Amano (even for a good reason), it will have to cooperate with the agency to lift all doubts and, in some respects, to confess and repent some sins of the past (however harshly this may hurt the Iranians' inflated feeling of self-dignity).

But, on the other hand, who is without sin? Such "slyness" in various years was displayed by some other members of the international community, for instance, South Korea. But Seoul has done its "homework to correct the mistakes," and now this incident is remembered by a handful of specialists only, if at all. Brazil has stubbornly refused to enact the additional protocol to the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA which could have provoked suspicions; but the climate in the region is different, and no distrust arises over Brazil's intentions (correctly so).

I suggest taking several steps to settle the Iranian nuclear issue.

*Step one must be Iran's cooperation with the IAEA*, extensive and without any wrangling. Iran has from time to time taken half-steps (in August last year and in January and February this year). Those were steps in the right direction, but surely not enough to make the world community, including Russia, believe that all of Iran's transgressions are gone. Iran must ratify the additional protocol, and for that it will have to volunteer to comply with its provisions, as if it has already been ratified. Incidentally, the Iranians have been acting this way, partially and selectively, though. Such selectivity must be brought to an end.

My Iranian counterparts have been complaining – in public, and in particular, in private conversations, that the IAEA "strips them naked" in front of U.S. and British intelligence services, and that eventually all information is leaked to Israel. Tehran finds this humiliating. But, apart from the negative emotions, one has to acknowledge that at a time when Israel declares outright it may attack Iranian nuclear facilities, this sort of "stripping" is very risky for Iran.

Many reproach Iran for building nuclear facilities first and notifying the IAEA only afterwards. I believe the reasons Iran does that are quite clear.



Is there a way out of this impasse? Yes, there is. And Russia can play a leading role here, of which I shall say below.

*Step two is to lift the demand that Iran give up the enrichment of uranium.* This demand is unrealistic and unnecessary. As long as Tehran complies with its NPT obligations (all of the doubts that there can be are retrospective ones), it is no use pressing it for what is not an international norm now and will not be a norm in the foreseeable future. Economically, Iran may be acting not very rationally, but politically its striving for self-sufficiency cannot but be respected. I have heard this from many counterparts in developing countries, Egypt in the first place. Self-imposed restrictions on uranium enrichment might be an appropriate and important step, in my opinion, but this can only be voluntary.

*Step three must be the adoption by the UN Security Council of a statement on the impermissibility of the use of force or threats to use force* (including cyber attacks) against any nuclear facilities in the Middle East falling under the guarantees of the IAEA or shown to IAEA inspectors at their request — those already built or under construction, as well as against these facilities' personnel. Such a statement should be adopted before the beginning of the international conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, due in Helsinki at the end of this year. Otherwise, Iran's participation in that important conference will be in question: indeed, is it normal to put up with a situation where you are invited to the negotiating table at a time when your nuclear industry and your scientists are at gunpoint and under the threat of an attack?

*As the fourth step Iran should impose a temporary freeze on the level of uranium enrichment* and on the number of centrifuges, and pledge to refrain from adding new centrifuges to the existing cascades, from creating more cascades and from launching rotating centrifuges (without gas). The importance of such a step was emphasized by Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, when he met with members of the Trialogue Club International under the auspices of the PIR Center. Such a step would work as a confidence-building measure, but not a legally binding rule.

*Step five suggests that the UN Security Council suspend sanctions against Iran, subject to satisfactory cooperation between Iran and the IAEA*



(this approach has been proposed by some European experts). If the IAEA closes “the Iranian file,” all sanctions should be lifted.

*Step six should be the creation of an atmosphere of confidence in the region in nuclear security matters.* My counterparts in Kuwait and other states in the Persian Gulf told me that they are worried over the reliability and security of the Bushehr nuclear power plant which Russia has built for Iran. They suggest conducting stress tests there, attended by observers from the adjoining countries concerned. Iran and Russia should respond to such requests positively and good-naturedly.

And, finally, *as step seven I suggest beginning a regional Middle East dialogue on the entire range of nuclear issues:* from forming a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East (with the participation of all Arab States, Iran and Israel) to forming a Middle East equivalent of the IAEA, identical to Euratom. The forthcoming WMD-free zone conference in Helsinki has good chances of becoming an overture to that process – of course, if it is not considered as a one-time gathering, but as a long-term process of restoring confidence, openness and dialogue.

It would be pointless to hinder Iran in its efforts to develop nuclear power. Tehran would create the full fuel cycle no matter what, even after Israeli bombardments and the destruction of a couple of its nuclear facilities. The sole difference would be that after such bombardments it would surely make changes to its strategic calculations. As Bill Keller, whom I have already quoted, remarked once in response to Matthew Kroenig’s article in *Foreign Affairs*, “bombing Iran is the best way to guarantee exactly what we are trying to prevent.”

It is worth taking into account and trying to respect the strategic tasks of Iran: three of the four create no problems either for the region or for the international community in general.

If Iran’s strategic tasks – at least some of them – were taken into account and respected, Tehran would have no motives to put its nuclear fuel cycle on the military track. All of Iran’s neighbors, including Russia, should get used to living next to that country’s nuclear fuel cycle; after all, all of us have been able to live next to the Japanese nuclear fuel cycle, some without even having a peace treaty. And if there is something to be afraid of, it is another Fukushima, and not nuclear bombs.



## HOW RUSSIA SHOULD ACT

I shall begin with this “naïve” question: why is a nuclear-armed Iran so bad for Russia? This question has to be answered right away to make clear my conclusions and ideas found below.

On the one hand, it might seem that Iran, should it make nuclear weapons, does not really threaten Russia’s interests. True, Iranian missiles will not be able to fly as far as Paris, but they would certainly reach Sochi. But for what reason would Sochi be their target? Then, in the Middle East there will emerge a system of regional deterrence along the Israel-Iran line. Deterrence worked in the worst days of the cold war in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States; it does work in relations between India and Pakistan; and it will work in the Middle East. Possibly, it will even make it easier for Israel and Iran to reach mutual arms control agreements (now inconceivable). Lastly, for the past five years Russia has lived side by side with nuclear North Korea — at first this gave one a sort of uneasy feeling (especially, in the Maritime Territory, where the experience of civil defense had to be refreshed), but now it is a fact of life. And Tehran’s level of responsibility would be certainly higher than that of the North Korean regime, and Iran will certainly not transfer its nuclear knowledge and know-hows to any other players (in contrast to irresponsible and unstable Pakistan).

How very true. Yet I adhere to a different point of view. Nuclear weapons in Iran’s hands would ruin the NPT, which, I strongly believe, remains a corner stone of international security. It is to the NPT that Moscow owes its exclusive status as a member of the Nuclear Five.

I do not share the opinion of those experts who predict that in case Iran develops nuclear weapons Saudi Arabia or Turkey may soon follow suit. The problem would be worse. The NPT as such would lose its value and cease to exist. This will be so not necessarily because Saudi Arabia will wish to follow in Iran’s footsteps, but because nuclear matters would be plunged into chaos around the world. And this would be harmful to Russia’s vital interests.

Iran is Russia’s very troublesome partner. Neither Russian politicians, nor Russia’s big businesses are eager to work tightly with Iran: the speculations about a “close relationship” between the two countries are



rather far-fetched. If asked to choose between “friend” or “foe” labels, both Russian diplomats and Russian businessmen would brand Iran as “foe.” “No friend” at best.

Iran has more than once deceived Russia – when it kept quiet about its nuclear facilities and dual-purpose research: being so evasive would be appropriate towards an enemy or a competitor, but not with someone you call a partner or a friend. The Iranians grinned skeptically, when Russia invited them to cooperate in the enrichment of uranium at the international center in Angarsk. At first the Iranians agreed, but then rejected Moscow’s proposal on fuel for the Tehran research reactor, produced with Russia’s active involvement.

Russia has let Iran down more than once: it procrastinated over building Bushehr and refused to sell S-300 air defense complexes. It was in no hurry to welcome Iran with open arms, when Tehran knocked on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s door. Let us be frank. Russia voted for all of the four resolutions on sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council.

To Russia it is often unclear who makes decisions in Tehran and how (even after strenuous attempts to figure it out). And Iran suspects that Moscow “leaks” part of the confidential information it gets from it to Washington and Tel-Aviv.

Of late, Moscow and Tehran repeatedly exchanged taunts. Yet Moscow played it cool to come out with the Lavrov Plan for Iran, based on “multiphasedness and reciprocity.” Probably, it was difficult for Iran to evaluate Russia’s efforts properly, because shortly after that – in November last year – there followed an IAEA report, which, as Tehran had hoped, Moscow had been just obliged to block.

It is really hard work. And still, Russia should step over its prejudices and take a look at today’s Iran as its serious and long-term partner in the region – not at the declarative level, but at the level of action. Such attempts have been made from time to time, but now and then they are interrupted – out of the wrong fear to anger the Americans, I reckon. Indeed, Russia has been cooperating with the United States over Iran and its nuclear program in the most constructive and tightest possible way. It is no use curtailing this cooperation; on the contrary, time is ripe to reinforce it by creating a bilateral working



group of creative minds, tasked with exploring scenarios of exit from the labyrinth (or what looks like a labyrinth).

But when an important discussion of nuclear facilities like Fordo falls off the track into a torrent of calls for lashing Iran in retaliation for “support of terrorism” and of speculations that it would be desirable to see a “different regime” in Tehran — I believe, this is not the path Moscow should agree to walk hand in hand with Washington.

At a time when its Western partners at the negotiations with Iran are rejoicing (hitherto not in public) at the death of Iranian nuclear scientists, when they are talking with pride about the quality of cyber attacks (who staged these we do not yet know for sure) against Iranian nuclear facilities, Russia should not hesitate to go its own way.

When Iran is invited to have a dialogue “without preconditions” and, at the same time, Moscow is advised to give thought to a new UN Security Council resolution containing measures against Iran spelled out in Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, I believe that Russia should stay aloof. Amid the growing turbulence over and mounting psychological pressures on Tehran, Russia should give thought to not only whether all possible sanctions have been adopted and effected for preventing Tehran’s access to nuclear and missile technologies, but to whether these sanctions do good in the current specific conditions. Neither the United States, nor the European Union have agreed to meet Russia’s insistent requests for refraining from the imposition of sanctions outside the UN Security Council. It is their right. But likewise it is Russia’s right to reconsider its approach to the current UN Security Council sanctions, and if it turns out that some of them have exhausted themselves, to act in the UN Security Council accordingly.

By the way, the sanctions that were formulated in New York then did not affect Russia’s right to supply air defense complexes, such as S-300 and S-400, to Iran. President Medvedev later issued a decree to declare that Russia should refrain from such supplies, which was done. At a time when Iran is being threatened with missile strikes, wouldn’t it be right and appropriate to make such supplies, and in general to help Tehran strengthen its defenses (on the condition this hardware will not be transferred to third parties)?

At a certain moment Russia steered clear, when Iran applied for admission to the SCO; moreover, a decision was made not allowing the



admission of states subject to UN Security Council sanctions. That temporary rule might be reconsidered. Russia, just as other active members of the SCO, has many issues to share with Iran: energy security, struggle against drugs trafficking, and stabilization in Afghanistan after NATO's withdrawal. Of course, before initiating that process Russia should figure out Iran's real attitude to a number of outstanding bilateral economic issues, for instance, those related to the Caspian Sea.

Lastly, Russian experts — both non-government and government ones — should get together to discuss, albeit informally, if the sextet mechanism — the main format for discussing the Iranian nuclear program and other Iran-related issues — is going obsolete. After all, even from the very same American partners we may hear now and then: "Let's address this issue (of Iran) without the Europeans, they are of little use, they do not decide anything." Russia might go ahead with the bilateral exchanges with the Americans, which it has been doing already quite successfully.

A multi-lateral approach to handling the Iranian nuclear issue is important. Today it is more important than ever. The simple reason is that there are different forces in the world with many constructive ideas, with greater chances of being heard in Tehran.

For instance, at the negotiations with Tehran it might be possible to replace the sextet format with the already existing BRICS formula. Here, alongside Russia, there are represented China (also a member of the sextet), Brazil, which was involved in the dialogue with Iran before (if Dilma Rousseff is still interested in this subject), and South Africa, maintaining a close dialogue with Iran. India has been an opponent of Iran of late, but in that capacity it may be even useful — particularly so in view of its close ties with the United States in combination with the traditionally balanced policy in world affairs.

Moscow should conduct a tighter dialogue with Beijing over the Iranian issues than the one it has maintained so far. And it should remember the simple truth that China has its own interests which may not coincide with Russia's. Beijing has successfully diversified its sources of imported hydrocarbons, and Iran as a source of energy may soon be replaced by Saudi Arabia. China's main sphere of interest for ten years to come will be not the Middle East, but the South China Sea, South-



east Asia and, possibly, Taiwan. The United States is a hindrance everywhere – under the current Administration, more than ever. What is to be done about that? Dragging the United States into a prolonged ground operation that would be far harder to withdraw from than from Iraq or Afghanistan. China's support for Iran, so obvious today, is not a constant value. On the other hand, Russia's dialogue with China over Iran might cause Beijing to adjust this point of view, or at least to make sure that it is not the dominant one, just as the point of view that "a war in Iran" is a pleasant synonym of soaring oil prices is not dominant in Moscow.

It is not ruled out that a group for a dialogue with Iran, which Russia and Turkey might create, would be more productive than BRICS. It might incorporate Brazil, South Africa, and also such authoritative (for the world and Iran) non-proliferation players as Kazakhstan, Indonesia, and, perhaps, even Egypt.

True, one must be realistic and aware that such a group would not present on a silver platter what Tehran needs the most these days: security guarantees from Washington (including a refusal to use force or intervene in the internal affairs). However, in case of Russia's active participation, the group might provide at least effective support for the first, most urgent step towards resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Namely – the transparency of the nuclear program, the certainty that in its current shape it does not pursue military aims, and at the same time respect for the information that would be received from Tehran within the framework of this "transparent" approach. Each of the aforesaid countries has authoritative technical experts who might get unprecedented access to Iran's nuclear infrastructure facilities, even those still under construction, which Iran is not obliged to show to anyone. By no means a substitute for the IAEA, but an assistant to the IAEA for the transitional period, until confidence has been restored to the full – this is how I see the role of the group of experts.

At a recent banquet in Riyadh an Iranian woman dissenter, currently resident in Los Angeles, snapped at me: "Russia should be ashamed of supporting the rotten regime in my country." The Saudis and Kuwaitis seated next nodded in agreement. "Russia should not feel ashamed. At least because it has been doing so much to prevent bombs from falling on your fellow country folks," I retorted.



Cynically speaking, Russia would feel pretty much satisfied with the current “neither-peace-nor-war” situation. That might be possible only if there were the absolute certainty that all other players have nerves of steel, and that nobody will ever lose self-control. Today there is the opposite feeling. Just one strike against Natanz or Arak – and in the next move Iran ... No, it would not necessarily bomb Tel-Aviv or send an amphibious force to Bahrain. Nor would it even plug the Strait of Hormuz. It would quit the NPT, a treaty that has failed to protect it. Part of the responsibility for that scenario would be placed on Russia – one of the three NTP depositories.

A slide towards war or greater tensions over Iran is against Russia’s interests. For this reason it is important for Russia not to stay aloof, but to do its utmost to prevent a use-of-force scenario, to play with responsibility and – what is most important – to use its own score.