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Jacques Chirac reaffirms Iran's right to non-military
nuclear technology...

THE CRISIS IS NOT RESOLVING ITSELF

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On Tuesday 28 February, during talks with the UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, President Chirac reaffirmed his view that Iran could have access to non-military nuclear technology, provided it "respected the requirements of non-proliferation. According to the President's spokesman, "he also underlined France's intention to work on this question in a spirit of international consensus, and he recalled that the general objective is to seek a Middle East free from nuclear weapons, as restated in the resolution of the IAEA's Council of Governors."

But a "consensus international" is a long way off.

Consider these four points :

- **1)** The Russian-Iranian compromise is not yet finalized. Will it be before March 6? If so, the uranium ore extracted in Iran (which is plentiful, notably in the Saghand and Gehin mines), or more likely the yellow-cake produced in Ardkan and Gehin, would head for Russia, where it would be enriched to produce the level of U235 needed for "civilian use" (3-4%). This would prevent Iran from having facilities and personnel qualified and capable of continuing the enrichment to the "weapons-grade" level (90 %, but less if need be).

However, the mullahs still insist on Iran's "unprescribable right" to have all kinds of installations linked to the "civilian" nuclear processing facility, and therefore to continue operating its plants for converting yellow-cake (at Isfahan) and enriching it in U235 (at Natanz).

The fact is that the NPT recognizes that Iran has this right, along with all other nations not possessing nuclear weapons, on condition that it is not diverted for military purposes - something that the Iranian government swears it has no intention of doing. We don't have to believe this - that is precisely what the "international community" claims no longer want to do - even if Iran still provides as tokens of good faith a certain number of concrete guarantees: "joint ventures" not only with Russia, but also with western companies (a tempting prospect for the France of Chirac and of the AREVA nuclear-energy giant); stronger surveillance from the IAEA; and a type of centrifuges supposed to be "non-proliferating" (a more dubious claim). But the USA (and Israel alongside) don't want to hear talk of an enrichment process continuing operation on Iranian soil, not even one that is merely "symbolic" of national sovereignty. There is saying "he who can do the least will end up doing the most", and Israel is well-placed to confirm this (except that Israel had the active support of the USA and France, and that the IAEA is still forbidden access to Israel's facilities at Dimona).

- **2)** The USA wants the UN Security Council, on March 6, to impose effective sanctions against Iran - political, economic and commercial sanctions ... accompanied if possible (either this time or next time) by the threat to use military force if the Iranians don't repent their evil ways.

If the USA succeeds in winning over to this position their British and French allies who at present seem to think differently, as do the two other permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China (whose interests diverge even more), and if the Iranian government then obstinately "affirms the right" (well-founded in law), then the "arm-wrestling" will continue and nobody knows how it will end. There would be a serious risk of the USA launching a unilateral strike against Iran, with the support of Israel and Turkey.

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If on the other hand Iran capitulates before or on March 6, the USA will have succeeded in imposing a "double standard" : certain states parties to the NPT, some of them with nuclear weapons, some without, would be able to keep on possessing uranium enrichment facilities and operating them on their territories - facilities which have helped the former to obtain atomic weapons and could help certain others to do so, while other countries would remain excluded. It would be, in the "civilian" domain, the same "double standard" which applies *de facto* in the military domain, between the "haves" and the "have-nots".

- **3)** From this point of view, one may note that India represents a singular, unique case... at the moment (President Bush has just made clear that the Indian example, without constituting a "precedent", could be the start of a new US policy). India benefits from both manifestations of the "double standard".

On the one hand, the "civilian" nuclear cooperation agreements which Bush and the Indian PM Manmohan Singh planned in July 2005 (though still not approved by Congress, since an exceptional law would be needed to lift the embargo on "sensitive materials") recognize India as a State which now has the right to nuclear commerce despite owning prohibited weapons: India is now therefore not only a *de facto* nuclear power. She is not yet a *de jure* one either, not being one of the nuclear weapons states (NWS) in the NPT which she never signed; but she's very close to that. Not officially accredited and yet authorized to obtain all the nuclear materials and equipment she wants, she has become *de facto* another *de jure* nuclear state!

The only difference is a some bizarre point of legal definition...

To justify this, the USA - and France soon after - has granted India a certificate of good conduct: unlike Pakistan, India has not contributed to proliferation ... apart from her own! We can bet that India, to ensure her lasting respectability and nuclear imports - will now join the NWS chorus in trying to stop Iran joining the club. A champion of nuclear disarmament while having no bombs, at least publicly (the 1974 test was said to have been "for peaceful purposes"), India maintained this position after her series of tests in spring 1998, with this argument: "give up your arms as you ought, and we will give up ours which nothing stops us from keeping." That virtuous tradition is over now. The world is now divided into two camps - those who have and those who don't.

On the other hand, although not subject to the conditions imposed on non-nuclear states by the NPT (since India never signed it), she still benefits, henceforth, from promises of civilian nuclear cooperation (and future contracts, which France and the USA are competing for), provided she does not divert their by-products (enriched uranium, re-treated plutonium) to military purposes. This is something she can easily commit to, since she doesn't need any, possessing already tried and tested military processing plants!

But as for the poor non-nuclear states which were "stupid" enough to sign the NPT - stupid if they want to obtain nuclear weapons - they will now see themselves as deprived of this chance.

The moral of the story: if you are a nation-state and want to have "national independence", "political weight", international "prestige" and "security" (real or imagined), do what the big boys do, obtain nukes! Do as Israel, India and Pakistan did, refuse to sign the NPT. And if you already signed (how pathetic) get round the ban, make use of the facilities and fissile materials which you are granted "for civilian use" and secretly build a pretty little bomb... then walk out of the NPT, as North Korea did! This will win you the respect of the USA and the "international community". Or finally, make haste to dump the Treaty before they force you to sign an "additional protocol" placing you under closer and stronger surveillance from the IAEA or before they impose on you the draconian sanctions they are planning for Iran!

Whatever the result of the current "arm-wrestling" with Iran, it augurs badly for the future of the NPT. Proliferation will have a healthy future. To keep it in check, there will be only one means remaining: the use or threat of use of weapons... nuclear ones if necessary!

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- 4) The position of the Iranian government seems very unclear. On the one hand it would be in its interests to yield to the pressures so as to avoid sanctions or even military attack (unless it is betting on a "sacred union" of almost all Iranians). On the other hand, this regime of mullahs has no such interest: to yield would be a final renunciation of their ambitions to be a nuclear power (if they have such ambitions, which would be no surprise), and it would also mean losing face at all levels - internationally, regionally (in the Muslim world which they would be happy to lead, to the advantage of the Shiite wing) and within Iran (given the social discontent and an opposition which they curb by dint of spying, police repression and political repression).

- Conclusion

We have entered a zone of serious turbulence, and there is no certainty it will not result in a disastrous crash. This makes the behaviour of France's political class even more deplorable: they are letting the pilot manage the crisis alone in his cockpit, just when he (Chirac in person) has informed us recently that he is not afraid of the possible use of nuclear weapons, not even for the purpose of guaranteeing France her "strategic provisions". In other words he is not afraid of a crash. What good hands we are in!

Apart from the former PM Michel Rocard - a rare exception - no influential man or woman in French politics has adopted a clear position on this subject, or pulled the alarm cord. Very few days remain. If they fail to speak, we must not be surprised if "France" reduced to one solitary brain, aided at best by a "brain's trust" with nuclear inclinations, makes decisions that they don't like at all and which could throw the aircraft into free fall.

Yet there is a simple solution, on which everyone could agree. Iran has not yet produced a single kilowatt-hour of nuclear electricity. Iran could renounce this, could abandon its "civilian" facilities (with or without inverted commas) and obtain in exchange (or "demand" if the mullahs really insist) considerable international aid for developing its numerous sources of renewable energy. Everyone would benefit, even Israel, which, freed from the Iranian threat, could envisage lifting the threat on its own neighbours, in a Middle East without weapons of mass destruction (neither nuclear, biological nor chemical) where every state would be guaranteed its sovereignty and security. Everyone... except AREVA, of course, and its foreign counterparts, since this solution would show that by renouncing nuclear power generation a country can simultaneously solve its (future) energy problems, solve its nuclear waste problems, renounce nuclear weapons, become less aggressive, live in security and protect the future of region, planet and future generations. We have written to President Bush outlining this very solution, but without excessive illusions. Will a French voice emerge with authority to champion this solution?

2 March 2006

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