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Iran

Shadow of war or war of shadows?

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Five days before the UN Security Council's deadline for the cessation of Iran's nuclear activities ran out, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad inaugurated a factory for the production of heavy water in the centre of Iran with great pomp. This was a new thumbing of the nose by Teheran to the West, in the context of a campaign of propaganda around economic sanctions and possible military attacks beginning more than two years ago.

This campaign is a psychological war aimed at forcing the Islamic Republic to accept the demands of the United States and its allies. The latter want the Teheran regime to submit to the policies that they propose for the Near and Middle East. According to the evaluation made by the warmongers, Teheran still needs three, four or five years before becoming a member of the nuclear club. There is then still room for diplomacy.

The occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by US imperialism and its allies has increased mass protests across the region. In the absence of revolutionary and democratic alternatives, it is the Islamic Republic of Iran which profits from the mass discontent in the region. It is exactly for that reason that the Teheran regime can allow itself to prevaricate before the demands of the US and its allies.

The Iranian regime has drawn the lessons from the fate of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The difference between the Iraq war and the threat of war against Iran is that the Saddam Hussein regime did not possess weapons of mass destruction, whereas Iran undoubtedly seeks to equip itself with nuclear weapons. On the eve of the second Gulf war, Saddam not only affirmed, even giving proof, that he did not possess weapons of mass destruction, but produced myriad initiatives and concessions destined to deter the threat of intervention. Iran and specifically its president are doing the opposite.

Certainly, the Teheran regime denies that it is trying to acquire nuclear weapons. But at the same time, the Iranian leaders do everything to give the impressions that they are on the way to acquiring them. They seize every opportunity to stress their progress in the military area and in particular in the area of rockets capable of hitting Israel. Far from hiding their nuclear ambition, they proclaim it at every opportunity and often in a fairly ambiguous way so that civil and military ambitions are difficult to distinguish.

The regime incessantly repeats that Iran is risking nothing because the US is weakened and durably bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan. They cannot run the risk of opening a new front when US public opinion is already demanding the withdrawal of the GIs from those countries. Moreover they evoke the kinds of reprisals that they would not hesitate to use in case of attack, including the sending of thousands of kamikazes against the Americans in Iraq, Afghanistan or around the world. The new regional situation after the war between Israel and Hezbollah, which is sponsored by the Teheran regime, renders a rapid and strong reaction from the great powers yet more difficult.

Nuclear energy, heritage of the Shah

The Iranian nuclear programme goes back to 1974. It certainly had a military dimension, but that was not a problem since it was about countering the USSR. Iran was the ally of Israel, which Washington had allowed to acquire the bomb. To better understand the circumstances we should recall the geopolitical situation of the region at the time. In the early 1960s, the war waged by China on its borders with India led the latter country onto the nuclear road, with a discreet initial aid from the US, and then the Soviet Union. India had nuclear weapons at the end of the 1970s and

the latter became operational in the mid 1980s. This situation, judged intolerable by the Pakistani military, ended a little afterwards in an inevitable Chinese riposte: Beijing supplied the technical means for a Pakistani counter bomb which would lighten the burden of the Chinese deterrent.

In the ballistic area in particular, China went through the intermediary of its North Korean ally to avoid any US sanctions. But the operation, much beyond the limited means of Pakistan, was financed at 75% by Saudi Arabia, which saw the prospect of a real "Islamic bomb", with the Emirates and Malaysia covering the rest. It was then Pakistan which, in the 1980, put the Saudis in contact with the Chinese (with whom they did not then have any diplomatic relations) so that the Wahabite kingdom could buy medium range missiles, an act which for the fundamentalist kingdom represented the first step in the direction of nucléarisation. In exchange for the Sinai, Sadat had to renounce the Egyptian nuclear programme, which was partly frozen and partly transferred by Mubarak, after Sadat's assassination, to Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1980s. Different rival Arab projects emerged at the same time, in Algeria, Libya and even little Syria. None of these projects has so far led anywhere definitive, and the renouncement by Qaddafi will undoubtedly be definitive.

It is in this charged context that Iran wished to acquire nuclear weapons from the time of the Shah onwards. The US was favourable, to dissuade a possible Soviet attack on the northern frontier of the country, which was, with its Afghan extension, the sole line of Western defence in contact with the USSR without nuclear protection. It was France which took responsibility, with the Eurodif factory, for supplying the Iranian leaders of the time with the initial technical means. Iran then entered with France into the capital of Eurodif, a European consortium for the enrichment of uranium, and obtained the right to use 10% of production, for civil purposes, from the Pierrelatte factory (which alone covered a third of world needs). Parallel to this, Iran loaned 1 billion dollars to France, through the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The repayment of this sum was to begin from the entry into service of Eurodif, that is in 1981. After the revolution of 1979, Iranian participation in Eurodif was frozen. In his book "Atomic Affairs", Dominique Lorentz shows the link between the importance of the contentious Eurodif/Iran and the terrorist attacks of 1986-88 in France. Iran abandoned this project, but the Iranian leader would resume it in the mid-1980s against the threat of invasion by Saddam's Iraq. The first Iraq war and above all the US strikes against Baghdad in 1991 demonstrated the vulnerability of their country

After 1988, France capitulated and settled the Eurodif dispute. After the 1988 armistice with Iraq, Teheran turned toward the Soviet Union, in exchange for supporting the Russians against the independence movements in Azerbaijan and central Asia and withholding any support to the Chechen cause (which rested increasingly on the Saudi-Pakistani Sunni axis).

“America is stuck”

Playing on this theme the current Iranian leaders have tempted the Europeans, in search of an original policy, and then the Americans themselves who, behind the bombast of propagandist proclamations, have been offered precious aid by Teheran, first in Afghanistan to consolidate the anti-Taliban regime of Karza and, at present, more fundamentally still, in Iraq: without the constant support of grand ayatollah Sistani, himself Iranian in origin, the situation of the Americans in Baghdad would be much more difficult, much more precarious. For the major fight in Iraq really opposes combatants who are either foreign or have been trained abroad: on one side troops allied to the US, and on the other armed elements linked to the Guardians of the Iranian revolution (Pasdarans and Iraqis previously exiled in Iran), like the Al Badr brigade. It is a low intensity war between the US and Iran which is taking place on Iraqi soil.

But if the Iranians have here chosen pragmatic realism against Al Qaeda and Sunni Salafist fundamentalism, it is of course in order to receive a payback. The constant moderation of the Teheran regime in relation to Moscow has

been rewarded by technical nuclear cooperation from the Russians. Their tacit alliance with India allows them to isolate their Pakistani rival. Their support, as unilateral as it is unstated, for the US occupation of Iraq will certainly bring the inexorable arrival of a Shiite regime in Baghdad, but that is hardly sufficient. For in consolidating itself, the new Iraqi regime will become more liberal than its Iranian neighbour and ally. After that, the Washington-Washington exchange will become much less advantageous, much more even-handed than is the case today.

That is why many Teheran, and not only the extremists, believe that this is the best time to come out of the non-proliferation treaty and declare openly that Iran is a nuclear power.

The US, despite the bluff of the sabre rattlers, has neither the military means, nor the political means (the stability of Iraq would be at stake), nor even the financial means to respond: a simple blockade of the Persian Gulf would lead to a doubling of the oil price and a freefall for the dollar. Committed in Iraq, Afghanistan, several African countries, Indonesia and the Philippines, the US cannot today wage a ground war against Iran. As to the Islamist regime in Iran, to avoid this land war, it has decided to militarily pin down the US in Iraq. As witnessed by operations which involve the encirclement, indeed the bombardment of Iraqi towns.

The main Iranian leaders and in particular the current faction in power are convinced that "America is stuck" because of the Iraqi fiasco; because of the threat of a massive entry of the Shiite population into insurrection alongside the Sunni population; the rapidity of the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan; the chaos in Palestine; the permanent terrorist threat underlined by the recent bombings in Egypt and the reappearance of Bin Laden; the fear of the use of the oil weapon; the increasingly high cost of the military operation launched by Bush; and the evolution of public opinion in the US itself.

One could add the stoking up of anti-Americanism across the entire world, the refusal of China and Russia, linked economically and militarily to Iran, to back an armed intervention to which even Tony Blair is opposed; the successive defeats in their respective countries of those western political leaders who backed the intervention in Iraq (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Norway, Japan and so on); the dizzying rise in oil prices which has enriched all the US's adversaries or competitors, and finally the upheavals in virtually the whole of Latin America. For all these reasons, then, the US cannot take the risk of another conflict.

EU in search of markets

Officially, the historic states of the European Union (EU) would like to stop the mullahs from having an Islamic nuclear bomb. But more concretely, they would like to take back from the Russians the market in Iranian nuclear supplies. In the role of challenger, they should be more friendly than the Russians: Henceforth, the wish to recapture this very lucrative market from the Russians links in with current and very significant European interests in Iran.

Because the Europeans continue to sign new contracts of great scope. And the Iranian market is not negligible: in 2004 Iranian imports ran at USD26.6 billion; industrial machines and plant (44.8%), metals and minerals (22.3 %), basic chemical products (14.5 %) and agro-alimentary products (9.7%) represented the main areas. Overall 51.8% of imports come from the European Union.

Germany occupies first place with 11.4% and France second with 8.5% of the Iranian market. In particular they supply industrial machinery and spare parts. In the motor vehicle sector, France occupies first place with 1.3 billion dollars (2nd place for China with 360 million dollars). In May 2006 Renault successfully bid for a joint-venture (of a value of 2 billion dollars) with its L90 (Logan) project, with the aim of manufacturing an annual total of 300,000 cars in Iran with the hope of rising to a million each year around 2010-2012. The global stock of French investment in Iran is

(according to French sources) 35 billion dollars outside Buy-Back contracts signed in the oil and gas sector by Total.

That is why the EU will do all it can to ensure that the Islamic Republic escapes sanctions from the UN Security Council. Because sanctions would restrain economic relations with Iran. Europe wants a negotiated solution: that is to say it wants to obtain the market for supplying Iran with civil power stations and nuclear fuel. Excluded from Iraq, the Europeans now consider Iran as an alternative base: and hope to win a privileged access to its oil. But that does not mean that the European leaders are ready to capitulate completely to the Iranian regime. Witness the declarations of Angela Merkel, on January 29, 2006 in Jerusalem, that an Iran possessing nuclear weapons "is not just a threat to Israel, but also to the democratic countries of the entire world". For his part, Jacques Chirac unleashed a political storm in Europe in threatening "the leaders of states who would have recourse to terrorist means against us, as well as those who would envisage using, in one manner or another, weapons of mass destruction", and stating that the France's "response" "could be conventional, could be of another kind".

But Germany and France have also sought to counterbalance US bellicosity by advocating "negotiations" and even the British government has stated that there "was no military option" in this crisis.

Strengths and weaknesses of Russian and Chinese arguments

Neither Russia, nor China, which is seeking to secure its supplies of Iranian hydrocarbons, would hesitate to use their Security Council veto to protect Teheran's back.

A long held objective of Russian policy - coinciding with that of Iran - has been to put an end to the political, military and economic presence of the US in Iran and to bring all its weight to bear on the region as a whole. Thus, the sale to Iran of nuclear know-how and conventional weapons (more than 8 billion dollars of weapons between 1999 and 2005) is one of the most effective and productive means of attaining this objective.

There are doubts as to the acceptance by the Russians of economic sanctions against their Iranian partner: bombing means destruction and reconstruction contracts and nothing on arms sales, whereas sanctions mean the end of Russia's economic supremacy in arms sales and nuclear technology.

Russia has rejected the US demand to cease its (civil) nuclear cooperation with the regime of Teheran and especially the construction of a nuclear power station in Bushehr. The Russian minister of foreign affairs has published a communiqué according to which each country is free to cooperate with the country of its choice, each country should have the right to decide on the manner and conditions of its cooperation with another country.

Everything indicates that the Russians have energetically aided the mullahs in their enterprise of industrial enrichment of uranium for military use. The declaration concerning the freedom of industrial cooperation between Iran and Russia represents a counter attack, but Russia has no other choice than to cede: the Russians will choose neutrality.

China receives 14% of the oil necessary to its rapidly growing economy from Iran. At the end of 2004, China and Iran signed an agreement worth 70 billion dollars in oil and natural gas for a period of 30 years. The Chinese state oil company, Sinopec, has obtained a share of 51% in the recently discovered Iranian oilfield of Yadavan, whose reserves are estimated at three billion barrels.

Finally, US imperialism has built a string of military bases in central Asia, practicing a strategic encirclement of China and seeking to control oil resources against both Russia and China. The US is pursuing a policy of containment of China, by strengthening the military links with Japan and providing India (a country which has not signed the Non Proliferation Treaty and which possesses a significant nuclear arsenal) with very advanced nuclear technologies to form a counterweight to China.

Things are evolving very slowly between the US, the Russians and the Chinese: we can already conclude that there is an agreement of principle between the great powers on the “undesirable” character of the regime of the mullahs and this for many reasons, like the need to strengthen the stability of the Middle East and Central Asia, the necessity of securing oil supplies, the war on terror and the struggle against nuclear terrorism and so on, but if the Russians and Chinese can accept that the US takes on this “job”, they would like to be sure that their interests in Iran do not suffer too much as a consequence.

But everyone knows that things can go further and that for the moment there is still much to play for. The regime of the mullahs know that it can avoid “giving in” while multiplying its provocations because it tells itself it can in any case sign in extremis (with the EU or with Russia) to “prevent escalation” or “save peace”. On the other hand, the Westerners know that they can let the crisis deepen because at any time they have the means to bomb Iran and to destroy its installations if they judge it necessary.

Israel

There remains one more serious threat to Iran's passage to the status of nuclear power: Israel. Certainly, the dispersal of the atomic centres renders the Israeli riposte hazardous.

And the Iranian bomb, which will only be truly operational in three or four years, will definitively protect the country against direct blackmail by its Saudi and Pakistani neighbours, with whom relations are much more tense in everyday reality than with Israel.

The offensive options are, on the other hand, more limited: For an uncertain strike on Israel (the anti-missile defences of the Jewish state are also progressing rapidly), the Tsahal submarine permanently immersed in the Oman sea and equipped with cruise missiles with multiple warheads could vitrify Teheran, the oil zone, the religious capital of Qom and several dispersed nuclear centres, with a precision of around 15 metres. No doubt the mullahs, less and less fanatical and increasingly given to the simple joys of existence, would ultimately choose life rather than death.

Also as has happened since the 1950s with all the new successive holders of the atomic bomb, the apparent tragedy which threatens at this time between Israel and Iran can also end in a dramatic turn of events. The US does not wish to compromise still further its position in Iraq. Iran would have a lot to lose if it sacrifices, like pawns, its positions of strength among the Shiite Arabs of Iraq and Lebanon. And Israel could not advance as quickly on the Palestinian terrain if a broad regional crisis broke out.

Immediately, the Iranian bomb bothers Pakistan and Saudi Arabia much more than Israel. And Jerusalem and Teheran share a very friendly relationship with India (and secondarily with Turkey). If an acceptable compromise can be found to the crisis, perhaps a great upheaval in the Oriental world would take place under our eyes.

Today, it is certain that the Islamic regime wants to secretly procure the nuclear bomb like Israel. However the goal of the Iranian regime is not to destroy Israel as the warmongers claim. For some years Iran has renounced the myth of

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the Islamic Revolution in the Muslim world to privilege the interests of the class in power, the sole preoccupation of the regime.