

Körber Dialogue Middle East

Security in Iran's Vicinity: Interests, Policies and Perspectives

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The Körber Dialogue Middle East provides a platform for multilateral discussions on foreign policy and security issues relating to the Middle East. It seeks to bring together representatives of important stakeholders on a regular basis in order to foster an open and policy-oriented exchange of ideas. At the workshop in Tehran, high-ranking foreign policy practitioners and representatives of leading think tanks gathered in order to talk about security and stability in Iran's vicinity.

This summary contains a selection of arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy discussion. It is being distributed to the participants of the Körber Dialogue Middle East and selected policymakers.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

I. Security in the Persian Gulf Region: Assessing Threats and Sources of Instability

The participants differed with regard to their analysis of the threat situation in the Persian Gulf region. Whereas Iran believes that the US presence in the wider region infringes upon its security interests, the Arab Gulf states are perturbed by Iran's perceived claim to regional hegemony. However, most of the participants agreed that a balance-of-power security system in the Persian Gulf region which is based on deterrence and containment cannot generate sustainable stability. They warned of the dangers inherent in the formation of two opposing blocs (Iran and its supporters vs US-backed Arab Gulf states). Instead of a situation reminiscent of the Cold War, a cooperative and inclusive security structure would prevent confrontation and pave the way for increased regional integration. One participant maintained that Iran's national security strategy hinges on asymmetrical deterrence. For this reason instruments which presuppose a symmetrical power constellation could not effectively contain Iran. Thus recent attempts by several Arab Gulf countries to strengthen their military capacities would probably be unable to deter Iran.

Others pointed out that, as a confidence-building measure, Iran might be prepared to sign a non-aggression pact with the neighboring Arab Gulf states. However, it was unclear whether such a non-aggression pact would depend on the resolution of border conflicts between Iran and some of its neighbors, or whether a pact could be signed after agreeing on the demarcation and mutual recognition of *existing* borders.

Some of the participants added that Iranian policymakers are concerned about what they perceive to be the ambiguous nature of NATO's objectives in the wider region, especially with regard to NATO's involvement in maritime security. It was suggested that Iran should be invited to join NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), both as a confidence-building measure and in order to enhance the inclusiveness and indivisibility of security in the Persian Gulf region.

II. Resource Management and Infrastructure

It was generally agreed that the political difficulties have created a situation where European-Iranian cooperation in the energy sector is not all that it might be. Since Iran hopes to be playing a leading role in science, technology and economic growth in West Asia by 2025, it will have to make use of Western technology to reduce its energy dependence and to diversify its energy mix. Although renewable energy resources already form an increasingly large part of Iran's energy mix, European-Iranian collaboration on "renewables" should be intensified. However, some participants questioned whether renewable energy resources were actually cost-efficient, since oil is still the cheapest source of energy.

Some of the participants pointed out that in geostrategic terms Iran is pursuing a multi-pronged approach. On the one hand it is trying to enhance its energy cooperation with the "rising powers" in East and South East Asia. A good example of this is the projected Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, which will deliver natural gas from the South Pars field to customers in East and South East Asia. Moreover, Iran is hoping to become a leading player in the oil-rich Caspian region.

III. Stabilizing the AfPak Region

Some of the participants thought that the conflict in Afghanistan could be brought to an end by promoting intra-Afghan reconciliation and integrating the Taliban insurgents into the political process. Other participants were sceptical about the viability and longevity of a power-sharing agreement between the Karzai government and the Taliban.

Participants stressed the fact that in the final analysis Iran is genuinely interested in the stabilization of Afghanistan, especially in view of NATO's declared intention to leave the country by 2014. One participant maintained that, from an Iranian point of view, the presence of NATO in Afghanistan was preferable to a Taliban government. However, he pointed out the lack of unanimity within the Iranian political elite on the subject of creating stability in Afghanistan. Whilst President Ahmadinejad and his supporters are in favor of a regionalist approach which is based on integrating Afghanistan into regional structures, former President Rafsanjani and his supporters are proponents of a policy of non-intervention. A third school of thought advocates armed intervention in Afghanistan.

Some of the participants believed that, despite the abortive nature of previous agreements, collaboration between NATO and Iran in Afghanistan might well turn out to be beneficial for all the parties concerned, especially if it takes into account common interests and goals such as the fight against drug trafficking, terrorism, and the refugee problem. One participant asked NATO and Iran to support the Six plus Two Group on Afghanistan, which includes six contiguous countries (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), the United States, and Russia. Moreover, Iran could also collaborate with NATO by providing support in the area of civilian logistics.

However, other participants pointed out that many Iranians harbor suspicions about NATO's real intentions in Afghanistan. One of them said that Iran should cooperate with NATO only if international pressure on Iran on account of the nuclear program were to be lifted. However, others argued that a selective mode of cooperation should be possible even in times of confrontation and conflict.

IV. The Nuclear Dimension of Regional Security

Several participants were of the opinion that the nuclear fuel swap agreement reached by Turkey, Brazil and Iran in May 2010 should be implemented in order to prevent further escalation in the standoff caused by Iran's nuclear program. Others argued that Iran should limit its enrichment activities to the production of 3.5-percent enriched uranium. While some participants called on Iran to ratify the NPT Additional Protocol as a confidence-building measure for the benefit of the EU3+3, there were others who blamed the West for applying double standards with regard to nuclear ownership, and for undermining the legitimacy and binding nature of the NPT.

In view of the planned new round of talks between Iran and the EU3+3, some of the participants warned against exaggerated expectations. At the same time, a failure of the talks would entail the risk of further escalation. The parties involved should at least try to draft a "roadmap to negotiations." One participant thought that if the diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear conflict once again turn out to be inconclusive, an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear installations may become an increasingly likely scenario. Other participants retorted that the prospect of an Israeli attack was of no concern to Iranian policymakers.

A nuclear disarmament regime in the wider Middle East was considered to be an important goal, albeit an unrealistic one in the foreseeable future. However, some of the participants called for the establishment of a sub-regional "nuclear-free zone" in the Persian Gulf region, since this would contribute to restoring trust among the regional actors, and especially between Iran and the Arab Gulf states. A sub-regional arrangement of this kind could form the core of an expandable structure which could later include other countries in the region. By gradually expanding the "nuclear-free zone," there would be mounting pressure on Israel to give up its policy of nuclear ambiguity.

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