

# NPT Review Conference 2010: The US Focus on Iran

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## Abstract

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, held in New York, 3-28 May 2010, was of particular importance to the US, especially in view of its serious concerns for nuclear proliferation. In this context, the US perceived violation of the NPT by Iran's nuclear activities was among its major concerns. For the US, the review conference provided a unique opportunity and occasion to draw international attention to the US non-proliferation concerns in general, and work towards further *containment* of Iran's nuclear program in particular. To this end, the US Administration under Barack Obama has pursued an overall "containment" *strategy*, aiming at the twin, inter-related objectives of rehabilitation of the tarnished US image and credibility and effective exercise of the US leadership towards non-proliferation and strengthening of NPT.

The present article undertakes to look into how Barack Obama and his Administration have fared in this regard since he took office in early 2009. The article explores, in particular, Obama's campaign platform of *change* in foreign policy, and how his "defensive neo-realism" outlook differs from the "offensive neo-realism" of the George W. Bush era. While looking in relative detail into the US wide-ranging, extensive "containment" strategy towards the Iranian nuclear program, comprising both of measures and policies at bilateral and multilateral levels, the article concludes on a positive note. The engaging, proactive approach and conduct of both countries at the 2010 review conference – allowing the meeting to produce a consensus final outcome – could point to a possible more engaging, and mutually-beneficial, multilateral work and even cooperation in the future in the nuclear field

**Keywords:** US Foreign Policy, Non-proliferation Concerns, Iran's Nuclear Program, Containment Strategy, NPT Review Conference

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## Introduction

The eighth Review Conference of the Nuclear Weapons Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was held in New York, 3-28 May 2010.<sup>(1)</sup> 189 countries have joined the Treaty. The only *hold-outs* are India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea.<sup>(2)</sup> For a host of reasons, the United States has always played a *decisive* role in shaping the fate of the NPT review conferences. The US role was even more important in the last review conference, since the preceding conference in 2005 had failed to agree on a final document. The failure was largely due to the US *militaristic* and *unilateralist* outlook and policy<sup>(3)</sup> of the George W. Bush era.

In 2010, a *perception* of threat of nuclear weapons and nuclear terrorism appeared to be one of the major US preoccupations. Of foremost concern to the US in this context was its perceived violation of the NPT by Iran's nuclear program. For the US, the review conference offered a unique opportunity and occasion to draw international attention to the US non-proliferation concerns, and more specifically, work towards further *containment* of Iran's nuclear program.

In this light, and in the context of the 2010 NPT review conference, the present article undertakes to look into the US focus on Iran's nuclear program. There is ample evidence to believe that further containment of the program has been a top priority of the US foreign policy for a number of years, even before the present Administration took office, at least since 2006 when the UN Security Council<sup>(4)</sup> took up the consideration of the program. The article will try to explore the US *strategy* in this regard, particularly from the vantage point of President Obama's campaign promise of *change* in foreign policy. At a more concrete level, the article will focus on the political aspects of the strategy, and then in so far as it relates to the 2010 review conference

The review of the US strategy is premised on the following *hypothesis* – to



be substantiated in the next section on the US foreign policy. Seriously concerned about the *threat* of nuclear terrorism and proliferation, it is reasonable to assume that the US felt obliged to strengthen its international *leadership* to combat the threat in an effective and internationally acceptable manner, which in turn required expanded foreign relations and a more effective international *diplomacy*. To that end, the US much-tarnished international image and *credibility* also needed to be rehabilitated and revived in respect of the NPT and other disarmament and non-proliferation treaties and issues. Within this overall outlook and strategy, no wonder, then, that Iran's nuclear program came to be perceived as a major source of proliferation threat, and its *containment* became a top priority US foreign policy objective.

Once placed in the context of the 2010 NPT review conference, the US strategy appears to have had in mind – and later pursued – these specific objectives: 1- to raise US disarmament and non-proliferation credibility (as briefly alluded to above); and 2 - to strengthen the NPT, particularly in respect of its non-proliferation provisions. The strengthening of the NPT, even though in an indirect manner, intended to exert more pressure on Iran's nuclear program, for which there existed more effective international and national channels available to the US – the UN Security Council and unilateral sanctions, both by the US and other like-minded countries. It should be added, however, that the intended strengthening was to be more comprehensive and more durable in effect, as it addressed the treaty as a whole, rather than addressing particular cases, like those of North Korea or Iran.

Iran's history, civilization, and culture, and developing capabilities and potentials, as well as its important geo-strategic position in a sensitive, even volatile, region of critical concern to the US has accorded it a special place in international and regional politics, including in the US foreign policy. That has been true for quite a long period, since at least the end of WW2, even at times when Iran-US relations have been in their lowest.<sup>(5)</sup> Another important consideration to be kept in mind relates to the intrinsically complex – and complicated – political nature of the US non-proliferation concerns and Iran's nuclear program, both of which have very important implications for the national interests and security of the two countries directly involved and also for regional and international security.



## US Foreign Policy

There are hard and deep-rooted factors<sup>(6)</sup> shaping – and directing - the US foreign policy, very much independent of the party in power or the individual at the helm at the White House. This might be the case in any other country, and is perhaps so in the US in a peculiarly more impressive way. This notwithstanding, it would be probably wrong, especially from a decision-making perspective, to underestimate much less neglect the impact of the personality, program, responsibilities, and authority of the President on the US foreign policy – at both levels of policy planning and execution. In this vain, and as “change” had most strongly been promised by Barack Obama in the course of his historic presidential campaign, it would have been reasonable to expect that his foreign policy once in office would be clearly distinct from those of the previous administrations. A brief look at the US foreign policy under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush would help towards a better appreciation of this and Obama’s promised “change.”

Bill Clinton’s approach to foreign policy (1993-2000) could be characterized by predominant “liberal institutionalism”, in which, among others, a rather high importance was accorded to international institutions. In this context, establishing “institutional balance”, which sought to place the US in a more advantageous position in decision-making in international institutions, enjoyed high priority. Multilateralism was also considered to be an important component of this approach and outlook. It was believed that through reform and strengthening of norms, regimes and institutions, regional and international balance could be achieved.<sup>(7)</sup> President Clinton’s 8-year period also witnessed the emergence of what could be called “international Wilsonism” - in which the use of force in international relations received particular importance in the conduct of the US foreign policy. This approach manifested itself in the resort to such terms as “preemptive strike”, “regime change”, and “humanitarian intervention”, resulting in a certain kind and degree of US unilateralism in international politics.<sup>(8)</sup>

The George W. Bush era (2001-2008), however, can be identified with an extreme shade of “realism” in foreign policy, during which some important concepts, such as balance of power in international politics, underwent significant change in how they were interpreted – and utilized – by the Bush Administration.



From the point of view, for George Bush and the neo-conservatives (Neo-cons) surrounding him in the Administration “balance of power” meant US *superiority* over all other nations - as defined in a document entitled *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.<sup>(9)</sup>

Neo-cons – as it came to light in their actual conduct - did not hide their utter lack of confidence in the international system, and hence, did not accord much attention to international diplomacy. This was particularly evident, inter alia, in the US opposition to a strong international drive for entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was rooted in their earlier refusal to ratify the Treaty. Similarly, the US had also opposed proposals regarding the initiation of negotiations for a ban on the production of fissile material (highly enriched uranium or plutonium) for weapons purposes, and refused to join the consensus outcome of the Review Conference in 2000, especially where it related to the establishment of a nuclear weapons free-zone in the Middle East and the practical steps towards nuclear disarmament.<sup>(10)</sup>

The Neo-cons influence in Washington led to the adoption of a radically more aggressive US foreign policy. Confronting potential threats to US national security, inclusive of the posture and determination to eliminate the presumed sources of such threats, was given a special focus in US foreign policy formulation from 2000 onwards. The ascendant Neo-cons, who had been on the margins of the American politics, had for years complained about Washington’s “dovish” and “appeasing” policies towards the “Islamic fanatics”. They also advocated forceful redrawing of the international political map, including spreading democracy and “regime change” throughout the Middle East, particularly in Iran.<sup>(11)</sup>

In the wake of the events of 9/11, the felt need for the simultaneous preservation of the US national security and confronting the enemy, both at home and abroad, were strongly boosted. In this vein, *national security* became the most powerful US obsession. Institutions dealing with national security were strengthened and new ones were created, which also came to enforce a much increased, expanded *control* over the home front public domain. In his State of the Union Address in late January 2002,<sup>(12)</sup> George W. Bush included Iran in his “Axis of Evil,” next to Iraq and North Korea. The surprising remark came at a time of a much improved atmosphere in the Iran-US relations and in the wake of clear



Iranian help to the US Afghan campaign.<sup>(13)</sup> As it turned out, the US was preparing for its second war in Iraq, and later perhaps, Iran.<sup>(14)</sup> The US *unilateralist militarism* was at its peak, especially during the first term of George W. Bush's presidency, which has caused huge material destruction and human suffering to this very day in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>(15)</sup> The two military adventures have also cost the US – and to some lesser degree, the UK, as its closest ally - dearly in terms of human and material resources and international credibility.

Aside from widespread and growing anti-American sentiments on a global scale, especially in the Middle East, the US unilateralist-militarist foreign policy also faced increasing criticism at home, which, among others, practically rendered impossible resort to another military adventure; military engagement against Iran. By late 2006, it was widely clear that the Neo-con's approach had to give way to a less costly US foreign policy approach.<sup>(16)</sup> In other words, the "offensive neo-realism" of the Neo-con administration which had resorted to war in pursuit of an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy<sup>(17)</sup> had run out of steam, hence, the need for change in the approach and policy. Barack Obama's campaign platform of "change" could, therefore, be seen as a response to the American society's urgent need for a *change* in US foreign policy.<sup>(18)</sup> In a major departure from the previous approach and policy, Obama came out openly in support of (a) "multilateralism" to resolve the US military conflicts and other pressing international issues, and (b) "co-operation" to attain and preserve international peace, security and stability.

Despite serious complexities, at both domestic and international levels, to define and pursue a policy of genuine "change,"<sup>(19)</sup> there are indications that Obama's foreign policy is in some important respects different from that of his predecessor. His approach to foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Middle East, where the US faces a range of crises and pressing security concerns,<sup>(20)</sup> – could be defined and termed as "defensive neo-realism." The concept is premised on the recognition of balance of power among dominant states, even if it has to be perceived and defined within the totality of the international system and the anarchic nature of international politics<sup>(21)</sup> (Chernoff, 2007: 109). Judging from many of his political positions and pronouncements since he took office in January 2009,<sup>(22)</sup> Barack Obama appears to be more favorable towards defense and constructive diplomacy, building and expansion of relations, conduct of



negotiations, arms control and disarmament, multilateralism, cooperation, rationality, pragmatism, flexibility, and consensus-building. For instance, in his remarks in Prague in early April 2009, he recognized that *differences* were inevitable, and with particular reference to nuclear issues, he observed that NPT parties would not always view each element of the treaty in the same way. “But we must define ourselves not by our differences, but by our readiness to pursue dialogue and hard work to ensure the NPT continues to make an enduring contribution to international peace and security”.<sup>(23)</sup>

### **Proliferation Concerns**

Looking at the history of the on-going dispute over the nuclear program in Iran, it comes to light that, unlike the positive approach and cooperative relations with the Pahlavi State in 1970s, expressions of concern by the US and its [Western] allies started soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, following 9/11, the US concern about nuclear terrorism and proliferation multiplied significantly, hence the multi-pronged, active policy since 2003 vis-à-vis the Iranian program, first through the IAEA and subsequently also through the UN Security Council (UNSC). A number of critical reports issued by the IAEA since 2003 and the subsequent string of resolutions by the Agency’s Governing Council, complemented and strengthened since 2006 with the engagement of the Security Council, increasingly tightening international sanctions against Iran, are a clear reflection of a more widespread international concern about the program, beyond mere US proliferations concerns. The fourth Council resolution,<sup>(24)</sup> expanding further the scope and depth of sanctions on Iran, which was further supported by the adoption of unilateral measures by the US and the European Union (EU) since July 2010, can in one sense reflect the continuation of serious international concerns about the program. The latest IAEA quarterly report on Iran’s nuclear activities, issued just a few weeks ago, has emphasized the point that the Agency is not fully satisfied with the cooperation from Iran,<sup>(25)</sup> a further indication of the fact that the concern is still very much alive and goes beyond a mere US-Iran dispute over the nature of the program. Iran, as is well-known, has judged and considering the IAEA reports and UNSC resolutions as merely reflective of a politically-motivated drive – mainly by the US and also to a lesser degree by a host of others – aiming at depriving Iran of



acquiring peaceful nuclear capability and undermining its national development process. In its dispute with the US on nuclear issues, Iran has also drawn attention to the contradictions in the US approach and policy, both with regard to the sheer size and sophistication of the US nuclear arsenal as well as its unconvincing policy towards Israel.

The growing international concern, over and above the IAEA and the UNSC, found its concrete manifestation at the 2005 NPT review conference, which was further pursued with renewed vigor – and as will be discussed below – much higher profile at the 2010 conference. As viewed by the US delegation at the opening of the conference, “the challenges of nuclear proliferation” was the primary subject of the 2010 NPT review conference. It was also emphasized that President Obama had made reducing the threat posed by nuclear weapons and materials a central mission of the US foreign policy, and strengthening the NPT was at the core of that mission. Stating the US primary concerns in more concrete terms, it was also underlined that while the vast majority of states were living up to their nonproliferation obligations, “a few outliers have demonstrated a determination to violate the rules and defy the international community.” While presenting the cases of North Korea and Iran as the examples of such “outliers,” it was recognized, however, that “the greatest potential danger facing the United States comes from a terrorist group like al-Qaida obtaining a crude nuclear device, not from a global nuclear war” (*US Department of State*, 3 May 2010).<sup>(26)</sup>

### The Containment Strategy

As stated earlier in the article, US had to strengthen its international *leadership*, in the first place, in order to contain a perceived *threat* of nuclear terrorism and proliferation. In other words, for the US to combat the threat in a more effective and internationally acceptable manner, in line with President Obama’s newly-adopted defensive neo-realist approach to foreign policy, the US needed to develop a much more influential foreign relations. To that end, the US much-tarnished image and *credibility* had to be rehabilitated and reinvigorated vis-à-vis the NPT and other disarmament and non-proliferation treaties and matters. Considering Iran’s nuclear program as a major source of proliferation threat, it would not be difficult to see how the *containment* of the Iranian program had come to be treated





as a top priority objective of the US foreign policy objective - years before the current Administration took office. Placing this objective in the specific context of the 2010 NPT review conference, the US strategy appears to have been targeted towards using the occasion for the following two concrete, and inter-related, objectives: 1- to promote US disarmament and non-proliferation credibility; and 2- to strengthen the NPT, particularly in respect of its non-proliferation provisions – to be discussed in detail in the next section.

### Boosting Leadership Credibility

Forty years after the entry into force of the NPT, nuclear weapon states, the United States in particular, are still in possession of thousands of nuclear weapons. This neither helps the credibility of the NPT, nor the political image of the nuclear weapon states aspiring to lead international efforts to strengthen the Treaty. Worse still, such a situation seriously contradicts the Treaty's spirit, as underlined in its opening: "[t]he devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples."

Clearly, to avert the danger of a nuclear war, there should be *no* nuclear weapons to begin with. That objective – albeit far-fetched in reality - makes *disarmament* the most immediate necessary condition for the Treaty's spirit to prevail. It may also be noted that the possession of nuclear weapons, under any pretext, by a group of states, is hardly an encouragement to nuclear weapons non-proliferation. As also stated in very clear terms in the opening to the Treaty: "Proliferation of nuclear weapons would seriously enhance the danger of nuclear war." These categorical stipulations, a number of other Treaty provisions,<sup>(27)</sup> and many UN reports and resolutions since the Treaty came into force underline the international importance and urgency of nuclear weapons disarmament.

Barack Obama's pledge in Prague (April 2009) regarding nuclear weapons disarmament clearly showed the US determination to lead the strengthening of the NPT. He said: "Countries with nuclear weapons will move toward disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can have access to peaceful nuclear energy.. Within that framework, he went on to state, the US was to strengthen the NPT to deal effectively with the *threat* of nuclear



weapons and nuclear terrorism. To seek peace and security in a world free of nuclear weapons, he had committed the US to take a number of initial steps. He cherished the hope that through cooperation and shared understanding the NPT pillars would be strengthened and confidence restored in its credibility and effectiveness (White House, 5 April 2009).<sup>(28)</sup>

Furthermore, besides enhancing its international credibility, the US had also developed a plan of action for disarmament. As outlined by President Obama in Prague, the US and Russia would, as a first step, negotiate a new agreement to replace the strategic arms reduction treaty (START), which was to expire in December 2009. In his own words: “We will seek a new agreement by the end of the year that is legally binding and sufficiently bold.... This will set the stage for further cuts, and we will seek to include all nuclear weapon states in this endeavor” (Ibid.).<sup>(29)</sup>

He had further confirmed in Prague that the US “would immediately and aggressively pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).” The pledge was made that the US would also launch a diplomatic effort to bring on board the other states whose ratifications were required for the Treaty to enter into force.<sup>(30)</sup>

In his Prague policy statement, Obama had also sought a new treaty that verifiably ended production of fissile materials intended for use in nuclear weapons – a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). The treaty was not only to help fulfill their NPT Article VI commitments, “but it also could help avoid destabilizing arms races in regions such as South Asia” (Ibid.).<sup>(31)</sup> It could as well facilitate the task of securing such weapons-usable materials against theft or seizure by terrorist groups. The negotiation of a verifiable FMCT, delayed for long, was a top U.S. priority at the Conference on Disarmament.<sup>(32)</sup> The US hoped that its renewed flexibility on this issue would enable negotiations to start soon in Geneva. Pending the successful negotiation and entry into force of an FMCT, the US had reaffirmed their “decades-long unilateral moratorium on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons”. Also, other governments, nuclear-weapon-states in particular, were called, “to declare or reaffirm their intention not to produce further fissile material for weapons.” Similarly, until CTBT entered into force, the US was to continue its nearly two-decade-long moratorium on nuclear explosive testing, and asked other



governments for a similar undertaking (Ibid.).<sup>(33)</sup>

A year later, President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the new START<sup>(34)</sup> treaty reducing long-range nuclear weapons, on 8 April 2010 in Prague. The year-long treaty negotiations represented the first major strategic accord between the former superpowers since the end of the Cold War. Barack Obama hailed the agreement as an "important milestone for nuclear security and nonproliferation and for US-Russia relations." Russians, however, seemed to have serious doubts about the viability of the treaty and even deeper misgivings about Obama's changes to US nuclear weapons posture review, which seemingly aimed at moving toward a nuclear weapons-free world (Weir, 8 April 2010).<sup>(35)</sup>

The Nuclear Security Summit meeting, held a few days later in Washington, D.C. and convened by President Obama<sup>(36)</sup> was to recharge efforts to keep nuclear material and loose nukes out of reach of terrorists. It was attended by a select group of 47 heads of state or government, including the NPT- recognized five nuclear weapon states, India, and Pakistan.<sup>(37)</sup> It concluded with a joint declaration to guide future work toward locking away and cleansing the globe, within four years, of materials still too easily accessible to terrorists (Hurst, 13 April 2010).<sup>(38)</sup> On the sidelines of the meeting, Barack Obama was reported to be busy lobbying world leaders, one by one, to back new sanctions against Iran then under discussion at the Security Council. Obama's meeting with the Chinese President Hu Jintao was probably the most difficult of all (Karon, 14 April 2010).<sup>(39)</sup>

Following its wide-ranging activities regarding the Iranian nuclear dossier, the US took the case to the NPT review conference. A few days after its commencement, a joint statement on proliferation concerns was issued by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (*US Department of State*, 5 May 2010),<sup>(40)</sup> in which Iran was the only state specifically referred to as a proliferation risk. This reflected the group's serious concern with Iran's nuclear program. They underscored the importance of Iran's full and immediate compliance with its international obligations, as underlined in the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions and with the requirements of the IAEA. The only other state named in the joint statement - North Korea - was urged to fulfill its commitments under the Six-Party Talks, including the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.



The statement emphasized, however, that group remained determined to achieve the satisfactory resolution of the nuclear cases of Iran and DPRK through diplomatic means. The statement made no direct mention of non-signatory states, Israel in particular, and the serious danger its nuclear arsenals pose against international peace and security. The content of the statement, and the process pursued for its preparation and issuance, reflected in clear terms the US nuclear non-proliferation outlook and policy. The above discussion, even if in broad brush, depicts the US wide-ranging and often very complicated<sup>(41)</sup> political and diplomatic efforts in the international arena towards enhancing its leadership credibility. Further, it was demonstrated that in parallel, as an inter-related objective, the US has been engaged in exercising its now energized leadership towards containing nuclear terrorism and proliferation. As stated by a well-known arms control expert, "The successes achieved at the conference were made possible by the leadership exhibited by the U.S. team and by the shift in U.S. nuclear weapons policy direction under President Obama over the past 15 months" (Kimball, 28 May 2010).<sup>(42)</sup>

### **The Containment**

Earlier in the article attention has been drawn to Barack Obama's determination to strengthen the NPT to deal effectively with the threat of nuclear weapons and nuclear terrorism. To that end, he had called for the improvement of verification of and compliance with the NPT. And as part of the US new outlook and policy towards peace and security in a world free of nuclear weapons, he had committed the US to take a number of initial steps, which, as indicated previously, were premised on cooperation and shared understanding, and which he hoped, would help strengthen the NPT pillars (White House, 5 April 2009).<sup>(43)</sup> Notwithstanding the serious concern with Iran's nuclear program, it is not difficult to fathom the rationale behind the US perception of the potential threat emanating from a terrorist group like al-Qaida, especially in light of the 9/11 episode. Moreover, Iran is hardly considered as a potential nuclear threat against the US or its allies – which is fully consistent with Iran's defensive ethos. And since there can be no nuclear terrorism without some kind of nuclear proliferation, therefore, adoption and pursuit of an effective strategy towards nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation assume a much higher importance than mere preoccupation with "nuclear



terrorism.” Simply put, with nuclear disarmament there will be no possibility of nuclear weapons proliferation to any terrorist group.

A few hours after urging China's President Hu Jintao to join forces with the US in ensuring that “Iran lives up to its international obligations,” Barack Obama stated in very categorical terms that the US “will continue to ratchet up the pressure on Iran over its nuclear program but would do so with unified international backing.” As reported, he had earlier lobbied the Chinese President’s cooperation in a rare hour-long telephone conversation late the night before their meeting. While China had opposed new UN sanctions against Iran in the course of the telephone exchange and later in the meeting, but Obama had “underscored the importance of working together to ensure that Iran lives up to its international obligations” (*AFP*, 2 April 2010).<sup>(44)</sup>

Over and above the measures already discussed, the US has also called for “more resources and authority to strengthen international inspections”. Much of the expected increase in resources and authority would reasonably go to the IAEA and its safeguards system, in particular. Universal entry into force of the Additional Protocol to safeguards agreements was also in need of vigorous, effective pursuit.<sup>(45)</sup> Another area in need of serious tackling related to addressing the consequences for those breaking the rules or withdrawing from the NPT without cause. Further, as underlined by the US administration, it was hoped that NPT Parties would consider and propose ways to work together to develop effective consequences for Treaty violators (White House, 5 April 2009).<sup>(46)</sup>

From the US perspective, the NPT’s basis had to be strengthened through additional, complementary measures, including a campaign to ensure that nuclear materials worldwide were adequately secured or eliminated, and also to ensure that international commerce in nuclear material and technology would support solely peaceful uses. From this perspective, such efforts were necessary not only to prevent proliferation to states, but also to ensure that terrorists never acquired a nuclear weapon. To address such potential risks and dangers, Barack Obama announced in Prague the convening of a Global Summit on Nuclear Security by the US (*Ibid.*).<sup>(47)</sup>

The US had also called for “a new framework for civil nuclear cooperation, including an international fuel bank, so that countries can access peaceful power



without increasing the risks of proliferation.” The proposed fuel bank “could reassure countries embarking on or expanding nuclear power programs and complying fully with their nonproliferation obligations that they could reliably purchase reactor fuel in the event of commercial supply disruption.” As argued by the US, the proposal was intended to assuage possible concerns and that it was “not necessary to pursue expensive enrichment and reprocessing facilities to exploit nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.”

The recent US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which came out shortly before the 2010 review conference, has been viewed by Barack Obama as part of an overall strategy to send a clear message that “we’re going to have a strong NPT, that everybody has an interest in being in the NPT ... and that we are going to try to bring every tool that we have at our disposal to prevent proliferation and to prevent nuclear terrorism”. Acting on this outlook, particularly with regard to countries like Iran or North Korea, the US had been executing a policy that would increasingly isolate them so long as they are deemed – or found – to be operating outside of accepted international norms. More importantly, the NPR promised that the US would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that were parties to the NPT and comply with their nonproliferation obligations (Miles, 6 April 2010).<sup>(48)</sup> Although, this formulation has been credited as an important positive change in the US nuclear weapons use policy, it clearly had *excluded* Iran, considering that from the US viewpoint Iran was hardly seen in compliance of her nonproliferation obligations. From the US vantage point, the US approach and policy has been geared to sending a very strong message through sanctions, through the articulation of the Nuclear Posture Review, the nuclear summit, and finally through the NPT review conference, that the international community is serious about Iran facing consequences if it did not change its behavior; that is, change its nuclear program (Sanger and Baker, 5 April 2010).<sup>(49)</sup>

The discussion above has tried to depict a clear picture of the extent and depth of the US containment plan against Iran’s nuclear program. The plan ranges from the guarantee, particularly in difficult times, to provide nuclear reactor fuel, if a member state is in full compliance with the NPT, to *no* guarantee not to *use* nuclear weapons against it, if it were not in compliance with the treaty. In terms of its depth, it is of interest to note that the plan goes to such details as the need for



upgrading of NPT safeguards' inspection technologies. Supported by an invigorated US leadership credibility, the US containment plan has also envisaged ways of achieving cooperation and shared understanding of all interested/concerned states. As for practical measures, the containment plan has included such varied means as ratcheting up pressure on Iran mainly through an expanded sanctions regime (both UN and unilateral sanctions); banning the production of fissile materials; raising the level of resources and authority for international inspection; punishing withdrawal from the NPT; punishing any violations of its provisions; and threatening, isolating and sanctioning non-complying member states. It goes without saying that some of these elements are more directly and, perhaps more immediately, applicable to Iran's nuclear program, as perceived by the US. However, as discussed earlier in the article, the containment plan, as outlined here, is part and parcel of a much larger US containment strategy.

And a final – brief - note on the outcome of the review conference. Despite the US preoccupation with Iran's nuclear program, as discussed in the article, the conference managed to address [some of] the legitimate interests and expectations of the non-nuclear-weapon states members of the NPT, including Iran. This, in sharp contrast to the 2005 review conference, allowed the 2010 conference to reach consensus on a final document in which non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, along with other important NPT pillars, were given high prominence. Such an outcome could, in a sense, be considered as a win-win situation for both the US and Iran. The comprehensive, albeit general, language of the final document on non-proliferation – without undue pressure of pointing fingers -- was seen by everybody to contain an adequately clear, potent message for the long-term objective of nuclear weapon non-proliferation – a major US concern and concrete objective also shared by Iran as a matter of principle. Iran's proactive engagement in the month-long conference, inclusive of the politically astute decision of joining the consensus, also a significant departure from the conduct in the 2005 review conference, did in fact help towards the meeting's ultimate success. The same could as well be said about the US practical conduct at the conference; reliance on diplomacy, multilateralism and institutionalism, in support of a proactive international cooperation and confidence building, which in the author's view, can indeed serve to build a basis for further mutually-beneficial multilateral work and even



cooperation, even if on a limited scale.

## Conclusions

The present article has discussed the US strategy, approach and policy towards Iran's nuclear program, with special emphasis on Obama and his Administration's pronouncements and policies since early 2009 and at the 2010 NPT review conference. Set in the context of the US foreign policy and the transition from a militarist-unilateralist approach and "offensive neo-realism" under George W. Bush to a more multilateralist-institutionalist approach and "defensive neo-realism" under Barack Obama, the article explored how the new Administration has conducted itself with regard to the question of non-proliferation as a strategic American objective and serious current concern with the Iranian program. The US approach to the Iranian program has been viewed from the vantage point of an overall "containment" strategy, which has had to grapple with the parallel, inter-related objectives of "boosting international credibility" and "exercising leadership" towards containing nuclear proliferation and terrorism through strengthening of NPT.

The article reviewed, in relative detail, the wide-ranging and often very complicated political and diplomatic efforts of the US Administration on the international arena, including in particular with Russia and China, as fellow Permanent Members of the Security Council and also important states with their own national interests and foreign policy. As discussed, the extent and depth of the US containment plan against Iran's nuclear program covered a gamut of policies and measures, inclusive of direct policies and measures as reflected in the active pursuit of Security Council sanctions resolutions and further unilateralist sanctions, and other indirect policies and measures geared towards strengthening of NPT and non-proliferation – whether at bilateral level with Russia or at the multilateral level through the review conference.

Notwithstanding the still on-going US extensive containment strategy – as reflected in the active pursuit of effective sanctions against Iran's nuclear program at both bilateral and multilateral levels – the actual approach and diplomatic conduct at the 2010 review conference, by both the US and Iran, could in fact point in the direction of a possible more engaging, proactive approach in the future. The





general language in the final outcome of the conference, albeit containing a very clear, potent message on non-proliferation, allowed Iran to join the consensus, thus helping the meeting's success. The final document broadly supported the US strategy to strengthen the NPT; it included balanced and practical steps to advance nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The fact that The US has welcomed the agreements reached at the review conference towards strengthening the global non-proliferation regime should be considered as an encouraging sign, which the author views as a worthy basis for further mutually-beneficial multilateral work and even cooperation between the two countries in the nuclear field, even if on a limited scale.

## Notes

1. The NPT, opened for signature in 1968, and entered into force in 1970, was intended to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, both vertically and horizontally. It requires the member states to be committed to nuclear weapons non-proliferation, enforcing safeguards for preventing diversion from peaceful uses of nuclear energy to weaponization, pursuing negotiations on cessation of the nuclear arms race and nuclear disarmament, and creation of nuclear-weapons free zones. Further, it allows for the transfer of nuclear technology and know-how, as an inalienable right of all the parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.
2. In 2003, North Korea withdrew from the NPT in order to develop nuclear weapons. North Korea tested the weapons in 2006 and 2009.
3. The specifics will be discussed at a later stage.
4. Before the 2010 review conference, the Security Council had already issued three sanction resolutions against Iran's nuclear program. A fourth resolution – 1929 – was adopted soon after the conference.
5. Council on Foreign Relations. "Iran: Time for a New Approach", 2004, pp. 1-2.
6. The highly influential Jewish and oil cartel lobbies, for instance, but also, the history, culture, and super-power status of the US.
7. Ebrahim Mottaghi, "Asymmetric Cooperation between Iran – US", *International Quarterly of Foreign Relations*, Fall 2009, Vol. 1, No. 3, p.11.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. Ervand Abrahamian, Bruce Cumings, and Moshe Ma'oz, *Inventing the Axis of Evil*. New York: The New Press. 2004, p. 46.
10. Rebecca Johnson, "Politics and Protection: Why the 2005 NPT Review Conference Failed", *Disarmament Diplomacy*, Autumn 2005, No. 80.
11. Abrahamian, et al., *Op. Cit.* pp: 97-99.
12. 29 January 2002.
13. Abrahamian, et al., *Op. Cit.* p. 95.
14. In retrospect, the Address set the tone and dynamism for the process that ended with the invasion of Iran over a year later.
15. The US forces, leading a coalition of like-minded countries, which had attacked the



Taliban regime in Afghanistan in October 2001 for harboring the Al-Qaida, invaded Iraq in March 2003. The military engagement against Iraq had been prepared and undertaken to unearth purported weapons of mass destruction and to end Saddam Hussein's support for anti-US terrorist groups. The fact that the military campaign ended the Saddam's regime as part of the larger democracy-promotion program is history now.

16. Francis Fukuyama, "After Neoconservatism" - New York Times, February 19, 2006. And James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, The Iraq Study Group Report, USA: Authorized Edition, 2006: xiii.
17. Fred Chernoff, *The power of international theory: re forging the link to foreign policy-making through scientific enquiry*, USA: Routledge, 2007, pp. 109-110.
18. The difficulty of the situation and the need for change was also felt by US allies.
19. For example, appointment of Hillary Clinton, a supporter of US war on Iraq - and Iran ("I will obliterate Iran", she said in the course of the 2008 US Presidential campaign) - and also a staunch pro-Israel Senator, as Secretary of State, points to the complicated domestic political setting and the influence of major lobbies in Washington. In terms of foreign policy execution, frequent incidents of killing of non-combatant Iraqis and Afghans by the US and coalition [NATO] forces show some of the actual challenges confronting Obama's platform and promise of "change."
20. The still on-going military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq without clear and assured exit strategy, Iran's nuclear program, practical impasse in the Arab-Israeli peace process (despite current efforts and US-brokered talks), the uncertain future of the US energy supply from the region [Persian Gulf], and the question of terrorism and the activities of Al-Qaida.
21. Chernoff, Op. Cit. p.109.
22. The latest US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) and National Security Staff report of the White House on Iran appear to indicate President Obama's effort to moderate previously predominant anti-Iran atmosphere and rhetoric.
23. White House, 5 April 2009.
24. Resolution 1929, dated 9 June 2010.
25. Report of the IAEA Director-General, dated 6 September 2010.
26. US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/05/141424.htm>. 3 May 2010. "Remarks at the Review Conference of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty".
27. Article VI of the treaty specifically deals with the issue. That is, each state party "undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament ...".
28. White House, 5 April 2009.
29. Ibid. President Obama and Russian President Medvedev had instructed that the new agreement achieve reductions lower than those in existing arms control agreements, and that the new agreement should include effective verification measures. The



Presidents had also directed that the talks begin immediately, and further charged their negotiators to report, by July 2009, on their progress in working out a new agreement. An initial meeting was held in Rome in April 2009, and another meeting was planned for Moscow after the review conference PrepCom.

30. Thus far little has been reported on any US action in this regard.
31. Ibid.
32. For years, the CD had been unable to achieve a consensus on beginning negotiations to end the production of weapons-grade materials dedicated to use in nuclear weapons.
33. Ibid.
34. Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. The new START is the successor to the 1991 treaty. If ratified by both countries' legislatures, it will lower the limit of nuclear warheads to at most 1,550 each over seven years, down from the current ceiling of 2,200.
35. Weir, Fred. . "Obama, Medvedev sign START' treaty ...", Christian Science Monitor. 8 April 2010.
36. 12-13 April 2010.
37. Although invited, Israel did not attend, probably, to avoid invoking criticism for peculiar nuclear status and also for its aggressive policies in the occupied Palestinian territories.
38. Washington. Hurst R. 13 April 2010. "Obama's nuclear summit yields early dividends", Associated Press.
39. Tony Karon, "Obama's Nuclear Summit: Progress on Security, Not Iran", London: *TIME*. 14 April, 2010 After an especially long meeting, a US official announced, "They are prepared to work with us". However, the Chinese speedily rejected the suggestion that they had embraced Washington's view that tough sanctions offered a path to resolving the standoff over Iran's nuclear program. Despite China's traditional insistence on their preference for dialogue and negotiation as the best way out for the issue, and that "[p]ressure and sanctions cannot fundamentally solve it" (Karon, 14 April 2010), China joined the other UNSC Permanent Members in adopting the resolution 1929 in early June 2010.
40. US Department of State, "Statement to 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference". 5 May 2010.
41. US relations with Russia and China are, due to a host of reasons and factors, quite complicated. For instance, the following remark on the new START' treaty by Dmitry Suslov, an expert with the Council on Foreign and Defense Policies, a Moscow think tank whose members include top Kremlin advisers, in connection with the new START' treaty, is quite indicative of the complexities involved: "We are seeing, in sharp relief, that the US and Russia view the strategic landscape through completely different lenses." He further continues: "Moscow is laying down the message that this new treaty is fine, but we should not interpret this as a new era in relations. The strategic picture is changing in ways that Russia is not completely comfortable with, and we need to keep our options open" (Weir, 8 April 2010). Also in a press conference two days prior to the signing of the treaty, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shocked many by



warning that “Russia might pull out of the treaty if US plans to station strategic anti-missile interceptors in Europe, which were suspended by Mr. Obama last year.” Pointing to the possibility of the revival of the system during the 10-year life of the START agreement, he indicated that there may be serious problems ahead with the Russian ratification of the treaty (Ibid.).

42. Daryl Kimball, “ACA Welcomes NPT Review Consensus”, 28 May 2010. (available at: Arms Control Association, <http://www.armscontrol.org>).
43. White House, 5 April 2009.
44. AFP via Yahoo. 2 April, 2010. “US to ratchet up pressure on Iran: Obama”.
45. Signed in 1998, the Additional Protocol entered into force in US in January 2009. Brazil and Egypt have not signed the protocol. While Iran has signed the Protocol, its ratification has been pending, subject to strong domestic opposition.
46. White House, 5 April 2009.
47. Ibid.
48. Donna Miles,. “Review Reduces Weapons, Maintains Deterrence, Obama Says”, Washington: *American Forces Press Service.*, 6 April 2010.
49. David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, “Excerpts From Obama Interview”, *New York Times.* 5 April,2010.