



Global Highlights

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Globalization and Geopolitics:

Swords, Ploughshares and Plastic Bags

- “Will they, won’t they?” has been the key question for most geopolitical analysts over recent days as they attempt to second guess whether the USA or Israel will attack Iran. Tehran insists that it is developing a nuclear capacity for the sole purpose of generating power for civilian use but many in the international community suspect that the regime wants nuclear warheads. This could be a case of turning ploughshares into swords.
- As Javier Solana remarked a couple of weeks ago, mistrust of Iran intentions has been fuelled in part by the conspicuous absence of power plant investment projects. As he said, they are investing in fuel pumps, but we see no plans for buying cars.¹
- But there is another aspect to the dispute which is less commented upon. Taken at its word, Iran would be just one of several countries which plan to develop or expand civil nuclear energy facilities. At the moment 31 countries, mostly in the developed world, have the capacity to generate nuclear power. But many more in the developing world, like Iran, want to construct nuclear power reactors.
- Egypt, Indonesia and Turkey are amongst those countries that have actually announced plans and other interested countries include Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Even oil and gas rich Venezuela joined in this week to announce interest in nuclear power generation. As the price of fossil fuels increase many see this as the most reliable option to power their future development. They also argue that nuclear power is the least contaminating in terms of CO2 emissions, so helping in the fight against global warming. But is this ‘nuclear renaissance’ feasible?
- A recent report by the Oxford Research Group (ORG) which analyses the possible future trends for civil nuclear power suggests not.² It argues that the world population is estimated to grow to 10 billion by 2075. It also assumes that 1 kilowatt per capita of electricity will be generated by then (probably an underestimation given that the current per capita demand is already higher). If even a third of electricity generation is to come from nuclear power this will require 3000 new nuclear power stations – or around 1 per week between now and 2075. In addition, it will also be necessary to replace some of the 429 nuclear installations which are currently operative but which will become obsolete.
- The report casts doubt on whether a civil nuclear construction and supply programme on this scale is possible. First, the known reserves of uranium are even more limited than reserves of fossil fuels. As stocks deplete and demand increases, prices will rise further (although this will surely boost exploration for new reserves). Secondly, plutonium could replace high grade uranium in future breeder reactors but this is more easily converted to military use – by governments and terrorists alike. The contradictory objectives of energy and counter terrorist policy are evident. Finally, the report suggests that under current arrangements the International Atomic Energy Agency (the international nuclear regulator) would be wholly unable to cope with inspecting plants world wide. Future AQ Khans (who sold Pakistan’s nuclear know-how to Iran) would find their trade even easier with damaging consequences for the geo-political balance.
- Meanwhile the effort to reduce energy consumption is being joined by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown who is campaigning against the plastic bag which he describes as “the most visible symbol of environmental waste.”³ Over 13 billion such bags –energy expensive to produce and non-biodegradable - are distributed in Britain each year. Brown hopes to reduce their use by 25% next year and then “eliminate the single-use disposable bags altogether.” The initiative comes with the introduction of new laws in Britain to make it the first country in the world with a legal framework to cut carbon emissions.

¹http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/Elcano_es/Zonas_es/0018

²http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers/toohottohandle.php

³<http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page13791.asp>