The USA - Iran: whether it is possible to shift from the policy of threats and sanctions

On 4 August, the inauguration of the newly elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran Hassan Rouhani will be held in Tehran. According to the statement by representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran Abbas Araghchi, for the first time since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, "all countries, excluding the USA and Israel" have been invited to take part in the ceremony. Earlier on, head of the press service of the Parliament Presidium Gholam Reza Mesri announced that all countries, except Israel, would be able to take part in the ceremony, including the United States. Moreover, Mesri noted that the list of the approved countries and of the countries which have expressed willingness to take part in the ceremony will be presented to the Parliament by the headquarters of the newly elected president and then they will be officially invited by the Parliament. However, this has not been the case. To date, the list of the invited representatives of foreign states has not been announced, and the Iranian Foreign Ministry is not yet able to name the countries which have expressed willingness to take part in the ceremony; however, the participation of the USA is ruled out. By the way, Tehran never received any congratulations from Washington on Rouhani's victory in the presidential elections.

It is not because of the forgetfulness of Obama's administration: even after Rouhani was elected President, the Americans demonstrated that they did not intend to soften their policy towards this state. It is in spite of the fact that, with the election of the new president of Iran, the White House might get hopes that the IRI's foreign policy can undergo changes in terms of the normalisation of their relations with the USA and the West as well as concessions in the field of the Iranian nuclear programme. For example, the famous analytical centre in the USA – the Brookings Institution - says the following in the recently published material looking into the new policy of the West regarding the Iranian nuclear issue after the election of the new president of the IRI: "Under the circumstances when the authorities of the USA, China, Russia and European states are preparing for the next steps of the negotiations with Iran, new opportunities arise in connection with the predominately moderate tendencies in the foreign policy of Tehran." Certain American politicians have also hastily appraised the electoral defeat of the conservatives from the immediate entourage of the head of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei as a motive for changing Washington's stance towards Tehran. Thus, 118 US Congressmen, including both republicans and democrats, issued a letter of appeal to President Obama, in the light of the outcome of the presidential elections in Iran, for making efforts towards starting direct negotiations with the Iranian authorities. Moreover, 29 American retired high-ranking diplomats and officials wrote to the US President urging him to begin new multilateral and bilateral negotiations with Iran after the assumption of office by President Rouhani.

It is noteworthy that there is cautious optimism regarding the appraisal of the change in the Iranian presidential team in Europe as well. Speaking at the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Commons, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague stated willingness for improving the relationship with Tehran on step by step basis. London and Tehran started reflecting on the restoration of the full functioning of their embassies. Iran made a friendly protocol step and congratulated the British Queen Elizabeth II and her grandson Prince William on the birth of an heir to the throne.

It is not only the British who are willing to make adjustments in the relations with Iran. European economists prove openly and convincingly that their countries are missing out on many opportunities as a result of the sanctions
against Iran initiated by Washington.

There are, obviously, diametrically opposed views in the West on the possible prospects of Rouhani's activity. In the view of many American experts, the situation around Iran will not change fundamentally with the election of the new president. Thus, former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton, who is currently one of the leaders of the American Enterprise Institute, is sure that Rouhani's election is nothing but a trap that gives America a false sense of security and leads to a prolonged delay in the negotiations but will not stop, even for a minute, nuclear developments. In his view, the difference between the new president and Ahmadinejad is only in the rhetoric and in the fact that the latter expressed the IRI's goals publicly while Rouhani will act without making unnecessary declarations. It is recalled in this regard that, in 2003-2005, Rouhani already led the Iranian delegation at the negotiations on their nuclear issue. According to some information, he boasted to his Iranian colleagues about the ease with which he had been able to outsmart European diplomats. In 2004, he allegedly made a speech before Iranian legislators and professors. He told them that Tehran had managed to gain time for its nuclear developments.

But now, in his first public statements, Rouhani takes a slightly different stance: "We will undertake two steps to lift the sanctions. Firstly, we are going to double the transparency of our nuclear programme. Secondly, we intend to build credibility between Iran and the international community." It must be admitted that this sort of statements by Rouhani have been heard and received seriously. High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton encourages swift resumption of the negotiation process with the IRI. In Brussels, at the non-public consultations of political directors of the "group of six", which includes the USA, Russia, China, Great Britain, France and Germany, participants in the meeting expressed their common interest in the beginning of a new phase in the discussion of the Iranian nuclear dossier. The negotiation process, which has been put on hold for the period of the presidential elections in Iran since April, will resume after the formation of the IRI's new government and the establishment of the composition of the Iranian delegation, and it is anticipated that the latter will probably have to make certain concessions indeed.

However, in the view of a number of political analysts, it should not be ruled out that American solidarity in the "group of six" is aimed at gaining political benefits from the situation with the new president in Iran. The main purpose of the Americans is still to increase pressure on Tehran, and there is also a temptation to test Rouhani's firmness. It is worth recalling that, after the election of the new president, the US authorities imposed new sanctions - this time against Iran's automotive industry. The other day, Russia did not accept the latest claims against Iran outlined in the report of Security Council experts and blocked, jointly with China, the imposition of new UN sanctions. Whilst Russia is sure that the actions of the international community aimed at resolving issues related to Iran's nuclear programme are undermined by unilateral sanctions, Washington has already promised President Rouhani new unilateral American punitive measures instead of the UN sanctions blocked by Russia and China. The USA's rigour makes it possible to draw a conclusion that there is a dominant American opinion that Rouhani's victory at the elections reflects the Iranians' discontent with the regime but it cannot have a fundamental impact on the IRI's political course. The proposals to reset the relations with Tehran have not found support from Obama's administration. You cannot really expect a dramatic thaw in the relations between Iran and the USA after the resignation of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The main argument of the Americans is that, in the Islamic Republic, it is not the president who has the last say in foreign policy matters but the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Such assessment can be agreed with. President Rouhani cannot radically reform and change the IRI's strategy in the international arena on his own. Firstly, he was only elected as head of the executive branch of the government. The head of state in Iran is the supreme leader, who has control over the armed forces, which function independently of the government, as well as over various higher religious and political oversight bodies, judicial power and the Parliament. Secondly, Rouhani himself is closely linked to the religious community, he has been a member of the political entourage of the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Khomeini, and he was put forward by the Islamic revolution. Moreover, he worked for decades next to the current supreme leader Khamenei and was his trustee. This fact, but not without reservations, rules out open political confrontation and the very possibility of any systemic contradictions between them.

Therefore, it is not coincidental that the end to the discussion, in absentia, of the possibility of direct negotiations with the USA was put yet again by Ayatollah Khamenei. According to his estimations, Washington "does not deserve the Islamic Republic's trust", that is why there can be yet no talk of establishing diplomatic relations between the two states. Nevertheless, the leader of Iran does not rule out the possibility of a dialogue on certain issues of mutual interest, admitting: "...over the last years, I have not prohibited a dialogue on specific issues such as, for example, on Iraq". It looks like the Iranian nuclear dossier is not the topic which, at this juncture, could be included in the number of "specific" issues for bilateral discussion. The format of the "group of six", securing the participation of
Russia and China, is preferable to Tehran. Realising that the Americans cannot afford military aggression, the Iranian leadership follow and will continue to follow their commitment to conducting nuclear research. The US sanctions supported by the EU, undoubtedly, cause serious problems for the Iranian economy. At the same time, it should be admitted that they are not the only reason for the economic downturn: it is also the result of some not very successful experiments of the previous government whose mistakes will have to be rectified by Rouhani’s new team. As for the steering wheel for the country's strategic course, it still remains in the hands of the supreme leader of the IRI.

*Nikolai Bobkin is an expert on the Near and Middle East security, candidate of military sciences, docent. This article was written exclusively for New Eastern Outlook.*