



PolicyWatch 2209

Clear-Eyed Diplomacy: Strategic Shifts Needed in the Iran Negotiations

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If Washington is to secure an Iranian nuclear deal that is sustainable and advances American interests, it must make several adjustments to its diplomatic strategy.

The Iran nuclear talks are set to resume in Vienna today, with the aim of reaching a long-term agreement to succeed the first-step "Joint Plan of Action" (JPOA). Negotiating an agreement that advances U.S. interests will require the Obama administration to deemphasize political battles in Washington and focus on the larger issues at stake, such as Iran's regional activities and the ultimate fate of the nuclear program. It should also endeavor to transform its fractious array of domestic and international allies from a weakness into a strength. Despite their tactical differences, these allies share an interest in preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, as well as avoiding a military conflict and promoting regional stability and global nonproliferation.

LONGER-TERM STRATEGY NEEDED

For all the debate it has spawned, the JPOA is a modest agreement built for the short run. In mandating that Iran disperse its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, it increases the regime's breakout time by several weeks. But Tehran can significantly reduce that time in the long run by continuing to perfect advanced centrifuges. And by continuing missile work, it can also improve its delivery capability. Enhanced inspections increase the West's chances of detecting a breakout, but in the JPOA, such efforts apply only to declared facilities; they provide little assurance of detecting covert facilities, where Iran would be more likely to attempt a breakout. At the same time, the sanctions relief provided in the agreement is insufficient to get the Iranian economy back on its feet unless Tehran can use the breathing room to subvert and erode the sanctions, which would likely render further talks futile.

The very modesty of the JPOA lends urgency to the new negotiations for both sides. But

the United States should not allow its desire for a deal to cloud the larger strategic purpose of the talks. A sound diplomatic strategy and worthwhile nuclear agreement can advance all of the shared international objectives noted above while also burnishing U.S. influence in the Middle East. But a hasty or ill-considered approach could just as easily undermine these goals.

INCREASING THE ODDS OF SUCCESS

Even as U.S. negotiators consider how they will address specific issues during the talks -- enrichment, reprocessing, missiles, and other matters -- they should also carefully weigh their broader diplomatic strategy in order to strengthen their hand at the negotiating table and ensure a positive outcome. In particular, the administration should consider the following steps.

Intensify consultations with Congress and allies. U.S. negotiators tacitly represent a broad coalition of actors -- within the United States and abroad -- who hold disparate views on what constitutes an acceptable end-state for Iran's nuclear program, but who share an interest in preventing a breakout and avoiding armed conflict. These allies can be a force multiplier for the administration, but they can also be difficult to manage. They will not necessarily acquiesce to whatever agreement the administration reaches with Tehran if they feel it undermines rather than advances those shared interests. Congress could refuse to lift sanctions if it believes the agreement insufficiently constrains Iran. Regional governments could seek to match Iran's residual nuclear capabilities to ensure parity, something that the United States would be hard pressed to resist. Allies who trade with Iran could resist the quick reimposition of sanctions in the event of Iranian cheating. The net effect would be an agreement that harms rather than helps U.S. security and leaves America more isolated in the region.

To prevent such an outcome, the administration should intensify its consultations with domestic and foreign allies, collaborating with them on the talks in advance rather than merely briefing them afterward. It must accept that successfully managing this coalition requires emphasizing common interests over differences in negotiating positions, and perhaps even modifying its own positions if they prove unacceptable to coalition partners. Above all, the administration cannot assume that allies will simply accept a fait accompli -- that is, an agreement negotiated, like the JPOA, behind closed doors with little coordination.

Finally, the administration should adopt a less aggressive public message toward allies whose much-needed support it could secure with a deft approach. U.S. spokesmen should emphasize areas of agreement and resist publicly dismissing every critical statement from allied capitals. The administration should also avoid exaggerating the benefits of the JPOA, which may serve a domestic political purpose but undermines allied confidence in U.S. negotiating savvy.

Mitigate the risks of Iranian cheating. While any long-term agreement must deal extensively with Iran's nuclear fuel fabrication activities, it must also do much more to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon. Any agreement that focuses disproportionately on nuclear fuel could give Iran time to perfect other elements of its program -- centrifuges, weaponization research, delivery vehicles -- and thus better position itself for a future breakout. Another risk is that Iran may develop a parallel, covert nuclear infrastructure using expertise developed in its permitted programs.

To guard against these risks, U.S. negotiators should insist that any long-term accord limit Iran's research and development efforts related to enrichment, reprocessing, and weaponization, as well as its ballistic missile and space launch programs. They should also require that Tehran fully come clean regarding its past nuclear work, to give inspectors complete insight into its network of personnel, locations, and activities and help them better detect and prevent covert nuclear work.

Don't disavow zero enrichment. The most likely endpoint of any given negotiation is the midpoint between each side's starting positions, assuming those starting positions are reasonable. When U.S. negotiators characterize their own previous position that Iran must suspend all enrichment and reprocessing work as "maximalist," the implication is that it was unreasonable. This gives important negotiating leverage to Iran, especially if officials from the other P5+1 countries (Britain, China, France, Russia, and Germany) believe Tehran's dubious assertion that it desires a large-scale enrichment program to fuel a national nuclear power industry. A final outcome based on this approach is less likely to fall between zero enrichment and Iran's current program than between the small-scale enrichment now advocated by Washington and the industrial-scale program desired by Tehran.

Even if U.S. officials have in fact abandoned hope of requiring Iran to fully suspend enrichment, they would still be well served tactically to characterize zero enrichment as reasonable and dismiss Tehran's professed desire for a large enrichment infrastructure as unreasonable. The JPOA indicates that any Iranian enrichment program must be "consistent with practical needs"; U.S. negotiators should therefore assert that Iran has no such need given its abundance of other energy supplies and its ability to import enriched uranium should it desire nuclear power. This would put them in a better position to insist that the P5+1 will not agree to even a "symbolic" enrichment capacity without significant concessions from Tehran.

Establish a credible "or else." While any number of real or perceived slights could cause Iran to storm away from the negotiating table temporarily, it is unlikely to abandon talks permanently unless the alternatives seem preferable. If those alternatives are -- as the administration attests -- more sanctions or a military conflict, then talks will likely remain the preferred route for both sides. The same holds true of Moscow and Beijing -- they support the P5+1 process in part because the other choices are all worse. The prospect of hostilities in the Persian Gulf is worrisome to China in particular given its reliance on energy supplies that pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

While the Obama administration pushed back on congressional plans to pass a "contingent sanctions" bill in order to uphold the U.S. side of the JPOA, it may have inadvertently made the alternatives to negotiations seem less threatening to Iran. The administration castigated critics as warmongers even as the president insisted that the military option remained on the table -- a confusing stance that likely rendered the latter warnings less credible. The president also threatened to veto sanctions, diminishing the threat of further economic pressure. Thus, Iran managed to sow divisions in Washington simply by threatening to walk away from the talks, despite uniform support among the White House, Congress, and U.S. allies for further pressure should it be necessary. To recover, U.S. officials should emphasize this uniform support to ensure that Tehran deems a final agreement preferable to the likely alternatives.

Don't lose sight of the big picture. Even as it tackles the monumental task of

negotiating a nuclear accord with Iran, Washington must bear in mind that its interests in the region are broader, as are those of other actors. U.S. allies worry that nuclear concessions foreshadow American withdrawal from the region -- an outcome that Tehran would welcome -- even as they eye Iranian activities in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere with mounting concern. If Washington focuses only on Iran's nuclear program, it could wind up with a tactical triumph but strategic defeat as its wider interests in stability and nonproliferation suffer regionally.

To forestall this outcome, the United States should not only consult with allies regarding a nuclear agreement, but also engage more actively in addressing their other concerns, most notably the Syrian conflict. Washington should determine how to engage Iran on these issues as well, for several reasons: to further ease allied concerns; to test President Hassan Rouhani's ability to deliver before lifting sanctions; and to satisfy Congress, which may require progress on nonnuclear issues as a precondition for sanctions relief as it did with Libya in years past. Because allies are suspicious of bilateral U.S.-Iranian talks as a forum for tackling regional issues, and because the P5+1 does not include regional states with the greatest stakes in these issues, U.S. officials should consider multilateral regional talks instead.

Finally, Washington should not neglect its efforts to engage the Iranian people. It would be a shame if the U.S. government did not use its thawing relations with the Iranian government as an opportunity to expand people-to-people exchanges and reach out to and empower ordinary Iranians.

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