



The US and Iran Nuclear Deal: The Temporary Hiatus

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The US and Iran over the past year have been trying to negotiate a nuclear deal; an agreement that should cap the Iranian nuclear program enough that it would take Iran a minimum of a year to make enough material for a nuclear bomb if it decided to ignore the accord. This would allow the US and other negotiating States to react diplomatically to the developments and/or to apply sanctions, ensuring that the military option is the last resort.

The negotiations have been focused on measures that would constrain Iran's ability to quickly produce a nuclear bomb but allow it the ability to maintain what Iran insists is a peaceful programme of nuclear power and research. Keeping Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon is of central importance to US security and it is with this view that the recent talks, which did not lead to an agreement, have been given an extended deadline. While some policy makers view this as a welcome sign; evidence that the two countries are committed to finding a solution to the impasse, others view it as yet another sign of the deep distrust that plagues the relationship. The US administration has been criticised by opponents for allowing Iran the concession of time, which they are sure would be used to build up its capacity and develop technology. They have called for stricter sanctions, a demand that the US administration for the moment has sidelined.

Iran has claimed time and again that it is not building nuclear weapons and feels that it has been treated unfairly, with a bias against the country at various international platforms. They

point to a *fatwa*, a religious edict, by the Supreme Leader against the development of nuclear weapons as proof of their commitment to not using nuclear technology for weapons. However, this reassurance is taken with scepticism by the international community. They point to the secrecy of the programme and Iran's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as proof of suspicious behaviour that warranted actions, such as economic sanctions.

The Iranians are equally suspicious of US actions. They point to the fate of Saddam Hussain, who complied with all the international resolutions and allowed IAEA inspectors, yet he was removed from power by the US. Given the history between the two countries, Iran suspects it would meet a similar fate if does not negotiate to protect its nuclear interests. For Iran, its nuclear programme is a question of pride and a step towards achieving its ambition of being a regional power. In such a situation it wants the US to acknowledge it as an equal partner and resents being treated as anything less than equal.

The staggered sanctions that have been applied on Iran in an attempt to pressurise it to abandon its nuclear programme have not had the desired effect. Domestically, in a poll conducted by Gallup (Feb. 2013) 63 percent of the public in Iran supports the programme, despite the hardship of the sanctions. Internationally, despite the sanctions Iran is allowed to sell oil to some nations of Asia such as China, Taiwan and India. China has started to import larger quantities of oil providing the Iranian economy with some much needed respite. According to Chinese customs data, China imported 630,000 barrels of oil a day in the first six month of 2014, a 48 percent rise for the same period in 2013. China was buying relatively large quantities of Iranian crude oil before these limited concessions were approved. This holds true of some other countries as well, such as Japan and Sri Lanka.

Iran has recently been able to sign a framework for USD 20 billion 'oil-for goods' deal with Russia. This is a significant development given that Russia's changing relations with the 'West', and the rise of a Russia that is expressing its willingness to challenge the US and the EU would mean that Iran could use its relations with Russia to maintain its economy, and also gather much needed international support. Thus, the isolation that the US covets, as a foreign policy tool, to pressurise Iran would not be as effective.

The US itself is trying to improve its relations with Iran. With the Middle East facing turmoil in Syria and Iraq, the US is exploring a role for Iran in restoring peace and stability in the region, while balancing the concerns of its allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. For the US the nuclear deal is no longer confined to the limited scope of just nuclear issues. It has political implication for the US in the region and at home too.

The agreement has to be one that is acceptable to not just the negotiators but thereafter has to be ratified by the parliament of the respective countries. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, faces differing views from within the government. However, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the final arbiter on all matters of State, has publicly expressed his support for a 'fair' deal and there is little doubt such a deal would be accepted by the Iranian parliament. US Secretary of State, Mr John Kerry faces an uphill task. The US Congress at the present moment is majority Republican, a party that has demanded stringent sanctions against Iran, an idea that is largely opposed by the democratic President and the White House. These differences, along with other issues, between President Obama and the Congress have not gone unnoticed by Iran.

The US is clear that it wants to halt Iran's nuclear programme. Iran is clear that it wants to preserve as much of its capacity as possible and removal of all sanctions. The two countries now have to negotiate an agreement that would allow them in achieving their respective goals and could be the first step in process of building a new relationship between the US and Iran.

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