2 December, 2013

Iran: The Historic Nuclear Deal

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Iran and the P5+1 concluded a deal on November 24, 2013 in Geneva in their efforts to end the decade-long nuclear stalemate between them. This breakthrough came after a series of failed negotiations, the most recent one conducted just ten days prior to this deal. The terms of this deal have been enlisted in a document called the 'Joint Plan of Action' (JPA) that was released soon after the end of the negotiations and contains the modalities of the deal including the actionable parts pertaining to both parties. This may at best be regarded as a set of guiding principles for the future negotiations towards the final settlement for which a time period of one year has been tentatively fixed. This JPA also contains an interim agreement to be implemented in about six months in which Iran would drastically reduce its nuclear activities and allow extensive inspections of its nuclear sites for ensuring transparency. In return the world powers would partially lift the sanctions on Iran and release some of its assets frozen in overseas banks which the White House later announced to be to the tune of US$ 7 billion.

In order to assess the feasibility of this deal, it would be helpful to recall a similar kind of agreement that was reached on October 21, 2003 in Tehran between Iran and the three European powers consisting of Britain, France and Germany, popularly known as the 'EU3'. This agreement had paused the nuclear dispute momentarily at a time when Mohammad Khatami was the President of Iran and the current President Hassan Rouhani was the Chief Nuclear Negotiator. However, the election of the hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005 as the

new President of Iran and his uncompromising nuclear policy had reversed the nuclear agreement reached by his moderate predecessor Mohammad Khatami.

By drawing lessons from the past experiences, it would be safe to conclude that the fructification of the current deal would also depend on the continuity of Iran's current nuclear policy pursued by Hassan Rouhani, the new moderate President of Iran. Further, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has again been assigned the responsibility to verify Iran's compliance commitments. In the past, most of the controversies related to Iran's nuclear programme were related to the disagreements between Iran and the IAEA, Iran's relation with this UN nuclear body would be critical in future negotiations.

In short, the omissions and commissions of Iran on its nuclear activities, to be judged by the IAEA, and the reciprocity of the P5+1 in lifting sanctions would now largely decide the fate of this deal being instrumental or otherwise towards the final settlement. Nevertheless, the manner in which the US has steered this deal despite stiff oppositions from its closest regional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and its European friend such as France, exemplifies a clear shift in the US policy towards Iran. It is this shift that makes this deal truly 'historic,' which implicitly recognised Iran's regional clout and could potentially herald a new era of constructive engagement between the US and Iran, who have been sworn enemies since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. This new phase of engagement may have enormous repercussions on many regional issues that have afflicted West Asia in recent years.

The Iran nuclear deal may also be instrumental in helping to resolve the Syrian issue. Iran is a major ally of Syria and supports the continuity of President Bashar al-Assad who is under pressure from all quarters to step aside. This issue germinated a bloody civil war in Syria in which over a hundred thousand people have lost their lives in last two years. Soon after the Iran nuclear deal the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced the resumption of Syrian talks scheduled for January 2014 and hoped for participation by Iran. Although the Syrian opposition groups have not yet accepted Iran's participation, the new dynamics between Iran and the US might change the course of these talks.

The Iran nuclear deal can potentially bring out a fundamental shift in various alliances in West Asia. For instance, the common cause of discontent with the US and enmity with Iran may bring closer two unlikely allies, i.e. Israel and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has openly exhibited its unhappiness with the US by rejecting the non-permanent seat of the UN Security Council on October 17, 2013. Israel on the other hand, while denouncing the Iran nuclear deal as a 'historic mistake,' has made public its unhappiness with the US. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia have now painfully realised that the US priority is shifting away from the region and this may compel them to find new understanding, away from their dependence on the US, to ensure their own security in the region. Nevertheless, the Palestinian issue is still the most contentious issue between the two countries, and the likelihood and the possible shape of such an alliance would be difficult to predict.

Indeed, the current phase of engagement between Iran and the US is a direct corollary of the US pivot shift from West Asia to East Asia as announced by President Obama's administration in 2012. The complex issues of West Asia had been delaying the implementation of this policy, which was crucial for the US to defy any challenge to its global supremacy from a rising China. Recognition of Iran as a regional power and its role in dealing with regional issues seems more logical in the current state of affairs for the US. This was evidenced when just two days after the Iran nuclear deal, the US challenged China by flying its two unarmed B-52 fighter planes through the contentious Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) announced by China. With confidence of a new found relationship with Iran, and partial easing of West Asian problems, Washington can now focus more on its most potent challenge since the end of the Cold War i.e. maintaining the status quo of a unipolar world.

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