



Nuclear Negotiations between Iran and P5+1: Respective Red Lines

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The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany, appears to be fast approaching towards an agreed timeline and acceptable draft. The negotiations that have been held so far in March 2015 between Iran and the US showed encouraging signs of progress. US Secretary of State John Kerry appeared to be positive about these talks with his counterpart Iran's Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif and he has accordingly briefed other members of the P5+1, particularly to France, Germany and Britain. The two parties are trying their best to work out a comprehensive deal for which the deadline has been fixed as July 2015.

The positive trajectory of the Iranian nuclear negotiations has caused nervousness in the minds of Israel, as evident in the speech of its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the joint session of the US Congress on March 3, 2015. Netanyahu shared his deep concern over the likely terms of the impending deal expressing that the world powers (indirectly referring to the US) had been heading towards a bad deal and suggested that no deal would have been better than a bad deal. In his response to Netanyahu's concerns, the US President Barack Obama retorted that despite showing his concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions, Netanyahu had failed to give any alternative option for solving this problem. Indeed, Netanyahu's speech, while indicating that the Iran Nuclear Deal was increasingly becoming

a reality, was more to serve his domestic constituency and reap benefits in the elections in Israel which was held on March 17, 2015.

The impending Iran nuclear deal has not only affected Israel but its realisation has worried the Congressmen themselves as evidenced by an open letter to Ayatollah Khamenei which was signed by 47 Republican Senators threatening that any deal agreed between the US President with Iran would not have any legal standing unless it was ratified by the Congress; in turn trying to derail the nuclear deal. Thoroughly rebuking this initiative, Iran's President Mohammad Jawad Zarif asked these Senators to read their own Constitution. Indeed, this initiative has done more harm than good to the standing of the US in the bargain, signifying the differences of opinions within their own fold. In fact, the number of Congressmen supporting this cause has now increased to 367, signifying the increasing internal opposition to the Iran nuclear deal.

Apparently, the end goal of the nuclear deal, as envisioned in the Joint Plan of Action, agreed on November 24, 2013 between Iran and P5+1, is to give Iran legitimate right to enrich uranium and remove sanctions imposed on the country in lieu of Iran's assurance that its nuclear programme was exclusively for peaceful purposes. A long term solution to the crisis is impeded because of the difficulty in defining the respective red lines of the respective parties. Indeed, the two parties appear to have staunchly adhered to their respective red lines in order to attain, at least, their minimum bargain, and placate their nationalist domestic constituencies.

For Iran, the red line means that it would not give away its right to enrich uranium for peaceful uses of nuclear technology such as producing energy or for medical purposes. Iran has proposed all sanctions to be lifted from the country so that it can easily integrate with the world economy and freely sell its oil to the world market. Iran is not willing to compromise on this demand. On the other hand, for the P5+1, and more specifically for the US the perceived red line is that there should be at least a year of breakout time for Iran to produce a nuclear weapon if it desired to do so. They are also reportedly considering

imposing some restrictions on Iranian nuclear programme so that this status quo remains for another decade or so.

More specifically, western powers wish to limit the number of centrifuges to be operated inside Iran so that its ability to enrich uranium could be limited. Additionally, they also wish to remove the existing enriched uranium from the Iranian soil either by destroying them or by shipping them outside Iran, possibly to Russia, which has in the past agreed to do so. The number of centrifuges and the quantity of enriched uranium to be left on the Iranian soil is to be decided in such a manner that if Iran breaks the deal then it should take no less than a year to produce sufficient enriched uranium to produce a nuclear weapon. It is also reported that the terms of the deal might include the imposition of this status quo for at least a decade.

As of the start of the implementation of the Joint Plan of Action on January 20, 2014, Iran was operating approximately 10,000 centrifuges, and the US and other western powers are apparently negotiating to reduce it to the range of 6,000-7,000. Another point of agreement is that Iran would not enrich uranium for more than 5 per cent. It is reportedly in possession of as many as 19,000 centrifuges in their two nuclear enrichment plants Natanz and Fordow. The primary difficulty in ensuring the deal relates to finding out exactly how many centrifuges Iran should be allowed to operate, especially because all the centrifuges in possession of Iran are not of the same type. Some types of centrifuges have low enrichment capacity while some high end technology ensures faster enrichment capacity. Calculation of the exact number and type of centrifuges that could ensure one year breakout period for Iran to enrich enough uranium to build a bomb is a difficult exercise and is one of the reasons behind the protracted negotiations.

However, there is a more serious issue hindering the culmination of the deal and it has more to do with envisaging Iran's role in the regional geopolitical process and ending its isolation. The current geopolitics of the West Asian region, inflicted by the advances of the Islamic State (IS) and regional turmoil, has compelled western powers to involve Iran in any counter offensive against IS. The recent air attack on Houthi rebels in Yemen by

Saudi Arabia has created difficulties in the region and the sectarian and regional differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran could further aggravate in case Iran returns to the West Asian geopolitical theatre at the behest of the western powers. The geopolitical dividend of the deal is seen as outweighing the short term costs. Given these complex configurations, Iran's nuclear deal would give a breather to the west so as to give better attention to terrorism and related issues.

The continuation of the negotiations despite the open letters of the Congressmen and the victory of Netanyahu in Israel's election amply show the firmness of the US President to clinch a deal with Iran. Similarly, the current sectarian conflicts in Yemen which has now involved military intervention by many Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia illustrates the necessity of bringing the nuclear negotiations to a positive culmination. It appears that only some serious untoward incidence can now derail the negotiations taking place between Iran and the P5+1 led by the US.

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