



Geneva Nuclear Talks: A Step in the Right Direction

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The latest round of nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1 concluded in Geneva on November 10, 2013 without any deal despite three days of intense negotiations. During these talks, P5+1 were represented by European Union's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton while Iran was represented by its foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. As the talks progressed, the foreign ministers of the US, UK, France, Russia, Germany and a vice foreign minister from China joined them, giving rise to expectations of some breakthrough. This was for the first time since the beginning of Iranian nuclear negotiations that talks were held at such a high level.

Although the real proposal that was being negotiated during these talks was a closely guarded secret, its finer points can be deduced by making a few conjectures from the media reports and remarks made by foreign ministers and diplomats present in Geneva during the talks and their political bosses sitting elsewhere. The important feature of this proposal was that it attempted to solve the nuclear issue in a phased manner. In the first phase, Iran would be offered 'some' immediate relief from the sanctions in lieu of freezing its 20 per cent uranium enrichment and accepting expansive inspections on its nuclear sites. Notably, contrary to the earlier proposals, this time the relief from sanctions was offered first and then Iran was given some time to comply. Since among the most stringent economic sanctions imposed on Iran are those legislated by the US Congress, the hands of Obama administration have been tight in giving

much immediate concessions to Iran. The way out was supposedly found out through focussing on Iran's frozen financial assets lying in overseas banks freeing of which would provide Iran some immediate relief from sanctions.

This would rule out the West's apprehension that Iran was making progress towards building a bomb while the negotiations were still in progress, thereby obviating the persistent Israeli blame that Iran was abusing negotiations to buy time. After this stage was agreed by all parties and Iran actually complied by ending its 20 per cent uranium enrichment and allowing the nuclear inspections, subsequent phases would be pursued, finally culminating into the end of the current nuclear stalemate.

Notably, this proposal was not in accordance with Israel's wish which demands the freezing of all nuclear enrichment process on the Iranian soil and closure of the Arak heavy water reactor which after completion could produce plutonium. On the other hand, Iran insists that nuclear enrichment within Iran, even if at a level lower than 20 per cent, is its inalienable right and terms it as its 'red line.' Apparently, all parties in the talks were initially agreeing to the proposal, until France openly objected to the deal which in its opinion was not effective for either curbing Iran's uranium enrichment or to stop the development of Arak nuclear reactor. Effectively, this round of talks not only witnessed the usual differences between P5+1 and Iran but also exposed the fissure within the P5+1 on the amount of concession to be give to Iran.

Despite the eventual failure to strike a deal, Catherine Ashton expressed satisfaction on the "concrete progress" made during these talks. She explained that the deal did not fructify because of "some differences" that were yet to be resolved. On the other hand, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, while acknowledging these "differences," insisted that these were "natural" especially since the negotiation process had entered into the details of the Iranian nuclear issue. He expressed satisfaction on the "political determination" of all parties to the talks which in his opinion was crucial to end the problem. US Secretary of State John Kerry also agreed with Minister Zarif in terming the talks as fruitful despite the failure of a breakthrough in at least bringing the deal closer and emphasised that it was natural for the confidence building

measures to take time when countries were at odds with each other for such a long time. The next round of talks has been fixed on November 20, 2013 in Geneva which would be held at a lower level than that of foreign minister.

It is fair to argue that the current round of talks, despite not culminating into a deal, may be considered as a step in the right direction. From the beginning, it was unreasonable to be too optimistic for a quick solution as hoped by the President of Iran. The Iranian nuclear problem is just the tip of the iceberg beneath which lies decades of mistrust between the US and Iran. Over a period of time the Iranian nuclear issue has involved other factors such as the regional power rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as Iran and Israel. Aligned with these respective regional powers are their powerful global allies such as the US, France, Russia and China. More recently, the Syrian issue, which has turned into a battle ground of global power rivalry, has also been intertwined with the Iranian nuclear question.

Apparently, all these factors were at play at the Geneva talks. Consequently, a resolution of the Iranian nuclear problem had to take into account these factors which made it a daunting task, devoid of any easy solution. One hopes that the international community soon realises that the transparency which is so essential in the case of Iranian nuclear programme is equally important for the success of these negotiations. Otherwise, we will continue to witness the same type of blame game that has been seen in the past after the end of each round of talks.

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