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Opinion: 3 factors set to rescue Iran nuclear talks

Posted By [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) On May 19, 2013 @ 7:00 am In [Opinion](#) | [No Comments](#)

The west is eagerly awaiting the results of the upcoming June presidential elections in Iran to determine whom they will be working with in Tehran for the foreseeable future. Certainly the nuclear issue will remain a high priority for world powers and Iran. Over a decade of negotiations with Tehran, world powers have challenged Iran's legitimate rights for enrichment under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), yielding no outcome. The world powers have continued hitting the hammer on the same nail and it is time for a renewed look at the status quo.

Prior to the elections, Iran held two sets of talks in Vienna and Istanbul on May 15 aimed at resolving the nuclear dilemma. Although talks between EU foreign policy head Catherine Ashton and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili in Istanbul were described as "useful", no progress was reported. While talks between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Tehran once again failed to achieve any progress. "We had intensive discussions today but did not finalize the structured approach document that has been under negotiation for a year and a half now," IAEA Deputy Director General Herman Nackaerts said after the eight-hour meeting in Tehran.

Meanwhile there is a glimmer of hope for a breakthrough in the troubled US-Iran relations since the 1979 Revolution. A compilation of factors have increased the chances of success, including the re-election of President Obama; the composition of his new team at the White House, most notably Secretary of State Kerry and Defense Secretary Hagel, not to mention Vice President Biden's recent remarks about engaging directly with Tehran. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei stressed that meaningful talks with the US should be without threats and pressures nor empty rhetoric, but instead backed by genuine constructive actions to demonstrate goodwill. Iranians will go to the ballot box in less than a month to elect the new president. It remains unclear whether the incoming Iranian president will make any advance in Iran-US relations and the nuclear stalemate.

A face-saving resolution regarding the Iranian nuclear dilemma would open the door for broader political dialogue between the United States and Iran aimed at

reducing decades of mistrust. If the current approach to nuclear negotiations continues, there is little hope that the nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1 (US, Russia, UK, France and China plus Germany) following the Iranian presidential election will be successful. There is a way out of this quagmire by rethinking three key factors that can reorient the current deadlock towards a breakthrough.

The first factor is changing the current dysfunctional composition of the P5+1 or EU3+3 talks with Iran. There are simply too many players to appease and reach a satisfactory outcome. Experience from negotiations in recent years has highlighted the innate bureaucratic red-tape that has marred negotiations and deemed them ineffective from mundane details to the draft of a deal.

The initial nuclear negotiations back in 2003-2005, during which I served as the spokesperson for the Iranian nuclear team, involved dealing with the EU3 (France, UK and Germany) and this failed due to the US absence from the negotiations that rendered a sustainable solution impossible. While joining the talks at the onset of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Washington opted to launch economic and covert warfare both unilaterally and multilaterally against Iran. This folly has entrenched mistrust, heightened tensions, and compounded the complexity facing the negotiations while at the same time cornered the US administration in terms of its ability to reverse these measures and provide sanction-relief in the hopes of advancing diplomacy.

The best option to alter the current impotent format of the nuclear talks is direct bilateral talks between Washington and Tehran, while keeping the other P5+1 members abreast of the latest progress. The basis for the negotiations should be the 'Russian Step-by-Step' proposal introduced in the summer of 2011. The Russian proposal, originally initiated by the US and Russia, addresses both the demands Iran seeks from the international community, and those from the UN Security Council and IAEA. "Iran welcomes Russia's step-by-step proposal and is ready to make suggestions to cooperate," says the Iranian presidency's official website.

The second factor is acknowledging that the dispute between the IAEA and Iran are technical in nature, while the nuclear dossier is political. The Iranians have no issue with applying their obligations under the Safeguard Agreement of the NPT. The dispute lies in the request by the IAEA for intrusive inspections in the framework of Additional Protocol and beyond. Iran cannot grant such concessions without proportionate reciprocation while the IAEA has no authority to strike such a deal. The invitations by Tehran for further negotiations with the IAEA are counterproductive in the absence of political instruments to advance the IAEA's requests and hence explain the failures of past negotiations with Iran. Such unavoidable failures also hamper broader negotiations with the P5+1.

The third factor is the type of approach to reach a settlement. Since the beginning of nuclear talks in 2003, the world powers insist on a piecemeal approach rather than embracing a comprehensive package to seal the deal. This reluctance will spell doom for any future talks, whether they are held in Washington, Tehran, Almaty, Istanbul, or even on the moon.

A substantial, serious, and comprehensive offer is vital. For success in the nuclear talks, the world powers and Iran need to agree on a package which includes all major demands of both parties, demonstrating the end state. For the world powers, the end state would ensure Iran commits to the maximum level of transparency and cooperation with the IAEA, in addition to granting assurances for non-diversion of its nuclear program toward weaponization in the future. While for the Iranians, the end state would be the recognition of its rights to enrich uranium under the NPT and the lifting of sanctions.

Thanks to these factors, Obama—in his second term in office—and the new Iranian president can break the deadlock on the nuclear impasse and prepare the ground for Washington and Tehran to cooperate on areas of mutual interest and concern. These include stability in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria; energy security in the Persian Gulf; stemming drug trafficking; cooperating in the fight against terrorism and extremism; and reviving economic and cultural ties.



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