

Respect is crucial in nuclear talks with Iran

At P5+1 talks in Moscow, all sides must learn from past mistakes and recognise that fair exchange should be central to dialogue

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'The P5+1 wanted Iran to stop enriching uranium to 19.75%' ... a uranium processing site in Isfahan. Photograph: Raheb Homavandi/Reuters

After a decade, we are nearing an endgame on Iran's nuclear file. The initial positive atmosphere during Tehran's talks with the P5+1 (the five members of the UN security council plus Germany) in Istanbul in April had been lost by the next round of talks in Baghdad, in May.

In Istanbul all the players seemed to understand that the most important issue was trust – not the number of centrifuges in the Islamic republic's possession. This was displayed through the announcement of EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, that

negotiations would be held on the basis of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT, which recognises Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes). Such mutual respect must be the basis of any dialogue, and future agreement.

Yet in Baghdad it became obvious there was a long road ahead when the P5+1 went in demanding the maximum concessions from Iran, in return for making minimal concessions themselves. The Iranian negotiators were offered merely spare parts for passenger planes and help with acquiring a light water reactor. In exchange the P5+1 wanted Iran to stop enriching uranium to 19.75% (medium enriched uranium), export all such material, halt operations at the Fordo plant and allow IAEA inspectors to visit sensitive military sites.

This trade-off was considered an insult by the Iranians. And the P5+1's incentive of fuel plates (uranium enriched to 19.75% moulded into plates) or the Tehran research reactor – which could have been attractive to Iran as recently as 2010, when it hadn't mastered the technology to manufacture such fuel on its own – didn't improve the mood. Luckily, this did not lead to the dialogue collapsing.

There has been a long, dark history of missed opportunities between Iran and the US in regards to this. In 2003, Tehran offered Washington a deal over issues ranging from security to its nuclear programme – Dick Cheney notoriously responded by saying that "we don't talk to evil".

A year later, the Iranians responded in kind when they rejected a request by the very same Bush administration for direct high-level talks. Then, in 2005, before Iran's nuclear file was referred to the UN security council, a nuclear deal between Iran and the EU was torpedoed by American opposition against any enrichment on Iranian soil. Almost a decade later, more items are being added to the list of missed opportunities.

In Baghdad, the P5+1 relied too much on the deterrent power of the sanctions, making the strategic miscalculation that punitive measures would force the Iranians to give in. Instead it left the Iranian negotiators believing that their western counterparts didn't want sanctions removed. Furthermore it convinced the Islamic republic that the P5+1 needed to retain the additional sanctions card for the future, as there were so few areas left for them to sanction.

For the dialogue to be fruitful and continue, all sides must learn from these mistakes of the past. If trust helped in Istanbul, in the talks with the P5+1 in Moscow on Monday, we need reciprocity. All sides need to be courageous enough to recognise a fair exchange is a central tenet of dialogue.

Between ordinary people and governments alike, reciprocity can be expressed in many shapes; among them, in the form of mutual respect. In the context of Iran's dialogue with the P5+1, this means considering the concerns of all sides as equal and being willing to give at least as much as one takes. The core objective of the upcoming talks must be to strengthen the agreed-upon framework, which emphasises the NPT as its foundation. Only a commitment to a sincere process aimed at resolving the outstanding concerns of all parties, and most importantly, the courage to ensure the kind of reciprocity that can move things forward will ensure the talks are fruitful.

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