



INSS Insight No. 634, November 26, 2014

Kicking the Can Down the Road: Another Extension of the P5+1 Talks

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The target date for concluding a final agreement on the Iranian nuclear program between Iran and the P5+1 world powers has been postponed yet once more. The original date was July 20, 2013, and when no agreement was reached, the date was postponed until November 24, 2014. Following the most recent failure to formulate an agreement, the new date agreed on is July 1, 2015.

Despite the strong desire of both sides to reach an agreement, the gaps between them were clearly too large to be bridged. Underlying the failure to reach an agreement is the skepticism of the Western powers regarding Iran's claim that it has abandoned its strategic goal of attaining military nuclear capability. This distrust of Iran has prevented formulation a detailed agreement that would eliminate any possibility of an Iranian breakout to the bomb. Similar distrust of the West prevails among the conservatives in Iran, headed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, who fear that an agreement blocking Iran's path to a nuclear military option is a slippery slope, implying surrender to the West and jeopardizing the regime's future.

The wide gaps between the sides reflect different strategic objectives that are, in effect, fully incompatible. The Iranians wish to retain capabilities that will enable them, at a time of their choice, to develop a nuclear bomb at short notice. In addition, in order to boost the Iranian economy, they demand the immediate removal of the Western-imposed sanctions. The world powers, however, want to ensure that the agreement will block Iran's path to nuclear weapons on the uranium, plutonium, and weapons development tracks. For its part, the chief motivation of the US government to reach an agreement reflects the assessment that an agreement, even if problematic, is preferable to the "alternatives to an agreement." Senior administration officials emphasize their duty to weigh the alternative scenarios to failure in the talks, and speak of the possibility of Iran charging forward to obtain nuclear military capability even if no agreement is formulated, the risk of a covert Iranian breakthrough to a bomb, and the risk of an all-out war. The problem with this line of thought is that it is liable to justify signing an extremely bad agreement.

At the same time, the decision to extend the talks indicates that the United States also has a red line separating a “reasonable agreement” from a “bad agreement.” President Obama does not want to leave a legacy of a nuclear-armed Iran and a nuclear arms race in the Middle East (led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey). Furthermore, the President must take into consideration a new Republican Congress that is expected to oppose a “bad agreement.”

From the Israeli government’s perspective, any agreement that could have been achieved on November 24 would have been a “bad agreement,” because any agreement would have legitimized Iran’s nuclear enrichment program, left Iran with a very short breakout time to the bomb, would not have resolved the questions regarding the Iranian missile programs or Iran’s encouragement of terrorism, and would have removed the sanctions against Iran, enabling the regime to survive and thrive.

At the same time, over the past year the Israeli government’s position on the negotiations has changed. The government strongly criticized the Joint Plan of Action (the “interim agreement”) signed with Iran in November 2013 and described it as an historical mistake. The government of Israel now prefers an extension of the Joint Plan of Action to a bad final agreement and to the collapse of the talks. It appears that the reason is that in contrast to the pessimistic predictions, Iran in fact suspended most of its nuclear program activity during the past year. In addition, the regime of economic sanctions against Iran, though weakened slightly, has not collapsed, as the government of Israel anticipated.

However, the establishment of the interim agreement as a “de facto final agreement” will maintain Iran as a nuclear threshold country only a few months away from a bomb if it decides on a nuclear breakout. The goal stated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in media interviews late last week, “to prevent Iran from becoming a threshold country,” has already been missed. A more accurate definition of the goal is to roll Iran back from the threshold, where it is at present, and to block any possible route to a bomb.

Many doubt whether Iran and the Western powers will ever be able to achieve an agreement. The conservative camp in Iran, which has the support of the Supreme Leader, opposes an agreement, and the Republican Congress, which has little faith in Iranian credibility, will also make it difficult to achieve an agreement by July 1, 2015. There are many gaps between the parties, with the dispute centering on four key issues:

The extent of the rollback: The Iranian nuclear program is currently three to six months away from a bomb. By reducing the number of centrifuges in Iran’s possession and by moving Iran’s stock of already enriched uranium outside Iran (to Russia), the world powers will attempt to roll the program back to at least a year away from a bomb. This involves leaving 3,000-4,000 centrifuges in Iran and a stock of enriched uranium lower than the minimum required for a single nuclear bomb. In the framework of the rollback,

conversion of the enrichment facility in Fordow to a research and development center and changing the parameters and structure of the reactor in Arak from a heavy water reactor to a low capacity light water reactor is required. For its part, Iran has refused to reduce the number of centrifuges, and insists on keeping Fordow as an enrichment facility.

Inspection, monitoring, transparency, and challenging verification: Because any agreement will leave Iran with the know-how and the wherewithal to produce a bomb secretly, and because the world powers have not been convinced that Iran has given up its nuclear program, any agreement must include a stringent and close verification regime over the nuclear capabilities and activity remaining in Iranian hands. Implementation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Additional Protocol, which allows surprise inspections of nuclear sites, and closure of the open files on weapons activity are essential elements in any agreement about the verification regime. Full transparency and the ability to monitor any deviation from the agreement are also necessary cornerstones. Iran, on the other hand, insists that it will not allow any discussion or supervision of the program's military dimensions, which, they insist, do not exist.

Duration of the agreement: Iran wants the agreement restricting its nuclear activity to be valid for two years, after which it will be recognized as a country entitled to maintain a widespread nuclear infrastructure, like Germany or Japan. This will put Iran only a few weeks away from a bomb, based on an extensive and diversified nuclear infrastructure. For their part, the world powers want the agreement to be valid for at least 15 years.

Sticks, carrots, and deterrence: One of the principal bones of contention is the question of the pace at which the sanctions will be removed. While Iran demands immediate removal of the sanctions, it has put particular emphasis on receiving the Iranian money frozen overseas – amounting to nearly \$100 billion. The Iranians want to enjoy once again complete access to financial markets and measures such as clearance mechanisms; fully resume their oil exports; and attract investments for the reconstruction of the faltering Iranian economy. The West, on the other hand, wants to keep the stick in its hands and release the carrots according to Iranian progress in rolling back the nuclear program, and according to the conclusions of the supervisory agency about whether Iran is genuinely fulfilling its part of the agreement, or whether it is persisting in its fraud and deception, as in the past.

Israel will continue to be unrepresented at the negotiating table. At the same time, it must continue working with the US administration through the existing working channels, particularly in view of the agreement and understandings between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu about a “bad agreement” and “an agreement that can be lived with.” An agreement that can be accepted, even if not ideal, must include rolling Iran back from a period of months to a period of years from a bomb, closing all routes of Iranian progress towards nuclear capability on the uranium and plutonium tracks,

clarifying the military dimensions of the program over the years and constant monitoring of those dimensions in the future, implementing a comprehensive intrusive verification regime, insisting on a period of more than a decade during which the agreement is valid, and removing the sanctions gradually – only in exchange for full Iranian compliance with its obligations under the agreement.

Extension of the negotiations with Iran on a nuclear agreement gives Israel a seven-month period in which it does not have to make fateful decisions on the matter. On July 1, 2015, however, if a “bad agreement” is signed or if the talks collapse, Israel will face a strategic situation that will demand difficult decisions. Both of these scenarios will require Israel to reformulate its strategy for stopping the Iranian nuclear program. Israel must therefore take proper advantage of the third extension of the interim agreement to prepare and enhance all its options regarding the Iranian nuclear threat.

