Can Biden Force Iran into Accepting a New JCPOA?

The US-Iran talks in Vienna are reportedly stuck, with Washington still unable to force Iran into accepting a deal that goes beyond the framework of existing JCPOA. However, the fact that Iran has not given up shows the limits of the strategy both the Trump and Biden administrations have been following ever since Washington unilaterally withdrew from the agreement. The US strategy is likely to become even more limited in the wake of the arrival of Ebrahim Raisi in Iran as the country’s new president, who is expected to follow a lot more conservative and more ‘Eastwards’ policy without prioritising, unlike the Rouhani administration, negotiations. While this is not to suggest that the new administration will adopt an aggressive and a belligerent approach towards the US, or Israel, there is equally no gainsaying the new administration will be a lot harder nut to crack for the Joe Biden administration than was the Rouhani administration. On top of it is the fact that the new administration in Iran is a lot more sceptical of the ability of the Biden administration to sign an agreement with a longer expiry date, one that is not undone by a populist administration in the future.

As it stands, states that begin pursuing nuclear ambitions are always likely to be those which have considered the risk of a preventive attack and thus prepared for repelling potential aggressors in advance. While the US and Israel have previously resorted to cyber-attacks, such as Stuxnet in 2010, the fact that Iran’s nuclear program is still very much intact and that it continues to make concrete progress shows that even these attacks have not been able to kill or even reverse Iran’s nuclear advancements.

Given the ineffectiveness of cyber and even direct attacks, such as the one that killed Iran’s top nuclear scientist last year, the US administration is left with the only option of pursuing its interests through talks backed duly by economic pressure generated through sanctions. It is for this reason that the Biden administration has repeatedly refused to lift Trump-era sanctions to enable reviving the JCPOA, expecting instead Iran to return to full compliance or face consequence. As Blinken recently remarked: “The ball remains in Iran’s court and we will see if they’re
prepared to make the decisions necessary to come back into compliance”, noting also that the Vienna process “cannot go on indefinitely.”

In the wake of a stubborn and hard-line US approach followed by economic and financial sanctions, Iran will only move further ‘Eastward.’ This has become a lot easier and more possible in the presence of an administration in Iran which believes, as Khamenei recently said, that “trusting the West does not work.”

The new administration is equally under no illusions that they will not be the target of the on-going US strategy of “maximum pressure.” Already, US officials involved in Vienna have confirmed that the US return to the JCPOA depends on potential future talks on regional issues. In addition, the US officials have reiterated that the US cannot agree to the lifting of arms embargo as provided under the JCPOA, nor will the present administration lift the sanctions imposed by Trump. The US officials have also refused to accept that they are obliged to compensate Iran for the huge damage caused to its economy by pulling out of the JCPOA unilaterally, followed by the US sanctions. On the contrary, the US officials believe that Iran must agree to newer restrictions on its nuclear agreements far beyond those stipulated by the JCPOA.

Therefore, the question is: how can the US and Iran revive the JCPOA without the former pushing for realising unrealistic demands?

The only way out of the stalemate is for the US to make an honest appreciation of the limitations of the combination of strategies – coercion, sanctions, cyber and direct attacks – it has been following for the past few years. The US and Israel need, given the drastic failure of their combined efforts, to realise that the only possible way to prevent Iran’s nuclearization is for them to immediately revive the JCPOA, rather than push for a new agreement that unnecessarily involves non-nuclear and geo-political issues, including clipping Iran’s presence in the region and/or its interests in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

As it stands, the impact of the US withdrawal and Israel’s resort to cyber and military attacks has been Iran’s rapid move towards upgrading its nuclear programme. As a New York Times recently noted: “Far more worrying, (US) officials said, is the scientific knowledge that Iran is steadily gaining by building more advanced centrifuges and experimenting with enriching uranium to 60 percent, just shy of what is needed for a weapon.”

While Blinken was quick to point that negotiations cannot go on forever in Vienna, Iran’s growing nuclear capability equally shows that a delay due to the US’ stubborn attachment to unrealistic and non-nuclear issues expectations directly enhance Iran’s capacity, consequently making it a lot harder for the US to even re-negotiate reviving the JCPOA.

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