Iran-US: a Nuclear Tug of War

There appears to be growing anxiety in Western capitals about the prospects for resuming negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal, with entirely contradictory signals recently. Tehran has outlined for the first time what looks like a timetable for the resumption of nuclear talks, thereby signaling that it is finally ready to embark on the negotiation process in Vienna. However, having lost the reality of its assessment of world events after Afghanistan, the US has adopted a harsher tone and confirmed that it has other options if these talks fail. Optimism about a successful outcome is waning amid a growing understanding that Tehran is negotiating with the Biden Administration and is well aware of former US President Donald Trump's insidious and hostile policies.

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi want strong assurances that if the parties return to the nuclear deal, the agreement should be protected from unilateral withdrawal by any country, as happened during former President Trump’s Administration. In 2018, Trump pulled the USA out of the multilateral deal and began re-imposing a wide range of sanctions on Iran. Consequently, Tehran has been forced to phase out its nuclear commitments as of 2019.

Many diplomats express the view that Europe understands Iran’s concerns, but political complexities stand in the way of its demands. “The maximum the Biden Administration can achieve is to resume talks with Tehran and return to an agreement, but providing assurances related to the behavior of future US administrations is not viable,” Saudi Arab News wrote. Whenever Tehran wants and needs the international community to revisit the nuclear deal, it would be a disaster for the country, Khamenei, and conservatives to reconsider the deal, only to see it scrapped again under a new US administration.
While Iran is stuck between a rock and a hard place on this deal, it also needs to keep moving to push the process forward. For the first time since the election of a new President Raisi, the Iranians have proposed a date for a possible return to the negotiating table. Iran expects talks could resume by early November, Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said. “I don’t think it will take us as long as it took the Biden Administration to get here,” Khatibzadeh said, referring to American diplomats indirectly joining the Vienna talks. “The government of [President] Ebrahim Raisi has been in power for less than 55 days… I don’t think [a return to negotiations] will take the whole 90 days,” he added, indicating that Iran believes negotiations will resume by the second week of November.

Although Khatibzadeh confirmed that Tehran is ready to resume talks soon, he warned that various “details” and “issues” need to be addressed. The biggest issue is the lifting of “800 (!) new unilateral and illegal” sanctions imposed on Iran after Trump unilaterally pulled the USA out of the nuclear deal back in May 2018. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has demanded the release of $10 billion worth of Iranian assets as a goodwill gesture. He said US officials had used mediators at UN meetings last month to discuss the resumption of nuclear talks, but he insisted Washington should first release the frozen funds as a sign of goodwill. Because of US sanctions on its banking and energy sectors, Iran has been unable to retrieve tens of billions of dollars of its assets in foreign banks, earned mainly from oil and gas exports. “The Americans tried to contact us through different channels [at the UN General Assembly] in New York, and I told mediators that if America’s intentions are serious, there needs to be a serious releasing of at least $10 billion of blocked money,” Amir-Abdollahian said.

Western powers have demagogically urged Iran to return to negotiations and said time is running out because Tehran’s nuclear program goes far beyond the limits set by the previous deal. For his part, Amir-Abdollahian reiterated that Iran would “soon” return to the stalled nuclear talks but declined to give an exact date. Tehran says in good faith that the steps it has taken regarding its nuclear program will be “reversible” if Washington lifts sanctions. Iranian and Western officials have said that many issues remain to be resolved before the agreement can be restored. Still, goodwill is needed from all parties involved, most notably the United States.

An unclear position has been taken by Germany, whose leadership has said it would reject any Iranian demands that the United States release frozen Iranian assets as a condition for resuming negotiations on the nuclear program. Apparently, “frozen” Iranian assets, which now work in the United States’ interests and bring it enormous revenues, remain the single most important concern to Berlin.

Meanwhile, senior US officials told their Israeli counterparts that the Biden Administration remains committed to diplomacy with Iran but would be willing to use “other avenues” to ensure Tehran does not acquire nuclear weapons. A serious US official said that a visit to Washington by Israeli national security adviser Eyal Hulata would allow the two allies to exchange intelligence and develop a “baseline assessment” of how far Tehran’s nuclear program has progressed. In other words, a military deployment program against Iran is already being developed. Whether it will be applied is still a question, but it is pretty obvious that there is enormous pressure on Tehran.

In this regard, it may be recalled that under a 2015 agreement, Iran curtailed its uranium enrichment program, a possible pathway to nuclear weapons, in exchange for lifting economic sanctions. Then US President Donald Trump blatantly violated international law by reneging on the deal in 2018. Broadly speaking, US experts believe that the time it will take Iran to achieve a nuclear “breakthrough,” that is, enough enriched uranium to build a nuclear bomb, has “shrunk from about 12 months to a period of about a few months” since Trump withdrew from the pact. “Obviously, it’s worrisome,” a State Department official told reporters ahead of Hulata’s talks with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. However, Iran has consistently and repeatedly denied that it is developing nuclear weapons.

Reiterating Biden’s position that the USA remains committed to the diplomatic route, a US State Department official said on condition of anonymity that “if that doesn’t work, there are other avenues, and we are fully committed to ensuring that Iran never develops nuclear weapons.” When asked what actions were being considered and whether they included military options, the official replied, “we will be prepared to take the necessary measures,” but did not specify which ones. The official said Iran is “sending instructions to a number of parties that they are preparing to return to Vienna,” where the USA and Iran held indirect talks earlier this year. But he made it clear that obstacles remain, citing Tehran’s demand that the USA first release $10 billion of Tehran’s frozen funds as a sign of goodwill, something the Biden Administration has shown no willingness to do while still profiting from Iranian money.

European capitals and those who signed the nuclear deal found themselves in a delicate situation, as a return to negotiations proved far more complex than they could have imagined. Now in power under President Raisi, the
Conservatives in Iran do not want to receive the same “American slap” as the Reformists. As for the Biden Administration, as Europeans discovered during the hasty withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan this August, its foreign policy is entirely designed for domestic audiences, leaving only a very narrow path to success, if any, on the world stage.

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