The Iran Nuclear Saga: US-Israel Hammer Out a “Plan B”

Even though the presidential candidate Joe Biden had vowed to “move quickly” to re-join the Iran nuclear deal, this has not happened. The Biden administration’s deliberate strategy to kill the previous deal by following the framework of talks it inherited from the Trump administration has contributed massively to the present deadlock, leading the US and Israel to devise a “Plan B” to force Iran into submission. While Iran has been insisting – and its demands are not illegitimate – that the US must lift its sanctions first to create the path for reviving the JCPOA, Washington’s (and Israel’s) insistence on including Iran’s ballistic missile programme into the deal has become an additional sources of tensions and the ensuing deadlock. Including a new agenda in the deal does not mean reviving the deal; in fact, it is actually involves a bid to push Tehran for an altogether new deal – a goal that the US and Israel have been pursuing ever since the Trump administration withdrew from the deal and Israel started sabotaging Iran’s legitimate nuclear production though cyber attacks and by murdering its top nuclear scientist.

With a simple revival of the deal is increasingly looking impossible, the talk of the town is the ‘military option’ if the ‘diplomatic option’ fails to produce the desired outcome, that is a one-dimensional result that favours the US and
While it is already hard to argue against the fact that Israel, by engaging in active sabotage, has been using proper military options to coerce Iran into submission, there is still no gainsaying that US and Israel are actively contemplating the military option to actually upgrade the military resources they have used so far. In doing so, both the US and Israel will be relying on the precedent set by the Trump administration when it killed Iran’s top military official, General Suleimani, last year in a drone air-strike in Iraq.

While the Biden administration may not itself want to start a new fully fledged war against Iran when it has just ended the US’ “endless war” in Afghanistan, there is no gainsaying that the US defense establishment may provide all the support, both diplomatic and military, Israel needs to carry out a military strike on Iran’s nuclear production capabilities. At the same time, it remains that the US may not be a fully opposed to actually coordinating with Israel a military strike on Iran. During his latest meeting with Biden, the Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, was a happy man when he received Biden’s reassurance that “all options” were on the table, should the on-going talks fail. Now that the prospects of JCPOA’s revival through the US participation look extremely bleak, other options, including a military/air strike, could become a possibility.

For Israel, resorting to military actions has an added political – electoral advantage. According to a recent survey conducted by Israel’s Democracy Institute, more than 50 per cent of Israeli Jewish population believes that Israel should have launched a military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities in the very early phase of its development. Launching a military strike, therefore, does not have political consequence for Naftali who sits on a multi-party coalition government.

Accordingly, Israel is building the momentum for its “Plan B” at both regional and international levels. The Israeli activity to build this momentum flows from its previous attempts at derailing the whole process to revive the JCPOA. Last week, in a joint press conference with his US and Emirati counterparts, Israel’s foreign minister, Yari Lapid, said that they “reserve” the right to act in self-defence. In Israeli geo-strategic parlance, the ‘right to self-defence’ has always meant a pre-emptive military operation. Lapid himself operationalized the definition of the so-called ‘right to self defence’ when he said that “If a terror regime is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, we must act. We must make clear the civilized world won’t allow it.” Antony Blinken reciprocated, saying that “we are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn’t change course.”

In his meeting with Biden’s National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, Lapid shared, without himself publicly revealing, with him details of Israel’s “alternative plan” against Iran. But some of the details of this plan have already been revealed by Israel’s military chief, when he said that Israeli and its intelligence community “is working against Iranian regional entrenchment throughout the Middle East.” “Operations to destroy Iranian capabilities will continue — in various arenas and at any time”, he added.

Echoing Israel’s discourse, US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley said last week that

“We will be prepared to adjust to a different reality in which we have to deal with all options to address Iran’s nuclear program if it’s not prepared to come back into the constraints of 2016.”

While the US officials continue to project that Iran is refusing to return to JCPOA, the fact remains that the deadlock is not an outcome of Iran’s refusal to revive the JCPOA, but its insistence on reviving the same agreement that was agreed in 2015 and lifting all sanctions the US has imposed, or failed to lift right after the deal after the deal. In refusing to lift sanctions, the Biden administration is essentially following in the footsteps of the Obama administration, which, while it did make the deal, continued to delay the lifting of all financial sanctions and unfreezing of the Iranian assets as well.

Therefore, the roots of the “Plan B” are impossible to find in the Iranian intransigence. It must be found in the US withdrawal from the treaty and its illegitimate insistence on negotiating a new deal, a demand that the other signatories of the deal – especially, China and Russia – do not support. A military action against Iran will thus be an avid example of how both the US and Israel have been staging wars to consolidate their regional and international dominance, respectively.

*Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*