The talks between the P5+1 — the UN Security Council members plus Germany — and the Iranian delegation are scheduled for February 26 and will be held in Kazakhstan’s former capital and chief business center — Almaty. This will be the first meeting in this format in 12 months’ time. Its chief focus will be on Iran’s nuclear program and the issue of Tehran’s possible development of nuclear weapons. The United States and the European Union remain convinced that Iran’s nuclear program is intended to develop nuclear weapons; however, they have presented no material facts to support that contention.

For example, the West is concerned that Iran has begun installing a new generation of centrifuges at its enrichment plant in Natanz. According to Western news agencies, Tehran is still enriching uranium to the 20% level. However, weapons grade uranium for use in nuclear weapons must be enriched to least 90%.

Many experts believe that Iran is still a long ways from developing nuclear weapons. “The concern is that by installing new centrifuges and improving its enrichment process Iran is on the verge of a breakthrough in developing an atomic bomb, and the time is coming when Iran will be ready to develop nuclear weapons, and it could make the decision to do so very quickly. But that time has not yet come.” The Washington Post published an article saying that all 16 of the US intelligence organizations still lack real proof that the Iranians are developing nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless, members of the new US administration continue to threaten Tehran with unstinting regularity. Secretary of State John Kerry has warned Iran and Syria that unless they accept the need for change they will have to face serious consequences. Kerry made that statement at a joint press conference in London with British foreign Secretary William Hague. He reminded Tehran that the United States would not allow the country to acquire nuclear weapons and warned that the “window for a diplomatic solution simply cannot by definition remain open forever. But it is open today. It is open now. There is still time but there is only time if Iran makes the decision to come to the table and negotiate in good faith.”

Iran, of course is demanding what it considers most important — that the P5+1 officially acknowledge that Tehran can enrich uranium and that the Western countries lift the sanctions that are damaging Iran’s economy. Convinced that they are in the right, the Iranians continue to actively develop their peaceful nuclear energy program, which apparently is very promising. They just recently announced the discovery of new large uranium deposits in the country and said that their nuclear program will be expanded and new nuclear power plants built. According to Iranian government spokesmen, construction sites have already been chosen for 16 nuclear power plants to be built over the next 15 years. Incidentally, as yet there has been no independent confirmation that new uranium deposits have been found. If the reports prove correct, Iran’s uranium reserves have tripled and now amount to 4400 tonnes.

Meanwhile, a report by the International Atomic Energy Agency says Iran is advancing in construction of a research reactor near the town of Arak. According to reports, Iran has almost completed installation of a cooling system for the reactor, and plans call for it to begin operation in 2014.

The IAEA document says that Iran has 167 kilograms of 20% enriched uranium as of February 2013. Media reports note that, in theory, Tehran needs to have about 250 kilograms of 20% uranium for further enrichment in order to build a nuclear bomb.

Iran is intent on defending its right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in the negotiations with the P5+1.
Supreme National Security Council Secretary Saeed Jalili, who will head Iran’s delegation in Kazakhstan, spoke about that. He said Iran will not go beyond its international obligations or accept anything outside its rights under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

At the same time, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said, “We will offer ways for removing possible concerns and ambiguities to show our goodwill, if Western countries, especially the United States, fully recognize the nuclear rights of countries, which shows their goodwill...”

Russia is convinced that Iran can prove that its nuclear program is peaceful if it cooperates constructively with the IAEA, said Levan Dzhagaryan, Russia’s ambassador to Tehran. “Russia is categorically opposed to the policy pursued by individual countries of imposing unilateral sanctions on Iran that go far beyond the UN Security Council resolutions,” he said. “That makes it difficult to find solutions to existing problems within the framework of the negotiations.” He said Russia is convinced that Tehran can prove that its nuclear program is entirely peaceful if it cooperates with the IAEA in a constructive manner. “If it does so, there will no longer be any reason for sanctions. It would also undercut the rationale of those who consider the use of force an acceptable alternative to diplomacy.”

Russia hopes that the next round of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran will enter the bargaining phase. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov spoke about that in the run-up to the talks. “If bargaining is to begin, firstly, political will must be demonstrated, as well as the inner resolve to move into this stage.” The parties must “come to terms on the balance of interests,” and we “want all negotiators to realize that no more time can be wasted,” he added.

Quite naturally, the test of political will comes in any negotiations when decisions must be made. Negotiators first lay the groundwork and remove any obstacles. They do that because the leaders, the politicians, those who are responsible for whether an agreement is reached or not, cannot work at the level of detail required. A limited number of major and truly important issues that lie at the heart of a future agreement must be worked out first. “During all the negotiating rounds held so far we have been clearing away the fallen leaves and twigs,” Ryabkov said, “and we aren’t finished yet. There are still quite a few issues that require expert study. But we are approaching the point where we will need to make some decisions. We hope everyone involved in the negotiations in Almaty understands that.”

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