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How Tehran Is Outflanking Washington

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Last week's talks in Baghdad between Iran and the P5-plus-1 -- the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia -- yielded no agreement. Paradoxically, however, both Washington and Tehran are likely to view the negotiations as successful, but for vastly different reasons.

There is an interest that both Iran and the United States hold in common: staving off military action, whether by the U.S. or Israel. From there, however, U.S. and Iranian motivations diverge; understanding this divergence is key to understanding why the talks thus far have failed.

Iranian officials publicly dismiss but likely privately worry about the consequences of war, while U.S. officials often seem more worried about the consequences of military action than about the Iranian nuclear program a strike would be designed to destroy.

Indeed, for many within the United States and other P5-plus-1 countries, the mere fact of "intensive" talks about Iran's nuclear program is itself a success. There is a narrative, espoused by then-candidate Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign, that at the root of the Iran nuclear crisis is U.S.-Iran conflict, and that the root cause of that conflict is mistrust.

As a candidate, Obama pledged to meet personally with Iranian leaders and predicted that the Iranians "would start changing their behavior if they started seeing that they had some incentives to do so." And as President, in his famous June 4, 2009, speech in Cairo, Obama spoke of the need to "overcome decades of mistrust."

In this narrative, talks are successful insofar as they end not in collapse but in a sustained negotiating process -- that is, more talks.

For Iran, meanwhile, there is little indication that the talks are aimed at building confidence

or opening up the broader possibility of U.S.-Iran rapprochement. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the Iranian regime views normal relations with the United States as undesirable, even threatening, while it views a nuclear weapons capability as strategically vital.

Giving up the latter for the former would make little sense to Tehran.

Prolonging the talks serves a threefold purpose for Iran beyond merely buying time or delaying an attack: first, to enhance Iranian prestige by sitting as co-equal with the world's great powers and discussing the great regional and global issues of the day; second, to secure tacit acceptance of nuclear advances once deemed unacceptable; and third, to gain relief from sanctions without making major concessions.

In this round, Iran appears to have made progress toward the first and second goals, but not the third. Regarding the first, Iran reportedly included in its proposals items relating to Syria and other regional issues -- clearly legitimizing its role as a regional power player.

Regarding the second, Iran's low-level uranium enrichment appears off the table for discussion, and Western analysts now frequently assert that insisting on the full suspension of enrichment and reprocessing by Iran is "unrealistic," even though it is called for in a series of UN Security Council resolutions.

The focus instead is now on Iran's 20% enrichment. While the recent discovery of 27%-enriched uranium at Iran's Fordo facility may have an innocent explanation, it would come as little surprise were Iran to pocket the P5-plus-1 concessions and move the goalposts once again.

While Iran failed to meet its third likely objective -- sanctions relief -- it has little reason to rush. It is true that oil sanctions have had a harmful effect on the Iranian economy, but history suggests that authoritarian regimes are willing to allow their people to endure severe hardship for the furtherance of the regimes' own survival.

For any negotiation to succeed, one must begin by understanding the interests of the other side. The fundamental bargain offered by the U.S. asks Iran to trade something it apparently values enormously -- the ability to produce nuclear weapons -- for something in which it has no demonstrable interest and likely regards as threatening, closer ties with the West.

To change this and give negotiations a chance of succeeding, Iran must be presented with a different bargain: end its nuclear weapons work or face devastating consequences. Iran must be convinced that continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability will threaten, rather than ensure, the regime's ultimate survival, and that talks are not a substitute for but a complement to a broader strategy, which includes ratcheting up the pressure on Tehran and bolstering the credibility of the U.S. military option.

The true failure of Baghdad and previous rounds of talks is not the failure to reach an agreement, but the failure to correctly apprehend Iranian ambitions and implement a strategy to counter them.

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