



Will Obama Win Jumpstart Diplomacy?

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Diplomacy has been on hold since the last round of talks in June between Iran and the world's six major powers in Moscow. What are the diplomatic options after the U.S. presidential election?

The talks have stalled since June. The Iranians may have been waiting to see if Obama won reelection and, now that he has, they will reengage. But Washington may also need to do something to reinvigorate the talks.

Diplomatic efforts so far have been based on small confidence-building measures, which have had disappointing results. So the Obama administration may want to consider a bolder proposal, such as outlining a comprehensive resolution to the impasse over Iran's disputed nuclear program. At the moment, there is a wide gap between Tehran and the P5+1 powers— the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia -- so a proposal could also initially serve to marshal world opinion for tougher action if Iran does not comply.

What does Obama's reelection mean for prospects of a military option? What about the timeline of dealing with Iran?

Obama's strong preference is to resolve the dispute through diplomacy, centered on economic and diplomatic pressures to persuade Iran to compromise. But in the second presidential debate, the president also pledged, "We're not going to allow Iran to perpetually engage in negotiations that lead nowhere." And he has vowed that the United States will prevent the Islamic Republic from getting a nuclear weapon, implying the military option.

Obama has strong-armed the Israeli leadership into accepting his approach. And his strategy was eventually endorsed by both Congress and his Republican opponents. Obama has also warned that Iranian proliferation could spark a nuclear arms race in the region. So he also has to deliver a result, one way or the other.

But making a decision to strike Iran, if diplomacy stalls, will not be easy. The natural tendency is to keep on talking as long as the other side is willing to engage. After the Iraq war, any decision to go to war based on U.S. intelligence assessments may also be difficult for a president to sell.

The timing is still unclear. Obama has so far refused to set a deadline or draw the kind of red lines demanded by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Obama administration now estimates that it could be a year or more before Iran decides whether to enrich uranium beyond 20 percent -- high enough for a weapon. In the meantime, the Islamic republic could accumulate sufficient nuclear material for a small arsenal before making any breakout moves.

The military option could include shadow warfare -- such as cyber attacks -- which the Obama administration has reportedly already used against Iran. The question is whether such measures will be enough to induce Iran to compromise or slow Iran's enrichment capabilities.

What are the prospects for a direct U.S.-Iran dialogue, either parallel or separate from the current international framework?

Washington will remain open to direct U.S.-Iran dialogue on a wide range of issues, but its strong preference will be for the nuclear issue to be resolved within the framework of the P5+1. But the Obama team will also not want to undermine international unity by appearing to go behind its partners' back.

The most fruitful form of U.S.-Iran dialogue would be secret meetings between trusted representatives of the two governments to explore whether a broader deal is possible. But a behind-the-scenes dialogue would be different from Track II meetings.

Since the last round of talks in June, has anything changed to increase pressure on Iran-- the economic crisis, sanctions, Syrian escalation?

Iran has come under considerable new pressure since the June talks. The United States and European Union have enhanced sanctions. Washington is convinced that sanctions significantly contributed to the increasing sense of economic crisis in Tehran. In September, the rial plunged some 40 percent in a few days. The coming months will be a testing time for the long-held U.S. view that sufficient economic pressure would lead Iran to compromise. Iran is often intransigent, despite the hardships.

On Syria, Washington sees the growing crisis as problematic for Iran. But Tehran is not necessarily convinced that President Bashar Assad will fall.

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