How Iran Outmaneuvered the U.S. in Nuclear Talks

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If Washington and its negotiating partners do not adjust their approach, the talks could be remembered not as a signature foreign policy accomplishment, but as a case study of a powerful country playing a strong hand poorly.

Whether one views the "key parameters" of the Iran nuclear deal announced Thursday as good or bad, it is hard to deny that they hew more closely to Iran's long-held demands than to those of the United States. So why is this particular deal, and not a different one, what was reached?

A "zone of possible agreement" is key to any negotiation. That is, all parties must find the range of outcomes preferable to no deal. If such a zone is present, then which of the possible agreements is reached depends on negotiating tactics.

Much of the debate in the U.S. during the talks focused on alternatives: What are they, and are they better or worse than whatever deal comes of the negotiations? How U.S. allies, Congress, and the public answer these questions determines the reception of any final agreement, which is why the administration and its critics have clashed so fiercely to frame those answers.

When it comes to the no-deal options, a clear difference has emerged between Iran and the United States. Whatever the reality, Iran has consistently asserted that it can live without a deal. And it didn't stop at rhetoric: Tehran has worked to improve its no-deal options and worsen those of the United States, such as by pursuing deals to circumvent sanctions and pressing its campaign for influence in the Middle East as the talks proceeded. Meanwhile, the U.S. has done the opposite: playing down the likelihood or likely efficacy of new sanctions and emphasizing the dangers of conflict while doing little to counter Iranian regional activities. The Obama administration's negative view -- aired publicly -- of military conflict and its other alternatives to a deal appear to have driven its willingness to make concessions, and Iran's willingness to stand fast, more than any other factor.

In negotiations, once potential outcomes are identified they must be compared to each other and not only to the no-

deal options. Which of the possible deals is achieved comes down to tactics at the table. On this score, the Iranians lived up to their reputation as savvy negotiators. A few examples:

- **The absent decision maker:** While Iranian negotiators engaged with their international counterparts, Iran's ultimate decision maker, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued red lines. He insisted that missiles are off-limits, that no facility would be closed, and that an agreement must be negotiated in a single stage. This absent authority limited Iranian negotiators' flexibility and set boundaries for the talks but could not be appealed to or even consulted by the other party -- leaving no choice but to accommodate his decisions or walk away. Congress could have served a similar role for U.S. negotiators, but the administration publicly rebuked legislators rather than using their tough stances to negotiating advantage.
- **Midpoint principle:** One of the most surprising positions taken by Ayatollah Khamenei was his insistence that Iran needs not only the 20,000 centrifuges it has but also about 180,000 more. In negotiations, parties often stake out a maximalist position anticipating that the other side will meet it in the middle. Yet the U.S. didn't just abandon its position that Iran needed zero centrifuges; Secretary of State John Kerry referred to it as "ridiculous." And ever since the U.S. stance was belittled, the number of centrifuges deemed acceptable by the U.S. has climbed.
- **Disappearing trade-off:** In complex negotiations, discussing issues in pairs or groups and trading them off against one another is, in theory, a way to avoid zero-sum issues and create win-win solutions. Because centrifuge numbers and stockpiles of enriched uranium are variables in calculating the "breakout time" in which Iran could achieve a nuclear weapon, they can, to an extent, be traded against each other. Iran reportedly agreed to ship away its stockpile of enriched uranium in exchange for keeping more centrifuges but later retracted this pledge. This left the U.S. choosing whether to walk back its concession on centrifuges in the face of a deadline or to accommodate Iran's gambit to avoid setting back the talks.
- **Same side of the table:** Iranian negotiators suggested that pragmatists in Iran would be harmed by failure and that hard-liners would gain. Put another way: The talks did not pit U.S. interests against Iran's but both countries' centrists against purported hard-liners. While President Hasan Rouhani may suffer politically if no deal is ultimately concluded, it's not evident that a deal would lift Iranian pragmatists, with concomitant benefits for bilateral cooperation. In addition, it is not Iran -- where the supreme leader's decision can be influenced but not easily challenged -- but the U.S. that has the greater need to allay domestic and allied skepticism if a deal is to be sustained.

As the negotiations progressed, Iran worked to improve its options in the event of no deal and to worsen those of the other side, while employing audacious tactics to secure the best possible agreement among the range of feasible outcomes. The U.S. and its allies should take note and seek to counter the Iranian approach, lest the nuclear negotiations be remembered not as a signature foreign policy accomplishment but as a case study of a powerful country playing a strong hand poorly.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal *blog '**Think Tank (http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/04/06/how-iran-outmaneuvered-the-u-s-in-nuclear-talks/)**."* ❖

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