What Could Diplomacy with Iran Produce?

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Brief Analysis

There can be little doubt that the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Russia, and China would all prefer a diplomatic outcome to the impasse over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Collectively, they make up the P5+1 mechanism that will soon resume negotiations with Iranian representatives. Talks were discontinued last year because Tehran's envoys were not prepared to discuss their nuclear program, or possible confidence building measures for dealing with it, without the P5+1 first dropping all sanctions and recognizing the Islamic Republic's right to enrich uranium.

Although those conditions have now been dropped, it remains to be seen whether the Iranians will come prepared to negotiate seriously. Their current posturing over the site for the talks is not a good sign in this regard. Nonetheless, with the nuclear program continuing to advance and President Obama stating that time is running out for diplomacy, Tehran has an opportunity to resolve the disagreement peacefully and avoid squandering what appears to be the last best option for diplomacy to work.

Iran has long claimed that it seeks civil nuclear power, not nuclear weapons. Indeed, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei recently reiterated his opposition to such weapons, declaring it a sin to possess them. To be sure, Iran's behavior -- such as violating its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), not answering International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) questions about the "possible military dimensions" of its nuclear program, enriching at least some of its uranium to 20 percent, and rejecting six UN Security Council resolutions calling for it to suspend enrichment activities -- has made the international community doubt such protestations. Yet if Khamenei is serious about not wanting nuclear weapons or a breakout capability, the parties could conceivably reach an agreement that gives Iran civil nuclear power while assuring the international community that firewalls are in place to prevent Tehran from converting its nuclear means into nuclear weapons.

There are two possible approaches to meeting these conditions, provided that Iran also answers all outstanding IAEA questions on its nuclear program and activities. The first would be for Iran to get its nuclear fuel from an international fuel bank, foregoing enrichment but receiving fuel for its nuclear reactors on a guaranteed basis. To do so, it would have to agree not to reprocess, permit the recovery of all spent fuel, and institute the level of transparency required by the Additional Protocol to the IAEA Safeguards Agreement. As incentive for taking these

steps, the P5+1 could offer Tehran material support for light-water reactors, ensuring that it could have a vibrant civil nuclear power program.

One virtue of this approach is that it would greatly strengthen the nonproliferation regime. If Iran were not enriching but getting its fuel from an international fuel bank (and also not reprocessing), it could establish a powerful precedent for all countries seeking nuclear power in the future -- a precedent that would make it difficult for any other country to break out and become a nuclear-weapons-capable state.

Although there is little doubt this option offers the best outcome from a nonproliferation standpoint, there will be those, including certain P5+1 members, who may balk at an agreement that strips Iran of even the symbolic right to limited enrichment. In their eyes, such an approach would single out Iran to an unacceptable degree. They might also point out that the P5+1 offer made in July 2008 would have permitted Iran to achieve its full rights under the NPT once it restored international confidence in the purposes and capabilities of its nuclear program. From this standpoint, denying Iran enrichment of any sort would be a retreat from that offer.

One could surely say that Iran, by defying the IAEA and the Security Council and engaging in terror internationally, has brought special treatment on itself and that the precedential value of the no-enrichment approach is so meaningful that it is worth pursuing. And, the fact is that Iran would still have an explanation for such an outcome: it would have civil nuclear power and it could rightfully claim that its solution would provide a future guide for all others in acquiring nuclear power.

Still, the P5+1 could divide on this approach and might find common ground on an alternative. In this alternative approach, Iran would be permitted to have limited enrichment. Its ability to enrich would be limited in terms of the number of centrifuges that could operate and be installed, the amount of low-enriched uranium (LEU) that could be accumulated in country, and the level to which uranium could be enriched. For example, the P5+1 could ask Iran to accept the following restrictions: no more than 1,000 centrifuges could be installed; no more than 1,000 kilograms of LEU could remain in-country, with the remainder shipped out to ensure that Iran never possesses even a single bomb's worth of LEU; and enrichment levels could not exceed 5 percent. Given Tehran's pattern of cheating, a rigorous inspection regime would be required to ensure that Iranian facilities could not exceed these limits. Indeed, the verification system would have to be far more extensive than in the first scenario of no enrichment. Practically speaking, this would mean ongoing monitoring at several steps in the process to make sure there is no diversion of yellowcake, of uranium hexafluoride, or of LEU, as well as transparency on the production, installation, and storage of centrifuges.

Iran might chafe at this intrusion on its sovereignty and at being singled out for more extensive transparency measures than called for in the Additional Protocol. But that would have to be the minimal price for international acceptance of a symbolic Iranian enrichment capability, particularly given Tehran's behavior on the one hand, and the unmistakable advantages of the no-enrichment option for the future of the nonproliferation regime on the other.

Even if Iran were prepared to accept such limitations, it would undoubtedly expect that all sanctions would be lifted in return and that it would receive many of the economic benefits offered in the July 2008 package. Removing some of the more onerous sanctions related to the nuclear program (e.g., restrictions on the Central Bank; boycotts on Iranian oil) would be logical. But there are also sanctions related to Iran's human rights violations and support for terrorism, and those would not necessarily be rescinded and could affect some of the economic benefits that the United States, at least, could provide.

In fact, it is difficult to see how Washington could normalize relations with Tehran unless the two parties reach more extensive understandings that go beyond the nuclear agenda. Real normalization would require changes in Iran's behavior toward terrorism, its neighbors, and its own citizens. This, of course, may be precisely what the Supreme

Leader fears; as he has often stated, he believes that any concessions to what he calls the "arrogant powers" will only whet the West's appetite for more concessions -- an appetite, he argues, that will not be satisfied until the Islamic Republic itself is conceded. However, the Obama administration's stated objective is not regime change, but change in the regime's behavior; while the nuclear issue has the greatest urgency, it is not the only area of concern.

Interim Step?

Given what the United States and its partners are likely to require to settle the nuclear issue and what Iran may seek in return, an interim step or agreement may be more doable. To have any meaning, such a step would have to stop the clock on what Israel describes as the "zone of immunity" -- the point at which the development of Iran's nuclear infrastructure is so advanced or fortified that Israel effectively loses its military option.

What could meet that standard? If Iran were to stop enriching uranium to 20 percent, ship out the material it has already enriched to that level, and deactivate the Fordow facility near Qom, that would probably be sufficient. Here again, the question is what Iran would seek in return. Lifting the Central Bank sanctions would probably be the minimum it would require.

The advantage of the interim approach is that it could buy time and space to reach more fundamental understandings. The disadvantage is that it does not solve the problem and may take the pressure off Iran in a way that would not be so easy to resume later. In short, an interim step that stops the momentum toward the use of force would be desirable but also risky, since that momentum may be the very thing spurring Iran's interest in finding a way out.

What to Expect

If this overview of the possible negotiated outcomes shows anything, it is that a deal -- while possible -- is probably still a long shot. In the past, when Iran felt the need to reduce pressure, it adjusted its behavior with an eye toward living to fight another day. That may happen again, but it would take the right mix of coercive diplomacy that also leaves Tehran a way out. The months ahead will show whether the deals that could be struck will be.

Ambassador Dennis Ross, counselor at The Washington Institute, previously served as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the central region at the National Security Council. ❖

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