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### New P5+1 Talks with Iran

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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#### Brief Analysis

On December 6, representatives of the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany will meet with Iranian delegates in Geneva for two days of renewed talks on Tehran's nuclear program. The aspiration of the P5+1 -- the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany -- is to finally achieve progress toward a negotiated resolution of concerns over Iran's nuclear activities. Led by European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, the negotiations are expected to be tough, with neither side wanting to make concessions. In addition, the atmosphere of the meetings will likely be influenced by the recent WikiLeaks revelations of heightened Arab anxiety about Iran.

#### Background

In 2002, the international community learned that Iran was working on a centrifuge-based uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water facility (capable of producing plutonium) at Arak. Both projects have the potential to produce fuel for atomic weapons. Accordingly, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) -- which polices the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, of which Iran is a signatory -- has been investigating ever since.

From the start, Tehran has maintained that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. In the IAEA's view, however, the regime has yet to adequately explain its activities. In 2003, Germany, France, and Britain -- then dubbed the EU-3 and since expanded to the P5+1 -- began a diplomatic initiative to resolve the outstanding questions.

The last time Iran and the P5+1 sat together at the negotiating table was October 2009. During that session, also held in Geneva, Iranian officials reportedly agreed in principle to send much of its stock of low-enriched uranium (LEU) abroad. They had argued that Iran needs the LEU to fuel the small Tehran Research Reactor, with the goal of producing medical isotopes. But they also acknowledged that new fuel rods could only be made outside Iran. By agreeing to send most of its LEU abroad, the regime would obtain fuel rods it purportedly wanted while also reducing international concerns, which centered on potential Iranian conversion of LEU into highly enriched uranium (HEU) suitable for a weapon.

Back in Tehran, however, the government stalled on implementing the agreement, with repeated attempts to change its terms. In the meantime, Iran has produced more LEU, undermining the basis of the deal. Although Turkey and Brazil attempted to rebroker the arrangement in May 2010, their efforts failed because they did not take into account the extra stocks of LEU Iran had produced since 2009.

#### New IAEA Report

In its latest report on Iran, released November 23, the IAEA stated that the Natanz plant continues to produce uranium, including some enriched to nearly 20 percent, the minimum threshold for HEU (although 90 percent enrichment is generally needed for an atomic weapon). The agency also noted, without explanation, that Iran had added centrifuges to some of the facility's cascades; specifically, each of the altered cascades now had 174 centrifuges instead of 164. Iran may have made this change to provide spare parts for each cascade in case of breakdown. In a potentially related development, Western officials recently confirmed that Natanz centrifuges appear to have been affected by the Stuxnet computer virus, reportedly capable of interfering with the speed of the machines and causing catastrophic failure. Iran's alterations could also mean that the regime is experimenting with arrangements of the cascades required for producing bomb-grade HEU.

Apart from Natanz, the IAEA reported that Iran was continuing construction at the Fordow enrichment plant near Qom, the existence of which was discovered only last year. The agency also noted that the Arak heavy-water reactor was still being built.

The section of the report titled "Possible Military Dimension" was particularly worrisome. According to the IAEA, previous reports "have detailed the outstanding issues related to possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program and the actions required of Iran...to resolve those issues. Since August 2008, however, Iran has declined to discuss the outstanding issues." The agency went on to note its concerns about possible undisclosed Iranian nuclear activities involving military-related organizations, including efforts connected to the potential development of a nuclear missile payload.

#### Why Talks Now?

American and European officials believe that Iran's willingness to reopen talks in Geneva demonstrates the effectiveness of escalating sanctions. Since 2006, the UN Security Council has adopted six resolutions condemning Tehran's nuclear posture, four of which have imposed trade and financial penalties on the country as a whole, along with travel restrictions on scientists and officials.

Whatever the case, Tehran appears to have agreed to the talks reluctantly. Initially, it asked to hold the meetings in Turkey, which it deemed a more congenial diplomatic location. The regime also regarded the agenda as problematic. Speaking this week to a crowd of supporters in northern Iran, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad insisted that "the people of Iran will not back down one iota" in the face of international demands to curb the nuclear program. Indeed, Iran agreed to include nuclear issues in the Geneva talks only if they are raised as part of a discussion "about international cooperation" and "solving the problems of humanity." Such rhetoric has been interpreted to mean that Iranian officials will attempt to focus the discussion on Israel's nuclear program.

Ironically, the recent WikiLeaks revelations of U.S. diplomatic cables may provide the P5+1 negotiators with added leverage. Some of the cables highlighted growing (but previously private) Arab concerns about Iran's nuclear activities, lending weight to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's December 1 assertion that the Geneva meeting would be "an opportunity for Iran to come to the table and discuss the matters that are of concern to the international community, first and foremost, their nuclear program."

#### Challenges for U.S. Diplomacy

American officials face a number of challenges in Geneva. First, they must make some progress in the negotiations because diplomatic engagement with Iran has been Washington's stated (though elusive) priority since the Obama administration took office. Second, they must maintain the P5+1's diplomatic unity, particularly with regard to Russia and China, which often seem to prefer diminishing Washington's standing by exploiting diplomatic or political vulnerabilities. Third, the United States must demonstrate to its allies, particularly in the Middle East, that it can make progress with Tehran, alleviating their concerns about Iranian interference and countering the perception of weakened U.S. leadership.

Assuming the talks are not aborted prematurely, Washington has few good options for countering further Iranian stall tactics or other ploys. At the same time, U.S. officials believe they have more time to negotiate such obstacles because of Iran's apparent technical problems with its centrifuges. For its part, Tehran seems a long way from conceding that its program has or even once had any military dimensions. It may well believe that its situation mirrors that of India and Pakistan in 1998 -- that is, if Iran does carry out a nuclear weapons test, the subsequent period of international condemnation would soon give way to acceptance of a new status quo.

In any case, short of draconian trade sanctions (which Moscow and Beijing are unlikely to support) or a military strike, Washington seems resigned to treating Iran's current nuclear achievements as acceptable. Indeed, Secretary Clinton stated this week that "Iran is entitled to the use of civil nuclear power for peaceful purposes." This formulation could allow Iran to continue enriching uranium even though the country has no discernible need to produce the material domestically: the medical isotopes produced by the Tehran Research Reactor can be bought commercially from many sources, and the country's sole nuclear power reactor (the Russian-built Bushehr plant on the Persian Gulf coast, expected to go online in January) uses uranium fuel imported from Russia. Another potential negotiating option -- allowing Iran to make the low-enriched fuel rods for Bushehr -- has its own perils, given that the spent fuel could be reprocessed into plutonium. Even purely peaceful nuclear work would enable Iranian scientists and technicians to develop the skills needed for an eventual military program.

Dennis Ross, the White House's point man on Iran, stated this week that Tehran has "a decision to make," presumably between carrots and sticks. On one hand, U.S. officials are reportedly offering greater economic and energy assistance if Tehran constrains its nuclear program. On the other hand, Washington is prepared to push for further economic sanctions if necessary, further compromising Iran's ability to conduct trade and investment activity in its important oil and gas sectors.

Indeed, the Geneva talks are high stakes, in terms of both Iran's nuclearization and Washington's diplomatic standing. So far, no one is predicting that the parties will reach an agreement, and few believe that much progress will be made at all. In fact, given the potential for an acrimonious end to the meetings, agreeing on a date for the next round of talks may be the most the negotiators can hope to achieve.

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