

The Iran-P5+1 Framework: Prospects & Implications

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The historical provisional deal of Lausanne, between the P5+1 countries (United States, France, Russia, China, United Kingdom + Germany) and Tehran for Iran's nuclear program, merely concerns the definition of the framework of the two negotiating parties for a final agreement in coming June (2015). As such, any enthusiasm that may exist for the outcome of this negotiation process should be mitigated by a more careful and sober approach.

The Framework of Agreement

Reading the framework of agreement one can trace many "ifs". However, it is an indisputable fact that Iran conceded to most of Western pressures including the nuclear program development timeframe, the abandonment of some reactors and of course the supervision of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). These are steps towards a positive direction mainly because the West is opening communication channels with Tehran; and it does so publically. The diplomatic discussion that was initiated in Geneva in 2013 that led to the framework of agreement at the Beau Rivage hotel in Lausanne is without a doubt to the benefit of the Western world. But if Washington attempts to play a role similar to Britain's in 1979, by naively thinking that when Ayatollah Khamenei dies it will successfully manage to instate the reformist Rouhani in the role of the supreme leader and "dash" Foreign Minister Zarif at the country's wheel, then the possibility of a grand failure might be waiting just around the corner. Consequently, the basic message of the provisional agreement, and of a final agreement at a later time, is dialogue; and more dialogue is always better than less dialogue.

The history of Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control during the Cold War, especially between Moscow and Washington, can provide valuable lessons as to how the West should proceed. A deal with Iran does not necessarily deter the latter from obtaining nuclear weapons. Agreements are often broken and those who shake hands often fool their counterparts; on a personal or state level. Could, therefore, the

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West deter Iran's potential "cheating"? In the agreed framework one of the provisions suggests that should Tehran fail to meet its commitments, then economic sanctions will be re-imposed. In other words, Iran could acquire the bomb and then return under a sanctions regime. In that case the West would be "back to zero", albeit any punishment would be for the sake of punishment and not deterrence.

To be sure, during the Cold War the agreements worked. Not because Washington and Moscow were not willing to "cheat", but simply because the great economic costs stemming from the arms race led them to realize the mutual benefits. In the case of Iran, however, if Tehran violates the agreement, things become more complicated and economic sanctions will likely not work. For example, the case of India testifies to this very reality: economic sanctions in cases of arms procurement, and even more so in the case of nuclear weapons, have no real value. Therefore, a Plan B is necessary and the West ought to make sure that it has one.

The Geopolitical Dimension

The Iran-West rapprochement changes decisively the geopolitical map of the Middle East while it is certainly too soon to analyze the full spectrum of implications for the region. However from Syria to Yemen and from the Tehran-Riyadh rivalry to the Sunni-Shia power struggle axis, the following years will witness rapid changes. Especially if Washington includes Iran into its regional security architecture. Yet with regard to the nuclear program, two potential developments could be decisive: a) an Israeli response related to its own nuclear weapons; and b) the reactions of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in terms of the development of their own nuclear programs. Another potential outcome of these negotiations or a future deal is that Riyadh might decide to bring back the issue of providing economic support to Pakistan's ballistic and nuclear programs. This is important as neither Pakistan's nuclear program is entirely transparent and its actual nuclear weapons operation capabilities are debatable. As Bennett Ramberg puts it in *Nuclear Power Plants as Weapons for the Enemy* (1985, p.116), "... regionally, Israel could pull its bomb out of the basement and Saudi Arabia could cash in its past financial support for Pakistan's weapons program by asking Islamabad to kick in a bomb or two". What remains to be seen is how these issues will play out in the next five years or so and, most importantly, whether Iran will uphold its end of the agreement.

In any case, a nuclear power race in the Middle East would entail two possible scenarios: absolute chaos or the vindication of Kenneth Waltz who was the first to talk on “why Iran should get the bomb” essentially arguing that a nuclear Iran would lead to a balance-of-power on the basis of a nuclear equilibrium (Foreign Affairs, July/August 2012). Already Saudi Arabia and Israel reacted negatively to the framework of agreement, each for its own reasons. Saudi Arabia fears that the easing of sanctions will enable Iran to reenter the global politics arena and thus emerge as a more powerful country, a more feared rival. The rise of Iran could at the same time entail the further empowerment of Tehran’s proxy Shia allies in the Gulf. For Israel, Iran’s nuclear ambitions in conjunction with the Islamist extremist ideology that dominates many policy circles in Tehran constitutes the most important and existential threat. As such, and given Israel’s strong and sensitive security culture a West-Iran final agreement could exacerbate existential insecurities, thus leading even to spasmodic decisions that would potentially be disastrous for everyone – i.e. Israel, Iran, the region and world politics more generally.

On a different front, Egypt and Turkey are equally important regional players when it comes to the issue of Iran. Though both of them welcomed the framework of agreement and expressed hopes for a final agreement, they maintain some concerns especially regarding the likelihood of Iran bypassing its commitments and obtaining “the bomb”. Egypt certainly hopes that this framework will contribute to the normalization of its relations with Iran while the lifting of the sanctions regime off Tehran would undoubtedly favor Turkey’s economy and relieve its great energy market that is largely depended on Iran. Having said that, Egypt and Turkey, as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran, perceive themselves as potential regional superpowers and Arab/Muslim leaders. This is often reflected in proxy conflicts such as in Syria, Iraq and Yemen while it brews rivalries and power struggles both between Shia and Sunni states as well as among the Sunni powers (e.g. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt).

For these reasons, the West needs to converse with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt alike as much as it needs to do so with Iran. But even if dialogue, instead of coercion or the cutting off of communication channels, leads to diplomatic concessions a final agreement with Tehran will ab initio bear no weight unless the motives of the parties involved are sincere as to the goals of the agreement. It then follows that the consequences of the collapse or violation of a future final agreement will be much worse than the failure to reach a final agreement in the first place. In comparison, the scenario of Pakistan, a pariah state and a terrorism hub, upgrading

its nuclear weapons capabilities is as nightmarish as the potential of a “cheating” Tehran; or as the conservative Iranian slogan “death to Israel”. That is to say that the negative scenarios are not limited to the failure of the P5+1-Iran negotiations or of a future agreement but that they rather extend to the possible implications of the agreement itself. In light of this dynamic and the high stakes of the ongoing negotiations, it seems that the United States and Iran are trying to avoid confrontation on other issues for the sake of diplomacy. A case in point is the tensions created between Saudi Arabia-US and Iran over Yemen. Both the US and Iran seem to have undertaken de-escalation efforts by turning away respective naval forces that were mobilized due to the Yemeni conflict. For its part, though Saudi Arabia pledged to cease its airstrikes in Yemen and support a political settlement to the conflict, it has yet to do so. However, the intention alone, which may turn into actions later on, might be propelled by US pressures and be part of the broader momentum that surrounds the West-Iran talks.

Epilogue – The Day After

When someone agrees on something, whether an international agreement or the rental of a house, there are two ways to ensure that the agreement will be upheld: through its content and its guarantees in the case of its violation. Even more important is for one to know how they can react should an owing renter comes at them with the aggressive intention of destroying their property. In that case the outcome would be twice as catastrophic: the owner would both lose what was owed to them and be left with a destroyed property. If they decide to take the law into their own hands they start to become like the infringer. The only solution is preemption: on the day that the owing infringer attempts to set the property on fire the Police will be waiting for them. In Iran’s case, things are fairly clear: after the final deal in June, the international community ought to clarify to Iran that it will either uphold its end of the agreement or become the recipient of serious repercussions. The West ought to do the same every time its Middle East allies decide to finance an extremist Islamist actor even as it builds a common understanding among them with regard to Iran’s nuclear program.