

## Pursue the Diplomatic Track on Iran

- [Arms Control Today](#)

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Nearly 10 years have elapsed since the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran had secretly built a uranium-enrichment facility. Nearly seven years have passed since talks between Iran and the European Union stalled and Iran resumed its enrichment activities. Since then, Iran and the P5+1—China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have fumbled fleeting opportunities to reach a deal that reduces the risk of a nuclear-armed Iran in exchange for a rollback of proliferation-related sanctions.

There is still time for diplomacy, but both sides need to move with greater urgency toward a lasting solution. Iran apparently has not made a strategic decision to pursue nuclear weapons and does not yet have the necessary ingredients for an effective nuclear arsenal, but its enrichment capabilities are improving. By year's end, Iran could install more-advanced centrifuges and significantly increase its enriched-uranium stockpile.

A deal that ties Iran's enrichment activities and its stockpiles to the actual needs of Iran's nuclear power plants, combined with more extensive IAEA safeguards, could sufficiently guard against a nuclear-armed Iran. Pursuing such a course is difficult, but it is the best option on the table.

Tighter international sanctions can help slow the advance of Iran's nuclear and missile programs and increase pressure on Tehran to negotiate seriously. Yet, sanctions alone will not halt Iran's nuclear pursuits. The so-called military option would be counterproductive and costly for all sides. Potential Israeli or U.S. air strikes could set back Iran's program for no more than a couple of years and would likely lead its leaders to withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and openly pursue nuclear weapons. Further cyberattacks on Iran's nuclear installations may buy time, but also deepen mistrust and increase the determination of Iran's leaders to expand their nuclear program.

Given the infrequency of serious, direct talks with Tehran on its disputed nuclear program, the failure to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough at the latest meeting in Moscow is disappointing but not surprising. There is a risk that both sides will harden their stances and effectively put the tenuous diplomatic process on hold until next year. That would be a serious mistake.

The three rounds of nuclear talks in 2012 have revealed the substantial differences between the two sides, but an initial confidence-building deal is still within reach if both sides provide greater flexibility and creativity.

Iran's reported proposal for "operationalizing" Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's fatwa against nuclear weapons, its call for sanctions relief in return for cooperation with the IAEA, and its reported offer to consider limits on enrichment above normal fuel grade are all worth exploring. The task now is to acquire sufficient detail on the proposals, sort out sequencing issues, and recalibrate positions to achieve a win-win deal at the next round of discussions.

The top priority for the P5+1 must continue to be a deal that halts Iran's accumulation of 20 percent-enriched uranium, which is above normal fuel grade and closer to weapons grade, in exchange for fuel assemblies for its Tehran Research Reactor and medical isotopes. This would be consistent with the principle that Iran has the right under the NPT only to enrich in full compliance with safeguards and only for legitimate civilian purposes and could serve as a basis for a broader deal to limit the

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size and scope of its enrichment program.

To help get to “yes,” the P5+1 should offer to suspend the European oil embargo that formally goes into effect this month, offer to ease the restrictions that will bar European shipping insurers from covering ships that carry Iranian oil to buyers around the world, or both. The effect would be largely symbolic because most EU states have already stopped buying Iranian oil. If Iran does not follow through with tangible steps, these new sanctions could be formally reinstated.

Failure to find a way to halt Iran’s accumulation of 20 percent-enriched uranium would be irresponsible, as it would make it easier for Iran to acquire the capability for a faster nuclear weapons breakout.

For its part, Iran could make a deal and sanctions relief more likely if it would immediately cooperate with the IAEA on inspections of key sites and personnel to ensure that past weapons-related experiments have been discontinued. In addition, Iran must clarify when it will allow IAEA inspections under the terms of an additional protocol to its safeguards agreement.

Some cynics and critics of the diplomatic option wrongly suggest that further negotiations with Iran only allow Iran to “buy time” for nefarious nuclear pursuits. The reality is that international and national sanctions will remain in place until Iran takes the steps necessary to provide confidence it is not pursuing nuclear weapons. Iran’s enrichment program goes no faster or slower as talks continue. Without a deal to curb Iran’s nuclear pursuits, however, Iran’s capabilities will only grow over time.

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