

A Nuclear Deal With Iran

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The United States and its “P5+1” negotiating partners are scheduled to resume talks with Iran on Nov. 7-8 in Geneva to seek a lasting resolution to the high-stakes standoff over Tehran’s nuclear program. These ongoing talks represent the best chance in years to guard against a nuclear-armed Iran. A framework deal could be achieved by early next year.

Neither side can or will get everything it wants. If one or both sides miscalculate and demand more than the other side is willing to deliver, the negotiations will fail.

For instance, it is counterproductive to demand, as nuclear-armed Israel suggests, that Iran permanently halt all enrichment work and dismantle its key nuclear facilities. “Zero enrichment,” which would be ideal from a nonproliferation standpoint, might have been attainable a decade ago when Iran’s program was in its early stages. Today, however, it is not realistic, and insisting on it is a recipe for failure.

In the absence of a deal to limit Iran’s nuclear program, Iran will continue to increase its capacity to enrich uranium, and the risk of Israeli military strikes against Iran’s nuclear sites will increase. Further sanctions will not halt or eliminate Iran’s nuclear weapons potential. Military strikes would only delay, not stop, Iran’s nuclear pursuits and would likely push Iran’s leaders to openly seek the bomb.

Negotiating a sound nuclear agreement will be difficult, but it is clearly the most effective course of action. The first priority must be to halt Iran’s production of 20 percent-enriched uranium and verifiably remove or down-blend its existing stockpile in exchange for fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor or alternative sources of medical isotopes produced by the reactor.

Iran says it is prepared to limit the overall uranium-enrichment capacity of its two declared and safeguarded facilities, Natanz and Fordow. In principle, Iran’s enrichment capacity and stockpile of material should not exceed the fuel supply needs of its nuclear power reactor program, which for now are close to zero. Consequently, the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) should seek an immediate halt to the further expansion of Iran’s enrichment program, and later secure a very significant reduction of its current installed enrichment capacity, which is about 19,000 IR-1 centrifuges.

The P5+1 should also press Iran to halt work on its Arak heavy-water reactor or agree that any spent fuel from Arak shall be exported for disposal. Arak, which is nearing completion, could provide Iran with a second path for producing fissile material for nuclear weapons if Tehran could extract the plutonium from its irradiated fuel.

To further guard against a secret weapons program at undisclosed sites and to provide additional warning time, Tehran must join the vast majority of other nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) member states in providing more-timely information to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about its nuclear projects under the standards of IAEA Code 3.1 and allow more-extensive inspections through adoption of an additional protocol to its safeguards agreement.

With these restrictions in place, Iran would find it extremely difficult to make a dash to build nuclear

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weapons before the international community would detect such activities and could act to block such an outcome.

To motivate Iran to take these confidence-building steps, President Barack Obama can and must be prepared to use his authority to temporarily waive certain U.S. sanctions on Iran, including some key financial and oil restrictions. Congress must refrain from pushing ahead with a new round of sanctions, which would severely undermine the prospects of a negotiated solution and increase the chances of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Most international and national sanctions will remain in place until Iran takes the final steps necessary to give the international community confidence that it is not pursuing nuclear weapons. But Iran will not likely agree to limits on its nuclear program if there is no prospect for serious sanctions relief.

To secure a deal, the P5+1 must also recognize Iran's right under the Article IV of the NPT to pursue peaceful nuclear activities under certain conditions. As Obama said in his Sept. 24 address to the United Nations, such recognition requires that Iran adequately and satisfactorily respond to the international community's concern about the nature of its program.

To do so, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani must follow through on his pledge for "greater transparency" by implementing the additional protocol and fully cooperating with the IAEA to resolve questions about suspected weapons-related experiments that may have been conducted over a decade ago.

Iran has the technical capability to build nuclear weapons if it wants to do so. In the assessment of senior U.S. intelligence officials, Iranian leaders have not made such a decision and are more than a year away from being able to produce nuclear weapons.

But in the absence of a negotiated solution, Iran's capabilities to produce material for nuclear weapons will only improve. Now is the time to finally secure a meaningful agreement on the basis of realistic and achievable goals.

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