

After the First-Phase Deal With Iran

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After years of on-and-off negotiations, the Obama administration's negotiating team, along with its diplomatic partners, secured a breakthrough agreement with Iran that sets back that country's nuclear potential and increases international oversight of Iran's nuclear activities.

The six-month agreement opens the way for further talks on "a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful."

The first-phase deal announced by the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and Iran after their marathon Nov. 20-24 round of talks will stop uranium enrichment to 20 percent, neutralize Iran's stockpile of 20 percent material, cap the amount of fuel-grade uranium (3.5 percent enrichment), freeze the installation or operation of additional centrifuges, and halt progress on nuclear components for the unfinished Arak heavy-water reactor, which is a potential source of plutonium for weapons.

Just as importantly, the agreement provides for unprecedented transparency measures, including daily, rather than weekly, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections at the Natanz and Fordow enrichment facilities; IAEA access to centrifuge production sites; and increased information on and IAEA access to the Arak site.

Together, these constraints increase the time it would take Iran to produce enough highly enriched uranium for one bomb to about three months, compared to less than a month by next year without the constraints. The new transparency measures would effectively detect and deter any such effort by Iran. The agreement is a significant milestone for nonproliferation.

In exchange, the P5+1 will extend limited, reversible relief from certain existing sanctions. Meanwhile, the core of the existing international financial and oil sanctions regime against Iran will remain in place, providing the P5+1 with substantial leverage during negotiations on a long-term agreement.

The next and more difficult challenge will be to hammer out a comprehensive, final-phase agreement. The central question will be the extent to which Iran is willing to reduce the capacity of its enrichment program. The Nov. 24 agreement does not explicitly recognize the right to enrich uranium, but it does recognize the fact that Iran has a uranium-enrichment program, and the two sides agreed to negotiate a "mutually defined enrichment programme" with "agreed limits on the scope and level of enrichment, activities, capacity...and stocks of uranium" that should be "consistent with practical needs." Iran's nuclear fuel supply needs currently are close to zero, but could grow in the coming years.

Given Iran's limited needs, a reduction in Iran's overall enrichment capacity—from 10,000 operating and 19,000 installed centrifuges at two sites to 3,000 or fewer operating first-generation (or equivalent second-generation) machines at one site—would be more than sufficient for Iran's potential needs. The two sides might agree to effectively halt any significant enrichment at Fordow by converting it to a "research" facility.

Such limits on Iran's enrichment capacity and the size of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium would

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significantly increase the time necessary to produce enough highly enriched uranium for one bomb.

Nevertheless, some critics of the agreement between Iran and the P5+1, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are continuing to demand Iran's total capitulation: the permanent suspension of all uranium enrichment and the dismantlement of the Natanz, Fordow, and Arak facilities.

Such an outcome might have been conceivable a decade ago when Iran agreed to suspend enrichment work and had only a handful of centrifuges. But today, such demands are unrealistic and are unnecessary to guard against a nuclear-armed Iran.

The P5+1 is expected to press Iran to abandon the unfinished Arak reactor, but Tehran will likely resist such an outcome. One compromise effectively neutralizing Arak as a threat would be to convert Arak to a more proliferation-resistant light-water reactor or to verifiably remove the spent fuel for disposition by a third country, possibly Russia, to prevent it from becoming a source of plutonium.

The final phase should lead to even more extensive IAEA inspection authority to guard against a secret weapons program under the terms of an additional protocol, which would give the IAEA access to undeclared sites and serve as a strong deterrent to any clandestine nuclear weapons work. To normalize its nuclear status, Iran must also resolve long-standing questions from the IAEA about suspected weapons-related experiments that may have been conducted in secret in the past.

To secure a final-phase agreement, the P5+1 will need to refrain from imposing additional sanctions and be prepared to phase out remaining oil and financial sanctions against Iran, which will require action by the European Union and the U.S. Congress.

Negotiating a comprehensive deal along these lines will be difficult. Implementing the steps that such an agreement would require will be even more challenging. But a practical, diplomatic solution that guards against a nuclear-armed Iran is within reach. Now is the time to seize it.

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