

Assessing a Nuclear Deal With Iran

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This month, top diplomats from Iran and six world powers have a historic opportunity to seal a long-sought, long-term comprehensive deal that guards against a nuclear-armed Iran and helps avoid a future military confrontation over its nuclear program.

The negotiation is one of the most important and complex nuclear negotiations in recent decades. Nevertheless, for the United States and the other members of the six-country group (China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom), which is known as the P5+1, the goals are straightforward:

- Establish verifiable limits on Iran's uranium-enrichment and plutonium-production capacity that substantially increase the time it would take for Iran to break out of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and try to build nuclear weapons.
- Increase the international community's ability to promptly detect and disrupt any future effort by Iran to build nuclear weapons, including at potential undeclared sites.
- Decrease Iran's incentives to enhance its nuclear capacity through nuclear fuel-supply guarantees and phased sanctions relief.

Such an agreement, on balance, would significantly improve U.S. and international security.

Negotiators have made progress in some areas, but gaps remain on key issues. Most importantly, they must still find a formula that would reduce Iran's capacity to enrich uranium sufficiently to guard against an effort to develop nuclear weapons quickly while providing options for fueling Iran's peaceful nuclear research and power reactors in the future.

Although the two sides are still talking tough, they can and must find win-win solutions. As explained in the pages of Arms Control Today and in the new Arms Control Association report, "Solving the Iranian Nuclear Puzzle," there is a range of creative, practical options.

Neither side can achieve everything it wants, but with creativity and compromise, each side can advance its core security and political interests.

Even if a nuclear agreement is concluded by the July 20 target date, the drama will not be over. There must be sufficient domestic support in Iran and in the United States to sustain implementation in the years ahead.

Inevitably, some will complain that the nuclear deal does not address human rights concerns, eliminate Iran's ballistic missile program, or put an end to Iranian support for terrorism. No, it will not, but that is not the goal of these negotiations.

Some may say the deal falls short of their expectations for limiting Iran's nuclear potential in one area or another. Any agreement that is struck between the P5+1 and Iran should not be evaluated on the basis of any single feature. Instead, it should be judged on its overall impact on reducing Iran's nuclear capacity and improving capabilities to detect any ongoing or future Iranian weapons program.

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Some will argue that, with additional, tougher sanctions, Iran could be coerced to limit its nuclear program even further. Such thinking is naïve and dangerous. Although the nuclear talks may be extended beyond the July 20 target date to resolve remaining issues, efforts to coerce Iranian leaders to make further concessions will likely backfire.

In the final analysis, serious policymakers in Washington and other capitals must consider whether their country is better off with a comprehensive nuclear agreement than without one. They must consider the results of failing to reach a comprehensive nuclear agreement:

- There would be no constraints on Iran's enrichment capacity. Iran could resume enriching uranium to higher levels and increase its stockpiles of enriched uranium. The time required for Iran to produce enough material for nuclear weapons would decrease.
- Inspections of Iranian facilities would likely continue, but would not be expanded to cover undeclared sites and activities, which would be the most likely pathway to build nuclear weapons if Iran chose to do so.
- Sanctions would remain in effect, and some might be strengthened. Sanctions alone, however, cannot halt Iran's nuclear progress. Eventually, the willingness of international allies to help implement those sanctions could erode.

Although Iran would still have to overcome significant hurdles to try to build nuclear weapons, such an effort would likely increase the possibility over time of a military confrontation. Yet, even Israeli leaders know that military strikes are not a solution. Such an attack would only delay, not destroy, Iran's nuclear program and, at worst, would lead to a wider conflict that could push Iran to openly pursue nuclear weapons. Israel would be far less secure.

Some say that "no deal is better than a bad deal." But it is clear that a good deal is better than no deal, and such a deal is within reach. Those who seek to block an effective agreement have a responsibility to present a viable alternative or take responsibility for its rejection.

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