

A Good Deal in the Making

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After extending talks on Iran's nuclear program beyond the original July 20 target date, Iran and six world powers are closing in on a long-term, verifiable, comprehensive deal. Such an agreement would block Iran's potential uranium and plutonium paths to nuclear weapons, removing a major threat to international security for many years to come.



Iran and the six-country group—known as the P5+1 because it comprises the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany—have worked out solutions on several key issues, including some that appeared to be intractable just a year ago. They agree in principle that the design of Iran's Arak heavy-water reactor project can and should be modified to drastically cut its output of weapons-grade plutonium and that Iran shall not build a reprocessing facility to separate that material from spent reactor fuel.

Iran is amenable to implementing and ratifying measures that would strengthen International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection authority. With the option of short-notice inspections of undeclared sites under the terms of an additional protocol to its safeguards agreement and with regular inspections of Iranian centrifuge workshops, the international community would have the capabilities necessary to promptly detect and disrupt an effort to pursue nuclear weapons in the future, even through a potential clandestine program.

Both sides understand that the ongoing IAEA investigation of past Iranian activities with possible military dimensions will continue after a comprehensive nuclear agreement is reached. At the same time, it is clear that key sanctions, including UN Security Council measures tied to the issue, will not be removed until and unless the investigation is resolved.

The members of the P5+1 agree that the goal is not to extract an admission from Iranian officials

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that their country engaged in nuclear weapons-related work in the past, but to ensure that the IAEA has sufficient information to determine that no such efforts are taking place now or in the future.

On uranium enrichment, the two sides agree that Iran should limit its enrichment of uranium to normal reactor-grade levels: 5 percent or less of fissionable uranium-235. They agree that Iran's underground Fordow enrichment plant need not be closed, as the P5+1 originally demanded, but shall be limited to a research-only role.

But as the negotiators have stressed, "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." With less than a month before their current Nov. 24 deadline, the two sides still need to hammer out technical understandings and make important decisions on at least two major issues in order to get to "yes."

Until recently, Iran has sought to maintain its current number of operating centrifuges—approximately 10,200—with the option to increase its uranium-enrichment capacity over time to provide fuel for potential new power reactors. The United States and its P5+1 negotiating partners want Iran to cut the current number of operating centrifuges for several years and to disable machines that are installed but not yet operating.

Given Iran's past actions, suspicion over its nuclear intentions is justified, particularly when its uranium-enrichment capacity exceeds its needs on the ground. Iran should be willing to accept a reduction in its enrichment capacity for a period of several years. This capacity could be allowed to expand in the future if Iran's needs for enriched uranium increase.

Reducing Iran's current enrichment capacity by half, combined with a significant reduction in the size of the country's enriched-uranium stocks or removal of those stocks to a third country, would increase the time it would take Iran to produce enough weapons-grade enriched-uranium gas for one nuclear weapon to nine to 12 months or more. That is more than enough time to detect and disrupt any effort to develop nuclear weapons.

In exchange for a significant reduction in Iran's uranium-enrichment capacity, the P5+1 will likely need to agree to allow limited research and development on more-advanced centrifuges. It is unrealistic to expect Iran to agree to a deal that limits it to using only first-generation centrifuges, which are inefficient and unreliable. The agreement can and should put in place verifiable restrictions that block Iran from manufacturing advanced centrifuges for production-scale enrichment for the duration of the comprehensive agreement.

Iran's current practical needs for enrichment are limited, but to assure Tehran that its needs can be met for the duration of an agreement, the P5+1 may also offer nuclear fuel-supply guarantees, including the shipment of several years' worth of fuel for Iran's one operating light-water power reactor, at Bushehr.

To enhance Iran's incentive to meet its nonproliferation obligations under the agreement, the two sides agree that the P5+1 will phase out and later lift nuclear-related sanctions as Iran meets its nonproliferation obligations and the IAEA investigation of Iran's nuclear program is concluded.

Policymakers in Washington and Tehran need to recognize a good deal when they see one. An effective, verifiable, comprehensive P5+1 nuclear agreement with Iran is within reach. Such a deal is critical to guard against a nuclear-armed Iran and an escalation of tensions in the Middle East, and it is the only way Iran can obtain relief from further international isolation and sanctions.

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