



## The US and Iran: Pre-Negotiation Maneuvering

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The United States and Iran are trading diplomatic fire, with each side demanding conditions for direct negotiations to discuss Iran's nuclear crisis. Neither side seems willing to budge on these demands, which raises the possibility that Iran will continue its drive to the bomb, leaving Obama with no other choice but to take military action.

The United States and Iran are exchanging tough messages on possible negotiations towards a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear weapons crisis. Both sides are presenting conditions for direct negotiations, which would be the first of their kind. In international relations theory this phenomenon is called "pre-negotiation." During this phase the sides calculate the benefits and drawbacks of the negotiating process itself and of a possible agreement. They present tough opening positions which they know the other side can't accept, and they attempt to obtain concessions from the other side just for agreeing to negotiate. This has been the negotiating style of both the Palestinians and the Iranians. It seems that the West in general and the United States in particular don't know how to effectively handle this style.

During a February 2013 international security conference in Munich, American Vice President Joe Biden said that there "is still time...[and] space for diplomacy backed by pressure to succeed. The ball is in the government of Iran's court." He added that the discussions would be held on condition of a "real and tangible" Iranian offer. Biden hinted that the atmosphere surrounding previous negotiations was not serious, because Iran was not ready to make a single compromise; its sole purpose was to buy time and advance its drive to the nuclear bomb in the interim. His message was clear: the United States will not agree to such negotiations, and will not remove

sanctions merely in exchange for Iran's entrance into deliberations. In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama called upon Iranian leaders to "recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution, because a coalition stands united in demanding that they meet their obligations." He concluded that the United States "will do what is necessary to prevent [Iran] from getting a nuclear weapon."

The Iranian reply was immediate. The two Iranian leaders – the spiritual and more significant leader, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; and the political leader, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – responded negatively and conditionally to Biden's invitation. We are ready for negotiations, they said, but only if the United States and the West announce support for Iran's right to a nuclear program, and on condition that the heavy sanctions against Iran are removed. It is obvious that the United States can't accept these demands, because the sanctions' removal would eliminate any chance, remote as they are, to stop the Iranian nuclear weapons program. The sanctions and the heavy damage they have inflicted on the Iranian economy pushed the Iranian leaders to seek negotiations, and suspending them now will eliminate any incentive they may have to compromise.

It is very possible that the tough stance of the Iranian leadership stems from its perception of the new senior appointments of the Obama Administration in foreign and national security affairs: John Kerry as Secretary of State and Chuck Hagel as the nominated Secretary of Defense. Both men are veterans of the Vietnam War and are almost fundamentally opposed to using any type of force to bring results. In the past, Hagel even opposed sanctions and claimed that it is impossible to halt the Iranian nuclear program. In his Senate testimony he also made an embarrassing statement by characterizing the Iranian regime as "legitimate." The Iranian leaders interpreted these appointments, as well as Obama's and Biden's invitation to open talks, as signs of weakness to be exploited for advancing their nuclear weapons program and for setting tough conditions for negotiations. The Iranian leaders have also closely observed the North Korean defiance of the United States and the Western pressure to stop the testing of nuclear weapons and long range missiles, and could have concluded that the US warnings and intimidations are not credible and ineffective.

The current stalemate threatens to cripple Obama's Iranian strategy. He planned heavy sanctions that he hoped would soften the Iranian position and bring them to negotiations and direct discussions with a good chance to stop the bomb. It is apparent that the goals of the two sides contradict each other: America wants Iran to stop enriching its uranium, while Iran wants to end the sanctions. The Iranians know how to conduct negotiations much better than

the Americans; they have thousands of years of experience in bazaar-like bargaining. Thus, if the United States and Iran reach an agreement to begin direct negotiations, the ultimate results may be favorable to the Iranians. The American desire to avoid the military option almost at any cost may produce a vague agreement which will still enable Iran to clandestinely continue developing nuclear weapons. If no direct negotiations are held, or if they are held but fail to stop Iran from continuing to develop nuclear weapons, and if Obama stands by his commitments to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb – the Administration may have no choice but to use military force.

The diplomatic fire that both sides have recently exchanged does not close the door on talks. Pre-negotiations will continue in public channels, and possibly even in secret ones. During Obama's upcoming visit to Israel he will have to clarify what he expects from direct negotiations with Iran, and what he plans to do should the sanctions and diplomacy fail to stop the Iranian bomb.

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