



Between a Hollow Success and a Legacy of Failure

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the West's nuclear negotiations with Iran head toward additional extensions, it is likely that future negotiations will focus on the concessions Iran seeks to secure. Moreover, the U.S. will probably come under pressure to step aside as the leader of the diplomatic efforts against nuclear Iran.

Presumptions about the nuclear negotiations with Iran were wrong. It was assumed that at the very last moment, the Iranians would offer a small gesture to ensure that the agreement would be signed. It was thought that, much like the traditional bazaar, the Iranian buyer would eventually agree to pay just a little more to see the deal through – in this case, so that Tehran could embark on the long road toward nuclear weapons.

But this assumption was wrong. The Iranians are feeling far more emboldened than previously thought. They have come to believe the six world powers – the U.S., Russia, China, the U.K., France, and Germany – are more eager to ink an agreement than they are, and therefore Iran is unwilling to budge so much as one inch more, despite the considerable incentives offered by the West.

Extending the talks, it seems, was in everyone's interest.

Iran knows that as long as the negotiations continue it need not worry about a military strike or any new economic sanctions. It also knows that the longer the

talks drag out, the better the offer it will be able to secure. This is how things have always been in the history of Iran's negotiations with the West. The current talks began with an offer allowing the Iranians to operate 500 centrifuges, and now that offer stands at 4,500 centrifuges. The Iranians currently have 9,000 active centrifuges and an additional 10,000 non-active centrifuges.

Tehran, it seems, is still dissatisfied with its achievements. The Iranians want to be able to pursue nuclear weapons development more quickly, without the risk of severe consequences. The odds of the Iranians relenting on their demands without graver sanctions and a serious military threat are slim. Unfortunately, the odds of the six powers compromising further, on other significant issues, are much greater.

Iran has been able to carve a significant advantage in the negotiations so far. This stems from two major mistakes made by the West.

Iran knows that for the U.S., which is heading the talks, failure is not an option, as it would exponentially increase the chances of a military operation. The Americans would do anything to avoid a strike, and they have pushed themselves into a corner with their own statement on the matter.

The U.S. has created a situation by which a deal – any deal – is the West's only exit strategy. Anyone touting a potential agreement with the Islamic republic as "one of the biggest achievements ever noted by American foreign policy," cannot afford to have the talks fail.

In addition, alleviating the sanctions imposed on Iran has released the pressure off it. In the past, the Iranian public had dreaded the steady economic decline, but that is no longer the case, as evident from the Iranian currency's recovery. The Iranian public, which has become accustomed to hardship, no longer frets over sanctions, and neither does the regime.

Moreover, the Iranians feel they have an advantage as a result of other developments in the regional theater: Iranian-backed Shiite forces in Yemen have

seized control of Sanaa, the U.S. has so far failed to quash the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, and calls to involve Iran in the fight are growing louder.

Despite denials, the fact that Iran's assistance is needed on the matter affords it an advantage. Global politics has indicated that when a country's assistance is required in one area, compensation is given in another area.

Extending the negotiations is far more convenient for Israel, at this time at least, than having the West reach a bad agreement with Iran, but in the absence of further sanctions and without keeping a military option on the table, any agreement cobbled together would be no better than the current draft.

Chances are that any changes made would favor Iran's position. It seems unlikely Russia or China would post further demands. Consequently, future negotiations are likely to focus on any other concessions Iran seeks to secure. If anything, the U.S. will come under pressure to step aside as leader of the diplomatic efforts.

There are two unknowns when it comes to the U.S., which makes it harder to predict the outcome of the negotiations. The first is U.S. President Barack Obama's tenacity: Once all concessions to Iran have been exhausted, would he rather do whatever it takes to reach a deal he could tout as a success, hollow as it may be, or, now that his presidential legacy has become his main focus, would he rather stand his ground, so as not to be the one remembered as the leader who capitulated to Iran? The second unknown concerns Congress. What will Congress, now controlled by the Republicans, do if any further concessions are offered to Iran?

The conflict in Washington has to do with substance – that is, how much pressure should be applied to Iran, what would a "bad deal" include, and what are the threshold conditions that could facilitate a deal. But it also has to do with domestic politics, meaning the president's authority over Congress – a tale as old as time in American politics, which takes center stage whenever a president is facing an adversarial Congress.

There are many among the Democrats who adamantly oppose any concessions to Iran, but they cannot overlook the domestic aspects of the debate, which naturally make it difficult for them to side with their rivals.

The White House understands the political sensitivities in the domestic arena, but it is also wary of imposing new sanctions on Iran, fearing it would derail talks and make the U.S. appear to be at fault, which is why it will do everything it can to prevent them.

Extending nuclear talks again next summer, after eighteen months of negotiations, would be difficult. As such, the events of the next few months are critical for nuclear talks.

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