

Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran (Part II)

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Hearing on Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran (Part II)

After nearly two years of intense diplomacy, the Obama administration is finally concluding an agreement that leaves Iran as a threshold nuclear state. In the coming weeks, there will be ample debate about the nature of the agreement, its verification regime, and its enforcement mechanism. As critical as all these elements may be, there are two overarching concessions that Washington made in 2013 that conditioned all its subsequent compromises. A more robust agreement would require reclaiming those two principles.

Practical Needs: In 2009, the Obama administration wrestled with the question of what type of civilian nuclear program Iran is entitled to. After much thoughtful deliberation, the administration settled on the notion of practical needs as determining the scope of Iran's atomic infrastructure. In the simplest terms, uranium is enriched to make fuel rods that then power reactors. Given the fact that Iran does not have a reliable capacity to make fuel rods or reactors, it was decided it should only have a very modest enrichment program.

It is precisely this important principle that the Obama administration abandoned in 2013 for the sake of a one-year breakout timeline. Suddenly, Iran could sustain its vast enrichment capacity so long as its breakout potential was delayed by one year. Even this one-year breakout period is not static and will be impacted by Iran's advancing technologies. As President Obama conceded recently, "What is a more relevant fear would

be that in year 13, 14, 15, they have advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that point the breakout times would have shrunk almost down to zero.” It is important to note that a zero-breakout period means that Iran’s surge to the bomb would be undetectable.

Trust and Confidence of the International Community: The second principle that was abandoned during the process of negotiations is the point at which Iran can rejoin the NPT community. As a signatory of the NPT, Iran does have certain rights and privileges. However, given its history of concealment and fraud, there has to be a balance between its rights and its obligations. The position of the United States was that once Iran convinced the international community that its nuclear program was strictly for peaceful purposes, only then could it expand its capacity. For that to happen, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had to certify that it is satisfied with Iran’s compliance record and the United Nations Security Council had to vote to allow Iran to rejoin the NPT community. This was indeed a high bar.

Once more, the Obama administration jettisoned this sensible precaution for the sake of a sunset clause. Under the impending agreement, after the expiration of the sunset clause, Iran has the right to build up its nuclear program to whatever size it wishes. In essence, Iran can become like Japan. To say the least, the Islamic Republic is not similar to Japan. It is neither a democratic state nor one that respects the prevailing global norms.

During the process of negotiations, the Obama administration has discarded its own sensible prohibitions. Once the principles of national needs and the establishment of the trust and confidence of the international community were discarded, a range of unwise concessions became possible. Suddenly, Iran did not have to dismantle much of its enrichment infrastructure. The underground enrichment plant in Fordow and the heavy water plant in Arak did not have to close. And Iran’s development of advanced centrifuges did not have to permanently cease. In essence, the United States moved from stopping Iran’s nuclear activities to regulating their growth.

The Iran Nuclear Deal and the History of U.S. Non-Proliferation Policy

The impending agreement between United and Iran is truly a landmark accord, for it upends fifty years of U.S. non-proliferation policy. Although today remembered best for the Vietnam War and the Great Society, Lyndon Johnson was also the architect of contemporary U.S. strategy toward nuclear proliferation. Johnson may have erred in Vietnam, but the legacy he left behind on the issue of arms control is a worthy one. That legacy was sustained by both Republican and Democratic administrations until the advent of the Iran deal.

In October 1964, China detonated an atomic bomb, sending shock waves throughout the U.S. government. Suddenly it was not just selective Western nations that possessed the bomb but a revolutionary Asian power. Fears of nuclear knowhow proliferating from East Asia to Latin America gripped U.S. policymakers. Under the direction of Roswell Gilpatric, former deputy secretary of defense, U.S. policy toward the bomb was evaluated and assessed. A report by the Gilpatric committee established parameters of U.S. policy toward proliferation that would guide successive administrations for the next five decades.

In the wake of the committee’s recommendations—accepted after spirited debate—the U.S. took a firm line on access to sensitive nuclear technologies by both adversaries and allies. It sought to prevent all countries

from enriching uranium or reprocessing plutonium. Under the new strictures should, say, West Germany, Taiwan, or South Korea be tempted to pursue the technological precursors to the bomb, they would be risking their security ties to the United States. In short, it was in the 1960s that the United States became a proliferation hawk.

In 1968 President Johnson signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that was to regulate civilian nuclear programs. Peaceful nuclear energy has industrial uses, but the U.S. government position held that there was no need for states to enrich uranium to benefit from atomic power. It was U.S. policy that becoming a signatory of the NPT meant that a nation could use nuclear energy, but not necessarily develop certain technologies that could easily be converted for military purposes. The U.S. also went on to institute rigorous export controls and established the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which restricts nuclear commerce. The efforts of several U.S. administrations—Republican and Democratic—were among the reasons that more states did not build the bomb after China.

U.S. actions on non-proliferation strained relations with many allies, including the enterprising shah of Iran. It is a talking point of the Islamic Republic today that Washington looked the other way and even assisted the shah as he sought to develop a nuclear weapon capability. This claim has been accepted as a truism by many U.S. policymakers and analysts. But the historical record belies such assertions. The Ford and Carter administrations opposed the shah's quest for completion of the fuel cycle and refused to give him access to sensitive nuclear technologies. Washington insisted that the shah, then head of a regime considered a reliable U.S. ally, forgo the capacity to either enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium.

To be sure, there were failures along the way as India, Pakistan, and North Korea defied the United States and built their own bombs. But Washington did not facilitate their programs and, in each instance, tried to derail their efforts. The position of the United States remained that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty does not give any state the right to enrich and that the most suitable path to a civilian nuclear program is to forgo that option.

Today, by contrast, the U.S. appears poised to concede to an adversarial regime not only an enrichment capacity but also one that is likely to be industrialized after the expiration of a sunset clause. This would have been like Washington aiding the Soviets in constructing the bomb in the 1940s or helping China in the 1960s. There is no dispute between the Obama White House and its critics that Iran is a revolutionary regime seeking to expand its influence in the Middle East. Tehran's destabilizing regional activities come at the detriment of the United States and its allies. The baffling part of all this is that Washington is seeking to conclude an agreement that envisions this radical regime gaining access to a sophisticated nuclear infrastructure that will not permanently be limited to peaceful exploitation of atomic power.

The Islamic Republic and the Future of the Middle East in the Aftermath of the Nuclear Deal

More than any other nation, Iran has always perceived itself as the natural hegemon of its neighborhood. Iranians across generations are infused with a unique sense of their history, the splendor of their civilization, and the power of their celebrated empires. A perception of superiority over one's neighbors defines the core of the Persian cosmology. The empire shrank over the centuries, and the embrace of Persian culture faded with the arrival of the more alluring Western mores, but an exaggerated view of Iran has remained largely

intact. By dint of their history and the power of their civilization, Iranians believe that their nation should establish its regional predominance.

However, to ascribe Iran's foreign policy strictly to its sense of nationalism and historical aspirations is to ignore the doctrinal foundations of the theocratic regime. The Islamic revolution of 1979 left a permanent imprint on Iran's foreign policy orientation. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini bequeathed his successors an internationalist vision that divides the world between the oppressed and the oppressor. Such a view is consistent with Shia political traditions where a minority sect struggled under Sunni Arab rulers that were often repressive and harsh. Thus, the notion of tyranny and suffering has a powerful symbolic aspect as well as practical importance. Iran is not merely a nation seeking independence and autonomy within the prevailing order. The Islamic revolution was a struggle between good and evil, a battle waged for moral redemption and genuine emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of a profane and iniquitous West. Irrespective of the changing nature of its presidents, Iran will persist with its revolutionary and populist approach to regional politics.

For much of the past three decades, the Islamic Republic's inflammatory rhetoric and aggressive posture concealed the reality of its strategic loneliness. Iran is, after all, a Persian nation surrounded by Arab states were suspicious of its revolution and its proclaimed objectives. The Gulf sheikdoms arrayed themselves behind the American shield, Iraq sustained its animosity toward Iran long after the end of its war, and the incumbent Sunni republics maintained a steady belligerence. Iran nurtured its lethal Hezbollah protégé and aided Palestinian rejectionist groups, but appeared hemmed in by the wall of Arab hostility. All this changed when Iraq was reclaimed by the Shias and the Arab Spring shook the foundations of the Sunni order. Today, the guardians of the Islamic Republic see a unique opportunity to project their power in a region beset by unpredictable transitions.

For Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the Arab Spring means "a people have emerged who are not dependent on America." Whatever confidence-building measures his diplomats might be negotiating in Europe, the Supreme Leader insists that Iran is "challenging the influence of America in the region and it is extending its own influence." In Khamenei's depiction, America is a crestfallen imperial state hastily retreating from the region. Today, Tehran sees an America unable to impose a solution on a recalcitrant Middle East. Whatever compunctions Tehran may have had about American power greatly diminished with the spectacle over Syria where Washington's redlines were erased with the same carelessness that they were initially drawn.

The key actors defining Iran's regional policy are not its urbane diplomats mingling with their Western counterparts in Europe, but the Revolutionary Guards, particularly the famed Quds Brigade. For the commander of the Quds Brigade, General Qassim Soleimani, the struggle to evict America from the region began in Iraq. "After the fall of Saddam, there was talk by various individuals that they should manage Iraq, but with Iraq's religious leaders and Iran's influence, America could not reach that goal," proclaimed Soleimani. The struggle moved on and today "Syria is the frontline of resistance." For the hardliners, the Sunni states attempting to dislodge Assad is really a means of weakening Iran. The survival and success of the Assad dynasty is now a central element of Iran's foreign policy.

The question then becomes what impact the nuclear deal will have on Iran and its regional surge. How will the Islamic Republic spend the billions of dollars it would receive as a result of an accord. Proponents of a

deal insist that Iran will funnel much of this newfound wealth into its depleted economy. By their telling, even during dire economic times, Iran prioritized funding for its malign activities and thus does not need to steer new money in their direction. Such a curious justification overlooks how Iran's regional policies, and its internal dynamics, are undergoing momentous changes.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stands as one of the most successful Persian imperialists in the history of modern Iran. In the 1970s, at the height of his power, the shah did not enjoy a commanding influence in Iraq. Lebanon's factional politics continued to elude him, the Assad dynasty was no mere subsidiary of Iran, and the Persian Gulf emirates resisted his pretensions. Today, Khamenei has essential control of much of the Iraqi state, he is the most important external actor in Syria, and Hezbollah provides him with not just a means of manipulating Lebanon's politics, but also shock troops who can be deployed on various war fronts. In the Gulf, the United States' crumbling alliances offer Iran many tempting opportunities.

Proponents of the view that Iran will not become a more aggressive regional power in the aftermath of a deal ignore how the Middle East has evolved since the Arab awakenings of 2011. The post-colonial Arab state system that featured the dominant nations of Egypt and Iraq is no more. Egypt is too preoccupied with internal squabbles to offer regional leadership while Iraq is a fragmented nation ruled by a Shiite government ostracized from Sunni Arab councils. Iran has embarked on a dramatic new mission and is seeking to project its power into corners of the Middle East in ways that were never possible before. This is not traditional Iranian foreign policy with its sponsorship of terrorism and support for rejectionist groups targeting Israel; imperialism beckons the mullahs, but it is also economically burdensome. Without an arms control agreement and the financial rewards it will bring—from sanctions relief, the release of funds entrapped abroad, and new investments—Iran would find it difficult to subsidize this imperial surge.

Still, the claim that Iran will invest a portion of the economic spoils of a deal on domestic needs is not entirely wrong. President Hassan Rouhani belongs to the wing of Iranian politics that has long been attracted to the so-called China model, whereby a regime purchases domestic consent by providing a measure of economic opportunity to its stifled citizenry. Two years into Rouhani's tenure, his government stands as one of the most repressive in the post-revolutionary period. Many civil society activists languish in prison, media censorship has continued unabated, and the intelligence services remain abusive and unaccountable. The state cannot sustain such an oppressive order without ameliorating some of its constituents' misfortunes. It may come to pass that Iran, with its small, badly mismanaged economy, will not be able to emulate China's authoritarian model, especially since the Green Movement that enlivened Iran six years ago continues to cast a long shadow. But to have any hope of success in his aims, Rouhani needs an arms control agreement as much as Khamenei's Islamist imperialism.

The much-discussed terms of the impending agreement with Iran thus offer the theocracy all that it wants. The accord would concede a vast enrichment capacity, as well as accepting both a heavy water plant and a well-fortified underground enrichment facility that the United States once vowed to shutter. It would permit an elaborate research and development program and would likely rely on an inspection regime that falls short of indispensable "anytime, anywhere" access. In the meantime, the sanctions architecture will be diminished, and the notion of ever "snapping back" sanctions into place once they are lifted is delusional. And because the agreement itself would be term-limited, there would be no practical limits on Iran's nuclear ambitions upon its expiration.

However, as disturbing as all this may be, the most important legacy of the prospective agreement may not even lie in the nuclear realm. The massive financial gains from the deal would enable the Islamic Republic's imperial surge while allowing a repressive regime that was on the brink of collapse in 2009 to consolidate power. This would be no small achievement for Iran's emboldened rulers.