

Iran's last chance?

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The latest round of negotiations on Iran's nuclear program between Iran and the so-called "5+1" group (the United Nations Security Council's five permanent members – the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China – plus Germany) has now begun. Following more than a year of deadlock, after negotiations in January 2011 led nowhere, this dialogue is for many the last chance to find a peaceful solution to a nearly decade-long conflict (in which I participated closely from 2006 to 2009 as the West's main negotiator with Iran).

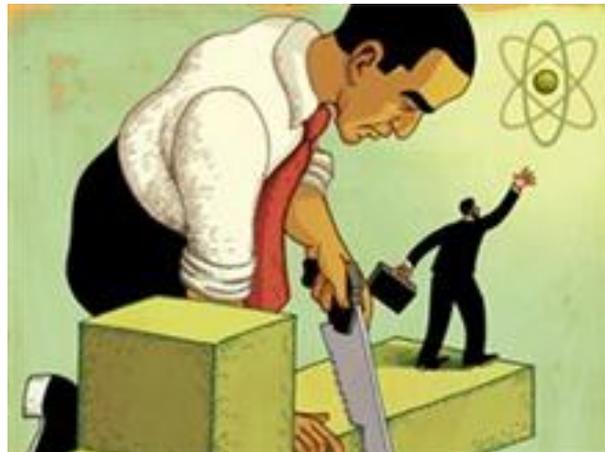


Illustration by Paul Lachine

The objective of the talks, chaired by the European Union's foreign-policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and Iran's chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, is still to persuade Iran to halt uranium enrichment and to comply with Security Council resolutions and its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But several factors heighten the current negotiations' strategic importance.

First, domestic economic and political conditions in Iran have changed markedly since the last round of talks. International pressure has mounted since the International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed last November that the country's nuclear program was advancing towards the production of nuclear arms, rather than electricity or medical isotopes, with new sanctions imposed on Iranian oil exports and on transactions with the Central Bank of Iran.

Although rising global energy prices have given Iran some respite in recent months, the sanctions have made themselves felt more than ever among Iranian consumers. The rial has lost 40% of its value since October (making imports less affordable), and financial transactions have become much more expensive and difficult for the government, businesses, and households alike.

Moreover, Iran's leadership is fragmented and weak. Relations between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continue to deteriorate, while tensions are growing within the Revolutionary Guard. It remains to be seen what impact these political developments will have on the negotiations.

Second, Iran's regional standing has been shaken by the wave of Arab revolts, especially in Syria – a decisive country, given its strategic relations with both Iran and Russia. Indeed, Syria is Iran's main ally in the Middle East, as well as being the only country outside of the former Soviet Union in which Russia has a military base. Russia's need to reconcile its role in these negotiations with its interests in Syria makes an already-complicated dialogue more difficult.

The strategy with respect to the Gulf's Sunni monarchies has also changed. Today, these countries are more at odds with both Iran and Syria than they have been for decades. Led by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, they have openly admitted the possibility of arming Syrian rebels in

order to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's oil reserves enable it to give crucial support to oil-export sanctions on Iran by offsetting the loss of global supply. China, with its growing energy dependency on the Gulf states, will have to weigh that factor carefully at the negotiating table. Along with Russia, China has backed Syria in the Security Council, and it was recently revealed that Iran helped Syria to defy international sanctions by providing a ship to transport oil from Syria to a state-owned company in China.

Third, Israel, already unhappy with the outcome of the previous round of negotiations, is becoming increasingly uneasy. With Iran's nuclear program advancing and political uncertainty looming over the region, Israel supports a military operation against Iran in 2012, before, in the words of Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, it crosses the "immunity zone," beyond which intervention would be futile.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking last month to the membership of AIPAC, the largest pro-Israel lobby in the US, emphasized the urgency of the situation. But the negotiations will be long, with many ups and downs, and, to add another layer of complexity, are taking place during an election year in the US, with the opposition Republican Party more closely aligned with Netanyahu's position.

Finally, US President Barack Obama knows that his reelection depends on avoiding mistakes in this matter. But how can a lengthy negotiation be carried out without seeming to benefit the party, which wants to gain more time? Political optics – that is, the management of public perceptions – will be a very important part of this negotiation.

For now, America is keeping a channel open for direct dialogue with Iran (as US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta warned Barak months ago). On the first day of the talks in Istanbul, Jalili accepted a US request for a bilateral meeting within the context of the negotiations, and all participants deemed the results so far to be a step in the right direction.

If we want to ensure that Iran never has a nuclear weapon, the only guarantee is to change its desire to possess one. And the best way to do that is still by negotiating, rather than by using force. No one has calculated the consequences of a war. Everyone has good reason to sit down and talk.

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