

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Iran: Decision Time in 2014

Without question, when it comes to President Obama's foreign policy legacy, his decision to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program will define his presidency. He assumes that the new president Hasan Rohani can be trusted and that he will break decades of duplicity, lying and manipulation on the part of Iran. It is risky at best, utterly foolish and stupid at worst. We will know in 2014. Several important thoughts on Iran, its nuclear program and President Obama:

- First, over the last 20 years, it has been the policy of the US government that it is unalterably opposed to Iran having any nuclear capacity whatsoever. The European Union, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and six United Nations Security Council resolutions have supported this position. There are very few international issues that have produced this amount of unity and consensus. But, for 35 years, Iran has been advocating what Henry Kissinger and George Shultz call "an anti-Western concept of world order, waging proxy wars against America and its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and beyond, and arming and training sectarian extremists throughout the Muslim world. During that time, Iran has denied unambiguous UN and IAEA demands and proceeded with a major nuclear effort, incompatible with any civilian purpose, and in violation of its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty in effect since 1970. If the ruling group in Iran is genuinely prepared to enter into cooperative relations with the United States and the rest of the world, the US should welcome and encourage that shift. But progress should be judged by a change of program, not of tone." At the heart of this entire issue is one basic set of facts: Iran has constructed a massive nuclear infrastructure and has amassed a stockpile of enriched uranium far out of proportion to any reasonable need for a civilian energy-production program, which it has said it is doing. As Kissinger and Shultz demonstrate, Iran has 19,000 centrifuges, more than seven tons of 3.5% to 5% enriched uranium, a smaller stock of 20%-enriched uranium, and a partially built heavy-water reactor that could soon produce plutonium—all in violation of IAEA and Security Council resolutions. Since 2003, the world community has been negotiating with Iran. What have been the results? "The record of this decade-plus negotiating effort combines steadily advancing Iranian nuclear capabilities with gradually receding international demands." Iran has rejected all proposals that would have rewarded their ending the program. In every instance, Iran has rejected all such proposals and, instead, has accelerated its nuclear efforts. It has periodically engaged in talks but has never "dismantled any aspect of its enrichment infrastructure or growing stockpile of fissile material. Six UN Security Council resolutions passed in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010 condemned Iran's defiance and imposed sanctions, demanding an unconditional halt to nuclear enrichment." We are now at one of those proverbial tipping points: The 24 November 2013 interim agreement is *the* critical test of whether Iran's inexorable progress toward military nuclear capability can be reversed. In exchange for about \$8 billion in sanctions relief, Iran has agreed to freeze for six months its existing nuclear program and stockpile, but it can still continue to enrich uranium. Any future progress on the heavy-water reactor and plutonium-reprocessing facility at the Arak facility are on "pause,"

though “it appears that ancillary work on the site will continue.” According to the interim agreement, daily inspections are required to verify Iran’s compliance. But the baseline has again changed. Previous UN and IAEA resolutions had demanded that Iran halt all activities related to uranium enrichment and plutonium production, and manifest unconditional compliance with IAEA inspections as a matter of right. Under this interim agreement, Iran actions that had been condemned as illegal and illegitimate are now the baseline and accepted!!! Logic and common sense would seem to indicate that the US has lost its edge in future negotiations. Iran has apparently substantiated before the world community its “right to enrich uranium” has been accepted by the world community. Further, future threats of use of force by the US will be met with significant skepticism. All verbal threats from the US have never been carried out. What does Iran really have to fear from the US?

- Second, assuming this interim agreement works (and that is a big if), what should the goals be for a permanent agreement? At bottom, Iran’s technical ability to construct a nuclear weapon must be “meaningfully curtailed” through a significant reduction in the number of centrifuges and a foreclosure of its “route toward a plutonium-production capability.” If the US and the world community are serious, Iran’s activity must be limited to a plausible civilian program subject to comprehensive monitoring according to the standards of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. “Any final deal must ensure the world’s ability to detect a move toward a nuclear breakout, lengthen the world’s time to react, and underscore its determination to do so. The preservation of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime and the avoidance of a Middle East nuclear-arms race hangs in the balance.” If Obama is serious about these negotiations with Iran, he must establish three clear tasks:
 1. Define a level of Iranian nuclear capacity limited to plausible civilian uses and then establish safeguards and benchmarks to guarantee that Iran never violates these.
 2. Leave open the possibility of a genuinely constructive relationship with Iran in the future.
 3. Design a Middle East policy that reflects a successful Iranian agreement or the possibility that it will not succeed. What will the US do then?

The bottom line is that Iran absolutely must dismantle and/or mothball a strategically significant portion of its nuclear infrastructure. If it’s unwilling to do so, any kind of agreement will be meaningless.

President Obama has made it clear that he seeks to disengage from the Middle East and focus more on Asia, especially China. The US has been the most important single factor in the Middle East in the last 50 years. It cannot completely disengage without a catastrophe occurring. His policies on Syria and Iran have accomplished something no other president has accomplished—he has brought Israel and Saudi Arabia together. Both fear a nuclear Iran and both fear the dismemberment of Syria, which is now occurring. With both Iran and Syria, Obama’s indecision and vacillation have been a disaster. Both now believe that Obama is going down a path that will be disastrous for their respective nations. What President Obama does in 2014 when it comes to Iran will not only define his presidency, it will either lead to greater stability and confidence in the Middle East, or it will produce a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. By this coming fall, we shall know! May God give wisdom, temerity and grace to our leaders.

See Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, “What a Final Iran Deal Must Do,” *Wall Street Journal* (3 December 2013).