

Bleak prospects for talks on Iran's nuclear program

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Talks due to start in Moscow next Monday between Iran and the P5+1 group—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—will mark a turning point in the protracted confrontation over Iran's nuclear program. If negotiations fail, as appears likely, tensions in the Persian Gulf will rapidly escalate with the imposition of harsh new sanctions on Tehran and the heightened threat of a US or Israeli military attack.

The Moscow meeting is the third round of talks that began in Istanbul during April and continued in Baghdad during May. Even to describe these meetings as negotiations is something of a misnomer. European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton put what amounted to a US ultimatum to Iran: end its production of 20 percent-enriched uranium, ship its stockpile of such uranium overseas and shut down its Fordow enrichment plant. In return, Iran was offered virtually nothing—spare parts for its commercial aircraft and fuel plates for its research reactor in Tehran.

Furthermore, the US previously made clear that these “confidence building” measures on Tehran's part were just a first instalment. The Obama administration has refused to recognise Iran's right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, including to 3.5 to 5 percent for its power reactor. At the same time, neither the US nor the EU offered to delay sanctions, due to start next month, which will sharply reduce the oil exports on which the Iranian economy heavily depends. The only agreement salvaged from the talks in Baghdad was to hold a further round.

A report released yesterday by the Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG),

described the bargaining position of the P5+1 as “deliberately ungenerous—some would say unrealistic”—in other words, designed to be rejected. The US administration has already made it plain that Iranian negotiators will face the same demands next week. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared last week that Tehran had to “take concrete steps”—i.e., to accede to Washington's demands.

Former Iranian nuclear negotiator Hossein Mousavian, currently a visiting scholar in the US, told Reuters that the US was demanding “diamonds for peanuts,” adding: “Therefore this is not something great to offer Iran.” If the major powers were not prepared to gradually remove sanctions and recognise Iran's right to enrich uranium, he said, “I'm afraid the Moscow talks also would fail.” Mousavian was a senior member of Iran's negotiating team in 2003-05, under the so-called reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

The current chief negotiator Saeed Jalili told the Iranian parliament on Wednesday that Tehran would not compromise on its right to enrich uranium. “There is no prohibition under the NPT over any kind of enrichment for peaceful purposes,” he said. Jalili explained that Iran had threatened to pull out of the talks, before being told by EU foreign policy chief Ashton that Iran's five-point plan would also be discussed in Moscow.

The Moscow talks will take place amid a steady drum beat of threats from Washington and inflated media stories about the danger of an Iranian nuclear weapon. Articles often declare that Iran has enough enriched uranium to build four or five bombs, omitting to add that it has no uranium enriched to 90 percent—the level

required to build a weapon. Others claim that 20 percent enriched uranium is “close to bomb grade,” ignoring the technical difficulties involved in going from 20 to 90 percent and the fact that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regularly inspects all Iranian nuclear facilities.

An article entitled “Obama’s drift toward war with Iran” published in the *Atlantic* on Thursday noted: “This [20 percent enriched] uranium is a ways from the 90 percent-enriched uranium that is weapons grade—and, anyway, having weapons-grade material is a ways from having a weapon; even if Iran launched a headlong effort to get a bomb, and started further enriching the 20-percent enriched uranium, a deliverable weapon would still be at least two years away, according to standard estimates.”

The Iranian regime has repeatedly declared that it has no plan to build a nuclear bomb. If Tehran ever had projects related to building nuclear weapons, the assessment of US intelligence agencies is that they were shut down by 2003—nearly a decade ago.

The *Atlantic* pointed to the danger of US conflict with Iran, declaring: “The most undercovered story in Washington is how President Obama, under the influence of election-year politics, is letting America drift toward war with Iran. This story is the unseen but ominous backdrop to next week’s Moscow round of negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program.”

Politically sympathetic to Obama, the article blamed the Republicans and also the Israeli government for putting pressure on his administration to pursue a hard-line in talks with Iran and make no significant concessions. The Obama administration, however, has relentlessly escalated tensions with Iran since coming to office, repeating the mantra that “all options”—that is, including military attack—are on table.

The US has all along exploited Iran’s nuclear programs as a convenient pretext for mounting an aggressive campaign designed to fashion a regime in Tehran more aligned to the interests of American imperialism. Strategically situated between the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia, Iran has long

between viewed by American strategists as crucial to US dominance over these regions.

The ICG report drew a bleak conclusion about next week’s meeting: “As usual, it is a far safer bet to wager on breakdown than on breakthrough. But there is a real cost to declaring failure. And that cost inevitably rises with each attempted (and failed) diplomatic foray, as prospects for a deal narrow and as the temptation of a risky, confrontational alternative grows.”

This “risky confrontational alternative” will rapidly accelerate the slide toward a dangerous new US-led war against Iran.



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