

Iran nuclear talks approaching make-or-break deadline

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With the deadline for a final agreement with Iran fast approaching, the foreign ministers of the P-6—the US, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China—are congregating in Vienna for what are being described as make-or-break talks with their Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif.

After failing to meet an earlier June 30 deadline, Iran and the P-6 agreed to extend through this Tuesday their negotiations on finalizing a “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” to “normalize” Iran’s civil nuclear program.

This second deadline is generally considered much firmer than the first. Under legislation passed with the backing of the Obama administration, the US Congress will have 30 days to consider a nuclear agreement with Iran if it is submitted by Thursday, July 9. After that, the review period doubles to sixty days and should no agreement be in place by September, Congress can punish Iran with still harsher economic sanctions.

US Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters late Sunday afternoon “genuine progress” had been made in the Vienna talks, but warned they could still collapse. The US, he vowed, would not hesitate to walk away from the negotiating table should Iran balk at making “hard choices ... quickly.” He added, “We are not going to shave anywhere in the margins just to get to an agreement.”

Speaking for Iran’s negotiating team, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said, “four or five” major differences remain with the US and its European allies. He reiterated Iran’s strenuous opposition to any agreement that on coming into force did not immediately lift the most significant economic sanctions.

In recent days, the US press has been full of reports touting the Pentagon’s new massive ordnance penetrator, a megabomb specifically designed to penetrate and destroy underground Iranian nuclear facilities. At a press conference Thursday, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, rebuffed suggestions that a “surgical” US strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities couldn’t permanently eliminate Iran’s nuclear program. He made

clear that the Pentagon has multiple and “layered” war plans. The military option, said Dempsey, “isn’t used once and set aside. It remains in place. ... We will always have military options, and a massive ordnance penetrator is one of them.”

Dempsey’s remarks underscore that the Vienna negotiations are taking place under the shadow of US war threats. Already, the US and its European allies have roiled Iran’s economy with sanctions that have halved its oil imports since 2011, hobbled its trade by freezing it out of the world financial system, and blocked Tehran from accessing up to \$150 billion in central bank assets and oil-sale proceeds.

The negotiations have also been the occasion for yet another display of brazen hypocrisy on the part of the US political establishment and corporate media. While the US violates international law at will—including invading Iran’s neighbor, Iraq, just over a decade ago, on trumped-up claims of weapons of mass destruction—the US politicians lecture Tehran for its ostensible violations of international law.

And while the US press obediently pumps out propaganda about the potential threat from a nuclear Iran, it remains silent about Israel’s nuclear arsenal, and, even more significantly, about the Pentagon’s trillion-dollar nuclear-weapons modernization program and its war plans. These routinely envisage the use of nuclear weapons, including, as recently revealed, a first-strike against Russian missile sites.

The immediate US aim in the nuclear negotiations is to secure an agreement that forces Tehran to dismantle and roll back key elements of its civilian nuclear program, while providing Washington with an array of mechanisms to continue to bully and threaten Iran. These mechanisms include: the staggered withdrawal of economic sanctions; their “automatic snapback” should the US and its European Union allies claim Tehran has violated the agreement; an unprecedentedly intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency inspections regime; and an Iranian obligation to disprove Israeli and CIA allegations its nuclear program once had a military dimension.

But from the standpoint of US imperialism, the negotiations in Vienna are about much more than the nuclear issue or even Iranian-US relations.

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution toppled the bloody dictatorship of the US-backed Shah, Washington has pursued a policy of confrontation with the rulers of the Islamic Republic. Over the course of the past decade, US aggression against Iran reached a qualitative new stage. In 2003 and then again in 2007 George W. Bush ordered the Pentagon to activate its plans for a “regime change” war against Tehran. Under Barack Obama, Washington has mounted cyber-warfare against Iran in conjunction with Israel and implemented with its European allies the most draconian economic sanctions ever imposed on a country outside of war.

Obama’s turn, since the fall of 2013, toward a “diplomatic solution” with Tehran has been based on a series of strategic calculations, many of them bound up with the military-strategic offensive US imperialism is mounting against Russia and China.

For starters, the US has relied on Beijing’s and Moscow’s support in enacting and enforcing the UN sanctions that underpin the international legitimacy of the much harsher US-EU sanctions. Under conditions where the US is openly threatening Russia and China, Washington’s ability to obtain their continued cooperation in pressuring Iran is very much in doubt.

Second, Washington calculates that over time it can “turn” Iran, that the Iranian bourgeoisie can be harnessed to serving US’s strategic interests in the Middle East and Eurasia. Hassan Rouhani, Iran’s president since August 2013, is a protégé of former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who for decades led the faction of Iran’s clerical-bourgeois ruling elite that championed reconciliation with Washington. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has himself repeatedly endorsed overtures to the US.

At the very least, a US diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran would forestall Iran becoming further aligned with Russia and China, which have themselves drawn together in response to the 2014 US-orchestrated coup in the Ukraine, the growing US-NATO military presence in Eastern Europe, and Washington’s anti-China provocations in the South China Sea. Russia is already Iran’s most important supplier of weapons and China its largest economic partner.

Obama also hopes to secure Iranian cooperation in stabilizing the Middle East. To a limited degree this is already happening through tacit US-Iranian collaboration against ISIS in Iraq. But all sections of the US ruling elite, including Obama and his administration, are wary of Iran’s influence in Iraq and committed to overthrowing the Iranian-supported Assad regime in Syria.

US and European business interests are also salivating at the prospect of gaining access to Iran’s oil and natural gas reserves respectively, the world’s fourth and second largest. Tehran, for its part, has been trying to whet western appetites with promises of a new “competitive” energy royalty and concession regime.

“All the Western countries” are eager to get into Iran a “top western diplomat” told Agence France-Presse recently. “They are jostling as if they’re at the start of a marathon, and are keeping a close eye on one another.”

Much of the US political and military-strategic establishment, including a sizeable section of Obama’s own Democratic Party, are highly critical of Obama’s Iran policy

They won’t be satisfied with anything short of a demonstrable Iranian capitulation to US interests across the Middle East, if not outright regime change in Tehran. They are also concerned about the adamant opposition of Israel and Saudi Arabia, which view a US-Iranian rapprochement as threatening their position as the region’s principal US-client regimes.

The Iranian bourgeoisie, for its part, is desperate for a deal with Washington. The sanctions have devastated Iran’s economy, further exacerbating deep class cleavages rooted in gross social inequality and rampant poverty, and stoking ruling class fears of mass social unrest.

In a video message Friday, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif suggested that the conclusion of a nuclear deal could open the way to strategic cooperation between Tehran and Washington, beginning with a common response to ISIS. “We are ready,” said Zarif, “to strike a balanced and good deal, and open new horizons to address important, common challenges.”

“The menace we’re facing,” continued Zarif, “is embodied by the hooded men who are ravaging the cradle of civilization. To deal with this new challenge new approaches are badly needed.”



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