

Iran talks continue into the weekend

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Iran and the P-6—the US, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China—have again extended the deadline for reaching a comprehensive final agreement on “normalizing” Iran’s civil nuclear program. The new deadline is Monday July 13.

While both Tehran and Washington continue to insist an agreement is within reach, there are increasing signs the talks could fail. US President Barack Obama is reported to have told a group of Democratic Senators last Tuesday evening that he estimated the chances of a final agreement at less than 50-50. On Thursday, the thirteenth consecutive day of high-level talks in Vienna, US Secretary of State John Kerry warned that if Tehran doesn’t soon “make tough decisions ... we are absolutely prepared to call an end to this process.”

As a consequence of the failure to meet the previous, Thursday, July 9 deadline, the US Congress will now have 60 days, rather than 30, to review and vote on any final agreement. The Obama administration had much preferred the shorter time-frame, because it would have made it more difficult to mobilize opposition within the US political and military-security establishment, which remains sharply divided over Obama’s “diplomatic turn” toward Tehran.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif complained Friday that the US and its European allies have hardened their bargaining stance in the last two days. “Unfortunately we have seen changes in position and excessive demands,” said Zarif. He also complained that the US, Britain, France, and Germany have adopted different “red lines.”

The previous evening an unnamed senior Iranian negotiator had told western media that the US has backtracked on recent bargaining commitments. “We’ve been seeing changes of positions, particularly since last night,” he claimed, then added, “It can go either way: It can be a small glitch ... or a major setback.”

The Iranian diplomat noted that the hardening of the US position had followed a 90-minute video-conference Obama held Wednesday evening with Kerry and the rest of the US negotiating team in Vienna.

Under the “framework agreement” Iran accepted at Lausanne, Switzerland on April 2, Tehran made sweeping concessions to US imperialism. These included agreeing to either dismantle or roll back and cap key parts of its civil nuclear program for 10 years, and in some cases 15, and to submit to the most intrusive International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection regime ever devised.

The talks on translating this framework into a final “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” on Iran’s nuclear program have stalled over differences about when and to what extent the punishing sanctions against Iran will be lifted, under what conditions IAEA inspectors will have access to Iranian military sites, and demands for an open-ended investigation into Iran’s previous nuclear research, with Tehran legally obligated to “come clean” on all the “possible military dimensions” of its nuclear program.

The Obama administration’s aim is to frame an agreement that will provide Washington with maximum leverage over Iran and maximum strategic flexibility.

It wants to be able to continue to probe whether Iran’s bourgeois-clerical regime can be harnessed to serving US strategic interests in the Middle East and across Eurasia through a combination of threats and inducements, while retaining the option of quickly pivoting to confrontation and a potential war for regime-change.

Towards this end, Washington is adamant that “sanctions relief” should be staggered. This refers to removal of the US-European Union economic sanctions that have halved Iran’s oil exports since 2011, crippled its trade, and denied it access to well-over a \$100

billion in foreign reserves and oil receipts.

The US and its EU allies also want to be able to automatically “snap back” these sanctions, and those imposed by the UN Security Council, should they deem Tehran insufficiently pliant.

The stipulation that Iran give a “full accounting” of its past nuclear work is aimed at providing Washington with a means to continuously pressure and threaten Iran, akin to the US demand that Saddam Hussein prove Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction.

In recent days, the US insistence on retaining the UN embargos on the sale of arms to Iran or any technology that could potentially assist Iran’s ballistic-missile program has become a major issue at the talks. It has also caused a significant rift in the P-6, with Russia publicly and China via diplomatic channels opposing the stance taken by Washington and its EU partners.

On Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for sanctions against Iran to be lifted “as soon as possible,” lending added force to repeated statements from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. At a Thursday press conference, Lavrov said Russia supports “the choices that Iran’s negotiators make” in pressing for an end to all sanctions. “Iran is a consistent supporter of the struggle against ISIS and lifting the arms embargo would help Iran to advance its efficiency in fighting terrorism,” he said.

Also on Thursday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met with Putin on the sidelines of the BRICs summit, which was being held in the Russian city of Ufa. Following that meeting, Rouhani praised Russia and specifically Lavrov for their role in the nuclear talks.

The emergence of a rift between the western powers and Russian and China is hardly surprising, but nonetheless significant.

One of the reasons the Obama administration has been pressing for a deal with Tehran is that it recognizes it cannot long pursue confrontation with Russia and China while relying on their support to uphold the sanctions against Iran.

Another—even more important consideration—is that Obama and Kerry want to prevent Iran from drawing closer to Moscow and Beijing, which, in response to the military-strategic offensive that the US is mounting against them, have become much more tightly allied over the past 18 months.

The US and its European allies are adamant that both

the arms and ballistic missile technology embargos remain in place under any final nuclear agreement and be reaffirmed in the new UN Security Council resolution that is to authorize it. “There will be an ongoing restriction on arms, just like there will be ongoing restrictions regarding missiles,” said one administration official.

The head of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, for his part, bluntly told a congressional hearing last Tuesday that “under no circumstances should we relieve pressure on Iran relative to ballistic missile capabilities and arms trafficking.”

The US determination to maintain the arms embargo against Iran is tied to its continuing plans—nuclear deal or not—for expanding military intervention in the Middle East, including overthrowing Syria’s government, a close ally of Tehran, and waging war against Iran itself, so as to ensure continued US domination of the world’s most important oil-exporting region.

Only last week, Dempsey had boasted about the US military’s ability to permanently eliminate Iran’s nuclear program and otherwise subjugate it. He noted that the Pentagon has multiple and “layered” war plans and options when it comes to Iran, with the new mega bomb specifically developed to eliminate underground Iran’s nuclear facilities, the massive ordnance penetrator, just “one of them.”



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