

Why the Iran Nuclear Deal Will Not Transform USA-Iran Relations

Written by Monish Tourangbam and Ramu C.M.

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MONISH TOURANGBAM AND RAMU C.M., AUG 28 2015

The nuclear deal that the United States has negotiated with Iran has become the buzz of diplomatic airwaves, with a number of countries debating how it would impact their own relations with the United States or Iran. For more than a decade, the nuclear standoff between the US and Iran has captured the attention of academia, think-tanks and all forms of media around the world. The relationship that had fractured since the 1979 Islamic Revolution was taken further downhill with the US response to the controversial Iranian nuclear programme. The American debate for a viable response ranging from sanctions “that bite” to multilateral negotiations to “all options on the table” and the divisive opinions in the US regarding the same have made matters more challenging. Moreover, the religiously tinged nationalism in Iran regarding its right to have access to civilian nuclear energy, Israel’s vociferous pressure on the Americans to act against Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons programme and the intractable host of issues between the USA and Iran besides the nuclear issue have hindered any possibility of détente. In this context, it becomes imperative to ask the question: “Will the current nuclear deal between Iran and the USA bring any broader political rapprochement between the two?”

On this issue, debates are ensuing in both the US and Iran, where opinions range from those of optimism for a more comprehensive political understanding to those of pessimism contending that the strategic divergence goes much deeper and wider than the nuclear imbroglio, and the emerging nuclear understanding will not drastically alter the overall relationship. After the signing of the deal, debates abound as to what the deal means for both the countries. In the USA, many believe that this is the best the two countries could have done, while others contend that the US has been unable to ensure that Iran would never become a nuclear weapons power, or would achieve the so-called “zero enrichment goal”, and that the US has compromised more than it should have. Former Bush administration official Nicholas Burns while acknowledging the substantial outcome of the deal also outlined how it was equally important in the USA’s interest to continue to try and contain Iran so as to prevent it from harming the sustenance of American influence in the Persian Gulf. According to him, such a strategy also entails reinforcing America’s convergence with its allies in the region and asserting America’s leading role not through just “money or weapons” but through “credibility” to secure the interests of both the US and its allies. Iran-watchers in the US have argued that details of the deal hardly mattered because the issue is really about the intentions of Iran’s ambitions and strategy as a regional power in the Middle East and its repercussions for US engagement in the region and the security of its allies. As a result, many believe that Iran as a country, with or without the deal, needs to be countered and contained. Even among those who accept the practicalities of recognizing the deal and accepting it, a concurrent argument is for the US to watch its moves towards the Middle East post the deal, and not be seen as disengaged from the region, resulting in Iran’s increased aggressiveness.

The nuclear deal has a considerable number of detractors within Iran’s hardliners and ruling clerics as well. The hardliners within Iran are by no means anticipating an immediate transformation in the US-Iran relations. Although most of the pioneers of the Islamic Revolution have either died or been replaced by a younger cadre of clerics, the wounds inflicted on recent Iranian history by the US, still continue to fan the flames of anti-US sentiments among the naysayers. From the 1953 CIA orchestrated coup against Mossadegh to the 1988 bombing of an Iranian passenger airliner by the USS Vincennes, the USA’s role as serial interferer has lingered on in the deep-rooted national pride of several Iranians. The Bush administration’s inclusion of Iran in the so-called “axis of evil” despite earnest attempts

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towards rapprochement by President Khatami worsened matters. Moreover, a turf war persists between the moderates and hardliners within the Majles (Iranian Parliament); not to mention the dichotomy seen in the approaches to the deal by those within Iran and the exile group, NCRI (National Council of Resistance of Iran).

The NCRI was responsible for exposing the alleged covert Iranian nuclear programme back in 2002. They have always been in favour of an Iran-US rapprochement under a moderate Iranian regime. As a result, they had pinned hopes on reformist President Rouhani after his resounding victory in the 2013 Presidential elections. However, Rouhani has so far been incapable of delivering on essential NCRI demands like human rights which might reduce the NCRI's incentive for lobbying in the US Congress for a US-Iranian détente.

Just after the signing of the deal on 14 July, jubilant crowds across the streets of Tehran hailed the efforts of the chief nuclear negotiator Javad Zarif and his deputy Abbas Araghchi. Praises were even showered on Zarif's American counterpart Kerry, who desisted from walking away from the negotiations even at the most testing moments. But there were no chanting of slogans for Rouhani; or for that matter, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Within Iran, there are sharp contrasts in the reactions to the nuclear deal on the part of Khamenei, Rouhani (and his moderate faction) and the hardliners who consist of certain clerics in the legislature, and most importantly, the powerful IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps).

The IRGC has over the past several years emerged as the greatest beneficiaries of the sanctions regime. Through its implementation of various asymmetric tactics by means of creating artificial bottlenecks and chokepoints, the IRGC, along with its domestic Basij wing and the elite Quds Force, have effectively circumvented the punitive impacts of the sanctions. This holds true in the case of smuggling of dual use goods (for both civilian and military nuclear installations), through its vastly intricate network. Moreover, by waging proxy wars in different theatres across West Asia, particularly Syria, through its protégé Hezbollah, the IRGC has often come at direct loggerheads with the interests of both the US and its allies in the region. So far, Khamenei has been ambiguous in his acknowledgement of the deal. He commended the efforts of Zarif and Araghchi, however simultaneously downplaying any sort of alliance with the US. IRGC Commander General Mohammed Ali Jafari appeared blunter when he refused to accept the UNSC resolution that called for the scaling down of Iran's nuclear programme, as per the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions) requirements.

In the face of stiff opposition from the hardliners, the onus is on the Rouhani administration to carry on the momentum attained from the signing of the deal. The President has already vowed to start implementing the JCPOA provisions from September onwards, which is paramount to the eventual lifting of sanctions. By doing so, he intends to repair the ailing economy by accelerating hydrocarbon exports, and thereby curtail soaring food price inflation. Such measures might help ensure more seats for the moderates in the February 2016 Parliamentary elections. But, as far as the overall US-Iran relations are concerned, it is too early to expect a substantial change in the status quo. Stephen Walt commented, "Having failed to kill the deal itself, hard-liners in Iran, the United States, and Israel will now turn their attention to making sure it produces no broader political benefits." Hence, there are enough constraints in perception, policy and practice of US-Iran relations, leading to assessments that the newfound understanding on the controversial nuclear issue might not translate to any broad-based and consequential political bonhomie between the two countries. However, despite this skepticism, there is no denying the fact that the latest nuclear deal that came through a long process of negotiations is indeed a diplomatic breakthrough. And one might at least give the leaderships on both sides some credit for having seen through this phase. Moreover, coming concurrently with the opening of diplomatic relationship with Cuba, the Obama administration has opened a new chapter in America's outreach to regimes that were hitherto seen as absolute adversaries with little chances of engagement.

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