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Iran Nuclear Talks: U.S. Should Stand Firm

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The revived nuclear talks with Iran, set to resume May 23 in Baghdad, face an uncertain and risky future. Iran has a long history of exploiting diplomatic talks on the nuclear issue as a means of forestalling international pressure, easing sanctions, and buying time for its steadily advancing nuclear program. The United States should stand firm and prevent backsliding by the international coalition mobilized to pressure Tehran to halt its nuclear weapons program.

In particular, sanctions on Iran should not be lifted or reduced until Tehran has taken concrete and irreversible steps to halt its uranium enrichment program, transferred its stockpile of enriched uranium out of the country, allowed more intrusive inspections, and dismantled its enrichment facility at Fordow.

Iran's Dilatory Diplomacy.

Despite more than three years of the Obama Administration's eager engagement efforts, Iran has refused to comply with its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) or abide by five United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for it to halt its uranium enrichment program and other nuclear activities. Worse, Iran was caught red-handed in September 2009 building a covert uranium enrichment facility at Fordow and has greatly accelerated its nuclear efforts since then.

Much of Iran's nuclear progress has come since the Obama Administration took office, contrary to the recent revisionist misstatements made by Vice President Joe Biden, who blamed the Iran nuclear standoff on the Bush Administration. Iran, which had enough enriched uranium when President Obama was inaugurated to build one nuclear weapon if it was further enriched, now has enough to build at least four nuclear weapons. Tehran in 2010 also began enriching uranium to 20 percent, ostensibly for medical research, which will greatly shorten the time needed to enrich uranium to the 90 percent level needed for a nuclear weapon.

Iran's chief goals at the Baghdad talks are to buy time for its nuclear efforts, establish the legitimacy of its uranium enrichment program, and gain a respite from international sanctions that are inflicting increasing damage on Iran's economy. U.S. sanctions on Iran's central bank are set to take full effect on June 28, and an embargo on Iranian oil by the European Union, which accounts for approximately one-fifth of Iran's oil exports, will come into full force on July 1.

Iran will seek to drive a diplomatic wedge in the P5+1 coalition (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) by peeling away Russia and China. Both have extensive economic ties with Iran and have diluted U.N. action in the past. Moscow has signaled its opposition to any new sanctions, and both are likely to support lifting existing sanctions in return for minor Iranian concessions that did not entail significant limitations on uranium enrichment.

Needed: A Credible and Verifiable Agreement. The Iran nuclear talks are a high-stakes venture. The longer the nuclear impasse drags on, the closer Tehran will push toward the nuclear threshold. Washington should insist that any

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agreement reached with Tehran, which has repeatedly violated and abandoned past agreements, must include terms that immediately reduce Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium and diminish Iran's ability to stage a rapid nuclear breakout. To prevent Tehran from running out the clock, the U.S. should also establish that the diplomatic track is time-limited and must quickly produce results if a preventive military strike is to be avoided.

Given Tehran's long record of duplicity on the nuclear issue, it is also crucial that sanctions are maintained until Tehran takes concrete and irreversible steps to reduce the nuclear proliferation threat masked within its civilian nuclear program. Washington should not agree to reduce sanctions pressure until Tehran has agreed to:

- **Halt uranium enrichment and transfer its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium to an outside power.** Iran has more than 100 kilograms of uranium enriched to this level, which is the chief short-term nuclear proliferation concern.
- **Close and dismantle the uranium enrichment facility that Iran secretly built at Fordow.** This hardened facility, built deep underground on a military base, was exposed in 2009 and is now engaged in enriching uranium far

beyond what Iran needs for its civilian nuclear program.

- **Come clean with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and allow unfettered inspections.** Tehran must grant IAEA experts full access to documents, scientists, and facilities—including inspection of the Parchin test site, which it has stubbornly blocked—to clear up long-standing questions about its past nuclear activities. Tehran must also accede to more intrusive inspections and implement the Additional Protocol to the NPT that it agreed to abide by in 2003 but subsequently ignored.

Washington should ensure that the P5+1 negotiating position remains focused on reaching a credible and verifiable agreement that will maintain the long-term barriers to Iranian nuclear proliferation; it should not merely defuse the crisis temporarily by reducing the size of Iran's stockpiles of enriched uranium. For example, Iran is building a heavy water reactor at Arak that will generate plutonium that could be used to arm a nuclear weapon. That proliferation threat needs to be addressed in any suitable agreement.

Washington and the P5+1 should reject any agreement that does not immediately address core proliferation concerns but amounts to only a short-term cosmetic deal that papers

over nonproliferation concerns with a diplomatic bandage.

Do Not Let Iran off the Sanctions Hook. The goal of the Baghdad talks should be to convince Iran that it has no choice but to immediately halt its nuclear weapons efforts if it seeks to avoid escalating international sanctions and the threat of a preventive military strike by Israel or the U.S. It would be a grave error to squander the diplomatic leverage afforded by the sanctions by lifting or relaxing those sanctions before Tehran takes concrete and irreversible steps to halt its accumulation of enriched uranium.

Carrots (such as lifting sanctions or providing Iran with fuel for its medical research reactor in exchange for its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium) may be useful, but a suitable agreement with Tehran is unlikely without the potential use of sticks. Iran must know that the military option is part of the picture and in fact is increasingly likely the longer it drags its feet on meeting its NPT obligations. The U.S. cannot afford to be suckered into endless talks that allow Tehran to buy time to build a nuclear weapon.

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