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U.S. Should Maximize Pressure on Iran at Nuclear Talks

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The Geneva talks have once again raised hopes for a breakthrough in the long-stalled nuclear negotiations with Iran. Western diplomats have expressed “cautious optimism” about the prospects for success after two days of talks. But Iran has not budged from its defiance of key elements of multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions; it has merely adopted a softer and more diplomatic tone.

Washington should reject a partial deal that allows Tehran to continue down its path toward a nuclear breakout capability. The United States should maintain sanctions as well as the credible threat of force until Iran has taken concrete actions to dismantle its uranium enrichment and reprocessing facilities, given up its stockpile of enriched uranium, and permitted more intrusive inspections of its nuclear sites.

Distrust and Verify. Iran has practiced denial, deception, and delay on the nuclear issue for more than 10 years. After being caught red-handed building clandestine nuclear facilities in 2002, Iran agreed to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment in 2003 to prevent the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from referring its violations of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to the U.N.

Security Council. In addition to staving off sanctions, Tehran had reason to fear a possible U.S. military attack after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq, but it quickly resumed its nuclear efforts when it believed it was safe to do so in 2005.

In October 2009, Iran reached an “agreement in principle” at talks in Geneva that would have sent roughly 80 percent of its enriched uranium stockpile to Russia for processing and then to France for fabrication into fuel rods. The uranium would then be returned to Iran to power its research reactor. But the Iranian regime soon backpedaled and made an unacceptable counterproposal that would have greatly reduced the amount of uranium that would leave Iran.

Tehran’s initial acceptance and subsequent rejection of that offer is consistent with its long-established pattern of cheat, retreat, and delay on nuclear issues. When caught cheating on its nuclear safeguards obligations, Tehran has repeatedly promised to cooperate with the IAEA to defuse the situation and to halt the momentum for imposing further sanctions. Then, after the crisis is averted, it reneges on its promises and stonewalls IAEA requests for more information. These delaying tactics consume valuable time, which Iran has used to press ahead with its nuclear weapons research.

Rouhani: Déjà Vu All Over Again. Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, has raised hopes that Tehran will moderate its hostile foreign policy and strike a deal on the nuclear issue. Although he has been incorrectly labeled as a reformer, Rouhani is the ultimate insider. He has been intimately involved in Iran’s nuclear policymaking for decades and served as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005,

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later bragging that the nuclear program continued to advance while uranium enrichment was temporarily suspended.

Rouhani remains firmly committed to Iran's nuclear program and has ruled out suspending uranium enrichment, which Tehran has wrongly claimed as a "right." But even if he were inclined to abandon the nuclear program, Rouhani would face strong opposition from the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on nuclear policy. Khamenei has blocked previous diplomatic compromises and remains implacably hostile to the United States.

Although Tehran has softened the tone of its nuclear diplomacy, it continues to reject a halt in its enrichment and reprocessing activities, which were called for by six U.N. Security Council resolutions. It seeks to gain relief from biting international sanctions by making tactical concessions that involve limited restrictions on enrichment that would allow it to retain the strategic option of later building a nuclear weapon.

Needed: Firm Nonproliferation Demands and Maximum Pressure. When the Geneva talks resume on November 7, the United States should insist that Iran take concrete and irreversible steps to comply with its nonproliferation obligations and minimize the risks of a nuclear breakout. The goal should be to reach a credible and verifiable agreement that would maintain the long-term barriers to Iranian nuclear proliferation, not merely to 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 ended in any suitable agreement.

Given Tehran's long record of duplicity on the nuclear issue and the fact that U.N. sanctions will be difficult to re-impose once they are lifted, it is also crucial that sanctions are maintained until Tehran takes major steps to comply with its nonproliferation obligations. Sanctions should not be eased until Tehran has taken action to:

- **Halt uranium enrichment and transfer its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium to an outside power.** The 20 percent enriched uranium poses the chief proliferation threat in the short run.
- **Close and dismantle the uranium enrichment facility at Fordow.** This fortified facility, built deep underground on a military base, is now enriching uranium far beyond what Iran needs for its civilian nuclear program.
- **Close and dismantle the heavy water reactor at Arak.** This reactor, which will generate plutonium, will give Tehran a second route to a nuclear weapon.
- **Come clean with the IAEA and allow unfettered inspections.** Rouhani's government continues to deny mounting evidence that Iran has a nuclear weapons program, which precludes trusting Tehran to comply with any future commitments it makes.

A Bad Deal Is Worse Than None at All. Washington should reject any agreement that does not immediately address core proliferation concerns but amounts to only a short-term cosmetic deal that fails to verifiably end Iran's nuclear proliferation threat. The U.S. goal 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 huge mistake to squander diplomatic leverage by relaxing sanctions before Tehran takes concrete and irreversible steps to halt its nuclear weapons program.

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