The Iran Deal and Its Consequences

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The announced framework for an agreement on Iran's nuclear program has the potential to generate a seminal national debate. Advocates exult over the nuclear constraints it would impose on Iran. Critics question the verifiability of these constraints and their longer-term impact on regional and world stability. The historic significance of the agreement and indeed its sustainability depend on whether these emotions, valid by themselves, can be reconciled.

Debate regarding technical details of the deal has thus far inhibited the soul-searching necessary regarding its deeper implications. For 20 years, three presidents of both major parties proclaimed that an Iranian nuclear weapon was contrary to U.S. and global interests -- and that they were prepared to use force to prevent it. Yet negotiations that began 12 years ago as an international effort to prevent an Iranian capability to develop a nuclear arsenal are ending with an agreement that concedes this very capability, albeit short of its full capacity in the first 10 years.

Mixing shrewd diplomacy with open defiance of United Nations resolutions, Iran has gradually turned the negotiation on its head. Its centrifuges have multiplied from about 100 at the beginning of the negotiation to almost 20,000 today. The threat of war now constrains the West more than Iran. While Iran treated the mere fact of its willingness to negotiate as a concession, the West has felt compelled to break every deadlock with a new proposal. In the process, the Iranian program has reached a point officially described as being within two to three months of building a nuclear weapon. Under the proposed agreement, for 10 years Iran will never be further than one year from a nuclear weapon and, after a decade, will be significantly closer.

Inspections and Enforcement

The president deserves respect for the commitment with which he has pursued the objective of reducing nuclear peril, as does Secretary of State John Kerry for the persistence, patience and ingenuity with which he has striven to impose significant constraints on Iran's nuclear program.

Progress has been made on shrinking the size of Iran's enriched stockpile, confining the enrichment of uranium to one facility and limiting aspects of the enrichment process. Still, the ultimate significance of the framework will depend on its verifiability and enforceability.

Negotiating the final agreement will be extremely challenging. For one thing, no official text has yet been published. The so-called framework represents a unilateral U.S. interpretation. Some of its clauses have been dismissed by the principal Iranian negotiator as "spin." A joint European Union-Iran statement differs in important respects, especially with regard to the lifting of sanctions and permitted research and development.

Comparable ambiguities apply to the one-year window for a presumed Iranian breakout. Emerging at a relatively late stage in the negotiation, this concept replaced the previous baseline -- that Iran might be permitted a technical capacity compatible with a plausible

civilian nuclear program. The new approach complicates verification and makes it more political because of the vagueness of the criteria.

Under the new approach, Iran permanently gives up none of its equipment, facilities or fissile product to achieve the proposed constraints. It only places them under temporary restriction and safeguard -- amounting in many cases to a seal at the door of a depot or periodic visits by inspectors to declared sites. The physical magnitude of the effort is daunting. Is the International Atomic Energy Agency technically, and in terms of human resources, up to so complex and vast an assignment?

In a large country with multiple facilities and ample experience in nuclear concealment, violations will be inherently difficult to detect. Devising theoretical models of inspection is one thing. Enforcing compliance, week after week, despite competing international crises and domestic distractions, is another. Any report of a violation is likely to prompt debate over its significance -- or even calls for new talks with Tehran to explore the issue. The experience of Iran's work on a heavy-water reactor during the "interim agreement" period -- when suspect activity was identified but played down in the interest of a positive negotiating atmosphere -- is not encouraging.

Compounding the difficulty is the unlikelihood that breakout will be a clear-cut event. More likely it will occur, if it does, via the gradual accumulation of ambiguous evasions.

When inevitable disagreements arise over the scope and intrusiveness of inspections, on what criteria are we prepared to insist and up to what point? If evidence is imperfect, who bears the burden of proof? What process will be followed to resolve the matter swiftly?

The agreement's primary enforcement mechanism, the threat of renewed sanctions, emphasizes a broad-based asymmetry, which provides Iran permanent relief from sanctions in exchange for temporary restraints on Iranian conduct. Undertaking the "snap-back" of sanctions is unlikely to be as clear or as automatic as the phrase implies. Iran is in a position to violate the agreement by executive decision. Restoring the most effective sanctions will require coordinated international action. In countries that had reluctantly joined in previous rounds, the demands of public and commercial opinion will militate against automatic or even prompt "snap-back." If the follow-on process does not unambiguously define the term, an attempt to reimpose sanctions risks primarily isolating the U.S., not Iran.

The gradual expiration of the framework agreement, beginning in a decade, will enable Iran to become a significant nuclear, industrial and military power after that time -- in the scope and sophistication of its nuclear program and its latent capacity to weaponize at a time of its choosing. Limits on Iran's research and development have not been publicly disclosed (or perhaps agreed). Therefore Iran will be in a position to bolster its advanced nuclear technology during the period of the agreement and rapidly deploy more advanced centrifuges -- of at least five times the capacity of the current model -- after the agreement expires or is broken.

The follow-on negotiations must carefully address a number of key issues, including the mechanism for reducing Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium to 300 from 10,000 kilograms, the scale of uranium enrichment after 10 years, and the IAEA's concerns regarding previous Iranian weapons efforts. The ability to resolve these and similar issues

should determine the decision over whether or when the U.S. might still walk away from the negotiations.

The Framework Agreement and Long-Term Defense

Even when these issues are resolved, another set of problems emerges because the negotiating process has created its own realities. The interim agreement accepted Iranian enrichment; the new agreement makes it an integral part of the architecture. For the U.S., a decade-long restriction on Iran's nuclear capacity is a possibly hopeful interlude. For Iran's neighbors -- who perceive their imperatives in terms of millennial rivalries -- it is a dangerous prelude to an even more dangerous permanent fact of life. Some of the chief actors in the Middle East are likely to view the U.S. as willing to concede a nuclear military capability to the country they consider their principal threat. Several will insist on at least an equivalent capability. Saudi Arabia has signaled that it will enter the lists; others are likely to follow. In that sense, the implications of the negotiation are irreversible.

If the Middle East is "proliferated" and becomes host to a plethora of nuclear-threshold states, several in mortal rivalry with each other, on what concept of nuclear deterrence or strategic stability will international security be based? Traditional theories of deterrence assumed a series of bilateral equations. Do we now envision an interlocking series of rivalries, with each new nuclear program counterbalancing others in the region?

Previous thinking on nuclear strategy also assumed the existence of stable state actors. Among the original nuclear powers, geographic distances and the relatively large size of programs combined with moral revulsion to make surprise attack all but inconceivable. How will these doctrines translate into a region where sponsorship of nonstate proxies is common, the state structure is under assault, and death on behalf of jihad is a kind of fulfillment?

Some have suggested the U.S. can dissuade Iran's neighbors from developing individual deterrent capacities by extending a U.S. nuclear umbrella to them. But how will these guarantees be defined? What factors will govern their implementation? Are the guarantees extended against the use of nuclear weapons -- or against any military attack, conventional or nuclear? Is it the domination by Iran that we oppose or the method for achieving it? What if nuclear weapons are employed as psychological blackmail? And how will such guarantees be expressed, or reconciled with public opinion and constitutional practices?

Regional Order

For some, the greatest value in an agreement lies in the prospect of an end, or at least a moderation, of Iran's 3 1/2 decades of militant hostility to the West and established international institutions, and an opportunity to draw Iran into an effort to stabilize the Middle East. Having both served in government during a period of American-Iranian strategic alignment and experienced its benefits for both countries as well as the Middle East, we would greatly welcome such an outcome. Iran is a significant national state with a historic culture, a fierce national identity and a relatively youthful, educated population. Its re-emergence as a partner would be a consequential event.

But partnership in what task? Cooperation is not an exercise in good feeling; it presupposes congruent definitions of stability. There exists no current evidence that Iran and the U.S. are remotely near such an understanding. Even while combating common enemies, such as Islamic State, Iran has declined to embrace common objectives. Iran's representatives (including its Supreme Leader) continue to profess a revolutionary anti-Western concept of international order. Domestically, some senior Iranians describe nuclear negotiations as a form of jihad by other means.

The final stages of the nuclear talks have coincided with Iran's intensified efforts to expand and entrench its power in neighboring states. Iranian or Iranian client forces are now the pre-eminent military or political element in multiple Arab countries, operating beyond the control of national authorities. With the recent addition of Yemen as a battlefield, Tehran occupies positions along all of the Middle East's strategic waterways and encircles archrival Saudi Arabia, a U.S. ally. Unless political restraint is linked to nuclear restraint, an agreement freeing Iran from sanctions risks empowering Iran's hegemonic efforts.

Some have argued that these concerns are secondary, since the nuclear deal is a way station toward the eventual domestic transformation of Iran. But what gives us the confidence that we will prove more astute at predicting Iran's domestic course than Vietnam's, Afghanistan's, Iraq's, Syria's, Egypt's or Libya's?

Absent the linkage between nuclear and political restraint, traditional U.S. allies will conclude that the U.S. has traded temporary nuclear cooperation for acquiescence to Iranian hegemony. They will increasingly look to create their own nuclear balances and, if necessary, call in other powers to sustain their integrity. Does the U.S. still hope to arrest the region's trends toward sectarian upheaval, state collapse and the disequilibrium of power tilting toward Tehran, or does it now accept this as an irremediable aspect of the regional balance?

Some advocates have suggested that the agreement can serve as a way to dissociate the U.S. from Middle East conflicts, culminating in the military retreat from the region initiated by the current administration. As Sunni states gear up to resist a new Shiite empire, the opposite is likely to be the case. The Middle East will not stabilize itself, nor will a balance of power naturally assert itself out of Iranian-Sunni competition. (Even if that were our aim, traditional balance-of-power theory suggests the need to bolster the weaker side, not the rising or expanding power.) Beyond stability, it is in America's strategic interest to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war and its catastrophic consequences. Nuclear arms must not be permitted to turn into conventional weapons. The passions of the region allied with weapons of mass destruction may impel deepening U.S. involvement.

If the world is to be spared even worse turmoil, the U.S. must develop a strategic doctrine for the region. Stability requires an active U.S. role. For Iran to be a valuable member of the international community, the prerequisite is that it accepts restraint on its ability to destabilize the Middle East and challenge the broader international order.

Until clarity on a U.S. strategic political concept is reached, the projected nuclear agreement will reinforce, not resolve, the world's challenges in the region. Rather than enabling U.S. disengagement from the Middle East, the nuclear framework is more likely

to necessitate deepening involvement there -- on complex new terms. History will not do our work for us; it helps only those who seek to help themselves

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