



LANDMARK DEAL WITH IRAN

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Foreign Ministers of Iran and the P5 + 1 i.e. US, France, UK, China, Russia and Germany, concluded a ground breaking deal about Iranian nuclear program last month imbued with an extraordinary potential and immense impact even in the short term. It was the result of arduous negotiations stretching over the current year, buttressed with bilateral contacts on the sidelines of formal sessions that go back even 2-3 years. The concluding round in Geneva took long and intense work which continued until early morning of November 24. The Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif tweeted at the end that "there was white smoke" invoking the Vatican's code to announce new Pope's election. The accord comprises just four terse pages of minutiae entitled, "Joint Plan of Action". It is

focused entirely on Iran's nuclear programme and related sanctions by US, UN and EU - and is nowhere near closure on either. It is nonetheless widely and unquestionably seen as a breakthrough.

It sets as goal of negotiations

a comprehensive agreement ensuring exclusively peaceful nuclear programme in Iran and lifting of all UN Security Council and other US and EU sanctions on Iran. That goal will be reached by a reciprocal, step-by-step process, fully transparent to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, involving stopping, curtailing, and partial dismantling of Iran's existing and planned uranium enrichment and plutonium production capacity, facilities and activities as also conversion and dilution of existing stocks of enriched uranium with effective

safeguards against its military use potential. Iran will be enabled to enjoy right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as well as agreed closure of UN Security Council's file on its nuclear programme.

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All these will be under enhanced monitoring by the IAEA, including daily access for inspections of enrichment activities, and information about Arak project and uranium mines and mills. These measures should ensure that Iran would not get closer to the bomb as negotiations progress.

New experience

As quid pro quo Iran will receive proportionate, limited sanctions relief from the US and EU; marking marginal concessions with regard to oil sales to Iran's customers, releasing sales revenue held abroad, suspending sanctions on Iran's petrochemical exports, auto industry, oil related insurance and transportation costs, gold and precious metals, and licensing spares for flight safety of civil aviation. Up to 7 billion dollars will be released to Iranian economy from the sanctions' hold over the initial six months. No new sanctions will be imposed by the US, EU or the UN Security Council.

This accord has triggered unprecedented commentary, analyses and assessments. Its text evoked visions of an abiding thaw between Iran and the US. Though the term Middle East does not figure in the document, it is vested with the potential of bringing the region on the verge of a historic transformation and of reordering alliances. Iran's Gulf neighbours, not mentioned in the text, are concerned about its praxis even as they voice nervous welcome and applause. The document contains the overriding proviso: "Nothing is agreed till everything is agreed". Thus, the reciprocal measures agreed by both sides are still 'voluntary' first steps. Nonetheless, scaremongering among the US right wing and Israel about Iran's stringing out on its part and President Barack Obama's premature release of tighter sanctions, remains unabated.

The success of sustained and quiet diplomacy, which

has been in the works between the US Administration and Iran for most of the current year, has made both cynics and optimists go overboard. Undoubtedly, it has evoked a sigh of relief from the dark portents of military action which loomed large last winter. However, caution and understatement with which the authors of this accord have related their achievement back home is in strong contrast with the hyperbole about the unfolding of a historic denouement.

The caution may have much to do with the extreme cynicism about Iran in the US Congress, and the wounded psyche of 'the Iranian nation', for whom the accord in President Rouhani's pithy comment, 'marks a starting point for a new experience'.

President Obama in an interview in Washington is reported to have expressed hope that he could envision a final diplomatic agreement with Iran that would let it enrich nuclear material for power production with restrictions which would be enough to provide assurance that it could not produce a nuclear weapon. At the same time, Obama said 'there was no guarantee that such a deal would emerge as Iran and Western nations negotiate during the next six months'. His line was "I wouldn't say that it's more than 50-50, but we have to try."

President Obama recently stated to the Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy

"If we could create an option in which Iran eliminated every single nut and bolt of their nuclear program and forswore the possibility of ever having a nuclear program, and for that matter got rid of all its military capabilities, I would take it," Obama said in a conversation with the center's founder, Haim Saban, a Los Angeles businessman and Democratic fundraiser.

"But I want to make sure everybody understands it — that particular option is not available. So as a consequence, what we have to do is make a decision as to, given the options available, what is the best way for us to [ensure] Iran does not get a nuclear weapon?"The idea that Iran, with more sanctions and military threats "could ultimately just say, 'OK, we give in' — I think does not reflect an honest understanding of the Iranian people or the Iranian

"In terms of using these talks to foster confidence, I don't think we have been very successful in that process. Because the talks have been followed by public statements that have not differed that significantly from statements that used to be made before the talks".

- Zarif

regime.”¹ In contrast the interview of Iran’s foreign minister Zarif to the Time magazine² had more caution when he observed, “One (issue) is the removal of all sanctions – both U.N. Security Council sanctions as well as national and multilateral sanctions outside the U.N. – and second is the issue of Iran having an enrichment program. These are the two elements of the final deal that are going to be there. How we shape the final deal to include all these elements will be a matter for discussion. The two other members, Russia and China, may also have concerns but they are more confident about the peaceful nature of our nuclear program.... I don’t see any obstacles. I believe it’s rather straightforward. We can reach an agreement but there are some areas which are more difficult than others.” However, in clear response to a question as to what would happen if Congress imposes new sanctions, even if they don’t go into effect for six months, Zarif’s answer was that then “the entire deal is dead”. These comments show the limits to which the forthcoming negotiations could be flexible.

Ground for hope

Stakes for both sides in making progress on the first steps are very high. The badly chequered record of the on-off diplomatic efforts over the past decade-plus may hound the process. Both the sides face the stark choice of honouring the process set by the accord on the one hand and the alternatives on the other of military action and mounting conflict, tension and unceasing attrition. The body language at Geneva and the emerging feel-good factor give ground for hope. As for the hyperbole, visionary zeal of some commentators, including many in India, needs moderation lest extraneous stuff weighs on the process.

Take for instance the talk about reordering in the Middle East — it is too early to imagine that the modus vivendi with Iran on the nuclear question will

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be at the cost of decades of close US and western ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. It is worthwhile recalling that President Obama had certified to the Congress in March 2012, apropos implementation of tighter sanctions on Iran’s oil trade, that the global oil market was strong enough to prevent spikes due to loss of Iranian oil. This assumes Saudi co-operation.

The step-by-step process will still depend on the continuation of existing sanctions on Iran’s oil export until ‘all is agreed’. This is inconceivable without undiminished cooperation of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Those dreaming of Iran’s instant mainstreaming in global oil trade should be reminded of the vexed political legacy of past several decades and of the years of stagnation of Iranian oil economy.

So, the longstanding relationships of the US and its European allies with the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia are not likely to change. On the contrary, the calming of Iran’s relations with the US and EU may have beneficial impact on the neighbourhood as a whole. The more Iran engages globally, the more responsive to good neighbourly relations it is likely to be. Rouhani has already made friendly gestures to neighbours, and

nuanced sound bytes for Israel, shunning his predecessor’s bluster and offensive language. Early signs of warming with Turkey too need not be considered out of bound.

Iran may eventually retrieve something more than the 2003 situation when there were fewer sanctions and it had offered a freeze at just 164 centrifuges as part of a grand bargain. This was spurned at a great cost. The supreme leader’s endorsement of present breakthrough may lie in

the tradeoff between entering mainstream of global economy and the staggering cost of isolationism as well as opprobrium of, at best, a risky breakout capability.

What Iran may finally concede was already on Rouhani's brief in 2003, including the acceptance of the Additional Protocol to the IAEA. The text of the accord duly recognises the Majlis's position within Iran's polity. It was Majlis which had suspended the Additional Protocol. The upturn has come about due to the farsighted, dignified and accommodative stance of Iran's interlocutors instead of the unremitting punitive approach of 2003-05. This seems to have made all the difference as reflected in Zarif's happy welcome back home. The praxis of the accord when seen in this light should augur well for all.

** A shorter version of the article has previously been published in "The Tribune" – December 11, 2013.*

Notes:

¹ http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-obama-us-mideast-20131208,0,2891554_story#ixzz2nFj5TO1z

² In a wide-ranging interview with TIME in Tehran on Dec. 7, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif spoke to writer and Iran expert Robin Wright about how the Geneva nuclear deal came together, how the government has to appeal to Iran's own parliament not to undermine the interim pact, and how any new sanctions passed by the United States Congress would kill the deal. The agreement, reached between Iran and six world powers in November, calls for a freeze on parts of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for an easing of sanctions. It is meant to pave the way for a final settlement between Iran and the international community on Iran's nuclear program. Iran says the program is for civilian purposes only; world powers fear that it has a military component.



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