

# TESTING THE RED LINES IN THE IRAN NUCLEAR TALKS

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Months after Iran's presidential elections in June, [multilateral nuclear talks](#) have started once again in Vienna with a new Iranian negotiating team. Iran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani reportedly introduced demands that in effect cancelled understandings reached in previous rounds of negotiations in June concerning a renewed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). As a matter of fact, a report by a nonpartisan organisation points out that Iran began exceeding JCPOA limits on both its allowed stockpile and level of enrichment a year after the Donald Trump administration withdrew from the deal in May 2018 and began re-imposing economic sanctions.

For the time being, the new round of Vienna talks seems to have no positive outcomes. Both sides are completely intransigent and want the other party to back down and make concessions before they will move. Iran insists on all sanctions being lifted, while the Americans are asking Iran to return to reduced enrichment of uranium and accept full International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. According to some analysts, the current impasse is not due to two factors. First and foremost, Iran is playing the North Korean card, while moving toward leaving the economic sphere of the United States and Europe and joining China and Russia. On the other hand, the Americans do not have a very clear direction for Iran's future, especially because the U.S. President, Joe Biden, is refusing to commit his administration to lift sanctions on Iran during the remaining years of his presidency.

### Tehran 'determined' to salvage nuclear deal

As for the Europeans, thus far they have been almost non-existent in these new talks. Even so, Enrique Mora, Deputy Secretary General/Political Director, European External Action Service, who coordinates talks between Tehran and six powers on reviving a 2015 nuclear pact seemed to be very positive about the way the negotiations had started. According to him: "the P4+1 must "fully take into account" the political sensibilities of the new Iranian administration", while the Iranian delegation has recognised "the work we have done in the past six rounds and the fact that we will build on this work going ahead".

Despite Mr. Mora's positive remarks, it seems that the Europeans are trying to salvage the deal as quickly as possible, as Iran ramps up uranium enrichment. But at the same time, they seem not to be forceful mediators in these talks, given that there are the Chinese and the Russians, who are in favour of the Iranians.

The Chinese comments about the "nuclear hypocrisy" of the West suggested that it is sympathetic to the fundamental arguments of the Iranian negotiators, that has been dealt a fundamental injustice by the U.S. — an injustice in which the Europeans have been complicit. Unsurprisingly, while the Iranian negotiating team believes that time is running out for the U.S., the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has warned Iran that "the hour is getting very late" to return to the nuclear deal. However, he also added that "it is not too late for Iran to reverse course to save the deal aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear capabilities, in exchange for an easing of sanctions from Washington".

### China, Iran sign 25-year 'strategic pact'

All in all, the new Iran nuclear deal presents itself as a path paved with uncertainties. It looks like Iran has headed into the present nuclear talks in Vienna armed with a new general nuclear strategy. Indeed, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's demands have consistently centered on full sanctions removal. But, at the same time, the newly elected government headed by Ebrahim Raisi has repeatedly proclaimed that nothing is agreed on unless everything has been agreed on. It seems that the Raisi government is testing international red lines, and trying to leverage Iran's expanding nuclear programme to produce more concessions from the international community, without paying significant costs. As a result, there is an increasing pessimism on whether the Iran nuclear deal can be revived.

The fact that Iran has begun using advanced centrifuges to pursue 20% uranium enrichment at the underground Fordow facility is making the IAEA very nervous. Meanwhile, Israeli officials have been pressing European governments and the U.S. on a real Iranian nuclear threat. However, according to the former Israeli Defence Minister, Moshe Ya'alon, "The main mistake of the last decade was to quit the deal during the Trump administration." However, let us not forget that the Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennet, declared openly in late November that, "The mistake we made after the first nuclear deal in 2015 will not repeat itself." He recently asked Washington to start using "a different toolkit against Iran's forward gallop in the enrichment sphere".

Israel urges hard line against Iran at nuclear talks

No doubt, Israel continues to see the Islamic Republic of Iran as an existential threat. From the Israeli point of view, this threat can be justified notably by Iran's current hegemonic military drive into the Levant. All this does not necessarily mean that Israel has a plan to act militarily against Iran, but the situation is far from encouraging for the Israelis.

Whatever it may be, the key question remains this: whether the nuclear negotiations in Vienna could become substantive or collapse with no results. No one has the answer to this question yet. But one thing is certain: Iran and the U.S. will both fail if they try to corner each other with a "Trumpian" attitude. After all, if the JCPOA is a complex affair, it is because diplomacy is all about complexity management.

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