



IRAN NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS PICK UP PACE

With Libyan production still offline and Iraqi production growth intermittent, attention has turned back to the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 countries as their six month agreement approaches its end on July 20. There is no guarantee that either side will be able to craft an agreement that is both acceptable to the other side as well as to domestic critics. However, the path of the current negotiations – including word of the pending bilateral consultations – point to a seriousness of purpose on both sides to at least try.

As the six month agreement between the P5+1 and Iran is approaching its end on July 20, the parties are picking up the pace of negotiations for a more lasting agreement regarding Iran's nuclear programs. The meetings in May in Vienna between the P5+1 group (the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) and Iran were reported to have gone poorly with each side accusing the other of having unrealistic expectations about the shape of a more permanent agreement. In response to this less-than-productive session, the U.S. and Iran are going to meet for two days of bilateral meetings in Geneva early this week. Iran is also reportedly going to meet bilaterally with Russia and possibly France as well in the coming days. According to numerous reports, the multilateral negotiations were supposed to begin the drafting of language of an eventual agreement, but the two sides could not agree to begin that step in Vienna. Such an increased pace of negotiations, as well as different negotiating geometries, are not surprising. In fact, many more meetings, side meetings, urgent meetings, statements about the negotiations possibly failing are likely in the coming weeks. For good or for ill, negotiations about issues with high stakes are often associated with drama, midnight (and after) bargains, and – if the negotiations are difficult but the parties do not want to walk away – extensions to deadlines that were deemed unbreakable.

The United States is reportedly sending its number two and number three diplomats – Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman – to Geneva for this set of bilateral discussions with Iran. Each of these two diplomats are long-time professionals with experience negotiating difficult agreements with nuclear powers – including Russia and North Korea. Tehran is reportedly sending its deputy foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, to the talks – a signal of its seriousness by meeting the U.S. negotiating team at a similar level of seniority.

The issues up for negotiation are the same as were covered in the six-month interim agreement. The P5+1 wants Iran to give up as much of its ability to manufacture fissile material (highly-enriched uranium and plutonium) as possible (ideally all). They also want Iran to clear up issues about its past nuclear activities that could shed light on Iran's suspected nuclear weapons activities. Iran, for its part, wants to keep as much of its ability to manufacture enriched uranium and plutonium as part of its quest for technological prowess, independence in the ability to gain the benefits of nuclear technology, and it wants relief from the myriad of financial and political sanctions that are in place against it. Each side in the negotiations would like to create a deal that will make it difficult for the other side to go back on its commitments. In the case of Iran, the P5+1 would like to make it technically difficult for Iran to create large amounts of fissile material quickly without being detected. Tehran would like to make it difficult for the P5+1 to re-impose sanctions. Each of these goals is technically possible. Neither side is making demands that the other would find impossible to meet.

The difficulty lies in the domestic political acceptability of any potential deal in Iran and, most importantly

for the P5+1, for the United States. In Iran, the politics will surround competing perceptions of giving in to the “Great Satan” as well as the shifts in economic and political power that may come about as the result of any negotiated settlement. Specifically, will the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and its more hard-line supporters lose the ability to control the domestic political dialogue if the remainder of the Iranian leadership is able to portray any deal as reasonable and therefore the West as not being completely anti-Iran? A deal that can be used as the start on a road towards a more comprehensive détente will be seen as particularly dangerous to the hard-liners in Iran – threatening to undermine their political and economic power. In the United States, the administration has to be able to fend off what is often a bipartisan antipathy towards Iran. This will take the shape of being able to defeat any proposed laws that would scuttle essential elements of an agreement such as the easing of U.S. sanctions on Iran. There is no guarantee that either side will be able to craft an agreement that is both acceptable to the other side as well as to domestic critics. However, the path of the current negotiations – including word of the pending bilateral consultations – point to a seriousness of purpose on both sides to at least try.