

Viewpoints
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Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran: A Deal, Not a Grand Bargain

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The nuclear agreement with Iran is a deal, not a grand bargain. In both Iran and America, the issue is a proxy for a more fundamental debate – in Tehran, about its identity – revolutionary state versus ordinary country – and relationship to the outside world; in Washington, about whether the U.S. objective toward Iran should be behavior change or regime change. This embedded status accounts for the protracted length of the negotiations and the sharply divergent reactions in the United States to the agreement.

Middle East Program



The nuclear agreement between the P5+1 and Iran, concluded in Vienna on July 14, has been called a milestone and a historic chance by some, an act of appeasement and a historic mistake by others. On the surface, the deal is a straightforward tradeoff between technology and transparency: Iran is permitted to retain a bounded nuclear program in return for assurances that it is not masquerading as a weapons program. That getting to yes required protracted negotiations and has generated such sharply divergent reactions reflects the persisting nature of the debate over this proliferation challenge.

In both Iran and America, the nuclear issue remains a proxy for a more fundamental debate. In Iran, it is a surrogate for the defining debate over the Islamic Republic's relationship with the outside world, in general, and America – the "Great Satan" – in particular. In the United States, the nuclear challenge is embedded in the broader issue of American strategy toward so-called "rogue states," such as Iran. After 9/11, the Bush administration argued that the threat posed by the rogues derived from the very character of their regimes, which was central to its case for a preventive war of regime change in Iraq.

President Barack Obama campaigned in 2008 on the controversial platform of engaging adversarial states. Upon assuming office, he reframed the debate on Iran, dropping the unilateral American "rogue" rubric, and instead characterizing the Islamic Republic as an "outlier" – a state violating established international norms. The Tehran regime was given a structured choice: come into compliance with Iran's obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or face punitive measures and deeper isolation. This recasting of the Iranian nuclear challenge helped forge broad multilateral support for the tough financial and oil sanctions that brought Iran back to the negotiating table under the reformist President Hassan Rouhani.

The 109-page nuclear accord (including 5 annexes) fulfills the parameters of the interim framework reached in Lausanne on April 2. The deal offers both sides a winning political narrative. The Obama administration can highlight the meaningful constraints the agreement places on Iran's nuclear program – cutting off the plutonium route to a bomb and sharply reducing the number of centrifuges to the sole uranium enrichment site at Natanz – and the extension to one year of the "breakout" time Iran would need to acquire a nuclear weapon if the Tehran regime made that strategic decision. President Rouhani and his chief negotiator, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, can argue that they codified Iran's sovereign "right" to enrich uranium and stood up to American bullying.

President Obama, challenging his critics to offer a better alternative to the deal, has argued that the only alternative to diplomacy is force. That option – what, by now, would be the most telegraphed punch in history – has major liabilities. A military strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure would only delay not end the program, could well escalate into a war with Iran, carries the risk of spewing radioactive toxins into the environment, and could have the perverse effect of domestically bolstering the theocratic regime in the wake of a foreign attack.

None of the administration's prominent critics have come out in favor of the military option at this time as an alternative to the deal. Instead, they have argued that if tough sanctions created an Iranian incentive for a deal, still tougher sanctions could lead to a better deal. This view was expressed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his controversial address to Congress on March 3. The contradictory argument, as one observer put it, is that Iran is so *irrational* that it constitutes a unique threat, but so *rational* that it would succumb to the coercive pressure of additional sanctions. Casting doubt on that alternative scenario, a British diplomat argued that multilateral sanctions had already passed "their high water mark" and would be difficult to sustain in the event of a diplomatic impasse or breakdown.

The diplomatic endgame in Vienna involved painful compromises. The agreement buys time (10-15 years), but after that period Iran's breakout time will again begin to shrink. In addition, technical questions and concerns (notably on verification and inspections) have been raised, which will put the agreement to the test during its implementation. But the two major criticisms that have been expressed about the nuclear agreement are on grounds beyond its realistic scope.

The first broad criticism is that the deal will not lead to a full rollback of Iran's nuclear program. When President Obama assumed office in 2009, Iran had 9,000 centrifuges and was already a nuclear threshold state since centrifuges that spin to produce low-enriched uranium for reactors can keep spinning to produce highly enriched uranium for weapons. This is the crux of the dispute between Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama. The former has pushed for a full rollback of Iran's nuclear infrastructure to deny Iran any hedge option for a weapon, whereas the latter has set the American red line further down the technological continuum – weaponization. The maximalist objective – full dismantlement with zero centrifuges spinning – was no longer an achievable outcome when negotiations with Iran began in 2013.

The second line of criticism has been that it does not address Iran's increasingly assertive regional role. From the U.S. perspective, the regional situation with respect to Iran is contradictory: the two are tacitly aligned in Iraq in the fight against ISIS and have parallel interests in Afghanistan, where both want to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban. But where U.S. and Iranian interests diverge – Syria, Yemen, Lebanon – Washington will have to meet those challenges through a revitalized strategy of containment.

The nuclear agreement is a deal, not a grand bargain. Iran is not the Soviet Union, but that Cold War experience is pertinent as Washington then pursued pragmatic engagement with the Kremlin on arms control within the context of an overall containment strategy. As a "deal," the nuclear accord is *transactional*, not *transformational* (to use James MacGregor Burns' classic policy dichotomy). U.S. hardliners are critical of the agreement because it is not a grand bargain and not transformational. That is, it does not affect the character of the Tehran regime, which they view as the source of the Iranian threat.

Though the nuclear accord is transactional, it is embedded in the broader issue of Iran's societal evolution. Obama and Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei are each making a tacit bet. Obama is defending the deal in transactional terms (that it addresses a discrete urgent challenge), but betting that it will empower Iran's moderate faction and put the country on a more favorable

societal trajectory. Khamenei is making the opposite bet – that the regime can benefit from the transactional nature of the agreement (sanctions relief) and forestall the deal’s potentially transformational implications to preserve Iran’s revolutionary deep state.

In short, for Obama, the tacit transformational potential of this transactional deal is a hope; for Khamenei, it is a fear.



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