



Iran has good reasons to hang tough in nuke talks

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Why won't Iran cut a deal? Its regime has taken an uncompromising line in renewed talks over its nuclear program. Although that has left the United States and its allies bewildered and frustrated, the regime has solid reasons for doing so.

After all, it is currently managing to weather the tough U.S. and global economic sanctions that were supposed to force the Islamic Republic to compromise. Washington and its allies, meanwhile, are split over how best to approach the talks with Tehran, while — after years of empty bluster — U.S. threats of military force to cripple Iran's nuclear program simply lack credibility. At the same time, the regime is watching America's current reaction to other global threats, and clearly finding all of it quite reassuring.

None of that bodes well for Washington's hopes of reviving the 2015 global nuclear agreement with Iran, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or JCPOA), and then negotiating a broader deal that would cover such matters as Tehran's ballistic missile program and its terror sponsorship.

With few signs of progress at the talks in Vienna, the Biden administration is moving to tighten the U.S. sanctions that are in place. But, while the sanctions of recent years have clearly battered Iran's economy — leaving its gross domestic product shrinking, its currency nosediving, and unemployment skyrocketing — the regime believes it can weather the sanctions and continue to make progress on its nuclear and its related ballistic missile programs. The decisions of China and Venezuela to buy Iranian oil and gas, and a \$400 billion deal under which China will invest in Iran's economy and buy Iranian oil at discounted rates far into the future, give Tehran important ways to sidestep sanctions.

Economic hardship has sent throngs of Iranians to the streets to protest many times over the last decade, but the regime has cracked down harshly in response, killing some protestors, injuring others, and imprisoning even more. That partly explains why, while public discontent with the government is broad and deep, it has not yet coalesced into an effective force to topple the regime.

Meanwhile, U.S. differences with its regional allies over how to approach the nuclear talks have left Washington without the strength of a unified position.

Israel believes the JCPOA is far too weak and loophole-ridden to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, so it opposes U.S. efforts to revive it, prompting growing tensions between Washington and Jerusalem. Israel fears that the United States will agree to lift some sanctions in the midst of nuclear negotiations, giving Tehran more funds for terrorist and missile attacks on the Jewish state.

At the same time, Sunni Arab nations (such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) are worried about America's continuing commitment to protect them against Iranian encroachment, so they are reaching out to Tehran separately to reduce their own tensions with the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, as seen from Tehran, U.S. threats of military action to prevent Iran from going nuclear almost certainly lack credibility.

Joe Biden is the fourth straight U.S. president to say that he will not let Iran get nuclear weapons, and the fourth to refer obliquely to military action if negotiations prove futile. Over that period, however, no president has approved military action, even as Iran continued to make progress on its nuclear program (enough progress, in fact, that it's now within a few weeks of developing a nuclear bomb if it chooses to do so).

To be sure, U.S. and Israeli military officials in recent days reportedly have discussed "military exercises" to prepare to attack Iran's nuclear sites if diplomacy fails; nevertheless, Tehran couldn't help but notice, via a New York Times report, that U.S. officials rejected an Israeli request to hasten the delivery of refueling tankers (which could be part of an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities) because they were back-ordered. Besides, U.S. vows to prevent North Korea from going nuclear, and its failure to do so, have left Tehran even more skeptical about a U.S. threat.

Finally, Tehran is watching U.S. and Western responses to Russia's build-up along Ukraine's border and finding more reasons for reassurance.

Cognizant of a war-weary American populace, President Biden stated firmly that he will not send troops to Ukraine in response to a Russian invasion. Instead, he has sent small arms and ammunition to Ukraine, and he warned Russian President Vladimir Putin by phone that, in the aftermath of an invasion, Washington would do what it has done to a nuclear-seeking Iran: impose sanctions.

Tehran does not make decisions about its nuclear program in a vacuum. Its tough stance at the talks in Vienna reflects confidence that it can weather sanctions as well as its skepticism that anything more serious might result. At the moment, the Biden administration doesn't seem to be doing anything to alter this calculus.

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