

Geneva Talks on Iran's Nuclear Program: Lavrov Reveals Amended Draft Circulated at "Last Moment", Russia not Consulted

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Credit: UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

WASHINGTON, Nov 15 2013 (IPS) – Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov revealed a crucial detail Thursday about last week's nuclear talks with Iran in Geneva that explains much more clearly than previous reports why the meeting broke up without agreement.

Lavrov said the United States circulated a draft that had been amended in response to French demands to other members of the six-power P5+1 for approval "literally at the last moment, when we were about to leave Geneva."

Lavrov's revelation, which has thus far been ignored by major news outlets, came in a news conference in Cairo Thursday that was largely devoted to Egypt and Syria. Lavrov provided the first real details about the circumstances under which Iran left Geneva without agreeing to the draft presented by the P5+1.

The full quote from Lavrov's press conference is available thanks to the report from Voice of Russia correspondent Ksenya Melnikova.

Lavrov noted that unlike previous meetings involving the P5+1 and Iran, "This time, the P5+1 group did not formulate any joint document."

Instead, he said, "There was an American-proposed draft, which eventually received Iran's consent." Lavrov thus confirmed the fact that the United States and Iran had reached informal agreement on a negotiating text.

He further confirmed that Russia had been consulted, along with the four other powers in the negotiations with Iran (China, France, Germany and the UK), about that draft earlier in the talks -- apparently Thursday night, from other published information.

"We vigorously supported this draft," Lavrov said. "If this document had been supported by all [members of the P5+1], it would have already been adopted. We would probably already be in the initial stages of implementing the agreements that were offered by it."

Then Lavrov revealed for the first time that the U.S. delegation had made changes in the negotiating text that had already been worked out with Iran at the insistence of France without having consulted Russia.

“But amendments to [the negotiating draft] suddenly surfaced,” Lavrov said. “We did not see them. And the amended version was circulated literally at the last moment, when we were about to leave Geneva.”

Lavrov implies that the Russian delegation, forced to make a quick up or down decision on the amended draft, did not realise the degree to which it was likely to cause the talks to fail.

“At first sight, the Russian delegation did not notice any significant problems in the proposed amendments,” Lavrov said.

He made it clear, however, that he now considers the U.S. manoeuvre in getting the six powers on board a draft that had been amended with tougher language – even if softened by U.S. drafters — without any prior consultation with Iran to have been a diplomatic blunder.

“[N]aturally, the language of these ideas should be acceptable for all the participants in this process – both the P5+1 group and Iran,” Lavrov said.

The crucial details provided by Lavrov on the timing of the amended draft shed new light on Secretary of State John Kerry’s claim in a press conference in Abu Dhabi on Monday of unity among the six powers on the that draft.

“We were unified on Saturday when we presented a proposal to the Iranians.” Kerry said, adding that “everybody agreed it was a fair proposal.”

Kerry gave no indication of when on Saturday that proposal had been approved by the other five powers, nor did he acknowledge explicitly that it was a draft that departed from the earlier draft agreed upon with Iran. Lavrov’s remarks make it clear that the other members of the group had little or no time to study or discuss the changes before deciding whether to go along with it.

Although the nature of the changes in the amended draft remain a secret, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has charged that they were quite far-reaching and that they affected far more of the draft agreement that had been worked out between the United States and Iran than had been acknowledged by any of the participants.

In tweets on Tuesday, Zarif, responding to Kerry’s remarks in Abu Dhabi, wrote, “Mr. Secretary, was it Iran that gutted over half of US draft Thursday night?” Zarif’s comments indicated that changes of wording had nullified the previous understanding that had been reached between the United States and Iran on multiple issues.

The two issues that French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius had raised in Geneva concerned what Iran would be required to do regarding the Arak heavy-water reactor and its stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium.

The agreement that had been worked out with Iran before Saturday had required that Iran not “activate” the Arak reactor, but did not require an immediate end to all work on the reactor, according a detailed summary leaked to CNN by two senior Obama administration officials Thursday night, Nov. 7.

A shift from “activate” to another verb suggesting Iran would be required to suspend all

work on Arak – which Fabius was demanding Saturday on behalf of Israel – would have nullified the previous U.S.-Iran compromise.

Even more sensitive politically was the understanding reached Thursday night on the disposition of the Iranian stockpile of 20 percent-enriched uranium. That was the main proliferation concern of the Obama administration, because that stockpile could in theory be enriched to weapons grade.

But the summary leaked to CNN indicated that the agreed text had required Iran to “render unusable most of its existing stockpile”, which left open the option of Iran’s continuing convert the stockpile into “fuel assemblies” for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) or for a similar reactor in the future.

According to the latest IAEA report made public Thursday, Iran has enriched 420 kg of uranium to the 20 percent level, a little more than half which has been converted to such assemblies. The agreement reached before Saturday evidently anticipated Iran converting most of the remaining 197 kg to fuel assemblies over the course of the interim agreement.

That would reduce the stockpile to less than 100 kg and would reduce the stockpile to roughly one-fifth of the 250 kg of 20 percent-enriched uranium that Israel has suggested would be sufficient to convert to weapons grade uranium necessary for a single nuclear weapon.

But if the text was altered to change “render unusable” to language requiring the export of most or all of the stockpile, as appears to have been the objective of the Fabius intervention, that would have nullified the key compromise that made agreement possible.

Zarif’s tweet, combined with remarks by President Hassan Rouhani to the national assembly Sunday warning that Iran’s rights to enrichment are “red lines” that could not be crossed, suggests further that the language of the original draft agreement dealing with the “end game” of the negotiating process was also changed on Saturday.

Kerry himself alluded to the issue in his remarks in Abu Dhabi, using the curious formulation that no nation has an “existing right to enrich.”

One of the language changes in the agreement evidently related to that issue, and it was aimed at satisfying a demand of Israeli origin at the expense of Iran’s support for the draft.

Now the Obama administration will face a decision whether to press Iran to go along with those changes or to go back to the original compromise when political directors of the six powers and Iran reconvene Nov. 20. That choice will provide the key indicator of how strongly committed Obama is to reaching an agreement with Iran.

Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy, received the UK-based Gellhorn Prize for journalism for 2011 for articles on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

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