

The Future Trajectory of Iran. JCPOA: A Bridge Too Far?

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*On Tuesday, **Ebrahim Raisi** will be formally confirmed as Iran’s next president by **Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**. Two days later, he will be sworn in as president in the country’s parliament. Yet another orderly transfer of power is under way in Iran.*

This transition is of momentous importance for the future trajectory of Iran, regional politics and international security. That is because a rare confluence of circumstances has appeared over the Iran nuclear issue and a new mainstream is taking shape in Tehran.

Contrary to expectations, the negotiations since April in Vienna over the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) are in a state of suspended animation. Things could go either way.

On the one hand, Raisi is widely regarded as an arch conservative (‘hardliner’) which means that the United States is getting a much tougher interlocutor in Tehran, although Iran’s compass remains well set under the watchful eyes of the Supreme Leader.

On the other hand, the Biden presidency is coming under pressure with the early signs that the much-vaunted strong economic recovery from the deep recession in 2020 may be hitting a snag. The massive stimulus and the buoyant Wall Street haven’t fired up the economic acceleration but will inevitably drive up the inflationary pressure. The resurgence of the Delta variant of coronavirus from America’s south to north also bring in uncertainties.

Simply put, President Biden cannot afford to be seen as a ‘weak’ negotiator at Vienna. Conversely, Tehran would sense that Biden may not even have the political capital to get Congressional approval for a new nuclear deal, which means that history may repeat.

In fact, the US officials are already arguing that no American president can guarantee that an agreement with a foreign country will not be undone by a future president or Congress.

Given the tortuous history of the US-Iran relations and the trust deficit, Tehran once again faces the dilemma of negotiating a deal with an uncertain shelf life whose expiry date may lapse even before the incumbent American president retires.

Meanwhile, the US negotiators drove a hard bargain in Vienna. They underestimated Iran's grit to secure its core interests. They assumed that given Iran's economic difficulties, it would bend over backward to get the sanctions lifted. And they began dictating terms and conditions.

Thus, from available details, Biden's team insists that the US' return to the JCPOA depends on potential future talks on regional issues; that the US cannot agree to the lifting of arms embargo as provided under the JCPOA; the present administration will not lift the sanctions imposed by Trump; the US is not obliged to compensate Iran for the huge damage caused to its economy by pulling out of the JCPOA unilaterally; Iran must agree to newer restrictions on its nuclear agreements far beyond those stipulated by JCPOA.

The US remains ambivalent on Iran's demand that any lifting of sanctions should be open to verification. And it believes that Iran will give up its longstanding position that the nuclear deal should not be made conditional on its missile programme or regional policies. [read more](#)

Broadly, Biden team hopes to realise the key objectives that the Trump administration pursued — and failed to achieve — through its 'maximum pressure' strategy, namely, an updated version of the 2015 agreement that would, amongst other things, almost permanently prohibit Tehran from exercising its prerogative to conduct a peaceful nuclear programme as a non-nuclear weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is entitled to, such as Japan. (In Brazil, another non-nuclear-weapons state, the military actually leases uranium enrichment technology to the civilian nuclear programme and the navy drives technological advances in the nuclear field, even developing a nuclear-powered submarine.)

Evidently, serious differences remain between Iran and the US over the revitalisation of the JCPOA. The latest remarks by the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken — "The ball remains in Iran's court and we will see if they're prepared to make the decisions necessary to come back into compliance" — blithely sidestepped this reality. So indeed, his veiled threat that "this (Vienna) process cannot go on indefinitely."

Khamenei, who has the last word on Iran's state matters, declared last Wednesday that Tehran would not accept Washington's "stubborn" demands in nuclear talks and again flatly rejected the insertion of any other issues to the deal. Khamenei's remarks spell out the parameters within which Raisi will approach the negotiations in Vienna as and when they resume. [read more](#)

In the coming weeks, Raisi will need to assemble his cabinet and thereupon get the Majlis' approval for his nominees, especially the new foreign minister. That means, serious negotiations cannot resume in Vienna, if at all, before the fall.

This is where Biden's team probably goofed up by making such excessive demands on Iran that were way beyond the previous government's mandate to discuss — predicated apparently on the naïveté that for **President Hassan Rouhani** and **Foreign Minister Javad Zarif** this was a legacy issue more than anything else. (Khamenei implicitly censured Rouhani and Zarif for their manifest eagerness to strike a deal with the Biden Administration.)

Meanwhile, pressure is going to build on the Biden Administration, since Iran's nuclear

research and production are speeding up and the 'breakout time' for making a bomb may be shrinking dramatically.

The New York Times noted, "Far more worrying, (US) officials said, is the scientific knowledge that Iran is steadily gaining by building more advanced centrifuges and experimenting with enriching uranium to 60 percent, just shy of what is needed for a weapon."

The point is, the IAEA inspectors are increasingly clueless since June when the agreement with Tehran to keep cameras and sensors running lapsed, as regards what is happening in the underground Natanz plant where the advanced centrifuges are spinning,.

Above all, it is all but certain that Raisi's team will be much tougher at the negotiating table and may even make new demands. Thus, there is the 'X' factor: Does the restoration of the JCPOA matter anymore? [read more](#)

Having weathered the brunt of Trump's 'maximum pressure', Tehran is in a better situation today. The international situation works in its favour too. Iran has gained strategic depth in the deepening partnership with Russia and China. It is neither possible now to 'isolate' Iran nor prudent to exercise the military option against it.

Make no mistake, Raisi, who has welcomed the negotiations at Vienna, will insist on stricter verification and US implementation of its part of a revived agreement. That seems an irreducible minimum demand.

Can Biden deliver on that? The Biden administration is showing signs of weakening. On the contrary, Raisi's ascendance underscores great cohesion at the leadership level, something which has been lacking through successive presidencies since the 1990s.

In such unequal situations, optics matter unduly in statecraft. For sure, the unresolved Iran question still lurks below the surface as the Biden presidency's most dangerous foreign-policy challenge.

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