



Pugwash Consultation “The Iranian Nuclear Debate”

Paris, France, 8 December 2012



Report

On 8 December 2012, Pugwash convened the latest in an ongoing series of consultations which have addressed the Iranian nuclear program in various contexts.¹ The meeting involved 21 participants from eight countries, including current and former senior policy makers and other experts. It was held at the EU Institute of Strategic Studies in Paris, according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules: participants took part in their individual capacities; statements are not attributed to any individual; and distribution of the substance of discussions is encouraged.²

Summary of key points:

- There are compelling reasons at this time to pursue a concerted effort at negotiations and also Track-II dialogue. Waiting until after the Iranian elections will not be helpful.
- Strong political leadership from the highest levels can be determinative, if this window of opportunity is seized. The outstanding issues are political, not technical, and many believe a “face-saving solution for all sides” is possible.
- Somehow the climate on all sides must shift from grandstanding to respectful dialogue. The Cold War experience shows that the *process* of negotiation can foster greater understanding

¹ For example, prior meetings have taken place in Israel (Tel Aviv, September 2012; [Yad Hashmona](#) (Israel), June 2012, and [Herzliya](#), Israel, January 2012); Beirut, Lebanon, September 2012; [London, England](#), September 2012; [Washington, DC](#), February 2012; and [Ramallah](#), January 2012. Reports available at www.pugwash.org.

² This report was prepared by Pugwash Senior Program Coordinator Sandra Ionno Butcher. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur, the Pugwash Conferences or any of the sponsoring organizations. Pugwash appreciates the support for its Middle East project provided by the Norwegian MFA, the Carnegie Corporation, other funders and our national groups. Pugwash would like to thank all participants for their involvement, and especially Bernard Hourcade, Venance Journé, and Jean Pascal Zanders and the EU-Institute of Strategic Studies for their help in organizing and hosting the event.

Photo: Amb. Sergey Batsanov, Amb. François Nicoullaud, Amb. Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Prof. Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Mr. Jean-Paul Chagnollaud, Sir Richard Dalton.

needed to enable possible breakthroughs. (“Confidence is not a prerequisite to negotiation,” said one seasoned former diplomat.) The people who sit at the negotiating tables must have a mandate and knowledge needed to conduct give-and-take negotiations. This will not be easy, as the mutual perceptions are hardened and damaging. In addition, each side believes they have made genuine overtures to the other. As there have been no breakthroughs, it is also possible that each side has given up too easily.

- While the ‘six’ share the same unwillingness to see Iran with nuclear weapons, the rest of their goals are unclear vis-à-vis sanctions and negotiations. Some raise the possibility that bilateral talks might be a more effective way forward.
- An agreement in principle that a phased approach is possible would be helpful. Question over sequencing could be negotiated, and many possible solutions exist regarding how to move these sorts of questions forward. However, any deal will have to recognize Iran’s right to enrich and include sanctions relief, as well as adequate guarantees that Iran is not developing nuclear weapons.
- The concerns over the Iranian nuclear issues must be resolved peacefully. Many believe that any possible military strike against any Iranian facilities would be limited in effectiveness and could potentially lead to a grave unraveling of the NPT and non-proliferation regime, and a decrease in security for all sides.
- It was noted that each side can build confidence in its intentions through various actions.
- A long-term strategic vision is needed. As one person said, “Where you want to end up has to be bigger than just solving the Iranian nuclear issue.”

Recent US elections

The meeting took place after the Obama election victory. Some believed the outcome of the recent US elections demonstrated that the Iran nuclear issue is “not determinative” in US politics, since voters were most driven by domestic and economic issues, despite some efforts by the Republicans to bring the Iran nuclear issue to center stage.

One person said President Obama has shown he is “not going into a third military adventure with unpredictable consequences in the region,” and it is understood that he is not going to let “a third party” drag the US into such a conflict.

However, others noted that the Obama election team chose conservative approaches to arms control issues, such as the Arms Trade Treaty negotiations, the disarmament resolution in the First Committee, and most importantly the failure to convene the Middle East WMD Free Zone conference. (One person said the latter was a “diplomatic disaster...playing into the hand of hardliners everywhere with no positive effect.”)

Without a higher level political approach, some are concerned that the earlier accumulated negative thinking about the Iran nuclear file (and other arm control issues) “might suffocate whatever new opening there may be for Obama on nuclear issues” in his second term.

It was emphasized that those actively in control of the US Iran policy are utterly convinced that Iran is going for a nuclear bomb or at the very least the option of a bomb. These people believe that the past 10 years proves Iran may be unstoppable. They also believe that Iran has no serious interest in negotiations and even if it were possible, Iran cannot deliver on a deal. Finally, they believe that the

Supreme Leader calls the shots in Tehran, and they believe he is absolutely opposed to engagement. These beliefs then lead to limited policy options; they are reluctant to make concessions because they do not believe Iran is seriously negotiating, and they believe the only way to get Iran to move is through pressure.

Another participant accepted this sort of characterization of the Obama team, but asked “If not under Obama, then under whom” would a deal be possible. Some raised concerns both about the temperature of Congress and also the influence of former Bush administration officials in the DC community (and the US electoral cycle which means in two years’ time they will be facing Congressional elections). However, others point out that as with the Defence of Marriage Act, “it’s complicated and difficult, but if the president saw an overriding interest, he can do a lot.” Others disagreed with the analogy and noted there is no strong, organized constituency for Iran in the US.

Some believe that President Obama has created expectations in Prague and elsewhere that he has yet to meet. For US domestic political reasons the assumption has been that a second administration would have more ability to progress in certain areas. Yet, weeks after the election there are noises already about how constrained the 2nd administration will be. Some believe Obama “should not be let off so easily this soon after the election.”

Upcoming Iranian elections

Iran will hold national elections in June 2013. Some believe that these elections will not influence the nuclear issue significantly, since the nuclear issue has become a matter of “national pride” and there is a consensus among decision makers on these issues. Some say the Supreme Leader, with input from the National Security Council and others, has “the ultimate power.” Some question the extent to which others can influence the Supreme Leader, and pointed out the fluidity of the process, as at times Ahmadinejad has been barred from attending Council meetings. One participant said that even if the Supreme Leader has the last word, he is always “very careful to organize consensus around him.” It was noted that Khamenei has very little personal experience with the West, and does not trust the “double language of the double track,” nor the stick and carrot approach to negotiations.

Some experts believe a change in president will not change the direction of policy, and if the US and Europe delay and wait for the elections, another opportunity will have been lost. It was noted that the Iranians, unlike Americans in their pre-election phase, have not sent signals of the need to wait until after the election for serious talks.

For many the question is what the Supreme Leader is likely to accept. There are those on all sides who recognize that in the end when Iran has been faced with a choice between ideology and national interests, national interests almost always win out. Iran is “pragmatic,” said one participant. One person said the magnitude of the decision facing the Supreme Leader today is similar to that in 1988 and the decision of a ceasefire with Saddam Hussein. So the question becomes whether Khamenei can make such a decision and whether or not he is willing to pay the price for such a decision. Our participants ranged from very skeptical to optimistic on this point.

NPT, IAEA and problems with the regimes

Participants were drawn repeatedly back to what some believe are structural deficits of the NPT regime and the challenges these pose to a resolution of the controversies surround the Iranian nuclear program.

The current debate over possible military dimensions (PMD) of the Iran program is one example of what may be an 'unsolvable' problem with the regime. It was noted that the NPT has no universal, non-discriminatory mechanism to provide an interpretation of the dividing line between military and non-military dimensions, and as a result this creates a situation where we have only individual countries' interpretations. In the current situation, this means that at the end of the day Iran and those countries will have to sit and come to some sort of mutual agreement regarding the interpretation. Even some of those most critical of the Iranian program agree that it is impossible to prove a negative. One person said he is "confident the issue cannot be proven."

Some believe that while some steps can be taken to address related concerns vis-à-vis the Iranian program in a proper format, this nevertheless falls outside the NPT, or some say it is at best a gray area. Others believe the core issue of the NPT is military/non-military dimensions of the technologies. One person said the question rather might be whether PMD goes beyond the NPT or beyond IAEA safeguards. It was noted there is an Iranian parliamentary law forbidding the government to go beyond the NPT. So, for example, the voiced concerns regarding Parchin is considered beyond the NPT obligations. The Iranian NSC has said it is okay to discuss this with the IAEA, but there is still a chance parliament could object.

Some believe the IAEA Director General is showing a bias in using intelligence information provided by national sources, without disclosing that information to others, such as the Non-Aligned Movement, who requested it. Someone said that Iran has a "moral debt to Mr. Amano" and that his "humiliation" in not being granted access to Parchin needed to be overcome by a more productive meeting in mid-December. Others questioned this characterization of events, and felt that the Amano team had complicated plans to allow access by going public at an inappropriate time (One participant said, "The modality had been set" for the visit. Two times previously the IAEA was brought "quietly" to Parchin.) Some felt allowing Amano access in December to Parchin could be a significant opportunity. However, if the mid-December meeting were to be a failure, then some thought this would be a pessimistic sign for further negotiations.

Much of the current tension arises from the UNSC resolution 1696 of 2006 that demanded that Iran suspended its uranium enrichment and from the ensuing 6 other UNSC resolutions on the matter, , which the six rely upon in negotiations and which the Iranian side rejects since they believe that there is no legal basis for these resolutions. From this latter perspective, one participant said, the UNSC resolution 1696 "has done serious damage to the credibility of the UN Security Council."

Some believe strongly that there is a need to reexamine these issues, or there is a danger that positive interactions made possible via IAEA inspections could be lost, which would be a great loss since some believe that most of the outstanding issues could be dealt with in the IAEA structure. One participant said, "after 10 years [of IAEA inspections], there is no smoking gun, no gram of uranium diverted to military purposes...despite the sanctions, despite the targeting of Iranian scientists." All Iranian centrifuges are currently on 24 hour cameras, this can all disappear, especially in the event of any possible military attack (discussed further below).

Prospects for talks

One participant said both sides are working from sets of very bad assumptions of other. On Iran's side there is a view that President Obama is not serious or, if he is serious, he doesn't have power since his hands are tied and he cannot make deal. There is a further belief that the US is interested only in overthrowing the Islamic Republic. On the US side, there is the belief that Iran is not interested in a deal, that they are actively pursuing nuclear weapons and buying time, and that Iran won't give in to pressure, they will only give into a lot of pressure.

One participant said now may be a good time to begin building on the common strategic interests that exist between the US and Iran, "because both sides are weak." This person said there is no solution where either side could go out and claim victory, but that a solution where both sides are not totally happy would be pragmatic. Others point out that this is a dangerous line, since on both sides the other has been built up as an enemy, and it is possible that things can spiral out of control.

There is a strong sense that there is need for increased understanding and greater dialogue among those officials who are working on this issue from various sides. One person referred to the limiting nature of the "monologues" at the IAEA and elsewhere, and the need to sit together to seek a face-saving solution for all sides. "All are for a breakthrough" to the impasse, said one participant. It was considered imperative by some that it must be clear that the people who sit around the negotiating table "have full authority." Some felt that the IAEA and P5+1 tracks can more positively influence each other.

It is a fact that Iran has enrichment capability. Some believe with "100% certainty" that Iran will never give up this capability. Many believe that if Iran's right to enrich is acknowledged and if the NPT is the basis for negotiations, there may well be possible solutions to the current problem. Some believe that the only way forward is a step by step process in which reciprocity will be important.

However, there also is a belief that the six have not yet developed their own consensus on a negotiating strategy. They do not have a consensus on the end state of negotiations, and they are not in agreement as to whether or not Iran is negotiating seriously. One participant wondered if there is some "test" that Iran could go through that would allow the six to believe a serious process is underway. While there is a consensus among the six that they are not willing to see Iran acquire nuclear weapons, there is a rift among the six. The situation is "not simple" and for example Russia and China do not have identical concerns. One participant noted that Russia feels "offended" and increasingly "irritated" by these additional sanctions both because Russia has suffered as result of the sanctions but also because they see a broader attempt to undermine the overall security framework.

Participants discussed various types of proposals that have been floated, including the Pugwash proposal. While the details can vary, the overriding belief seemed to be that if political will exists, technical issues can be addressed in various ways. However, the sequencing, timing, etc. can all become difficult issues along the way. One person highlighted the need for agreement in principle that a phased approach is possible would be helpful, even if the six cannot at the moment agree on a starting point. This person thought that while it might be problematic at the outset for the six to acknowledge Iran's right to enrichment in the beginning, there are diplomatic ways it can be "signaled in advance and not conceded up front." It was noted by a senior participant that

suspension of Iranian enrichment to 20 percent is an option, but that a modality is needed. However, It was pointed out that on the US side many of the same people who were present under the Bush administration's "zero enrichment" policy are still around, and might have been back in a Romney government. There are those in DC and in the Obama administration who believe acknowledging Iran's right to enrich is a "cosmic concession" that can only be made once. They are not prepared to "play this card" unless and until they are convinced, as they have not been so far, that Iran is serious about negotiating a deal. (It was noted a group of senators recently sent President Obama a letter saying no deal with Iran is acceptable.)

The "stop-shut-ship" option was discussed in which Iran might stop enrichment above 20 percent, ship out any enriched further than that, and shut Fordo. It was recognized that the stop and ship parts of the equation are less problematic than shutting Fordow. It was unclear where the "six" stand on this issue now. Other pointed out to the reassuring effects of converting quickly the enriched uranium into ready made fuel and how this could help in finding a solution to the nuclear controversy.

Both sides have a narrative of missed opportunities for a settlement of these issues. From the Iranian side, the proposed TRR deal was an intensely frustrating experience. One participant said it was "a unique opportunity that could have opened a new avenue in diplomacy."

Some said it is important to consider the format of negotiations, as the current structure is perhaps limiting. "What kind of negotiations" do the sides want to have? The lack of expectation for "give and take" in negotiations is seen by some as being a missing part of the US negotiating strategy. Some believe the only way to free this situation, is a high level of political engagement. One participant said that the current framework of discussion, "rights versus obligations" is leading to asymmetric negotiations which will never yield an agreement. In this sort of situation it might be necessary to "back off" and to "not hold larger political arrangements hostage" to this particularly difficult issue. If some way forward on other issues could be found, perhaps it might then be possible later to move back to the nuclear issue. Someone else pointed out that "Where you want to end up has to be bigger than just solving the Iranian nuclear issue."

Others thought it is not possible to shelve the Iran nuclear issue at this time, but that there has to be some sort of understanding to stop the escalation, some agreement not to go further – no strikes, not to introduce the nuclear weapons program, etc. As one senior participant said, it should be possible to "sit together and find a way" toward a "negotiated, peaceful, face-saving relationship."

Problems are political?

Some believe strongly that the current obstacles to negotiations are political and not technical (this includes the challenges of Israel-Iran tensions). One person said a "technical screen" is covering a political issue.

One person said it is "astounding how some take refuge in counting kilograms and enrichment levels to find a safe and measurable way to find a solution to what is in the long run a political issue." (Some wondered if the goal is always to find a solution or perhaps to delay a solution.) This can never be solved, this participant said, by technical fixes since "the question of what intentions we impute to others' actions, cannot be measured objectively."

There exist many proposals (including one put forward by Pugwash, appended to this report) that demonstrate there are ways to address the various technical issues which have prospect for being acceptable to all sides. However, the overriding concern is that the political climate is halting progress in the talks. However, it also was noted some perceive technological imperatives which they believe further complicate the negotiating process. Also, it was noted that there will never be a “technical quick fix” since the possibility will always exist for hidden facilities, etc.

Some believe that in the post-Fukushima world, it is urgent to de-politicize nuclear energy discussions. The current climate makes it impossible to have important dialogues on the issue. For example, it is not possible to raise concerns about Bushehr being in an earthquake zone.

The negative role of the non-proliferation analytical community was raised during discussions. Some felt that the community needs to “roll back” to a more political way of analyzing the situation. There will not be a stable agreement, one person said, if it only addresses the number of centrifuges or the ability to destroy those centrifuges. And, importantly, such a structure will not be applicable in other tricky situations.

Sanctions

As mentioned earlier, the so-called “carrot and stick” approach to negotiations has caused a trust deficit on the Iranian side. One participant pointed out that to the Iranian side, even that term is humiliating and counterproductive as it describes a technique applied to animals.

One participant believed that unless and until Iran has restored confidence in the intentions of the negotiating partners, it will not be possible to hold negotiations. This person believed this is especially complicated since on the reverse side Iran is being asked to demonstrate they have no intention to produce a nuclear bomb before negotiations can start. “It is like asking them to demonstrate there is no monster in Loch Ness unless you drain the lake.” It is, this person said, “not easy.” However, if both sides could accept they do not trust each other, and recognize that “confidence is not a prerequisite to negotiation, but confidence is borne from good, simple, clear, and easily verifiable agreements.” Many participants in the meeting reemphasized the point that these coming weeks and months are a critical period. “Some opportunities don’t repeat themselves,” said one participant.

One person commented that the goal of sanctions is rarely addressed. This illustrates the wisdom, he said, that “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” One person said Obama has made it “very clear” that he intends to keep flexibility and choices regarding sanctions in the executive branch. The various bills and proposals in Congress that seek to tie the president’s hands have little to do with the Iranian nuclear program, some believe, but are more an internal domestic American dispute regarding which branch of government has control of foreign policy. Even a Republican president would likely have similar concerns about some proposed Congressional actions. It was pointed out that this situation makes it very difficult for the Iranian side to know who has ultimate power of decision making. There is a concern that this can be used as a way to “play” with Iran, if the administration were to say it wants a deal but can’t because of Congress. The role of the EU then also further complicates calculations.

One participant noted that at the end of the day, in the US system this battle will always rage and Congress will always “make noise.” At the end of the day it will be the president/executive branch and especially the secretary of state that will be determinative on foreign policy. Since Clinton brought with her some hawkish people, there is a chance that the new team may be more favorably disposed to negotiations.

The role of Europe

Some wonder if Europe could be playing a more proactive role, rather than following US lead. For example, while the US president may be bound by Congress regarding the unilateral US sanctions, some wondered what role phased lifting of the EU sanctions might play in negotiations.

One person expressed frustration that a very small group in Lady Ashton’s office is “very closed” and “no one knows what is going on.” This is a problem since “The EU is more than the three countries of France, Germany and the UK.” Another person said the “E3 have hijacked what started as a coincidental group and became institutionalized.”

Possible military attack

Some participants believe that there is a tendency to underestimate the likelihood of a US military attack on Iran, especially given the views of the senior policy advisors on these issues.

If Iran is attacked, then in Iran “parliament and the hardliners won’t keep quiet.” There is a strong likelihood that the “saturation point will be reached” and IAEA inspections would be stopped, Iran might withdraw from the NPT, and any damage centrifuges would be replaced. In other words, any possible gains from such a strike would be limited, and the resulting situation could be much worse. In addition, Iran would be likely to seek to defend its territorial integrity and rights. However, they have sent clear signals that they do not want war. One participant said, Iran “understands what war means, they have had casualties and lost loved ones.” There is still hope on all sides that a military confrontation can be avoided.

Need for dialogue

It was pointed out that even at the height of the “ferocious” war between Iran and Iraq, contact between the two countries continued in Geneva and elsewhere. The question posed by one experienced diplomat was, while there is no big, ferocious war between Iran and the US or Israel at this time, there basically no line of communication between them (it has been noted that there are some tentative lines of communication, but there is a need for much more). It was noted that there were some significant steps forward in Istanbul, when experts met until 1 am and were able to dig into some of the details (this also led to frustration, when perceived gains were delayed due to the US election).

It was pointed out that both sides believe they have already made genuine overtures. This report and our discussions did not delve systematically into these examples. This does not diminish the importance of understanding the record as presented by all sides. However, one person noted, there have been no significant breakthroughs and the coming months are an important period to explore any possibilities out there. Each side, one person said, has given up too easily.

Some believe that a higher level of political engagement and other steps can increase confidence are essential to forward movement. This applies to the six as well as to Iran. For example, some thought that Iran could help to shape another image of its policy and clarify its intentions by some steps that would project a positive image – for example, joining the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Such steps could be done in stages, not linked to any progress on negotiations. Others suggested that in various forums, such as the OPCW in The Hague and the BWC in Geneva, Iranian representatives are creating negative feelings that “reinforce prejudices.” A change in tone in ancillary forums could help create a more positive opportunity for progress.

It was noted that there have been positive proposals put forward, including from the Iranian side, for work on narcotics, anti-piracy issues, etc, and that there could be great benefit to “sitting together and finding a way” to move forward on these sorts of initiatives. Another idea for an agreement by all in the region not to attack the nuclear installations of other countries, based on the 1990 IAEA resolution 533 (and re-endorsed in General Conference two years ago) was suggested. Hotlines, increased diplomatic representation in each other’s country, etc. are all steps that can be taken to create a more positive environment and easier communication. Even during the height of the Cold War such communication existed among bitter enemies.

Conclusion

Pugwash was encouraged to continue to explore ways forward, with a focus on how to increase chances for success for negotiations. One seasoned former Western diplomat said, “This discussion shows there is a need for much greater mutual exposure between Iranian officials...and other officials,” perhaps beyond the very limited confines of the negotiating room. It was pointed out that “very long” meetings between the US and Soviets at the height of the Cold War were not designed to lead to breakthroughs, but rather they helped each side better understand the inner mechanisms of the brains of the various sides. Over time, the pace of discussion could quicken since things that used to take a long time to explain could be said in a much shorter time period. Participants, many of whom had long experience, expressed a hope that this current window of opportunity could be seized, and that a process could be set in motion that might not only finally put to rest the Iranian nuclear issue but which might lead to a more stable and secure future for all involved. Given the possible shared strategic interests Iran has with others (in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc), increased dialogue can only help.

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