Let It Spin: The Iranian Nuclear Deal and Its Implications for U.S. Non-proliferation Policy

Rabia Akhtar, Kansas State University
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The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a political framework agreement that has been reached between Iran and six major powers including the five permanent nuclear weapons states: the United States, Russia, United Kingdom., France, China plus Germany (together known as P5+1) on April 2, 2015. It is being hailed as a triumph of international nuclear diplomacy. However, the JCPOA is still not finalized. Between now and June 30, the details will be further negotiated and then finalized to be implemented in the later part of this year.

What has Iran agreed to? And Why?

Iran has agreed to bring down the number of its centrifuges from 19,000 to 6,104. Iran has agreed to enrich uranium in only one nuclear facility based in Nantanz for the next ten years. Iran has agreed to enrich uranium to 3.67% at this facility for the next
fifteen years. Iran has agreed to allow highly intrusive IAEA inspections, both announced and unannounced at all its nuclear related and R&D facilities for the next twenty five years. Iran has agreed to do all this so that its political and economic isolation could come to an end.

In return, the P5+1 have accepted that uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes is Iran’s right under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and thus the agreed number of centrifuges must spin.

It was interesting to see the joyous Iranian public out on the streets rejoicing at the prospect of their country’s normalization following the live telecast of President Obama’s speech in Iran – but the devil is in the details. In addition to the spinning machines, Iran has been promised that its nuclear and economic sanctions will soon be lifted. Although the P5+1 want to see Iran implement the deal as soon as possible and are eager to see it follow through on the agreed terms, details on immediate-, short-, medium-, and long-term relief from sanctions for Iran are yet to surface. Relief from sanctions was an outstanding issue for the Iranian negotiators and it still remains to be seen whether the Iranians have struck the grand bargain where they are not the only ones on the giving end. While President Obama announced “If Iran cheats, the world will know it,” the Iranian President Rouhani in his speech also echoed the same but with a warning: if the international community falters on its promises of lifting nuclear and economic sanctions, Iran will not be obliged to keep its end of the bargain.

**After the Promise?**

The JCPOA is being seen in the United States as a triumph of U.S. nuclear diplomacy. However, it is premature to say whether this success will also translate into a long-term victory for U.S. non-proliferation policy in the Middle East.

By reaching out and negotiating with an adversary with whom U.S.
diplomatic relations had been suspended for the past thirty five years and whom was tagged as a part of the “axis of evil as late as 2002, the Obama administration has walked the extra mile. It has shown the rest of the world (and primarily Israel) that Iran is neither an existential threat to Israel, nor is uranium enrichment on Iranian soil a threat to Middle Eastern security and stability. To be honest, there is plenty brewing in that region for which Iranian nuclear ambitions are not to be blamed. However, the important question remains: Is the U.S.-Iranian rapprochement sustainable beyond Obama? While the EU approach towards the Iranian nuclear issue has remained more or less stable over the years, it is the consistency in U.S. policies towards Iran that the world is worried about and for good reason.

We all remember the cartoon bomb and Bibi’s obsession with the Iranian nuclear bomb, and his urging the UN General Assembly in 2012 to halt Iran’s nuclear program – by which he meant no centrifuges and no enrichment for Iran. We have witnessed tensions between Netanyahu and Obama over the past several years over the latter’s willingness to accommodate the Iranian point of view. We also witnessed the unprecedented act of 47 Republican Senators writing a letter to the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, undermining the negotiation process and basically telling the Iranian leaders not to get too comfortable with any deal signed by the current U.S. president – for it can be scrapped ‘with a stroke of a pen’ by the next president.

While the Obama administration has dealt with these policy challenges successfully at home and aboard, the promise of a sustainable U.S. foreign policy towards Iran remains weak. Will the “axis of evil” be revisited once Obama is out of the White House in 2017? If the Republicans come to power, will they be as understanding of the Iranian position as the Democrats have been for the past four years? There are plenty of statements out there by the Republicans wanting to bomb Iran to make us all worry about
the prospect of use of force on Iran under some ill-conceived pretext or Israel’s use of force on the post-deal lone Nantanz facility without many repercussions from the international community. These are legitimate concerns which require critical analysis.

**Implications for U.S. Non-proliferation Policy in the Middle East**

U.S. non-proliferation policy has historically been dictated by its foreign policy, and what dictates U.S. foreign policy are global and regional dynamics which remain ad hoc at best. My own doctoral research suggests that the United States has conveniently been shifting its non-proliferation goalposts to achieve broader foreign policy objectives in regions where countries have had nuclear ambitions. It did so with both Pakistan and India.

Let’s take Pakistan for example. Inconsistent application of U.S. non-proliferation laws (Symington, Glenn, Pressler, and Solarz) against Pakistan during the course of the latter’s nuclear weapons development from late 1970s until 1998, coincided with the final decades of the Cold War where the United States needed Pakistan to play proxy. As quid pro quo, the United States deliberately decided to ignore Pakistan’s nuclear weapons development. Good for Pakistan I say, but bad for U.S. non-proliferation policy. Pakistan was the NPT outlaw and still is. Same goes for Israel. But not Iran. With Iran the United States has established a quid pro quo which is unprecedented. Iran’s non-compliant behavior is being forgiven and forgotten on the promise that both sides will keep their word: *thou shalt be allowed to enrich uranium in 6,104 centrifuges and your compliance will be rewarded with nuclear cooperation and economic reintegration.* This is not to be taken lightly and Iran will make sure that the promises made are kept.
The Iranian nuclear deal with the P5+1 binds all countries with audience cost - not just Iran - even if it seems that the entire burden of proof or commitment rests with Iran. From this point onwards, the United States can no longer allow its alliance with Israel or Saudi Arabia to dictate its Middle East policy. And although through this deal, the United States has signaled Israel to move on and move forward, it needs to do the same for itself. Faltering on its word after stripping Iran down to a specific number of centrifuges with one functional nuclear facility will not bode well for U.S. non-proliferation policy. Iran is a nuclear threshold state and the nuclear know-how it possesses cannot be reversed or forgotten. It has brilliantly established weaponless deterrence that has allowed Iran to successfully negotiate its foreign policy objectives with the major powers.

One wonders if Iran is even aware of what it has managed to achieve. By striking this deal with the P5+1, Iran has not only succeeded in establishing parity with Israel’s weaponized nuclear ambivalence through non-weaponized means but it also gets to do the following: keep its centrifuges spinning and continue to enrich uranium on its soil while anticipating the end of its political, economic and nuclear isolation. May this be a stable beginning for all parties involved.

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