



The last deadline for Iran...and the West?

Underlying interests

Bart Smedts¹

The Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence produces on an occasional basis brief assessments about current events in its e-Note series. These series and other publications are available on our website www.rhid.be



Over a year ago the P5+1 negotiators (United States, United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, Germany) developed for the first time a new discourse regarding the Iranian nuclear programme: Iran's political objective had been achieved, it was said by (Jazy, 2013). If the country had wanted to have nuclear weapons, it would have had them for long. As nuclear weapons do not guarantee regional security, what is the Islamic Republic actually pursuing? According to that same source, Iran calls for the recognition of its right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The recognition of this right is enshrined in article IV of the Non-Proliferation

Treaty that the country signed in 1970. In that respect, the Iranian regime wants to have full decision-making autonomy over its own fuel cycle. Even if the negotiators imposed restrictions on the amount of centrifuges, the maximum quantity of fissile material to be produced, or its concentration, the idea that Iran has its own capacity could not be completely discarded without undermining the treaty itself. What is the country hoping for then? It hopes that the sanctions that seriously affect its economy and in particular regarding the production of oil will be lifted. Oil is indeed Iran's main export product and the combination of an embargo on exports with the restrictions on banking transactions or even the freezing of funds, harms the local economy so seriously that the authorities are blamed for it. If there is a scenario that should be avoided at all costs, it is the scenario of an internal strife between, on the one hand, the conservative hardliners forming the majority in the parliament, and on the other hand, the moderates led by President

¹ Research fellow at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). The views expressed in this paper are only those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the Belgian Ministry of Defence or the Royal Higher Institute for Defence.

Rouhani. A year ago the possible strengthening of the hard line was already a matter of great concern. However, last year, all the parties agreed to a one-off negotiation that would lead to substantive discussions during which, first and foremost, the principle of peaceful access to nuclear energy would be recognised. After again a postponement of four months, the new deadline set for the negotiations in Vienna was 24 November 2014. But why could it be the final deadline? And which factors determine whether it is the final deadline?

First, the current regional situation is not comparable with that of a year ago whatsoever. In Syria and Iraq, an unexpected factor has thrown a spanner in the works: the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), a non-state actor that threatens regional security. Can we imagine how severe the threat in the region would be today if the chemical weapons had not been removed from Syria? However, this extremist organisation's non-conventional ambitions and possible undeclared stocks are still a cause of great concern in the Middle East. Iran can play a key role in that region if, after the negotiations of 24 November, it was to swap its role of sworn enemy for that of indispensable partner: how important is this cooperation? As important as the answer to the question whether the chaotic situation in Afghanistan would have dragged on for more than a decade in the event that Iran had been the West's partner. Could Iran be the West's partner or ally? Is this a utopia, or an extraordinary response to an extraordinary threat?

Another factor is the local climate in Iran: the population is feeling the effect of the economic sanctions and the hardliners can exploit the situation to attempt to seize power again. Neither the moderates, led by President Rouhani, nor the West want a scenario in which the hardliners present a new Ahmadinejad-type candidate, whether it be Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the conservative mayor of Tehran, or Mohsen Rezaee, the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards. The most popular hardliners are, this time, likely to achieve more success than Rouhani if the economy collapses. Besides, everybody knows that nothing can be achieved in Tehran without negotiating with the hard line, including the City Council. The question remains whether the lifting of sanctions could have an immediate material effect on the Iranian economy in order to keep the hard line in check: there will be a latency period between the (partial) lifting of sanctions and the concrete results for the economy. Therefore, a definitive solution is urgently needed. Moreover, Iran's domestic policy could benefit from a final agreement: if the latter could be sealed, the lifting of sanctions could initiate both a political and economic recovery for the country. Iran would promptly become an important actor in the backstage of the Helsinki conference which seeks to create a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East: never has the motivation of the West been so high to bring this project to a successful conclusion since the IS has become overtly radical.

Furthermore, in western and certainly in European circles, there is an additional motivation to resume negotiations with Iran on good terms: in the present context of the Ukrainian crisis, the possibility as well as the explicit promise to for an alternative to the delivery of energetic products from Ukraine provide a further motivation to bring negotiations to a good conclusion. As winter approaches, the awareness that available energy resources could be insufficient in some European countries, reinforces this argument.

One last factor is the uneasiness towards the US Republicans: President Rouhani cannot afford to exacerbate US hardliners by thwarting an agreement. The midterm elections were indeed won by the Republicans and President Obama does not want to wait until the next presidential elections to

conclude negotiations with Iran: most Republicans would reject an agreement if the investigation of Iran's alleged military programme and the related missile tests were not to yield concrete results. Materially, this goal cannot be achieved by 24 November.

Still, are these factors determining or only elements that are likely to shape a final agreement? The fact that the deadline of 24 November is close to the review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in May next year is probably essential. The viability of the treaty and its enforceability depend on the success of these negotiations, including the recognition of Iran's right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Conditions can be imposed, in particular as regards the maximum concentration for the production of fissile material, its maximum available quantities of fissile material and the number of centrifuges, the control of exports and reprocessing,... but the failure of the negotiations prior to that date would have unprecedented consequences, threatening the viability of the treaty itself. And no one wants that to happen.

Bibliography

Jazy, Nasser Hadian, University of Tehran, Speech EU Non-proliferation and disarmament conference, 1 October 2013, Brussels.

Maleki, Abbas, Sharif University of Technology, Speech EU Non-proliferation and disarmament conference, 4 September 2014, Brussels.

Any comments or remarks are welcomed at the following e-mail address:

irsd-cesd-scvd@mil.be.

More publications from the Centre for Security and Defence Studies are available for download on <http://www.irsd.be>