

High Stakes in U.S.-Iran Deal

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The temporary six-month agreement between Iran and the six countries negotiating with it can be viewed in several different ways. On one hand, the document creates an atmosphere of trust between the parties involved. It is a first step toward fully resolving all questions regarding Iran's nuclear program and reflects tactical concessions from both sides that do not compromise their basic positions. If either side fails to comply with the agreement, each party will then revert to their original stance, which would mean that Iran would resume enriching uranium to 20 percent, restart its heavy water reactor in Arak and continue its drive to build a nuclear bomb. The six countries would reinstate the previous sanctions and even strengthen them.

But Iranian leaders view the agreement in a different light. They claim that Tehran has won an unqualified diplomatic victory over the West for completely preserving Iran's full nuclear potential and not having to destroy even a single centrifuge.

Israel interprets the agreement similarly, saying that Tehran simply bought time and gained billions of dollars in "reward money" after the sanctions will be removed for agreeing to halt

its nuclear program — money that it can use at the first available opportunity to resume its campaign to build a nuclear bomb. Israel would have preferred an arrangement like the one requiring Syria to liquidate its chemical weapons, obligating Iran to destroy all elements of its military nuclear program while maintaining its peaceful program.

But it is clear now that Iran will never agree to such a deal. The ayatollahs want to maintain its Damocles sword in the region, while reaping financial rewards from the international community every time they claim to be walking away from their nuclear program.

Notably, President Vladimir Putin issued a special statement calling the Geneva agreement "balanced" and just short of an outright victory for the long-standing Russian diplomatic call for basing the negotiations on the principle of "gradualism and reciprocity."

In a last ditch diplomatic effort to influence the deal, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Russian leaders in Moscow last week. But it appears to have been a waste of time. The agreement on Iran favors the conditions established by Russia's ruling elite.

What is at stake for Russia in the new U.S.-Iranian configuration?

First, Moscow wanted to be included among the group of countries negotiating with Iran to add legitimacy to its negotiations with the U.S. on Syria. The end goal was to ensure that Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime survives. In contrast to the West, Russia is less interested in Iran than it is in Syria because Moscow has invested heavily in Assad. As long as the world is focusing on Iran, Assad can breathe easier.

Second, the Geneva agreement formally includes Moscow in the ranks of the six negotiating countries, even while giving it the freedom to support either side in the talks. Moscow also has no desire to see Iran with a nuclear bomb, but it does not like the more radical approaches for addressing the problem, such as that proposed by Israel. Without its nuclear threat, Iran ceases to be a troublemaker and will be only as a limited Shiite power surrounded by the region's Sunni majority. Neither is Moscow interested in improved relations between Iran and these Sunni powers. Even a modest improvement in relations between Iran and its rivals could push oil prices down, and that would have disastrous consequences for the Russian economy.

Third, the problematic agreement between the six countries and Iran is already looking like a direct threat to Russia because it establishes a connection between Tehran and the Western countries that have promised to lift sanctions. Moscow has positioned itself as a mediator between Iran and the West, but once Tehran takes the steps to reduce tensions and normalize relations with the West, Moscow will lose whatever leverage it held over Iran.

If Russia were to deliver its S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Tehran, it could further exacerbate its already bad relations with the Persian Gulf monarchies. It would also mean that Russia would replace Iran as the "chief troublemaker" in the region.

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