

The US and Iran: To negotiate or not to negotiate

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“The ministers of foreign affairs and other officials from the P5+1 countries, the European Union and Iran while announcing the framework of a Comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme.” Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

By Tridivesh Singh Maini*

The Middle East’s geopolitical landscape has witnessed significant changes in recent years. In 2020, UAE and Bahrain normalised ties with Israel under the Abraham Accords. The Trump Administration brokered these accords and have been hailed by the Biden Administration.

Much to the chagrin of the US, China’s clout in the Middle East has risen. After the US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear deal, Tehran was left with no option but to move closer to Beijing. Subsequently, Iran’s ties with Saudi Arabia and UAE have also improved.

The Saudi-Iran agreement, brokered by China in March 2023, re-established diplomatic relations between the two powerful Middle Eastern countries. Earlier this month, Iran reopened its embassy in Saudi Arabia for the first time after seven years. In its public posturing, Iran deploys considerable anti-US rhetoric, and many analysts perceive Tehran to be part of the Russia-China camp. However, Iran cannot be excessively dependent upon Beijing or Moscow and can not afford to be isolated from the rest of the world. Despite its public rhetoric, Iran realises that a revival of the Iran nuclear deal/JCPOA will benefit it economically. The recent remarks of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on the Iran Nuclear Deal/JCPOA assume importance in this context. Iran’s supreme leader stated:

“There is nothing wrong with the agreement [with the West], but the infrastructure of our nuclear industry should not be touched.”

There have been talks of an interim deal between both sides. While Iran would curb its nuclear program, and the US, in turn, would remove certain sanctions. Iran and US are supposed to have held talks in Oman in May this year. Senior Iranian and US officials went to Oman and did not talk directly but exchanged messages via Oman officials. Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Nasser Kanaani, on June 12, 2023, confirmed that Iran and US had exchanged messages via Omanese intermediaries.

The US, on its part, has denied reports of an interim deal. A US official said there had been no “... talks about an interim deal”. The US official dubbed the news of an interim agreement as “misleading.” The official stated that the US conveyed some of the steps Iran needed to take to reduce tensions with the US. While the 2015 Iran deal allows the enrichment of uranium up to 3.67%, Iran is supposed to have enriched uranium well

beyond 60% and is in a position to make two nuclear bombs. According to International Atomic Energy Agency reports, Iran's stockpile is well beyond the limit prescribed by the 2015 deal.

In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the US tried to revive the deal with an eye on ensuring stability in the global oil market. The violent suppression of protests after a Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini died in the custody of Iran's morality police in September 2022, Iran's supply of drones to Russia resulted in further strains between both countries, and Washington imposed additional sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities.

Several factors drive the recent talks. First, in the aftermath of the Saudi-Iran agreement, brokered by China, there has been a perception that the US is losing its clout in the Middle East. At the same time, Beijing's economic and strategic influence is increasing in the region. While the US strained ties with Iran are of higher order, its relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE have also deteriorated recently. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have moved closer to China and have taken an independent stance on the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

During his recent visit to Saudi Arabia, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken made efforts to convey that the US is very much "invested" and has not lost its clout in the region. The US has also been pushing for important economic and connectivity initiatives in the Middle East to counter Beijing's influence.

Second, reaching even an interim deal may seem challenging given the anti-west posturing by Iran. At the same time, Tehran's economy is in a precarious situation, and while China had promised investments under a 25-year strategic agreement, so far, its investments have been negligible. Iran would want to open up to the rest of the world and not depend on China.

Thirdly, the improvement in relationships between UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran was perceived as a reduction in the US's influence in the region. On the other, these developments are also an opportunity for the US. For long, the Saudis and UAE did not kindly take Washington's overtures towards Iran, but now these countries can act as a bridge facilitating conversations between Tehran and Washington DC.

In conclusion, the US-Iran attempts at negotiation highlight the importance of engagement even in the midst of severe strains. They underscore the complex geopolitical situation of the Middle East. From a geopolitical perspective, the negotiation efforts are significant to Washington. For Iran, these talks are crucial to re-vitalise its economy.

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