

THE REVIVAL OF JCPOA: CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR GLOBAL PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT AMID NEW REGIONAL ALIGNMENTS

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Abstract

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a mixed blessing for international peace and security but its revival may lead to fresh challenges to regional powers due to fluid international environment. In early March 2022, signals from Vienna were that the tricky negotiations spread over one year to revive JCPOA were “on the verge of success”. But soon the optimism dissipated. Widely different assessments of the Doha talks by the stakeholders nuanced their strategies. For instance, the EU representative for foreign policy and security, Joseph Borrell Fontelles cautioned against “crossing the finish line”. The US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley declared it “a wasted occasion.” Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian expressed his determination “to continue negotiating until a realistic agreement is reached.” Erwin Van Veen explains the variant views and held that these leaders’ perceptions of broader geopolitical environment in which the negotiations for nuclear deal are taking place, their own domestic constraints, and the combined effect of these variables led to different interpretations and for “upping the game”.

Keywords: JCOPA, Peace, Regional Stability, Ukraine War, Emerging New Geopolitical Realities, Iran, Pakistan, Middle East, Sanctions, Biden’s Difficulties.

Introduction

Questions being raised in important capitals, particularly in the region, are bound to get tougher and complex in dimension and scale. These include; can JCPOA be revived without any new conditionality i.e. expansion in its scope or punitive sanctions, would the sealing of deal boost regional security and stability

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or would a deal accepted under duress be abandoned at the first available opportunity, would the regional non-nuclear countries seek new security safeguards if the deal comes through, would it suppress the existing rivalries or raise the specter of new nuclear threshold states. Another question, albeit an old one and adequately taken care of during the JCPOA negotiations, is whether the restored Iran nuclear deal would encourage Iran to continue fortifying its nuclear capability it has managed to build, creating more chaos in the muddled situation of the Middle East politics. The article would focus on these questions and assess factors for the ongoing shift in the American stance over additional sanctions and Iranian obligations as the US role remains central to the revival or otherwise for the JCPOA.

The diplomatic efforts are nearly dead, but the on-again-off-again switch which marked the negotiation rounds may anytime come into play. It is widely realized that there is no quick solution and rebooting is not easy for key players due to high stakes and shifts in global politics. The US fell prey to its old tactics of putting more pressure on Iran by imposing additional sanctions, targeting exports of petroleum, petroleum products, and petrochemical products—accusing “Iran for both sides’ failure so far to reach an agreement on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal”¹. The fresh US sanctions tend to suggest slim prospects of an early deal.

JCPOA will be a mixed blessing for international peace and security. Its early or delayed revival in any case will lead to fresh challenges due to fluid international situation. The new developments involving the visit of President Xi Jinping to the region (December 23, 2022) and its perceived consequences for US position in the Middle East has further compounded the already gloomy situation. Clearly, the real move forward lies in resuming the stalled discussion.

Issues and Challenges

In view of the setback at Doha, the main parties may have to change their JCPOA revival strategy and adjust to new developments. Would it involve toning down their respective initial hopes and expectations or simply opting for a strategic pause to reflect on rhetoric versus real possible gains for them in particular and the world in general? The US, Britain and France hold Iran responsible for the delay. Nothing is certain but this much can be said that the negotiating process would involve open and candid estimation “of gaps in realization and actual impediments in striking a new nuclear deal with Iran”². Negative reports from US against the backdrop of President Biden’s visit to Israel

and Saudi Arabia further pushed Iran to the edge. The tough American stance helped to forge a possible Israel-Saudi Arabia-UAE axis against surging Iranian influence in the region.³ Saudi-Israel bilateral axis is haunting Iran. It may involve restricted military operations with the approval of US⁴.

Israeli-Saudi Axis: What Lies Behind? How China would react to US President's policy to limit its growing relations in the Middle East will add new dimension to geopolitics; it may help Iran in a way that the Iranian regime should feel encouraged and confident enough to sustain the regional political pressure. Nevertheless, reviving the Iran nuclear deal will benefit every stakeholder. Some more, some less. Attempts to score maximum gains are understandable and to harness additional gains where possible are also considered normal in diplomacy. For instance, Iran has sought a guarantee that the next US administration would not again abandon the deal as Trump had done⁵. Iran perhaps knows that the current administration cannot agree for a permanent State guarantee without risking domestic ire.

American Plans and Capacity

What is really afflicting "the Biden⁶ administration's firm determination to reach any deal with Iran, regardless of its nature or duration, temporary or indefinite"? Is Biden expanding its scale and scope? Is it an issue of having bad cards or playing a bad game only? The US and the Western allies think that the revival of the deal would ultimately reassert peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program. It would be possible to integrate Iran into the international community. The gains it sees include prevention of war threat with Iran and stopping a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For Iran, it may ensure return to the center stage of the region's geo-politics⁸. A mollifying act in a sense that EU is ready to ignore other Iran related issues including UGV supply to Russia for use in Ukraine war and the ongoing three-month-old protests and demonstrations in Iran. Tehran demanded that Washington should give guarantees that no US president will abandon the deal, the same way Trump did. Biden cannot give this promise because the nuclear deal is a non-binding political understanding, not a legally-binding treaty. As the negotiations moved forward, additional challenges on both sides emerged, half resolving the previously front runner issues.

Globally Important Agreement

JCPOA is neither a simple nor an ordinary agreement. The long and tortured negotiation process the deal went through clearly establishes its significance and desirability. Whether it gets revived or not, the deal will have serious implications for global powers and US-Iran-Europe ground realities and future projections, the regional security situation in West Asia and Iran's neighbors. What happens if the stalemate continues and the deal remains unsalvageable in any form? Would all be lost that was achieved in the context of non-proliferation? The statement of Biden's special envoy for Iran, Rob Malley is very pessimistic; Iran "significantly up scaled infrastructure to build nuclear weapons, contrary to what the deal was designed, and accumulated sufficient enriched uranium and made sufficient technological advances to leave the breakout time as short as a matter of weeks."⁹ Similar disquieting developments were listed by Dr. Majid Rafizadeh. He concludes that "the Iranian regime appears to be going all-out for a nuclear weapon".¹⁰ Though central to the deal, the US alone cannot kill the deal. JCPOA was a process that succeeded with the support of China and Russia. They along with Germany, France and Britain may ultimately work harder to resurrect the nearly dead deal. The recent statement of EU foreign policy and security chief Borrell that EU would continue to work with Iran (December 20, 2022, Reuters) betrays this trend. Iran which has been playing hardball has recently signaled progress on "the only remaining outstanding obstacle regarding "the origin and explanation of nuclear particles found in 2019 (The Guardian, December, 20. 2022, Patrick Wintour).

Perceiving JCPOA beyond its Original Mandate

It is paramount to understand that JCPOA was initially meant to be an arms control regime. Gradually, it was expected to change into an agreement that alongside its original aim would seek balancing of the competing geopolitical and economic interests and issues at global level. This was not what Iran had thought and agreed to in 2015. An objective assessment of what was negotiated and agreed by Germany, France, UK, Russia, China, and the US to resolve the nuclear impasse concerning Iran in 2015 provides verifiable assurances that nuclear material in Iran could not be diverted towards weaponization purposes; and the lifting of US and UN nuclear-related sanctions on Iran. The possibility that Iran cannot sustain crippling sanctions any more may have solid economic basis due to heavy costs it inflicted on Iran, but sanctions have miserably failed to induce any policy change in Iran.

Hurdles and Shifting Ground Realities: Litany of Hurts

Iran is wary of broken commitments in the light of its experiences. It is nervous and seeks some concessions to avoid not only the Trump type punitive actions but also broken promises of allies. For instance, in 1974 Iran had signed an agreement with the French-based consortium Eurodif to fuel Advanced Test Reactor (TRR) and Bushehr power reactors. France pulled out of it despite the fact that Iran had already paid \$1.2 billion for the project. Germany did the same; it abandoned the Bushehr two 1200-megawatt light water reactors project, despite having received nearly the total cost (8 billion Deutschmarks)¹¹. The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s recounts how Iran tried to convince France and Germany to comply with their commitments, but to no avail¹². Under the perceived US pressure, Argentina, India, Spain, China, Germany, and France stopped cooperating with Iran on the development of peaceful nuclear-related technologies, in clear contravention of the NPT¹³. In 1996 President Clinton signed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act and in 2000 he signed the Iran Nonproliferation Act, imposing sanctions against individuals or organizations aiding the Iranian nuclear program. The “Iran Nuclear Deal Advice and Consent Act of 2021” restricts any federal funding to advance JCPOA until President Biden proposes a successor agreement to the Senate for its opinion and advice. Though not any more important Iranian demand, a bill supported by 62% of the US Senate barred the Biden administration from removing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the US terror list – once a key demand made by Tehran. Another bill prevents the US Administration from rolling back sanctions on the IRGC and the Central Bank of Iran¹⁴.

Misgivings and Culture of Mistrust

Comparatively, Iran is a stable and fairly democratic country in the region as it holds elections notwithstanding domestically developed restrictions. It tries to pursue an independent foreign policy. Despite widespread challenges posed by the ongoing aggressive and unending women protests, threatening the regime and its ideological base, Iran is perceived by America as a threat to latter's geopolitical as well as economic interests. Iran is in stiff competition with Saudi Arabia and Gulf states. It is, therefore, no surprise that both have clashing interests and misunderstandings of shifting arrangements in the region. Exchanges of intimidating posturing between Iran and Saudi Arabia and UAE as well as Israel create strategic impulsiveness in US to politically and economically squeeze Iran. The Saudis apprehend that in case of the restored deal, rapprochement between Iran and US may be possible. This could undermine

their special relationship, raising Iran as “the second most important pillar of US policy in the Middle East, after Israel.”¹⁵ This thought is still petrifying for Saudi government despite China’s focused presence in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states¹⁶. The Saudis understand well that China would not enhance its security as it follows friendly relations with all in the region without choosing sides in a conflict or near conflict. Both Iran is critical of the Abraham Accords which certainly undercut Iranian interests and close links with Israel-Palestine issue. It holds this Accord responsible for breaking the fragile Arab consensus over the Palestinian issue.

The US is increasingly tied to external influence in the Middle East and apart from Iran it is focused on countering China’s growing investments in infrastructure and provision of technology. The recently concluded trade and investment agreement between China and Iran generated additional waves of concern. These developments are seen as long-term risks to the US military presence, economic interests and political influence. The revival of JCPOA may lead to better political and economic relations with Western countries, but there is no guarantee that President Ebrahim Raisi would stop working to solidify relations with China and Russia. The Iranian bargaining position is relatively better now than in 2015; Iran entered the nuclear talks from a weak position, both economically and politically. Former President Hassan Rouhani had contested the presidential elections on promises that his government’s priority would be resolving the nuclear issue, setting out a pre-determined outcome in case of victory.

The prospects for diplomatic breakthroughs in areas outside the scope of the Iran nuclear deal to assuage allies in the Middle East are low. At best, the US can assuage the apprehensions of its friends including Saudi Arabia and the UAE by assuring them of no sudden and unilateral change in American policy towards Iran. Perhaps, countries would want some concrete measures, not ruling out new security agreements in parallel. However, revival of the Iran nuclear deal is not a foregone conclusion, “even if President Biden had himself locked in to settle the nuclear issue, one way or another.” Iran is not prepared to budge from its position. Seyed Hossein Mousavian points out that “coercive pressure would fail to force any policy changes and Iran is likely to respond moving further away from its agreed JCPOA obligations”¹⁷. Contrary to the West’s expectations, sanctions have failed to induce Iran’s acquiescence. Iran has defied all attempts to accept US demands to halt its missile programme and

regional activities. Economically wrecked but ideologically strong, Iran is not fearful of sanctions which are hurting American allies as well. Iran believes that patience will eventually ensure that conflict and energy pressures on the EU culminate to the point of concessions¹⁸. This helps to explain Tehran's positive assessment of the Doha talks.

During the August Vienna talks, Iran reportedly dropped a condition that its Revolutionary Guards be removed from a US list of 'Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO),'¹⁹ but it continued to insist on 'guarantees' that US would not again leave JCPOA. Also, the E-3 and US were not satisfied with Iran's breaches of the 2015 JCOPA. The main sticking point reportedly was an IAEA safeguards inquiry into Iran's nuclear programme which Tehran wanted to be closed.

After talks concluded on August 8, the EU circulated what it called a 'final text' and urged all sides to finalize a deal. Iran called the talks positive but found these short of expectations.²⁰ The gap obviously could not be bridged. The violent women protest in Iran changed the US priority. By October 2022, US officials, including special envoy Rob Malley, said that JCPOA revival was no longer their focus.²¹ The Biden administration in November 2022 sanctioned 13 companies²² from mainland China, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates, over alleged involvement in selling Iranian petrochemicals in East Asia. Tehran continued expanding its nuclear program beyond JCPOA limits by employing more advanced centrifuges.

In June 2022, Iran announced the installation of two new cascades of IR-6 centrifuges at Natanz after the IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution censuring Iran for failing to explain uranium traces found at three different locations in 2018 and 2019 but linked to work done before 2003. Iran also removed 27 cameras²³ through which the IAEA was monitoring various aspects of its nuclear program.

In November 2022, Tehran announced plans to install more IR-6 centrifuges and enrich uranium to 60 percent at the Fordo facility after the IAEA Board again censured Iran for refusing to account for the nuclear materials at the three undeclared sites, as required by Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) safeguards obligations.²⁴

IAEA inspectors had visited three of the sites and detected traces of processed uranium, which indicated that Iran violated the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA). Iran subsequently stonewalled the investigation and refused to provide credible explanations, despite two IAEA resolutions censuring Tehran. Both Russia and China voted against motions in June and November 2022 at the 35-nation board of the IAEA censuring Tehran over an agency enquiry into uranium traces found at undeclared sights, saying the vote would merely make matters worse²⁵. Now discussions are in progress between parties to identify the hard issues left to be negotiated raising the hope that the next round at Vienna may take place in March/April 2023. There is no significant headway to resolve the difficult questions that caused a deadlock.

Restored Deal and Regional Stability

On the face value, it looks that a restored nuclear deal would enhance regional stability and may kill proliferation pathways being pursued covertly all over the world. By treating Iran, a legitimate stakeholder as a signatory of NPT and trusting its public vows to remain embedded to peaceful use of nuclear technology, the US may have a sobering effect on a resurged Iran and its contest for influence in regional countries with sizeable Shia population. It may then be forthcoming through constructive engagement to defang sectarian boils in Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and resolve historical issues through diplomacy. In this context, it will not be out of place to recall Iran's recent talks with the UAE over the fate of three disputed Gulf islands and invitation to all Gulf States to inspect its nuclear installations. The Saudi Foreign Minister, in positive messaging, has confirmed that Saudi Arabia's "hand is extended" to Iran to achieve normal relations. Prince Faisal added that Iranian weapons were part of the reason for the continuing conflict in Yemen, pointing out that dialogue and diplomacy were the only solutions to Iran's nuclear program.

But it may be correct to perceive that "a resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue is not a panacea for the vast array of social, political, economic, ethnic, national and sectarian problems in the MENA."²⁶ It may not be out of place to mention that "The struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for dominance in the Middle East has insinuated itself into nearly every regional issue, fracturing international alliances and sustaining wars across the region, while raising fears of a direct conflict between the two powers"²⁷. The current regional volatility and instability "could redraw some national borders and is likely to involve messy political and social transitions"²⁸. The removal of autocrats in Egypt, Tunisia,

Libya and Yemen in recent past and the civil war in Syria have added deep unsettling repercussions to this deadly potion.

Israel Factor in American Thinking

The US unstinted support for Israel is another important factor that influences the political dimensions of the US decision to seal the Iran nuclear deal. The Israelis believe that Biden is too tolerant of Iran's destabilizing activities in the region, ranging from financing and arming a wide network of militias and terrorist groups to enriching uranium to levels well beyond any peaceful purpose²⁹. Israel is not ready to change its Iran view as an existential threat and a major source of instability in the region. Israeli authorities are adamant that Tehran should never acquire nuclear military capability, or have any unchallenged presence close to Israel's borders, either directly or through a proxy.³⁰ "As long as the theocratic establishment is in power, the Iranian regime is extremely unlikely to give up pursuing its nuclear ambitions or that any deal will put an end to Tehran's nuclear threat"³¹. Iran is equally adamant; "Any targeting of our security from neighboring countries will be met with direct response to these countries and Israel."³² There is also a view that more than likely, Iran is deliberately dragging negotiations until it achieves the status of a nuclear weapons threshold state, akin to Japan and South Korea. The United Nations nuclear watchdog says Iran already has enough material for one bomb.³³

Due to disunity among Arabs, accentuated by the Abraham Accords, the American defence and economic support for Israel may marginally wane as it views security threats to Israel declining. But Israel is likely to remain a key element in the American calculations involving long term issues of insecurity and sudden shifts in geopolitics. However, some experts are of the view that "Israel might not rely on the security umbrella provided by the US as much as it has in the past."³⁴. In the wake of Biden's visit, Israel has made direct threats towards Tehran. Israeli Army Chief Aviv Kochavi said that the military is preparing for the possibility it will have to act against Iran's nuclear programme³⁵.

Ukraine War: An Inhibiting Factor

Another major factor is the impact of Ukraine war on energy and food supply chains, causing global concerns and shortages. Iran knows the value of its oil in the greater conflict between the West and Russia. With supply of drones to Russians in the Ukrainian war, Iran has demonstrated its capability to take independent foreign policy decisions despite crumbling economy and domestic

unrest. It may be willing to “play its cards pragmatically with the long-term view of advancing its ideological and strategic objectives.”³⁶ This means that Iran may not go the whole hog with Russia. Perhaps in this context Dergham raises the possibility “to entice Iran out of Russia’s orbit by promising to lift sanctions, remove the IRGC from the terror list, and open up European markets to its oil at high prices.”³⁷ This was one of Iran’s demands³⁸. EU has already sounded that it would treat Iran’s military supplies to Russia and massive human right violations against women protesters separately.

Hardening of Positions

On the contrary, Biden made his stance vis-à-vis Iran even harder during his Middle East visit³⁹. First, he would not remove the IRGC from the terrorist list and second, if Iran went nuclear he would not shy away from using force.⁴⁰ With Arab leaders, he put Iran and oil at the top of his agenda. US and Saudi Arabia agreed on stopping Iran’s bid for nuclear weapons. Another major take away from Biden’s visit to Saudi Arabia was that he will ensure there was no vacuum in the Middle East for China and Russia to fill⁴¹. A swift response to American moves came from President Raisi who declared Iran would “not accept any insecurity or crisis in the region’ and the US and its allies should know that any mistake will be met by a harsh and regrettable response⁴². The threat took ominous turn when Kamal Kharrazi, an adviser to the Supreme Leader told Al Jazeera on July 18, 2022 that “Iran is technically capable of making a nuclear bomb but has not decided whether to build one”. Iran was able to enrich uranium up to 60% when Trump reneged from the nuclear deal. It can “produce 90% enriched uranium. Iran has the technical means to produce a nuclear bomb but there has been no decision by Iran to build one,”⁴³ Kharrazi said Iran would never negotiate its ballistic missile programme and regional policy, as demanded by the West and its allies.⁴⁴ Off late, there is some softening in their stance. Is it a strategic policy change or mere posturing? The US is not presently focused⁴⁵ on the deal the road to an endgame remains unclear⁴⁶. In the wake of new arrangements in the region, ambivalence will mark the day.

Russian and Chinese Overtures to Arab States

The US priority to confront Russia and China may not sit well with the Arab states. They are pursuing cooperation with Russia and China. Putin’s visit to Iran on 19 July 2022 to meet Iran’s Supreme Leader and President, and Turkey’s President Erdogan may unnerve Arab countries further as they may think that the US pressure is driving Iran in the lap of Putin. US is alarmed as serious signs of

differences have surfaced: Saudi abstention on the UNGA resolution to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its inclination to join BRICS Plus (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa-Plus). In its calculations, Russia and China were behind this shift. Russia is now focusing on developing its ties with Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are Russia's principal partners in OPEC + format. Turkey and Iran are major independent players in a key strategic region. The fact that the vast majority of non-Western countries refused to condemn Russia for what it is doing in Ukraine, many of them despite strong US pressure, is most encouraging for Moscow.

In Iran, Putin's discussions revolved around grain exports, Syria, Ukraine and the reality behind Biden's commitments to the region during his visit to Saudi Arabia. As it looks, the visit is designed to go beyond scoring points with US. It provided Russia an opportunity to deepen ties with Iran, one of Moscow's few remaining international allies and a fellow target of Western economic sanctions. Reports from Tehran suggested that the trip had symbolic meaning for Putin's domestic audience as well, showing off Russia's international clout. Iran also benefitted immensely. Putin strongly supported Iran and called for full revival of JCPOA and a complete lifting of sanctions against Iran to allow a "free development of cooperation in any areas without any discrimination."⁴⁷

The Russian Gazprom has signed a new development deal worth \$40 Billion with Iran's State oil company. Already, there is strong perception that Iran, China and Russia are exploiting every available opportunity to get closer to each other. China and Iran signed a 25-year 'strategic cooperation pact' in March 2021. A similar 20-year agreement is underway with Russia. In June 2022, both countries signed a MoU on road transportation at the Road Transportation Joint Committee meeting in Moscow. Sanctions imposed by Europe and the US on Russia due to Ukraine war made them realize more cutely how imperative it was to have this cooperation⁴⁸. Iran has already supplied combat drones to Russia for use in Ukraine. Most importantly, Putin's visit manifested that "international sanctions have failed to isolate Russia, and that some of its friends are sticking around, like Turkey and Iran and it retains geo-political influence."⁴⁹

This emerging matrix is not free from rivalry between Russia and Turkey and Iran. In Syria and in Libya, both Turkey and Russia oppose each other; they compete for influence in the South Caucasus. As for Iran, it is competing with

Russia in global energy markets. There is no guarantee of long-lasting friendship.⁵⁰ China's enhanced cooperation with Iran as evident by agreements signed during President Xi's visit to Iran in September 2022 caused concerns in US and Saudi Arabia. But mostly it was seen in geo-economic terms as China's position on the nuclear deal is unshakable.

Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan's relations with Iran, when seen beyond the historic and shared affinities, offer multidimensional opportunities as well as challenges, merely because they are neighbors. The complexity often limits their drive to inject depth and substance in their relations. Pakistan does not find it easy to deal with Iran. The solution to solve this puzzle is not easy either. The cordial frigidness of Iran-Pakistan relations manifests a culture of distrust based on religious differences, a history of policy differences in Afghanistan and competing political influence in CARs. A nuclear-armed Iran, or even a threshold state is likely to further complicate the relations. Pakistan welcomed the Iran nuclear deal and supports Iran's sovereign right to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, not any development beyond this.

But the reality is that a return to the 2015 nuclear deal is not around the corner. It is nearly dead, a flat still line. Talks, negotiations and diplomacy are being denied any chance to revive it. Many believe, and also confirmed by a senior aid to the Iranian spiritual leader recently that as diplomacy faltered, Iran moved ahead defying the agreed parameters of the deal. This is a significant new development. Pakistan needs to watch its impact carefully for three reasons if not more: first, its geographic proximity to Iran, second, rapidly transforming strategic and tactical geopolitics of the Middle East and third, Pakistan's status as the only Islamic nuclear state.

Iran's new status as a nuclear state or threshold nuclear state would escalate the realpolitik tensions and geopolitical power rivalry particularly in the Persian Gulf region. Mindful of the tremendous pressure it faced from Saudi Arabia in case of Yemen, Pakistan's ambassador to the UN, Munir Akram, had once in a press article advised withdrawing direct support for the nuclear deal for fear that it might antagonize Riyadh whose "stability and prosperity are in Pakistan's national interest"⁵¹ In another article in New York Times, he called into question the mind-set of US regarding Pakistan's nuclear programme that its

mindset would strengthen the perception in the Muslim World that US desires to denuclearize all Islamic countries.⁵²

Another factor that imperils Pakistan's foreign policy objectives is the deep hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The enmity due to recent political developments in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen where Iran's influence has been rising, makes it harder to emerge unhurt from Iran-Saudi-Israeli equation. As a by-product of this, Iranian nuclear deal or no deal needs to be assessed in the context of both geopolitical and geo-economics ground realities. Iran's relationship with Sunni-majority Pakistan has often been one of restrained fear and loathing, dating back to the spring of 1998.⁵³ According to Behraves, Iran is concerned about the "fastest-growing" nuclear arsenal of Pakistan and "the risk of falling it into the wrong hands".

The neighboring countries including China, India, Russia and CARs, like Pakistan, do not support a nuclear Iran. For them too, it would ignite a regional nuclear arms race in which the Arab states and Israel would react strongly, plunging the region into a new and dangerous phase of chaos and unmanageable instability. The new status will embolden the entire Iranian-led radical axis and Shia minorities in Sunni states, sparking sectarian tensions.

Overall, the implications of the JCPOA for Pakistan are complex and multifaceted, and will depend on a range of factors including the outcome of the negotiations, Iran's actions, and the responses of other regional powers. In essence, its implications for Pakistan are largely indirect.

If JCPOA succeeds, this could have positive implications for Pakistan's economic and energy interests. Iran is a key neighbor and trading partner for Pakistan, and the lifting of sanctions could open up new opportunities for economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. JCPOA could affect Pakistan's security interests, particularly in the context of the Afghanistan. JCPOA could potentially give Iran more space and resources to influence events in Afghanistan. This could have both positive and negative implications for Pakistan, depending on Iran's actions and intentions. JCPOA could have implications for Pakistan's relations with the US, which is a key party to the agreement. If the US re-joins the JCPOA and eases sanctions on Iran, this could marginally improve the US image with the people of Pakistan.

Indian Factor

Pakistan feels inhibited by growing India-Iran relations⁵⁴. It finds India's Iran policy more than a balancing act to secure its national interests and to counterweight Pakistan. It rather sees India using its civilizational links with Iran to pursue anti Pakistan activities. The Indian factor sometime causes irritants in the Iran-Pakistan relations. But both adversaries share the view that the new status of a nuclear power would negatively impact on the region and broader agenda of non-proliferation. Both support revival of the Iran nuclear deal.

Perils and Prospects-Deal or No Deal

A denuclearized Iran could in part alleviate some problems in the region rooted in the country's tense relations with its neighbors. Sanctions will be lifted (in phases) allowing projects like the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, tackling conflicts in Middle East by involving Iran (while taking into account the sensitivities of Saudi Arabia) and normalizing Iranian ties with European countries, and stabilizing oil and energy supplies. The spin off such a situation presents would be huge for economically starved Pakistan. It may not need to readjust or realign its existing nuanced policy of neutrality over Saudi-Iranian ties as approved by the parliament's resolution on April 10, 2015 assuring that the Kingdom's "territorial integrity" and the defense of the "holy places" are high on Pakistan's agenda, and Pakistan would rather "play a mediating role and not get involved in the fighting in Yemen"⁵⁵ For Pakistan, the "no deal scenario" means; continued instability in Afghanistan, non-implementation of Pak-Iran gas pipeline project due to sanctions, non-connectivity of Iran with CPEC, and a possible speedy realignment with the Indian-sponsored Chahbahar sea port and transportation projects, diminishing prospects to realize its geo-economic vision, and finally no slackening in Indian sponsored terrorist activities against Pakistan using Iranian territory⁵⁶. It is rather a frightening scenario as it may encourage Iran to scale up enrichment process shortening the breakout time.

Conclusion

The prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough are low. There are no winners in case of no deal. The key players are upscaling their already untenable rhetorical positions. They are soliciting strategic support from friends and allies to raise the ante; the US should accept the agreed deal without delisting the IRGC and Iran asks for removal of sanctions. As the time passes, the prospects for revival of the nuclear deal are diminishing and ambiguities are thickening. Even

the confluence between Iran and EU countries on some issues has started eroding despite their earlier pragmatic policy to avoid heavy costs of US sanctions on their economies. Their support for the Iran nuclear deal may not be collapsing but they are unhappy with Iran for linking new issues to the deal. They want the deal and showed their willingness to discuss the other issues separately. The Ukrainian war and the resultant gas shortages have created unprecedented crisis affecting their economies. They want the deal so that they can have access to Iranian gas and oil. For the time being, the beneficiaries of the collapse of the deal i.e. Israel, Saudi Arabia, the US Republicans and Iranian hard liners are winning. For instance, Javad Heiran-Nia⁵⁷ (Javad Heiran-Nia, director Centre for scientific Research and Middle East Studies in Iran; Are Israel and the Arab States Allaying Against Iran? *The National Interest*, September 28, 2022) builds on the Middle East NATO concept and asserts that in case of continued stalemate or failure, tensions in the region would escalate and may lead to faster expansion in rapprochement as per the Abraham Accord.

The gain of torturous negotiations is being lost for transient posturing by both sides. New strategy based on pragmatic diplomacy is nowhere in evidence. The talks have riveted to the old theme that the Iran deal was “winning a little, losing a lot”. If the deal survives in any form, it will be a plus for security and stability, notwithstanding a puffed-up Iran and more assertiveness in dealing attendant ideologically related issues. So much bad blood has been spilled that review of the sealed nuclear deal would be acceptable only after discovering any major breach. In all possibility, Iran will stick to the deal and pursue carefully its nuclear strategy in the light of available models including “Japan to be a screwdriver-turn away from having a nuclear weapon.” Iran may face multiple sanctions consistent with JCOPA. Additionally, even after revival of JCPOA, Iran may be denied the facility to trade in dollar denomination and immediate access to US financial institutions. Most likely, international financial intuitions would continue to avoid financial transactions with Iran. There may not be international parties to fund energy projects Pakistan seeks with Iran. The Iran- US relations are not likely to improve to the extent that US would start ignoring Iranian influence in Middle East and its domestic human rights violations. The specter of US sanctions would continue to lurk, making investors hesitant to put money in new projects or fund the ongoing projects. The revival of JCPOA is a mixed blessing for international peace and security. Its revival will be generally welcomed but may lead to fresh challenges due to fluid international political order.

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