The P5+1 and Iran Nuclear Negotiation: Status, Prospects, and Congress’ Role

January 21, 2015

On January 21, 2015, the Arms Control Association and The Lugar Center hosted a briefing for Congressional staff in the Dirksen Senate office building to discuss the on-going negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran over Iran’s nuclear program. The event aimed to answer the following questions: What would a good, comprehensive agreement with Iran look like? What is the outlook for such an agreement? How should Congress weigh-in? What impact would new sanctions have on the prospects for a final agreement?

Paul Pillar, a Brookings Institution senior fellow and former CIA analyst, began the discussion with an overview of the negotiations. Pillar said that Iranians are very keen and well-informed regarding American politics and legislative action, and that Congress doesn’t need to pass legislation right now to indicate that if the nuclear talks fail, further sanctions will be imposed on Iran. Pillar warned that if sanctions legislation were passed, this could weaken Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and their ability to negotiate a final agreement acceptable to the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Furthermore, the United States could reasonably expect the Majlis, Iran’s Parliament, to retaliate.

Michael Singh, managing director at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and former National Security Council, noted that the interim agreement, known as the Joint Plan of Action, is the second best option for both the United States and Iran in that it offers limited sanctions relief for Iran and limited restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program for the west. Singh doubted whether more sanctions would actually be implemented should the nuclear talks fail and pointed particularly to some international allies who may not be as keen to renew sanctions on Iran. Singh noted that he is doubtful that Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will sign a final agreement with the United States and highlighted instances where Khamenei has both supported the negotiators but also undermined negotiators by setting redlines that limited their flexibility. Singh also noted that the White House should work with Congress and show a willingness to implement new sanctions if the talks fail instead of threatening to veto new sanctions.

Elizabeth Rosenberg, senior fellow and program director at the Center for a New American Security, argued that Iran’s economy is currently weak and that the rollback of certain sanctions and unfreezing of a limited amount of assets under the Joint Plan of Action have had a limited effect on improving Iran’s economy. Rosenberg said legislating more sanctions now could be self-defeating and fatal to negotiations. She said Iran would see new sanctions as an act of bad faith by the United States and demonstrate that the administration cannot actually deliver sanctions relief down the road if a deal is
reached. In addition, she said that new unilateral U.S. sanctions would anger the U.S. negotiating partners in the P5+1 and could result in the unraveling of the multilateral sanctions regime. Rosenberg also warned that new sanctions will not result in Iran halting their enrichment, but will likely decrease the transparency in regards to their nuclear program.

Speakers:

● **Dr. Paul Pillar**, Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence in the Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, and former CIA intelligence officer

● **Mr. Michael Singh**, Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and Managing Director at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and former Senior Director for Middle East Affairs at the National Security Council

● **Ms. Elizabeth Rosenberg**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Energy, Environment, and Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, and former Senior Advisor at the U.S. Department of the Treasury
  ● “Don't Wreck the Iran Talks,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2014

Source: Arms Control Association

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