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Will Iran have a nuclear bomb?

Iran has advanced in uranium enrichment, while the US is unable to make commitments. But there is still hope for the nuclear deal

As of this Monday, negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme will resume in Vienna. This is good news, even if success is by no means guaranteed. After a five-month break in talks surrounding the change of government in Tehran, the first task is to find common ground once more.

Three central points stand in the way of a compromise that would severely limit Iran's nuclear programme again in return for the lifting of numerous US sanctions. First, Washington is apparently not willing to give the co-signatories binding guarantees that - after its exit in 2018 - it will henceforth abide by the Vienna nuclear agreement of 2015. Secondly, Iran has made enormous progress in uranium enrichment in the meantime. The country is now technologically on the threshold of possessing a nuclear bomb, which greatly worries its entire neighbourhood - the Arab states as well as Israel. Thirdly, the geopolitical balance of power in the region and beyond has shifted, making cooperation in the nuclear dossier increasingly difficult. Apart from Russia as a security actor on the ground, this is especially true of the global rivalry between the two superpowers China and the USA, which is rubbing off on conflict management around Iran.

Two unwilling parties

Joe Biden had already announced in his 2020 election campaign that he intended to return to the Vienna Agreement, which his predecessor had rescinded and to which Iran subsequently also no longer saw itself bound. However, all those who had expected a quick resumption of the talks, ideally before the Iranian presidential election in June 2021, were left disappointed. Instead of preparing a negotiating offer to Iran, the Biden administration continued the previous administration's 'maximum pressure campaign' almost unchanged.

Similarly, the administration has so far failed to provide details on how it

envisions the 'longer and stronger' deal it supposedly seeks, let alone what it would do if the negotiations fail. Ultimately, the US has reportedly so far refused to give any kind of guarantee to Iran that it will abide by the agreement at least until the end of the current presidency.

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If Washington's course sometimes seems unclear, what is troubling about Tehran's strategy is precisely its supposed clarity: a year after the US pulled out of the agreement, Iran began to disregard the agreed restrictions. The country has been slowly but surely moving closer to the bomb ever since.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is responsible for monitoring the agreement that is still in force, but which is increasingly hampered in its work by Iran, is sounding the alarm in regular reports in view of these advances. High-ranking delegations of the UN agency have already travelled to Tehran several times this year to ensure at least basic monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities. Because without this knowledge - for example about the production of advanced centrifuges or the verification of suspicious traces of radioactivity outside monitored facilities - the international community can hardly build up a picture of the country's nuclear infrastructure.

A neighbourhood under pressure

Such a review is necessary not only for a possible new or revised deal, but also for a realistic - rather than alarmist - assessment of Iranian activities by neighbouring countries. The nuclear confrontation has long since reached the other side of the Persian Gulf, reinforcing the decades-long Saudi-Iranian struggle for regional dominance. Riyadh has made it unmistakably clear that it will not back down from its rival on any issue: If Iran enriches uranium, Saudi Arabia intends to do the same. The same applies to the construction of a nuclear bomb.

The neighbouring United Arab Emirates (UAE) are politically more reserved, but technologically already a step ahead. While Saudi Arabia has so far only pushed ahead with plans for domestic nuclear energy, the first commercially operated nuclear reactor in the Arab world has been running in Abu Dhabi since the end of 2020. The Emirates have agreed to important international non-proliferation restrictions for this. Riyadh, on the other hand, continues to try to circumvent them. The nuclear arms race in the region, which was already looming in the background during the previous negotiations between 2003 and 2015, is now within reach. The renewed restriction of the Iranian programme would at least

reduce the - self-generated - pressure of the Arab neighbours to catch up in terms of nuclear technology.

Changing dynamics

In the end, however, the negotiating dynamics between the regional and world powers have also changed in recent years. The increasing focus of the United States on confrontation with China has led to a gradual but discernible withdrawal of the Americans from the region. This was particularly felt by the Arab allies in recent years when Washington did not come to their aid after multiple attacks on their own oil infrastructure, which were attributed to Iran.

States like Qatar, the UAE and even Saudi Arabia are engaged in direct talks with Tehran to reduce tensions in the region.

To compensate for the threat of weakening American protection, some Gulf states are now pursuing a double strategy. On the one hand, they have intensified cooperation with Israel, with whom they share concerns about Iran's regional rise in power. With the Abraham Accords of 2020, Bahrain and the UAE have become the third and fourth Arab states to recognise Israel. At the same time, states like Qatar, the UAE and even Saudi Arabia are engaged in direct talks with Tehran to reduce tensions in the region. This security policy approach towards Iran is a sign that its strategy has worked: to show its neighbours that they will not be safe as long as Tehran feels threatened.

Meanwhile, through years of cooperation with Iran and Israel in the Syrian civil war, Russia has also emerged as an actor with its own security interests in the region. China, in turn, cleverly links the existing tension in Southeast Asia to the nuclear dossier. With reference to the recently concluded AUKUS alliance between the USA, Great Britain and Australia, Beijing accuses the American and British negotiating partners of having double standards. This is because AUKUS foresees the sale of nuclear-powered submarines from the USA to Australia, including the associated transfer of certain nuclear technology. Yet this is precisely what Iran is intended to be deprived of.

It is worth getting back to the

negotiation table?

Against this background, it will not be easy to bring the world powers to an agreement in Vienna. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the USA is only allowed to participate indirectly, as it is no longer a part of the agreement - a condition imposed by Iran for the resumption of negotiations. Even the mere return to the original agreement is now seen as delicate because of Iranian progress and the imponderables of US policy.

So is it even worth returning to the negotiating table? Most certainly. An interim agreement, for example, could ease tensions and lay the groundwork for broader negotiations by first restricting uranium enrichment and allowing the IAEA to resume comprehensive monitoring. In return, countries like the US and the UK would release frozen Iranian assets. This has a quicker and more targeted effect than the complicated and lengthy lifting of US sanctions. But even such an intermediate step presupposes the political will of all parties to reach an agreement. Only then can the 'spirit of Vienna', which is fed by the summit meetings during the Cold War as well as the conclusion of negotiations there in 2015, contribute to success.



Cornelius Adebahr
Berlin

Cornelius Adebahr is a political analyst, consultant, and lecturer living in Berlin, Germany. His work focuses on European foreign policy issues, transatlantic relations, and Iran. He recently pulished his book "Europe and Iran: The Nuclear Deal and Beyond" and "Inside Iran".