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Why an Iran Deal Must Be Sealed Now

By Moritz Pieper

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Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. This simple clause from the "joint plan of action" negotiated in Geneva last November between Iran and the P5+1 (the permanent Security Council members plus Germany) captures the spirit of the talks over Iran's controversial nuclear program as delegations enter the final negotiating phase before the Nov. 24 deadline. The seven negotiation teams are now a week away from a potentially historic nuclear deal with Iran.

Delegations from the U.S., the European External Action Service and Iran recently convened in Oman to discuss further details of a possible comprehensive joint plan of action. The German, French, British, Russian and Chinese delegates joined later and are scheduled to reconvene again this week for the final round of negotiations in Vienna before the deadline of Nov. 24.

As reported by The New York Times two weeks ago, the shipment of parts of Iran's nuclear stockpile to Russia to be made into fuel for Iranian nuclear power plants could be part of a final nuclear settlement, and is reminiscent of the idea of a fuel-swap deal already discussed in late 2009. It remains to be seen whether the idea of a multilateralization of Iran's nuclear

fuel cycle is still realistic, given Iranian sensitivities about perceived infringements of its sovereign rights. It also needs to be spelled out how and where enrichment can take place.

But while most experts are cautiously optimistic about hammering out a deal by the deadline, Iran seized the opportunity to remind all parties that sanctions must be lifted, not suspended, as part of such a deal. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has underlined the authority of President Barack Obama's administration to suspend Iran sanctions, though is wary of congressional skepticism regarding an agreement with Iran. The administration knows that a comprehensive joint plan of action with Iran could be scuttled in the maelstrom of U.S. domestic institutional shadow-boxing.

Reports by U.S. media on Nov. 7 of a letter sent by Obama to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei indicate that Obama needs an agreement with Iran for important geopolitical reasons. A tacit cooperation with Iran on matters of regional concern such as the fight against the Islamic State — is conditioned on an agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program. Iranian officials confirmed that Obama has reached out to Khamenei with such a letter.

Short-term political objectives outweigh long-term structural challenges associated with the narrative of a U.S.-Iranian ideological enmity. About 40 percent of the United States' sanctions against Iran are based on executive orders given by the U.S. president. The remaining 60 percent are codified into law by Congress. Lifting these latter sanctions require congressional legislation repealing them. The State Department's remarks indicated that an accommodation with Iran is too important to be scuttled by institutional politicking.

Meanwhile, Obama said his administration has offered a framework plan to meet Iran's nuclear energy needs. Referring to a "progressive step-by-step verifiable way" to ensure that Iran's nuclear program is peaceful, Obama in fact harked back to diplomatic language used three years ago by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

The impression prevails that Obama is hedging against attacks from any side that may have a vested interest in seeing a deal with Iran derailed. While the U.S. government is quick to say on any occasion that an issue linkage between regional violence in Iraq and Syria and the Iranian nuclear talks is a non-starter, Obama needs a deal as much as his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani does.

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