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### **THE IRAN DEAL: LOOKING BEYOND THE 'NUCLEAR'**

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The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran Nuclear Deal was signed between the E3/EU+3 (the United States, China, the Russian Federation, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) and the Islamic Republic of Iran on 14 July 2015. The nuclear deal is to ensure that, "... Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful..."<sup>i</sup> in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. The 159-page agreement, which includes a main text and five technical annexes, was unveiled in Vienna after weeks of lengthy talks and within the contours of the framework agreement agreed upon in April 2015.<sup>ii</sup>

Given the history of the relationship between the United States and Iran, the nuclear deal has generated a considerable amount of debate within the United States. Opponents of the deal are of the opinion that it is detrimental to the United States' interests, in particular, and those of the Middle East, in general. Proponents point out that it is in the interest of the United States to improve relations with a country, which plays an influential role in a crisis prone region. They also express the view that being aware of the nuclear programme of Iran, through the international verification process, is in the interest of the security of the United States and its alliance partners, in both Europe and the Middle East.

While the deal has been a joint effort between the E3/EU+3 and Iran, it has been largely viewed as a deal between the United States and Iran. The deal is being viewed as a beginning in a relationship that has been fragmented and based on distrust. Thus, the deal is not confined to just



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addressing the 'nuclear' issue but has larger geo-political and strategic implications for both countries.

**F**or Iran, the emphasis has been on the removal of economic sanctions. While, Iran has been under United States imposed sanctions since 1979, the sanctions applied by the international community in 2012, following further revelations about the Iranian nuclear programme have had a detrimental effect on the economy. While taking a stand for its civil nuclear programme, Iran has demanded that sanctions be removed and Iran allowed to fully participate in international commerce.

**T**he deal also brings recognition to Iran, as a nation that can influence the politics of the region. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, for the leadership of the Gulf region, has led to the two countries trying to increase their power, by supporting various factions and groups in the crisis prone region. Saudi Arabia has been wary of Iranian rise and has been cautious in expressing its support or disapproval of the nuclear deal. The Arab region has long been an ally of the United States and post the signing of the deal, US Secretary of Defence Mr Ashton Carter, has been on a tour of the region to reassure allies that the deal would not be damaging to their security.

**W**ith the deal, the international isolation that Iran was facing as a result of the United States pressure has lifted. Iran can now be invited to play a stabilising role in the region. The common threat to both the United States' and Iranian interests in the region is the radical/extremist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. The deal could allow the two countries to establish a tactical agreement to cooperate against these groups increasing reach<sup>iii</sup>. It is a possibility that the two countries may work together to bring stable governments in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, it is not likely that we would see a strategic relationship emerging between the two nations.

**F**or the United States, the deal not only ensures that Iran is unable to develop nuclear weapons technology but also brings accountability through the implementation of the verification regime. The



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international community has to strengthen the IAEA and empower it to conduct this task as best as possible.

**T**he deal also provides the United States with an opportunity to re-engage with Iran, a nation it has a relationship that is fragmented and suspicious. For Iran, its nuclear programme is a matter of pride and to be able to accept certain conditionalities on it is evidence that Iran is also willing to move forward. Much has been spoken about the United States 'pivot to Asia'; but it would not be able to disengage from the Middle East. It has major alliance partners in and around the region that depend on its security support and will ensure that the United States continues to be involved in the region. For the United States, to be able to focus on Asia, it would need a stable Middle East.

**T**he United States policy to reconnect with Iran is probably also due to a waning interest within the United States to militarily engage in conflicts. After more than a decade and a half, the United States has withdrawn its troops from both Iraq and Afghanistan; it is unwilling to recommit them to the region again. It is perhaps also recognition by the United States of the limits of its global reach to engage in every crisis situation.

**D**espite the United States efforts to isolate Iran, Iran has considerable influence among the nations of the region. With the region facing turmoil, it is in the interest of the United States to engage Iran in persuading various groups to negotiate for peace.

**S**anctions, though effective, have not stalled the Iranian economy. Ambiguity and loopholes in the sanctions have been exploited by nations to continue to do business with Iran, with the United States being the only exception. With the nations of Asia and Europe unwilling to continue with sanctions on Iran in light of Iran's willingness to negotiate, it would have been counter-productive for the United States to ignore the potential of the country in the economic and geo-political sphere.



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In the author's opinion it is premature to view the deal as a success that would promote nuclear non-proliferation in the region and greater transparency of the Iranian nuclear programme, or as a failure that would have allowed Iran time to augment its military strength. The deal, to reach implementation stages, needs to be endorsed by the US Congress and the Iranian Parliament, both have a sixty day review period. The first major success of the deal thus, would be if it is endorsed by the legislatures of the two countries and thereafter implemented. Nonetheless, as mentioned there are peripheral advantages that should not be overlooked and may be used as leverage to argue for a favourable outcome.

If one is to judge the deal then the success is the fact that it brought the two nations to talk with each other. It is unlikely that hostilities between the two will cease in the near future, but the deal has paved the way for both to be able to come to the table, to hold discussions on the way forward.

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***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

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<sup>i</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action text is available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/271540181/Nuclear-Deal-Text>.

<sup>ii</sup> ---, "Republicans fume over Iran nuclear deal but hope of undermining accord is slim", The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/14/republicans-iran-nuclear-deal-reaction>, (Accessed on 28 July 2015)

<sup>iii</sup> Kathy Gilsinan, "Theory of U.S.-Iran Relations", The Atlantic, 02 July 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/07/iran-nuclear-deal-isis/397604/>, (Accessed on 23 July 2014)