

# BREAKTHROUGH OVER IRAN

Jayantha Dhanapala expresses a sense of optimism over the prospect of world peace

Even cynics must admit that the time comes in international relations when long-frozen situations suddenly thaw, causing positive change for international peace and security. Examples of such game changers are many, but outstanding (in chronological order) are US President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972; the 1978 Camp David Accord on the Middle East; the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, signifying the end of the Cold War; and South African President F. W. de Klerk's release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, leading to the final dismantlement of apartheid in South Africa in 1994.

We were fortunate to witness two such dramatic events in quick succession last year. There was the agreement on Syria's chemical weapons in September, and although the Syrian civil war continues its bloody course, the worst is seemingly over. We are now headed towards the Geneva II Conference, scheduled for the end of January.

And we now have the 24 November, in Geneva, interim agreement on a Joint Action Plan for six months between the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany facilitated by the European Union) and Iran achieving a peaceful resolution to the problem of Iran's nuclear programme. It caused acute tensions, threatening to erupt into war, for about a decade.



Today, the world is a better and safer place as a result of all these events.

**STATEMENT ON IRAN** The Joint Statement issued by the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and the Iranian Foreign Minister

Mohammad Javad Zarif states: "After intensive negotiations, we reached an agreement today on a joint plan of action which sets out an approach towards reaching a long-term comprehensive solution. We agreed that the process leading

to this comprehensive solution would include a first step on initial reciprocal measures to be taken for both sides for a duration of six months. We also share a strong commitment to negotiate a final, comprehensive solution."

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AFP PHOTO/HEMMAI KHAFI/ISNA

**SIGNS OF VICTORY** A photo obtained from Iran's ISNA news agency shows supporters of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif flashing the victory sign, as he arrived at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport following talks in Geneva. World powers reached an agreement with Iran over its nuclear programme on 24 November.

secretly over a long period of time.

Amidst the numerous claims for credit in negotiating the breakthrough, there is the unsubstantiated report that the Sultan of Oman was a key broker, since the secret talks were conducted in Muscat by a team of US diplomats led by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns. Significantly, these contacts began during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, but accelerated after Rouhani's election.

For Iran, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei prepared the ground by telling a carefully chosen audience of hawkish elements that a red line for Iran was the right to enrich uranium for peaceful uses of nuclear energy. It was a matter of national pride.

Iran had already enriched large quantities of uranium in pursuance of its right to do so. In fact, no such right is explicitly stated in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which Iran has signed and ratified. At the same time, the enrichment of uranium is also not prohibited by the NPT.

**NUTS AND BOLTS**

It is important to clarify here that plutonium and uranium are the two indispensable raw materials necessary for the manufacture of nuclear weapons.

The active materials are fissile uranium (uranium with a high percentage of U-235) and plutonium (Pu-239), explosively assembled into a chain-reacting critical mass. Uranium, in its raw state, is unsuitable for such manufacture.

For the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, uranium enriched to five or 3.5 percent is used for power reactors; 20 percent for research reactors; and 80-90 percent for a bomb.

**CURRENT AFFAIRS**



The deal, spelt out in four pages, calls for Iran to halt most – but not all – of its uranium enrichment efforts; eliminate its stockpile of enriched uranium through conversion and blending; open its facilities to daily monitoring by international inspectors; significantly slow the construction of the Arak

reactor; as well as a promise of immediate relief for Iran from sanctions, amounting to an estimated value of US\$ 7 billion, with more to follow – and no more sanctions in the future.

**ROUHANI'S INFLUENCE** It was the election of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani as Iran's President in June last year that

changed the atmosphere. Rouhani visited New York for the UN General Assembly, assuring the world of Iran's peaceful intentions. His telephone call to President Barack Obama promised positive results.

It is now revealed that the outline of an agreement and a road map had been discussed

Iran makes the telling point that in the early stages of negotiations in 2003 with the Bush Administration, it offered to stop uranium enrichment when it had 164 centrifuges. But since the West rejected this, it went on to enrich 19,000 centrifuges (11,000 estimated to be usable), with second-generation centrifuges about to be commissioned.

The text of the deal makes it clear that Iran is allowed to keep five percent of its enriched uranium, subject to daily verification visits by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in two of its facilities – Fordow and Natanz. That is a victory for Iran, but the deal obliges Iran to give up a stockpile of up to 20 percent of the uranium enriched (by diluting and converting it into uranium oxide) and refrain from operating the idle centrifuges, as well as halt the production and installation of new second-generation centrifuges.

The facility at Arak – which had been the focus of Israeli allegations that it will use plutonium – will have to cease working, unless it is subjected to IAEA safeguards. The deal has to follow an Action Plan, and it will last for a duration of six months, after which a more permanent understanding has to be negotiated.

And the agreement says: “Following successful implementation of the final step



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of the comprehensive solution for its full duration, the Iranian nuclear programme will be treated in the same manner as that of any non-nuclear weapon state party to the NPT.”

That would be an excellent conclusion, but much will depend on how the deal is implemented. Spoilers – especially Israel, Saudi Arabia and Republicans in the US Congress – are at work to wreck the deal.

The P5+1-Iran interim agreement has been welcomed by an overwhelming majority of the international community, including some significant persons in Israel. It has relieved tensions in the Middle East, where Iran – with its huge influence with Shiite groups – can help mitigate sectarian clashes.

**OPPOSITION FORCES** US Secretary of State John Kerry has begun his term with laudable ambitions to make progress on a two-state solution

for Palestine, but has had to face stubborn opposition from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Iran deal may encourage Kerry to persist, especially since the Obama Administration will be in power for three more years.

Palestine is undoubtedly the crux of the Middle East problem from which much of the hate-fuelling terrorism arises. With a solution to the Palestine problem, the world will see a significant reduction of terrorism.

Iran can help in achieving solutions to problems in Syria and Afghanistan in the coming months. The re-entry of Iranian oil and gas to the world’s markets will benefit everyone, especially developing countries like Sri Lanka which has good relations with Iran. Further implications are the impact this agreement is likely to have on the North Korean nuclear programme.

The road to be traversed in the next six months is dangerously mined. Avoiding the dangers will require sincerity and goodwill on the part of all concerned parties. The European Union (EU), especially its High Representative Ashton, has been dogged in its determination.

But within the P5, France has played a dubious game with lucrative arms deals with Saudi Arabia. The IAEA will have to cooperate by fulfilling its role, but the statements made by its pro-US Japanese head Yukiya Amano thus far have not been encouraging. Fresh responsibilities cast on the IAEA will add to its budget, which the US and EU will be expected to cover.

The process of convening the conference on the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone, required by the 2010 NPT Review Conference, may receive a fillip from the Iranian deal, and thus improve prospects for the 2015 NPT Review Conference as well as the overall longevity of the NPT.

Thus, while Obama’s diplomacy has succeeded, he faces huge pressures. Mid-term Congressional elections are due in the Fall of 2014; and until then, the Obama Administration will face many problems in Congress. Holding off additional sanctions on Iran will add to these barriers. The breakthrough has many enemies, so the parties must ensure it works.