



IRAN IN FOCUS

A Monthly Brief

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Table of Contents

Summary	P. 1
JCPOA Negotiations and Regional Shows of Force: Iran's Janus-Faced Foreign Policy Strategy?	P. 2
China to Open Consulate in Iran's Most Important Commercial Port Amid Tehran's Deepening "Look to the East"	P. 6
International: President Raisi Meets Putin in Moscow	P. 8
More Insights: Articles, Panel Discussions, and Press Commentary	P.10



SUMMARY

In this first edition, Iran In Focus zooms into some of the aspects of the Islamic Republic's "look to the East" geopolitical strategy, as this January witnessed two widely-reported developments, first with Iranian President Raisi meeting Russia's President Putin at the Kremlin and second the implementation of a 25-year "strategic partnership" agreement with China announced by Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abollahian upon his return from Beijing. Moreover, the brief examines the state of the Vienna negotiations over the revival of the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as they turn decisive, from both Tehran's and Washington's positions, as well as in context of Iran's foreign-policy strategy. Iran in Focus then ends with a short list of background articles and discussions.

JCPOA Negotiations and Regional Shows of Force: Iran's Janus-Faced Foreign Policy Strategy?

In late January, the Vienna talks over the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal were paused, with the delegations returning to their respective capitals for what may be political consultations for important decisions to be made the following week. In this context, a top White House Middle East official [said](#) “we are in the ballpark” of a possible deal to restore US and Iranian full compliance with the JCPOA. With Iran boosting its nuclear program, concerns about the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal had already resurfaced in the West last year. More recently, at a Berlin news conference on January 20, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken after meeting his British, French and German counterparts [stated that](#) “we are indeed at a decisive moment,” adding that “there is real urgency and it’s really now a matter of weeks, where we determine whether or not we can return to mutual compliance with the agreement.”

On the Iranian side, since the start of the Vienna talks, Iran had refused to negotiate with the US delegation directly, Iran’s foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian [said](#) “if we get to a stage where reaching a good deal with strong guarantees necessitates direct talks with the US, we will consider it.” He then added that “reports saying that Iran and the US are directly negotiating with one another are untrue.” Also, Ali Shamkhani, the secretary-general of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), [tweeted](#) that “contact with the American delegation in Vienna has been through informal written exchanges, and there was no need and will be no need, for more contact, so far. This communication method can only be replaced by other methods when #GoodAgreement is available.” His statement can be interpreted as a sign that he agrees with direct talks between the Islamic Republic and the White House to take place.

Meanwhile, while both Washington and Tehran have signaled their willingness to reach an agreement, the US team has reportedly faced disagreements, resulting in three of its members leaving. First, it was reported that Richard Nephew, the State Department’s deputy special envoy for Iran who is known as one of the architects of the previous economic sanction regime against Iran during the Obama administration, has left the team to assume other role at State. However, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#), “Two other members of the team, which is led by State Department veteran Robert Malley, have stepped back from the talks, the people familiar said, because they also wanted a harder negotiating stance.” Seemingly, the strife between Malley and those members of the team is related to how far the US should leverage the existing “maximum pressure” sanctions regime force Iran into more concessions and whether to cut off negotiations as Iran drags them out while its “nuclear escalation” strategy continues.

Meanwhile, throughout the Middle East, this January saw a series of incidents involving

groups allied to Iran (including the Yemeni Houthis' drone attack on Abu Dhabi as well as rocket attacks in Baghdad), leading to speculations on what Iran's current strategy may be amid a critical time in the Vienna negotiations over the revival of the JCPOA.

Beyond the Headlines

While it is widely held that a revival of the JCPOA is reachable by the end of February, there are still unresolved issues that need political decisions by the two key antagonists. In fact, Iran still demands a guarantee that the US will never withdraw from the deal under any President either Democrat or Republican, while Joe Biden has no authority to offer such concessions to the Islamic Republic. However, a compromise solution may involve guarantees during Biden's own presidency for economic actors to meaningfully engage with Iran without fearing the sword of Damocles of US sanctions and their resulting massive penalties. However, none of these components of a compromise can be seen as easily attainable to satisfy Tehran's economic dividends demand.

From Iran's part, direct talks between Tehran and Washington are still considered controversial to some of the regime's base. When Amir-Abdollahian and Shamkhani – two senior foreign and security policy officials with close links to the IRGC – suggested that meetings between Iran and US negotiators may be possible in the near future, it brought about different reactions in Iran. Kayhan, a hardline daily known to be close to Supreme Leader Khamenei, warned both Shamkhani and Amir-Abdollahian “Why and with what logical and acceptable analysis do you speak of the possibility of direct negotiations with the United States?! And which part of the issues is unclear, the clarification of which requires direct negotiations with the United States?!” In response to reactions to his tweet, Shamkhani in a [phone call with Kayhan](#) ensured that “he never agreed or does agree with direct talks with the US.” Also, a group of clerics from the Islamic Seminary of Qom released a [statement to Amir-Abdollahian](#), urging him to “correct these misguided and irrational remarks” and “not to repeat the same naïveté and mistake of the Rouhani administration and [its] Foreign Minister Zarif.” However, Javan, a major IRGC-affiliated newspaper, has implicitly [supported](#) the remarks of Amir-Abdollahian for the possibility of direct negotiations between Tehran and Washington. All this can be read in two ways: (1) That the ever united center power in Iran is confused about choosing the appropriate strategy toward the revival of the nuclear deal and talks with the US, fearing that Iran would not obtain what it had declared as its negotiations goals during this diplomatic process. (2) That such controversy in the final analysis shall pave the way for the argument that it is incumbent upon the hardline administration to pursue direct talks with the “Great Satan” (i.e., the US, according to regime parlance) given purported national interests to see the removal of “illegal and oppressive sanctions” against Iran and arguably for regime-security reasons. Arguably,

such a PR strategy shall serve to convince or appease possible domestic opponents that are part of the centers of power's key constituencies adamantly opposed to any understanding with the US, to accept the necessity of engaging with talks with Washington.

From the perspective of the US, the departure of key members of its Iran team, which have been known as proponents of a more stalwart approach to the Iran talks by leveraging existing "maximum pressure" sanctions, may be a strong signal that Washington seeks a deal as soon as possible and is ready to offer important sanctions relief in exchange for Iran returning to full nuclear compliance, or rather partly doing so.

Meanwhile, Tehran's proxies in the Middle East have been active to what could be read as wanting to highlight Iranian "hard power" to assist its diplomacy in Vienna. There appears Iran is trying to push forward a mixed-signals strategy. On one hand, signs of provocation and demonstrations of power via Middle Eastern groups aligned with it, and on the other hand, what seems like a conciliatory diplomatic approach and signs of goodwill and regional co-existence, including Iranian diplomats to be stationed in Saudi Jeddah that hosts the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), some rapprochement with the UAE, and talks with Saudi Arabia in Iraq. The Yemeni Houthis' attacks can also be read as serving Tehran that seeks to have the upper hand in the negotiations with Riyadh.

We have witnessed such a dual approach by Iran also in the past, e.g., during the former administration of President Hassan Rouhani. On one hand, the provocations and shows of force throughout the region via proxies can be read as a demonstration of Tehran's power of nuisance, or destructive power, while – and this is important – Iran can claim, and in fact in almost most cases does so, that these groups exclusively act on their own to pursue their goals in a setting defined by a legitimate fight against their aggressors, in other words, a claim of "plausible deniability." And, of course, it is difficult to show solid evidence that such acts by Yemen's Houthis or Iraq's Shia militias were undeniably a result of Tehran ordering. Be it as it may, such displays of force shall in such an implicit fashion serve Tehran to elevate its bargaining power in the JCPOA negotiations. On the other hand, Iran has simultaneously shown its "benign face" when taking steps albeit small and not very substantial, to seek détente with its regional foes Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that are closely aligned with the US – meant as a signal of goodwill toward not only Washington but also Europe.

In fact, the new Iranian administration believes the US power is in significant decline throughout the Middle East and the White House almost desperately needs the revival of the JCPOA. In this context, the Islamic Republic has come to the conclusion that the spillover of such US weakness and unreliability would influence Saudi Arabia and the UAE in a manner favorable to Iranian interests. Therefore, Tehran attempts to take

advantage of such circumstances in the aim to gain more concessions, both regionally and internationally. Meanwhile, despite its foreign-policy focus, the Islamic Republic does not profoundly believe that the ties with Russia and China will satisfy all of Tehran's needs, so it continues to play its various cards in the Vienna negotiations stemming from its Janus-faced foreign policy with both its malign and benign faces while relying on nuclear escalation.

This Iranian “nuclear escalation” strategy pursued since mid-2019, which gradually reduced Tehran's nuclear commitments under the 2015 JCPOA as a reaction to then-President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from it and the imposition of “maximum pressure” sanctions, may turn out to emerge as a decisive bone of contention. [According to US officials](#), a new deal is unlikely to sustain the one-year breakout time (i.e., the time to amass enough nuclear material needed to build one atomic weapon) as envisaged in the 2015 deal to probably half the time. Robert Einhorn, a former senior State Department arms-control official, assessed that while “There's nothing that a restored JCPOA will do to compensate for that increased knowledge and experience” Tehran has gained, a six-month breakout period that would suffice to respond – with military means if necessary – to an overt Iranian nuclear breakout.

In conclusion, we must await the political decisions from Tehran and Washington on their respective red lines regarding expectations from the other side and their respective willingness to accordingly provide concessions to emerge. If a compromise fails, however, as both sides would still stick to their full demands and expectations, the future of diplomacy could be undermined if Iran continues its “nuclear escalation” after talks collapse.

China to Open Consulate in Iran's Most Important Commercial Port Amid Tehran's Deepening "look to the East"

In early January, Iran's new Emrahim Raisi administration officially approved that China opens a Consulate in Bandar Abbas, Iran's most important commercial port along its Persian Gulf coast. ILNA, a news agency close to the Islamic Republic's so-called reformist elite faction, reported that about 5,000 Chinese are currently living in Iran, suggesting that China's Embassy in Tehran may not be sufficient to meet their needs. Mohammad-Hossein Mala'ek, Iran's former ambassador to China, said that "China's decision to open its consulate in Bandar Abbas is a calculated move as it will be able to offer support to the many companies that the Chinese expect to establish in Makran [a region in south-eastern Iran] as well as those already active in Chabahar Free Trade and Industrial Zone and Bandar Abbas." However, Mardomsalari, a reformist daily, noted that "Given that the number of Chinese citizens in Iran was not so high that the country needed to establish a consulate, opening a new consulate in Bandar Abbas could be a sign of increasing the number of Chinese in Iran." The newspaper added that "it is speculated that Iran has offered unprecedented concessions to China for its presence in Iranian ports."

Beyond the Headlines

The footprint of China in Iran has expanded step-by-step over the last two decades. Also, the two countries signed a 25-year accord in March 2021, claiming a "strategic partnership." However, there are ample reasons to doubt the accuracy of the term "strategic partnership" to explain the relationship between Tehran and Beijing due to their unequal standing, both on the economic level and politically. Still the Islamic Republic pursues its long-stated quest to find a powerful ally against US pressures. In this context, there are high hopes pinned upon China assuming that role. Meanwhile Tehran sees Moscow, with whom it wants to forge a 20-year agreement (the contents of which, however, are as non-transparent as in the case with the agreement with China), in a less powerful position to challenge US unilateralism, given Moscow's economic weakness and concomitantly its vulnerability to US pressure. Therefore, within Tehran's "look to the East" policy that had been established in the 2000s, Beijing is increasingly playing a more prominent role than Moscow.

However, Iran's expectations from the benefits of its "look to the East" is reflective of its oversimplification of international relations. Such tunnel vision from Iranian officials was recently questioned by Ebrahim Rahimpour, Iran's former ambassador to India, Ireland, and Austria. The retired diplomat, who once headed the Asia and Oceania

department at Iran's foreign ministry, echoed this point in a [Dec. 2021 interview](#), when he bluntly stated: "Indeed, Asia is important. Extremely important. But look at Asia during this period of American sanctions – all the [Asian countries] rejected us. You say 'Asia but not America' or 'but not the West' [...] No. I think this is a dream, an empty illusion. We must work with everybody. It is true that you can have different priorities, and that you can focus on China, if it serves our interests. But even China... Once it realizes that you will never become closer to the U.S., never become closer to Europe, and never become closer to Saudi Arabia – China would process on its own path. Your value for the Chinese would plummet, because they would say: 'Iran has no alternative but to work with us.' We must never allow this to happen." He later added: "Why do we need to fight America, when the Russians and the Chinese will be the ones to benefit from this? Why? This is not right."

However, there is a dim chance that Tehran will alter its focus on China and/or strive for a significant improvement of ties with the US, which would in turn strengthen its standing toward China. For instance, in late December 2021 it was [leaked](#) that "US intelligence agencies have assessed that Saudi Arabia is now actively manufacturing its own ballistic missiles with the help of China." Moreover, in the same month, Majid-Reza Hariri, the head of the Iran–China Joint Chamber of Commerce, [stated](#) that "Iran was China's first trading partner in the Middle East until about seven or eight years ago, and the Chinese invested the most in Iran. But now Iran has lost its position and countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Iraq and Qatar are selling more fuel to China and are a safer place for Chinese investment." To solve this problem, Iran has attempted to offer more concessions to China (such as discounts for its oil), but it is doubtful that this policy would markedly improve Iran's position of weakness in that bilateral framework as long as Tehran's enmity with Washington persists.

International: President Raisi Meets Putin in Moscow

On January 19, the new Iranian president visited Moscow, aiming to improve bilateral ties in an attempt to contain US pressure. President Raisi [stated](#) “we have common interests with Russia and our collaboration and common interests could certainly create security and combat unilateralism in the region.” He promoted his trip as a “[turning point](#)” in relations between the two countries. “Today’s exceptional circumstances require significant synergy between our two countries against US unilateralism,” Raisi told his counterpart Putin in their meeting. He also suggested that the “successful experiences” of Irano–Russian cooperation in Syria can expand onto other regions, such as Afghanistan and the Caucasus. Iran’s president also [delivered](#) a speech in Russia’s State Duma (i.e. the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia), in which he claimed that the US was “in its weakest position” and reiterated that there would be “no restrictions” in the development of relations between Iran and Russia.

IRGC-affiliated [Fars News Agency](#), arguably the most important élite outlet in Iran, referred to the visit as producing “significant results,” while criticizing the country’s reformist camp by claiming that Iran’s moderates and “pro-Western groups” were angry given the improvement of Tehran–Moscow ties as “they [the reformists] see progress in relations with the West and the US” instead. In this vein, Zohreh Ellahian, a hardline MP, claimed that Iranian critics of the expansion of ties with Russia were primarily concerned about their own interests, adding that interactions with the West have so far brought about nothing but a fruitless JCPOA.

Moreover, regarding the planned 20-year deal between Tehran and Moscow, it appears that little progress was made towards signing it during this trip, yet nothing formal nor any details were released.

Beyond the Headlines

The relationship between Russia and Iran has been subject to heated debates over at least the last two decades, in Iran, the Middle East, and world politics. Although bilateral ties were mostly marked by strong dose of fluctuations in the past, it seems a new era has arrived in which the two countries have enough reasons to boost their bilateral ties. For Iran, the Raisi administration has vowed to expand and deepen the Islamic Republic’s “look to the East” geopolitical strategy, suggesting that it will produce important benefits for Iran on the international scene. Since Raisi took office last

summer, Iranian media have been engaged in a campaign to propagate the new hardline president's alleged ability to improve Iran's global standing. In this vein, to show the importance of the recent visit, Fars News Agency has boasted that "those who have seen the 21-minute footage released by Ria Novosti know how stressed Putin looked during the meeting, tidying his tie twice, moving his legs and shoulders. Why? Because he feels that this is a very important political meeting that is vital for his country." *Javan*, a daily affiliated to the IRGC, referred to the meeting between Putin and Raisi as a "history-maker meeting of the East." It also stressed that Putin has a very good relationship with Supreme Leader Khamenei, adding that the Russian president currently sees the Raisi administration as an opportunity to improve his relationships with all centers of power in the Islamic Republic. On their part, reformist dailies have been very cautious in criticizing the Raisi administration, instead suggesting that undeniably Iran would need a better relationship with Russia and China, but the administration should also improve Tehran's ties with the West, so as to create a balance between the West and the East in Iran's foreign policy.

The Islamic Republic has significantly suffered from US-led sanctions in the last decade, imposed both by the Obama and Trump administrations. In the meantime, its legitimacy has declined, with two nationwide protests in 2018 and 2019 creating new conditions. Therefore, both domestically and internationally, the Iranian regime needs to create protective shields. To this end, forging closer long-term and allegedly strategic ties with the major non-Western great powers of our time, China and Russia, has been designated as key by Tehran's main authorities, where Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has been the strongest proponent of such a "look to East." This time, tensions between Moscow and Beijing with Washington have generated an optimistic view in Tehran that even though the "look to the East" strategy during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration (2005-13) had failed to fulfill Tehran's expectations since both Russia and China had refrained to act as shields against US-led extra-territorial crippling sanctions pressure, President Raisi could complete this mission of creating an "Eastern" protection for the Islamic Republic. However, despite Tehran's eagerness to even offer more concessions to "the East," the details of both long-term deals remain non-transparent, while arguably Moscow and Beijing know fully well about the unprecedented pressure Tehran has been facing internally and externally, thus leading them to conclude that Iran still acts from a position of weakness in those bilateral ties. For Beijing, forging closer ties with Tehran often translates into oil supplies at discounted levels, while Moscow can use its ties with the Islamic Republic as a kind of scarecrow against Washington. In brief, there is little evidence that China and Russia would act differently this time in shielding Iran against US sanctions pressure. Meanwhile, there is a strong likelihood that Tehran would seek help from both to boost its security-military and IT capabilities meant for repression at home.

More Insights: Articles, Panel Discussions, and Press Commentary

Article on Iran's Forthcoming Annual Budget

Ali Fathollah-Nejad & Mahdi Ghodsi, [Raisi's shrinking budget cements the Islamic Republic's »trinity«](#), Washington, DC: Middle East Institute (MEI), Jan. 20, 2022.

Panel Discussions

Jan. 25

[Iran-Europe Dynamics and the JCPOA Negotiations](#) | Panel with Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad, [Dr. Clément Therme](#) (Sciences Po Paris & EHESS & EUI Middle East Directions) & [Prof. Heinz Gärtner](#) (University of Vienna & Chair, Advisory Board of the International Institute for Peace, IIP), mod. [Dr. Asif Shuja](#) (Snr. Research Fellow, MEI-NUS) | org. Middle East Institute (MEI) Political Economy research cluster, National University of Singapore (NUS).

Jan. 18

Book Discussion of Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad's [Iran in an Emerging New World Order {YouTube video}](#), [Discussants](#): Prof. Ali Ansari (Professor of Iranian History & Founding Director, Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews) & Kazem Sajjadpour (Distinguished Senior Fellow & fmr. Director and President, Institute for Political and International Studies [IPIS] & fmr. Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran), mod. Dr. Joseph Bahout (IFI Director), org. Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs (IFI), American University of Beirut (AUB).

Media Commentary

Laure-Maïssa Farjallah, [A quoi joue Téhéran dans la région ?](#), L'Orient-Le Jour, Jan. 19, p. 1.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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