

SPRING 2021

Bringing Iran back to the table

EVENT REPORT



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Iran, as pointed out by many involved in this briefing, is complicated. Internal political rivalries, regional meddling and an equivocating foreign policy – these factors come together as a tangled web of political machinations. However, Friends of Europe's roundtable discussion revealed that the motives and mindset behind Iran's actions are often simple, underwritten by a sense of pragmatism or a lack of viable options.

Taking place at the same time as the ongoing indirect talks between the United States and Iran in Vienna, the timely briefing placed heavy emphasis on the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as US President Biden takes steps to enter back into the nuclear deal abandoned by his predecessor.

Topics up for debate were not limited to the Iran nuclear deal, with speakers and participants also speculating and commenting on Iran's upcoming presidential elections, its actions as a regional player, the foreign policy implications of Iran's oscillation between the East and West, and the role of Iran in the Western Balkans.

Dealing with Iran

The indirect negotiations in Vienna aim to bring the US back into the JCPOA and Iran back into compliance. The discussions are focused on the issue of the extent to which the US will lift its sanctions against Iran. The briefing revealed some progress and suggested that the talks will precipitate positive steps, despite some disagreement on which sanctions should be lifted.

The apparent political will for negotiation brought up whether Iran would be open to negotiations on other issues, such as regional policy, its missile programme, domestic policies and human rights issues.

The answer to this, as one attendee put it, is complex. Iran might be interested in negotiations, but it would have to see that concessions were willing to be made by the other side, especially regarding military and regional policies.

Iran will not reduce its presence in the region when the US and its allies have a military presence in Iraq and Syria. And even then, it will always have a presence in the region, particularly in neighbouring countries like Iraq, where historical relations and proximity create a vested interest.

There was a similar answer to the question of whether Iran would accept COVID-19 aid from the US – “it depends on how it is packaged and politicised”, said an attendee. Iran has previously accepted US aid through back channels. But if it is made into a political statement, they are unlikely to accept.

Domestic politics

The discussion also took place during the run-up to Iran's presidential elections, involving the two political factions, which one attendee defined as the hardliner, conservative faction versus the moderate, pro-diplomacy, pro-West faction.

If the elections were to take place tomorrow, the conservative hardliners would most likely win. However, Iranian elections are often subject to last-minute changes. If US sanctions are lifted after the Vienna talks, the resulting economic benefits could inject hope into the population and affect the outcome.

One participant questioned whether domestic politics and the two rival factions impacted Iranian policy, given the tendency to make decisions by consensus. Another agreed that the presidential election does not have the same capacity for change as a US presidential election because the president is not the top power in Iran. The Supreme Leader is already considered a hardliner. However, he sees his role as that of a unifier, therefore the balance of power between the president and the speaker of the parliament plays a role in policy direction. If the speaker of the parliament and the president were both conservatives, this could impact relations with the West, making it more difficult for negotiations.

Foreign relations

The state of foreign relations was linked to discussions on US sanctions and Iran's moves towards the East.

The moderator questioned whether increasing economic ties with China and military exercises with Russia confirmed Iran as a paid-up member of the 'alliance of autocracies' or if the West could still exert its democratic influence.

One attendee highlighted Iran's lack of options as a reason for closer ties with the East. The impact of US sanctions has led to Iran's dealings with the next largest economy – China. If the West is blocked off, Iran will go elsewhere to build diplomatic ties.

Iranian influence on the Balkans was also a much-discussed topic. Although this influence is minimal and has been essentially non-existent for the past 20 years, recent geopolitical developments leave the space for change. The declining influence of the EU in the region, as the enlargement process drags on, has left the Balkans region susceptible to foreign influence, such as from Russia and China.

One attendee addressed the possible reasoning behind the negligible Iranian influence, bringing up the potential impact of US sanctions. Another attendee agreed that the capacity of Iran to compete in energy and trade diplomacy has been limited in comparison to Russia and China due to its lack of resources.

Meetings with the Serbian Foreign Minister in Tehran also indicate that further engagement is considered a possibility.

Conclusions

As the moderator aptly summed up, the discussion revealed that "Iran is a difficult but not an impossible country to deal with, there is ideology, but there's also pragmatism, there is a limited political space, but it's not frozen [...] if Iran goes in a certain direction, it is not always because it's its preference but because it sees no alternative".

US sanctions have pushed Iran to the East. Lifting them could increase dealings with the West and encourage the moderates domestically. Further negotiations are possible, but only under terms that Iran finds acceptable.

A final note recommended that the key to dealing with Iran is to "always have an alternative offer on the table".

