

The emerging Iran nuclear deal raises major concerns



FILE - In this Jan. 14, 2015 file picture US Secretary of State John Kerry, left, listens to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, as they walk in the city of Geneva, Switzerland, during a bilateral meeting ahead of nuclear discussions. (Martial Trezzini/AP)

By Editorial Board February 5

AS THE Obama administration pushes to complete a nuclear accord with Iran, numerous members of Congress, former secretaries of state and officials of allied governments are expressing concern about the contours of the emerging deal. Though we have long supported negotiations with Iran as well as the [interim agreement](#) the United States and its allies struck with Tehran, we share several of those concerns and believe they deserve more debate now — before negotiators present the world with a *fait accompli*.

The problems raised by authorities ranging from Henry Kissinger, the country's most senior former secretary of state, to Sen. Timothy M. Kaine, Virginia's junior senator, can be summed up in three points:

- First, a process that began with the goal of eliminating Iran's potential to produce nuclear weapons has evolved into a plan to tolerate and temporarily restrict that capability.
- Second, in the course of the negotiations, the Obama administration has declined to counter increasingly aggressive efforts by Iran to extend its influence across the Middle East and seems ready to concede Tehran a place as a regional power at the expense of Israel and other U.S. allies.

- Finally, the Obama administration is signaling that it will seek to implement any deal it strikes with Iran — including the suspension of sanctions that were originally imposed by Congress — without a vote by either chamber. Instead, an accord that would have far-reaching implications for nuclear proliferation and U.S. national security would be imposed unilaterally by a president with less than two years left in his term.

The first and broadest of these problems was [outlined by Mr. Kissinger in recent testimony](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee. The talks, he pointed out, began as a multilateral effort headed by the European Union and backed by six U.N. Security Council resolutions intended “to deny Iran the capability to develop a military nuclear option.” Though formally the multilateral talks continue, “these negotiations have now become an essentially bilateral negotiation” between the United States and Iran “over the scope of that [nuclear] capability, not its existence,” Mr. Kissinger said.

Where it once aimed to eliminate Iran’s ability to enrich uranium, the administration now appears ready to accept an infrastructure of thousands of Iranian centrifuges. It says its goal is to limit and monitor that industrial base so that Iran could not produce the material for a warhead in less than a year. As several senators pointed out last month during a hearing of the Foreign Relations Committee, the prospective deal would leave Iran as a nuclear-threshold state while theoretically giving the world time to respond if Tehran chose to build a weapon. Even these limited restrictions would remain in force for only a specified number of years, after which Iran would be free to expand its production of potential bomb materials.

Mr. Kissinger said such an arrangement would very likely prompt other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, to match Iran’s threshold capability. “The impact . . . will be to transform the negotiations from preventing proliferation to managing it,” he said. “We will live in a proliferated world in which everybody — even if that agreement is maintained — will be very close to the trigger point.”

A related problem is whether Iran could be prevented from cheating on any arrangement and acquiring a bomb by stealth. Mr. Kaine (D) underlined that an attempt by the United States to negotiate the end of North Korea’s nuclear program failed after the regime covertly expanded its facilities. With Iran, said Mr. Kaine, “a nation that has proven to be very untrustworthy . . . the end result is more likely to be a North Korean situation” if existing infrastructure is not dismantled.

The administration at one time portrayed the nuclear negotiations as distinct from the problem of Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism, its attempts to establish hegemony over the Arab Middle East and its declared goal of eliminating Israel. Yet while the talks have proceeded, Mr. Obama has [offered assurances](#) to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that the two countries have shared interests in the region, and the White House has avoided actions Iran might perceive as hostile — such as supporting military action against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

For their part, the Iranians, as Mr. Kaine put it, “are currently involved in activities to destabilize the governments of [U.S.-allied] nations as near as Bahrain and as far away as Morocco.” A Tehran-sponsored militia recently [overthrew the U.S.-backed government of Yemen](#). Rather than contest the Iranian bid for regional hegemony, as has every previous U.S. administration since the 1970s, Mr. Obama appears ready to concede Iran a place in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond — a policy that is viewed with alarm by Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey, among other allies.

Former secretary of state George P. Shultz cited Iran’s regional aggression in pronouncing himself “very uneasy” about the ongoing negotiations. “They’ve already outmaneuvered us, in my opinion,” he told the Armed Services Committee.

While presidents initiate U.S. foreign policies, it is vital that major shifts win the support of Congress and the country; otherwise, they will be unsustainable. Yet Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken [suggested in Senate testimony](#) that the administration intends to postpone any congressional vote on a deal indefinitely, meeting its commitments to Iran by using provisions allowing it to suspend legislatively enacted sanctions. Mr. Blinken conceded that the Iranian

parliament would likely vote on any accord but said that Congress should act only “once Iran has demonstrated that it’s making good on its commitments.”

Such a unilateral course by Mr. Obama would alienate even his strongest congressional supporters. It would mean that a deal with Iran could be reversed, within months of its completion, by the next president. It’s hard to escape the conclusion that Mr. Obama wishes to avoid congressional review because he suspects a bipartisan majority would oppose the deal he is prepared to make. If so, the right response to the questions now being raised is to seek better terms from Iran — or convince the doubters that an accord blessing and preserving Iran’s nuclear potential is better than the alternatives.

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