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Historic Iran Nuke Deal Resets Eurasia's 'Great Game'

by Pepe Escobar

7/15/2015

This is it. It is indeed historic. And diplomacy eventually wins. In terms of the New Great Game in Eurasia, and the ongoing tectonic shifts reorganizing Eurasia, this is huge: Iran — supported by Russia and China — has finally, successfully, called the long, winding 12-year-long Atlanticist bluff on its “nuclear weapons.”

And this only happened because the Obama administration needed 1) a lone foreign policy success, and 2) a go at trying to influence at least laterally the onset of the new Eurasia-centered geopolitical order.

So here it is – the 159-page, as detailed as possible, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); the actual P5+1/Iran nuclear deal. As Iranian diplomats have stressed, the JCPOA will be presented to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which will then adopt a resolution within 7 to 10 days making it an official international document.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has described the deal — significantly — as a very Chinese “win-win” solution. But not perfect; “I believe this is a historic moment. We are reaching an agreement that is not perfect for anybody but is what we could accomplish. Today could have been the end of hope, but now we are starting a new chapter of hope.”

Zarif also had to stress — correctly — this was a long-sought solution for an “unnecessary crisis”; the politicization — essentially by the US — of a scientific, technical dossier.

Germany’s Foreign Minister Steinmeier, for his part, was euphoric; “A historic day! We leave 35 years of speechlessness + more than 12 years of a dangerous conflict behind us.”

Looking ahead, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani tweeted now there can be “a focus on shared challenges” – referring to the real fight that NATO, and Iran, should pursue together; against the fake Caliphate of ISIS/ISIL/Daesh, whose ideological matrix is intolerant Wahhabism and whose attacks are directed against both Shi’ites and westerners.

Right on cue, Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed the deal will contribute to fighting terrorism in the Middle East, not to mention “assisting in strengthening global and regional security, global nuclear non-proliferation” and — perhaps wishful thinking? — “the creation in the Middle East of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed the deal “fully corresponds” with Russia’s negotiating points. The fact is no deal would have been possible without extensive Russian involvement — and the Obama administration knows it (but cannot admit it publicly).

The real problem started when Lavrov added that Moscow expects the cancellation of Washington’s missile defense plans, after the Iran deal proves that Tehran is not, and won’t be, a nuclear “threat.”

There’s the rub. The Pentagon simply won’t cancel an essential part of its Full Spectrum Dominance military doctrine simply because of mere “diplomacy.” Every security analyst not blinded by ideology knows that missile defense was never about Iran, but about Russia. The Pentagon’s new military review still states — not by accident — major Eurasian players Iran, China and Russia as “threats” to U.S. national security.

Now from the brighter side on Iran-Russia relations. Trade is bound to increase, especially in nanotechnology, machinery parts and agriculture. And on the all-pervasive energy front, Iran will indeed compete with Russia in major markets such as Turkey and soon Western Europe, but there’s plenty of leeway for Gazprom and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) to coordinate their market share. NIOC executive Mohsen Qamsari advances that Iran will prioritize exporting to Asia, and will try to regain the at least 42% of the European market share that it had before sanctions.

Compared to so many uplifting perspectives, Washington’s reaction was quite pedestrian. US President Barack Obama preferred to stress — correctly — that every pathway to an Iranian nuclear weapon has been cut off. And he vowed to veto any legislation in the US Congress that blocks the deal. When I was in Vienna last week I had surefire confirmation — from a European source — that the Obama administration feels confident it has the votes it needs in Capitol Hill.

And what about all that oil?

Tariq Rauf, former Head of Verification and Security Policy at the IAEA and currently Director of the Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Program at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), hailed the deal as “the most significant multilateral nuclear agreement in two decades – the last such agreement was the 1996 nuclear test ban treaty.” Rauf even advanced that the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize should go to US Secretary of State Jon Kerry and Iran’s Foreign Minister Zarif.

Rebuilding trust between the US and Iran, though, will be a long and winding road.

Tehran agreed to a 15-year moratorium on enriching uranium beyond 3.67 percent; this means it has agreed to reduce its enrichment capacity by two-thirds. Only Natanz will conduct enrichment; and Fordo, additionally, won’t store fissile material.

Iran agreed to store no more than 300 kg of low-enriched uranium — a 96% reduction compared to current levels. The Arak reactor will be reconfigured, and won’t be used to produce plutonium. The spent fuel will be handled by an international team.

The IAEA and Iran signed a roadmap in Tehran also this Tuesday; that was already decided last week in Vienna. By December 15, all past and present outstanding issues — that amount to 12 items — should be clarified, and the IAEA will deliver a final assessment. IAEA access to the Parchin military site — always a very contentious issue — is part of a separate arrangement.

One of the major sticking points these last few days in Vienna was solved — with Tehran allowing UN inspectors to visit virtually any site. But it may object to a particular visit. A Joint Commission — the P5+1 + Iran — will be able to override any objections with a simple majority vote. After that Iran has three days to comply — in case it loses the vote. There won’t be American inspectors — shades of the run-up towards the war on Iraq; only from countries with diplomatic relations with Iran.

So implementation of the deal will take at least the next five months. Sanctions will be lifted only by early 2016.

What’s certain is that Iran will become a magnet for foreign investment. Major western and Asian multinationals are already positioned to start cracking this practically virgin market with over 70 million people, including a very well educated middle class. There will be a boom in sectors such as consumer electronics, the auto industry and hospitality and leisure.

And then there’s, once again, oil. Iran has as much as a whopping 50 million barrels of oil stored at sea — and that’s about ready to hit the global market. The purchaser of choice will be, inevitably, China — as the West remains mired in recession. Iran’s first order of work is to regain lost market share to Persian Gulf producers. Yet the trend is for oil prices to go down – so Iran cannot count on much profit in the short to medium term.

Now for a real war on terror?

The conventional arms embargo on Iran essentially stays, for five years. That's absurd, compared to Israel and the House of Saud arming themselves to their teeth.

Last May the US Congress approved a \$1.9 billion arms sale to Israel. That includes 50 BLU-113 bunker-buster bombs — to do what? Bomb Natanz? — and 3,000 Hellfire missiles. As for Saudi Arabia, according to SIPRI, the House of Saud spent a whopping \$80 billion on weapons last year; more than nuclear powers France or Britain. The House of Saud is waging an — illegal — war on Yemen.

Qatar is not far behind. It clinched an \$11 billion deal to buy Apache helicopters and Javelin and Patriot air defense systems, and is bound to buy loads of F-15 fighters.

Trita Parsi, president of the National American-Iranian Council, went straight to the point; “Saudi Arabia spends 13 times more money on its defense than Iran does. But somehow Iran, and not Saudi Arabia, is seen by the US as the potential aggressor.”

So, whatever happens, expect tough days ahead. Two weeks ago, Foreign Minister Zarif told a small group of independent journalists in Vienna, including this correspondent, that the negotiations would be a success because the US and Iran had agreed on “no humiliation of one another.” He stressed he paid “a high domestic price for not blaming the Americans,” and he praised Kerry as “a reasonable man.” But he was wary of the US establishment, which to a great extent, according to his best information, was dead set against the lifting of sanctions.

Zarif also praised the Russian idea that after a deal, it will be time to form a real counter-terrorism coalition, featuring Americans, Iranians, Russians, Chinese and Europeans — even as Putin and Obama had agreed to work together on “regional issues.” And Iranian diplomacy was giving signs that the Obama administration had finally understood that the alternative to Assad in Syria was ISIS/ISIL/Daesh, not the “Free” Syrian Army.

That degree of collaboration, post-Wall of Mistrust, remains to be seen. Then it will be possible to clearly evaluate whether the Obama administration has made a major strategic decision, and whether “normalizing” its relation with Iran involves much more than meets the eye.