

A combination of internal changes, domestic issues and sanctions mean that Iran is back at the negotiating table with the U.S.

Last week President Barack Obama and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani shared a historic phone conversation, the first such high level contact between the two countries for more than 30 years. [Alireza Ahmadian](#) looks at the current state of the U.S./Iran relationship, and argues that while U.S. sanctions have had some part to play in encouraging rapprochement, the greater role of reformists and pragmatists in Iran's government has also had a part to play.



The United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran have not had diplomatic relations since the Islamic Revolution and the hostage crises in Iran in 1979. Last week, however, John Kerry, Secretary of State, met with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif in the context of the P5+1 (permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany) to resolve Iran's nuclear standoff with the West. The two also had a bilateral meeting for half an hour. The following day, President Barack Obama and President Hassan Rouhani talked on the phone for fifteen minutes. The aforementioned incidents were the highest diplomatic interactions between the two countries in the last thirty-four years.

The Americans have reiterated throughout the process that they appreciate the change in tone and the vision of the government of Iran, but they want to see actions not words on the part of the Islamic Republic. They want Iran to abide by its obligations under different international treaties and United Nations Security Council's resolutions.

In recent years, the US has pursued a dual-track-policy towards Iran, which combines imposing sanctions (coercive diplomacy) with the offer to negotiate a way out of them. Sanctions have been imposed on Iran for its nuclear programs, violations of human rights and what the US government perceives to be the country's support for international terrorism. The major source of contention, however, is Iran's nuclear program.

Rouhani [stated](#) that it would not relinquish Iran's right to enrich uranium, but "is prepared to engage immediately in time-bound and result-oriented talks to build mutual confidence and removal of mutual uncertainties with full transparency." In other words, Iran is willing to show transparency to alleviate the concerns of some Western governments and earn their trust that Iran's nuclear program is not geared towards militarization and making the bomb.

Some American politicians believe that their dual-track-policy toward Iran has forced the Islamic Republic to take a more conciliatory approach. For instance, Senators Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) [maintained](#) last month that Iran expresses an interest in negotiations "because the economic pain levied on it by Congress and the International



President Barack Obama talks with President Hassan Rouhani of Iran during a phone call in the Oval Office, Sept. 27, 2013. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

community has become unbearable. This outreach was borne out of necessity, not a sudden gesture of goodwill.” However, this approach does not consider the agency of the Iranian people and Iran’s political elite.

Iranian reformists and pragmatists (moderate conservatives) have always been willing to collaborate with the West and avoid confrontation. Rouhani and Zarif are just two examples of those officials. The former was the chairperson of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council and the latter Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations under the reformist president Mohammad Khatami. They both exerted a considerable influence in shaping policies made by Khatami administration.

Zarif led the cooperation between Iran and the US in Afghanistan in 2001 to oust the Taliban and establish a new government. The Bush administration, on the other hand, named Iran an Axis of Evil in 2002 and refused to engage the country diplomatically. In 2003, when Iran offered a “[grand bargain](#)” proposal to the Bush administration to address all major issues of conflict between the two countries, Rouhani and Zarif held their influential positions and undoubtedly had put their insight into the proposal. Americans rejected it by saying “we don’t talk to evil.” Furthermore, in 2004 Rouhani negotiated a voluntary and temporary suspension of Iran’s uranium enrichment program. It did not last when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power.

Rouhani and Zarif are realists. They talk about national interests as opposed to some abstract notion of good and evil. They have always been in favor of cooperating with the West when it was in Iran’s interests. The fact, that they are implementing policies that are in sharp contrast to those of Ahmadinejad has a lot to do with their worldview and not with the sanctions. This is not to say that sanctions have no influence on bringing hardship on the Iranian government and the Iranian people. Iran’s economic problems are due to the considerable influence of sanctions and also Ahmadinejad’s management of the economy.

However, to assert that only imposition of the sanctions led to Rouhani’s election is to suggest that outside forces are dictating to Iranians for whom they should vote and that domestic issues are irrelevant in election. Furthermore, it also does not acknowledge the history of reformists’ and pragmatists’ willingness to cooperate with the West. Rouhani and Zarif would like to resolve Iran’s nuclear standoff with the West peacefully. Rouhani [has stated](#) repeatedly that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the most powerful man in the country, authorized him to deal with the nuclear issue as he sees it fit.

The fact that Rouhani was welcomed in Tehran’s airport, upon his return from New York, by the Supreme Leader’s senior foreign policy advisor, Aliakbar Velayati, proves that the leader still supports Rouhani. Velayati told the reporters that “overall, the behavior of Iran’s diplomatic team was measured,” an indication that the Supreme Leader approved of what Rouhani and Zarif did and say in New York. It is also worthwhile to know that the overwhelming majority of the Iranian people strongly support Rouhani administration and his attempt to normalize relations with the West.

Iran seems to be ready for a deal. However, the United States Congress is not in tune with the Obama administration. Senators Menendez and Graham put forward four suggestions to achieve a resolution on Iran: an explicit message that the US will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapons capability, a genuine demonstration of openness to negotiations by Iran, “the maintenance and toughening of sanctions” and a persuasive threat of the use of force. Moreover, Representative [Trent Franks](#) (R-AZ) and Senator [Lindsey Graham](#) (R-SC) have announced in mid-September 2013 that they were introducing legislation to authorize the use of military force in Iran. For some congressmen, more sanctions and the threat of war are the solutions for Iran’s nuclear crises.

The preceding statements are in sharp contrast with those of European diplomats. Asked whether new sanctions should be imposed on Iran, [Catherine Ashton](#), European Union foreign policy chief stated that she would like to have “the best possible atmosphere” to have negotiations with Iran. She added that both Iran and P5+1 “need to show willingness and good faith to have discussions”, and that, “We should be ready to move if they are ready to move, but not ready to move until they are ready, they have done it and they have proved it and we are confident in them.”

Moreover, Ashton asserted that pressure is to bring people to the talks and in order to try and make progress, but warned that “it may be that we don’t make progress. But it may be ... that we do.” In other words, she has trust in the Rouhani administration and wants to give diplomacy a genuine chance.

Iranians are back on the negotiating table because of combinations of internal changes, domestic issues and sanctions. There is no point in increasing pressure at this time. Is diplomacy going to succeed? Nobody knows until it is given a chance. New sanctions and the threat of war against Iran would weaken Rouhani and his team and strengthen the radicals who argue that no concession on the part of Iran will change the US' inherent animosity towards the Islamic Republic and its desire to bring about a regime change.

If the hawks in the US succeed in legislating for new sanctions or the use of force against Iran, the Iranian radicals would wage a campaign to undermine and discredit the Rouhani administration. That does not benefit the United States. It is in the US' national interests to deal with someone like Rouhani and not Ahmadinejad. The Obama and Rouhani administrations should realize that time is of essence in their potential rapprochement process. They have to prove to the opponents of direct negotiations that Iran and US can work together on win-win bases and guarantee each other national security and interests. Amongst other things, Iran can help the US in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and even the peace-process between Israel and Palestine, and the US can help Iran to have better relations with the Arab world and improve its economy.

The potential spoilers are the hawkish/radical elements within each country. They frame national interests in a way that is aligned with the interests of external players or what they call their strategic partners (i.e., al Assad regime, Palestinian militant groups, Hezbollah, Israel, etc) than their own core national interests. The good news is that both Obama and Rouhani administrations stated that there is an opening and everyone should commit themselves to using this opportunity in good faith to address Iran's nuclear program and potentially other bilateral issues.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/172IBGW>

About the author

Alireza Ahmadian – SOAS, University of London

Alireza Ahmadian is a PhD student in Global Studies at SOAS University of London. He has a Masters of Arts in international studies and diplomacy from SOAS and a Bachelor of Arts in history from University of British Columbia in Canada. Ahmadian's work has appeared on forums such as openDemocracy, the Foreign Policy Association Blog, and BBC Persian Blog's Nazeran Migooyand [Observers say...]. He has also appeared on BBC World News and BBC Persian TV to discuss world affairs.



- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP