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The IAEA-Iran Agreement: A Palliative?

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The agreement between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran, announced on November 11, 2013, is a culmination of sorts of many years of disagreement between these two parties. The IAEA has long sought the right to inspect all nuclear-related facilities and sites in Iran, including the right to search for undeclared facilities. More specifically, the IAEA wanted Iran to reinstate IAEA rights under the Additional Protocol (AP), which permits intrusive inspections, and to address the many questions regarding the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program.

At present, the IAEA carries out inspections in Iran under what is (mis)named “full scope” or “comprehensive” safeguards. Because of the rather limited scope of these arrangements the IAEA devised the Additional Protocol to the existing safeguards agreements, giving the inspectors more leeway in executing their mandate. Although Iran did sign the AP, it did not ratify it, and the IAEA was powerless to do anything about it. The periodic IAEA reports to its Board of Governors and to the UN Security Council included many items that could not be verified, as well as the questions related to the possible military dimensions of the Iranian nuclear program. For example, Iran would not permit the IAEA to visit the site at Parchin, the possible site of development of the explosive mechanism.

The agreement signed between the IAEA and Iran includes six items:¹

1. Providing mutually agreed relevant information and managed access to the Gchine [uranium] mine in Bandar Abbas
2. Providing mutually agreed relevant information and managed access to the Heavy Water Production Plant
3. Providing information on all new research reactors
4. Providing information with regard to the identification of 16 sites designated for the construction of nuclear power plants

¹ “IAEA, Iran Sign Joint Statement on Framework for Cooperation,” IAEA Press Release, November 11, 2013, <http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/2013/prn201321.html>.

5. Clarification of the announcement made by Iran regarding additional enrichment facilities
6. Further clarification of the announcement made by Iran with respect to laser enrichment technology

What do these items mean, and how relevant are they to the drive to attain complete knowledge of the status and capabilities of Iran's nuclear development program? None of these items are mandatory under the existing safeguards arrangements with Iran, and as such, their acceptance evinces some Iranian goodwill. But are they significant?

The Gchine uranium mine production is interesting, but is it the only indigenous source of Iran's uranium? Heavy water is an essential commodity for the Arak reactor that is under construction, and the information supplied would include production rates and quantities produced. However, the most important property is the purity of the heavy water. It is a go-no-go issue. If it is not pure enough, the IR-40 reactor at Arak will simply not function.

The item concerning new research reactors is perhaps the most interesting. The question is whether this item includes the information concerning the under-construction Arak reactor that the IAEA has sought for a long time. Providing information as to future sites for nuclear activities does nothing to allay present-day apprehensions concerning Iran's nuclear program. The laser enrichment issue is also intriguing, since this is an additional uranium enrichment technology and it would be useful to see Iran's progress.

On the other hand, if one has to define the burning issues that the IAEA faces at present, they would include: the capabilities and plans for expansion of Iran's uranium gas centrifuge enrichment program, including the production and capabilities of new centrifuge types; the military issues related to research and development of the explosive mechanism; the detailed and updated design of the heavy water reactor at Arak, and other issues detailed in the periodic IAEA reports.

Thus, the agreement signed between the IAEA and Iran is, in a way, an empty victory for the IAEA (and the international community). The inspections agreed to by Iran not mandated by the present agreements are not really important to the evaluation of the status of Iran's nuclear program, which proceeds irrespective of the findings of the inspectors. Moreover, the inevitable Iranian game of gaining time is evident here: according to this agreement the information and access will be provided within three months. As to the future, the agreement notes that "it is foreseen that Iran's cooperation will include providing the IAEA with timely information about its nuclear facilities and in regard to the implementation of transparency measures. Activities will proceed in a step-by-step manner."

A more basic question concerns the international community's expectations of the IAEA safeguards system. According to the IAEA definition, "The Department of Safeguard's primary role is to deter the proliferation of nuclear weapons by detecting early the misuse of nuclear material or technology, and by providing credible assurances that States are honoring their safeguards obligations." Because of its severely curtailed freedom of activities in Iran, the IAEA, as seen from its reports, can do little to deter the proliferation in Iran, and it can offer little more than concerns about Iran's program – certainly not assurances. Furthermore, if the IAEA uncovers something out of order it can do little about it. It can report what it found, but nothing more. Thus if it detects a serious breach of obligations, the most it can do is to verify the facts and report them. They can raise the alarm (if not prevented from doing so), but that is all.

Apparently, therefore, although the new agreement is "nice to have," it does not have much more than a placebo effect, where the patient, in this case the world, believes that it is receiving a true palliative. Unfortunately, this is not the case here.

And, finally, what effect can this agreement have on the Geneva talks between Iran and the P5+1? On technical matters, very little. However, this can be seen as a success for Iran's "charm offensive," since it shows that an agreement can be reached with Iran, although of very little practical value.

