

Position Paper

The Nuclear Deal and the Russian Guarantees: Motives and Implications

March 20, 2022



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

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On March 5, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Washington should grant Russia [guarantees](#) that the Western sanctions against Moscow will not impact the country's dealings with Iran when the nuclear deal is revived. This comes at a time when the United States, Europe and their allies are imposing on Russia unprecedented sanctions due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. He also announced that either Russian interests are secured under the deal that is agreed, or the deal will not be revived.

Lavrov's remarks were categorically rejected by the United States. US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) reiterated that Lavrov's remarks "have nothing to do with the Iran nuclear deal [...] These things are totally different and are just are not in any way linked." According to the US administration, Russia shares a common interest with the United States in seeking to revive the nuclear deal. It seems that Iran was surprised by the Russian request. Hence, Iran reiterated its principal demand: for the nuclear deal to be revived independently of any bilateral issues or concerns raised by the parties to the nuclear deal.

In the context of these Russian remarks and the reactions to them by the United States and Iran, questions arise regarding the circumstances surrounding the aforementioned Russian remarks, the aims behind them, the US and Iranian reactions, their ramifications on the talks to revive the nuclear deal as well as Iran's relations with Russia and Washington's options for dealing with these new variables.

Nuclear Negotiations in a Complex Environment

The nuclear negotiations have been held in a deeply complex environment which has arisen because of the following factors:

- **Rising tensions between Russia and the West:** Relations between Russia and the West, led by the United States, are experiencing escalating confrontation — perhaps not seen in the international arena since the Cold War. The crisis in Ukraine has attracted the attention of the world, its leaders and international institutions while the focus on other issues has declined — including the issues related to the Middle East. No doubt this crisis has overshadowed the nuclear negotiations.
- **Imminent understandings between Iran and the West over the nuclear deal:** The nuclear negotiations with Iran are nearing the finish line. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian [said](#), “I think we have never been close to concluding a deal as we are now.” There is no doubt that Iran — somehow — has benefited from the situation in Ukraine, with the crisis allowing it to strengthen its negotiating position and diminish US pressure, in light of the West being preoccupied with its confrontation with Russia — an issue it deems more urgent at this moment in time. Most of the outstanding issues have been resolved. Only a limited number of issues remain to be resolved through a political decision by the United States and Iran.
- **An expected Russian role in helping Iran to honor its commitments under the nuclear deal:** There have been a host of measures to ensure progress in the nuclear negotiations. The first measure was when the United States reinstated the sanctions waivers previously rescinded by former President Trump in May 2020 as part of Washington's maximum pressure campaign against Iran. The move allows Russia

to cooperate with Iran in non-military projects at the Bushehr nuclear facility, the Arak heavy water facility and the Tehran Research Reactor — in addition to transferring surplus amounts of enriched uranium and heavy water and helping in maintaining and developing the aforementioned sites as well as others. The second measure was the understandings reached between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on implementing the UN watchdog's protocol and Tehran observing its nuclear obligations once again. Russia has an important role in the implementation of the nuclear deal if revived.

• **Sanctions on the Russian energy sector and Iran's emergence as an alternative supplier:** The United States is imposing crippling sanctions on Russia, hence hiking energy prices to an unprecedented level. Meanwhile, Iran managed, in light of the heedlessness toward the implementation of the sanctions, to raise [its oil exports](#) to 1.5 million barrels per day. Maybe the West will need Iran to enter the energy market as an alternative to Russia to curb the hikes in energy prices in the short term and provide alternative supplies to Europe in the long run. According to [estimates](#), Iran has nearly 80 million barrels stored in oil tankers and storage facilities in a number of Asian countries that could be immediately sold.

• **Iran's ambiguous position toward the Ukrainian crisis:** [The Iranian position](#) has not been clear since the drums of war began to beat between Russia and Ukraine. Initially, Iran's position supportive of Russia led it to face extensive criticism, hence it attempted to control its repercussions and consequences. Later, Iran attempted to forge a balanced position on the Russia-Ukraine crisis given the sensitivity of its current situation in light of the ongoing negotiations with the West.

• **An alliance of necessity between Russia and Iran:** Both sides have common interests, primarily hostility toward the United States and a desire to restructure the global order. Moreover, they cooperate on some regional files such as Syria. But there are differences and intersecting interests. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif accused Russia of impeding the conclusion of the nuclear deal signed in 2015. Therefore, the current position on Russia is nothing new. Iran always looks to Russia as the party that seeks to

[cause harm to it](#)— in addition to the insufficient Russian cooperation to mitigate US sanctions, and Moscow's cooperation with Israel in Syria, causing harm to Tehran's interests. This is compounded by Russia voting in favor of the recent UN Security Council resolution against the Houthis in Yemen, let alone the historical scars related to the Soviet annexation of Iranian territories.

Iran's Objectives

It is clear that Russia raising its demand coincided with the US announcement that it along with its European allies were mulling over the possibility of imposing a ban on Russian oil imports as a response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, it coincides with Tehran's announcement that it had agreed to the IAEA's roadmap to resolve the outstanding issues that have impeded the negotiations with the world powers in Vienna to revive the 2015 nuclear deal. Hence, Russia seeks to undermine Western sanctions and obstruct the pathway of Iran and the other negotiating parties, steering the prospective deal and its results to circumvent the crisis resulting from the sanctions imposed on Moscow and preventing the decline of its economy in the future. Russian objectives can be summarized as follows:

- **Employing the lever of the nuclear deal to put pressure on the West:** Russia seeks to take advantage of the current disagreement between Iran and the West over the nuclear deal in light of the Ukrainian crisis. Russia believes that if the nuclear deal is resurrected, the West, primarily the United States, will settle one of its thorny issues. There will be more focus on Ukraine, putting more pressure on Russia. Without a doubt, Russia plays an important role in the issue of providing Iran with future guarantees, ensuring its compliance with the Additional Protocol and some technical provisions of the nuclear deal. The Russian position threatens to break the consensus on preventing Iran from approaching the nuclear threshold, a significant step that would exceed the red line set by the West. Russia is aware that this file is vital for the United States, as it is keen to control the Iranian nuclear program in light of talk about Tehran shortening its nuclear breakout time to less than a year.

• **Delaying the return of Iranian oil to the market:** Reviving the Iranian nuclear deal presently is not in the interest of Russia. In case the sanctions imposed on Iran are lifted and Iranian oil returns to the market, the need for Russian oil will diminish significantly. Yet, estimates indicate that oil prices will [go down from 10 percent to 15 percent](#). As a result, it is in the interest of Russia to delay the return of Iranian oil to the market as much as possible. It is worth mentioning that there is a debate in the United States on lifting the sanctions imposed on Venezuela in order for Caracas to be an alternative source to Russian oil. This is expected to happen with Iran, especially if the sanctions are lifted. This will blow up an important lever in Moscow's hand in its dispute with the West.

• **Creating a major loophole in the sanctions and circumventing them via Iran:** Through its request, Russia wants to create a loophole through which it can circumvent the sanctions imposed on it. The problem lies in the fact that in case the United States and Europe agree to the Russian request, the greenlight will also have to be given by other countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada and others that imposed sanctions on Russia due to the Ukrainian crisis. These countries could possibly agree to sanctions waivers for trade and economic relations between Russia and Iran. This means if Russia's request is accepted, it could create a loophole in the Western sanctions against it.

• **Russia's desire to keep Iran under the weight of Western sanctions:** Russia fears that reviving the nuclear deal will lead to improved ties between Iran and the United States and the European countries, thereby Tehran will have no need for Russia as a strategic partner. Iran will lose it as an allied country in the Middle East, a region where it is keen to have an influential presence and compete with Iran in the energy markets.

Iran and the US Reject Russian Demands

• **Iran's refusal to draw the nuclear negotiations into Russia's dispute with the West:** Iran believes that the ongoing dispute between Russia and the West should not impact the Vienna negotiations. The ongoing talks in Vienna are based on a critical rule that was agreed

by Iran, Russia and China: Any issue outside the realm of the nuclear negotiations such as Iran's regional behavior and missile program must not be included. The Russian step marked a desire to reshuffle the cards and link the Ukrainian crisis to the nuclear file. Iran has rejected this Russian desire to mingle the two issues. Iran and all the other parties view the nuclear negotiations as an independent file. Iran has denounced Russia's attempt to exploit the Vienna talks to achieve its interests in the aftermath of the problems that surfaced between Moscow and the West because of its invasion of Ukraine.

Most of Iran's newspapers considered the Russian request as an attempt by Moscow to obstruct the nuclear deal and hijack it with the aim of blackmailing the West. Though those opposed to the Russian position blame the Iranian government which granted the Russian government powers that amount to guardianship over the nuclear negotiations. However, [the reiteration of the Iranian foreign minister](#) that Tehran will not allow any outside action to influence its interests in the nuclear talks and its trajectory was considered a rectification of the course by the Iranian government.

- **An Iranian keenness to revive the nuclear deal to address the internal crisis:** Iran believes that it has a principal interest in reviving the nuclear deal — for the sake of tackling its increasing internal challenges. The Raisi government is depending on returning to the nuclear deal as a means to boost the political system's legitimacy, quell domestic tensions and end the country's international isolation.
- **Internal debate on the Russian position and the policy of heading eastwards:** This new complexity to the nuclear negotiations file after the Russian position has brought to the fore conflicting voices in Iran. There are those critical of or opposed to the orientations of the Iranian government regarding the nuclear deal and the trajectory of the ongoing negotiations and the “reformist” voices who are and have been opposed to the foreign policy approach of turning eastwards in recent years — a policy that requires Iran to exclusively put all its eggs in the Russian and Chinese baskets, away from embracing a balanced foreign policy and hedging its economic and strategic interests between the Eastern and Western camps to ensure that it will have wider options to repair its economy and its tattered economic sectors.

The recent Russian position fueled domestic criticisms which have continued since the recent visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Moscow and the concomitant debate on how far Iran's foreign policy approach of turning toward the East is bearing fruit.

- **The Iranian dependence on the US rejection of the Russian request:** Iran is well aware that the United States will turn down the Russian request since it will undermine the effectiveness of the sanctions it has recently imposed on Russia. This has already happened as [US Secretary of State Antony Blinken](#) dismissed the Russian request, describing it as “out of context,” saying that the sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine have nothing to do with the Iranian nuclear deal. Yet Iran realizes that the United States and several European countries are seeking through using the international sanctions on Russian oil exports to make the invasion of Ukraine highly costly for Russia — especially as oil revenues accounted for 36 percent of the overall Russian budget in the past year (2021). In light of the international — and especially the European — need for Russian oil and gas, the United States is seeking to find alternative markets to make up for this need. The Iranian nuclear deal and enabling Tehran to return to the global oil and gas markets represents a suitable compensatory alternative capable of replacing Russian gas exports to Europe. This comes as Iran possesses the second-biggest gas reserves in the world behind Russia. There is no doubt that Iran looks to the aforementioned realities within the framework of its interests to revive the nuclear deal as soon as possible.

The Results and Consequences of Russian Pressure

- **The lack of coordination between Russia and Iran and the potential exacerbation of differences:** Russia brought forth its demand without coordination with Iran. Even [the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh](#) said on March 7, 2022, “We have learned of the remarks of Mr. Lavrov from the media outlets and we are waiting the details about them via the diplomatic channels.” Maybe this points to the beginning of a divergence in positions between the two sides, which could lead to differences at the negotiating table in Vienna or in other files.

- **Adding complexity to the nuclear negotiations:** By seeking guarantees regarding its relations with Iran, Russia opens the door for obstructing the ongoing negotiations in Vienna. In case Russia insists on its demand, it will take the negotiations to another parallel trajectory after the concerned parties have made great strides toward reviving the nuclear deal. However, Russia will face a challenge in this respect. The return to the nuclear deal is essentially an Iran-US decision that depends on the two sides' return to complying with their obligations. In light of the ongoing international circumstances, the Americans and the West may express a desire to resolve this issue to focus their efforts on standing up to Putin's increasing ambitions.
- **Searching for an alternative to Russia in the field of nuclear cooperation with Iran:** Russia will take over a technical responsibility when the nuclear deal is agreed and implemented — including importing some surplus enriched uranium from Iran and granting it yellowcake among other things in return and participating in developing Iran's peaceful nuclear program. In case Russia is not ready for cooperation, especially after the United States revoked the sanctions waivers, the United States, Iran, and the European troika could find an alternative country for transferring the nuclear materials. The United States and the West will surely welcome cooperation in this regard. Maybe China will be the destination in case Iran insists on turning eastwards.
- **Iran not aligning with Russian demands and maintaining mutual interests:** Iran is keen on resurrecting the nuclear deal as a vital and perhaps crucial interest for the Iranian political system, which looks to take the second step of the revolution. Perhaps it will be able to take advantage of the current developments to enhance its project. Therefore, Iran most likely will not be dragged into Russian schemes with regard to the nuclear agreement and employing it in its dispute with the West. However, Iran will not totally renounce its relations with Russia. The two countries have mutual interests and an alliance of necessity — the major aspect of which is the mutual animosity toward the West and the United States in particular.
- **Moving toward direct negotiations between Iran and the United States:** Russia played an important role along with Iran in preventing

the nuclear deal from collapsing. It also played a role supportive of Iran at the negotiating table. It was a mediator in the indirect Vienna talks between Iran and the United States. But the Russian tendency to employ the negotiations in its dispute with the West could push both the United States and Iran to engage in direct negotiations to thwart any efforts that could obstruct the negotiations. This comes as the past period has seen increasing calls on both sides to engage in direct negotiations to outmaneuver the Russian move.

Directions of the Russian Position

In the end, in light of the escalation in the Ukrainian crisis and the intensification of the dispute, the crisis puts pressure on all parties not to make concessions. But the Iranian interest requires the nuclear deal to be signed swiftly to overcome its economic crunch and not giving the opportunity for this file to turn into a bargaining chip on the agenda of the major world powers. This crisis may take one of the following two directions:

First: Russia may retract its demand in light of its desire to remain as Iran's guarantor in the negotiations. This comes in light of the indications of possible Russian-Ukrainian understandings regarding a compromise, following a meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries in Ankara and Lavrov signaling that there is a possibility for holding a meeting between Putin and Zelenskyy. In case of approving the return to the nuclear deal, Iran will hasten to return to the oil markets to raise its exporting capacity to 2 million barrels per day and take advantage of the currently soaring prices. Tehran's return to the oil markets could contribute to reducing energy prices and alleviating the stress currently faced in international oil markets.

Second: Russia could insist on its position, prompting Iran to turn to China as an alternative guarantor instead of Russia. In this case, Russia will lose an important lever, which will accelerate the resumption of relations between Iran and the Western world and lead to Tehran returning as an important actor in the energy markets. This is in addition to gaining sufficient assets to continue supporting its proxies in the region and purchasing and developing advanced weapons.

To conclude, it could be said that the Russian position harms Iran's vital interests in reviving the nuclear deal. Perhaps it will overshadow Iran's relations with Russia. But the intermingling of interests and the current complexities in the regional and global arenas will not thrust Tehran and Moscow's relations into crisis. The two countries — despite the mistrust — are aware of their need for each other. They move in a joint and agreed upon direction despite the differences and the conflicting interests in some cases. The United States has taken a decisive position by turning down the Russian request. Russia itself has an interest in resurrecting the nuclear deal and curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions as a strategic assessment of the dangers on its southern borders. Moreover, the Russians have an interest in keeping themselves part of the deal and continuing to shoulder their responsibilities in relation to cooperation with Iran and the IAEA regarding Tehran's nuclear program. In addition, Russia does not desire to see Iran turning to the West away from itself. Therefore, Russia may not insist on its demand, especially as its demand is part of the political rivalry with the West and it is attempting to play whatever cards it has in its hands. But there is no question that the Russian demand has brought Iran closer to the West than ever before and has granted the United States the chance to dissuade Tehran from moving eastwards. This comes as there are massive inducements for Iran. But this will depend on whether there will be a deal or whether the outstanding issues — which Iran refuses to discuss, primarily its ballistic missile program and regional role — will be resolved.



✉ info@rasanahiiis.com

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