

Between two ideals



BY BUNN NAGARA

After all the claims and recriminations over the Iran nuclear deal, it boils down to whether a country really wants to have a deal or not.

THE just-concluded Iran nuclear deal may be regarded on several levels, but two principal ones stand out: the pragmatists' and the fantasists'.

Realists on all sides were jubilant that a workable compromise had finally been struck between Iran, the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Germany as well as the European Union, after nine long years of tiresome haggling and suspicions.

But daydreamers in the United States and Israel were upset that Iran and its government had been left standing, its dignity unblemished and its sovereignty intact. How could the US government, the chief protagonist at the other end of the table to Iran all these years, have made such a blunder?

Their fellow fantasists in Iran were similarly incensed. How could a justly proud sovereign nation kowtow to any set of conditions imposed from abroad?

Yet the fact is that after a decade of talks, including the final 20 months of intense negotiations, progressive leadership in both Teheran and Washington found common cause to reach a deal. This achievement was witnessed and endorsed by Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the EU.

Due credit goes to US and Iranian leaders who worked hard to arrive at a bold agreement that is realistic, practical, reasonable, verifiable and multilaterally acceptable. The formula also provides for the promised concessions to Iran to be reversible in case of unforeseen or undeclared contingencies.

A *Washington Post/ABC News* poll of ordinary Americans last weekend showed supporters of the agreement outnumbered opponents three to two. However, the opponents' well-oiled machinery is pouring many more millions than the supporters can muster into a campaign to block the deal.

The US Senate now has seven weeks to approve the agreement or not respond, allowing the agreement to proceed, or reject it and thus move President Obama to veto the rejection. Meanwhile, hardcore opponents can be expected to try every trick in the book to sabotage the deal.

Voting mainly along party lines, Senate Republicans generally oppose the agreement even before knowing what it contains. These armchair critics nitpick on cushy cushions far removed from the heat of negotiating with an Iran they never cared to understand.

They can carp and whine but not offer a better, or any, alternative. Like their fellow naysayers in Israel, they cannot conceive of any agreement that would treat Iran as a sovereign negotiating party in the first place.

The Obama White House, occasionally known to put US interests before Israeli ones, may be better disposed to a deal with Iran than any other US administration. The moderate and pragmatic Iran President Hassan Rouhani may also be more inclined to a deal than many of its predecessors or successors.

Iran had the political will to work constructively with the United States to end an unwinnable impasse. Obama himself could be accused of no more than seeking a legacy that could justify his Nobel Peace Prize award.

Denunciations of the deal by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are to be expected, helping to stake out his ideological territory in a changing world. The best way for conservatives to ensure their own political longevity is to refresh and reinvent the need for conservatism.

The Ayatollah's condemnation also helped to assure the United States that the Rouhani government's agreement contained no hidden tricks or trapdoors. Similarly, Israel's continued attempts to undermine the agreement helped convince Iran that it could be worthwhile.

The Ayatollah and Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu are mirror images of each other, but inverted. They seem to occupy opposite poles, but need each other to help define their respective identities through contrast.

Here was Iran, among the oldest countries in the world, being confronted by an upstart and criminal Israel that was among the world's youngest nations. Netanyahu had criticised the previous Iranian government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of seeking the dismemberment of Israel, but now he has switched the blame to unidentified protesters on Iran's streets.

As Iran's nuclear agreement shows, Netanyahu's preferred method is to drag Iran through the mud and rub its nose in the dirt. But expecting Iran to submit and surrender while being humiliated was just pure fantasy – as Secretary of State John Kerry put it, Iran's "complete capitulation" was never really an option.

For Netanyahu, however, what was workable was never a priority. That is evident from his curt rejection of the two-state solution with Palestine, which the rest of the world had anticipated for generations.

So when the international community was relieved that Iran had opted for the carrot of an end to sanctions, Netanyahu was disturbed that Iran was not shown much more of the stick instead. If politics is the art of the possible, deal-making is the craft of the compromise.

However, Israel is not completely irrational in attacking the nuclear agreement while seeming to imagine an improbable alternative. That is because its loud complaints have at least four other undeclared purposes.

First, the deal leaves Iran and its leadership unscathed. It contains nothing of the scorched earth policy that Israel wants for Iran.

Second, Netanyahu wanted more intrusive demands imposed on Iran in hopes of opening up its military facilities – albeit unrelated to nuclear activity – to spy on Iranian defence capabilities.

Third, harping on the supposed weaknesses of the agreement serves as a cover for Israel's own illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, which continue quietly and even escalate aggressively.

Fourth, and not least, loud Israeli complaints to US policymakers are likely to encourage more aid for Israel, particularly in the form of military assistance. Israel has not said anything openly about this, but US moves to "assure" Israel with more military aid began last weekend, just days after the Iran nuclear agreement was signed.

All the countries behind the agreement had come together as one in growing up, becoming mature enough to lift the sanctions on Iran and move on. Their business communities had been waiting for this moment for years, but it would not have come if Iran was still not trustworthy.

Arab countries like Sunni Saudi Arabia that were unhappy with the deal related less to Iran's nuclear issues. They were more concerned that Iran, a Shia Muslim country, would soon be free from sanctions.

The continuing rift between supporters and opponents of the deal centres on six basic issues.

One, unlike the opponents, supporters understand that a deal between two parties can work only when both can agree on a common set of conditions.

Two, supporters know a country can agree to a set of conditions only through negotiations, not through the threat or use of force.

Three, opponents believe Iran can be bullied into submission and surrender, while supporters prefer to negotiate with Iran as adults.

Four, opponents think the choice is between a "good" deal, a "bad" deal and no deal at all. Supporters realise that the choice is between a range of imperfect deals with varying degrees of imperfection, since perfection acceptable to all would require no negotiations.

Five, no deal can provide an ironclad, foolproof guarantee against violations – by either side – because deal-making is not law enforcement, even if it contains elements of it.

Six, sincerity in wanting a deal makes a deal possible.

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