

One deal, many interests

BY BUNN NAGARA

Critics of the Iran nuclear deal cite many reasons against it, but they forget it is more than just about Iran or nuclear issues.

THE preferred US term for realigning its forces and influence in East Asia and the Pacific is “rebalancing”, although little of that seems evident.

The bigger rebalancing that the US and Europe are undertaking may well be in West Asia. And typically, when the moves are so definitive, they are not called rebalancing at all.

Instead, they are given a name as innocuous and commendable as “the Iran nuclear deal” (officially, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA).

Indeed, the deal that deters any Iranian nuclear arms ambitions in exchange for lifting sanctions against Teheran may be commendable and timely for several reasons.

Appearances aside, just about any interested party will notice that the deal is meant to “adjust” the West’s relations with more than just Iran. That is all the more evident when the US and the EU are so keen on the adjustments.

Discussion and debate in Western media are often restricted to a few narrow issues, missing the bigger picture.

On one level, the West is said to be encouraging progressive elements in Iranian politics currently headed by President Hassan Rouhani. Ending sanctions would boost Iran’s economy and promote the prospects of progressives at next month’s parliamentary elections.

Critics contend that the dividends to the Iranian economy can come only much later. Rightwing critics in particular insist that Iran has not shown enough goodwill, and never will, to justify ending sanctions.



New beginnings: with the nuclear deal, Rouhani paves the way for a new economic reality in Iran, now freed from harsh international sanctions. AP

On another level, Western leaders seem unimpressed with Saudi Arabia's latest reactionary tendencies such as its attack on Yemen, and seek to send an oblique message to Riyadh that Western support is not a blank cheque.

Saudi Arabia, ever mindful of sectarian schisms between its Sunni persuasion and Shia Iran, can be counted on to be horrified by a higher regional profile for Teheran.

Panic would reign in Riyadh's gilded palaces if ever Iran replaced Saudi Arabia as Washington's good friend. That is very unlikely to happen, but any Western diplomatic moves even in the direction of normalising ties with Teheran would fill the Saudis with concern.

And so, Saudi Arabia stands alongside Israel in opposing the JCPOA. Israel of course has its own predictable propagandistic reasons to oppose it.

Anything that even resembles giving any Muslim country in the region its due space or a fair chance would be criticised and obstructed by Israel. That has become such a given that Israel would want to criticise and obstruct because not doing so may be seen as endorsement.

What Israel and Saudi Arabia do not realise or understand is firstly that there are limits to their attitude and behaviour, even in the West.

If not the Iran nuclear issue, there would be other ways for Western powers to show disapproval of their extreme policies.

Secondly, the regional status quo keeping Iran down even during Teheran's more progressive administrations has become tiresome for the West, which feels it should not continue indefinitely.

Not only is it unhelpful in promoting progressives in Iran, it cannot be a permanent solution for anything. The West felt it was time to move on, and doing a deal with a more reasonable Iranian administration would not only look better but also more likely to succeed.

Critics further misunderstand the issues when they say that Iranian conservatives are regrouping and Western hopes of encouraging moderates with the deal are in vain. It is precisely because conservatives are gathering that dealing with Hassan Rouhani is preferable to having to do so with his conservative counterparts later.

If a deal had to be made it had to be made with the present Iranian and US administrations. In Washington, it would be more likely with a Democratic White House, especially one nearing the end of its final term.

But critics still ask, why should permitting Iran to become more of a "normal country" be a priority at all? Western powers have their own motivations for it and for not disclosing them openly.

Of course, the Western agenda is no more idealistic or altruistic than anybody else's, especially when the details have not been highlighted.

Ending sanctions against Iran also allows Western corporations to do business there. There are business contracts worth billions just waiting to be signed.

French oil companies for example have been chafing at the bit for years to do more business in Iran more openly and legitimately. Over time, these companies have brought pressure to bear on their governments to end the sanctions.

Meanwhile, allowing Iranian oil to return to world markets beginning with immediate access for 300,000 barrels a day would keep world oil prices low. That burdens the Russian economy further and places more pressure on President Vladimir Putin by weakening the market for his chief export.

If Western powers can do all these, while also keeping Israeli and Saudi waywardness at bay, nobody should be surprised at why a deal had to be done. Not everyone may agree with the motives or wish to accept all the outcomes, but the reasons for such a deal are clear enough.

Besides, none of the JCPOA's critics have a better proposal to offer. The Obama administration challenged them to propose a better alternative for ensuring peace and stability in West Asia, but nobody took it up.

Technically, the JCPOA's provisions may not look like the ideal guarantor of peace in the region. But the absence of the deal is even riskier, such that its greatest value may come by default.

In the ultimate analysis, US and European negotiators may well know that Iran does not really want to develop nuclear weapons. Thus the JCPOA is essentially to placate Israel which has threatened to bomb Iranian nuclear power/research installations, thus triggering a regional conflagration.

Iran has always insisted that its nuclear work has only been for nuclear power and medical applications.

The IAEA as nuclear watchdog last month found that despite some signs of work on a possible "nuclear explosive device" until 2003, for the past seven years nothing indicated Iran was developing a bomb.

Perhaps the biggest reason why the West has been so anxious to reach agreement with Iran is China's growing presence in the region.

The JCPOA was signed in Vienna last July and after a series of procedures, sanctions against Iran were lifted last Sunday. Two days later, China's President Xi Jinping arrived in Saudi Arabia to begin a three-nation tour to build stronger ties in the region.

Among the issues Xi discussed with his Saudi hosts was Beijing's intercontinental plans for its One Belt, One Road initiative spanning East Asia and Europe.

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud warmly greeted Xi, presented him with a medal, and remarked that Saudi Arabia was a key country in China's grand scheme.

The Saudis know that unlike the West, China does not seek to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Xi's tour also took in Iran and Egypt, but China's plans would impact on more than these three countries in the region.

China has also floated the idea of mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Evidently, the "great game" between the major powers is alive and well in West Asia.

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