



SHORT CALL, BIG SIGNIFICANCE: THE OBAMA – ROUHANI CONVERSATION

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Historic *détentes* in the past have radically changed the course of international relations. Are we on the threshold of another such event in USA-Iran rapprochement? Going by the developments of last week, which have included a first telephonic conversation in 34 years and relatively constructive statements by Presidents Rouhani and Obama at the 68th session of the United Nations General Assembly, things do look brighter than they have been in a long time. Indeed, both sides have expressed a strong desire to defuse the crisis that has now lasted over ten years since questions were first raised on the true intent of the Iranian nuclear programme after disclosures were made by Iranian dissidents.

However, an opening has certainly emerged with the election of a moderate leader as the Iranian president. He fired his opening salvo with the desire to alter the engagement parameters from what had been used by his predecessor. US President Obama, who currently enjoys the lowest approval ratings at home, and who is in search of opportunities that can help him earn the Nobel Peace Prize that he received in 2009, was quick to seize the initiative. Can he now get some concessions out of Rouhani and can he offer any worthwhile compromises to Iran? To supplement the possibility of a nuclear rapprochement with the US, and by extension with the international community, Iran also entered into negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on 27 September 2013 with the stated intention to cooperate in “mutual confidence building and constructive interaction”. Will this culminate with the IAEA being able to put an end to the Iranian dossier? It is too early to tell.

In fact, the answers to these questions depend a great deal on the domestic and regional dynamics for both nations. For Iran, while Supreme Leader Ayotallah Ali Khamenei appears to have given a long rope to Rouhani to undertake nuclear negotiations, there is no denying that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which oversees the nuclear programme, is peering over his shoulder. The political power balance at home could circumscribe Rouhani's maneuverability. In any case, it should be expected that Iran would not be willing to surrender the right to enrichment. But, as long as the programme can be brought under IAEA safeguards, it would be a positive development. Even more, if Iran can agree to ratify the Additional Protocol (which allows for more intrusive inspections) which it had signed in 2005, it would be a major step forward.

In order to strengthen Rouhani's position at home, Obama will have to appear to concede some of Iran's demands, including a phased lifting of sanctions. It may be recalled that Rouhani was the Iranian nuclear negotiator from 2003-05 when the nuclear programme was first suspended. But the inability to make any breakthrough had led to a hardening of positions. From then to now, under hardliner Iranian President Ahmedinejad, Iran substantially improved its enrichment capability through addition of basic and advanced centrifuges at Fordow. The agreement arrived at on the future of this capability could make or break the currently developing rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Rouhani too will have to understand the constraints on Obama from his own domestic opposition, as well as from its ally, Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has already expressed deep skepticism over the Iranian overtures and even described them as a show of duplicity. Given this attitude of Tel Aviv, the onus will be on Washington to soften positions in order to help develop the Iran and US negotiations into a wider dialogue on regional security. In any case, a Conference on negotiations for a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East, as recommended by the 2010 NPT RevCon is due. A coordinator for the same had already been appointed, but the conference could not be held in 2012 due to the intractable positions taken by Iran and Israel. As part of the evolving situation now, the convening of this Conference should be a goalpost since the next NPT RevCon is looming large in less than two years now. Progress on this front would enable foster a positive atmosphere at the meeting and reinvigorate the non-proliferation regime.

In fact, Obama could well use this opportunity of engaging with Iran to take some larger steps aimed at sustainable non-proliferation. While the immediate focus is on binding Iran to restrictions that may stop it from moving towards nuclear weapons, the long term objective should be to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons by delegitimising their use or threat of use through a UN convention or treaty to this effect. This would, in the long run, reduce the desire of nations to move in the direction of acquiring weapons that are unusable. The Syrian case, in a sense, has reinforced the strength of a taboo against the use of WMD, chemical weapons in the case of Syria. The norm against nuclear non-use could be strengthened in the backdrop of the Iranian - US nuclear rapprochement.

The short telephonic conversation between the two Presidents may yet prove to be a historic one. The onus lies equally on both to ensure progress. The repercussions of a failure, just as much as the benefits of a thaw, would go beyond the two capitals.

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