

What lies ahead for US-Iran ties?

Biden presidency offers a chance for talks to revive the nuclear deal, but many hurdles remain

By WANG LEI

Following president-elect Joe Biden's statement that the United States would rejoin the 2015 Iran nuclear deal if Teheran returns to full compliance, China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang told ambassadors at a Security Council briefing on nuclear nonproliferation on Dec 22 that the other parties to the Iran deal should fulfill their commitments.

Although the Teheran leadership, too, has said that it is ready to return to full compliance with the landmark nuclear deal as soon as the other parties honor their commitments, Iran faces a precarious situation, particularly after the assassination of its leading nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on Nov 27.

Despite being forced to adopt an increasingly hard-line stance against Israel and the US, Iran cannot take any retaliatory action against Fakhrizadeh's killing, because that would make it even more difficult for Biden to lift the sanctions against Teheran and jumpstart diplomacy. Yet, if Iran does not do anything to "avenge" Fakhrizadeh's death, its retaliation threats would

sound hollow to not only other players in the region, especially its rivals, but also the Iranian people.

Along with the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's elite military force and one of the most powerful leaders of the country in January 2020, and an explosion that destroyed Iran's nuclear facilities in Natanz in July, the Iranian scientist's killing seems to have put Teheran in a spot. As such, the future of US-Iran relations, which nose-dived after the Donald Trump administration pulled the US out of the nuclear deal and launched its "maximum pressure" campaign, seems uncertain.

Despite declaring that it would no longer abide by the nuclear deal's restrictions after the US pulled out of the pact, Teheran, of late, has reportedly reduced its involvement in Iraq and Syria in the hope that the incoming US administration will lift the sanctions.

But the assassination of Fakhrizadeh has cast a shadow on the future of US-Iran ties.

Though no group has claimed responsibility for Fakhrizadeh's assassination, Iran claims Israel was behind it. Israel's intelligence agency Mossad has been involved in the killings of several Iranian scientists

in the past decade, and Israel and the US jointly planned a cyberattack that damaged Iran's centrifuges through a computer worm called "Stuxnet" in 2010.

Considering the close ties between the US and Israel, which have further deepened during Trump's presidency, if Israel had a hand in Fakhrizadeh's killing, the US likely knew about it in advance.

The assassination is a political challenge for Iran, as it has exposed the loopholes in its intelligence and security, and prompted Iranian hard-liners to demand that the government take reciprocal action. That has put President Hassan Rouhani's moderate government in a dilemma. But by targeting Israel or US facilities in the Middle East, Iran will only add fuel to the fire in the region.

Also, the moderates seem to be losing support among the Iranian public, as was evident in hard-liners winning a majority of seats in the parliamentary election in February — raising fears that a hard-liner could win the Iranian presidential election in June 2021.

Resolving the Iranian nuclear issue is an extremely difficult task. The Trump administration's maximum pressure dashed Iran's hope of

being free of international sanctions in return for pledging to not develop any nuclear weapons.

To press the other five signatories to the nuclear deal (the four other permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) to fulfill their requirements, Iran has been gradually reducing compliance with the pact. For example, in July 2019, Iran announced the breaking of the 300-kilogram limit for enriched uranium stock and the 3.67 percent limit for uranium enrichment. On Nov 5, 2019, it announced the activation of the centrifuges at the Fordow facility. And on Jan 5, 2020, it announced that it would no longer honor the nuclear deal's terms.

Besides, the nuclear scientist's killing could prompt Iran to further intensify its nuclear program, jeopardizing the chances of any talks on the full revival of the nuclear deal.

In fact, two days after Fakhrizadeh's death, the Iranian parliament passed a bill, "Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions", aimed at enriching uranium to 20 percent and above. If Iran succeeds in doing so, it would be the most serious breach of the nuclear deal. It seems foreign attacks on its leading figures, including top scientists, have made Iran more determined to make the

nuclear program a success.

Another challenge for Iran is the deteriorating external environment. Still, many expect Iran to exercise restraint until Jan 20, when Biden is scheduled to take the oath of office as US president. Perhaps Middle East countries opposed to Iran are using the last days of Trump's presidency to launch a barrage of attacks against Iran to force it to retaliate and thus jeopardize the chances of resolving the disputes with the US through peaceful dialogue.

If Iran's strategic tolerance gives way to desperation, and it launches revenge attacks, the Middle East will become even more turbulent.

But if it continues to exercise restraint, the period from January, when Biden assumes office, to June, when Iran holds presidential election, could provide Teheran and Washington the opportunity to hold negotiations to settle their disputes, leading to the revival of the Iran nuclear deal.

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A confluence of interests

China and Muslim countries have plenty of reasons to develop an engaging partnership

By MD MONIRUZZAMAN

In its endeavor for a global community of shared future, China over the years has brought the world the Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation mechanism and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation among other things. The Muslim countries have great potential for inclusive cooperation in the mechanisms.

An ineluctable inclusiveness is emerging in China's BRI economic projects that can encompass all the Muslim economies in Asia. Indeed Chinese President Xi Jinping happened to unveil both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Maritime Silk Road in Muslim countries, the first in Kazakhstan in September 2013, and the other in October 2013 in Indonesia with the world's largest single-nation Muslim population.

Collectively, the Asian Muslim economies, either rich or developing, are simultaneously large con-

sumer markets as well as suppliers of raw materials. So it is obvious that China and the Asian slice of the Muslim world cannot shrug off each other for practical benefits on either side.

On regionalism, the SCO has been fostering closer ties between China and the regional Muslim countries. It is believed by some that in the wake of growing unilateralism by the United States after the end of the Cold War, SCO is an attempt to bring the Far East and Central Asia together for lasting stability and peace.

Therefore, while maintaining traditional relations with the West, the Muslim countries may find SCO more attractive to increase their collective power for global balance.

And on globalism, the Chinese-led BRICS initiative (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) as well as the China-Africa cooperation agenda to represent the global East and South cannot bypass the vast majority

of Muslim economies, people and societies that fall within the arena.

If BRICS is taken to represent an Eastward movement of civilizational cycle from the West, the Muslim world is bound to march with BRICS due to geographical and civilizational proximities.

Throughout history, the Muslim world has been partnering with China for mutual development not only of each other, but also of Europe and Africa.

Apart from China's ever increasing trade deals, China depends heavily for gas and petroleum on Muslim countries in the Arab peninsula, Iran and Central Asia. The South and Southeast Asian Muslim countries are also huge raw material suppliers as well as markets for Chinese industrial products.

In return, Chinese policies on foreign aid and exchange are generally dominated by partnership, political equality, and win-win cooperation in contrast with the Western policies of conditionalities and imposi-

tion of sanctions on countries like Iran, Sudan and Syria on political grounds.

The Christian West tends to treat its relation with the Muslim world in terms of civilizational conflict, while China looks at such relations from cooperation perspective. Therefore, China's relations are based on non-intervention in domestic affairs, an approach that makes it more popular and acceptable in the Muslim countries as a reliable partner for development.

However, the Muslim world is now more divided over the role of the West due to the latter's successive devastation of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen, and continuous denial of emancipation from Western-backed authoritarianism and a solution to Israeli occupation of Palestine.

For political stability the Muslim world is in search of a more reliable partner. If the civilizational cycle of the past two and a half millennia is to renew, then it is logical that the

next civilizational candidate is China which needs supporting sojourners.

All these and other indicators only strengthen the age-old China-Muslim world inter-acquaintance and relationship further. In the contemporary time, China as a leading power in the eastward shift of civilizational cycle is acquiring the trust of the Muslim countries for being non-interventionist in their domestic affairs.

Clearly, the Muslim world might increasingly find China as a reliable partner in both development and politics. If the present trend continues, then the durable tradition of Islamic-Confucian bonds and a greater partnership building will apparently be more plausible for each other's interests.

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