

**Testimony for the House Armed Services Committee**  
**June 19, 2014**  
**Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering**  
**“P5 + 1 Negotiations over Iran’s Nuclear Program and its Implications for United States Defense.”**

Mr. Chairman: It is a pleasure and honor to join you and all the members of the committee. I thank you for the invitation.

Since my retirement from the State Department at the end of 2000, I have followed events in Iran closely. My principal association has been through The Iran Project, which was set up more than a dozen years ago to support closer contacts between The Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. I have participated in dialogues with Iranian government officials, and written on the subject. The Iran Project has kept the US Government fully informed on its contacts and activities.

**Introduction**

Since 2013, we have seen a shift in the US-Iran relationship. Official bilateral talks held confidentially, the important election for the President of Iran won by Hassan Rouhani, and the successful completion of the first step of negotiations with the November 24, 2013 Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) have opened the door to progress. Today, this committee wishes to discuss how this progress, and a possible comprehensive agreement can impact US strategy in the region and beyond.

**Strategic Assessment**

The US strategic objective in the Middle East should be a stable and secure region, open to commerce and interchange. The states in the region should have the opportunity to cooperate, enjoy peaceful relations and trade among themselves. It should be a region without nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

I want to be clear that I am strongly opposed to Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon and am deeply concerned about its support for terrorism and Hezbollah, its violations of the human rights of its citizens, and its threats against Israel. I recently led a delegation for The Iran Project to Israel, and exchanged points of view with the highest levels of Israeli government, military and intelligence leadership, as well as respected foreign policy experts. We were well received and had engaged discussions of key issues pertaining to Iran and its nuclear program, which lead to a greater understanding of Israeli assessments and outlook on this issue. We plan to continue these informal exchanges.

The US strategy should be to develop policies in support of its long-term goal of a more stable and secure Middle East, through peaceful processes, with the use of force reserved only to address the most extreme and unmanageable threats to US security. At the same time, we must recognize that this part of the world is likely to pass through many years perhaps decades

of turmoil and violence – problems that only the leaders and people of the region can resolve for themselves.

What role can the United States play now to achieve the goals we have laid out? An important variable in looking at this strategic outcome is whether a comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran can be reached and on what time scale.

There are three major possibilities: agreement by July 20, 2014; agreement within the next six-month period before January 20, 2015; and failure to reach an agreement altogether. For assessment purposes only two are significant at this point — agreement or no agreement.

### **Iran's Compliance so Far with its Commitments**

Before we assess these two scenarios, and their important implications for US policy, it is instructive to acknowledge that Iran has, in fact, fully complied with its commitments taken last November. The IAEA, which has long been skeptical of Iran's seriousness, has provided monthly reports verifying the scale and timeliness of its actions. Under the JPOA, Iran agreed to take several major steps to limit its nuclear capacity:

- Iran ceased production of 20% enriched uranium, disabled the interconnections between the cascades being used to enrich 20%, and began dilution or conversion to oxide of the existing stockpile of 20%. These were significant concessions by Iran and the IAEA confirms they have been completed.
- Capped the number of centrifuges operating. The IAEA confirms this has been done.
- Limited its centrifuge production, which the IAEA confirms has been completed.
- Capped the total amount of 3-5% enriched uranium it maintains by July 20. The IAEA confirms that Iran has commissioned a conversion plant that is due to start operation in late June to convert the excess LEU to oxide by July 20.
- Prevented the start-up of so-called advanced centrifuges (IR-2Ms). Again, the IAEA confirms that advanced centrifuges are not operating.

Importantly, and frequently lost in this debate, the JPOA prevents shortening of breakout time. Without the Joint Agreement, Iran would have been free to run all of its centrifuges, including the advanced centrifuges, and would have had access to 20% enriched uranium.

And, for the first time, the JPOA expanded safeguards verification – including daily physical access to enrichment facilities, as well as broadened access (e.g., to centrifuge production facilities and uranium mines).

As a result of the JPOA, the IAEA has doubled its staff on the ground in Iran and has issued monthly, rather than quarterly, reports on Iran's status. These monthly reports so far confirm that Iran is complying with the JPOA – often ahead of schedule.

With this status of the JPOA clearly laid out, let us examine the two scenarios: a comprehensive agreement or no agreement.

### **The Consequences of No Agreement**

Without a realization to reach a negotiated agreement, the US may be left with two unpalatable options: containing a nuclear armed Iran, or war. It is possible that Iran will not decide to pursue a nuclear weapon even if an agreement is not reached, but understanding the consequences of alternative strategies to diplomacy is important. Let me be clear about the limits of a use of force strategy in preventing a nuclear-armed Iran. The use of military force by Israel or the United States, at best, could only set back Iran's nuclear program 2-4 years; it would not eliminate it. Iran's nuclear capability is in the minds of Iranian scientists, which cannot be taken out by force alone. In fact, military intervention might actually stimulate an Iranian decision to acquire a nuclear weapon — a decision according to the US intelligence community — has not to date been made. A unilateral US or joint US-Israeli military strike against Iran would open up the potential for a wider conflict in the region and perhaps beyond. The recent violent actions in Iraq by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the continued conflict in Afghanistan gives evidence of the high volatility of the region and the unpredictable escalation of conflict across borders.

The failure to reach a diplomatic solution would have profound political implications inside Iran as well. It will certainly weaken moderates and embolden hardliners — which would most certainly impact human rights, political openness and freedoms, and other issues that concern us worldwide.

Moreover, if an agreement is not reached, the US and its allies in Western Europe will have no alternative but to fall back on adding more sanctions which presents new problems. We have learned from the past year that sanctions have worked to get the Iranians to the table to negotiate seriously about issues of great import to US national security. Yet the imposition now of more sanctions to achieve “a better deal” will not lead to Iranian capitulation on this issue. Sanctions alone are not an objective, but a means to reach a specific goal: in this case, preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Sanctions work best, or at all, only when diplomacy works. And additional sanctions during the diplomatic process could very well upend the entire course, losing the transparency gained and rolling back the important progress we have already made.

If the US were to walk away from a deal that most of the other P5+1 partners believe fulfills our main objectives, those countries are no longer likely to see value in abiding by the strict sanctions regime set in place under American leadership. This would leave the US alone to enforce largely unilateral sanctions, which we know are less effective.

### **The Consequences of Reaching a Comprehensive Agreement**

The impact of an agreement that meets US security needs would enhance US security, as well as that of other nations in the region. It would include a significant reduction of Iran's nuclear

program, the institution of an intensive monitoring system, and prevention of Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capacity. (My testimony assumes neither the US nor Iran would accept an agreement which was not in their long-term interest).

Such an agreement, if it holds, could mark the beginning of a longer process of further efforts by the US and Iran to resolve the many other problems between our two countries. Early efforts could take the form of confidence-building measures (CBM's): attempts to deal with important issues such as stabilizing Afghanistan, addressing the rapidly changing situation in Iraq, and even in Syria, as well as longstanding questions such as financial disputes stemming from the time of the Iranian revolution and the fall of the Shah. The process would be long, tenuous and demanding. No early establishment of full diplomatic recognition or normalization of relations would be likely. Thirty-five years of mistrust and misunderstanding will not disappear overnight despite the emergence of areas of mutual interest, such as cooperation in Afghanistan and now quite possibly Iraq.

Iran remains consumed by distrust over US objectives and interests, including an abiding concern over a feared US focus on regime change in Iran. And many in the US have a deep suspicion that Iran's key objective is regional hegemony fueled by the acquisition of nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems. Early agreements, potentially positive in their impact, will not set aside past history. That will take time and positive experiences with each other. It is important to note that the civil and serious relationship that has evolved over the past six months demonstrates that Americans and Iranians can achieve much through direct talks. It is not yet clear that good will can be replicated in addressing other issues in the near term, but it should be explored. We recall that normalizing relations after a long hostile relationship is not achieved quickly. The US and China took seven years from Nixon's visit in 1972 to normalized relations. This happened only after overcoming long periods of tensions and disagreements, including a number of visits at senior levels and the "Shanghai Communiqué." The US and the Soviet Union moved equally slowly in the implementation of new relations, beginning in 1933 and lasting until the Soviet Union was invaded by Nazi Germany, after which the US and the Soviet Union collaborated closely throughout the Second World War.

Even if the US were to expand its relations with Iran over the coming years, we are unlikely to accept Iran as a hegemonic force in the region, nor withdraw US military presence in the region. The US simply has too much at stake with the GCC States and Iraq to shift its strategic focus in the Gulf. Despite recent signs of serious instability and uncertainty in Syria and Iraq, the US is unlikely to engage in seismic shifts in its policies. Regional strategic implications are harder to read and predict. The sharpening sectarian conflict between the Sunni and Shia has impeded rapprochement between Arabs and Persians across the Gulf. Yet both sides, at least on the surface, seem committed against war and open for high-level visits, and even a seeming agreement if not full cooperation. Saudi Arabia and its Arab neighbors will need to be satisfied and assured that the US stands with them, even as they seek some regional accord with Iran.

More importantly, the US support of Israel's security must and will remain the keystone of American interests in the region and US relations with Iran will not change this commitment.

Rather than being taxed with building new relations with nations at odds with each other, whether it is Israel or across the Gulf, the US needs to act carefully to achieve better balances on both sides without upsetting its own relationships. This is a major challenge for US diplomacy.

Without a comprehensive agreement, we can expect even more strategic challenges. Could the absence of an agreement encourage Iran to push for nuclear weapons? The answer to this is not clear, but certainly all contingencies must be considered. The US seeks a reduction in the “breakout” time for Iran to dash to a nuclear weapon, which is outlined in the comprehensive agreement. Without an agreement, the US and others could still use sanctions, negotiations, and any other measure short of force, to prevent potential breakout. Should that fail, in the event Iran were to decide to breakout, the implication is clear that the US would keep open the option to use force. The US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has since 2007 prepared an annual assessment, and has “with high confidence” repeatedly stated that Iran has made no such decision.

### **To Summarize**

A successful agreement would:

- Improve the security of all regional players, including Iran, Israel and the GCC states as well as the US;
- Increase the opportunities for the US to play an enhanced diplomatic and political role in the region as it seeks to manage carefully its relationships among all of those states, avoiding the notion it was supporting Iran against the others, or vice versa;
- Reduce the chances for conflict;
- Improve the potential for more stable, longer-term relationship between the US and Iran;
- Benefit Israel as chances of a nuclear-armed Iran diminish and reduce a credible threat to its existence;
- Achieve another major milestone toward stopping nuclear proliferation;
- Increase the chances for a more stable, secure and prosperous region.

Failure to reach a comprehensive agreement could:

- Generate another major war in the region, led by the US;
- Lead to a nuclear-armed Iran;
- Generate further mistrust between Iran and major world players, making any future agreement on Iran’s nuclear program more difficult;
- Embolden the hardliners in Iran, impacting human rights, political openness and freedoms;
- Generate more instability and uncertainty in the region—particularly for US allies.

## **The Comprehensive Agreement – Negotiations**

A brief overview of where things stand may be helpful in reviewing and understanding the strategic assessment. I do so with the following points:

1. Both parties seem committed to finish the current process by July 20th, 2014;
2. The early stages were smooth;
3. Serious differences remain: they are reported to cover enrichment (numbers and other characteristics of centrifuges and amount of low enriched uranium to be produced); the Arak reactor and plutonium output; possible past military dimensions concerns (now being handled by the IAEA); extent of inspection; sanctions; and the duration of an agreement;
4. There are possible paths through each of these issues; and an agreement will require tough compromises;
5. Iran is focused on creating a peaceful civil program, protecting what it has already achieved – in part to address domestic political opposition;
6. The US seeks a minimal Iranian civil program capable of meeting current needs without significant increases in “breakout time”;
7. The scope of subjects to be resolved is reportedly agreed, and some progress has already been made on a number of these issues.

## **In Conclusion**

The opportunity with Iran represents one of the most significant for American diplomacy in this century. The complexities are great. The diplomacy is demanding. The potential strategic gains for the US and the region are real. The consequences of failure will impact our alliances in the region, especially with respect to Israel and our energy interests. And, importantly for all of us here today, questions of war and peace are not far from forefront of our minds. The prospect of the use of force – to deal with a feared Iranian weapon – is not matched by the potential benefits of first exhausting diplomacy. Force and sanctions will have to back diplomacy and its impact will be seminal. The US has no opt-out strategic possibilities without grave damage to itself, its friends and its allies.

Seldom do we see such opportunities before us as they present themselves now. It will take a major effort to pursue them, but the effort is worth the risk.