



## Policy Memo

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In my remarks I would like to focus on two questions that were laid out for our meeting -- “What Russia should and can do to make Geneva agreements on Iran sustainable and irreversible?” and “What are the main conditions for a sustainable US-Iranian dialogue?”

The first question is – in my point of view – rather easy to answer. Russia should do what it has done before – pursue a consistent and clear policy on the Iranian nuclear issue. Russia’s foreign policy may be criticized for quite a few reasons, but even the most critical experts will agree that for the last couple of years it has been consistent. On the Iranian nuclear issue there is not even much to criticize Moscow for: the approach that was taken upon in the Geneva agreements – a step-by-step approach that would allow Iran and the international community to make careful concessions and build trust – was proposed more than two years ago. I am talking about the so called “Lavrov plan”. And whereas the western press is reporting that it was secret talks between Washington and Tehran that helped forge the interim deal on the Iranian nuclear issue, as far as I understand Russia was actively involved in those meetings that ran parallel to the official negotiations. So for the Russian side to ensure that those agreements are irreversible I would propose to keep active involvement, try to keep balancing between the parties maximalist demands and keep pressure up on those positions that seem to be crucial for a sustainable compromise (like the 5% enrichment issue vs. the US position of a total limit and the discussion about the missiles).

The second question is a more complex one. But one of the most important conditions for a sustainable US-Iranian dialog and irreversible agreement on the Iranian nuclear

issue are careful and consistent messages. In the past weeks we have seen many examples of how bold messages – targeted mostly at inner audiences, voters, precisely to say – are harming foreign relations.

I'll give you a few examples. Earlier this month president Hassan Rouhani has praised the nuclear deal struck in Geneva as his country's "victory", telling a home crowd it effectively means the "surrender of big powers before the great nation of Iran". While it is clear that such statements are part of the moderate Rouhani's efforts to bring around hard-liners who claim that the deal tramples on Iran's enrichment rights, it was not hard to foresee what kind of a reaction those words will raise in the US Congress. As many experts noted it played directly into the complaints of hawkish members of the US Congress that the deal gave too much up to Iran for too little in return.

The debate on Iran in the US Congress is by itself another example of foreign policy goals falling victim to domestic lobbying and electoral logic. Slapping a new round of sanctions on Iran will make the US president's foreign policy look inconsistent, unreliable and simply weak. It is obvious that the White House is fighting a tense political battle to prevent Congress from tightening sanctions. But just as it was the case with the damaging effect of the "Magnitsky bill" on the US-Russian relations (and I am not defending Russia's position on the Magnitsky case) in the end it will be the outcome that counts. If new sanctions are endorsed Iran will not hesitate a minute to walk away from the negotiating table.

Another unfortunate example of inconsistent policy and messaging is the US position towards the participation of Iran in the "Geneva-2" conference on Syria. Whether you support the Russian position on Syria or not, you must admit that Moscow has its logic when it asks why special conditions for participation are spelled out only for Iran. Nobody demanded any pre-concessions from Saudi Arabia. The US goes into a landmark deal on the nuclear issue with Iran and at the same time has severe doubts of even letting it participate in a peace conference on Syria. Good to please the Israeli lobby in the US but not very helpful to build trust with Iran I must say.

Let me close by citing a very recent example of unfortunate messaging. Reuters ran an article about a potential oil-for-goods swap between Russian and Iran. The White House reacted angrily saying it was concerned about these reports and that the deal could potentially trigger U.S. sanctions. At the same time the same news agency is citing US senior officials saying that “American companies are very eager to enter Iran’s market, from car manufacturers to aircraft makers” and that they are “preparing the ground for the time when the sanctions are lifted”. Russian companies get a warning from the White House for doing just about the same – nobody said the oil-for-goods deal will be made right away. According to official Iranian sources since early December trade delegations from Turkey, Georgia, Ireland, Tunisia, Kazakhstan, China, Italy, India, Austria and Sweden have visited Iran. The Brits were there this month and a delegation of senior French industrialists is expected in Tehran in the beginning of December. How did the White House miss all this?