

Iran: Giving Up On JCPOA

by GWYNNE DYER

'Lifting Trump's sanctions, @SecBlinken, is a legal and moral obligation, NOT negotiating leverage. Didn't work for Trump ? won't work for you,' tweeted Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif late last month. But what if US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (and President Joe Biden) have just decided that reviving the 2015 nuclear deal is a lost cause?

There are quite a few people in the Biden administration, and particularly in the State Department, who can count to 20 without even taking their shoes off. So they must have realized that there was going to be an election in Iran next Friday (18 June).

Many of them would even have known that this time the Iranian election has been rigged so that the 'hard-liners' are bound to win it.

Joe Biden therefore only had five months to reverse Donald Trump's deliberate wrecking of the 2015 treaty that prevented Iran from working on nuclear weapons. After the June election, the wreckers would be in power in Tehran, and they would sabotage the talks.

So why didn't Blinken's people move faster?

It was the Trump administration that unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA treaty (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and slapped crippling economic sanctions on Iran in 2018. Since then, Iran has repeatedly said that if the US just cancelled Trump's sanctions and rejoined the treaty, all would be well. Now it's probably too late.

Iran did nothing for more than a year, waiting and hoping that the other signatories (Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China) would find ways to help Iran get around the American sanctions.

The other countries all agreed that Iran was not violating the terms of the treaty in any way, but none of them wanted to get into a showdown with Trump by breaking the US sanctions. So when Trump tightened the sanctions further in May 2019, crushing Iran's remaining oil exports, Tehran began to go beyond the treaty limits ? a little bit.

It didn't leave the treaty, but it began to enrich its uranium a bit beyond the treaty limit of 3.67% (far below weapons-grade). It allowed inspections to continue, it kept nothing secret, but every three or six months it moved the enrichment up another notch to create some counter-pressure on the other signatories to sort their American problem out.

Finally Trump lost the 2020 election, Biden replaced him in the White House last January, and it became possible to repair all the damage. However, the new secretary of state, Antony Blinken, then announced that Iran would have to roll back all its post-2019 increments to the enrichment process BEFORE the US lifted its sanctions.

The question of who goes first is fundamentally childish if there is trust, but America has forfeited the right to demand that Iran trust it. Biden and Blinken must know that demanding Iran go first dooms the negotiations, and that a rigged election in Iran will shortly close the door on the deal for good. So they must have decided that this is the least bad outcome (for them).

They can't say so publicly, of course: better to delay the negotiations and let a new Iranian government break them off. And it would break them off, because Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has arranged for his faithful supporter Ebrahim Raisi to win the election by banning more open-minded candidates from running at all.

Both men are fiercely anti-Western ultra-conservatives, but they wouldn't have got away with rigging the election like this four years ago, when the treaty was new and popular hopes were still high in Iran. The despair created by Trump's renewed sanctions killed those hopes.

Biden may be wrong to let the JCPOA treaty die. An immediate end to US sanctions and a quick roll-back of Iran's deviations from strict adherence to the treaty's terms might have been done the trick. Even a new hard-line government in Iran would have found it hard to unpick that sort of done deal.

But it would have been a gamble, and Biden seems to have decided that he couldn't afford to risk his political capital that way. It will be years before we know if this was a fatal mistake (and who it was fatal for).