



IRANIAN NUCLEAR DEAL CRISIS

The “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (JCPOA) agreement signed in 2015 during the period of Barack Obama was repeatedly criticized by Donald Trump, who was elected as the President of the United States of America (USA) in 2017. Stating that the agreement did not cover Iran’s ballistic missile program, Trump, evaluated it as the worst agreement in history, despite the objections of other countries, announced that the USA left the agreement on May 8th 2018, and anti-Iran sanctions, including the oil purchase ban, were restored in November 2018. The USA decision was met with disappointment by Iran and other “P5+1” (USA, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, France, China and Germany) members and announced that they would strive to maintain the agreement without USA involvement.

In response, when sanctions were tightened in 2019, Iran announced that Tehran was gradually reducing its obligations under the agreement, by removing restrictions on nuclear research, centrifuges and uranium enrichment levels, and began enriching uranium and violating the agreement’s constraints. Iran recalled that “if one of the parties materially fails to fulfill the JCPOA requirements, the other party has the right to fail to fulfill its agreement commitments, in whole or in part”.

Nearly six years have passed since the JCPOA went into effect to resolve the crisis around the Iranian nuclear program. As a result of the agreement, both sides met on a common point, and Iran’s nuclear program was slowed down and taken under control, as the West wanted, in order to gradually remove the sanctions that had been imposed on Iran for years and to prevent Tehran from having nuclear weapons. In this context, Iran was compelled to reconfigure the reactor at Arak in order to conduct nuclear research for peaceful purposes and to keep the uranium enrichment limits at a maximum of 3,67%. It is believed that if Iran exceeds its determined uranium enrichment capacity, it will have the chance to develop nuclear weapons which could be considered a potential threat for stability and peace in the region and international arena.

Joseph Biden, who was elected President of the USA in November 2020, favors the continuation of the “nuclear deal” with Iran and believes that the USA should return to the agreement and fulfill the terms of the agreement. While the whole world, especially the West, does not want Iran to have nuclear weapons for security reasons, the possibility of Iran having nuclear weapons firstly arises from security concerns. Iran, which is in the

center of the conflict zone due to its location, aims to protect its own national interests and security like other states. In this context, the nuclear program that is developing strengthens its position and bargaining power in the international arena by acting as a deterrent.

On the other hand, with the election of Ebrahim Raisi as the President of Iran in June 2021, the term of Hassan Rouhani, known as a “moderate conservative” and following moderate policies against the West during his 8-year rule, has officially come to an end. Thus, conservatives, known for their distant politics to the West, took power again after 8 years. However, it seems that Ebrahim Raisi, who is known to be extremely conservative, and close to Iranian supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, could suspend the negotiations and it would be difficult and time-consuming for the USA and Iran to come together and meet at a common point. Western officials are increasingly concerned that Iran’s advancing nuclear activities would frustrate hopes of reviving the 2015 nuclear deal, the Biden administration’s top foreign policy goal.

Talks to maintain the JCPOA and realign Iran began in May 2021, after Joe Biden succeeded Trump as USA president. While Biden said that if Iran reversed its violations, the USA would rejoin the agreement and lift the sanctions, while his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi emphasized that the USA should take the first step.

In addition, Western diplomats stated that Iran increased its demands, wanted the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration to be lifted after the USA withdrew from the agreement in 2018, and that Iran was moving away from the steps it had committed to take to rein in its nuclear activities and return to complying with the agreement. The USA responded to Iran’s non-compliance with the nuclear agreement by trying to increase the economic pressure on Iran.

While the Biden administration has expressed its desire to reinstate the agreement and then use it as a platform to negotiate a longer and stronger agreement, Tehran has repeatedly criticized the Biden administration for continuing to impose Trump-era sanctions even as it tries to restore the agreement. In the first six rounds of negotiations, which lasted from April to June, the USA expressed its readiness to lift its sanctions on Iran’s economy, including its energy exports, most of its banks and the maritime sector, while also removing the barrier to access to tens of billions of dollars of oil revenues trapped in overseas bank accounts. Iran should discuss ways to reduce its currently large stockpile of nuclear fuel and the number of centrifuges producing nuclear fuel,

and to cease production of enriched uranium at its underground nuclear facility in Fordo. However, it is known that Iran’s stance under the new government hardened and backed down from some of these commitments. Noteworthy that nuclear negotiations between Iran, USA and other major powers resumed in Vienna in November 2021.

Iran also seeks the complete lifting of sanctions, including the lifting of sanctions on human rights and ballistic missiles exempt from the JCPOA. Moreover, requesting the USA to lift all sanctions first so that it can check that the treaty is starting to reap its economic benefits, insists that Washington must give a guarantee that the USA will not exit the nuclear deal again in the future.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) report from November 17th 2021, Iran’s stockpiles of uranium enriched with 20% Uranium-235 (U-235), many times more than allowed, rose to 114 kilograms from the 85 kilograms documented in the agency’s previous report published on September 7th. According to reports, Iran has accumulated a stockpile of enriched uranium just below the level required for a bomb, 60% pure enriched uranium, including 10 kilograms to 17,7 kilograms of material. Uranium enriched to these levels poses a more significant risk, as it can be enriched more rapidly to weapons grade level, or 90% U-235. Therefore, under the JCPOA nuclear agreement, Iran is prohibited from enriching uranium above 3,67%, which is an appropriate level for nuclear power reactors. While Iran had enriched uranium up to 20% before the JCPOA negotiations, it started to enrich it to 60% in April 2021. It also resumed enrichment activities at Fordo; installed more and more advanced types of centrifuges than allowed; and took steps towards the production of enriched uranium metal, an important material in nuclear weapons. Iran has also significantly reduced the reach of international investigators by stopping the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the IAEA Safeguards Treaty.

If current negotiations fail and Iran is confirmed to be in breach of the agreement, all United Nations sanctions will automatically “snap back” for 10 years, with the possibility of a five-year extension. This means that the crisis in the Middle East escalates and that the nuclear agreement reached years later is wasted effort. In order for the crisis in the region not to escalate further and not reach the international problem, actors such as the European Union, Russia and China are expected to make efforts to preserve the JCPOA again and to bring the USA and Iran together at a point.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- On 28 December 2021, the Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summed up results of interaction in 2021 at the informal meeting in Saint-Petersburg, Russia. The participants discussed the plans for strengthening and further developing mutually profitable cooperation and implementation of joint projects. Kazakhstan took over the CIS Chairmanship from Belarus. The next session of the CIS Council of Heads of Government will take place in Nur-Sultan in May 2022 (Kazinform, 01.01.2022).
- President of Russia Vladimir Putin had a phone conversation with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Heads of State reviewed bilateral cooperation and reaffirmed their determination to continue boosting mutually beneficial partnerships between the two countries. Regional issues and international developments, including the situation in the South Caucasus and efforts to resolve the Syrian and Libyan crises, were discussed (TASS, 02.01.2022).
- In a recent interview, the President of Moldova Maia Sandu stated that there was no "initiative to join NATO" in Moldova at the moment and that according to the Constitution, Moldova was a neutral state. She also said that if Moldova intends to strengthen relations with the European Union, this does not mean that the country cannot conduct a "constructive and pragmatic" dialogue with Russia. At the same time, the president wants to see the same respectful attitude towards Moldova from Russia (News.liga.net, 28.12.2021).
- Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Askar Mamin had an online meeting with his Uzbek counterpart Abdulla Aripov. The parties reviewed the state of implementation of agreements reached at the highest level and within the 19th session of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission for Cooperation. They discussed the ongoing work on the implementation of the International Center of Industrial Cooperation «Central Asia». The Prime-Ministers set a task to increase the volume of mutual trade to \$10 billion in the medium term (Kazinform, 30.12.2021).
- The Ambassador of Tajikistan to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Permanent Representative of Tajikistan to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Akram Karimi met with the new OIC Secretary-General Hissein Brahim Taha in Jeddah. The parties discussed the issues of cooperation of Tajikistan with OIC and ways of expanding cooperation in the framework of the OIC. The sides also exchanged views on a number of international and regional issues, including the situation in Afghanistan and mechanisms for providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people (ASIA-Plus, 29.12.2021).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan Ceyhun Bayramov held a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. The ministers exchanged views on the founding meeting of the 3 + 3 consultation mechanism held in Moscow, the meeting of representatives of the Azerbaijani and Armenian communities. The parties also discussed topical issues on the agenda of bilateral relations and other topics of mutual interest (Azertag.az, 30.12.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- During the 10 months of 2021, bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reached almost \$3 billion, increasing by 33% compared to the same period last year. Kazakhstan's exports amounted to \$2.2 billion, while its imports equaled \$833 million. Kazakhstan's exports to Uzbekistan mainly consist of wheat, flour, industrial products, various ores and minerals, textiles and plastic materials. It is important to note that the two countries are set to increase mutual trade turnover up to \$10 billion (Qazaq TV, 29.12.2021).
- In the first half of 2021, China's investments in Kazakhstan exceeded \$500 million, increasing by more than 64% compared to the same period last year. China is on the list of top 5 investors in Kazakhstan's economy. The two countries are jointly implementing 52 projects worth over \$21 billion, 18 of which have already been commissioned for a total of \$4.3 billion. In total, over the past 15 years, China's investments in the country amounted to \$20 billion (Qazaq TV, 27.12.2021).
- According to the report of the Central Bank of Uzbekistan, the country's external debt continues to increase. As of October 1, 2021, the indicator amounted to \$37.6 billion, increasing by 11% or \$3.7 billion compared to the beginning of the year when the volume of debt was \$33.8 billion. The foreign debt of the country increased by 7% or \$1.5 billion to \$22.9 billion, and the non-guaranteed external debt amounted to \$14.7 billion, an increase of 18% or \$2.2 billion (Kun.uz, 27.12.2021).
- According to Tajikistan's national power utility company, Tajikistan and Afghanistan signed an agreement on the supply of electricity from Tajikistan to Afghanistan in 2022. Under this agreement, Tajikistan will deliver daily up to 400 megawatts of electricity to Afghanistan from May to September next year. It is important to note that Tajikistan exported to Afghanistan about \$94 million worth of electricity during the 11 months of 2021. This number exceeded the indicator of the same period last year by 80% (Asia-Plus, 28.12.2021).
- In 2021, Azerbaijan's international trade indicators demonstrate positive dynamics. In particular, the country increased the trade turnover with Turkey and Russia in January-November 2021. Bilateral trade between Azerbaijan and Turkey amounted to \$4.1 billion, of which exports equaled \$2.5 billion, while imports to \$1.6 billion. The trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia amounted to \$2.6 billion, of which exports reached \$802.2 million, while imports amounted to \$1.8 billion. Turkey and Russia were Azerbaijan's second and third largest trade partners, respectively (AzerNews, 29.12.2021).
- According to the Prime Minister of Ukraine Denys Shmyhal, in 2021, international financial organizations allocated almost \$2.5 billion for Ukraine. The Prime Minister notes that these funds were the result of the country's active cooperation and show confidence in Ukraine's economy. A list of investors includes the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union, World Bank, European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). In November, Ukraine received the second tranche from the IMF under the Stand-By Arrangement in the amount of \$699 million (Ukrinform, 29.12.2021).

Society and Culture

- The Kazakhstan Pavilion was opened to the public at Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy (VDNH) in Moscow, introducing the history and culture of Kazakhstan. The pavilion underwent a large-scale restoration and its opening was timed to the 30th anniversary of the independence of Kazakhstan. On the eve of the prestigious Moscow Restoration-2021 competition, the Kazakhstan pavilion was recognized as the best object of restoration in the city. The reconstruction effort became possible with the direct participation of the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Russia (The Astana Times, 29.12.2021).
- A cargo of humanitarian aid from Uzbekistan to the Afghan people was solemnly handed over in the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Shari. The cargo had a total weight of 4,000 tons and consisted of flour, sugar, rice, coal, clothing, fuel, and other essential goods designed to prevent mass famine in Afghanistan and help the country out of its dire economic situation. The solemn ceremony was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister of the Provisional Government of Afghanistan Sher Abbas Stanikzai and the Governor of Balkh Province Kudratilla Abu Hamza (Centralasia.news, 27.12.2021).
- The UN Country Team in Turkmenistan has launched a series of information events to raise awareness and increase the literacy of citizens of the country about coronavirus infection. This information will also help fight disinformation and effectively manage the process when they mislead citizens with false information. During the events, participants could ask experts questions and share their concerns about common myths about the pandemic (Centralasia.news, 30.12.2021).
- A round table entitled "30 years of cooperation in a new international order: experience and new concepts of development" was held in Bishkek. The event was organized by the Confucius Institute at the Kyrgyz National University named after J. Balasagyn and the Kyrgyz-Chinese Faculty. The participants of the meeting considered the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and China in all areas of interaction over the past 30 years, as well as possible ways to expand them (Kabar, 29.12.2021).
- Ankara hosted the "International Congress of Kazakh History, Culture, and Language". The event was attended by the Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Turkey Abzal Saparbekuly, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the International Turkish-Kazakh University Muhittin Simsek, Kazakhstan's representative in TURKSOY Bakytzhan Omar, and other scientists of the two countries. The participants of the event discussed the current issues in the history and culture of Kazakhstan and stressed the importance of further developing cultural ties between the two countries (Kazinform, 28.12.2021).
- Turkey began vaccination against COVID-19 with the domestic vaccine Turkovac in large hospitals across the country. This made Turkey one of the nine countries that can produce a COVID-19 vaccine. The new vaccine was developed in collaboration with Erciyes University in Kayseri and the Ministry of Health of Turkey. The President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also vowed to make the vaccine available globally (Anadolu Agency, 30.12.2021).