



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Could China be the ice breaker in stalled talks on Iran's nuclear programme?



The chances of renewing the nuclear agreement with Iran are around zero, because the issue has been pushed aside by the new global crisis. This does not mean that the danger of the Iranian nuclear programme development or its destructive potential, primarily for the Middle East region, is decreasing.

On the contrary, it only means that a neglected problem calls for new creativity in international diplomacy, because previous solutions are stuck in a dead-end. Involved parties are not optimistic about the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), being reactivated soon, since attempts to revive it practically stopped in August.

A video made in November, in which President of the US Joe Biden said the 2015 Iran deal was "dead", was published on social media at the beginning of the week, and the White House did not deny its authenticity. "Nobody's questioning the authenticity of [the video]", White House foreign policy communications co-ordinator John Kirby said. "The President's comments are very much in line with everything we've been saying about the JCPOA, which is just not our focus right now".

As for Iran, renewing talks on the nuclear agreement "was not the priority", as head of diplomacy Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said recently in Jordan after talks with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell. Even the chief European diplomat did not have particularly high expectations after those talks, except to maintain the line of communication between all actors.

### The nuclear programme remains a critical part of Iran's national security

The US withdrawal from the Iran deal in 2018, on the decision of then-President Donald Trump, clearly caused damage that still seems irreparable. Meanwhile, new crises have surfaced and accelerated the dissolution of the

2015 agreement, as new, more pressing interests have emerged, such as the escalation of tensions between China and the US regarding Taiwan, the mass civil protests in Iran and, ultimately, Russian aggression against Ukraine. During that time, the nuclear programme remains a critical part of Iran's national security, while work on its development continues rapidly and unhindered.

Since the JCPOA broke down in 2018, Iran has enriched uranium to 60% – well above the 20% threshold generally considered to be the top end of enrichment needed for most civilian applications. Iran does not want the massive internal protests and the repression it applies on its citizens to be a stake in the talks about the nuclear programme, but in the West, and above all in the US, this topic simply cannot be ignored. The Biden administration is under great pressure from its own public and from human rights groups in Iran, to abandon any talks with Tehran and focus on further strengthening sanctions.

The biggest obstacle to the unfreezing of the agreement has been Iran's supply of weapons to Russia in its aggression against Ukraine. It has become a completely separate topic on the list of Iran's violations, and it cannot realistically be ignored if they want to reactivate the talks on the nuclear programme.

### The previous channels of talks, in which the EU's soft diplomatic hand represented the only chance for relaxation, are clearly not producing results

The talks are deadlocked, but on the other hand, new international circumstances open up space for the creation of a new, different framework in which talks with Tehran are not so inconceivable. The previous channels of talks, in which the EU's soft diplomatic hand represented the only chance for relaxation, are clearly not producing results. But, based on several events in the past months, we should not write off the possibility of another hand appearing in the talks with Iran: the Chinese

one.

In Bali, last November, Presidents Biden and Xi largely relaxed several of the heated crisis issues, and opened the door to new agreements, those concerning "third parties". From their first live meeting, it has been clear that China wants to stabilise relations with the US, affected by internal crises and the cooling of its economy. This is a direction that hints at greater cooperation between Beijing and Washington in international crises, of which the one in Ukraine is certainly the biggest, but Iran is not far behind. Neither according to the announcements from the White House, nor according to the briefing of the head of Chinese diplomacy, Wang Yi, immediately after the meeting of the two presidents, can we be certain that Biden and Xi discussed Iran in November.

Nevertheless, it seems quite likely that Iran was a topic in the long, three-hour conversation, considering the Iran's importance for the interests of both countries. "The two presidents discussed five topics, namely, their respective domestic and foreign policies, China-US relations, the Taiwan question, dialogue and cooperation in various fields, and major international and regional issues," said the head of Chinese diplomacy, Wang Yi, and we can realistically assume that the term "major international and regional issues" included the word Iran.

Biden and Xi repeated that nuclear war should never be fought, which is usually placed in the context of the war in Ukraine, similar to Xi's statement in a conversation with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in early November when he said that "The international community should...jointly oppose the use or threats to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought, in order to prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia." The Chinese president did not mention specific countries in this context. His words were mostly related to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, but the traditional vagueness of Chinese diplomacy strongly implies Iran as well.

## The partnership with Saudi Arabia, which is already called "strategic", is also an important Chinese message to Iran

The favourable climate for the renewal of talks on Iran's nuclear programme also comes after Xi's recent visit to Saudi Arabia, which will bring a boost to giant oil and real estate deals, but will inevitably have a political effect as well.

The partnership with Saudi Arabia, which is already called "strategic", is also an important Chinese message to Iran, as China is still the number one oil buyer, It means that partnerships of this type do not have to be eternal, if interests say otherwise.

Although both Beijing and Riyadh frown on America's insistence on conducting its foreign policy on the basis of respect for human rights, the strengthening of their partnership is based on long-term contracts worth hundreds of billions of dollars, including China's willingness to buy weapons from Saudi Arabia for \$30 billion.

From a political point of view, it is a far-reaching entry of China into a partnership with countries that have a rival relationship with Iran (and Iran with them), and seek a change in its policy, including reducing its nuclear programme. Talks on Iran's nuclear programme are stuck, and there is almost no chance of their being renewed in the context in which they have been conducted so far, because a complete disappearance of mutual trust, above all between Washington and Tehran, is visible.

However, an indirect hope for their restoration still exists and should be sought in major shifts of interests in the circle of important actors, where China appears as an important ice-breaker. Needless to say, taking into account only its positions, which are much more tied to the US and its traditional allies than they were before.