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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 37: Iran Nuclear Talks

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Haenle: You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role, and China's relations within the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center here in Beijing. I'm Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I'll be your host.

Today we're delighted to be speaking with Dr. Ariel Levite, a non-resident senior associate in the nuclear policy program at the Carnegie Endowment. Prior to joining Carnegie, Dr. Levite was the principal deputy director general for policy at the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission from 2002 to 2007. He also served as the deputy national security advisor for defense policy and was head of the Bureau of International Security and Arms Control in the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Dr. Levite, thank you for joining us in Beijing this week and being on our podcast today.

Levite: Delighted to be with you, delighted to be here.

Haenle: You were with us a few months ago, in November of 2014, and at that time negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program had been extended—just been announced that it was extended—to the end of June 2015. Talks have resumed again in Geneva. Secretary of State John Kerry, Iranian foreign minister Zarif, have reportedly indicated they want to speed things up. I wanted to start by asking whether or not new strategic considerations have emerged since the last round of talks that could potentially change the dynamic or the calculus for the negotiating parties.

Levite: If there are any people [that] were thinking that maybe the declining oil prices would have that impact on Iran, that Iran would become more accommodating; I think for the moment the Iranians are bending over backwards to dispel that notion. And, the same gap between the two sides' positions that was apparent in November I think is now even more apparent. And I see a great difficulty overcoming that, that disagreement between the parties.

Haenle: Can you talk in a little more detail for our audience in terms of the gaps and the questions that still remain among the P5+1 negotiating parties and Iran?

Levite: They boil down to a lot of technical detail, but, I think in the broader scheme of things I would say the following: Iranians insist on sustaining currently, and developing over time, a fairly large activity in the nuclear domain that does not lend itself to any reasonable peaceful use, at least not in terms of the way the program has been organized to date or would be able to develop into in the next couple years. The U.S., needless to say, understands that the composition of the program could easily translate into a nuclear weapons capability, and therefore has determined that whatever deal is put into place would have to cap those capabilities, and keep them capped and monitored closely for an extended period of time.

So, that is essentially the divide of the parties. It then translates into: How many centrifuges they're allowed to have? And, how many would they be allowed to have overtime? And how would those be monitored, and whether those would be modernized or not, and things of that nature. Whether other parts of their program, in terms of the weapon configuration, would also be covered by the arrangement. But I think the whole thing boils down to a question of whether the Iranians cap or it otherwise doesn't lend itself to a nuclear—a peaceful application, at least at the current time.

Haenle: These gaps are not new. What can we expect will take place over this period of time in the negotiations that would work to minimize those gaps? What would give people hope that by the end of June we could be near reaching some goal, some conclusions to the negotiations?

Levite: Well, first of all, those gaps have been there since 2003, and there were on and off negotiations between 2003 and the present, so, in fact, nobody has been able to bridge those differences now for more than a decade. And, they have definitely been intensely debated between the parties between 2013 and 2014, so that was another 18 months of negotiations which didn't yield the desired-for breakthrough, other than an interim agreement which covers only part of the issues.

So, I'm less than certain that one could actually bridge those differences ever. That being said, I don't think that the parties are actually interested in a showdown, or an escalation, or a complete collapse of the discourse, and so what we could emerge with is some extension, and modification, and maybe, under the best of circumstances, additional steps within the interim arrangement that would be of a longer duration. That is what I think might be the case.

Haenle: I've heard some discussion among experts of trying to find ways to put together agreements that would over time add up to a larger agreement. Is that something that's being discussed now, or is that in the realm of possibility?

Levite: Well I'm not privy to what transpired last week in Geneva or what might be discussed in the beginning of February when negotiations resume. That being said, I would submit that those type of incremental arrangements aren't likely to reassure a Congress that is getting increasingly impatient, and therefore, imposed some more sanctions. Nor would they provide the kind of sanctions relief that the Iranians want to get out of negotiations and, where the Iranian leader is quite skeptical, the U.S. would be most forthcoming. So, there isn't much in those "incrementalisms" that either side could point to, but we may end up with some incrementalism, perhaps not identical to one you've highlighted, because the other alternatives are so much worse.

Haenle: You mentioned Congress; U.S. domestic context is important here. Also, there's a domestic context, of course, in Tehran. Obama and Rouhani have signaled their continuing support for a deal, but they face tough opposition at home from interest groups—U.S. Congress is one, of course, in Iran you have the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Under what terms do you think hard-liners in Iran, the U.S. Congress, and also American allies in the region, including Israel, could find a nuclear deal acceptable?

Levite: Well, I could think of a few that would meet one or the other party's requirements. I'm not sure I could find any that would meet all of the parties' requirements. I would point out another difference, namely that, unlike President Obama, in Iran the Supreme Leader is the one who calls the shots, and he's far from persuaded about the bona fides of the United States and, I think more importantly, whether his regime would survive the kind of normalization that would ensue in the aftermath of the deal. And, I think that is what things ultimately boil down to on the Iranian side of the house.

Haenle: That, ultimately, a broader deal is not Iran's interest?

Levite: That is not in this regime's interpretation of Iran's interest. It is in the President's interpretation, but not in the Supreme Leader's interpretation, as far as one can tell. And, that—some circles that have incredible influence on the policy of Iran at present, from the Revolutionary Guards and so on—have a vested interest in keeping things the way they were, rather than opening up, losing their monopoly over power, and so on, which would likely come as a result of the deal. Whereas what the president of Iran wants to happen is exactly that, that the deal would open up things, free more resources, and enable him to deal with the population as a whole rather than with the small circles that have benefited from the isolation of Iran and the nationalization of the economy and so on.

That being said, I think that the real issue in front of us as we speak now is whether the Iranians are willing to significantly defer their progress on the nuclear program, with an eye towards eventual normalization in 10 to 15 years. For the moment, judging by the Supreme Leader's statements, that is not the case. But, if that were to be the case, I think the U.S. would readily sign onto this, as would all its partners in the P5+1 process.

Haenle: To extend the timeframe, is that what you're saying? To extend it out longer?

Levite: To apply the constraints that one would impose on the program, to last for 10 to 15 years, and at that point, Iran would be able to reclaim what it calls its inalienable rights under the NPT. For the moment, the Supreme Leader says this is not in the cards, and if it's not in the cards I can't see how one could reconcile that, unless the Iranians genuinely reconfigure their program.

Haenle: Some have said, given the recent U.S. rapprochement with Cuba, that perhaps President Obama has some ambition for a broader rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran. Do you think, in the U.S. context, that this is something that's being thought about in the administration?

Levite: Well, I think the president had spoken out repeatedly—and by the way, not just in this last year, where one could say he's principally preoccupied with legacy issues—about his desire to establish normal relations with Iran. He's repeatedly written to Iranian leaders and suggested as much, essentially from the day he took office. So, I don't think that the president has shied away from expressing his desire for such a relationship to ensue. I, one, could argue that this has become even more forceful a policy pursued by the U.S. in light of the upheaval in the Middle East and the desire to have Iran play more constructive role in dealing with the Islamic State as well as other regional sources of instability. All of that being said, it doesn't seem that, for the moment, those wider interests are shared by Iran and that the Iranians are willing to look at the broader considerations as something which would outweigh their narrow preferences on what the nuclear program looks like in the short to medium term. For the moment, their insistence is that the U.S. would give them a break on the nuclear program, and if it did that then they would be slightly more accommodating on the other issues.

Haenle: Well it's been a pleasure. Thank you for spending time with me today, and we welcome you to come back again, at some point, to talk about these issues, perhaps around June, around the time of the anticipated conclusion—of the, potential conclusion—of the Iranian negotiation. I understand you have a paper coming out this week which deals with U.S. policy on this issue?

Levite: It's *U.S. and the P5+1*, and the paper has just been published by *Arms Control Today* and would be available on both the Carnegie website and the *Arms Control Today* website in the next couple of days. But I might be careful, I might take you up on this offer. Thank you.

Haenle: Well, that's it for this edition of Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read or learn more about Dr. Levite's research you can find more articles, events, and podcasts on our website. I encourage you to visit and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening and be sure to tune in next time.