

A narrow but crucial window of opportunity is emerging for nuclear negotiations with Iran

Talks between the West and Iran about their nuclear programme need to begin immediately to take full advantage of a narrow, but crucial, window of opportunity ahead of the run-up to Iran's summer Presidential elections, claims a new Whitehall Paper published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory, written by Shashank Joshi, provides an overview of the decade Iranian nuclear crisis and argues that now, as sanctions begin to bite deeply, is the best window of opportunity to reach an interim deal to avoid tensions rising further as Iran faces a tense period of political transition.

Joshi warns that unless an interim agreement is urgently reached – in which Iran's uranium enrichment and stockpile was capped, plus its operations were limited at Fordow, the underground enrichment facility; in return for limited sanction relief from the West – there is a danger that the current crisis becomes a 'permanent' one.

'If the process of reaching a nuclear deal is not started in 2013, there is a risk that sanctions become entrenched for a much longer period, potentially fracturing the cohesion of the anti-Iran bloc, as well as weakening and embittering the Iranian regime without dislodging it or forcing it to abandon its nuclear activities,' argues Joshi.

'Over the longer term, the policy of making the regime more vulnerable, something that is an objective of sanctions, and actually pursuing regime change, something that is not, are easily confused and, under certain conditions, nearly indistinguishable. This might increase the value of nuclear weapons to the regime.'

'Although Iran would still face serious obstacles to breaking out, including the near certainty that it would be detected, it might nonetheless take this risk or if it were desperate, or threaten to do so – in turn precipitating a war that would only delay and push the Iranian programme underground.'

'An unstable Iran, hollowed out by years of sanctions, facing the constant possibility of major war, and undergoing a crisis of political legitimacy is not conducive to stability in the Middle East. It is therefore in the long-term interests of all parties to ensure that this crisis does not become accepted as a permanent feature of the international system.'

'Although the domestic political flux in the United States has now eased, making it easier for the second Obama administration to demonstrate flexibility in nuclear talks, Iran's own politics are not going to stabilise until at least June 2013, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is replaced. This means that diplomacy will struggle to find traction over next spring and summer,

as sanctions begin to bite deeply,' Joshi states.

'This would mean a tense and volatile eight-month period in which Iran's economy will further deteriorate, its political system will be stressed by the presidential elections, and its stockpiles of enriched uranium and its enrichment capacity might both continue to grow. In short, there is a disjunction between the political timetable and the timetable of the Iranian programme, which makes the period after the spring of 2013 fraught with risks.'

'As Iran's uranium stockpiles grow and diplomacy falters, the discourse around the nuclear crisis is growing both more apprehensive and more polarised. In this context, there has been a fresh series of warnings that a nuclear Iran would be more dangerous and costly than any plausible alternative. Many of these warnings have been unduly alarmist. Yet, even with strenuous and protracted diplomacy, and despite – or because of – any war with Iran, it is not beyond the realm of plausibility that Iran will obtain nuclear weapons sometime in the future. This would herald not the end of the crisis, but its mutation into a new and almost certainly more permanent form.'

'Iran has shown great determination to preserve a nuclear-enrichment capability even despite these enormous pressures. Its reasons for doing so include, among others, scientific nationalism and prestige, and a desire to keep open the option of producing nuclear weapons in the future. Unless a deal can be reached whereby Iran preserves some of its nuclear infrastructure under conditions that assuage Western concerns, then there is a risk that this decade-old 'permanent crisis' will continue to simmer for many years to come.'

To read excerpts from the Whitehall Paper 79: The Permanent Crisis: Iran's Nuclear Trajectory, please visit: www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/WHP79_sample_chapters.pdf