

## **Iran Raises Uranium Enrichment to 60% Confusing Middle East Situation**

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New tensions over Iran have grown in the Middle East. On April 13, Iran said that it would add 1,000 centrifuges at its Natanz nuclear facility to raise the uranium enrichment to 60%. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal has become dysfunctional as Iran has strengthened its uranium enrichment to counter the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the deal and its enhancement of sanctions on Iran under the previous Trump administration. While the deal has limited Iran's uranium enrichment to 3.67%, Iran has gradually raised the uranium enrichment level in reaction to U.S. economic sanctions. In early January, Iran vowed to increase the uranium enrichment level to 20% as seen before the deal. The latest announcement to raise the level further to 60% is a significant step towards the grave decision to reach the 90% enrichment level suitable for a nuclear weapon.

As the Biden administration has indicated the United States' potential return to the Iran nuclear deal, how the two countries would negotiate the return and what such negotiations would produce have attracted global attention. In Vienna on April 6, the European Union convened a meeting of relevant countries including the United States to reconstruct the deal, although U.S. and Iranian representatives refrained from holding direct talks. Iran has asked the United States to lift economic sanctions before negotiating the reconstruction, while the United States has demanded that Iran return to compliance with the deal. Given their wide differences, how their negotiations would go ahead remains unpredictable.

On April 11, an electric system accident occurred at the Natanz nuclear facility. Media reports stated that an explosion damaged an electricity supply system required for uranium enrichment. Tehran then attributed the trouble to a terrorist attack and announced a plan to take a retaliatory action. On April 12, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif blamed Israel for the terrorist attack and vowed retaliation. Irrespective of the accident, Tehran indicated plans to replace centrifuges and enhance uranium enrichment.

The announcement of the plan to raise its uranium enrichment to 60% can be interpreted as demonstrating internally and externally that Iran is strongly determined and able to enhance uranium enrichment in response to the attack on the Natanz nuclear facility. It might have been designed to check Israel by indicating that Iran can promote nuclear activities irrespective of attacks on the facility and to increase pressure on the United States by implying that nuclear deal reconstruction would be required to prevent Iran from enhancing its uranium enrichment.

Behind the series of actions and developments regarding Iran has been a complicated international situation involving Iran. Progress in U.S.-Iran talks on the nuclear deal reconstruction is viewed as extremely important for checking Iran's nuclear development and stabilizing the Middle East from the viewpoint of the entire international community. At the same time, however, some countries are wary of seeing Iran returning to the nuclear deal and normalizing relations with the international community. They include Israel that sees Iran as its enemy.

Under the Trump administration that toughened sanctions on and contained Iran, U.S. and Israeli leaders had been in a honeymoon phase. Since Joe Biden replaced Donald Trump as U.S. president, however, the situation has turned around. The United States' return to the Iran nuclear deal or Iran's escape from isolation from the international community is not favorable for Israel. The addition of complicated and difficult factors for nuclear deal reconstruction talks meets Israeli interests. We must watch how the Iranian decision to raise its uranium enrichment to 60% would impact nuclear deal talks. As noted above, Iran might have attempted to take advantage of the uranium enrichment enhancement plan as a kind of brinkmanship to exert pressure on the United States. Whether the attempt would be successful is still unknown.

The brinkmanship strategy indicates that Iran might have been prepared to see the uranium enrichment enhancement plan becoming a double-edged sword in a sense. Iran might have strategically sought to demonstrate that it has a legitimate right to promote nuclear activities without succumbing to any attack on the Natanz nuclear facility. At the same time, Iran might have tried to step up pressure on the United States by threatening to substantially raise the uranium enrichment level. It is extremely important for the current Rouhani administration to demonstrate its unrelenting attitude toward the United States and Israel and promote nuclear deal talks to its advantage toward the June 18 presidential election. If the administration fails to achieve a breakthrough in the stalemate on nuclear deal talks, it may encourage conservative hardliners to call for tougher approaches in a run-up to the presidential election.

However, the plan to raise its uranium enrichment to 60% could lead Iran to come under fire from the international community. In fact, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and other European countries mediating between the United States and Iran expressed their grave concern on the Iranian plan, criticizing the plan as complicating the nuclear deal reconstruction talks. The plan could also lead Israel, which is wary of Iran coming closer to nuclear weapon development, to take further provocative actions only to trigger an Iranian retaliation. Tensions over Iran could thus be escalated.

In the United States, the Biden administration is agonizing over how to manage the Iran issue while exploring the return to the Iran nuclear deal. It is expected to retain its basic stance of favoring diplomatic efforts rather than the maximum pressure under the Trump administration. At the beginning of the diplomatic efforts, however, Washington's talks with Tehran have hit a snag. Even if Biden attempts to differentiate himself from Trump, he might be reluctant to see his Iran policy as being viewed as too conciliatory within his country and would have to consider the interests of Israel, Saudi Arabia and other U.S. allies in the Middle East. If talks with Tehran remain in a stalemate or go in the direction of deterioration, however, it would lead a conservative hardliner to win the presidential election, making the Iran issue even more difficult for Washington. The Biden administration may also have to consider the Iran issue's linkage to the China issue, now the biggest foreign policy challenge for the United States. As Iran's relations with the United States grow difficult, its ties with China become stronger. China is expected to approach not only Iran but also other Middle Eastern countries that are facing challenges over how to establish and enhance relations with the Biden administration that gives priority to human rights. Washington may be required to make fine-tuned diplomatic efforts to maintain U.S. influence over the entire Middle East.

The Iranian decision to raise the uranium enrichment level has made the situation more difficult in Iran and the Middle East plagued with such complicated geopolitical conditions. As the national interests of the relevant countries are complicatedly entangled in the Middle East, we must

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closely watch how the growing geopolitical tensions over the Iranian situation would affect the entire Middle East as the gravity center of global energy supply and international energy markets.

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