

US POUTS OVER POTENTIAL CRIMEA SPILLOVER WHILE RUSSIA ENTERS P5+1 TALKS WITH OPTIMISM

Alissa Rubin today has two separate articles in the New York Times that parrot US misgivings ahead of today's round of talks between the P5+1 group of countries and Iran. In the article that went up first, Rubin offers anonymity to a "senior American official" to do some hand-wringing over how Russia's move toward full annexation of Crimea could disrupt US-Russian relations to the point that the P5+1 negotiations could be thrown off track:

Tensions between the West and Russia over events in Ukraine have cast a shadow over the second round of talks set to begin on Tuesday in Vienna on a permanent nuclear agreement with Iran.

/snip/

A senior American official, speaking before the Iran talks and just before the secession vote in Crimea on Sunday that overwhelmingly approved reunification with Russia, indicated concern about possible consequences from the friction over Ukraine. Since western nations consider that vote illegal and have warned President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia not to annex Crimea, the situation for the Iran talks would now seem more worrisome.

"I think that we all hope that the incredibly difficult situation in Ukraine will not create issues for this negotiation," said the official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks.

“We hope that whatever happens in the days ahead, whatever actions we and the international community take, depending upon the decisions and the choices that Russia makes, that any actions that Russia subsequently takes will not put these negotiations at risk,” the official said.

Rubin allows this “official” to frame the situation as only dire while completely ignoring that significant and rapid progress was made on the negotiations for Syria to abandon its chemical weapon stockpile while the US and Russia were on completely opposite sides of the Syrian conflict. In the current case, while Russia is more closely aligned to Iran than the rest of the P5+1, their differences with the group on general issues of nuclear proliferation are much smaller than the differences between the US and Russia in the Syrian conflict. So why is Crimea a barrier to talks with Iran when being on opposite sides of the Syrian conflict wasn’t a barrier to an agreement on chemical weapon destruction?

Even when Rubin moves on to her article relating Iran’s interest in seeing the talks progress, she can’t resist opening with a repeat of the concerns of a spillover of Crimean tensions:

As talks on a permanent nuclear agreement with Iran resumed in Vienna on Tuesday, under the shadow of tensions between the West and Russia, Iran said the onus to ensure progress was on the world powers with which it is negotiating.

“Important and tough discussions ahead today,” Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, said on Twitter. “We have held our end of the bargain. Time for our counterparts to keep theirs.”

The article then goes on to repeat many of the same paragraphs from the original, including the senior American official quotes, although it does mention in passing that EU negotiator Catherine Ashton and Zarif held a brief meeting prior to the main negotiations opening this morning.

Contrast that with the reporting in the Iranian press. PressTV reports that Russia is in fact optimistic about the talks:

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov says there is good reason to hope that the new round of the nuclear talks between Iran and six world powers will bring about progress.

The talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, Russia, Britain, France and the United States – plus Germany have resumed at the UN headquarters in the Austrian capital of Vienna.

“Everyone is in the working mood and there are grounds to hope that progress will be achieved but without crucial agreements since this is only the second round,” Ryabkov, who is Russia’s chief negotiator in the talks, said upon his arrival in Vienna on Monday.

An agenda for the talks was agreed on in talks Monday between deputies for the two sides:

Iran’s deputy FM for Legal and International Affairs Abbas Araghchi and deputy EU foreign policy chief Helga Schmid have met in Vienna and agreed on the agenda of the fresh round of talks over Iran’s nuclear energy program .

/snip/

Zarif said on Monday that the new round of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the six world powers will focus on uranium enrichment and Arak heavy water reactor.

Normally, Zarif and Ashton meet for dinner on the evening before talks begin, but last night's dinner was cancelled by Iran because Ashton held an unannounced meeting with figures Iran referred to as "convicted seditionists" on her last trip to Tehran.

Mehr News notes that even though last night's dinner was cancelled, Ashton and Zarif did meet ahead of the official opening of the talks this morning (as was also reported by Rubin above).

So while the US pouts over Putin annexing Crimea, Russia and Iran see no barriers to making significant progress toward a final agreement that could be reached this summer on Iran's nuclear program. Here's hoping the US learns to deal with separate issues on separate tracks and doesn't miss this opportunity to avoid a war that seemed inevitable only a few months ago.

Postscript: While this post was being written, Reuters published a story under the headline "Ukraine crisis not seen hurting Iran nuclear talks: EU". It opens:

Iran and six world powers sought on Tuesday to make headway toward resolving their decade-old nuclear dispute, with Western officials expressing hope talks would not be further complicated by the Ukraine crisis.

So far, diplomats said, there is little sign that the worst East-West confrontation since the Cold War would undermine the quest for a deal over Iran's atomic activity and avert the threat of a Middle East war.

The March 18-19 meeting between Iran and

the powers – the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany – began a day after Washington and the European Union imposed sanctions on Russian officials over events in Crimea.

“I haven’t seen any negative effect,” Michael Mann, a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton who coordinates the talks on behalf of the six nations, told reporters. “We continue our work in a unified fashion”.

Awww. Those poor hand-wringers are just going to have to toughen up and carry on with their negotiations.