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Atlantic Council

Members' Conference Call Series and the Iran Task Force:

Geneva Talks on Iran: A New Beginning?

A discussion with

R. Nicholas Burns

*Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Politics
Harvard Kennedy School of Government*

and

Former US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs

Moderated by

Fred Kempe

*President and CEO
Atlantic Council*

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Operator: This is a recording of the Vicente Garcia teleconference with the Atlantic Council, Thursday, October 17, 2013, scheduled for 2:00 p.m. Central Time. Excuse me, everyone. We now have Atlantic Council President and CEO Fred Kempe, joined with Atlantic Council Board Director and former US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns, who is currently Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Please be aware that each of your lines is in a listen-only mode. At the conclusion of our guest's remarks we will open the floor for questions, and at that time instructions will be given as to how to proceed if you would like to ask a question. I would now like to turn the conference over to Mr. Kempe who will be offering some introductory remarks and facilitate a discussion with Professor Burns. You may begin, sir.

Fred Kempe: Thank you very much for that, and welcome to all of you. As the Operator mentioned, I'm joined by Nick Burns, former US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, to hear his insight on the recent Geneva talks on Iran. And unless Nick tells us otherwise when he comes on, today's call is on the record. It's part of our members' conference call series, which in addition to our roundtables in Washington DC and occasionally elsewhere, provides our members from around the world an exclusive opportunity to speak directly with some of the best experts in the world and policy makers about issues of current concern. This call is hosted by the Atlantic Council and its South Asia Center Iran Task Force, which has been generously supported by the Ploughshares Fund. We've been blessed to have Stu Eizenstat as chair of that task force with Barbara Slavin, really doing a lot of the work and the heavy lifting there. Before, our former chairman Chuck Hagel was the co-chair with Stu, and it's really done great work all along.

We're very fortunate to have Nick with us today who, besides everything else he's done in his life, is an Atlantic Council board director, and actually is a member of the executive committee of the Atlantic Council board. He served in the US government for 27 years as a career foreign service officer and as under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 2005 to 2008. The State Department's third-ranking official when he led long-term political— excuse me, long-term military assistance agreement with Israel, and was the lead U.S. negotiator on Iran's nuclear program, which of course is very important for our discussions today. He was US Ambassador to NATO, 2001-2005; Ambassador to Greece, 1997-2001; and State Department Spokesman. I won't list all his other positions in the interest of time, but in short, we have a chance to discuss one of the most important issues of our time, and certainly one of the most important issues for the Obama Administration, with one of the finest and most-accomplished public servants of his generation. So thank you, Nick, for taking some time with us, and without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to you for some opening comments, and then we'll get into Q&A directly thereafter. The operator will tell you at that time how to place your questions, and we've always had a rich discussion on these calls so we really welcome everybody pitching in. Nick, over to you.

Nicholas Burns: Fred, thanks very much, and it's a pleasure to be with you and it's a pleasure to be with the Atlantic Council community. I first wanted to thank Fred as President of the Atlantic Council and Damon Wilson as Vice President for the extraordinary work they've done to build the Atlantic Council. And there's been a renaissance in the Atlantic Council like we haven't seen in many of the Washington DC think tanks, and all of us who are board members and supporters of Fred and of Damon are really pleased to see this. I wanted to pay tribute to Fred, our moderator, and to Damon, our great friend.

Fred, I thought what I would do is just make some very basic points to begin with and then do that rather quickly and in an elementary way so that we can get to questions and a conversation with everybody else on the phone. And let me just lead with how we might perceive the Geneva

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talks, the two days this week that just wrapped up yesterday, between Iran and the countries of the P5 plus Germany. I think you have to say that so far, so good. That if you look at how Foreign Minister Zarif in particular, but also Cathy Ashton, the head of delegation for the P5+1, and Jay Carney, the White House spokesperson, how they all framed it, it seems that this meeting was positive as a start in beginning to build perhaps a modicum of trust among these countries and Iran, and also some substantive progress, though it remains to be seen whether actual progress can be made. But if you look at the language they agreed on, and this was the first joint statement in many years between Iran and the P5+1, they agree that the meetings were substantive and forward-looking, that's diplo-speak for a good start. That a roadmap was discussed, a map forward that would lead to some desired end state, and that they didn't have agreement on perhaps even many elements of the roadmap, they agree where they're heading, which is at least a start.

I was present at the creation of the P5+1 process back in 2005. It began, as you all remember, the EU 3 had been negotiating with the Khatami government. The United States joined the EU in March/April of 2005 and we invited Russia and China in December 2005/January '06 to join. That was the basis of these talks. We've been at it since then in both the Obama and Bush Administrations, and I think yesterday's meeting was certainly, by all accounts, the most positive that's been held during that entire period over the last eight years. The conversation seems to have been qualitatively different and it was interesting to listen to some of the US and European officials remark on the very different tone that Foreign Minister Zarif took, and the change in style and perhaps even in intent. But, and here's the big but, it's just the first round. This is a good start, but it by no means indicates that these talks are going to ultimately succeed. As you know, experts are going to meet in a week or 10 days and then the same negotiators, this is Cathy Ashton, Zarif, and the political directors, the US political director being Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, will get together in Geneva on November 7 and 8.

What we don't know about the talks are of course the key variables. And if you look at some of the major issues at play here, do we think that Iran is willing to agree to some freeze, or some at least partial suspension of its enrichment activities during the course of the negotiations. We know that that's an early factor that the P5+1 countries are looking at. They'd like to achieve that. We don't know—we suspect they're at disagreement on that, but we don't know for sure. The major issues I think that all of you understand will be discussed are whether or not Iran has a right to enrichment, I think that's an issue they can quickly agree on, the nature and intrusiveness of IAEA inspections, the cap on the level of enrichment that Iran would be willing to undertake, the stock of highly enriched uranium, whether or not the plant at Fordo will be closed, the sequencing of lifting of sanctions, and what's going to happen to the Arak heavy water reactor, which is very troubling to a lot of people in the P5+1 camp. A key tactical issue that the negotiators were discussing is whether or not they could agree on some interim measures that would build confidence at the beginning and allow them to stay at the negotiating table for a considerable period of time to try to reach a final agreement. So we come back to this issue, will Iran agree to some either moratorium or partial suspension of enrichment, and would the P5+1 countries in turn consider some partial, and it would really be, I think at this stage, elementary lifting of some of the more mundane sanctions that have been placed on the Iranians. These would be ones of course that the Congress would not have to legislate or pass laws to lift, because I think at this point in our political system that'd be too much for the Congress to do.

So will they be able to proceed in other words in two stages, an interim agreement first, followed by the more difficult issues. I would expect that these talks would last for several months. That 'several,' not 'seven,' but several months into the future, certainly to the end of this calendar year, very possibly, perhaps even likely, in the beginning of 2014. President Obama is going to have, I

think, a difficult time managing several different constituencies first. There are at least three countries that want him to take a very hard line on these talks and not to stay at the table for very long: Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. That's going to be— those countries will need to be managed and reassured by the Obama Administration that these negotiations are not giving away the store and that they're in fact the right thing to do at this point. And second, Congress, because as all of you know, Congress has been threatening—both Republicans and Democrats—to impose even more sanctions during the course of these negotiations on Iran, and the Obama Administration does not want that to happen. This is going to come down to perhaps an argument between the two branches of government as to who should be in charge during a negotiation, and I certainly think as someone who served in the executive branch my entire career that the Congress should not interfere with the president's responsibility to conduct the tactical aspects of these negotiations. If the Administration wants additional sanctions to be imposed, then of course it can ask for them. If it believes that the imposition of sanctions by Congress would be detrimental, then I would hope that Congress would adhere to the wishes of the Administration. But that's going to be an issue as well.

And then finally, let's talk a little bit about barriers to agreement. What's the probability of success here? What's the likelihood that at the end of this process there'll be some negotiated agreement that would make the use of force by the United States or Israel unnecessary? I would say that there are two big barriers. The first concerns Iran's internal politics. I certainly am willing to believe that Rouhani and Zarif are genuinely, in the Iranian political context, reformers, and that they are governing in a very different way than their predecessors. And in particular on the nuclear issue, they're willing to discuss a final end state with us, a final agreement that's qualitatively different than Ahmadinejad or the supreme leader in the past would have considered. But I am impressed by the fact that in the Iranian National Security Council and the Revolutionary Guard, and in the Office of the Supreme Leader and the supreme leader himself, there are powerful forces in Iran that will very likely object to the type of hard-nosed, tough-minded agreement that the United States must adhere to as a final deal. Most because it will be the right thing for the United States to be tough-minded in these negotiations, the right thing to make sure that this agreement does not provide an avenue for Iran to cheat and to be deceitful, and finally, an agreement that won't allow Iran in any way to have a breakout capacity or the capacity to construct a nuclear weapon.

I think it's going to be difficult if Rouhani does agree to the type of agreement that I think the United States and Europe wants this time, difficult for him to hold the center of Iranian politics and to get agreement in his own capital that he should go forward. That's the first barrier to success and the most important one. Second, if it's possible to have an agreement that Rouhani and the rest of the Iranian leadership can agree with, the question, the second barrier then becomes will the Congress agree at that point—this is months down the road and it's obviously hypothetical—will the Congress agree to lift the sanctions that have been imposed, particularly the very tough financial sanctions that are embedded in Congressional legislation. And this would be, if you look forward, sometime in the first quarter or first half of 2014 as we're fully into another election year, in this case, the mid-term elections. What's the probability that Congress would vote to lift sanctions in that event? I think that's another possible barrier. It'd be a good problem to have. It would mean in a sense that we've agreed with Iran, we've agreed with the rest of the P5+1 that the Iranian government at all levels is willing to go forward, but it might be a possible barrier to final success.

If I had to assess the overall probability of success, I think it's less than— certainly less than 50 percent. I would think it's more around 30 to 35 percent of ultimate success here. But as someone who served in the Bush Administration as a career diplomat on this issue, and who thought long

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and hard about how we would negotiate with Iran had we had the chance as we wished to negotiate with them in 2006 and 2007—they turned us down—I think President Obama has managed this very skillfully since his inauguration in January 2009. I think he's—in essence, we have the basis for a bipartisan framework here in the United States. I perceive the Obama policy to be a direct extension of the Bush second term policy. I think if anything, President Obama has strengthened that policy, and he's been able to increase the leverage through the sanctions and through the threat of force on the Iranians that was necessary to bring them to the table. So I think the president's doing the right thing and I hope that there's going to be a patience in our political system, a patience in the Israeli and Saudi governments in particular, that would allow the president now a window of opportunity to negotiate in a flexible and creative way. Because certainly, a negotiated agreement of the tough-minded variety that I suggested is far preferable to the use of force and the possible consequences of a third war in the Middle East, should that ensue.

So Fred, those are some very general comments based on my assessment of the talks in Geneva and of this issue, and I'd be happy to discuss any aspect of this with you and any others on the phone.

Fred Kempe: Nick, thank you very much. That was a great opening and really set the stage, and set the stage not only for what's going on in the talks, but also what to look for in the weeks and the months ahead, and the potential obstacles that one will have to overcome to get this done. So that was just terrific. And thank you for the compliment of the Atlantic Council. Let me just share with those on the phone that seven years ago, when we first undertook the changes of the Atlantic Council, an Under Secretary of State named Nick Burns was enormously helpful with his ideas and took us very much in the global direction we've taken with his thinking that the U.S. and its European allies have to take on global challenges together, or the alliance would not be as useful in the future. So I thank Nick for those suggestions.

The operator's going to come on the line and give you instructions how to call in. When he's done with that, I want Barbara Slavin from the Atlantic Council to ask the first question. I also want to tip the hat to Shuja Nawaz, the Director of the South Asia Center. The creation of that center was one of the first manifestations of the new Atlantic Council approach to global affairs. And so, thanks to Shuja, and then Barbara will start after the operator gives instructions for placing your questions.

Operator: Sure. At this time we will open the floor for questions. If you would like to ask a question, please press the 'star' key followed by the '1' key on your touchtone phone now. Questions will be taken in the order in which they are received. And please be sure to introduce yourself when asking a question. And if at any time you would like to remove yourself from the questioning queue, you can press 'star 2.' Once again, that is 'star 1' to ask a question.

Barbara Slavin: Hi, Nick. It's Barbara Slavin. It's great to have the chance to talk to you again. Just this morning I got some information from an Iranian source of mine that outlined possibly what was in the PowerPoint presentation that Mr. Zarif made, and I'm just going to tick off a couple of the items and ask you what you think, whether this might be a decent deal. The Iranians are talking about a two-stage process, six months for each stage. In the first stage, Iran would freeze its production of 20 percent uranium. It would convert its stockpile entirely into fuel for the Tehran research reactor. It would not close the Arak facility, but it would agree to allow the IAEA to monitor the construction of the facility, and would agree to a deal that if this reactor ever comes online, that whatever spent fuel there was would be turned over, sort of like the arrangements they have with the Russians at Bushehr where the spent fuel is turned back to the

Russians. They won't close Fordo, but they would allow more monitoring of it by the IAEA and they would turn it into a research center rather than a uranium production site. They would ratify the additional protocol of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. They would scale down their production at Natanz. In return, they want their nuclear (0:18:09 inaudible) to go back to the IAEA from the UN Security Council and they want the six UN Security Council resolutions against Iran suspended. How does that sound to you as an opening gambit?

Nicholas Burns: Well, Barbara, first of all, let me say as a board member of the Council, I think the work that you and Shuja Nawaz have done on South Asia and Iran has been really spectacular for the Council, and so I want to thank you for that. I guess the first thing I'd say Barbara is, as you know, there's been a high degree of discipline in the US government and the other P5+1 governments about not sharing the details of negotiations. And I certainly sympathize with that and I understand it. They don't want this negotiation to play out in public. So what we have here is a very aggressive, very artful Iranian PR campaign. I don't want to diminish it too much by describing it like that, but I think that's what it is, to basically put out a lot of information to portray Iran in the most positive light, and you can understand why they're doing that. I think the US government and the other governments are holding back a little bit, they're more disciplined, so we're just getting the Iranian side of the story. And there's been enough discipline that—a lot of my comments at the beginning are really my appreciation of what's happening, but they're not based on any inside information, because I think there's a proper degree of discipline of not sharing it with people like me and the press, and that's a good thing from my perspective. You have to negotiate in a confidential basis.

I would say this. I don't want to respond to everything that was said by the Iranians in public, but I think the idea of six-month stages is going to be too much for the market to bear and the P5+1. The dilemma for the Obama Administration, for the French government, for the very tough-minded governments is this: Since it's been three decades, particularly for the Americans, since we've had a detailed substantive conversation with the Iranians, we need to stay at the table long enough to get a sense of them, to get a sense of their trustworthiness, although we're not going to bank just on trust. We'll want to verify, to get a sense of whether they're serious, of whether they can commit to the deal and make it stick in their own capital, and to get into these details, which are going to be extraordinarily complex to work out. So we have to stay at the table long enough to assess the seriousness of their proposal. But we can't stay so long that they run out the clock on us as we negotiate. In other words, if they don't agree to measures to either slow down or arrest completely the enrichment of uranium, then we'd be foolish to stay at the table through two 6-month stages. And I think it would just be untenable for the Administration to do it and they wouldn't do it, because the Obama team is very smart and very skillful.

So I would say as a first measure, I would think as a negotiator that the U.S. and other would say we need to have a faster process. We need to say earlier in the process your bona fides, whether you're serious, and you need to prove to us that you're serious. In a way, it's not an equal negotiation. Iran is the offender. Iran is the one subject to four Chapter 7 UN Security Council resolutions. Iran is the one that has to convince the others that it's going to adhere to international standards. So I think the faster timeline first is important. Second, it's really asking too much of the P5+1 to give up too much on sanctions at the beginning of this process. I think it's reasonable to suggest that if Iran agrees to some suspension of uranium, that we would in turn, the P5+1, suspend some of the sanctions, but not all of the sanctions and not all of the UN sanctions either. So I think they're asking too much there. And I also think that the Iranians are going to have to understand that they're going to have to go drill down ten layers deep on all of these issues to satisfy our side, the devil being in the details, that what they're proposing is real and that the

implementation's going to be there, not just the promise on their side. So those are some general comments to react to what the Iranian government has put out in public.

Fred Kempe: Sorry, go ahead, Barbara.

Barbara Slavin: This isn't public, Nick, this is a leak that I got. And so, (0:22:34 inaudible) point out the U.S. and Europeans and the others have not commented on it, it's not been confirmed. I would point out though that the Iranians would presumably do the freeze on 20 percent as an initial step, and their desire for UN sanctions to be lifted would come at the end of the process.

Nicholas Burns: End of the entire process.

Barbara Slavin: Yes, that's my understanding of it.

Nicholas Burns: Well, we'll see. When Zarif and Rouhani were in New York and you were up there, Barbara, there was a real sense in what they were saying that they were excessive in their expectations in what early sanctions relief would look like. I think it would not be in the interest of the U.S. and the Europeans to give away too much on sanctions. That's our leverage at the beginning of these talks.

Fred Kempe: Okay, thank you, Nick. A reminder to those on the call, if you do 'star 1' if you want to ask a question, 'star 1.' And let me just throw in one question, Nick, and that's as under secretary obviously you would have not only had to take a look at how these talks were unfolding, you'd have to look at what sort of impact they have on a number of other things, Syria comes to mind, which resolution can't come without Iranian engagements. Another question about what the role of Russia in the Geneva talks and in Syria, questions of Afghanistan. So how would you be looking at the entire landscape as you entered this, and what impact could these talks have in other areas of interest of the United States.

Nicholas Burns: You know, Fred, I think that's a really pertinent question and it's a really good one, because I was struck by how many times Rouhani, in his interviews publically when he was in New York, refused to go where you wanted him to go. When people said, well how about Syria, how about Iraq, Iranian influence there, how about the departure of American forces in 2014, the majority of them in Afghanistan, and he kept saying no, no, no, we need to only discuss the nuclear issue. It may be that his carefully worked out mandate from the supreme leader and others in Tehran is really limited to this issue. I would think it's in the interest of the U.S., France, Britain, even Russia. As we sit with the Iranians over the next several months in these extended conversations, and what a rare opportunity this is, the first time for us, Americans, really since the Jimmy Carter Administration, to have these high-level talks sustained, talks that ultimately may include the American Secretary of State John Kerry if they get to a certain level. I would think it would be in our interest to put these issues on the table and to test them, because what the Iranians have been doing in Syria is directly contrary to American interest. They've been entirely unhelpful to us for years in Iraq and I haven't seen them helping much on our wish to stabilize the Afghan government post-2014. So, I would think it's in our interest to put them on the table. And if the president of Iran and the foreign minister of Iran are the ones who are the godfathers of these talks on their side, they ought to be able to respond to basic questions and basic points that the United States and others want to put forward. So I think it's good to broaden these talks at this point. It'll give us a sense of how serious they are and whether or not— Zarif said something very big yesterday in his press conference, "A new era." He's talking about a new era. Well, it's not going to be a new era if Iran is fundamentally trying to undercut the interests of the United States,

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Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Europe, and Israel on important issues concerning Syria or Iraq. And so we need to be pressing them on all sides to see if the Rouhani government really speaks for the powers in Tehran. I hope they do, but I think we have to be convinced by facts, not just words.

Fred Kempe: Nick, can you give one practical suggestion in a concrete way of how the U.S. might test one of these issues in their talks with Iran.

Nicholas Burns: Yes, I would say Syria, Fred, is probably the example I was thinking of. It seems given the change in American policy and given the fact that we didn't engage in limited airstrikes against the Assad government, that we're now engaged in fact in this major initiative to try to have chemical weapons withdrawn from the country. It seems that the next step for the U.S. working with Russia, working with the Saudis and Turks, and frankly, working with the Syrian authorities, however distasteful that might be, would be two things. Is it possible to arrange a ceasefire, because at least 6 million of Syria's 22.4 million people are now refugees inside their country or outside, which is catastrophic. And the UN believes that those numbers could expand rapidly as the civil war continues over the coming months.

So, is Iran willing to use its influence on the Assad government to try to impose a ceasefire? And I wonder if the Iranians are willing to go that far. They are fueling the civil war. They're running the guns and they are the largest supporters of the Syrian government. And number two, if there is to be some kind of Geneva II process, and there are press reports in the last couple of hours that a Geneva II meeting could be held just before Thanksgiving, maybe on the 23rd and 24th of November, is the Iranian government going to be responsible and productive in trying to achieve some transitional arrangement that would lead Syria out of the catastrophe that it's experiencing. Now, I fully understand that there's another side to this and that it's an open question whether or not the current rebel groups would ever agree either to a ceasefire or to a transitional arrangement, but I think that's where the United States should head with the Russians, the Turks, the Saudis, and the Iranians. So, we can test the Iranians in the next 30 to 60 days about how serious they are about a new era, and the Syria issue should be issue number one, I think.

Q: Thank you, Fred, and good to be with you on line. Nick, I have a question based on your concerns about the domestic audience. We have a disadvantage in this discussion with the Iranians that there's an imbalance in terms of the knowledge that is available to us on what the debate is inside Iran. They know everything that's happening in the United States and in Europe about this debate. The question that comes to mind is to what extent can we get the Iranians to define the end goals in an open way so that we then get a sense of what the reaction is inside Iran, to their definition of these end goals. And this reminds me of my favorite Alice in Wonderland quote, "When you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." (0:30:00 Inaudible) defining those end goals and are subjected to the action at home, we have no idea how we're going to get to those goals. The other related question is next year, if I'm right, the Assembly of Experts is up for reelection, every six years. This is the group that selects the supreme leader. Doesn't that have a factor in addition to the midterm election in the United States? Thank you.

Nicholas Burns: Yes, Shuja, thank you very much, and I think you're right to raise this issue. There is certainly an imbalance in our understanding of Iran's domestic political realities versus their understanding of ours in our very transparent society. And I think you're also right to suggest that what we need to hear from Zarif, and maybe they heard this behind closed doors in Geneva, is we need to see a trajectory in these talks from the Iranians. Where do the talks begin, how does Iran think they can end, and how can they meet our very valid concerns that they've

been deceitful in the past and they have lied, their government has lied repeatedly to the United Nations in the past about what their nuclear activities are and what they've been doing, and they're going to have to assure us I think at the beginning of these talks that there's an end state out there that all of us can live with. And I think that's what, as I understand just reading the voluminous press reports on this, what Zarif was trying to do yesterday, the question is whether it was credible. Of course, I can't judge that not knowing the details.

Secondly, do we think that public opinion in Iran could be mobilized in such a way that it might push the Iranian government towards a solution? I mean, obviously it's a very complex society and we've seen the public assert itself in the last Iranian elections that brought Rouhani to power in a very impressive way. But I would have to think that the key variable, again, is the supreme leader, the Revolutionary Guard, the National Security Council. And my own view is that what we're witnessing, what we've been witnessing since that dramatic week in New York to now, is a thinly disguised Iranian attempt to get sanctions relief early and then see what talks might bring them. That's not going to work. The Administration, the Obama team is not going to give away our leverage on sanctions at the beginning. So, I think a more accurate variable rather than public opinion would be how does the supreme leader and his circle react to what the United States and Europe say back to the Iranians. Here are our demands. Here is our view of how this roadmap should work. And that is an open question, but I'm skeptical that it's going to be a positive answer.

Q: I just wanted to ask about the potential for sanctions. Obviously, you've got a Congress now that is quite skeptical about not only a reduction in sanctions, but there are members on both sides who are interested in actually ramping up sanctions to put more pressure on Iran during the negotiations. So as we enter an election year and you have a lot of skepticism here on the Hill, and distraction as a result of the budget crisis that we're going through, how do we effectively calibrate and time sanctions to support this negotiation process, not only to keep the Iranians at the table, but also to ensure we don't somehow undermine negotiations and give the president a strong hand as he moves forward in trying to get a solution.

Nicholas Burns: Thanks, and thanks for that question. First, I just have two points quickly, and it's obviously, I think it's one of the key variables here and that's why I emphasized it at the end of my opening presentation. When I was in the Bush Administration, Congress, Democrats and Republicans, were extremely helpful to us in making both the threat of force credible, which is part of our leverage, and then making sanctions increasingly severe. And I think what Congress has done between 2008/9 and 2013 has been very effective. And it's helped and I think the Israelis have helped too to make the threats credible. And there's no question in my mind that the primary motivation for the Iranians for this turnaround is sanctions relief. So I think Congress can, both parties, can take some credit for having contributed to a very effective policy. That's point one.

Point two, and you'd expect me to say this, but I'm a former negotiator and a former Iran negotiator, although we never got to the table with the Iranians, we just passed sanctions at the UN against them. I think it's very important that President Obama be given time, space, and flexibility. Now that we're at the table for the first time in 34 years, I think it would be highly disadvantageous for the Congress to impose sanctions on Iran that the Administration did not wish to be imposed. And so, there may come a time in these talks where toughness on the part of Congress or another sanctions resolution would make sense, and the Obama team would believe it would make sense. Well that would be one thing. But if the Administration takes the position thank you to Congress, but we'd rather now just see where we can get in negotiations without any further sanctions, then I think that should be respected. And obviously I don't want to delve deeply into constitutional issues, but the Constitution does give the president very broad authority

to conduct the foreign policy of the United States. I would hope that Congress and both parties would let him do that and would really respond to his wishes and Secretary Kerry's wishes in a tactical way. Because if the reverse happens, if sanctions are imposed by Congress that the Administration finds to be negative and counter-productive, then I think we're really hurting ourselves. And so, I very much support the president's prerogative here.

Q: I'm curious to know whether you think at this point it is possible for us to get a sense of, to put it in simple terms, if we have sort of the supreme leader at the top and in the center and tugging him on one side ostensibly is the Rouhani it's a new day point of view, and tugging him on the other side is the IRGC, which a) has a different point of view, and b) is the only entity that has been a winner in the sanctions era. I wonder if it is possibly for us at this point to know the relative sort of poll strength of those two sort of opposing forces, if that's an accurate way of describing it. And how far we can get in Geneva to get a sense of whether we're playing with someone who actually is willing to make a deal or is ultimately Eban's thing about the Palestinians, they never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

Nicholas Burns: Thank you very much, and I would just say very simply I think this is the key barrier to potential success, and it's the key variable that we have to really keep our eyes on. And unfortunately, it's the analytical issue we know least about. Since we haven't had an embassy there— effective embassy since November 4th, 1979, an operating one, since we have very few American journalists in the country, we have smart people like Barbara who knows Iran as well as anybody, but I don't think any of us really has a true, down-to-earth, gritty understanding of Iranian politics and of the power balanced. And so the key question becomes this is not a monolithic political culture. It's a very complicated and complex one. Will Rouhani prevail? Because I do think he's genuine. I have to give him that. I think he has a very different way of how he wants to deal with the rest of the world, as does Zarif, then say the Revolutionary Guard or the supreme leader. Will Rouhani and Zarif be able to convince the rest of the government, the more hard-line elements, that a very tough-minded intrusive deal where we ask a lot of the Iranians, is in the Iranian national interest. And I don't know the answer to that question. My guess is only a guess, and maybe it's because of all the scars I have from working on this issue for three years when I was under secretary. My guess is that Rouhani has been given a lot of rope to negotiate, because perhaps the hard-line elements believe that sanctions relief can be obtained early enough in the process before Iran has to give away some of the issues they don't want to give way on.

So I'm a little bit skeptical, not so much of Rouhani, but of the true power, which I think still rests with the Revolutionary Guard and the supreme leader. And therefore, if my students ask what's the probability of success, I don't think it's over— I think it's somewhere in the 30 to 35 percent range. Now, that's a lot higher than two months ago. It's much higher than eight years ago when we started the P5+1 process in the Bush Administration, but it's not high. And I think it's because there's been so much mistrust, damage, pain in this relationship going back 40 years, that we're never going to be able to trust this team, we're just going to have to be able to verify a very toughly negotiated deal. And I'm skeptical at the end of the day that the Iranian government will be able to live with it, but I hope I'm wrong. And I don't know if Barbara, or Shuja, or other people on the call, they may have a better view of this than me or have a different view. They may have.

Fred Kempe: Thanks for that answer, Nick. I think this is one of the things that we often forget about in dealing with authoritarian partners of one sort or another, which is they have their own domestic policy, as opaque as they may be, whether it's Gorbachev and the Soviet Union or

whether it's Rouhani today. So thanks for adding that point. And Randall Fort of Raytheon, please. Do we have Randall Fort of Raytheon? If not—

Q: Good to hear you, Nick. Thanks for your presentation. My question is how do you think this proposed deal is going to go over in Israel? Obviously, they've got a very interest here and just wondered your thinking on how that's going to fly there or not, and what impact that will have on their red line.

Nicholas Burns: Right. Well, we're just about to begin here at Harvard tonight a two-day US-Israel strategic dialogue with a lot of former senior leaders of the Israeli government. So, I'll have a better view of that in the next two days. But I would say this, just three quick things, Randy. Number one, I think there's been too much criticism of Prime Minister Netanyahu in our camp, in our society. If you're the Israeli prime minister and you've got to look out at this huge challenge, a possible challenge of a nuclear-armed Iran, it's got to be the overriding top issue and he's got to be very demanding and unrelenting to make sure that the security of his state can be protected. So I have a lot of sympathy with what the Israeli leadership, including Prime Minister Netanyahu are going through.

Secondly, I don't think they're happy about a lot of aspects of our policy in the Middle East these days concerning Egypt, and Syria, and Iran. And there's been a public debate between the Israeli and American governments now for several years running. It intensifies, it lessens, but it's there, it's still there, and we'll continue to see that. But the government—the prime minister's a smart a guy, he understands that the president is committed at this phase and I think the president is right to take advantage of this time to negotiate, and I don't think you'll see the Israelis try to interfere in a big way. I think there's very little prospect, if any at all, that the Israelis will use force while the United States is negotiating. It won't happen. But I think the Israelis are going to want to make sure that they're carefully briefed on this and fully informed, and of course, the U.S. will do that, and they'll want to know that any deal meets their test. And so, I think Israel becomes a more prominent factor and I would even add Saudi Arabia to this in a strange sort of way. The Israelis and Saudis are in the very same place, deeply distressful of the Iranians, unconvinced that a negotiation can result in a deal that's advantageous.

And so, as the administration, if it gets close to a deal, then as you know, Randy, from our time in government together, the amount of time the president and Secretary Kerry will have to spend with the Congress and that's appropriate with the Israelis and Saudis is going to increase. And convincing the Congress and convincing the Israelis and Saudis that this is a deal worthy of support is going to be a big challenge, but a necessary one. And so in a way, as with all negotiations, most negotiations are intense for a long time between the adversarial parties, in this case, Iran, the U.S., and the others, but then they transform and morph and they become much more about domestic politics, and also about our key allied relationships. So there will be another set of negotiations, if you will, between the Administration and Congress, and Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and others as we go forward.

And just one last word, and Randy's question allows me to just remember this. I'm encouraged by one thing here, and that is I think that there is a lot—right now I perceive a rough bipartisan consensus between a lot of Republicans who remember what President Bush was trying to do, and I served in that administration, and a lot of Democrats. That this strategy of hoping to negotiate, hoping for a deal, of wanting to give negotiations a real chance, not just one or two meetings, but several months, making sure that we maintain of leverage with sanctions and don't give away that store yet, and making sure that the threat of force is still credible by the United States and Israel, that's a worthy policy. And my sense is that there's a big center in American

politics that can support that strategy. So, in contrast to the divisive politics of the government shutdown, is the possible for us to kind of have a big center of American politics supporting the president, I hope so for the next few months.

Barbara Slavin: Thanks, guys. I was just in Iran in August and my sense is that the pressure on the Rouhani government from the Iranians is much stronger even than the pressure from the international community. I met no one who had even bothered to vote for Rouhani when I was in Tehran. People were extremely skeptical. They thought he would be just another ‘mullah’ as they put it. So I think that he, and the supreme leader, and the entire Iranian political elite understand that they have to deliver something for their population. It may be an authoritarian regime, but it is one that does have politics, and that has suffered greatly, the legitimacy (0:47:21 inaudible) was the disputed presidential elections, and particularly in the last couple years under sanctions. So, that’s one of the reasons why I’m cautiously optimistic about these talks.

The other thing is I just wanted to set the record straight. I spent a lot of time with the Iranians in New York and also, as I say, I’ve gotten some information which people can find on al-monitor.com, which is a website that I write for this version of the Iranian proposal. They are not expecting sanctions relief from the U.S. Congress any time soon. What they are looking for are steps that could be taken by the Executive Branch. Our task force reports that American and European medicine is not getting to Iran because companies don’t know how to get paid because of the banking sanctions. So they’re looking for relief on some of these issues, and they don’t expect the U.S. Congress to lift sanctions, although I’m sure they would be appreciative if the Congress does not impose any new ones for a while.

So, I just wanted to clarify that. But I agree with you, Nick, that the negotiations with Congress, with the Israelis, with the Saudis, and others is going to be key. And I know that John Kerry is going to be meeting with Bibi (0:48:36 – ph) Netanyahu in Rome next week and I’m sure Iran is going to be topic number one.

Fred Kempe: Thank you, Barbara. Let me sort of (0:48:46 indiscernible) on with a question here as we’re getting into our last few minutes, Nick. We haven’t really discussed the Russian dimension of this or even the Chinese dimension of this. And even though they’re not negotiating, or at least the Chinese are not negotiating there with us, I’d love to— as you would be looking at this with that sort of global dynamics knowing the relationship of those two countries with Iran, what role do you think they are playing and how should the U.S. and the Obama Administration manage them through this process, also realizing what’s going on in Syria?

Nicholas Burns: Well, I certainly dealt with the Russians and Chinese extensively when I was in government on the Iran issue, and there’s a real difference between them that I don’t think has changed very much. The Russians know Iran very well. They are closer geographically to Iran than any of the other P5+1 countries. They’ve had a long history with them. They’ve been building the Bushehr reactor. And they have I think a deeper appreciation of the complexity of Iranian thinking than anybody else. So for us, the Russians in a way were a very, very important partner is trying to help understand the Iranians and understand what their motivations were and are. Second, if a deal is going to be made, it’s going to have to be made with Rouhani as well as with Khamenei. And if there’s any one of the leaders in the P5+1 group who is probably capable if he believes in the deal and agrees with the others, of communicating that most effectively, it might be Putin.

So, if you take this forward and we get to an endgame where a deal is possible, I think Putin's role might be critical here. And the United States would be well-advised, despite our many, many well-deserved disagreements with him, he's a difficult leader. The United States might be well-positioned to say to Putin, "Can you help close this deal?" because he might be the most effective of all the (0:50:46 indiscernible). My sense of the Chinese is that they— and this is not an original thought obviously, but just based on my experience, is they often just hide behind the Russians on this particular issue. They're all about their energy relationship with Iran. They don't want to sacrifice it. They don't want it interfered with. They do not lead. They have very few ideas. The Russian are a much stronger player on this issue. The roles are reversed on North Korea, by the way, where China's the lead party, not Russia. But here, I think Russia's the key party. The other country to look at is France. And beginning with Sarkozy, France became as tough-minded a partner as anybody in the P5+1. Very important for the United States to have a really solid partner in Europe and France has been it in many ways. So, I think the French, I hope, under Hollande will be as tough-minded as they were on Sarkozy, and I think that they've shown that so far.

So, the politics of the P5+1 is complicated. And a last thought, which Barbara and others will recognize. In a way for the Iranians, the P5+1 of course is a critical group, but the country they're really focused on is us, on the United States. They have a very, very difficult past with us. They are obsessively— they're obsessed about us in a very, very negative way, very distrustful towards us. And as these negotiations proceed on a multilateral basis, a key barometer of success will be how many times can our team break out and have individual direct conversations with the Iranians. So, as we saw in the six party talks in '06 and '07 the United States and Iran begin to talk directly in a way that would be complementary to what the group is doing, in a way that would reinforce the direction of the P5+1. I think we've got to see that emerge. We've got to see direct conversations between Americans and Iranians. Not that we believe we can ever trust this government, but that we can have a good sense of whether or not a deal is possible with them. So that's something else to watch.

Fred Kempe: Thank you very much, Nick. I think we'll close with that one. The only thing I would say on top of this, just to see if you agree is for some of what may seem odd to the Russians help us on this, but that seems to be their frame of mind right now given their role on the chemical negotiations in Syria. And the relationship between Ivanov and Kerry seems to be a productive one. Would you agree with both of those?

Nicholas Burns: I would, Fred, and I would say this. When I was involved on the Iran issue for those three years, '05-'08, the Russians were a real problem for us. And I think that the Russian until very recently, their first objective has been to block the United States from using force. Now that they believe the United States is dedicated to a diplomatic process, I think the Russians also believe that it's in their interest not to see Iran become a nuclear weapons power. And so, in a way, our interests may be coinciding with Russia in a way that they had not in '05, '06, '07, '08, when they believed that there was a possibility, a real possibility that the United States might turn towards force. So, if that's true, and I don't— you'll have to test that proposition, then Russia could turn out to be a very important member of this team, and one that could be in some ways very supportive of what the United States wants to see.

Fred Kempe: Thank you, Nick, very much. We started this Iran Task Force a couple of years ago when we had no idea we would be in this position now. But the whole notion was as impossible as it sometimes seemed to get into a situation where we have some shot at these certain negotiations, if one actually tried to creatively imagine the region with a normalization of relations with Iran, it just opens up all sorts of possibilities for improvements that are pretty far-

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reaching. So, thanks so much, Nick, for taking this time. This was a really rich conversation. Thanks to all the members on the call for your questions. Let me remind you that we have our members' day at our new offices at 1030 15th Street, beautiful new offices. If you haven't been there yet you really should come and visit them. On October 30th from 9:00 to 5:00 p.m., and then an open house from 5:00 p.m. on for a couple of hours where we're going to have delightful food and beverages from many of the regions that we're covering at the Atlantic Council, so don't miss that. And with that, thank you all for coming on the call and thanks, Nick, very much to you.

Nicholas Burns:

Thanks, Fred. I enjoyed it.

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