

John Kerry, a tireless diplomat with zeal for a deal

Demetri Sevastopulo

A career marked by self belief and Vietnam is crowned by Iran agreement, writes Demetri Sevastopulo

Just hours after engineering the biggest gamble in US foreign policy since Richard Nixon went to China, John Kerry, the Vietnam veteran turned chief US diplomat, explained what drove him to a deal with an Iranian regime that routinely shouts "Death to America".

"When I left college, I went to war. And I learnt in war the price that is paid when diplomacy fails," said the former five-term senator who narrowly lost the 2004 presidential race to George W Bush. "I made a decision that if I ever was lucky enough to be in a position to make a difference, I would try to do so."

While President Barack Obama will forever be associated with one of the most controversial agreements in US foreign policy, Mr Kerry made it happen.

"Obviously you feel good if you undertake a tough task and get it done, Mr Kerry told the Financial Times in a brief interview. "This was a tough task and some four years and more of work, so I would be stupid if I didn't say I was pleased and thrilled."

Speaking in the 19th century Palais Coburg in Vienna, he joked that the day was historic because it was the "first time in six weeks that I've worn a pair of shoes" after his recovery from a cycling accident in France. But in truth the deal to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon was a legacy-defining victory for a man whose long career had lacked a crowning achievement.

"When you have a secretary of state who for a year and a half conducted this far-flung high stakes roll of the dice negotiations, 18 days in Vienna with a broken leg, that is pretty heroic," said Nicholas Burns, who was lead Iran negotiator under George W Bush.

Under the deal, Iran must freeze parts of its nuclear programme and roll back others to ensure its "break out" period - the time needed to develop enough fissile material for a bomb - is one year. It must also give inspectors access to its declared nuclear facilities and any suspicious sites. In exchange, it will get relief from the sanctions that have placed a heavy burden on its economy.

People close to the 71-year-old Mr Kerry say his personal style - a frenetic pace of work and sheer perseverance married to incredible patience honed in the Senate - helped secure what supporters say is the best way to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb. Some add that his ability to create a rapport with Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister with whom he negotiated in Vienna, was crucial.

“If you can establish a relationship based on respect and mutual understanding of people’s needs, then you can try to make some progress,” said Mr Kerry. “Zarif and I didn’t know each other in the beginning . . . [but] we were both seized by the idea of trying to get it done, understanding that we both had difficulties and there were histories that presented hurdles that we had to get over.”

Detractors counter that the deal will make the US more vulnerable. Ed Royce, the Republican chairman of the House of Representatives foreign affairs committee, where Mr Kerry will testify next week on the agreement, says the deal allows Iran too much time to open up military sites when suspicions emerge and that Mr Kerry should not have agreed to remove embargoes on conventional arms and ballistic missiles after five and eight years respectively. “There is no question that the zeal for the deal got the better of him, particularly in that last week,” says Mr Royce.

While the accord is a huge gamble for Mr Obama, it was Mr Kerry’s persistence that convinced Tehran to unclench its fist. “John Kerry deserves enormous credit for his skill and determination and vision,” says Bill Burns, the former deputy secretary of state who was instrumental in bringing Iran to the table. “He is inexhaustible.”

Tom Daschle, a former Senate majority leader who consoled Mr Kerry after his 2004 loss, describes the deal as “a personal triumph.”

Others are less complimentary. One person who knows the secretary of state well described Mr Kerry as a “one-man” show who comes up with policy on the fly and tends to make promises in negotiations that he may not be able to keep: “This is the most supremely confident person in the world . . . His [2004] loss did not diminish his self-confidence.”

The agreement also reflects the enthusiasm with which Mr Kerry embraced the state department after leaving the Senate, a glacial-paced body where he was overshadowed by Ted Kennedy, the senior senator from Massachusetts until his death.

“The Senate has kind of ground to a halt and that has an effect on people,” says Don Riegle, a former senator and friend. “He did seek that kind of action. He was feeling frustrated in the Senate.”

Mr Kerry, who is married to the heiress Teresa Heinz Kerry and whose father was also a diplomat, became secretary of state after Mr Obama was forced to abandon Susan Rice, his first choice. But he threw himself into the job, including making a Herculean, albeit unsuccessful, effort to reach a Middle East peace deal, before switching focus to the Iran negotiations.

Jonah Blank, a former aide who watched him deal with Afghan president Hamid Karzai, said he was “tailor made” for the Iran talks because “when he latches on to something like this, he is like a bulldog.” Frank Jannuzi, another former staffer, recalls a 2012 meeting between Mr Kerry and the vice foreign minister of North Korea featuring some of the same logic as the Iran deal. “He explained that the US has no permanent enemies,” Mr Jannuzi says. “This was his message to them: ‘If you address our core security concerns — North Korea’s nuclear programme — it is possible for us to normalise relations.’”

There is a long road before any normalisation with Tehran. Congress could still block the deal, while Iran could force America’s hand by cheating.

But Mr Kerry is likely to keep working on the issue with the personal drive that has marked his decades-long career. His self-belief was captured in a 1971 comic strip by the cartoonist Garry Trudeau, who attended Yale University at the same time as Mr Kerry.

In the cartoon, a man walks into a room and tells some students of a big debate on Vietnam that evening. "If you care about this country at all, you better go listen to that John Kerry fellow," he declares. After he leaves the room, one of the students asks: "Who was that?" to which the other replies: "John Kerry."

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