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Iran Nuclear Deal Unlikely to Halt Regional Proliferation

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Optimists contend that a prospective nuclear deal with Iran, being negotiated by the permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (P5+1), would not only prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, but avert contagious proliferation in the Middle East. That happy outcome is unlikely, however, because any deal acceptable to Iran would leave it several plausible paths to the bomb, thereby compelling regional rivals to pursue their own nuclear programs for deterrent purposes. In theory, such contagious proliferation could be prevented by military and diplomatic options, but none appears politically viable. Thus, unless Iran's program is stopped by military action or regime change, regional nuclear proliferation may be inevitable – even if the P5+1 reaches a deal with Tehran.

Terms of the prospective deal are still being negotiated, but media reports and statements by U.S. and Iranian officials suggest at least five key features. The duration of the agreement would be temporary, about 10 to 15 years. Uranium enrichment capacity would be capped, but a few thousand first- or second-generation centrifuges would continue to operate. Research and development of more advanced centrifuges would be permitted. The proposed Arak research reactor would be redesigned to reduce its proliferation risk, but the facility still would produce plutonium capable of being used in nuclear weapons. After expiration of the deal, its restrictions would be lifted, so Iran could engage in all nuclear activities permitted to signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Such a prospective deal would leave Iran three paths to the bomb. The first is "overt breakout," whereby Iran would kick out international inspectors and then race to produce one or more nuclear weapons. Using only the centrifuges permitted under the deal, Iran could produce sufficient highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a bomb in a few months. Alternatively, Iran could wait until the Arak reactor is operating, then kick out inspectors and reprocess the spent fuel to separate plutonium for weapons, likewise requiring only a few months. In either case, the fissile material could be inserted into a prefabricated weapons package, overnight establishing a nuclear deterrent to fend off further international enforcement. Facing overt

breakout, the international community's only hope to stop Iran would be decisive military action during the narrow window of a few months between Iran kicking out inspectors and producing its first nuclear weapon.

Iran's second path to the bomb would be "covert breakout." Under this scenario, Iran initially would openly develop more efficient centrifuges, as permitted under the proposed P5+1 deal, either indigenously or with benefit of international technological assistance. Once successful, Iran would divert the advanced technology to a clandestine enrichment facility. Based on greater efficiency, the hidden plant would require only hundreds, not thousands, of centrifuges to produce enough HEU for a bomb in a few weeks or months. This miniature enterprise would thus have a much smaller "signature," hindering detection by international inspectors and foreign intelligence services. Iran would aim to enrich enough uranium for a bomb before the facility even were discovered. To prevent covert breakout, the international community first would have to detect the facility before it produced sufficient HEU, and then take rapid action to halt its operation.

The third path to proliferation would come following expiration of the proposed agreement. At that point, Iran legally could expand its enrichment capacity without limit. Tehran has announced plans for more than a hundred-thousand centrifuges, ostensibly to produce fuel for its nuclear power program currently supplied by Russia. Given such expansion, Iran could produce enough HEU for a nuclear weapon in just a few days. Post-agreement proliferation could take at least two routes combining overt and covert aspects. Iran might announce publicly that it was producing HEU for non-weapons purposes permitted under the NPT, such as fueling research reactors or submarine propulsion reactors, then later divert the HEU to weapons. Detecting such diversion could take years, especially if the HEU were declared for naval propulsion, which under the NPT is immune from international inspection. Alternatively, during the approximately two weeks between international inspections of its enrichment facilities, Iran could reconfigure centrifuge cascades and produce enough HEU for at least one bomb. When inspectors arrived, they would detect this malfeasance but could not reverse the fait accompli. Under either scenario, the international community would be unable to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon after expiration of the proposed P5+1 deal.

Neighboring rivals of Iran will feel compelled to pursue their own nuclear weapons programs for deterrent purposes unless they are confident that all three of Iran's potential paths to the bomb are blocked. Unfortunately, these neighbors are unlikely to be reassured about any of these risks. First, they know covert breakout will become easier over time. The longer Iran is permitted to conduct R&D on advanced centrifuges, the smaller a clandestine enrichment facility will need be, thus lowering the probability of detection. In light of the lead time neighbors require to develop their own nuclear weapons, they will start well in advance if they fear Iran eventually could break out quickly and covertly.

Second, in the event of detected breakout (overt or covert) by Iran, neighbors doubt the United States or Israel would take military action to stop it. Washington failed to launch such preventive strikes when it detected nuclear programs in Syria and North Korea, even under George W. Bush, who was far more hawkish than Barack Obama. Israel has threatened – but refrained – from strikes against Iran so many times that it has lost credibility. Of course, Israel or the United States might eventually use military force to roll back Iran's nuclear program, but meanwhile skepticism about that outcome will drive neighbors to pursue their own nuclear options.

The third concern of neighbors is that following expiration of the proposed deal the only hope of preventing Iranian proliferation would be if Tehran itself chose not to acquire nuclear weapons due to fear of international sanctions. Such self-restraint is unlikely, however, because Iran knows that two previous

proliferators – India and Pakistan – easily survived such sanctions. Indeed, in both cases the United States eventually rewarded the proliferators: India with a civilian nuclear deal, and Pakistan with military aid.

Several of Iran's neighbors, aware the P5+1 deal would leave Iran plausible paths to the bomb, are accelerating pursuit of their own nuclear-weapon options under cover of civilian energy programs. This includes Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Algeria, and Egypt. Three more Arab states – Morocco, Tunisia, and United Arab Emirates – also have nuclear energy programs that eventually could provide the technology and expertise necessary for proliferation. The region also has an ample uranium supply in Jordan.

To prevent Arab states and Turkey from acquiring nuclear weapons, the international community could try three approaches, yet none offers much hope in the long run. First, traditional nonproliferation efforts could impose delay, but they could not prevent eventual weapons acquisition via at least two pathways. Overtly, these countries could build nuclear fuel-cycle facilities permitted under the NPT – enrichment or reprocessing plants – to produce HEU or plutonium under international inspection. Later, at the time of their choosing, they could withdraw from the NPT and divert the fissile material to weapons. This would resemble North Korea's successful route to the bomb. Alternatively, these countries could pursue clandestine weapons programs, imitating Pakistan's successful proliferation path.

The second way to stop the contagious spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East would be preventive military action. Such "counter-proliferation" is technically feasible, as Israel demonstrated against Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007. However, it is politically implausible against countries that have cooperative relations with the United States. If Washington and Israel lack the political will to launch preventive strikes against Iran – a pernicious enemy – they are even less likely to attack allies.

The third method to avert contagious proliferation would be for Washington to provide extended deterrence to these neighboring states, expanding the U.S. nuclear umbrella to dissuade them from pursuing their own nuclear programs, an approach that has long worked in Europe and East Asia. However, Arab countries and Turkey would doubt the credibility of such an offer, questioning whether in a crisis the United States really would be willing to "trade New York for Riyadh." This is not a new challenge. Cold War allies initially were skeptical of U.S. extended deterrence in Berlin and Asia. In those cases, however, Washington deployed thousands of ground troops to serve as "tripwires," so a potential Soviet attack would kill Americans, making it more credible that Washington would fulfill its pledge to retaliate. By contrast, in most Middle East countries, it is implausible that the United States would want, or be permitted, to station large numbers of troops – for domestic political reasons on both sides. Thus, extended deterrence lacks credibility for most of Iran's neighbors, who accordingly will want their own nuclear forces.

For all these reasons, if the proposed P5+1 agreement is finalized under expected terms, both Iran and its neighboring rivals likely still will pursue and eventually acquire nuclear arsenals. Such proliferation in the Middle East would greatly increase the chances of nuclear weapons being used – due to miscalculation, accident, extremism, or terrorism. Obviously, that raises grave risks, including to U.S. personnel, interests, and allies.

The best hope of averting such a dangerous scenario is favorable political change in Iran prior to its acquiring nuclear weapons. Anything that delayed Iran's nuclear program could help by providing time for regime change. For that reason, the expected P5+1 deal would be beneficial, but only if accompanied by sustained international efforts to promote political change in Iran.

The final question is whether any other strategy could offer a better expected outcome than the combination of a P5+1 deal and promoting regime change? The only obvious alternative is military coercion. Under such a strategy, one or more states would demand that Iran halt or greatly constrain its enrichment and reactor programs under rigorous international inspection. If Iran refused, a military air campaign would be conducted, and repeated as many times as necessary, to prevent Iranian production of sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon. Based on published studies, the United States has the military capability to accomplish this mission with high confidence, and Israel might do so with lower confidence. Neither country, however, appears to have the political will for such preventive military action in the absence of a detected breakout, due to fears of Iranian retaliation and negative international public opinion.

The above analysis suggests that ongoing diplomatic efforts are unlikely to prevent proliferation by either Iran or its neighborhood rivals. Yet, there is no politically viable alternative strategy at the moment. The potential benefit of the prospective P5+1 deal is that it could delay Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. That extra time should be put to maximum effect by bolstering international efforts to promote regime change in Iran, so that by the time Iran could produce nuclear weapons, its leaders will have decided not to. However, if Iran refuses to sign the proposed P5+1 deal, or signs and then is detected breaking out, the international community – led by the United States and Israel – must quickly revisit military options.