



IRAN IN FOCUS

May 2014

THE DANGER OF A SHORT IRANIAN BREAKOUT TIME

Perhaps the most contentious issue of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran is the fate of Tehran's uranium enrichment program. Any final agreement must require the dismantlement of Iran's centrifuge capacity such that it does not have a uranium path to a nuclear weapon.

WHAT IS "BREAKOUT TIME"?

The term "breakout time" refers to the time period Iran requires to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. Breakout time can vary depending on the number and type of centrifuges and the quality of the uranium feedstock.

WHAT IS IRAN'S CURRENT BREAKOUT TIME?

Iran could break out in about two months if it used the 9,000 centrifuges it is currently operating. Iran could shorten that time frame by employing 11,000 additional centrifuges that it has installed but is not operating today. Some in Washington have spoken about the possibility of the U.S. accepting an Iranian capacity to break out in 6-12 months.

HAS THE INTERIM AGREEMENT LENGTHENED IRAN'S BREAKOUT TIME?

Under the Joint Plan of Action, Iran has diluted half its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium to lower levels and agreed to convert the remaining half into a form less readily accessible for nuclear weapons.

This step will only slightly increase Iran's breakout time, because Iran has installed more than a thousand advanced centrifuges that can enrich at a pace 3-5 times faster than first generation models.

WHY IS A 6-12 MONTH BREAKOUT TIME DANGEROUS?

Any agreement that would accept Tehran's ability to breakout in as little as 6-12 months poses serious dangers. These include:

- Uncertainty of detection: Such an agreement would require the international community to rapidly detect an Iranian attempt to break out. History is replete with cases of states that have successfully concealed their nuclear intentions, and Iran has a long track record of lying and concealing with respect to its nuclear program.

- Unrealistic expectation of rapid response: Successful international response to an Iranian breakout attempt would require quick detection, rapid decision-making, and the will to employ all necessary measures to stop Iran's program. This would be a difficult combination to guarantee.
- The irrelevance of new sanctions: Such a limited breakout timeframe would leave insufficient time to implement stringent new sanctions, forcing the international community to choose between accommodation and the use of force.

Given these pitfalls, any agreement must include dismantlement of Iran's enrichment infrastructure if it is to offer hope to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

QUOTES TO NOTE

- "...our bottom line is that we will only accept a deal that effectively constrains Iran's ability to break out and produce a nuclear weapon. That means real curbs on all elements of the program and a verification regime that gives confidence Iran isn't conducting activities in secret."
- National Security Advisor to the Vice President Jake Sullivan May 1, 2014
- "I don't think that we did everything that we've done [in imposing sanctions on Iran] to only get a six or a 12 months lead time. Because a deal that would ultimately unravel the entire sanctions regime for a six-to-12 month lead time is not far from where we are today."
- Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez, April 8, 2014