

How the Iran Deal Could Complicate U.S. Efforts to Prevent a Nuclear Breakout

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Contrary to what the White House has said, the nuclear deal with Iran could make preventive military action an even more problematic proposition than it was before.

President Obama has often stated, regarding Iran's potential nuclear weapons ambitions, that "all options are and will remain on the table" and that the United States would be able to deal with such an eventuality because "we preserve all our capabilities...Our military superiority stays in place." Administration officials have likewise claimed that the inspection regime agreed to in the nuclear deal with Iran would increase America's insight into Iran's declared nuclear infrastructure, greatly enhancing the effectiveness of a military strike should it someday be deemed necessary.

Further scrutiny, however, raises questions regarding whether political and military dynamics set in train by the nuclear deal with Iran will in fact make preventive military action an even more problematic, and therefore unlikely, option for the United States.

This could influence Iran's future proliferation calculus. The nuclear deal, if implemented fully, could place major constraints on Iran's ability to undertake a breakout from declared, or possible covert, facilities for 10 to 15 years. But as these constraints are lifted (or circumvented before then by Iran), the temptation to pursue a breakout could be strengthened. Several factors will influence Iran's decision-making on this matter; foremost among these is Iran's assessment of the risk of attempting a breakout.

Because it is unclear how the sanctions "snapback" mechanism might work in practice, it is especially important that the nuclear deal be backstopped with a threat of force if it is to be viable. Iranian doubts about the credibility and efficacy of the U.S. military option could, however, undermine the long-term sustainability of the agreement. So what impact will the deal have on this option?...

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