

FDD Media Call: Iran Nuclear Program Talks

April 24, 2025

Featuring Behnam Ben Taleblu and Andrea Stricker

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Good morning and thank you for joining us for today's FDD media call. My name is Joe Dougherty. I'm senior director of communications here at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. We're grateful that you've joined us, as FDD experts who will set the table for Saturday's technical and diplomatic talks regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Joining us for today's call, first up we have Behnam Ben Taleblu. Behnam is an FDD senior fellow and director of FDD's Iran program, specializing in Iran's nuclear program, Iran's ballistic missile, cruise missile, and drones programs, US sanctions, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its proxies, the foreign security policy of the Islamic Republic, and internal Iranian politics.

Also joining us on today's call is Andrea Stricker, an FDD research fellow and deputy director of FDD's Nonproliferation and Biodefense Program. Andrea has extensively researched Iran's nuclear program, including its history, the regime's proliferation efforts and technical advances, as well as diplomatic agreements.

We're going to get to the call very quickly, but some important housekeeping items. First, today's conversation is on the record. Also, we will share the transcript and video of the call as soon as it's prepared. The transcript will take a little bit of time, but the video will be posted shortly after the call concludes.

Behnam is going to open the call with opening remarks followed by Andrea, and then we will open things up to your questions. During the Q&A portion, you may submit your questions via the chat feature or the raise-your-hand feature, in which case we'll let you know when you are called upon so that you can ask your question. Thanks for your patience. Behnam, thanks for getting us started here.

TALEBLU: Greatly appreciated, Joe. Greetings, everyone, great to be with you. Great to share the virtual stage with my friend and colleague, Andrea Stricker, who is joining us also remotely.

As we preview the third round of US-Iran direct or indirect nuclear talks this time back in Muscat in Oman, I think it's worth taking perspective of a few important trend lines that have emerged both from a political perspective and from a policy perspective when looking at things through the lens of Tehran. The first is -- why engage now? And the second is -- why is engagement by the Islamic Republic qualitatively different in 2025 than in 2013 or even in 2015?

The first, of course, is that the Islamic Republic doesn't have a nuclear theory of the case. If you go back to the negotiations that led to the 2013 JPOA and 2015 JCPOA, the Islamic Republic was really auditioning for the role of responsible nuclear stakeholder. And you don't have to take it from me, you can take it from IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi, who when he has to look at the mixed messaging he gets from the Iranians, the lack of explanation he gets from the Iranians when it comes to things like monitoring and verification, when it comes to a response that I think just a few hours ago outlets published when they talked about this most recent potential centrifuge construction facility underground, Rafael Grossi asked about it and the reported quote from the Iranians was, "That's none of your business."

So, the sheer change in the Iranian nuclear discourse is very important to note, but that is also important because unlike in 2013 and 2015 where the Islamic Republic desperately engaged to fight off these sanctions and to earn or gain economic relief, there is much more of a security angle to why the Islamic Republic is engaging today. It is not disconnected from the wars of the post-October 7 Middle East, particularly the two direct exchanges in April and in October between the Iranians and the Israelis.

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So, I would say the first reason these talks are continuing is because there is a security imperative for Tehran. The foremost element of Tehran's diplomatic strategy today is not to earn sanctions relief or to buy time, but those are secondary or tertiary reasons. The foremost strategy is to use direct engagement with the United States as a literal human shield against an Israeli preemptive attack against Iran's nuclear and/or military installations. They believe so long as Washington is talking, Jerusalem is not shooting, and through that prism everything else flows. Their ability to rebuild their proxies in the region, their ability to potentially stabilize but not solve some of their economic issues. You saw the sudden appreciation of the Iranian rial on the free market exchange rates relative to the US dollar.

I think the regime has learned, actually, a lot of the experiences about negotiating with America and seeing different American presidents deal with the political and policy challenge of things like sanctions relief. So, I think they're looking to simply improve the economy on the margins. If they can get something like the 2013 or 2015 deal that allows them a couple more formalized connections back into the international economy, back into the dollar-driven economy, then they'll take it. But they've learned to limp along under max pressure 1.0, and under max pressure 2.0, they're looking to blunt the securitization of the crisis.

And because the regime is playing a very high-risk/high-reward game right now by putting all of its eggs in the nuclear basket, it is trying to actually elicit something that is much more important than dollars this time around, and it is trying to ensure or guarantee regime survival. And that is precisely why you've seen such flip-flopping on are these talks direct or indirect? Will Iran engage with or not engage with Donald Trump? And ultimately, what can the US settle for when it comes to a nuclear deal? And I can think of no better person to talk about those finer points about what the US wants versus what it may settle for in the contours of a nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic than my friend and colleague, Andrea, who will pick up some of the technical parameters from here. Turning it over to you, Andrea.

STRICKER: Thanks, Behnam. Thank you all for joining us. So, I think a bit concerningly, we're heading into this round not really knowing what the US position is. It's important that we don't know what Witkoff has been telling the Iranians in the first two rounds of talks. Is he open to continued enrichment or has he simply just been gathering the facts of the Iranians' positions?

We saw Marco Rubio yesterday explaining to the FP that Iran shouldn't have enrichment, that Witkoff was referring to the level of enrichment Iran could have if it were importing fuel for a remaining civil program. That's positive, but still it's not Rubio who is at the table, unfortunately. And so, I think those of you who have been covering this issue for many years, you know that if you're going into a negotiation with the Iranians, you want to know what your bottom line is before it starts getting whittled down.

From what I was hearing yesterday that the team members going to Oman may not have even known what they were supposed to go and talk about. I think for that reason, it's positive, this POLITICO report that Michael Anton will be involved, he does seem to know the Iran file pretty well, even though he's not a technical expert. But I think another key point is a Trump agreement that provides for continued Iranian enrichment, I think it would be really tough for it to survive politically. The reaction from his allies against continued enrichment was so swift that he may not be able to push through something like that.

So if we have an agreement that allows enrichment, it would be, I think some kind of an interim deal that he is somehow able to sell as better than the 2013 Joint Plan of Action that preceded the 2015 deal and had some kind of a cap on Iran's enrichment level and stockpile. But still, I think it's going to be tough because he did set out and so many of his advisors echoed this dismantlement position.

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I think one of the worst cases if he does reach a deal is that something emerges like a rollback of the program that isn't permanent. On a technical level, Iran may say that it's permanent, but in effect, it would retain all its enrichment infrastructure to wait out the Trump administration and bust out of the restrictions. David Albright of @TheGoodISIS [Institute for Science and International Security], he posted on X a few days ago, some breakout estimates for what it looks like to leave Iran's advanced centrifuge stockpile in the country, even with eliminating the 20% and 60% enriched uranium stocks, and it still gives us a breakout time, that's the time it would take to make the weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon, it would be around two months.

So, the breakout time would be short. It's not clear that you would get much from an interim deal. And repackaging something like the JCPOA but saying it doesn't have sunsets or an end to restrictions is not going to fulfill the dismantlement pledge that Trump's advisors have made. And it would simply kick the can down the road. Pressure would diminish on Iran, and we would lose this very significant window for military action by the US and Israelis to possibly eliminate the program.

So, in a best case, I think, given where we are and the gap between the US expectations and demands and the Iranians' position, I think that the talks could fall apart. The administration may suddenly revert back to its dismantlement position more firmly this weekend. And if things fall apart, then the administration can revert back to letting the pressure build on Iran and there just may not be enough pressure on them yet to even consider getting a dismantlement deal. They really need to be put in a position of seeing the nuclear program as a threat to their survival rather than something that protects their survival. So, something that could get them bombed, shake the economy, and cause uprisings and really doom the regime rather than something that protects it.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Andrea, and thank you, Behnam. Okay. We are preparing to move to the question-and-answer portion of the call. Just a quick reminder, you may submit your questions via the chat feature or you may use the raise-your-hand feature, and my wonderful colleague, Ellie, will line things up.

In the meantime, I will get things started and I'll come out of the gate hot, if you will, on this one and ask you both what is the worst case scenario, what do you fear out of the talks heading into Saturday?

TALEBLU: Sure. I'll offer you two things that I'm afraid of, not just heading into talks, but based on the trajectory of talks succeeding, based on the public statements we've been hearing from US officials, and if talks collapse.

Here at FDD, I have the pleasure of overseeing the breadth and depth of all of our Iran programs, which is not just nuclear-heavy, but there's regional, there's terrorism, there's human rights, there's cyber, there's a whole host of threats that we face from the Islamic Republic, and the counter-proliferation challenge is just one challenge that we have from the Islamic Republic that is part of the larger counter-regime challenge. The reason I'm saying that is because the two things I worry about most as we focus in on nuclear diplomacy and the nuclear crisis is: one, a limited deal, basically a bad deal. One that merely allows through an interim to a final deal-type process, like the JPOA that caps the threat briefly, and then the JCPOA that for a time period rolls back select vectors of that threat, only to allow the Islamic Republic to surge back after a few years or at a time of its own choosing, and that ignores delivery vehicles like ballistic missiles or anything else for that matter. I'm greatly afraid of that, not just from the counter-proliferation perspective and the things that Andrea laid out, but because of what this would do to a regime, which is really indeed in the region and at home, on back footing. This would inject life into the regime. This would allow the regime to actually generate a little bit of that fiscal and economic health. This would allow the regime quite a few talking points to use against enemies at home and abroad and really step up or bolster their penchant for more risk-taking on the whole host of non-nuclear threats that we face from the Islamic Republic. So fear number one, bad deal number one is that you would inject life into an already illegitimate, bankrupt, and weak regime and not capitalize on the window of opportunity. That's fear number one.

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Fear number two, and I'm not mincing my words here, is from seeing the Iran threat only through the counter-proliferation challenge. Fear number two, converse of a limited and bad deal, is a limited and bad military strike. Increasingly what we're hearing from dissenters inside the country, members of the diaspora is as follows: the biggest fear is in the case of a conflict, is not actually inadvertent casualties, which is something that anyone would fear in any war zone, not just in the Middle East, but around the world. But the big fear is that there is a disarming or defanging kind of limited military conflict underway or coming our way, that neuters part, if not all, of the regime's nuclear and/or military capabilities. But just like Saddam after Kuwait in 1991, locks in a domestic totalitarian terror with just enough capacity to wield what's left of its wounded military apparatus against an increasingly dissatisfied population, hurts them, and then has just enough domestic capacity to make the US, the West, US partners in the region, worried about what it could do with that capacity and then with a growing threat and diminished monitoring, have to force us into a longer-term conflict.

So when I hear a lot of people talk about Iraq, I unfortunately don't hear a lot of people talk about the decade between the two Iraq Wars between the 1991 and 2003 war. So fear number two that I have is that only seeing the Iran threat through the counter-proliferation prism and not focusing on something like dismantlement being part and parcel of a larger counter-regime strategy, if there is just a limited nuclear strike, and in the event that it's successful and there is no follow up larger counter-regime policy, and the Trump administration or the Israelis think it's one and done, we're going to have a major problem on our hands here, and that would be the proper Iraq analogy.

DOUGHERTY: Andrea.

STRICKER: Thanks. I think we should consider a couple of wild card scenarios. I've already touched on the pitfalls of reaching a weak interim deal or a watered-down but lengthened JCPOA.

Iran could use the time between now, when it's talking, sort of stringing out the US on the military threat, preventing Israel from acting. It could use this time to conduct additional secret work on a nuclear weapon and consider dashing to the bomb. The New York Times reported in February that Iran is looking to possibly shortcut its route to the bomb by making crude weapons. And those estimates are that it could likely do so within six months, and it has enough highly enriched uranium to make several nuclear weapons already. And something that we're looking at closely is the IAEA may not have the ability to notify the international community if Iran does divert the uranium fuel until maybe several days have gone by. It doesn't have remote and near real-time notification. If some of that fuel is enriched further, it may actually have to go into the facilities to be able to obtain that kind of data or surveillance footage. So that's something to watch. That would put the US and Israel in a position of having to quickly act to stop a breakout militarily with limited information about where this uranium might have gone. It could be deep underground perhaps at the Natanz facility that @TheGoodISIS highlighted yesterday, where Iran is erecting a security perimeter.

Another wild card scenario, I think is Russia providing help on weaponization. It's been closer to Iran lately, and it may provide some needed data, some needed testing help, assistance on the various layers of creating a nuclear weapon if Iran does decide to dash to a bomb.

For both of those scenarios, for many reasons, those scenarios may not be likely, but we certainly want to get ahead of them. One, certainly hopes intelligence eyes are looking closely at both of those possibilities and that we've got lots of different robust military capabilities, sabotage capabilities, intelligence that could help prevent a breakout or Russian assistance.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks to you both. One of the things I hope you get to in a few minutes is the pressure that the White House might be under and how it could affect this weekend's negotiation talks due to what's happening in Ukraine. So the White House says Ukraine going on plus Iran. So we'll get to that in a second. But we do have a question from Todd Prince at Radio Free Europe. Todd, over to you. Thank you for joining us today. I think you're still muted.

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PRINCE: Sorry. Yeah, sorry.

DOUGHERTY: There we go.

PRINCE: My question was just addressed on Russia by Andrea.

DOUGHERTY: Oh, excellent. So you're good to go. Todd, a point that I think you will find of interest here and others on the call, Andrea and Behnam, is Iran's European strategy. Wondering if you can go into that a little bit.

TALEBLU: Sure. Just very briefly on Europe, but Todd, you're all clear with Russia and Andrea, I don't want to jump in.

PRINCE: Yes.

TALEBLU: Okay, great. You may have seen, speaking of Russia, before the round in Rome before round two, Iran's foreign minister Araghchi went to Moscow. There was a couple of very high-level meetings over there. And then on the back end, he went to Tehran back home. And then prior to round three, being in Muscat, Araghchi has gone to Beijing, the capital in China for more high-level engagement there. And in each place, there's been a lot of commentary, not by hawkish Americans, but from Iranians themselves talking about this thing, this newfound kind of building block of the anti-American order. This Russia, China, Iran dynamics, sometimes it's called an axis, sometimes it is called a partnership, whatever term you choose to use. The Iranians are clearly counting on the anti-American elements of the P5+1, which by the way is not a vehicle being used today, to really be their lawyers in the international system.

I think there is a lot of close, high-level diplomatic and political coordination. And then there's also the status dividend that the Islamic Republic gets from trying to not be seen as the junior partner, but a mid-level partner to those two other powers who have their own sets of geopolitical issues with the West and Washington in particular. So look for the status and security dividends of tightening Russia, Iran, China, Iran, military and political, and even as Andrea potentially mentioned as a wild card, nuclear ties, and how they may make themselves manifest in a deal here. I remember in the previous deal, when in the JCPOA, the Russians had to take away the spent fuel. The Russians have a totally separate non-JCPOA related contract for Bushehr [Nuclear Power Plant]. The Russians had a role in the Fordow [Fuel Enrichment Plant] redesign following the JCPOA.

So look for the Iranians to try to find the Russians to shoe themselves into any kind of diplomatic process here. And then I would also note towards the E3, the Iranians always love when there's a transatlantic tiff or a transatlantic row. And what the Iranians rightly worry about is that halfway through the Biden administration, the E3 moved to the right of the US on Iran, whether it was the number of human rights sanctions following the domestic crackdown after the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, the ferocity with which they move to counter the Iran-Russia drone nexus, particularly post-Ukraine invasion, as well as even on the nuclear file at the Board of Governors being to their right. And there's quite a bit of reporting about all of that. And now that the 2025 is being made to be a legal and political year of decision on the Iranian nuclear crisis because of snapback, Iran's foreign minister just today tweeted that he would be willing to engage in diplomacy with the E3.

So even though the Iranians have totally carved out separate channels, they have put pieces in place to basically have a baseline P5 consensus where if they can offer each one of these actors, the E3, the Americans, the Russians, the Chinese, something -- I think that would all translate to, if there is an interim deal as Andrea has worried about, that may translate to trying to move the P5 to kick the can down the road when it comes to that same legal and political forcing function. And that is to get them to delay snapback potentially through a least common denominator kind of Security Council resolution, which by every single actor would be framed as buying time for diplomacy. So I'm watching right now, Iran's à la carte nuclear diplomacy happen in real time. So it's not just Muscat, but the things all around the Muscat channel. Sorry, that was long.

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DOUGHERTY: That's okay, Behnam. We do have another question from Aamer Madhani at AP. He was curious, if the panelists here, of your thoughts on how much impact that President Trump, who hasn't been able to fulfill his promises of quickly to end the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, could be vulnerable to embracing a less-than-good deal for the sake of being able to say it has scored a big foreign policy deal.

STRICKER: I think I talked about at the top how it is a real risk that Trump could be pushed to negotiate something like an interim deal that would leave Iran's breakout capability intact -- a short timeline to the bomb. We have to remember that Iran only needs a few hundred advanced centrifuges at a secret site to be able to ratchet back up within a couple of months to the uranium stockpiles that it has now. And unless you're dismantling all of that infrastructure -- the equipment, the stockpiles permanently -- then you're not really getting much. And I really think that the president's allies on the Hill in particular, will not let that slide. We've seen the opposition come out pretty fiercely against a non-dismantlement deal.

Congress may even want to use its review powers under an INARA [Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015] to try to block a deal like that. So I think it depends on how the president would be able to sell a deal like that. And personally, it's my hope that people who have been covering the Iran issue for many years would circle the wagons and try to stop that.

DOUGHERTY: Behnam.

TALEBLU: I have a slightly counterintuitive take because the logic of the question is essentially trying to see a national security issue and a diplomatic agreement through the lens of a domestic political victory. I think what's increasingly clear and what was forgotten between the decertification of the JCPOA in October 2017 and the leaving of the JCPOA in May 2018 was that President Trump didn't like the optics of having to continuously waive sanctions as required by INARA as well as the JCPOA itself. He didn't like having to issue those certifications that Iran was "in compliance," that it was worth giving sanctions relief to the Islamic Republic. And that, I think, has a certain political weight on its own. The president may want to benefit from the rally effect of a political win of a diplomatic agreement with the Islamic Republic, but the president may soon understand that that will be followed by a host of diplomatic losses in terms of the optics and in terms of the politics of having to continuously waive sanctions that even President Obama may not have waived, that President Obama actually helped sign into law. Admittedly these were congressional sanctions, but President Obama used them effectively to get the JCPOA and the optics of that for him may not be particularly good.

And also just to push away from the table. Once the Iranians begin to take the win, as it were, the president may respond. And the win here is that the Iranians would have been able to, if the deal that Andrea is talking about ends up getting achieved, like an interim deal or a JCPOA-type deal, the Iranians would have the talking point that they forced the same person who left the deal many years later, after them resisting maximum pressure, into an equal or worse deal. And that would be a very powerful talking point and a feather in the cap of the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism that would be allowed to retain much of its nuclear program.

And the lack of a political win that that talking point would generate would, I think, shake the Trump administration. So long as the administration is aware of these political, not roadblocks, but political costs it'll have to pay for a bad deal on the back end, I don't see them rushing to ink one. But we'll have to wait and see because this is after all a term two. And a term two is always about legacy, be it at home or abroad.

DOUGHERTY: Aamer, thanks for that great question.

FDD recently released a report talking about the complete dismantlement of the Iranian nuclear program. Can you talk a little bit about that? And what is an Iran model for dismantlement? How does it compare to previous cases where countries disarmed their nuclear weapons? I'll open that up to both of you.

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STRICKER: Sure. So our report is, it's on FDD's website, it's by Benham, myself and Orde Kittrie, and we're really talking about removing Iran's nuclear threat permanently. So removing its ability to produce enriched uranium fuel for nuclear weapons, to reprocess plutonium, potentially, dismantling all these facilities, centrifuges, and having full IAEA access, full accounting for a nuclear weaponization program, so that the effort that Iran would take to build nuclear weapons. And in addition, removal of the missile delivery program, particularly the missiles that would carry nuclear weapons. We know this is a very maximalist position, but we want to set standards for the administration since so often they tend to get watered down. So if we can reach something like this, something that would actually permanently remove the threat, that would be something we think that is worth a Senate treaty, worth the president's allies and his opponents even ratifying as a treaty.

And it's important to note, and we touch on this in the report, that other countries have dismantled their nuclear weapons programs. A lot of print is given to the Libya model, which we know gave up a turnkey nuclear weapons program and missiles. It's important to note that an Iran model would be very unique. For this reason we want to take some lessons from these models but not use them as a strict template. I think we have the former Soviet states that returned nuclear weapons to Russia peacefully. Taiwan dismantled its plutonium production and reprocessing facilities in the 1980s under IAEA and the US supervision. But I think the most salient example that we have is South Africa actually dismantling fully built nuclear weapons in the 1990s and allowing the IAEA to come in and verify the end of that program. And it had full anywhere, anytime access. It went in and interviewed personnel and they were able to ascertain that all these capabilities were removed. Weapons designs eliminated. The fuel was under safeguard in that case.

But I think the key point there on South Africa is that we had the government's buy-in and if we don't have the regime's buy-in to dismantlement, then inspectors could be in there with an Iraq-type situation, where you have Saddam Hussein giving inspectors the run around. So that's an important lesson as well. Another key point is the dismantlement could take place very quickly to render key facilities defunct. But it would take years of IAEA investigations, questioning, access, et cetera, to ensure that the nuclear weapons program is fully shut down. So no perfect comparison to the Iran example, it would be its own animal, but there are lots of different examples to draw from.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you for that, Andrea. Quick question, I think.... Well, statement first. I think unpredictable is a fair word to describe the White House foreign policy and how it moves forward. Could walking away from the talks be an option, and what would happen if the White House decides to do that?

TALEBLU: I'll just begin here. I certainly think it is an option. And I certainly, actually, I think it is wise as well. The Iranians are trying to grow the level of risk kind of like an hourglass. Growing the nuclear capacity this way while diminishing the monitoring this way kind of creates an hourglass figure that generates more risk, that tries to take time, which is something that is on the US side, and transfer it to an asset being on the Iranian side of the ledger instead. And we've seen time and time again how the Iranians enter negotiations with a weak hand, take advantage of the fears and the concerns through trust building exercises that Americans or other Westerners mention in those conversations and play upon those fears to leave those negotiations with an unfortunately much stronger hand.

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And I think something that the White House has at its disposal is the fear, the uncertainty, and the doubt that the various shades of even in just a few months of Trump 2.0 of its Iran policy that we've seen. The president's been actually investing a little bit in everything. In public diplomacy, in private nuclear diplomacy, in resurrecting the maximum pressure policy. A small corollary there, is actually unlike the Obama and Biden administration, being willing to sanction oil while talking. You had a teapot refinery, the second teapot refinery in China in the past three months sanctioned between round one and round two of US-Iran nuclear talks. This stuff is important. It shows Washington can talk and walk and chew gum all at the same time. At the final part doing preemptive military action against Iran's proxies on the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, the Houthis in Yemen, moving more military assets, particularly those that could be used to strike subterranean facilities like the B-2 into the region.

The president is investing quite literally in every policy option to tell the Iranians that they don't have favorable exit options and that there is no way out but through. And I think the president will be wise actually to push away from the table, to play up the fears, the uncertainty, the doubts that the Iranians may have about the president and the ease at which the president may actually be willing to escalate sanctions as well as the ease at which, or even dare I say, the casualness with which the president may change his mind with respect to even a preemptive Israeli military strike. All those things need to be weaponized to actually get the Iranians to take the knee here.

STRICKER: I have a couple points to add just on the timeline. If the talks do fall apart, I think it's worth noting that we do have a very favorable timeline to ratchet up pressure on Iran. So we have this whole arsenal of leverage leading up to the UN sanctions snapback in October, and at that point we bring in the Europeans to circle the wagons. We know that's traditionally been successful when Iran knows that it can't divide the Transatlantic coalition. First, I think we give Iran a deadline at the June IAEA board meeting. We have this IAEA comprehensive report that's coming out and it will lay out all of the IAEA's remaining safeguards concerns, and that's going to happen within a month or so. And I think we give them a deadline. We say come into compliance within a month or the IAEA will schedule an emergency board meeting and then we'll refer the case back to the UN Security Council. And that positions us for snapback before October when the deadline runs out.

So we'll have a snapback clock that could take 30 to 60 days or so. We want a favorable country to be chairing the UNSC at that time, so that would put us with a window for August or September. In August, it's Panama, and in September it's South Korea that will be helming the UNSC and they could put that on the agenda. In the meantime, as Benham has mentioned, we need to be continuing to roll out these Iran sanctions packages around every week and a half or so that would really fill the gaps that the Biden administration had left with their failure to meaningfully pressure Iran over four years. And we need to see more military assets going into the region, a continuation of what President Trump has done already and seeing statements from both Trump and the Israelis that they might consider using force, that the time is getting short. And then we may be in a far stronger place by the fall and we could see Iran coming back with better, newer offers, looking something more like dismantlement.

DOUGHERTY: Todd, I'll get to you with your question in a moment. I do have two other questions I want to get to real quick. Andrea and Benham, I know you don't talk people, you talk policy, but we do have an interesting angle on this one: What is your assessment of Witkoff's performance so far, and how do you think the next talk will go?

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TALEBLU: Performance as in just with respect to Iran or, I mean, he's also the special envoy. He's done negotiations with the Russians. He's gone with the Israelis over Gaza. But with respect to Iran, I think one reason he is in this position, and it's not an aberration for the president to negotiate diplomatic agreements going around the Secretary of State or the traditional foreign policy bureaucracy you saw, that's exactly how the detente conversations with the Chinese happened in '72 with Nixon and Kissinger, with Kissinger doing the secret diplomacy both in Vietnam and also to go to China to prep the Nixon trip to China. It's not odd to have a special envoy have really the trust of the president because he's loyal to the president to really try to get a diplomatic agreement. The question really is to what end?

And that really, I want to circle back to what Andrea mentioned earlier. We don't know to what end Witkoff has been negotiating with the Islamic Republic. And until we really know that end state, it's really going to be hard to judge both politically, the quality of the diplomatic footwork there. I certainly, at least from someone with an acute historical interest, have some issues with some of the commentary that he's put out about other conflict areas such as Russia-Ukraine, for example. But I think we would be wise to see how they try to manage or merge ways, means and ends, and that's a criticism of the foreign policy establishment under this administration more broadly. There are some end states articulated, but there's not one clear one articulated. And until we have one clear one, we can't really give a judgment call just yet as to how well or how poorly he's done, especially just because it's only been two rounds. That's just my take.

DOUGHERTY: Todd, over to you for your question. Thank you.

PRINCE: Yeah, it's a little bit of a follow-up on that previous one. Just in what ways could ongoing U.S. negotiations with Russia over Ukraine, U.S. negotiations with Iran influence each other in light of Russia's ties to Iran and Witkoff's role in both dialogues? The White House press releases following Witkoff's meetings with Putin have said that the two have discussed the gamut of issues, Ukraine and the Middle East and so on.

TALEBLU: I have a view, but Andrea, don't let me monopolize. You go ahead first, then I'll...

STRICKER: No, go ahead. I think there was just some concern that I had heard behind closed doors that they were trying to link the two negotiations. Maybe Russia was urging Iran to sort of draw it out and try to link a solution to both. So I'm not sure if that's still the case, but yeah, Behnam, feel free to go ahead.

TALEBLU: I think just on one point that question of linkage, the outstanding question remains, well, who was trying to create linkage and who was trying to infer linkage? Who is trying to get the Russians involved as a broker on behalf of somebody else? Is it more the Iranians or is it more the Trump administration? Trump administration may think, "Okay, we got to find a country that is closer to Iran that could be some kind of otherwise mediator or play some kind of role in an interim or in a final deal." Or the Iranians might want to be enlisting their lawyers to try to help generate leverage by linking a whole host of complex geopolitical issues to force the Trump administration to make trade-offs. The one thing I would be worried about beyond replicating the mistake, which I think right now, the countries that would see that as a mistake would be the E3, France, Germany, and the UK, of incorporating the Russians into the nuclear negotiating framework with the Iranians.

Make no mistake, that was something that started in 2006 with the P5+1 and the term two Bush administration going for that framework. But Europe very much is still a post-February 2022 Europe. And while the administration may be looking to get a ceasefire vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine, I think it would be mistake to think that you can get a ceasefire in Russia, Ukraine, and to also at the same time generate meaningful, necessary and permanent concessions from Russia's partner just to assuage the Islamic Republic of Iran. I think if anything, if you try to overlink these two theaters, you may try to end up prematurely imposing a ceasefire on Ukraine and Russia and merely only hope that that generates enough goodwill to divorce Russia and Iran and get Russia to be your agent.

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Whereas in reality, it may be Iran's principle, and you may end up inadvertently freeing up Russia's defense industrial base to bolster the Iranians. You may end up facilitating that which Andrea feared, which is potential nuclear transfer knowledge or material from the Russians to the Iranians that would allow the Iranians actually an even stronger hand and allow the Russians to use the Iranians to tie down America in negotiations in the Middle East and get the focus off of Eurasia. There's a whole host of costs and consequences with overlinking these theaters, and at the heart of it is, well, the Russians are quite keen to play every side.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Behnam and Andrea. We've got time for one more question. Caitlin McFall asks, "You mentioned the timeline of snapbacks and referring the case back to the UN Security Council. Given the lineup for the presidency in late summer then into the fall, are you concerned waiting until June is too late to prompt the UNSC to enforce snapback?"

STRICKER: Yeah. Ideally, we would've already reached a resolution at the IAEA in March. I think that's a pitfall of the administration not having the personnel in place, not having an IAEA ambassador in its seat. So if we are in a position now where we're teeing up the ultimatum for snapback in June, I think we're still okay because we have, I guess, just a 30-day window that they could actually skip over the first 30 or so days of snapback where there's a whole deliberative process looking at whether the situation could be rectified. But you could actually move to put the sanctions back into place within 30 days or so. So even waiting until August as it looks like it might have to be, we'll still be in an okay position to enact it and trigger it.

TALEBLU: Yeah. Just very briefly, I worry about not the Iranians being able to run the clock, but the country that has the host of the UNSC presidency during the summer and into the fall. The Russians actually have it, I think, in the early fall, September or October if I'm not mistaken. But them being able to order the docket or delay this from being an issue for consideration at the UNSC. Remember, there's a whole host of bureaucratic and political things that could run interference with the 30-day timeline. That's why most people, when you talk to them about realistically, how long is it going to have to take? It's close to what Andrea said, between 30 and 40 days or between one and two months.

And so you have to take the politicking at the UNSC and the bureaucratic politics there into account, which I think you will need a pathway to move from US-Iran bilateral to E3 pressure to the IAEA board to really a more unified Western vision of snapback and to make the case for it at the UNSC. And the hard thing really happens post-snapback. It's if snapback, then what? And that's why I think priority number one for the administration needs to be rebuilding those bridges with America's transatlantic partners who secretly have been doing maximum pressure on Iran on their own since Trump term one has ended given the increasing Iranian nuclear human rights, Russia, military and other threats. So it really would behoove the Trump administration to be negotiating with its partners, because as you see from the Iranians, the Iranians are coordinating and negotiating with their partners, be it Russia or China.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Behnam. Thank you, Andrea. We will come back to you, just each of you to provide a 30-second summary of your thoughts. But before we do that, for those reporters on the call, I do want to mention that Ellie hosted the FDD dismantlement report. The link to that, you'll find that in the chat. Also, Mark Dubowitz, CEO of FDD, is hosting the Iran Breakdown, a multi-series podcast that I really think you will find of interest. He's got some great guests and goes in some tremendous detail. Mark, as you know, has a long history on the Iran file and the Iran nuclear program. You'll find the link to that, to the Iran Breakdown in the chat as well. Thank you to each of you for being on the call. Before we wrap up, we'll start Andrea with a quick summary then over to Behnam.

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STRICKER: Thanks for joining us. I think a key point, let's not forget, we have a ton of leverage over the Iranians. Their domestic situation is precarious. They have water shortages, inflation, currency depreciation, domestic unrest, so we need to harness what's possible for dismantlement as we tighten this pressure. So we don't want to reach an interim deal that would weaken that pressure before we see what's possible. And I think also if it does come down to a fundamental question of Iran facing military action to stop its nuclear program, then the president needs to be willing to act on his military threat along with the Israelis and bear the risk that they will have to need to continue going after any reconstitution efforts. This could be a historical window to prevent the Islamic Republic from going nuclear, and I think we can't miss it if it's available.

TALEBLU: Thanks, Andrea. Allow me to just echo the same notes to you all today. We appreciate you joining us for this call. We, like all of you, will be watching very patiently what happens very early Saturday morning, keeping up with things Oman time despite being East Coast and Washington to make sure we can get you the latest breaking news there. But I would say keep your eyes on the Islamic Republic's ability to walk and chew gum at the same time; the ability to actually grow the program while engaging in these talks, the ability of the regime to use one track of talks, be it political to gain leverage on the technical or vice versa, and really the Islamic Republic's increasing à la carte nuclear diplomacy bilateral with America. Then, of course the anti-American sides of the P5, the Russians and the Chinese. And increasingly, or potentially now with the E3. Washington really does need a diplomatic ground game here. And with talks only continuing, we can't afford to keep talking for the sake of talking, particularly when time is a weapon on Washington's side, not on Tehran's side.

DOUGHERTY: Andrea, Behnam, thank you very much. We will have the audio to this call available early this afternoon, and I'll share it to each of you that are on the call today. And then I think by tomorrow morning we should have the transcript, which we will share all of it in time ahead of Saturday's meetings. In the meantime, if you would like to talk with Andrea or Behnam separately, happy to arrange that. Please reach me and my colleagues at press@fdd.org. Thanks for joining us. This does conclude today's call.