

The Iran War and Nuclear Weapons: Paths Forward or Backward?

By

Stephen J. Cimbala, Sr. Fellow

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The announcement of a mid-June 2026 agreement between the United States and Iran on a framework for resolving the conflict that began on February 28 promised immediate relief for transit through the Strait of Hormuz and raised hopes of unblocking international maritime trade and reducing oil prices. The conflict with Iran, or Operation Epic Fury, has become a defining moment for global security, injecting volatility into an already fragile international system. While the immediate humanitarian and geopolitical consequences are important, the conflict's deeper, longer-term implications may be felt most acutely in the realm of nuclear arms control and nonproliferation.

For decades, the global nonproliferation regime, anchored by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a web of bilateral and multilateral agreements, has sought to limit the spread of nuclear weapons and reduce the risks of nuclear conflict. Yet the conflict in Iran has exposed structural weaknesses in this regime, challenged long-standing assumptions about deterrence and diplomacy, and risked additional proliferation pressures in one of the world's most strategically sensitive regions.

Erosion of Trust in Diplomatic Agreements

Iran's nuclear program has been at the center of international diplomacy for many years. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), negotiated by the P5+1 countries in 2015, demonstrated that sustained negotiation could address nuclear activities through verification, inducements, and incentives. Its unraveling, however, weakened the credibility of diplomatic agreements and signaled to states worldwide that nuclear deals may be vulnerable to political shifts.

Current and historical animosities over a variety of issues have deepened skepticism about the effectiveness of multilateral agreements in containing proliferation. States observing this conflict may conclude that compliance with agreements is often a matter of perception, and that external actors may still resort to military force if threats are recognized despite formal commitments and diplomatic assurances. Conversely, states considering future negotiations may fear that concessions made today could be rendered meaningless by tomorrow's geopolitical realignments. This erosion of trust undermines diplomatic tools that have historically underpinned nonproliferation efforts.

Over [three decades and six presidential administrations](#), both Democratic and Republican, one fundamental national security principle has remained constant: The United States will not permit Iran to have a nuclear weapon under any circumstances.

Conversely, the war could hinder efforts to revive or renegotiate agreements with Iran and other nuclear-aspiring nations. Diplomatic efforts have been exhausted, and the political risks of

making concessions have risen. Without credible negotiation pathways, countries may increasingly resort to unilateral actions, such as secretly advancing nuclear programs or emphasizing deterrence. Regarding Iran, the ruling elites, worn down by months of anti-regime strikes, are likely to delay denuclearization and other military restrictions.

Regional Challenges to Nonproliferation

The Middle East has long been a region of latent nuclear potential. Several states possess advanced civilian nuclear infrastructures, and many have expressed interest in developing fuel-cycle capabilities. The conflict with Iran has intensified these dynamics by heightening perceptions of vulnerability. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt may interpret the conflict as evidence that regional security guarantees are unreliable.

As a result, they or others may pursue nuclear hedging strategies by developing civilian programs that shorten the timeline for potential weapons development without overtly violating the NPT. Others may [sign mutual defense pacts](#) with other nuclear-armed states. This hedging behavior could trigger a proliferation cascade, in which each state's actions prompt others to follow suit.

If multiple states in the region begin to pursue nuclear latency or weapons capabilities, the Middle East could become the world's most volatile nuclear arena. Such a development would strain the NPT, challenge IAEA safeguards, and increase the likelihood of miscalculation or escalation.

Spiking Great-Power Competition

The conflict with Iran erupted amid intensifying competition among the United States, China, and Russia for international preeminence. These powers have distinct strategic interests in the Middle East and can use nuclear diplomacy as a tool of influence. Their rivalry and differing interests complicate efforts to build consensus on nonproliferation issues, including the ultimate determination about the status of Iran's nuclear program.

Great-power divisions have already weakened the effectiveness of institutions such as the UN Security Council. When major powers cannot agree on enforcement measures, sanctions, or diplomatic strategies, the credibility of the nonproliferation regime suffers. The war has amplified these divisions, making coordinated responses more difficult. As great-power competition intensifies and long-standing norms, such as the taboo against nuclear proliferation, may weaken. States may perceive that geopolitical alignment matters more than compliance, reducing the incentive to adhere to international rules.

Risks to the Nonproliferation Regime's Tool Kit

War creates conditions that undermine the ability of the IAEA and other bodies to monitor nuclear activities. Inspectors may lose access to facilities, satellite imagery may be obscured by

conflict, and supply chains for nuclear materials may become harder to track. Conflict zones are fertile ground for illicit networks seeking nuclear materials.

In some cases, the breakdown of state authority increases the risk that sensitive technologies or materials could be diverted, stolen, or sold on the black market. Sanctions on regimes depend on stable political conditions and international cooperation. During local or regional wars, enforcement becomes more difficult, and states may prioritize military objectives over compliance with international obligations.

Opportunities for Post-Conflict Innovation

In contrast to the above, major conflicts have sometimes encouraged breakthroughs in arms control. The Cuban Missile Crisis led to the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; the Cold War produced the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks and other reduction treaties. The war in Iran may similarly prompt a reassessment of existing frameworks. The conflict could motivate states to explore new regional security architectures, such as a Middle East nuclear-weapons-free zone, or enhanced transparency measures.

Although politically challenging, such initiatives could reduce pressures to proliferate. In addition, emerging technologies, such as remote sensing, AI-assisted monitoring, and blockchain-based tracking of nuclear materials, could strengthen verification regimes. Post-Epic Fury consultations may accelerate investment in these tools as states seek more resilient oversight mechanisms.

Conclusion: Future Pathways

The war in Iran has brought the global nonproliferation regime to a crossroads. One path leads toward fragmentation: weakened norms, regional arms races, and diminished trust in diplomacy. The other path, albeit politically challenging, offers the possibility of progress with new agreements, modernized verification tools, and renewed commitment to cooperative security. Which path the international community ultimately follows will depend on states' willingness to learn from the conflict and recognize that nuclear stability cannot be taken for granted. If the wider postwar Middle Eastern political alignments sought by the Trump administration comes to pass, including a lasting rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the nonproliferation regime may be a beneficiary from reduced regional political toxicity and increased regional military cooperation.

Stephen J. Cimbala is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Penn State Brandywine and the author of numerous works on nuclear deterrence, arms control, and military strategy. He is a senior fellow at NIDS and a recent contributor to the Routledge Handbook of Soviet and Russian Military Studies edited by Dr. Alexander Hill (Routledge: 2025). The views of the author are his own.