Iran's Nuclear Program: A Contentious Discourse

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Abstract

The rationale for Iran's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and nuclearization appears more realistic than ever due to the rapid transformation in its geostrategic environment. However, the Iranian ruling elites seem sensitive to the fact that overt nuclearization may prove counterproductive. Therefore, it pursues a balanced nuclear policy by improving latent nuclear weapons potential without withdrawing from the NPT. The alarming riddle is Israel's Premier, Benjamin Netanyahu's endeavor to establish a new order in the Middle East with the connivance of the United States (US) through military might, which may constitute Iran's final incentive to cross the nuclear threshold. Iran's noncompliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) implies that Iranian leadership is contemplating its nuclearization's future course of action.

Keywords: Iran, nuclearization, IAEA, uranium enrichment, Middle East, Trump 2.0

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Introduction

The Middle Eastern geostrategic landscape is undergoing rapid transformation due to the Israel-Palestinian war in Gaza, Israeli military operations in Lebanon, and the escalating conflict between Iran and Israel. Since September 2023, heightened nuclear signaling by the Israeli leadership and the exchange of strikes between Tehran and Tel Aviv have the probability of a shift in Iran's current nuclear policy. Emerging trends on the regional strategic chessboard could push Tehran to transition from a latent nuclear status to overt nuclearization. The rationale for Iran's weaponization of its nuclear program has become more compelling than ever, driven by its need to restore a balance of deterrence with its longstanding adversaries, the United States and Israel.

While Iran's overt nuclearization may reestablish a deterrence equilibrium between Tel Aviv and Tehran. First, it could trigger a domino effect, encouraging Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states to pursue nuclear weapons development. Second, Tehran's decision to develop nuclear weapons would escalate its hostility with the US. In this context, Antony J. Blinken, the US Secretary of State, stated:

> "We demonstrated to Iran that there was a path back to a mutual return to compliance—if Iran was willing to take it—while maintaining a robust sanctions regime and our commitment that Iran will never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon." [1]

In response, Iran would likely face severe Western secondary sanctions, economic coercion, and further isolation. Third, a nuclear-armed Iran would embolden the resistance axis—Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis—to further its geopolitical objectives in the Middle East. Fourth, Iran's nuclear threshold crossing would challenge Israel's efforts to establish a new Middle Eastern order through military means. Israel aims to dismantle the Iranian regime's network of allies and proxies—the axis of resistance—with Hezbollah as a central component.[2]

1. Antony J. Blinken, "Rebuilding Leadership for a New World," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 6, November-December 2024, p. 67.
2. Maha Yahya, "Lebanon's Day After: Will the Country Survive the War With Israel?" *Foreign Affairs* November 20, 2024. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/lebanon/lebanons-day-after

Finally, Iran's overt nuclearization would credibly deter detrimental covert and overt actions by Israel, the US, and their Middle Eastern regional partners. Western nations led by the US have provided gigantic political, economic, diplomatic and military support to Tel Aviv in the war. Iran's rapid advancement in pursuing a nuclear weapon would compel the US to deepen its involvement in Israel's wars. As Carrie Lee highlights "Israel's strategy is a familiar one. Weaker partners in an alliance will always seek to transfer the risk of escalation onto the stronger partner, a phenomenon that political scientists call 'moral hazard.'" [3]

A second Trump Administration is likely to adopt a tougher stance against Iran, intensifying Washington's opposition to Tehran's nuclear and missile development projects, as well as its influence in the Middle East. Besides, it will continue to provide robust financial and diplomatic support to Israel. It continues promoting Israel's interests in the United Nations (UN), its affiliates, and other global organizations. Thus, Trump Administration 2.0 pro-Israel policies would encourage and further harden Israel's hostile policies towards the Axis of resistance and Iran.

Hitherto, the US robust support of Israel's covert and overt aggression in the region has not intimidated Iran. Therefore, Tehran has refrained from overt nuclearization, which is imperative to deter the nuclear-armed adversary. The continuation of Biden's current Middle Eastern policy under a Trump Administration 2.0 could heighten the likelihood of Iran developing and testing nuclear weapons.

Consequently, there is a greater chance of horizontal nuclear proliferation which could lead to heightened tensions in the Middle East. These developments raise four interlinked questions: What is the present state of Iran's nuclear program? Why has the international community been unsuccessful in limiting Iran's uranium enrichment? How did the tit-for-tat strikes between Iran and Israel drive Iran's nuclear posture? What are the likely consequences of the shift in Iran's nuclear posture? To answer these questions, the article is organized into seven parts.

3. Carrie A. Lee, "The Paradox of Israeli Deterrence: How a Campaign Against Hezbollah Could Lower Iran's Inhibitions," *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2024. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/paradox-israeli-deterrence

The first part provides a brief overview of the development of Iran's nuclear program. The second part discusses Iran's clandestine enrichment of uranium since the beginning of twenty-first century. The third part explains the diplomatic initiatives and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions to discourage Tehran's uranium enrichment endeavors. The fourth part elaborates on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The fifth part elucidates the mistrust between the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Tehran. The sixth part sheds light on Iran and Israel's tit-for-tat military strikes and their potential implications for the Iranian nuclear policy. The final part contemplates the probability of Iran's overt nuclearization and expected horizontal proliferation in the Middle Eastern region.

The Evolution of Iran's Nuclear Program

In the late 1950s, Iran began its nuclear program with the aim of pursuing peaceful purposes. Over the past four decades, its nuclear capabilities have steadily advanced.[4] In the mid-1980s, a significant turning point occurred when Tehran undertook efforts to revitalize its scientific and technological foundation, including its civilian nuclear energy program. In order to achieve its objectives, Tehran signed long-term cooperation agreements with China in 1990 and Pakistan in 1987 with the aim of training nuclear professionals and offering technical assistance, and it sent several students abroad for nuclear training. However, both countries eventually withdrew from these agreements under pressure from the US.[5]

With the notable exception of Russia, the US was able to block Iran's lawful acquisition of nuclear technology and materials from the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). This forced Iran to rely on the clandestine nuclear marketplace to advance its uranium enrichment project. Iran managed to acquire nuclear materials, including Zippe centrifuges, uninterruptedly from the European market, largely because many of the items they needed had dual-use applications.

4. The work on uranium enrichment in Iran was initiated in the mid-1980s. Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran's Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Capabilities—A net assessment," *Strategic Dossiers*, Executive Summary (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, February 3, 2011), p. 1.
5. Shannon N. Kile, "The controversy over Iran's nuclear program," in Shannon N. Kile, ed. *Europe and Iran Perspectives on Nonproliferation,* SIPRI Research Report, No. 21 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

For example, Degussa, one of Germany's largest chemical companies and a key player in the nuclear weapons materials industry, supplied Iran with Zippe centrifuges.[6] As Jeremy Bernstein pointed out: "The Degussa representatives made it clear that they did not care if the Iranians were going to use the material to make weapons. That was fine with them as long as they paid their bills."[7]

The Europeans have assisted Iran in building its civil nuclear program under the IAEA's comprehensive safeguards program for peaceful purposes. In parallel, the US' pressure policies have increased Tehran's technological dependency on Russia for Bushehr 1000 MWe light-water power reactor completion. In 1974, the German firm Siemens (then KraftWerk) inaugurated the Bushehr nuclear power plant close to Bushehr on the Persian Gulf. Moscow and Tehran signed a deal in 1994 to construct the VVER 1000 MWe light-water reactor.[8] The project materialized in 2005, driven by Vladimir Putin's efforts to align Russian foreign policy with Russian nationalism and national interests rather than US geopolitical priorities.[9] Construction on the Bushehr reactor commenced in 2006.[10] Notably, Moscow intermittently paused construction, citing technical issues; however, these delays were actually responses to Washington's concerns about the project.[11]

Skepticism Surrounding Iran's Nuclear Program

Since the early 21st century, Iran's nuclear program has faced intense international scrutiny. The US and European countries accused Iran of noncompliance with its obligations as a member of the NPT. Although the Iranian ruling elite consistently assured the international community that it was not developing nuclear weapons, a series of events indicated that Tehran was continuing its clandestine uranium enrichment activities.

6. Jeremy Bernstein, *Nuclear Weapons: What you need to know* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 263, 266.
7. Jeremy Bernstein, *Nuclear Weapons: What you need to know*, Op. cit., p. 263.
8. "Nuclear Energy in Iran," World Nuclear Association, www.world-nuclear.org.
9. "Iran's Nuclear Program and the West," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2006, p. 649.
10. Shannon N. Kile, "The controversy over Iran's nuclear program," Op. cit., pp. 2-3.
11. Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, "Iran: A View From Moscow," Washington: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2010, p. 21. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/iran_view_moscow.pdf.

In August 2002, revelations emerged regarding the clandestine establishment of a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, located 130 miles south of Tehran, in addition to a heavy water producing facility close to Arak. This revelation heightened skepticism about the pursuit of a covert nuclear weapons program by Iran. After conducting an investigation, the IAEA verified that Iran had engaged in clandestine fissile material production activities for eighteen years, in violation of its responsibilities under nonproliferation agreements. By 2003, it became evident that Iran's uranium enrichment program was significantly more advanced than initially suspected.[12]

Proliferation experts from the United States and Europe concluded that the 40 MWt heavy-water research reactor (IR-40) and related heavy-water production plant under construction at Arak were supposedly for civilian use. Its type and scale, however, were quite similar to reactors that manufacture plutonium for nuclear bombs in Israel, Pakistan, and India.[13]

A nuclear arms race in the Middle East, a threat to European security, and pressure on Israel to renounce its nuclear ambiguity policy are all possible outcomes of Iranian nuclear weapons, according to European authorities. They contended that Iranian nuclear weapons may pose a direct threat to European security when combined with medium- and long-range missiles. For example, the 2,000-kilometer-range Iranian Shahab-3 ballistic missile can reach portions of Southeastern Europe.[14] The way Iran was portrayed in the West influenced Europe's view of the country as a threat. As Adam Tarock noted: "The image of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the West has for more than two-and-a-half decades been painted in black, simply ugly and demonic. It has been called a 'rogue' and 'outlaw' state and, more recently, 'evil,' conjuring up mythical monsters."[15]

12. Robert J. Einhorn, "A Transatlantic Strategy on Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2004, pp. 21-22.
13. Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran's Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Capabilities—A net assessment," Op. cit., pp. 1-12.
14. Oliver Thranert, "Ending Suspicious Nuclear Activities in Iran: Discussing the European Approach," Presentation at *Brandeis University*, Boston, November 18, 2004, p. 1. http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/trt_brandeispaper_november_04_ks.pdf, accessed on March 13, 2011.
15. Adam Tarock, "Iran's Nuclear Program and the West," Op. cit., p.654.

President Mohammad Khatami announced in February 2003 that Iran will create a full nuclear fuel cycle, which would include waste management, spent fuel reprocessing, and the mining and processing of uranium ore for nuclear power reactors.[16] After decades of being concealed from international scrutiny, Iran's nuclear program was much more extensive and sophisticated than previously believed, according to a report delivered to the IAEA Board by then-Director General Mohamed ElBaradei on November 10, 2003.[17]

The unearthing of A.Q. Khan's network in 2004 and subsequent revelations about Iran intensified suspicions regarding its nuclear weapons ambitions. The NPT Additional Protocol, which had given IAEA inspectors greater access to Iran's nuclear facilities, was terminated by Tehran in 2006 as a result of these developments. Concerns over Iran's NPT violations grew worldwide in 2009 after the discovery of a covert enrichment plant at Fordow. This reinforced the perception that Iran had a highly advanced nuclear enrichment program. In April 2006, then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad shocked the world by proclaiming Iran's enterance into the "nuclear technology club" after successfully enriching uranium to 3.5%.[18] The Director General of the IAEA stated on November 23, 2010: Based on its analysis of all the information available to it, the Agency remains concerned about the possible existence in Iran of past or current undisclosed nuclear-related activities involving military-related organizations, including activities related to the development of a nuclear payload for a missile. Certain of these activities may have continued beyond 2004.[19]

On February 16, 2011, James Clapper, the US Director of National Intelligence, updated the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Iran is keeping open the option of developing nuclear weapons through the pursuit of various nuclear capabilities but the intelligence community does

16. Shannon N. Kile, "The controversy over Iran's nuclear program," Op. cit., p. 5.
17. The controversy over Iran's nuclear program," p. 8.
18. Adam Tarock, "Iran's Nuclear Program and the West," Op. cit., p. 646.
19. Report by the Director General, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *IAEA Board of Governors*, November 23, 2010, p. 7. http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2010/gov2010-62.pdf

not know if Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons."[20] Additionally, he said, the intelligence community has determined that Iran "is technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) for a weapon within the next few years if it chooses to do so."[21] Despite numerous UNSC resolutions urging Tehran to stop enriching low-enriched uranium (LEU) at its Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant and building the IR-40 heavy-water nuclear research reactor at Arak, Iran was still doing so, according to an IAEA report released on February 25, 2011.[22]

Yukiya Amano, the Director General of the IAEA at the time, reiterated the Agency's stance on March 7, 2011, stating: "Full implementation by Iran of its binding obligations is needed to establish international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program." He further said, "I request Iran to take steps towards fully implementing its Safeguards Agreement and its other obligations."[23] Western nations increased their pressure on Iran to stop its uranium enrichment program as a result of these declarations and reports. Iran forcefully rejected assertions by the US and Western nations that it intended to become a nuclear-weapon state or violates its NPT obligations.[24] At the same time, it admitted to not promptly reporting certain advancements in its nuclear program to the IAEA.[25]

Iranian leaders contended that a nuclear weapons program is forbidden both by their religious principles and by Iran's commitments under the NPT. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, issued a fatwa, or religious decision, that specifically forbade the creation and application of nuclear weapons. By emphasizing the necessity of developing a civilian nuclear energy capacity, Iran defends its expanding domestic nuclear prog-

20. Peter Crail, "US Updates Iran Assessment," *Arms Control Today*, March 2011. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_03/Iran
21. "US Updates Iran Assessment."
22. "IAEA Obtains New Details on Potential Iranian Nuke Work," *Global Security Newswire*, February 25, 2011. http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20110225_9165.php
23. Mr. Yukiya Amano, "IAEA Director General, "Introductory Statement to Board of Governors," *IAEA Board of Governors*, Vienna: March 7, 2011. http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/2011/amsp2011n005.html
24. Mustafa Kibaroglu's "Good for the Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2,Spring 2006, p. 210.
25. "Good for the Shah, Banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's Quest for Nuclear Power."

-ram and enables it to export oil and gas earnings that would otherwise be utilized to meet domestic energy needs. Tehran cited Article IV of the NPT, which gives member countries the freedom to produce nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, to support the development of various nuclear energy installations.

Diplomacy in Action: The Role of the UNSC

The Europeans adopted a diplomatic and incentive-based approach, rather than a threatening or military coercive strategy, to hinder Iran's ability to acquire nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. France, the United Kingdom (then an EU member), and Germany (EU-3) have been the main representatives of the European Union on Iran's nuclear program since 2003. They acted as intermediaries between Tehran and Washington. As Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko noted, "They used to act as proxies in Iran's dialogue with the West when the United States refused to deal with Iran directly."[26]

In order to find a peaceful solution and convince Tehran to stop its uranium conversion, enrichment, and plutonium reprocessing activities, the EU-3 initiated a number of diplomatic attempts.[27] They offered further collaboration with Iran on October 21, 2003, in return for its pledge to abide by the IAEA's Additional Protocol and to stop all efforts to construct a complete nuclear fuel cycle.[28] Tehran then consented to halt all enrichment and reprocessing operations, adhere to the IAEA's Additional Protocol, which required more invasive inspections, and reveal all information regarding its nuclear program.

In return, the EU-3 promised that the matter would not be brought before the UNSC and promised to support Iran's civilian nuclear industry and other technological needs, provided Tehran complied with its obligations.[29] They further cautioned Tehran that any violation would lead to the matter being reported to the UNSC.

26. Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, "Iran: A View From Moscow," Op. cit.
27. Charles D. Ferguson, "Steps Toward a Deal on Enhanced Safeguards for Iran's Nuclear Program," *Arms Control Today*, March 2011. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_03/Ferguson
28. Oliver Thranert, "Ending Suspicious Nuclear Activities in Iran: Discussing the European Approach," Op. cit.
29. Robert J. Einhorn, "A Transatlantic Strategy on Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2004, p. 22.

The United States has insisted since the beginning of the crisis that the IAEA Board of Governors was incapable of controlling and reversing Iran's nuclear program. As a result, the United States pushed for the issue to be brought before the UNSC. In situations where the Agency's mandates are not being followed, the UNSC serves as the final arbiter and guarantor in accordance with Article XII-C of the IAEA Statute. However, the EU-3 opposed the Bush Administration's recommendation, believing it lacked a clear strategy for how the UNSC should handle the situation. Nevertheless, the dispute over Iran's nuclear program ultimately came before the UNSC, which adopted several resolutions—1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929—sought to compel Iran to adhere to the IAEA's regulations.

The Security Council voted Resolution 1696 on July 31, 2006, calling on Iran to carry out the actions described in the resolution issued by the IAEA Board on February 4, 2006. These actions included resuming a thorough and ongoing halt of all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities as well as settling all outstanding concerns pertaining to Iran's nuclear program.[30] Iran was also warned by Resolution 1696 that sanctions might be imposed in the future. The first multilateral sanctions were subsequently imposed by UNSC Resolution 1737 (2006), which also demanded that Iran immediately cease all enrichment-related and reprocessing operations. This language, which emphasized the seriousness and necessity of compliance, was repeated in resolutions 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), and 1929 (2010). The international community's attempts to curb Iran's nuclear aspirations grew steadily stronger as a result of these resolutions.

Three previous rounds of sanctions against Iran were strengthened and extended by UNSC Resolution 1929 (2010), which also added new requirements in a number of sectors. Pressure to halt uranium enrichment activities, including plans to enrich uranium up to 19.75% for medical research, stop construction of its facility in Qom, fully cooperate with the IAEA's investigation into the military aspects of its nuclear program, and allow the Agency unfettered access to all of its nuclear facilities were the main goals of this fourth round of sanctions. The resolution strengthened a number of military, high-tech, and economic penalties. In order to stop the

30. Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, IAEA Director General, *Statement to the Sixty-First Regular Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, New York, October 30, 2006. http://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/2006/ebsp2006n020.html

acquisition of nuclear technology and experience, it prohibited Iran from funding sensitive nuclear projects outside, including uranium enrichment and reprocessing. Investments in uranium mining and activities involving ballistic missiles that could carry nuclear weapons were also prohibited. The resolution's prohibition on significant arms transfers to Iran was one of its most noteworthy features. All member states were required to "prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale, or transfer to Iran of any battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large-caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles, or missile systems... or related material."[31]

Additionally, states were instructed to "prevent the provision to Iran of technical training, financial resources or services, advice, or other assistance related to the supply, sale, transfer, provision, manufacture, maintenance, or use of such arms and related material."[32] The purpose of these actions was to limit Iran's ability to advance its military and nuclear capabilities.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

The JCPOA, often known as the Iran nuclear deal, was signed on July 14, 2015, by Iran, the P5+1 nations (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany), and the European Union. The pact sought to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and ensure that its nuclear program remained exclusively peaceful. UNSC Resolution 2231, which affirmed that Iran was not pursuing nuclear weapons and committed it to refraining from actions that would give the appearance that it did, approved the agreement.

The JCPOA provisions were designed to cap and roll back Iran's enrichment of uranium. For instance, the agreement capped Iran's uranium enrichment level, reduced its stockpile of enriched uranium, ensured transparency at the Fordow facility, and enhanced IAEA inspection and monitoring processes.[33] In return, Iran received significant sanctions relief. Under the deal, Tehran reduced its uranium enrichment capacity by decre-

31. United Nations Security Council, resolution S/RES/1929 (2010): https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/1929-%282010%29
32. Text of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929 (2010).
33. Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?"

-asing the number of operational centrifuges and limiting enrichment levels to 3.67%. Additionally, Iran pledged to cut its enriched uranium stockpile by 98%, bringing it down to no more than 300 kg over a 15-year timeframe.[34]

The agreement effectively curtailed Iran's ability to produce weapons-grade uranium, which requires enrichment levels of 93%. Reports indicated that Iran dismantled two-thirds of its nearly 20,000 centrifuges, shut down its entire plutonium production facility, and relinquished approximately 97% of its low-enriched uranium stockpile, which previously totaled nearly eight tons. Additionally, the IAEA gained unprecedented powers to monitor Iran's nuclear facilities in perpetuity. The JCPOA offered a vital opportunity for the international community to promote the creation of a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone. However, the potential of horizontal nuclear proliferation in the region has significantly increased as a result of the Trump administration's harsh stance and withdrawal from the deal.

Despite thorough monitoring and inspection reports from the IAEA that verified Iran was fulfilling its obligations under the JCPOA and the NPT, the Trump administration dismantled the JCPOA. These reports did not uncover any evidence of nuclear material being diverted for military purposes. However, Iran's apparent compliance was insufficient to change the mindset of President Donald Trump, a staunch critic of the JCPOA who frequently referred to it as a "bad deal." Trump was particularly concerned about Iran's growing regional influence and continued ballistic missile development.

Despite protests from the other signatories, the US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, and reinstituted sanctions on Iran. The collapse of the JCPOA undermined the economic interests of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the EU,[35] while providing Russia and China with significant diplomatic, economic, and military advantages. Antony J. Blinken remarked, "The Trump administration's unilateral and

34. "Iran nuclear deal: What it all means," *BBC News Services*, November 23, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655

35. The Europeans desire to keep Iran's oil and gas products selling, continue sea, land, air, and rail transportation relations with Tehran, maintain effective banking transactions, and protect European investments in Iran.

misguided exit from the Iran nuclear deal freed Tehran's nuclear program from its confinement, undermining the security of the United States and its partners."[36] In an attempt to lessen the impact of US sanctions, Iran's then-foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, traveled to Beijing on May 13 and Moscow on May 14. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi assured his Iranian counterpart, stating, "China will take an objective, fair, and responsible attitude, keep communication and cooperation with all parties concerned, and continue to work to maintain the deal."[37]

China may help the US and European nations in pressuring Iran to fulfill its responsibilities as a signatory to the NPT and to really cooperate with the IAEA, despite the fact that it has taken a balanced stance on Iran's uranium enrichment programs. "Given Iran's economic and strategic dependence on China, any US strategy to counter Tehran's nuclear and regional ambitions will likely require some collaboration with Beijing. There is reason to believe such cooperation is possible, despite the global competition between Beijing and Washington. China and the United States ultimately share common interests in the region i.e., political stability and the free flow of trade and energy."[38]

Iran and IAEA Polemic

Iran's nuclear program has steadily advanced since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018. Tehran has adopted a balanced nuclear approach, ensuring the continuation of nuclear research and development—particularly the high enrichment of uranium not required for civilian purposes—while maintaining its membership in the NPT. It gave the IAEA permission to inspect and monitor its nuclear plants in order to confirm adherence to the Treaty. However, the collapse of the JCPOA has intensified Iran's security dilemma, prompting Tehran to revisit its nuclear policy to deter perceived aggression and nuclear blackmail from Israel and

36. Antony J. Blinken, "Rebuilding Leadership for a New World," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 6, November-December 2024, p. 67.
37. Ben Westcott, Sara Mazloumsaki and Samantha Beech, "Iranian Foreign Minister visits Russia and China to try to save nuclear deal," *CNN World*, May 14, 2018. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/14/middleeast/zarif-russia-china-iran-deal-intl/index.html
38. "An estimated 90 percent of Iranian oil exports are bound for China," Karim Sadjadpour, "The New Battle for the Middle East Saudi Arabia and Iran's Clash of Visions," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 6, November-December 2024, p. 86.

and the US. Resultantly, Tehran has revised its uranium enrichment policy, attracting heightened scrutiny from the international community. After Tehran refused to comply with the IAEA Board's instructions, the debate over Iran's nuclear program grew more heated. Iran was officially censured by the IAEA on June 5, 2024, for its nuclear program developments and lack of cooperation.[39] Concerns regarding undeclared nuclear material and activities at four locations—Lavisan-Shian, Varamin, Marivan, and Turquz-Abad—were raised by the IAEA.[40]

As an NPT member state, Iran's nuclear activities are required to be under IAEA's safeguards. Iran should grant access and arrange for Agency inspectors to visit these sites to address and refute the IAEA's claims. On August 29, 2024, the IAEA reiterated, "The outstanding safeguards issues stem from Iran's obligations under its NPT Safeguards Agreement and need to be resolved for the Agency to be able to assure that Iran's nuclear [program] is entirely peaceful."[41]

In support of the IAEA's demands, France, Germany, and the UK urged Iran to refrain from producing nuclear weapons. However, Tehran rejected the IAEA's allegations. On September 6, 2024, Mohammad Eslami, the Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), stated, "For over two decades, the nuclear case has been unjustly targeted against Iran. The arrogant system and the Zionists falsely claim a secret, undeclared nuclear program, utilizing this fabrication to pressure Iran's Atomic Energy Agency." He added, "The IAEA's responsibility is to investigate nuclear activity worldwide, but its arrangement is orchestrated by the arrogant system."[42] Eslami's rebuttal underscores Iran's position that it has not decided to develop a nuclear bomb.

39. IAEA Board of Governors, "NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Resolution adopted on June 5, 2024, during the 1723rd session," GOV/2024/39, June 5, 2024. https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2024-39.pdf.
40. David Albright and Andrea Stricker, "Analysis of the IAEA's Iran NPT Safeguards Report - August 2024," *Institute for Science and International Security*, September 5, 2024. https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-the-iaeas-iran-npt-safeguards-report-august-2024
41. "NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran," Report by the Director General, IAEA- GOV/2024/44, August 29, 2024, p. 8. https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2024-44.pdf
42. "No deviation in Iran's nuclear program, nuclear chief says," *Tehran Times*, September 6, 2024. https://tehrantimes.com/news/503322/No-deviation-in-Iran-s-nuclear-program-nuclear-chief-says

Iran enriched 60% of its uranium stockpile, according to an August 2024 IAEA assessment.[43] This degree of enrichment contradicts Iran's declared stance that it has no plans to produce nuclear weapons and that its nuclear program is for civilian use. The concern arises because 60% enriched uranium can be quickly upgraded to 93%, which is suitable for the production of nuclear weapons. The US, Britain, France, and Germany remain committed to limiting Iran's enrichment operations. On November 21, 2024, the IAEA's Board of Governors voted 19 to 3 (with Russia, China, and Burkina Faso opposing and 12 abstentions) in favor of a resolution tabled by Britain, France, Germany, and the US.[44]

Antony J. Blinken commented, "Russia once supported UN Security Council efforts to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions; now, it is enabling Iran's nuclear program and facilitating its destabilizing activities."[45] Iran was criticized by the IAEA for failing to fulfill its NPT-mandated cooperation with the Agency's monitoring and inspection activities. Iran's Atomic Energy Organization and foreign ministry responded by announcing intentions to start using new, more sophisticated centrifuges for uranium enrichment.[46]

The IAEA's censure could result in penalties against Iran, including renewed economic sanctions. However, Russia is expected to veto any attempt to impose sanctions on Iran through a UNSC resolution, given the growing defense cooperation between the two countries. Russia and Iran's strategic partnership has deepened since the beginning of the Ukraine war, driven by the Kremlin's need for Iranian weapons. "Iran is providing missiles and drones produced in its defense plants as well helping build such plants in Russia itself, and getting assistance with its own missile, drone,

43. David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Spencer Faragasso, "Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report — November 2024," *Institute for Science and International Security*, November 21, 2024. https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-november-2024

44. Steven Erlanger, "U.N. Watchdog Censures Iran Over Nuclear Program Secrecy," *New York Times,* November 21, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/21/world/europe/iaea-censure-iran-nuclear.html

45. Antony J. Blinken, "Rebuilding Leadership for a New World," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 6, November-December 2024, p. 73.

46. Steven Erlanger, "U.N. Watchdog Censures Iran Over Nuclear Program Secrecy," *New York Times*, November 21, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/21/world/europe/iaea-censure-iran-nuclear.html

and space programs and perhaps with civil nuclear power as well."[47] Consequently, As a vital geopolitical ally and source of weaponry, Iran has emerged as a key player in Moscow's war effort. In return, Moscow provided Tehran with diplomatic support, advanced air defense systems (such as the S-300), and other forms of assistance. For instance, Russia stated that Iran's nuclear program "does not pose any real problem"[48] for the international community. It has increased its diplomatic backing for Iran in international forums and facilitated its entry into organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS.[49]

This partnership has come at the expense of Russia's relations with Israel. The United Nations has recognized Israel's right to self-defense, but Moscow has vehemently resisted this, calling it an "occupying state." Russia allegedly hosed a Yemeni team from Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthis, in January 2024 and provided satellite targeting information to support Houthi strikes on Western ships in the Red Sea. Furthermore, representatives of Hamas, and the Palestine Liberation Organization met in Moscow in February 2024 as part of an "intra-Palestinian" gathering that Russia had arranged.[50] Given these dynamics, Russia is unlikely to permit the US and European nations to reimpose UNSC sanctions on Iran.

Iran-Israel: tit-for-tat strikes

Washington has given Israel substantial financial and military backing as a key non-NATO partner of the US. For example, the Biden administration provided Tel Aviv with $17.9 billion in military aid between October 2023

47. Stephen Hadley, "Xi Jinping's Axis of Losers: The Right Way to Thwart the New Autocratic Convergence," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2024. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/xi-jinpings-axis-losers

48. Erika Holmquist and Ismail Khan, 'Isolated together: Russian-Iranian Military Cooperation,' *FOI Memo* 8528, May 2024. https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208528

49. Erika Holmquist and Ismail Khan, "Isolated together Russian-Iranian Military Cooperation," Russia and Eurasia Studies program, *FOI Memo* 8528, Project no: A12401, Swedish Defence Research Agency, Stockholm, May 2024. https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208528

50. Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss, "Russia's Enduring Presence in the Middle East," Middle East—*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 1, 2024. https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russias-middle-east-diplomacy-relationship?lang=en

and October 2024.[51] On July 27, 2024, a White House National Security Council spokesperson stated, "Our support for Israel's security is iron-clad and unwavering against all Iranian-backed terrorist groups, including Lebanese Hezbollah."[52] Israel and the US are also jointly involved in developing advanced military technology and weaponry. Israeli early warning systems, offensive and defensive missile systems, fighter jets, and other military assets have been manufactured with US technological and material support. This backing has given Israel a significant edge over Iran in military technologies, including satellite monitoring systems, due to the generous financial, technological, and material assistance provided by the US. This superiority in military technology, coupled with its strong partnership with the US, has emboldened Israel to systematically broaden the scope of the Gaza War, aiming to undermine Iran's influence in the Middle Eastern region.

Israel has been making a concerted effort to draw Iran in its war on Palestine since it began in October 2023. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appears convinced that Iran's engagement in the war would serve as a trigger for US military involvement, which could potentially obliterate Tehran's growing influence in the Middle Eastern region and destroy its ballistic missile as well as latent nuclear capabilities. Such an outcome would eliminate the "Axis of Resistance" and establish Israel's undisputed hegemony in the region.

Thirteen people, including seven top members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), were killed in an Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, on April 1, 2024. This attack escalated tensions, leading to tit-for-tat strikes between Iran and Israel. On April 13, 2024,[53] Iran retaliated by launching Operation True Promise (OTP-1), a massive aerial assault involving 300 missiles and drones targeting Israel.[54]

51. Knickmeyer, Ellen "US Spent a Record $17.9 Billion on Military Aid to Israel Since Last October 7," *Time Magazine,* October 7, 2024.
52. "US condemns 'horrific' missile attack on Druze village in Israel," *Reuters*, July 28, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/us-condemns-horrific-missile-attack-druze-village-israel-2024-07-27/.
53. Kelsey Davenport, "Iran-Israel Tensions May Push Iran to Rethink Nuclear Arms," *Arms Control Today,* May 2024. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-05/news/iran-israel-tensions-may-push-iran-rethink-nuclear-arms
54. "Iran-Israel Tensions May Push Iran to Rethink Nuclear Arms."

Israel responded six days later, on April 19, 2024, by attacking many Iranian military locations, notably those close to Isfahan, a city known to have declared nuclear facilities.[55] Fears of a possible Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities were heightened by the increasing number of strikes and calls from former US and Israeli officials for Prime Minister Netanyahu to target these locations. On April 14, 2024, former US National Security Advisor John Bolton publicly advocated for Israel to "destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program."[56]

The killings of Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukur in Beirut on July 29, 2024, and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 30, 2024, exacerbated the situation even more. These actions elicited strong responses from Iranian leadership, which vowed to retaliate. The killing of Haniyeh in Tehran seemed to be a calculated effort to provoke Iran into a larger conflict. Iran, which has consistently opposed American and Israeli influence in the region, regarded the attack as a direct provocation.

Iran began Operation True Promise-2 (OTP-2) on October 1, 2024, launching a relentless assault of 180–200 missiles against Nevatim Airbase, Tel Nof Airbase, the Mossad headquarters in Tel Aviv, and other locations in and near Tel Aviv.[57] Tehran claimed that it had achieved its objectives by damaging the physical infrastructure of the Mossad headquarters, Nevatim Airbase, and Hatzerim Airbase. Recognizing the rapidly escalating violence in the region, UN Secretary-General António Guterres addressed an emergency meeting of the UNSC, declaring: "This deadly cycle of tit-for-tat violence must stop."[58]However, Israel reacted negatively, declaring Guterres "persona non grata." Israeli Foreign Minister Katz remarked, "Anyone who cannot unequivocally condemn Iran's heinous attack on Israel does not deserve to step foot on Israeli soil."[59]

55. "Iran-Israel Tensions May Push Iran."
56. "Iran-Israel Tensions"
57. David Gritten, "Iran launches more than 180 ballistic missiles at Israel," BBC News, October 2, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9dyxxgxv1jo; "Iran missiles target 'Mossad HQ, air base housing F-35 jets'; Israel to hit oil facilities," *Hindustan Times*, October 2, 2024.
58. "'Deadly Cycle of Tit-for-Tat Violence Must Stop,' Demands Secretary-General, as Security Council Takes Up Situation in Middle East," *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, October 2, 2024. https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15841.doc.htm.
59. "Israel declares UN chief persona non grata," *Dawn*, October 3, 2024. https://www.dawn.com/news/1862753, accessed on October 3, 2024.

OTP-2 demonstrated greater military sophistication compared to OTP-1, employing slow-moving drones and cruise missiles, which gave Israel more warning time. During this operation, Iran used advanced missile systems, including Emad and Ghadr-1 medium-range ballistic missiles (variants of the Shahab-3), as well as the Fattah-1, which Iran described as a "hypersonic missile." Jeffrey Lewis, a noted American scholar, tweeted, @ArmsControlWonk, "Our first count is that 32 missiles struck Nevatim Air Base."

Despite Israel's state-of-the-art military hardware, it faces challenges in intercepting long-range ballistic missiles, particularly hypersonic missiles. The Iron Dome is reliable against rockets and drones, while David's Sling is effective against short-range missiles with ranges between 100 and 200 kilometers. Similarly, the Arrow missile defense systems, comprising Arrow-2 and Arrow-3, are designed to intercept missiles up to 1,500 miles away and at altitudes of 100 miles but are not optimized to counter hypersonic ballistic missiles. Israel's key advantage lies in its close coordination with the US military, which provides crucial assistance during crises. During OTP-2, US Navy destroyers Bulkeley and Cole, deployed in the Middle East, fired approximately a dozen interceptors to defend against incoming Iranian missiles.[60]

A critical examination of OTP-2 revealed that Tehran deliberately avoided targeting residential areas to minimize civilian casualties. Thus, the operation aimed to demonstrate Iran's military capability to inflict unacceptable damage on Israel while attempting to establish a stable deterrence between Tehran and Tel Aviv. This tactic sought to deter Israel and its allies from conducting covert intelligence and overt military operations against Iran. Additionally, OTP-2 was an effort to restore Tehran's credibility in the Middle East, exposing Israel's vulnerability to Iran's military capabilities. Simultaneously, the missile strikes provided Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu an opportunity to broaden the war theater and create conditions for involuntary US involvement in a potential all-out war between Iran and Israel.

60. Heather Mongilio, "US Warships Fire a Dozen Interceptors Against Iranian Missile Attack," *US Naval Institute*, October 1, 2024. https://news.usni.org/2024/10/01/u-s-warships-fire-a-dozen-interceptions-against-iranian-missile-attack-against-israel.

Without American participation, Israel is unlikely to effectively terminate Iran's influence in Middle Eastern geopolitics or neutralize its missile inventories and latent nuclear weapons potential. Despite OTP-2 exposing Israel's vulnerabilities, Tel Aviv remained resolute, declaring that Iran would "pay a price" for its actions.[61] In response to OTP-2, Israel launched a targeted attack on an Iranian missile production site on October 26, 2024, killing one civilian and four IRGC soldiers. Following this escalation, the US deployed B-52 Stratofortress bombers and F-15 fighter jets to the region. "The US military became an active participant in the war—twice stepping in to defend Israel against Iranian missile and drone attacks following Israeli escalations."[62]

The Nuclear Threat

OTP-2 demonstrated Iran's advanced missile capabilities. Despite close coordination between Israeli and American forces and attempts by US naval destroyers to shield Tel Aviv, Iranian missiles breached defenses and struck their intended targets on October 1, 2024. Missile interceptors were unable to intercept the Fattah-2, a hypersonic glide vehicle capable of speeds between Mach 5 and 20. However, conventional warfighting capabilities alone are insufficient to deter nuclear blackmail or aggression.

Israel, possessing nuclear weapons capability, has openly signaled its willingness to use them for its defense. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a stern warning to Iran during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 22, 2023, stating, "Above all—Iran must face a credible nuclear threat. As long as I'm prime minister of Israel, I will do everything in my power to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons."[63]

61. Israel vows Iran "will pay a price" for drone attack on PM Netanyahu's home," *Asian News Network,* October 21, 2024. https://asianews.network/israel-vows-iran-will-pay-a-price-for-drone-attack-on-pm-netanyahus-home/.
62. Kelly A. Grieco, "Bring the National Defense Strategy into Balance," *Defense Policy & Posture, Stimson Center*, November 20, 2024. https://www.stimson.org/2024/bring-the-national-defense-strategy-into-balance/?utm_source=Stimson+Center&utm_campaign=a60efcdfa9-RA%2FComms%2FWeekendRead+Pres.+Inbox+%231&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-a60efcdfa9-46283745.
63. "Prime Minister Netanyahu's 2023 UN General Assembly Speech," *Jewish Virtual Library*, September 22, 2023. https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/prime-minister-netanyahu-s-2023-un-general-assembly-speech.

On November 5, 2023, Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu threatened to use "some kind of atomic bomb" on the Gaza Strip "to kill everyone."[64] He renewed this call on January 24, 2024, advocating for a nuclear strike on Gaza."[65] These statements serve a deliberate purpose: to advertise Israel's nuclear weapons capability and reinforce the notion that Israel could employ these weapons in a war for its defense.

The rhetoric from Israel's ruling elite regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons in the ongoing Middle Eastern crisis warrants critical examination. Despite conducting an atmospheric nuclear test off the South African coast in 1979, Tel Aviv has traditionally maintained a firm and opaque nuclear policy. The apparent shift in this policy raises two interlinked questions: why has there been a shift in Israel's nuclear policy, and what are the ramifications of this change? It appears that this shift is driven by the unpredictable dynamics of asymmetrical warfare. The Israeli ruling elite seems to have concluded that it cannot decisively win in an asymmetrical conflict. Consequently, Israel has sought to create a new theater of confrontation and leverage the massive support of its US-led Western allies as a means of face-saving and ensuring survival in an increasingly hostile regional environment.

The primary aim of the Israeli ruling elite's references to the use of nuclear weapons is to intimidate and coerce Iran while terrorizing the entire region with the threat of nuclear retaliation. This repeated rhetoric reinforces the notion of Tel Aviv's "Samson Option," which refers to Israel's doomsday strategy of employing nuclear weapons to annihilate the region if the state of Israel faces existential collapse. The Samson Option is considered a last resort, to be employed in the event of conventional deterrence failure. In essence, Israel possesses nuclear capability and has signaled its willingness to use it if deemed necessary. During the first week of October 2024, speculation about Iran's nuclear program focused on whether Iran had clandestinely conducted a nuclear test. However, no credible information confirmed such an event.

64. "Israel minister reprimanded over Gaza nuclear 'option' comment," *Le Monde with AFP*, November 5, 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/05/israel-minister-reprimanded-over-gaza-nuclear-option-comment_6229042_4.html.
65. "Israeli minister renews call for striking Gaza with 'nuclear bomb," *AA*, January 24, 2024. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israeli-minister-renews-call-for-striking-gaza-with-nuclear-bomb-/3117351.

The US' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 enabled Iran to expand its uranium enrichment stockpile and increase purity levels to 60%. Furthermore, Iran has achieved notable progress in its ballistic missile program. According to media reports, Iran has accumulated sufficient near-weapons-grade uranium to potentially produce approximately three nuclear weapons. Iran could develop enough weapons-grade material for a nuclear weapon in less than a week, according to security analysts.[66] Ahmad Haghtalab, the commander of the IRGC in charge of protecting Iran's nuclear facilities remarked that the potential for Israeli strikes on Tehran's nuclear infrastructure "makes it possible to review our nuclear doctrine and deviate from our previous considerations."[67]

The Iranian leadership has warned that any attack by Israel on its nuclear infrastructure would be counterproductive. Analysts generally agree that a strike by the US or Israel would not eliminate Iran's nuclear capability but instead push Iran from being a latent nuclear-capable state to an overt nuclear-armed state. Regarding the speculation of a clandestine nuclear test, Tehran has maintained silence. To date, Iran has neither withdrawn from the NPT nor officially announced a shift in its nuclear policy. Iran has not conducted a nuclear test, but it can be concluded that it has acquired rudimentary fissile material and modernized nuclear-capable delivery systems.

A shift in Iran's nuclear strategy could set off a chain reaction across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, destabilizing the existing nuclear world order. Regional non-nuclear states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, might increasingly pursue nuclear weapons development, driven by their perceived deterrent value. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has long stated that it would develop nuclear weapons if Iran obtained them. Presently, Riyadh is planning to construct a nuclear power plant under IAEA safeguards and has sought a civilian nuclear agreement with the US. However, critics argue that Saudi Arabia's advancements in nuclear energy could enable it to initiate a nuclear weapons program.

66. David Albright, "Home How quickly could Iran make nuclear weapons today?" *Institute for Science and International Security*, January 8, 2024. https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/how-quickly-could-iran-make-nuclear-weapons-today.
67. "Iranian commander says Tehran could review 'nuclear doctrine' amid Israeli threats," *Reuters*, April 18, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-commander-warns-tehran-could-review-its-nuclear-doctrine-amid-israeli-2024-04-18/.

Consequently, Washington has been reluctant to finalize a civilian nuclear agreement with Riyadh. This cautious American approach may prompt Saudi Arabia to seek nuclear technology and material assistance from Russia and China, both of which have made nuclear industry exports a cornerstone of their energy and geopolitical strategies. Moreover, several nations in the MENA region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, are advancing plans to develop nuclear power plants. These countries rely on civilian nuclear cooperation, which entails the transfer of nuclear technology, materials, or expertise from NSG members for peaceful purposes.

However, Iran's deviation from its commitments under the IAEA and its obligations as a signatory to the NPT undermines the trust of nuclear supplier states. This erosion of confidence discourages them from supporting civilian nuclear aspirants in the region, fearing these nations might emulate Iran's precedent and potentially divert civilian nuclear programs toward military applications.

Conclusion

Iran continues to focus on advancing its nuclear and missile capabilities, utilizing indigenous technology and expertise acquired from Russia. For the IAEA, dealing with Tehran has become significantly more challenging. Iran now possesses a larger uranium enrichment stockpile, more advanced and diversified missile programs, and strategic partnerships with China and Russia, all of which have emboldened its position. When the time is right, Iran is likely to demonstrate a willingness to cap uranium enrichment to strengthen its negotiating position with a potential Trump Administration 2.0.

Tehran could also exploit Trump's hawkish stance on China to draw Beijing closer, thereby fortifying a united Iran-China-North Korea-Russia front to challenge the US. If Trump's "America First" approach weakens US alliances, Tehran may seize the opportunity to establish cooperation with European nations, shaping the regional and international environment to its advantage. In summary, the preceding discussion reveals that Iran has achieved latent nuclear weapons potential. The IAEA, with the support of the US and European nations, has failed to cap and roll back Iran's uranium

enrichment efforts. Israel has undertaken covert operations to hinder Iran's nuclear program modernization but has been unable to inflict significant damage on Iran's nuclear facilities, many of which operate under IAEA safeguards. Furthermore, Israel's missile and air forces cannot destroy Iran's deeply buried nuclear facilities without US assistance. The US shares Israel's interest in eliminating Iran's nuclear potential and curbing its influence in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

However, the rapid transformations in international politics are exposing the limits of US power and highlighting Russia's growing assertiveness in Middle Eastern affairs. Consequently, escalating skirmishes between Iran and Israel, along with the direct involvement of the US in regional warfare, could compel Iran to exit the NPT, conduct a nuclear weapons test, and further entangle great powers in a regional conflict, potentially causing more significant global challenges.