



NUCLEAR ARMED IRAN: A CATALYST FOR STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST? REASSESSING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores through the lens of neo-defensive realism whether a nuclear-armed Iran could contribute to stability in the Middle East by deterring large-scale conflicts and reshaping regional power dynamics. Drawing on historical precedents and nuclear deterrence theory the research scrutinizes the potential for strategic balance while acknowledging the risks of escalation, arms races, and proxy warfare. Although, nuclearization imposes caution on Iran and its rivals. Yet, it also raises uncertainties regarding regional security and non-proliferation efforts. The findings highlight the paradox of nuclear deterrence—offering both the potential for stability and the danger of heightened tensions. Demanding the need for diplomatic strategies to navigate this evolving geopolitical landscape. This research offers Global South perspective rather than promoting nuclear proliferation.

Keywords: neo-defensive realism, Middle East, nuclear deterrence, nuclear proliferation, proxy wars, Global South

INTRODUCTION

April 2030: The Middle East sees an unprecedented calm. For the first time diplomacy has taken the driving seat over use of force in Iranian-Israeli crisis to achieve détente. As, with both nations nuclear-armed, the threat of mutual destruction forces negotiation over conflict. Could nuclear umbrella provide shadow of peace? This hypothetical situation forces us to confront a long-standing paradox in international politics. Sometime stability could be only achieved by acquiring



lethal weapons. From Thucydides' account of power struggles in the Peloponnesian War to Thomas Hobbes' notion of the Leviathan maintaining order through fear. History is witness to the fact that deterrence has capacity for coercion (Hobbes, 1651/2010).

Nuclear deterrence theory has tendency to stop catastrophic wars (Waltz, 1981). Cold War supports nuclear proliferation: despite ideological differences USA and Soviet Union did not face nuclear war because of nuclear parity (Gaddis, 2005). Iran Israel recent military confrontations have risen serious concerns about regional stability (Associated Press [AP], 2025). Will Iran introduce a new balance of power in the Cold War' fashion by becoming nuclear power? Some scholars argue that nuclear deterrence fosters stability in multipolar settings by discouraging reckless military actions (Sagan & Waltz, 2013).

For others nuclear proliferation in volatile regions may generate a whole new range of crises (Paul, 2000). This research critically examines whether a nuclear-armed Iran could, contrary to mainstream security narratives, serve as a stabilizing force in the Middle East. By analyzing Iran's potential nuclear deterrent through historical, theoretical, and strategic lenses. This study reassesses regional security considering geopolitical realities.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran remains one of the most contentious issues in international security. Especially, when it comes to regional stability, power dynamics, and conflict in the Middle East. Eurocentric discourse argues that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons then that would heighten tensions, trigger an arms race, and exacerbate proxy conflicts (Sagan, 2011). However, global South voices are marginalized and the strategic rationale for nuclear deterrence is taken for granted. Because of historical dominance of western scholarship in nuclear proliferation studies (Biswas, 2014). Aim of this research is to provide objective analysis including regional perspectives and the security concerns of states outside the Western-led global order.

We have a successful case study from the Cold War of nuclear deterrence which highlights prevention of full-scale war between the United States and the Soviet Union (Gaddis, 2005; Waltz, 1981). Despite this precedent, many Western scholars' express paranoia over the possibility of a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic of Iran could lose strategic patience. Moreover, they consider Iran an irrational actor incapable of responsible nuclear deterrence (Posen, 2006). Such assumptions not only ignore Iran's strategic calculus but limit the scope of nuclear proliferation. And disregards regional balance of power. This study critically investigates whether Iran's nuclear capability would function as a stabilizing force in the Middle East so that it may counter the military superiority of Israel and other regional actors.

To make International Relations truly international we have to apply a non-Western lens for evaluating the potential of a nuclear armed Iran. The researcher discovers this significant gap in literature. This research is grounded in neo-defensive realist and nuclear deterrence theory. This study has examined historical patterns, evaluated regional power shifts, and explored the impact



of nuclear weapons on proxy conflicts. A systematic literature review which has integrated both Western and Global South perspectives. This research aims to provide a nuanced analysis of whether Iran's nuclearization could foster stability rather than escalate insecurity in the region.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What historical precedents or international relations theories suggest that nuclear proliferation could lead to stability in the Middle East?
2. How could a nuclear-armed Iran reshape the balance of power in the Middle East, and what are the potential implications for regional stability?
3. How could a nuclear Iran influence proxy wars and alliances?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To conduct systematic literature review for analyzing historical precedents and international relations theories that suggest nuclear proliferation could contribute to stability in the Middle East.
2. To examine the potential impact of a nuclear-armed Iran on the regional balance of power and assess its implications for stability.
3. To investigate how a nuclear Iran could influence proxy conflicts and regional alliances, considering both historical patterns and contemporary geopolitical dynamics.
4. To assess policy responses and strategic adjustments by regional and global actors in response to the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it challenges the dominant Western narrative on nuclear proliferation by incorporating Global South perspectives and historical evidence from the Cold War. It will enhance the body of knowledge considering nuclear deterrence theory in the context of the Middle East. How a nuclear-armed Iran could play an instrumental role by maintaining a balance of power. Furthermore, this study will be beneficial for policymakers and security analysts by gaining a more nuanced understanding of Iran's strategic calculus. Which could inform realistic non-proliferation policies. Additionally, this study provides a foundation for further research on nuclear stability, regional security dynamics, and proxy warfare in the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researcher is embarking on the mission how a Nuclear Iran could influence the Middle East by maintaining balance of power. Considering the historical background of nuclear proliferation in Cold war era. Furthermore, he will explore whether a nuclear Iran means less reliance on proxy wars. The world of international relations would be entirely different if nuclear weapons were used as frequently as conventional arms. Despite chaos these weapons are mainly unused since 1945. Whether this restraint is deeply embedded in 'nuclear taboo,' institutional traditions, or the cold rationality of deterrence? This crucial debate regarding a potential nuclear Iran and its implications for regional stability provides critical insights.

The researcher is going to unfold this discussion by the first argument: non-use of nuclear weapons



is a nuclear taboo in international politics. Tannenwald (2007) argues that the restrained behavior towards nuclear weapons is not only fueled by strategic and military considerations but also from a strong normative taboo that developed after World War II. This taboo is nurtured in the nursery of moral and ethical concerns. These concerns warn us of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear warfare. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has taught this harsh lesson (Tannenwald, 2007). Additionally, Geneva Conventions and the Non-Proliferation Treaty reinforced this taboo by framing the use of nuclear weapons as unacceptable under international law (Tannenwald, 2007).

Author also discusses how at the hottest moment in cold war era major powers bounded themselves with social norms. Where nuclear weapons were seen primarily as deterrents rather than active tools of war (Tannenwald, 2007). She acknowledges that nuclear taboo is shaping international politics. However, nuclear escalation could not be totally ignored in extreme circumstances (Tannenwald, 2007). On other hand, Paul (2010) argues that traditional deterrence theory is limited in scope to explain the non-use of nuclear weapons. particularly since these weapons have never been employed even against non-nuclear states. He suggests that it is better to associate this behavior a modest tradition rather than a strict taboo. Because, nuclear-armed states continue to consider scenarios for their potential use.

According to Paul (2010) strategic calculations including the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons are decisive factors in their non-use. He accentuates that to make effective policies vis-à-vis preventing proliferation and promoting disarmament these tendencies are quite instrumental. However, Paul warns that changing global politics and advancements in technology could be blow to this already fragile tradition. And it is an urgency to strengthen international norms. Paul (2010) concluded that non-use of nuclear weapons is tradition sustained by informal norms not a strict taboo. We need legal commitments to further strengthen this tradition. While the significance of a nuclear taboo could not be disregarded in policy discussions. But it may create false confidence in disarmament. For the establishment of this tradition, we have to take solid measures supported by international law.

Nuclear deterrence is the key argument to explain peaceful nuclear proliferation in cold war era. Waltz (1981) stated that nuclear proliferation could contribute to international stability by highlighting the threat of mutual destruction. He argues that nuclear states act rationally as nuclear conflicts are existential threats (Waltz, 1981). Additionally, author suggests that the slow decision making in nuclear strategy provides enough time to avoid miscalculation and escalation (Waltz, 1981). His perspective debunks the myth of conventional fears of proliferation and asserting that nuclear-armed states are likely to exercise caution and restraint (Waltz, 1981).

Cold War diplomacy relied heavily on nuclear weapons to prevent large-scale wars, offering valuable evidence for peaceful nuclear proliferation (Gavin, 2012). We have another evidence from South Asia providing insight into Pakistan's nuclear program and its peaceful operation in spite of



tensions with India (Khan, 2012). Despite the high tensions between India and China during the 2020 Galwan Valley clash nuclear deterrence played a crucial role in preventing further escalation. Both states as nuclear powers were compelled to exercise strategic restraint avoiding full-scale military confrontation despite the violent skirmishes. By this outcome deterrence theory has proven its relevance in international politics.

Nuclear proliferation brings stability or causes instability is a heated debate. Particularly in the case of Islamic Republic of Iran. Two prominent scholars express there contending perspectives. Sagan (2007) emphasizes that new nuclear states are risky. Especially, taking organizational and command-and-control weaknesses into account. Which could lead to accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. He argues that Iran's nuclearization might trigger a proliferation cascade in the Middle East. As, other states would feel compelled to develop nuclear weapons to ensure their security. Furthermore, he highlights that a nuclear-armed Iran could behave aggressively under the protection of a "nuclear shield."

When it comes to Pakistan, Sagan illustrates the dangers of the stability-instability paradox, where nuclear weapons encouraged Pakistan to provoke conflict with India during the Kargil crisis of 1998–1999. He also discusses: Pakistan's relocation of nuclear weapons during crises increased the vulnerability-insecurity paradox. In addition to it, Sagan expresses his concerns regarding internal elements within a nuclear-armed state, could result in dangerous proliferation. Waltz (2007), however, adopts a more optimistic view, arguing that nuclear weapons promote stability by deterring aggression and reducing the likelihood of conflict. He points out that nuclear proliferation is quite slow and deliberate. We have only nine nuclear-armed states after decades and suggests that Iran stabilized the Middle East by creating a balance of power.

Waltz contends that Iran would act rationally as nuclear weapons bring heavy responsibility due to enormous consequences. He does not buy the proliferation cascade argument. Because, neighboring states are neither in the need of urgency like Iran nor they have resources. Moreover, Waltz also disagrees with the idea that Iran's religious or ideological motivations would lead to irresponsible behavior. As, historically nuclear-armed states—regardless of ideology—have behaved with caution. While acknowledging the challenges of managing nuclear weapons, Waltz maintains that their deterrent effect ensures stability, even in regions with significant geopolitical tensions.

These contrasting perspectives accentuate the complex debate over nuclear proliferation, with Sagan emphasizing risks such as instability, theft, and proliferation cascades. Whereas, Waltz is focusing on the stabilizing effects of deterrence and the rational behavior of nuclear states. A vital question grounded in this intense debate that, what is the driving force pushing a state towards nuclearization? Waltz (1981) provided several justifications for this behavior. He says that firstly, great powers typically counter other great powers by developing similar advanced weapons (Waltz, 1981). Secondly, doubts about the reliability of an ally's nuclear protection drive states to acquire



their own nuclear capabilities, as seen in the cases of Britain and France during the Cold War.

Thirdly, non-nuclear states facing adversaries with nuclear arms feel compelled to develop their own weapons for self-defense. This dynamic explains China's and India's nuclear programs, with Pakistan likely following suit. Fourth, states may seek nuclear arms to counter the superior conventional military power of adversaries, as illustrated by Israel's assumed nuclear capability. Fifth, nuclear weapons are often seen as a cost-effective alternative to prolonged and expensive conventional arms races. Finally, states may pursue nuclear programs for international prestige, though this is typically a secondary motive.

Waltz (1981) also highlights that the emergence of new nuclear states generally does not drastically alter international relationships. For example, U.S. relations with Britain, France, China, India, and Pakistan remained largely unchanged after these nations became nuclear powers. Despite its efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation, the United States often prioritized other geopolitical interests. By drawing on Waltz's arguments it is fair to say that, a nuclear-armed Iran could act as a deterrent against potential attacks from regional adversaries including Israel and Saudi Arabia. Also, the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran could counterbalance the nuclear capabilities of Israel, reducing the likelihood of aggressive actions by any party.

Additionally, nuclear weapons might provide Iran a more efficient means of ensuring national security. Iran, surrounded by adversarial military forces and regional tensions, may use nuclear deterrence to prevent escalation and external threats. Moreover, the presence of a nuclear Iran could encourage more restrained behavior among its regional rivals. Furthermore, nuclearization does not necessarily harm diplomatic ties. The U.S. maintained relations with nuclear powers like India and Pakistan for strategic reasons. A similar pragmatic approach could develop with Iran, where its nuclear capability might be tolerated if it serves broader regional stability.

When we analyze what are these factors pushing Iran to enhance its nuclear capabilities here two schools of thought emerge. A number of scholars argue a sense of threat and insecurity is motivating Islamic Republic to developed nuclear deterrence and sooner or later this urgency would allow Iran to accomplish its goal. For others Iran's deterrence is independent from nuclear weapons. Its true deterrence is imbedded in asymmetric ways of war. For instance, ballistic missiles, proxies, drones, naval guerilla warfare, and cyber technologies. Iran established "mosaic defense" doctrine in 2005. "Mosaic defense" essentially employs an asymmetrical approach by the IRGC and the Army (Artesh), through the mobilization of a large, dispersed militia force to engage in attritional warfare against the adversaries (Eslami 2024).

However, Tehran reliance on asymmetric warfare does not suggest that the country has disregarded the role of its nuclear program in its deterrence strategy. President Masoud Pezeshkian reaffirmed Iran's commitment to a peaceful nuclear policy during a meeting with the British ambassador to Tehran in January this year that Iran does not have tendency to use its nuclear capabilities for



military purposes. He cited the fatwa issued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which explicitly prohibits the use of nuclear weapons. Pezeshkian stated, "The Islamic Republic has absolutely no intention of utilizing its nuclear capabilities for military purposes, in accordance with its ideological principles and the fatwa by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran's nuclear policy is at a pivotal juncture. With critical decisions ahead that will shape both its future direction and global ramifications (Atomic Energy Organization of Iran [AEOI], 2025).

How a nuclear-armed Iran will impact the Middle Eastern geopolitics is a very complicated issue. On one side, neo realist argue that it will act as a deterrent against regional threats and preventing unilateral dominance by any single state particularly Israel. On the contrary, skeptics warn that it may provoke a nuclear arms race, heighten regional tensions, and embolden proxy conflicts. Understanding how Iran's potential military nuclear dimension could reshape the security landscape requires a nuanced analysis of historical precedents, power dynamics, and the region's fragile stability.

Bowen and Moran (2015) stated that, regional rivals may respond to Iran's nuclear hedging and the JCPOA by adopting similar strategies, though not necessarily leading to a widespread nuclear arms race. While Arab states currently lack Iran's nuclear infrastructure, some may gradually develop hedging capabilities within the limits of the NPT to maintain a strategic balance. Maintaining NPT compliance is key to avoiding international backlash. Countries like Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia expressed their interest in nuclear technology. For instance, the GCC's 2006 study on nuclear programs and the Arab League's 2007 directive for nuclear development indicated a long-term regional shift toward hedging. They further argue it could lead to the collapse of nuclear restrictions in the Middle East. Israel might be abandoning its policy of nuclear ambiguity and regional arms competition will start.

Preventive military action by Israel or the U.S could hit Iran's nuclear program. it could also push Iran to accelerate its efforts. We have historical example: Iraq after the 1981 Israeli strike on its Osirak reactor. Military intervention could also strengthen Iranian nationalism and diminish the effectiveness of sanctions. A preferable approach would be to manage Iran's nuclear ambitions within the framework of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as the Iran deal aimed to do. Nuclear hedging—where a country remains close to nuclear capability without fully developing weapons. It will be less risky to the NPT. This approach aligns with the idea of "weaponless deterrence (Bowen and Moran, 2015).

The debate over Iran's nuclear ambitions revolves around two opposing perspectives. John Mearsheimer, a leading realist scholar, argues that a nuclear Iran would stabilize the Middle East by reinforcing deterrence. He asserts that nuclear weapons prevent wars because of their catastrophic consequences. (PBS NewsHour, 2012). Conversely, Dov Zakheim, a former U.S. Department of Defense official, warns that Iran's nuclearization would likely provoke an arms race, encouraging rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey to pursue their own nuclear programs



(PBS NewsHour, 2012). Furthermore, he highlights Iran's support for non-state actors, which could make its nuclear deterrence strategy unpredictable compared to traditional nuclear powers (PBS NewsHour, 2012).

If Iran enhance its nuclear capabilities for strategic purpose how Israel will react? According to Brandeis University (2023) the potential emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran presents a significant strategic dilemma for Israel, prompting a range of possible responses to maintain regional stability and deter potential threats including pre-emptive strikes as history has proven it. While such actions could temporarily halt Iran's nuclear progress, they risk triggering broader regional escalation and may not provide a long-term solution. Additionally, Israel may seek formal security assurances from the United States. It could strengthen its deterrence posture without directly engaging in military conflict. This approach not only mitigates immediate security concerns but also reinforces Israel's strategic alignment with the United States, enhancing diplomatic leverage in broader regional affairs (Brandeis University, 2023).

Israel's responses will be multi-dimensional including diplomatic, military, and deterrent measures considering Iran's nuclear advancements, geopolitical shifts, and the broader security landscape of the Middle East (Brandeis University, 2023). The potential emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran has profound implications for the foreign policies of Turkey and Egypt, two key regional powers with distinct security considerations. The scholarly literature highlights how Iran's nuclear capabilities could reshape regional dynamics, prompting strategic recalibrations by both Ankara and Cairo. While Turkey's response is aligned with NATO commitments and regional balancing strategy. On the contrary, Egypt's reaction is deeply rooted in its long-standing advocacy for nuclear nonproliferation in the Middle East.

According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2012), Turkey will use diplomatic means to address this issue as history witnessed its mediation efforts during the 2010 Tehran Declaration. Ankara's broader foreign policy approach is to balance relations with Tehran while maintaining strong ties with Western allies. However, a nuclear-armed Iran could alter Turkey's security calculations. And maybe leading to deeper cooperation with NATO or even start domestic discussions regarding nuclear proliferation. IRAM (2023) emphasizes Turkey will play a constructive role by using diplomatic channels to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions through negotiations rather than confrontation. Nonetheless, if Iran nuclear policy does not ensure peace Turkey will enhance security arrangements with the United States and European allies.

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI, 2023) stated that prolonged nuclear hedging could pressure Turkey to seek enhanced military partnerships with Gulf states to counterbalance Iran's regional influence particularly in Syria and Iraq. Iran's nuclearization will put Egypt in a difficult situation. The Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI, 2023) highlights that Egypt has been opposing nuclear proliferation in the region and predominantly criticizing Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal. If Iran becomes a nuclear power, Egypt may intensify its diplomatic efforts to revive



international discussions on regional disarmament while simultaneously reassessing its own security posture. According to RUSI (2023), Iran's nuclearization could bring Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE together for containing Tehran's regional ambitions. Furthermore, growing nuclear asymmetry in the region might reignite domestic debates in Egypt about acquiring a nuclear deterrent, particularly if Cairo perceives an imbalance of power that undermines its strategic influence. However, IRAM (2023) argues that diplomatic engagement will remain prominent solution to manage Iran's nuclear rise without escalating tensions. Ultimately, whether Iran's nuclear status leads to confrontation or accommodation will depend on how Turkey and Egypt navigate their security concerns while maintaining regional stability. These evolving dynamics will shape the future of Middle Eastern security, determining whether Iran's nuclearization reinforces deterrence or exacerbates regional instability.

A nuclear armed Iran will reduce proxy warfare in Middel East is a thought-provoking question. Specially, considering this fact that literature on proxy warfare is not quite rich and this issue is under theorized despite its empirical relevance (Rauta, 2018). As, Iran's long reliance on proxy warfare is a key element of its security strategy. Because of its conventional military limitations and the Mosaic Defense Doctrine. Which, highlights asymmetric tactics, decentralized militias, and regional influence (Nadimi, 2018). Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and various Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria provide opportunity to Iran for exercising power beyond its borders with the strategic advantage of deniability (Byman, 2005; Smyth, 2015).

This strategy has been instrumental in countering regional adversaries like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States. However, the researcher is exploring: whether a nuclear-armed Iran shift its strategic reliance on other alternatives. The deterrence theory suggests that nuclear weapons create stability by discouraging direct military engagements between adversaries (Schelling, 1966). Waltz (1981) argues that nuclear deterrence fosters strategic caution. As, nuclear states are more responsible due to the catastrophic consequences of escalation. Taking this logic in to account it is quite clear that a nuclear armed Iran could less rely on proxies theoretically. And it will use a direct deterrence against existential threats for restrained regional posture.

Empirical cases support this notion; for instance, post-nuclearization era in 1998 Pakistan modified its behavior and avoided direct military confrontations with India despite continued low-intensity proxy engagements (Kapur, 2016). Similarly, after China acquired nuclear weapons in 1964, its support for Maoist insurgencies in Southeast Asia gradually diminished. Because, it shifted its security priorities (Fravel, 2019). However, we cannot ignore an alternative perspective rooted in the stability-instability paradox (Snyder, 1965) says that while nuclear weapons deter full-scale wars, they might enable more aggressive low-intensity conflicts. Iran's ideological commitments and strategic depth considerations will allow Iran to fully abandon proxies even with nuclear capabilities is unlikely (Levitt, 2013).

Yet, nuclearization could alter the behavior of Iran's proxies. Making them act with greater caution



or aggression due to the overarching security umbrella. In sum, while Iran's nuclearization could reduce its strategic dependence on proxies by enhancing deterrence and promoting greater strategic patience, complete disengagement from proxy warfare remains unlikely. Instead, nuclear deterrence might shift Iran's focus toward selective proxy engagement. Where non-state actors are used more defensively rather than offensively. Potential embedded in future researches. How Iran might recalibrate its strategic calculus in a post-nuclear scenario.

While conducting literature review on nuclear proliferation and regional stability the researcher has gone through contending perspectives. For some scholars Cold War-era and nuclear deterrence theories suggest that nuclear armament can create strategic stability. While other scholars highlight that a nuclear-armed Iran could pose the risk of heightened tensions. Particularly, in the context of proxy wars and shifting alliances. This study aims to build upon these discussions by examining how Iran's nuclear capability could reshape the geopolitical landscape and influence patterns of conflict, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of stability in the Middle East.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative approach, grounded in an anti-foundationalist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. Through this lens, the study explores how a nuclear-armed Iran could contribute to regional stability in the Middle East by reinforcing the balance of power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies Neo-Defensive Realism (NDR) to examine whether a nuclear-armed Iran could act as a stabilizing force in the Middle East. Theory is very important in research as research initiates and ends with theory (Roselle et al., 2025). Theory serves as a powerful instrument for questioning biases, conventional perspectives, and established worldviews. It not only challenges traditional wisdom but also generates thought-provoking questions for analysis. Additionally, theory facilitates the critical examination of underlying assumptions and viewpoints (Jørgensen, 2017). NDR, a branch of structural realism, argues that states seek security rather than power maximization, emphasizing role of the international system in shaping state behavior.

This framework helps in analyzing how nuclear capability might deter conflicts, reshape regional alliances, and influence proxy wars. Defensive realists like Waltz (1981) stated that nuclear weapons can create stability through deterrence. As, seen in Cold War-era bipolarity. This study extends these principles to the Middle East. For evaluating whether Iran's nuclearization could contribute to a balance of power that discourages aggression rather than provoking instability. This theory argues that states act rationally to ensure survival. The theory aligns with historical cases and supported by literature where nuclear proliferation contributed to stability. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry went through a stable bipolar order due to mutually assured destruction (MAD).

Additionally, despite tensions, nuclear deterrence has prevented full-scale war between India and Pakistan. By applying this precedent, the framework explores whether similar dynamics could



emerge in the Middle East, reducing large-scale conflicts through the logic of deterrence. Furthermore, this theory emphasizes that states respond to systemic threats by balancing against adversaries. A nuclear Iran could trigger internal and external balancing mechanisms. Internal Balancing: Iran may develop stronger defensive capabilities to deter adversaries. On other hand, External Balancing for instance, Saudi Arabia and Israel may enhance their security cooperation leading to a more structured balance of power.

NDR suggests that nuclear states are less likely to engage in direct conflicts but may use proxies to exert influence while avoiding full-scale war. A nuclear Iran could strengthen deterrence, leading to a shift from direct military engagements to diplomatic and economic strategies. This theoretical framework indicates that nuclear proliferation in this region could strengthen stability. By analyzing deterrence mechanisms, balance of power shifts, and the evolution of proxy conflicts, the study evaluates whether nuclear proliferation in the Middle East aligns with historical patterns of stability or introduces new security dilemmas.

DATA COLLECTION

The researcher collected data through a systematic literature review using purposive sampling. In a systematic literature review secondary sources have been considered. These sources are books, peer-reviewed research papers, journal articles, and expert analyses. These sources provide theoretical insights, historical context, and scholarly interpretations relevant to assessing the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran on Middle Eastern stability.

DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting data Thematic Analysis is applied as tool for making sense of collected data. Thematic analysis helps to examine systematically expert opinions, scholarly debates, and qualitative data related to a nuclear-armed Iran and its implications for regional stability. By identifying recurring themes and patterns, this approach allows for a structured interpretation of key arguments surrounding nuclear deterrence, balance of power, and regional security dynamics. Thematic coding categorized insights from secondary sources into major themes such as 'Deterrence and Stability,' 'Shifts in Regional Power Balance,' and 'Impact on Proxy Conflicts and Alliances.' This analytical framework ensures a nuanced understanding of how a nuclear Iran could influence the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research instruments, informed consent, and confidentiality are paramount in research ethics. In qualitative research, the researcher himself is the research instrument. That's why, researcher competence and self-reflexivity are essential for transparent study. Moreover, prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, audit trail, and negative case analysis will further enhance the accuracy. The eight 'big-tent' criteria help assess qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Considering the above factors the researcher is hopeful to expand the body of knowledge in the realm of Nuclear Armed Iran: A Catalyst for Stability in the Middle East?



Reassessing Regional Dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated how a nuclear-armed Iran could reshape the Middle East. Assessing whether it would maintain the regional balance of power or escalate competition. Additionally, it examined how proxy actors might interact under the nuclear umbrella and whether Cold War-era nuclear deterrence models are applicable in the Middle Eastern context. Like any study, this research has certain limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary sources rather than primary data; however, extensive cross-referencing with existing scholarship mitigated this issue. Second, as a qualitative study, its findings are interpretative rather than generalizable. Despite these limitations, the analysis provides valuable insights into Iran's nuclear strategy, regional security dynamics, and potential policy responses in the Middle East.

First question was that What historical precedents or international relations theories suggest that nuclear proliferation could lead to stability in the Middle East. While conducting literature review the researcher found substantial answers to this question. For instance, several historical precedents and international relations theories suggest that nuclear proliferation could contribute to stability in the Middle East. Waltz (1981, 2007) argues that nuclear deterrence promotes stability by discouraging aggression, as states act rationally to avoid mutually assured destruction. He contends that Iran's nuclearization could create a balance of power in the region and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

Historical examples, such as the Cold War standoff between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan provide evidence that nuclear weapons can promote stability. Gavin (2012) highlights how Cold War diplomacy relied on nuclear deterrence to prevent large-scale wars. After acquiring nuclear weapons, the case of India and Pakistan' is a classic example of maintaining strategic restraint (Khan, 2012). Even in the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, nuclear deterrence played a role in preventing escalation between India and China.

Beyond deterrence, Tannenwald (2007) argues that the nuclear taboo—a strong normative and ethical restraint against the use of nuclear weapons—has played a crucial role in preventing their use. She suggested that international institutions, legal frameworks, and moral concerns are instrumental to reinforce the idea that nuclear weapons are unacceptable as tools of warfare. This perspective indicated that even if Iran acquires nuclear capabilities, the nuclear taboo will prevent Islamic Republic from aggression.

In contrast, Paul (2010) argues that the non-use of nuclear weapons is not strictly due to a taboo but rather a nuclear tradition—an informal norm shaped by strategic calculations rather than ethical constraints.

He expressed that this tradition is not well established. Ongoing advancement in technology and



changing geopolitical conditions could further diminish this tradition such as the development of mini-nukes. If Iran's nuclearization is perceived as challenging to this tradition it could lead to an erosion of restraint and regional instability will increase.

Sagan (2007) presented a counterargument to nuclear proliferation. He emphasized on proliferation cascades, accidental use, and the stability-instability paradox. He warns that a nuclear-armed Iran could embolden its leadership while increasing regional tensions. In contrast, Waltz (2007) dismisses these concerns, asserting that nuclear-armed states act cautiously regardless of ideology.

Overall, while nuclear deterrence theory suggests that proliferation could enhance stability, the role of the nuclear taboo and nuclear tradition make this matter complicated. Strong taboo could result in low nuclear conflict. However, a fragile nuclear tradition because of shifting geopolitical dynamics will lead to nuclear escalation. Strengthening international norms, legal regulations, and diplomatic efforts are necessary to ensure peace in the Middle East. Whereas, the second question deals with balance of power and possible implications of nuclear proliferation for Middle East.

Literature review highlighted that the potential emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran will present significant implications for the balance of power in the Middle East. Nuclear proliferation would be double-edged sword. Mearsheimer (PBS NewsHour, 2012), argued that nuclear deterrence could create a strategic equilibrium by preventing unilateral dominance and discouraging military conflicts through the logic of mutually assured destruction. Conversely, Zakheim (PBS NewsHour, 2012), expressed his concerns regarding Iran's nuclearization that it could escalate regional tensions by triggering an arms race as states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey seek nuclear capabilities of their own.

Bowen and Moran (2015) stated that while some Arab states currently lack Iran's nuclear infrastructure, they may gradually adopt nuclear hedging strategies within the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework for maintaining strategic balance. If Iran is going to be a nuclear country, it could prompt the collapse of nuclear restrictions in the region. Furthermore, Israel might respond with preemptive strikes as seen in past operations against Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007). Though such actions carry the risk of regional escalation (Brandeis University, 2023).

Alternatively, Israel could seek security guarantees from the United States to reinforce deterrence without direct military confrontation. The responses of regional powers for instance Turkey and Egypt would likely be shaped by their geopolitical considerations. Turkey as a NATO member may deepen its cooperation with Western allies while leveraging diplomatic channels to mitigate tensions (Carnegie Endowment, 2012; IRAM, 2023). However, continued ambiguity over Iran's nuclear status will motivate Turkey to pursue stronger security arrangements with Gulf states (RUSI, 2023).

Egypt a long-time advocate for a nuclear-free Middle East, may respond by intensifying diplomatic



efforts for regional disarmament while reassessing its own security posture (NTI, 2023). If Egypt perceives a significant power imbalance, domestic debates on acquiring a nuclear deterrent may resurface (RUSI, 2023). Overall Iran's nuclearization could either reinforce deterrence or exacerbate regional instability, depending on the responses of key Middle Eastern actors. However, a positive image could be drawn from history. In 1991, despite their historical rivalry, India and Pakistan agreed through a treaty not to attack each other's nuclear facilities. Their decision was based on the understanding that instability caused by threats to nuclear deterrence was more dangerous than deterrence itself.

Since then, despite episodes of heightened tensions, both states have avoided full-scale war. Similar expectations would emerge from Israel and Iran. As, nuclear-armed states tend to deter each other, reducing the likelihood of direct conflict (Waltz, 2012). On other hand, the third question is seeking explanation about proxy wars in this region under nuclear umbrella. Findings are quite interesting. Historically, Iran has leveraged proxies such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shiite militias to project influence while mitigating direct military risks (Byman, 2005; Smyth, 2015).

This approach is perfectly aligned with Iran's Mosaic Defense Doctrine. Which prioritizes asymmetric tactics and decentralized militias (Nadimi, 2018). However, the question: would a nuclear-armed Iran shift away from proxy warfare is seeking explanation. According to deterrence theory (Schelling, 1966; Waltz, 1981), nuclear capability fosters strategic caution and reduces the need for indirect conflicts. Historical precedents suggested that nuclear powers: Pakistan post-1998 and China post-1964 reduced direct confrontations and scaled back ideological proxy engagements (Kapur, 2016; Fravel, 2019).

Applying this logic, a nuclear Iran might feel less reliant on proxies for deterrence. Additionally, it will adopt a more restrained regional posture. Nevertheless, we should not take the stability-instability paradox for granted (Snyder, 1965). He predicted that while nuclear weapons deter large-scale wars, they might embolden low-intensity conflicts. Iran's ideological commitments and regional ambitions will prevent it from fully abandoning its proxies. Even if its nuclear status will reduce existential threats (Levitt, 2013). However, nuclearization could alter proxy behavior. Moreover, this new development will make non-state actors act more cautiously under Iran's strategic umbrella. Neither the researcher is strongly advocating for a nuclear-armed Iran nor its ideological commitments would allow to do that. In fact, we have examined nuclear proliferation from Global South perspective. Future research should examine historical cases of nuclearized regional powers and their proxy networks to further refine expectations for Iran's post-nuclear strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the potential impact of a nuclear-armed Iran on Middle Eastern stability. Focusing on historical precedents, regional balance of power, and the role of proxy warfare. The



findings indicate that while nuclear deterrence has the potential for contributing to regional stability but, significant risks and uncertainties remain intact. Nuclear proliferation could create a strategic balance by discouraging direct military confrontations, as seen in historical cases where nuclear deterrence prevented large-scale conflicts. A nuclear-armed Iran would act more cautiously because the stakes of war are significantly higher. This could prevent unilateral dominance in the region and reduce the likelihood of direct military aggression among rival states.

However, the potential for an arms race cannot be ignored. If Iran's nuclearization prompts neighboring countries to pursue their own nuclear capabilities, the region could enter a period of heightened tensions and strategic uncertainty. Additionally, concerns over accidental escalation, miscalculations, and shifts in long-standing nuclear norms raise questions about whether deterrence alone would be sufficient to maintain stability. Regarding Iran's reliance on proxy groups, nuclearization could alter but not eliminate its use of regional allies. While possessing nuclear capabilities will reduce Iran's direct security concerns, it will also embolden certain proxy engagements, particularly in low-intensity conflicts.

Nonetheless, the presence of nuclear weapons might also impose greater caution, as any escalation involving proxies could have far-reaching consequences. Iran would continue its proxy strategies under a nuclear umbrella are uncertain. And will depend on its broader strategic objectives. Ultimately, whether a nuclear-armed Iran stabilizes or destabilizes the region depends on various factors, including the reactions of neighboring states, the resilience of international non-proliferation efforts, and the evolving geopolitical landscape. A careful balance of diplomatic engagement, security arrangements, and non-proliferation measures will be essential in shaping the region's future.

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