



***NAVIGATING THE NUCLEAR FUTURE:  
U.S. STRATEGIES FOR  
NONPROLIFERATION IN THE MIDDLE  
EAST AND INDO-PACIFIC***

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*Photo: Iranian flag next to a missile launch pad.  
Source: EAP via Al Jazeera*

At a recent workshop on the [Nuclear Future of the Middle East](#) hosted by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory's [Center for Global Security Research \(CGSR\)](#), Young Leaders from the Pacific Forum International gained critical insight into the current state of the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime. A shared concern amongst the multinational attendees at the workshop was the volatile geopolitical climate in the Middle East, with Iran at its center, presenting a dynamic and evolving nuclear threat. Following the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an emboldened Tehran, with alleged uranium enrichment capabilities and suspected fissile material stockpiles, presents a significant threat to regional security. Furthermore, the complicated interconnectedness of Iran and the de facto nuclear weapon states (DNWS) beyond the Middle East—specifically India, Pakistan, and North Korea—poses risks for the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime to levy strategic costs in addition to sanctions. Still, there is potential to counter Iran's malign nuclear ambitions more effectively by leveraging the strategic position of these DNWS, or influencing them, and bringing Tehran to the negotiating table for a lasting nuclear deal that is feasible and impactful. This collaborative article is a reflection of the authors' experiences after attending the CGSR workshop.

The Middle East, part of the greater Asian continent, is deeply interrelated with the Indo-Pacific. Within this region, issues stemming from nuclear weaponization, and opaque first-use policies are a cause of concern for all stakeholders, especially the U.S. as Washington navigates competition with another nuclear-armed nation, China. Tehran's unclear and irrational nuclear endgames and the unpredictability of its proxies in the region have pushed the Middle East towards widespread insecurity, especially given the current conflicts Iran is involved in. In addition to the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states perceive Iran's nuclear ambitions as a direct threat to their security, prompting considerations of their own version of nuclear deterrence and likely pursuit of weapons capabilities. Moreover, Iran and its proxies, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthi rebels, as well as the Bashar al-Assad regime, have exacerbated regional instability with Iran's enduring support,

which was highlighted during the CGSR workshop. This situation has led to unanticipated disorder across the Indo-Pacific in North Korea and within the India-Pakistan-China triangle.

The DNWS includes Israel, North Korea, India, and Pakistan, which are currently countries out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). North Korea joined the NPT in 1985, however, it announced its withdrawal in 2003, subsequently asserting its status as a nuclear-armed state. The DNWS continue to possess nuclear weapons capability, purposely to address perceived security challenges within their respective geopolitical systems. For our discussion on leveraging DNWS interconnectedness to bring Iran into the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime, we will focus on the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Pakistan, India, and North Korea, since Israel's current volatile relationship with Iran, is unlikely to abate tensions in the Middle East in the near term.

U.S. nonproliferation response towards India and Pakistan's DNWS status has evolved over time but the South Asian neighbors' geostrategic value cannot be understated. The U.S.-India-Pakistan nexus has the potential to garner support for integrated deterrence by showcasing non-NPT nations that shared values can also contribute and function inside the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime. [Pakistan's cultural and political affinity towards Iran](#) coupled with India's increasingly definitive position in the BRICS, [the G7](#), the [G20](#) [the Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) would likely allow the U.S. a platform to demonstrate positive enforcement with historically non-aligned regional actors. However, the antithesis of this scenario would suggest to Iran the U.S.'s implied acceptance of India and Pakistan's de facto status and allowing both to sustain their nuclear weapons capabilities without oversight. This would encourage other threshold states to follow suit. The same is true for North Korea, whose increasingly bold missile tests and sanctions evasion mechanisms encourage Tehran's dissent. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a concerted U.S. effort to enable rational actors such as Pakistan and India to assume a greater role as bridging powers to moderate regional tensions. Specifically, India's strategic autonomy and non-alignment policy would endorse multi-alignment,

allowing all sides to negotiate equitably in their respective spheres. Partnerships based on integrated deterrence and bound by export controls, physical security safeguards, and prevention will almost certainly bolster the U.S.-led nonproliferation regime and bring stability to the region.

Pakistan's nuclear strategy has historically been shaped by its border security dynamics with India. But we now know that Pakistan's clandestine proliferation network, with likely backing from Rawalpindi and led by Abdul Kadeer Khan, dubbed "[the Khan network](#)" collaborated with North Korea and Iran on nuclear weapons technology between [the late 80's](#) to the early 2000's. It is assessed that Pakistan transferred enrichment technology and weapons design information to both Iran and North Korea in exchange for funding and launch technology, effectively creating a threshold state on its own border. However, recent military actions in Pakistan's tribal areas [by Iran](#) indicate that relationships between Islamabad and Tehran have taken a toll. Pakistan's hyper-alertness towards Iran's impulsive defense strategy highlights Islamabad's perceived threat from a historical partner. Tehran, aware of the growing U.S. influence in South Asia, likely aims to entangle Islamabad in Middle Eastern geopolitics to further destabilize the region and derive reprieve from international attention, a tactic it has also employed with India.

Between 2015 and 2018, shortly before the U.S. exit from the JCPOA, Tehran capitalized on the Sino-Indian rivalry by offering competing investment opportunities in its energy markets to New Delhi and Beijing. Pitting India against China, Iran has continued to exploit the economic disparity and power competition between the two Indo-Pacific giants to negotiate bilateral infrastructure projects that benefit its isolated economy. New Delhi's fervent investment in the Chabahar port and the International North-South Transport Corridor demonstrates Tehran's ability to secure geopolitical goodwill and capital investment from influential regional players. This strategic maneuvering showcases Iran's adaptability and statecraft to effectively counter Western sanctions. Consequently, whether inadvertently or willingly, India and Pakistan have created an environment where Iran can continue to undermine U.S. nonproliferation

efforts by leveraging its economic and strategic relationships within the U.S.-India-Pakistan triangle.

Competing with Iran involves a multifaceted approach based on strategic positioning and leveraging regional influence. India and Pakistan, though not signatories to the NPT, likely understand their shared responsibility in the nuclear proliferation landscape, especially concerning Iran. As DNWS with vested regional interests, both manifest the intent to support nonproliferation efforts outside the NPT framework and contribute to regional stability. The U.S. exerts significant influence over India and Pakistan through defense cooperation and economic support, positioning itself as a balancing actor that can encourage both countries to adopt and adhere to nonproliferation norms to set a positive example for Iran. This influence can promote transparency, secure nuclear materials, and foster participation in international nonproliferation agreements.

Additionally, the meaningful discussion during the CGSR workshop helped identify the following opportunities:

To promote multilateral nonproliferation efforts driven by cooperative endeavors, the U.S. would benefit from signaling its commitment to regional security by encouraging India and Pakistan to commit to multilateral initiatives such as the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM) and the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT). Both aim to ensure physical protection and prohibition of the production of fissile materials for nuclear weapons. Though historically, Pakistan has opposed the FMCT due to security concerns over India's nuclear stockpile, it might be more willing to cooperate seeing U.S. outreach and independent mediation along with India's genuine effort to address Pakistan's concerns. The involvement of two regional powers in U.S.-led cooperative mechanisms strengthens the nonproliferation regime and sets a precedent for Iran and others in the periphery.

Encouraging those two DNWS to develop their nuclear programs under conditions that align with the nonproliferation regime can serve as a model for Iran, showing that nuclear energy and security can coexist

responsibly without the need for weaponization. By working with India and Pakistan, the U.S. demonstrates a commitment to nonproliferation principles despite India-Pakistan's non-NPT status. This approach can undermine Iran's justification for its nuclear program by showing that non-NPT states can be responsible nuclear actors. Diplomatic dialogue and positive pressure can facilitate talks between key stakeholders, including Iran.

Another actor, North Korea's situation may vary slightly. In reality, it is challenging to bring North Korea back into the NPT regime and pursue complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as North Korea has announced its nuclear weapons capability is [irreversible and non-negotiable](#). Iran likely views North Korea's successful development and maintenance of a nuclear arsenal as a model for its ambitions. North Korea's ability to withstand international sanctions and pressure by leveraging its nuclear weapons program provides a template for Iran, demonstrating that nuclear capabilities can ensure regime survival through strategic leverage. North Korea also closely monitors Iran's nuclear progress, drawing lessons for its own strategic calculus and security policy. Given North Korea's status as a DNWS, untethered to the rules-based order, its developmental relationship with Iran poses significant threats. Historical and ongoing collaboration between Iran and North Korea since the Iran-Iraq War in the [1980s](#) in missile technology and nuclear development highlights their symbiotic relationship. North Korea has reportedly provided Iran with ballistic missile technology to enhance its delivery capabilities in exchange for foreign currency and technical expertise, which aids Pyongyang's nuclear programs. This collaboration serves both nations' strategic interests by circumventing international sanctions and improving their technological prowess.

North Korea also benefits indirectly from the international focus on Iran's nuclear activities. As global powers, particularly the U.S., prioritize countering Iran's nuclear ambitions, North Korea often gains temporary respite from the intense economic measures and pressure directed at its own nuclear program. This diversion allows Pyongyang to advance its nuclear capabilities while mitigating the

risk of international intervention. North Korea's direct and indirect leverage against the nonproliferation regime, facilitated by its collaboration with Iran, ultimately poses a significant threat to U.S. allies such as South Korea and Japan, imposing substantial strain on their defense treaties between the U.S. and these allies in East Asia.

Preventing advancements in North Korea-Iran relations and effectively showcasing methods to suppress the nuclear threat posed by North Korea in the international community are crucial steps toward re-engaging Iran in negotiations. To address this adequately, it is essential to establish trilateral cooperation among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan and extend integrated deterrence. Since the failure of the Hanoi summit in 2019, North Korea has been intensifying its efforts to enhance its nuclear capabilities, while simultaneously solidifying its relationship with China and Russia and persistently displaying hostile behavior towards South Korea.

Moreover, given the recently increasing nuclear threat from North Korea, there have been discussions in South Korea about developing its own nuclear weapon capability. Assessing the feasibility of this option proves difficult considering the financial resources at stake, the possibility of economic sanctions, China's opposition, and the potential negative impact on the nation's reputation within the NPT regime. Nevertheless, the emergence of this discussion in Korean society may indicate South Korea's concerns regarding navigating its relationship with North Korea during the ongoing international nuclear security crisis, as a panelist mentioned during the CGSR workshop. Therefore, the extensive integrated deterrence that can immediately respond to the threat requires enhanced readiness to mitigate the Korean public's concerns. Particularly, active collaboration with South Korea and Japan, threatened immediately due to their proximity to North Korea, is crucial for dissuading North Korea.

Since the Washington Declaration in August 2023, substantial achievements have been limited, but efforts to strengthen trilateral cooperation against the North Korean nuclear threat persist on a practical level. Not only did the U.S. and South Korea reaffirm

compliance with the NPT regime and the ROK-US Agreement on the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy through the declaration, but they also promised a substantially progressive effort to address the increasing nuclear threat in the Indo-Pacific region through the sharing of crisis awareness. These efforts were supported by the revision of the Tailored Deterrence Strategy (TDS) and the successful execution of the Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC) Table-top-exercise (TTX), in addition to the [Extended](#) Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) and the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM). In the wake of this, the U.S. and Japan have been actively enhancing their extended deterrence measures in the U.S.-Japan [Extended Deterrence Dialogue \(EDD\)](#) and the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") meetings, reinforcing the bilateral alliance to ensure a robust deterrent against potential North Korean aggression. Moreover, the U.S., Japan, and South Korea began initiating [trilateral cooperation](#) last year, and are anticipated to enhance their collaborative capability by expanding efforts previously undertaken through bilateral partnerships to encompass trilateral collaboration. Potential strategies for extensive integrated deterrence could involve using existing channels such as EDD or EDSCG, as well as taking advantage of opportunities for cooperation among the three countries through enhanced strategic dialogues, joint military exercises, strengthened missile defense collaboration, intelligence sharing, and cybersecurity measures. Such an intensified extensive integrated deterrence could effectively respond to North Korea's nuclear threats, thereby reducing the threat in this area and ultimately weakening the nuclear linkage with Iran.

The interconnected nature of global nuclear proliferation means that developments in one region can significantly impact others. Nuclear developments in the Middle East influence the strategic calculations of North Korea, India, and Pakistan, fostering insecurity across Asia. DNWS countries carefully observe and adapt their strategies in response to international reactions to Iran's nuclear program. The international community's efforts, including the JCPOA and economic sanctions, aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions, serve as a

precedent for ongoing diplomatic outreach aimed at reintegrating Iran. However, implementing global nonproliferation norms and engagement strategies with nuclear-armed or aspiring states often faces challenges, leading to potential failures, such as the six-party talks in the past.

Therefore, addressing nuclear proliferation requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach that considers the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East within the complex web of regional and global security dynamics. Nuclear threats in the Middle East, North Korea, Pakistan, and India are deeply associated and shaped by strategic alliances and geopolitical competition. Understanding these interdependencies is crucial for formulating effective U.S. nuclear policies and global alliances. By examining how nuclear developments in one region impact another, policymakers can better anticipate and mitigate the risks associated with nuclear proliferation, ultimately enhancing global security and stability.

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