# Sustainable nuclear non-proliferation. Case-study: Iran

*By Tom Sauer*

*Sustainable nuclear non-proliferation is only possible in a world without nuclear weapons. As long as there are nuclear weapons, the odds are that nuclear proliferation will happen, despite the existence of a comprehensive nuclear non-proliferation regime. The next proliferator may be Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)(2015) – better known as the Iran deal – was a very good effort to constrain Iran's nuclear program. In exchange for sanctions relief, Iran promised to restrict the size of its civilian nuclear program. President Trump withdrew from the Agreement in 2018. As a result, Iran is now very close to acquiring nuclear weapons. The bombings of Iranian nuclear facilities by Israel and the US in 2025 have only caused a delay. Knowledge cannot be bombed. It remains to be seen whether President Trump will succeed in signing an agreement with Iran in his second term.*

***Keywords:*** *nuclear weapons; non-proliferation; Iran*

**Introduction**

Since the origins of the nuclear era, the goal has been to limit the spread of nuclear weapons to more and more states and non-state actors. One of the consequences of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 was the start of multilateral negotiations for the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was concluded in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. For a long time, the NPT has been characterised as the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. An international regime is a collection of formal (and informal) procedures, rules, norms, treaties, and organisations to mitigate one specific problem, e.g. contain the further spread of nuclear weapons.

There is a consensus in the literature that the NPT certainly made a positive difference (Horovitz 2015; Abe 2020). On the other hand, four more states have acquired nuclear weapons since the NPT (Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea), and since the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 it is going downhill with respect to nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. As early as 2006, I wrote an article titled "The crisis of the nuclear non-proliferation regime" (Sauer 2006). Nowadays, most observers agree that the NPT is facing stormy weather (Tannenwald 2024). The absence of a final consensus document at most five-yearly review conferences, including the last two, is testimony of this. Some observers – albeit a minority – have predicted (and even prescribed) the end of the NPT (Pretorius / Sauer 2021).

Because there is a natural trend towards more proliferation and because of the current fate of the NPT, it seems more likely than not that the spread of nuclear weapons will not be stopped. One of the candidates to become the next nuclear-armed state is Iran.

On top of this bleak overview with respect to non-proliferation, international politics at large is currently going through particularly turbulent times. It is tempting to blame individual political leaders not only in authoritarian states like Russia (Putin) and China (Xi), but also in democracies like the US (Trump). The problem, however, goes deeper: the ongoing turbulence has to do with the changing balance of power in the world. Apart from a rising China and a relatively declining US, there is the Global South with upcoming regional powers such as India, Brazil, Turkey and others.

Advocates of multipolarity like Karl Deutsch point to the inherent uncertainties that go together with more power poles, which should make leaders more prudent. Unfortunately, the current generation of world leaders do not seem to fit this pattern.

As such, the current world order resembles multipolarity. Advocates of multipolarity like Karl Deutsch point to the inherent uncertainties that go together with more power poles, which should make leaders more prudent (Deutsch / Singer 1964). Unfortunately, the current generation of world leaders do not seem to fit this pattern. President Putin risked waging war with Ukraine by annexing the Crimea, making trouble in the Eastern part of Ukraine, and invading Ukraine in February 2022. While the US had previously attacked other countries (Somalia, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran, and others) for similar reasons (including regime change), it never did so vis-à-vis neighbours, and it never had the intention to annex (parts of) a country. That said, in the meantime President Trump has threatened to do the same as Putin by annexing Canada, Greenland and the Panama Canal. Whether this is bluff and therefore part of his typical bargaining behaviour remains to be seen. However, the tariffs he is imposing on enemies and friends in the meantime are real, if also meant for bargaining. His domestic policy is unworthy of a democracy, and his foreign policy is unpredictable, to say the least.

These uncertain times directly affect the nuclear non-proliferation regime as well. One of the major consequences of Trump's erratic behaviour is increasing uncertainty in the capitals of US allies, both in Europe and Asia (Hirsh 2025). The result is a growing chorus of allies talking about the need for an alternative to the existing US extended nuclear deterrent. In particular states like Poland, South Korea, and to a lesser extent Germany and Japan are talking about acquiring nuclear weapons themselves or at least threatening to do so to put pressure on the US to maintain the existing nuclear umbrella. Additionally, a renewed debate about a 'Eurobomb' was triggered after the infamous Oval Office incident between President Trump and President Zelensky in March 2025 (Perot 2025).

**Sustainable non-proliferation**

The best way to prevent nuclear proliferation in the longer term is to eliminate all nuclear weapons. This was a legally binding obligation under the NPT and the main objective of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)(Sauer 1998; Meyer / Sauer 2018). It will be more difficult to produce nuclear weapons in a world without nuclear weapons than in a world with them. There will also be less incentives to produce these weapons

and more means for verification as nobody (in theory) would have something to hide. Very concretely, in a world without existing nuclear weapons, Iran in all likelihood would not have been so close to the bomb as it is today.

The best way to prevent nuclear proliferation in the longer term is to eliminate all nuclear weapons. This was a legally binding obligation under the NPT and the main objective of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

In the short and medium term, the spread of nuclear weapons to more and more states and non-state actors can be contained by trying to reduce the demand and the supply of materials necessary to build nuclear weapons. On the demand side, (perceived) insecurity because of political conflicts amongst states (including changes in the regional or global balance of power) is the main underlying reason why states are driven towards the acquisition of the necessary ingredients of weapons, including nuclear arms. The best way to prevent interstate conflicts from becoming violent is to establish a regional and global collective security system. Security means shared security. For instance, as long as Russia feels insecure (because of NATO expansion, etc), the chances are that the relationship between Russia and the West will remain problematic. In contrast, in a collective security order, member states try to reassure each other that they prefer to cooperate instead of making trouble. They will also make rules to prevent conflicts becoming violent. In such an order, there is less chance of miscommunication, misperceptions, and miscalculations than in a classic balance of power constellation. Examples of collective security organisations are the UN and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE). The Concert Européen, which unified the major regional powers in Europe after the Napoleonic wars in 1815, is another positive example of a collective security order (Sauer 2017; Sauer 2025).

With respect to the supply side of the necessary ingredients of nuclear weapons, the objective should be to keep and ideally strengthen the existing non-proliferation regime. The latter contains different elements: the NPT, the IAEA, export control regimes, arms control agreements including nuclear weapon free zones agreements, negative and positive security guarantees, and more. If that does not work, coercive diplomacy could be used to convince the proliferator to halt its programme.

*The NPT*

The NPT consists of three pillars: non-proliferation (including safeguards); support for civilian nuclear programs (including nuclear energy); and nuclear disarmament. The NPT is a discriminatory treaty in the sense that it makes a distinction between two categories of states: nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states. The former are defined as those which had exploded a nuclear device before 1967; namely, the US, Russia, the UK, France, and China. All other states had to promise that they would never acquire nuclear weapons. The deal was that in exchange, the non-nuclear weapon states would get support for setting up civilian nuclear programs, and the promise to start multilateral negotiations to eliminate nuclear weapons (albeit without a deadline). Unfortunately, nowadays the NPT is on the cusp of collapse, and it will be extremely hard to rescue it. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, there is increasing polarisation between the nuclear weapon states and the non-allied non-nuclear weapon states. The latter accuse the former of not fulfilling their legally binding obligations to eliminate their nuclear arsenals, while they themselves keep fulfilling their own obligation not to acquire nuclear weapons. Rising states like Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia and others are tired of hammering on the same nail since 1970. That is also the reason why many Global South countries support the TPNW, an initiative of a group of states that include Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Austria, Switzerland, Ireland and Norway.

The second reason why the NPT is in danger is the further trend towards proliferation, which is especially acute in the Middle East. Iran has acquired more than enough fissile material for building at least nine bombs, and the chances are that the 400 kilograms of highly enriched uranium needed for these bombs have remained intact after the bombings by Israel and the US in June 2025. Iran only needs to take the political decision to manufacture, test and deploy them. If so, Saudi Arabia would in all likelihood follow suit, as announced in 2023 (and before) by high-ranking Saudi officials (Borger 2023). There are also rumours that Turkey is interested in acquiring nuclear weapons. Egypt had already a nuclear weapons program in the past, and could re-start it.

Unfortunately, nowadays the NPT is on the cusp of collapse, and it will be extremely hard to rescue it.

If Iran withdraws from the NPT, it would be the second country to do so after North Korea. If other states in the region or if some of the US allies (like South Korea or Poland) follow Iran, that would mean the *de facto* end of the NPT. Even without further proliferation, the odds are that the outcome of the next NPT review conferences will be the same as the two previous conferences: no final document.

The main reason why non-nuclear weapon states have not withdrawn from the treaty is the support they are entitled to in establishing civilian nuclear energy programmes.

*IAEA*

The IAEA, or the International Atomic Energy Agency, is the UN watchdog for nuclear proliferation. It was established in the 1950s, long before the NPT. Within the realm of the NPT, the IAEA received the task of verifying the declarations made by the non-nuclear weapon states with respect to the presence of fissile material in their respective countries. One should note the additional discrimination here between nuclear and non-nuclear states, as the nuclear weapon states under the NPT do not fall under this obligation. Issues of compliance are a further difficulty, and more in particular the risk of politicisation. The UN Security Council is in charge of handling these issues after notification by the IAEA. Furthermore, there are inherent limitations of the Agency. If a state refuses (certain) IAEA inspectors (as has occurred in North Korea and Iran), the Agency cannot do very much. Lastly, the creation of stronger verification instruments such as the IAEA Additional Protocol (1997) is regarded by some states (like Brazil) as an additional discriminatory burden for the non-nuclear weapon states. The Additional Protocol is therefore not universally accepted.

*Export control regimes*

Export-control regimes are informal regimes of groups of states that decide which products are not allowed to be exported for non-proliferation reasons. In the nuclear realm, there is the Zangger Committee and the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Similar

arrangements exist for missiles (Missile Technology Control Regime), chemical weapons (Australia Group), and conventional weapons (Wassenaar Agreement).

*Arms control*

The main objective of arms control treaties is to control the quantity and/or quality of weapons. Most of the time, they are less ambitious than disarmament treaties, which aim to eliminate a specific category of weapons. Past nuclear arms control agreements have, to a certain extent, delegitimised nuclear weapons, and can therefore be regarded as reinforcing the disarmament pillar within the NPT.

Most arms control agreements initiated during or after the Cold War, however, do not exist anymore. The bilateral strategic arms control agreements (SALT, START, SORT) expired, and the remaining one – New START – is supposed to end at the beginning of 2026 and is in tatters because of the war in Ukraine, having been extended by President Biden and President Putin in 2021. It is very unlikely that a follow-up treaty will be negotiated before the beginning of 2026, and certainly not a lengthy one that includes extensive verification mechanisms. A major issue of debate is whether China, France and the UK will also have to be involved in the next round of negotiations.

No treaties exist with respect to sub-strategic (or tactical) nuclear weapons. While the Partial Test Ban Treaty that prohibits testing in the atmosphere is still in place, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996) never entered into force because eight states (including the US and China) still refuse to ratify it. Russia 'de-ratified' it in 2023. The most successful arms control agreements are arguably the nuclear weapon free zone treaties (like those in Latin-America and Africa), some of which date back to the 1960s.

All in all, the result of arms control is very meagre. Unless the war in Ukraine comes to a halt soon, the prospect for arms control looks very dire. A similar assessment can be made with respect to global nuclear disarmament. While the numbers are still very high (12,000), until recently the numbers at least slightly declined. Since 2023, however, the numbers have started going up again, mainly due to the rising numbers in China.

*Negative security guarantees*

Negative security guarantees are assurances by the nuclear weapon states not to attack non-nuclear weapon states with nuclear weapons. There is, however, no progress with respect to making these negative security guarantees legally binding, an old request by the non-allied non-nuclear weapon states.

While the nuclear non-proliferation regime has certainly made a positive difference, a state that is eager to acquire nuclear weapons can do so. If North Korea is able to produce nuclear weapons, many other countries (including Iran) could do so as well.

The only sustainable solution is to make an equal playing field. There are only two options: a world where all states that are eager to have nuclear weapons are allowed to do so; or a world without nuclear weapons. Most will agree that the second option is the best. However, as long as no serious steps are taken in that direction, the trend will be towards more proliferation.

The only sustainable solution is to make an equal playing field. There are only two options: a world where all states that are eager to have nuclear weapons are allowed to do so; or a world without nuclear weapons. Most will agree that the second option is the best.

To explain why some states (in contrast to others) are able to acquire nuclear weapons requires a detailed analysis of the domestic political scene of the potential proliferator (Tabatabai 2020) as well of that of the hegemon and its allies that aim to prevent it.

*Coercive diplomacy*

Once a state has embarked on a nuclear program, other states can try to halt it. This can take the form of non-coercive or coercive diplomacy (including economic sanctions), grey zone war, or preventive war.

States can try to convince proliferators to halt their nuclear programs by using diplomacy in the form of carrots and sticks. In case of threatening the use of sticks, such as economic sanctions, we speak of coercive diplomacy (George 1997; Sauer 2007). If economic sanctions do not work, one could enter the realm of grey zone war including cyberattacks, assassinations of nuclear scientists, and small-scale attacks against nuclear facilities. Lastly, states could launch a large-scale preventive war to prevent another state to acquire nuclear weapons.

**Case-study: Iran**

Iran's military nuclear program dates back from the Shah in the 1970s. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the program was put on the backburner until Iraq attacked Iran with chemical weapons. It got a further boost under the moderate President Khatami at the end of the 1990s. The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), one of the opposition groups, revealed its existence in 2002. Since then, the program has been the subject of international controversy. Recently, Israel carried out what it had threatened to do for a long time, namely bombing Iran's main nuclear facilities (Natanz and Isfahan). The US joined the fight by bombing the Fordow site with bunker busters.

*Coercive diplomacy succeeded in concluding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*

Interestingly, it was the EU – or rather, France, the UK and Germany – that took the initiative to start negotiations with Iran in 2003 (Sauer 2007). The two agreements with the EU were not a success. In 2006, the Iranian file moved from the IAEA to the UN Security Council, resulting in economic sanctions. But it was only after the imposition of harsh unilateral economic sanctions by the US followed by the EU in the period 2010-2012 that coercive diplomacy seemed to have impact. Presidential candidate Rohani was elected in 2013 on the basis of starting negotiations with the international community to get rid of the economic sanctions. That is also what happened. An Interim Agreement was signed between Iran and the EU-3+3 (France, Germany, the UK plus the US, Russia and China) or the P-5 + 1 (the UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany) in 2013. Two years later in 2015, the Obama administration took the lead with the support of Oman in a mediating role, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – better known as the Iranian nuclear deal – was signed.

The JCPOA limited the civilian nuclear program of Iran substantially (in terms of percentage of enrichment, number of centrifuges), while at the same time suspending the economic sanctions, albeit with a snap-back clause in case Iran violated the agreement. The limitations were set to come to a halt after ten or fifteen-years' time, depending on the measure (= sunset clauses). The result was that the break-out time, the time that Iran needed to make a nuclear weapon in secret, would be extended to a year. Overall, this was heralded as a very good agreement.

Critics like Trump (in the opposition at that time) did not like the 'sunset clauses' and the fact that the scope was limited to the nuclear program, while issues like the Iranian missile program as well as its regional policy of supporting proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas were not covered by the deal.
The implementation on the JCPOA, however, was more difficult than foreseen. Western and especially European firms that were interested in resuming trade and investment with Iran were hampered by remaining unilateral US sanctions.

*The JCPOA became more or less irrelevant*
In May 2018, President Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Agreement. As a matter of good will, Iran continued to abide to the agreement for one year. In the meantime, the EU was unable and/or unwilling to rescue the JCPOA. European firms were threatened with secondary sanctions by the US (being cut-off the US market) if they traded with Iran. In June 2019, Iran gradually started violating the Agreement. President Trump had promised to make a better deal with Iran, but that never came to fruition. At the end of Trump's first presidency, Iran stood much closer to the bomb than in the period before the JCPOA.
After the first Trump administration, one could have expected that the JCPOA would have been rejuvenated. But both President Rohani and President Biden played hard-ball, which led to no concrete progress. When the more conservative Raisi government came to power in the summer of 2021, the JCPOA became more or less irrelevant (Mousavian 2023; Sauer 2024). Iran continued working on its nuclear program.
In the meantime, President Trump has been re-elected and had re-started negotiations with Iran in the Spring of 2025. However, after the fourth round of negotiations, Israel started a large-scale bombing campaign against the Iranian nuclear facilities. President Trump joined the attacks by bombing the Fordow site with bunker busters. It is unclear to what extent the Iranian program has been destroyed. Most observers seem to believe that the program was not 'obliterated' but only delayed by months or a maximum of one or two years (in contrast to what President Trump has stated)(Davenport 2025). In all likelihood, Iran had hidden its highly-enriched uranium in a secret location, has since recuperated some or many of its gas centrifuges, and can always rebuild gas centrifuges and enrich uranium again. Knowledge cannot be bombed.

**The future: two scenarios**
The most likely state to become the tenth nuclear-armed state is Iran. That said, writing in August 2025, the outcome remains uncertain. There is still a window of opportunity to prevent Iran from going nuclear. The main reason why this window is closing has to do with the JCPOA. Some of the sunset clauses will come to a halt in October 2025, ten years after the entry into force of the JCPOA. Thereafter Iran will have more freedom to build the bomb. Until then, the parties to the agreement have the possibility to invoke the so-called snapback mechanisms that will reimpose the previously installed UN sanctions. The EU parties – France, the UK and Germany – have already threatened to do so. In turn, Iran has threatened to leave the NPT if such sanctions were implemented. After the bombings by Israel and the US in June 2025, the Iranian parliament proposed to suspend the cooperation with the IAEA, and more voices in Teheran demand the government to leave the NPT. If that were to happen, Iran would have its hand untied to build nuclear weapons, at least after a three-month waiting period. There remain basically two scenarios.

*Scenario one: Iran acquires nuclear weapons*
From a Realist point of view, the odds are that Iran will build nuclear weapons for reasons of security and power. Iran is situated in a geopolitically unstable environment. It was attacked by Iraq in 1980 (including by chemical weapons). During that war hundreds of thousands of Iranians died. The theocratic regime is an arch rival of both Israel and the US (and vice versa) that both possess nuclear weapons and preventively bombed Iran in 2025. Sunnite Saudi Arabia is another regional enemy (although the relations have improved over the last few years). Within this context, it is understandable that Iran is looking for means to survive. The Iranian leaders notice that similar regimes without nuclear weapons – more in particular Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – have been attacked by the US. Similar regimes with nuclear weapons – North Korea and Pakistan – have been spared. The message that thrives in Teheran is as follows: a nuclear-armed state will not be attacked (or the idea that nuclear deterrence is effective). At the same time, the nuclear club remains relatively small. Possessing nuclear weapons seems to yield prestige, status, and therefore power to the nuclear-armed states, both vis-à-vis neighbouring states without nuclear weapons as well as vis-à vis its own people. In addition, there are powerful advocates of a nuclear weapon within the regime. Many of the Guards and other conservatives in Iran are in favour of building the bomb, even more so after the Israeli and US bombings. They identify themselves with the Islamic revolution and at the same time they have material self-interests related to the economic sanctions via the so-called black market. They argue that the country has already invested a lot of money, personnel, and opportunity costs (due to the sanctions) in the nuclear program, and make the point that to abandon it now would be hard to explain to the Iranian people.

The current geostrategic circumstances are not in favour of Iran, which yield additional arguments for the advocates of the bomb.

The current geostrategic circumstances are not in favour of Iran, which yield additional arguments for the advocates of the bomb. Since the attack of Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2023, many of the Iranian proxies have been harshly attacked and partly decimated by Israel: Hamas and Hezbollah. Indirectly, also, the Assad regime in Syria came to a halt. Even the relationship with neighbouring Iraq is weakening. Even before bombing the nuclear facilities in Iran in June 2025, Israel had attacked both the Iranian nuclear programme (by cyberwarfare – Stuxnet – and kinetic attacks against nuclear facilities and nuclear scientists) as well as its air defence system. Iran is therefore more isolated and insecure than ever. That applies even more after the large-scale bombings of its nuclear facilities whereby high-level Iranian military and nuclear scientists have been killed as well. All this provides additional arguments for the domestic advocates of the bomb.
Furthermore, the international community is less united vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear program than in the period before the conclusion of the JCPOA. Iran has become an ally of Russia in the war in Ukraine, providing drones and missiles; and China jumped into the Iranian (oil and gas) market as a result of the Western sanctions against Iran. It is therefore still unclear to what extent China and especially Russia will play a similar constructive role

in preventing a nuclear Iran in comparison with the period of the JCPOA. That said, neither Russia nor China actively helped Iran when it was being bombed by Israel and the US.

Last but not least, the nuclear programme has advanced so far that Iran is currently believed to have enough fissile material for at least nine atomic bombs. It can easily and quickly step up the enrichment level from 60 to 90%, the level needed for having bomb-graded material. The time that is needed to weaponise is uncertain. Some believe it could be limited to a couple of months.

*Scenario two: nuclear diplomacy succeeds*

It seems that the theocratic regime since the mid-1980s, which is building upon the ambition and infrastructure already set up by the Shah, at least wants to have everything ready to build the bomb if needed. That said, the Iranian program can hardly be described as a sprint to the bomb (Narang 2016/2017). The main reason for this delay is not technical, but political: the Iranian elite is split on the issue. Moderates may have (more) moral and religious qualms (including Ayatollah Khamenei's Fatwa against the bomb)(Golkar 2025) and want to use the nuclear program for bargaining reasons, e.g. to get rid of the economic sanctions. They see short-term opportunities to open up the Iranian economy, and as a result bring welfare to the people. In doing so, they hope to stabilise the theocratic regime, which remains the ultimate goal of the regime, including the goal of the moderates.

The Iranian program can hardly be described as a sprint to the bomb. The main reason for this delay is not technical, but political: the Iranian elite is split on the issue.

There is currently a moderate president in charge in Iran, President Pezeshkian, while in the US President Trump has started his second term. Donald Trump pleaded for negotiations with Iran during his second presidential campaign. The latter corresponds to his image of being a president that prefers to stop instead of starting wars. Trump sees himself as a dealmaker. One recalls his two meetings with the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in his first term, even though the latter did not lead to a peace agreement. Being characterised as narcistic, he undoubtedly will be proud if he is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. All this may explain his tendency to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis by negotiations. On the other hand, he is also known for being impatient, as is demonstrated by the limited (in time) but heavy US bombings on Fordow in June 2025. Earlier on, President Trump signed a presidential memorandum on 4 February 2025 to put maximum pressure on Iran (in contrast to President Biden). That said, while signing it, he stated again that he wanted to make a deal (Parsi 2025). He sent another letter in the beginning of March 2025 in which he proposed to start up negotiations and finish them in 60 days. Iran and the US have sat together in Oman. Afterwards, both parties stated that the talks had been constructive (Hernandez 2025). Then, the bombings took place. Many observers believe that it will be the death knell of the negotiations (Allison 2025). Remarkably, the Trump administration was interested in starting up negotiating again in the summer of 2025. Sceptics argue that such negotiations will provide time for Iran to restore its nuclear program after the bombings. Optimists believe that there is still a window of opportunity for a limited deal, comparable to the interim deal of 2013 (Nephew / Tabatabai 2025; Einhorn 2025; Nasr 2025). Possible elements of such a deal are: restrictions of the nuclear program (including low levels of enrichment, a maximum number of centrifuges, no reprocessing, and a prohibition on weaponisation) and renewed IAEA inspections, in exchange of suspending the economic sanctions. One last caveat is that the possibility to install snapback sanctions against Iran ends in October 2025 as part of the JCPOA. The E3 – France, Germany, and the UK – initiated the process to snap back UN sanctions at the end of August 2025 because there was no progress with respect to the negotiations between the US and Iran. The procedure is that there is a 30-day window before snapback is finalised. The hope is that an interim agreement with Iran can be reached before the end of September 2025 (Geranmayeh 2025). However, in case this strategy fails, and the UN and EU sanctions are reimposed, the odds are that Iran will leave the NPT, which increases the chances that it will build the bomb.

**Conclusion**

Sustainable nuclear non-proliferation equals nuclear weapons elimination. In the meantime, a vibrant non-proliferation regime and a less turbulent world could limit the number of proliferators. Unfortunately, the nuclear non-proliferation regime is in tatters, and the world is turbulent.

Iran is on the cusp of finalising its decades-old nuclear programme and acquiring nuclear weapons. The bombings by Israel and the US are not a game-changer. Knowledge cannot be bombed. Iran will always be able to restart its nuclear program, depending on the external environment as well as domestic politics, both in Iran and beyond. Even in case the regime implodes, and Iran becomes a full-fletched democracy (which is unlikely in the short term), there is no guarantee that it will not produce atomic weapons. Democratically elected governments in South Korea and Poland, to name only those two, are currently playing with the idea of building the bomb as well.

The only sustainable solution, as explained in the first part of the article, is to start delegitimising nuclear weapons around the world with the objective to eliminate them by means of an international legally binding treaty signed by all states, both nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed. The latter is also an obligation under the NPT. The TPNW could be used or a Nuclear Weapons Convention could be negotiated. Only in that case will the odds be that Iran will not build the bomb.

---

**References**

Abe, Nobuyasu (2020): The NPT at fifty: successes and failures. In: Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament, 3(2), 224-233.

Allison, David (14 July 2025): Why Force Fails to Stop Nuclear Proliferation. In: Foreign Affairs. *https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-force-fails-stop-nuclear-proliferation*. Viewed 11 July 2025.

Borger, Julian (21 September 2023): Crown Prince confirms Saudi Arabia will seek nuclear arsenal if Iran develops one. In: The Guardian, *https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/21/crown-prince-confirms-saudi-arabia-seek-nuclear-arsenal-iran-develops-one*. Viewed 11 July 2025.

Davenport, Kelsey (9 July 2025): Iran's nuclear program after the strikes: What's left and what's next In: Arms Control Association Issue Brief, 17(4). *https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2025-07/irans-nuclear-program-after-strikes-whats-left-and-whats-next*. Viewed on 11 July 2025.

Eisenstadt, Michael (2025): Attacking Iran's nuclear program. In: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Notes, 157. *https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyNote157Eisenstadt.pdf*.

Deutsch, Karl / Singer, Peter (1964): Multipolar Systems and International Stability. In: World Politics, 16(3), 390-406.

Einhorn, Robert (29 August 2025): The Path to a God-Enough Iran Deal. In: Foreign Affairs. *https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/path-good-enough-iran-deal*. Viewed 29 August 2025.

England, Andrew / Bozorgmehr, Najmeh (31 March 2025): Is Iran on a collision course with the West? In: Financial Times, 15.

England, Andrew / Bozorgmehr, Najmeh / Schwartz, Felicia (21 June 2023): Halting Iran's nuclear march. In: The Financial Times.

George, Alexander (1997): Forceful persuasion: coercive diplomacy as an alternative to war. Washington DC: US Institute of Peace.

Geranmayeh, Ellie (21 July 2025): Snap out of it: Europe, Iran and nuclear negotiations; In: ECFR Commentary. *https://ecfr.eu/article/snap-out-of-it-europe-iran-and-nuclear-negotiations/*.

Golkar, Saeid (11 February 2025): Khamenei's nuclear fatwa: religious ruling or political strategy? In: Norwich Blog. *https://www.norwich.edu/topic/all-blog-posts/khameneis-nuclear-fatwa-religious-ruling-or-political-strategy*. Viewed 11 July 2025.

Hernandez, Michael Gabriel (15 April 2025): Trump thanks Omani sultan for facilitating Iran talks. In: Anadolu Ajani. *https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/trump-thanks-omani-sultan-for-facilitating-iran-talks/3539335*. Viewed 21 April 2025.

Hirsh, Michael (11 April 2025): Trump may be triggering the fastest nuclear weapons race since the Cold War. In: Politico. *https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/04/11/trump-says-he-fears-nuclear-weapons-so-why-is-he-making-them-more-popular-00278790*.

Horovitz, Liviu (2015): Beyond Pessimism: Why the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons will not collapse. In: Journal of Strategic Studies, 38(1-2), 126-158.

Meyer, Paul / Sauer, Tom (2018): The Nuclear Ban Treaty: A sign of global impatience. In: Survival, 60(2), 61-72.

Mousavian, Sayed Hossein (2023): The rise and fall of the joint comprehensive plan of action. In: Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, September, 32-47.

Narang, Vipin (2016/2017): Strategies for nuclear proliferation. In: International Security, 41(3), 110-150.

Nasr, Vali (2025): Iran's Roads Not Taken. In: Foreign Affairs, September-October, 104(5), 122-135.

Nephew, Richard / Tabatabai, Ariane (4 February 2025): Trump has a rare and short window to solve the Iran problem – here's how. In: War on the Rocks. *https://warontherocks.com/2025/02/trump-has-a-rare-and-short-window-to-solve-the-iran-problem-heres-how/*. Viewed on 4 February 2025.

Parsi, Trita (4 March 2025): Trump's narrow Iran window is closing. In: Responsible Statecraft. *https://quincyinst.org/2025/03/04/trumps-narrow-iran-window-is-closing/*. Viewed on 10 March 2025.

Perot, Elie (20 March 2025): Revisiting deterrence: towards a French nuclear umbrella over Europe? In: CSDS Policy Brief 6/2025. *https://csds.vub.be/publication/revisiting-deterrence-towards-a-french-nuclear-umbrella-over-europe/*.

Pretorius, Joelien / Sauer, Tom (2021): Ditch the NPT. In: Survival, 63(4), 103-124.

Sauer, Tom (2025): Concerts and collective security: A more stable security order than balance of power. In: Atanassova-Cornelis, Elena / Sato, Yoichiro / Sauer, Tom (eds.): Security Order and Strategic Alignment in Europa and the Asia-Pacific. Times of Global Power Shifts. London: Routledge, 73-88.

Sauer, Tom (2024): The failed negotiations to restore the Iran nuclear deal. In: Global Policy, 15(4), 583-592.

Sauer, Tom (2017): The origins of the Ukraine crisis and the need for collective security between Russia and the West. In: Global Policy, 8(1), 177-181.

Sauer, Tom (2007): Coercive diplomacy by the EU: The Iranian nuclear weapons crisis. In: Third World Quarterly, 28(3), 613-633.

Sauer, Tom (2006): The nuclear non-proliferation regime in crisis. In: Peace Review, 18(3), 333-340.

Sauer, Tom (1998): Nuclear Arms Control. London: Macmillan.

Tabatabai, Ariane (2020): Nuclear decision-making in Iran. In: Center on Global Energy Policy paper, Columbia University.

Tannenwald, Nina (2024): The nuclear non-proliferation regime as a 'failed promise'. In: Global Studies Quarterly, 4(2).

*Tom Sauer, Universiteit Antwerpen (Belgium). Tom's major research interest is nuclear proliferation, arms control, and disarmament. He published an EU non-proliferation and disarmament paper in December 2024 titled 'The potentially revolutionary impact of emerging and disruptive technologies and strategic conventional weapons on the nuclear deterrence debate'.*

*Email: tom.sauer@uantwerpen.be*