



RCAS Commentary

Iran Crisis And The Nuclear Question In Global Security

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About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

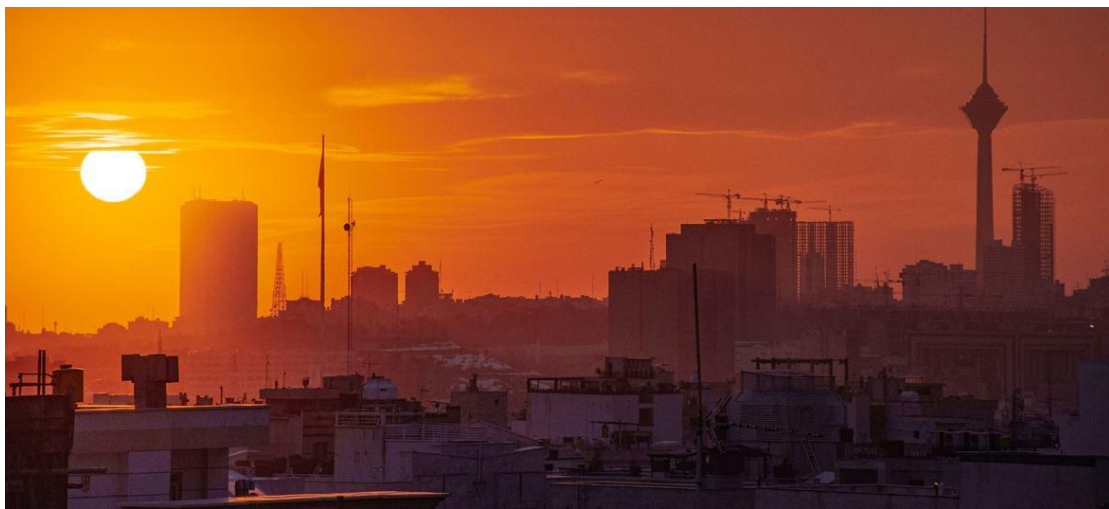
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The international nuclear debate has recently become central to global security discussions due to the Iran crisis. The main reason given in Washington for supporting military action against Iran is clear: to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. However, this preventive approach may actually be accelerating the very outcome it seeks to avoid—an increase in nuclear ambitions in already unstable regions.



▲ Unsplash/Hosein Charbaghi Tehran, the capital of Iran, where more than 500 civilians are reported killed since Israeli and U.S. strikes began on Saturday, sparking retaliatory attacks across the region.

The most important crisis problem is the nuclear program of Iran. A recent report by the International Atomic Energy Agency showed that Iran was stocked with over 408 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent. This reserve can be further enhanced to provide adequate material for various nuclear warheads. Coupled with the possession of approximately 2500 ballistic missiles, the largest in the Persian Gulf region, the military capability of Iran has taken over the top of the list of Western policymakers. Also, Tehran has been sponsoring armed groups in the region, which again enhances the perception of the Iranian nation as an unstable body, which again justifies the sound action in the minds of its detractors.

Such an opinion was condensed by the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, who noted that Iran should at no time be allowed to develop the capacity to possess nuclear weapons by arguing that once such an attainment is made, it would be impossible to bring peace in the Middle East. According to this view, military

intervention is not aggression, but it is imperative. This argument, however, has a fundamental premise: that coercive power can be used to prevent nuclear proliferation without unintended consequences. History suggests otherwise.

The Iranian facilities of ballistic missiles have been severely damaged by the recent American and Israeli attacks. Nevertheless, rather than undermining the Tehran drive to build a nuclear program, such attacks would have strengthened it. The search for nuclear weapons can become increasingly crucial to the survival of a state that has been the victim of military attacks many times, even during the negotiation. Nuclear deterrence, in this sense, is not a strategic choice but a feeling of existential need.

This is not an unfamiliar practice in Iran. Other states have also received a clear indication from the crisis, especially those already in the process of overcoming the intricate security dilemma. Kim Jong Un has publicly used the case of Iran to demonstrate why North Korea does not have to disarm itself. The case is self-explanatory: disarmament does not necessarily lead to security in a world where even the most powerful countries can abandon their diplomatic commitments. In 2018, the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), reinforced this impression. It demonstrated that its reliance even on agreements with Washington could be subject to internal political changes, therefore undermining their legitimacy.

Besides the enemies, opponents, and even the allies, the U.S. neutral states are also reconsidering their security policies in response to the Iranian crisis. This situation in Europe has been aggravated by political uncertainty and a shifting tactical focus on American interests, alongside the old skepticism about American pledges in Europe. As countries have tried to hedge against the risk of Russian attacks and also the potential withdrawal of the U.S., there has been a growing clamor in the debate over new defense structures, not tied to NATO.

South Asia has a strong nuclear deterrence. India, as well as Pakistan, which have both acquired nuclear power, does not appear to alter its mind, particularly following the recent border confrontations. Their experiences bring to the fore a larger picture: once the states acquire nuclear potential, they are unlikely to renounce it as a political and strategic measure.

East Asia may be the region undergoing the greatest change. The growing tensions in the Korean Peninsula and the growing aggressiveness of China on issues concerning Taiwan have revived the debate about nuclear weapons. The South Koreans have also shown a massive interest in the production of native nuclear bombs that have never been experienced in history because of the fear of relying on the U.S nuclear umbrella. On the same topic, Japan, which has a different history as the only country to experience nuclear attacks, is only beginning to feel its way in the new security

conditions. The shift in the discourse is progressive, as officials and security representatives have stated that it is time to redefine nuclear options.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the civilian nuclear infrastructure is high in Japan. The amounts of uranium and plutonium are also large, and thus, the technical obstacles to weaponization are not large either. A move in that direction would have far-reaching regional implications, particularly to China, which has already dismissed the idea of nuclear Japan. Taiwan is another probable point of conflict. Though it did so long ago under U.S. pressure, it had to abandon its secret nuclear program, but the evolving situation in global security may raise questions about the concept of strategic self-sufficiency.

Even the countries that were never put in the nuclear discussion are not absolutely safe. In Australia, the situation that was once believed to be far-fetched, like the purchase of nuclear weapons, is addressed, but with a narrow scope. This is the totality of the anxiety posed by the Iran crisis and its consequences for world security.

Altogether, these events suggest that the Iran crisis is not the first of its kind but part of something larger: a change in the world nuclear status quo. The major objective has been to make sure that Iran is not equipped with nuclear weapons, but the net effect has been that the normative and institutional structures of the basis of non-proliferation are undermined. These questions have been raised regarding the plausibility of security guarantees, the reliability of the international contract, and the effectiveness of the coercive actions.

First, the crisis's main dilemma is whether the end justifies the means of using force to achieve non-proliferation. Such an event could pave the way for a new nuclear age, not repressive, but spreading as more states recognize nuclear weapons as alternatives to ensure survival.

The irony is clear. Iran had no conclusive intentions to develop the nuclear bomb. However, attempts to avoid this scenario have heightened the incentives for Iran and others to take the same direction. Such a contradiction shows the weakness of a security paradigm that prioritizes short-term risk above long-term stability.

In conclusion, the Iranian crisis has made the nuclear issue global rather than regional. It has demonstrated the instability of the current non-proliferation regimes and illustrated the insecurity that characterizes international relations in the contemporary world. The need for nuclear deterrence will continue to grow as other states doubt the credibility of external security guarantees. It must not only have power, but also credibility, consistency, and a fresh determination to continue with diplomacy to thwart further proliferation. In their absence, the world will be at risk of sliding into a

new, unknown era where nuclear weapons will no longer be an exception but a reality, which is far worse than what the policy-makers are trying to prevent.

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