Fritts Johnson

Dr. Brad Clarke

AP Comparative Government

25 May 2025

Preventing a Nuclear Iran Through Multilateral Diplomacy and Soft Power

For more than twenty years, the United States and its allies have struggled with the same foreign policy problem: how can the world prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons without creating another major conflict in the Middle East? Some policymakers argue that Iran cannot be trusted with any nuclear technology and that military action may eventually be necessary. Others argue that Iran has the same right as every other signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop civilian nuclear energy. Neither side is completely wrong. Iran's nuclear activities raise legitimate concerns about proliferation, but completely denying Iran access to peaceful nuclear technology would undermine the international system designed to regulate nuclear energy in the first place. The United States should pursue a multilateral foreign policy based on soft power by allowing Iran to maintain a civilian nuclear energy program under strict international oversight while preventing the development of nuclear weapons through diplomacy, inspections, and targeted economic pressure. Although diplomacy can be frustratingly slow, it offers a more realistic and sustainable solution than military intervention.

Much of the modern debate surrounding Iran's nuclear program can be traced back to the complicated history between Iran and the United States. During the Cold War, Iran was one of America's closest allies in the Middle East. The United States supported Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi politically, economically, and militarily. Through President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace initiative, the

United States even helped Iran begin developing civilian nuclear technology (Robinson). At the time, Washington viewed Iran as an important partner in containing Soviet influence throughout the region.

That relationship changed dramatically in 1979. The Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah and replaced his government with the Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Robinson). Later that year, Iranian students stormed the American embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two Americans hostage for 444 days (Robinson). The hostage crisis fundamentally reshaped relations between the two countries. Many Americans began viewing Iran as a hostile adversary, while Iranian leaders increasingly defined their government through resistance to Western influence. More than four decades later, that distrust continues to shape negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.

Iran's political system also makes the issue more complicated than many Americans realize. Unlike a traditional dictatorship, political power in Iran is divided among several competing institutions. Citizens elect a president and parliament, but ultimate authority rests with the Supreme Leader. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also holds enormous influence over national security and significant portions of the economy. As a result, foreign policy decisions are rarely controlled by a single political actor. Even when elected officials support diplomatic engagement, powerful unelected institutions may have different priorities. This helps explain why negotiations with Iran often move slowly and why agreements can be difficult to maintain over time.

Religion adds another layer of complexity. Iran is a Shi'a Islamic republic, and many of its leaders see themselves as defenders of Shi'a communities throughout the Middle East. This identity influences Iran's relationships with groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and contributes to its rivalry with Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia. For this reason, Iran's nuclear program cannot be separated from broader regional politics. Questions about nuclear technology are also questions about security, influence, and power within the Middle East.

Despite these concerns, Iran's interest in civilian nuclear energy is not inherently unreasonable. Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, countries are permitted to develop peaceful nuclear technology so long as they do not pursue nuclear weapons ("Monitoring and Verification"). Iran argues that nuclear energy can help diversify its economy, meet future electricity demands, and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Critics often point out that Iran possesses some of the largest oil and natural gas reserves in the world, making nuclear power appear unnecessary. However, the issue is more complicated than that. Domestic energy consumption continues to rise, and every barrel of oil used at home is a barrel that cannot be exported abroad. Civilian nuclear energy could allow Iran to generate electricity while preserving valuable fossil fuel exports.

Nuclear energy also offers environmental benefits that are often overlooked in discussions about Iran. Unlike coal, oil, and natural gas, nuclear power produces very little greenhouse-gas emissions during operation. Many countries view nuclear energy as an important tool for reducing carbon emissions while maintaining reliable electricity production. This matters because Iran faces serious environmental challenges. Droughts, water shortages, rising temperatures, and declining agricultural productivity have become increasingly common throughout the country. In recent years, environmental pressures have contributed to protests and economic instability. While nuclear power will not solve all of Iran's environmental problems, it can provide a low-carbon source of energy that supports long-term economic development.

The problem is not nuclear power itself. The problem is enrichment. The same technology used to create fuel for civilian reactors can also be used to produce material for nuclear weapons. Most civilian reactors require uranium enriched to only three to five percent purity. Nuclear weapons generally require enrichment levels approaching ninety percent ("IAEA Investigations"). According to reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran has accumulated uranium enriched well beyond levels typically necessary for civilian energy production ("Monitoring and Verification"). Although this does not prove

Iran intends to build a nuclear weapon, it significantly reduces the time required to produce weapons-grade material if such a decision were made.

The consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran would extend far beyond Iran itself. The greatest danger may not be a direct nuclear conflict but the possibility of a regional arms race. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly suggested that it would pursue nuclear capabilities if Iran successfully developed nuclear weapons. Turkey and Egypt could face similar pressures. Such a development would weaken the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and increase the risk of future conflicts involving nuclear-armed states. The Middle East is already one of the most politically unstable regions in the world. Adding several new nuclear powers would only make future crises more dangerous.

Iran's nuclear ambitions are also connected to several ongoing regional conflicts. Iran supports Hezbollah in Lebanon, backs the Assad government in Syria, and provides assistance to Houthi forces in Yemen. Tensions between Iran and Israel have increased substantially since the outbreak of the Gaza war. Each of these conflicts influences the others. Israeli leaders fear that a nuclear-capable Iran could embolden regional proxy groups. Saudi Arabia worries about growing Iranian influence throughout the region. Meanwhile, Iran views American military presence and Israeli military power as threats to its own security. Because these conflicts are interconnected, solving the nuclear issue requires more than simply limiting enrichment levels. Policymakers must address broader regional security concerns as well.

Some analysts argue that military action represents the only reliable way to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. They often point to Israel's successful strike against Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 or its attack on a suspected Syrian nuclear facility in 2007. These examples show that military force can delay nuclear programs under certain circumstances. However, Iran presents a very different challenge. Its facilities are spread across multiple locations, protected by sophisticated defenses, and supported by decades of scientific expertise. Airstrikes might destroy infrastructure, but they cannot destroy knowledge. In fact, military action could strengthen hardline factions inside Iran and convince

leaders that nuclear weapons are necessary for national survival. A policy intended to prevent proliferation could ultimately accelerate it.

A more effective strategy would rely on multilateral diplomacy and soft power. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015, demonstrated that negotiated restrictions could significantly limit Iran's nuclear activities while avoiding war (Robinson). Although the agreement had flaws, it successfully reduced enrichment levels, limited stockpiles of enriched uranium, and expanded international inspections. A revised version of the agreement should build on those successes. Iran should be allowed to maintain a civilian nuclear energy program, but only under strict inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Enrichment levels should remain capped, inspections should be expanded, and sanctions should automatically return if Iran violates the agreement. In exchange, Iran would receive gradual sanctions relief and greater access to international markets.

This approach reflects both multilateralism and soft power. Rather than acting alone, the United States should work alongside European allies, the United Nations, and the International Atomic Energy Agency. International institutions are not perfect, but they provide transparency, legitimacy, and accountability that unilateral military action cannot. More importantly, diplomacy allows countries to pursue their interests without creating another costly conflict. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated how difficult it is to achieve long-term political goals through military force alone. Policymakers should not assume that Iran would be any different.

The future of Iran's nuclear program will affect far more than one country. It will influence whether international agreements can still prevent nuclear proliferation in an increasingly unstable world. If diplomacy succeeds, it could strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, reduce tensions across the Middle East, and demonstrate that international cooperation remains possible even between longtime adversaries. If diplomacy fails, the result could be a regional arms race that makes future conflicts far more dangerous. Iran should be allowed to pursue peaceful nuclear energy, but the international

community must ensure that such technology never becomes a pathway to nuclear weapons. A multilateral strategy built on diplomacy, inspections, and accountability offers the best chance of achieving both goals.

Works Cited

Arms Control Association. “IAEA Investigations of Iran’s Nuclear Activities.” *Arms Control Association*, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/iaea-investigations-irans-nuclear-activities. Accessed 24 May 2026.

Arms Control Center. “Fact Sheet: The Iran Deal, Then and Now.” *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, https://armscontrolcenter.org/the-iran-deal-then-and-now/. Accessed 24 May 2026.

European External Action Service. “Nuclear Agreement – JCPOA.” *European Union External Action*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nuclear-agreement-%E2%80%93-jcpoa_en. Accessed 24 May 2026.

International Atomic Energy Agency. “IAEA Board Reports – Iran.” *International Atomic Energy Agency*, https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran/iaea-and-iran-iaea-board-reports. Accessed 24 May 2026.

International Atomic Energy Agency. “Monitoring and Verification in Iran.” *International Atomic Energy Agency*, https://www.iaea.org/topics/monitoring-and-verification-in-iran. Accessed 24 May 2026.

International Atomic Energy Agency. *NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran*. 31 May 2025, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/06/gov2025-25.pdf. Accessed 24 May 2026.

Robinson, Kali. “What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 Oct. 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/what-iran-nuclear-deal. Accessed 24 May 2026.

Samore, Gary, et al. *The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide*. *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2015,* https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstreams/7312037d-cbd5-6bd4-e053-0100007fdf3b/download. Accessed 24 May 2026.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).” *Britannica*, 6 Mar. 2026, https://www.britannica.com/event/Joint-Comprehensive-Plan-of-Action. Accessed 24 May 2026.

Warrick, Joby. “Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report.” *Institute for Science and International Security*, 31 May 2025, https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-may-2025. Accessed 24 May 2026.