

Power, Knowledge, and Nuclear Proliferation

Abdulqasem Bakhshi

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The modern international order increasingly struggles with the dual challenge of managing scientific knowledge and maintaining geopolitical stability. The debate over nuclear proliferation illustrates the difficulty of controlling a diffuse, cumulative capability that cannot easily be constrained through traditional military or coercive means. Iran's nuclear program, subjected to international inspections under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), offers a case study in both the possibilities and limitations of international oversight. While Iran accepted verification measures and limited enrichment, its treatment contrasts sharply with states such as Israel, India, and North Korea, which have pursued nuclear capabilities without the same degree of scrutiny. Understanding this inconsistency requires examining the formal rules, informal lessons, and the interplay of secrecy, privacy, and transparency in an environment shaped by mistrust.

The NPT was designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, promote peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and encourage eventual disarmament by nuclear-armed states. Compliance is expected to confer legitimacy and security, while violations attract sanctions or military pressure. In practice, however, enforcement has been uneven. Israel, which has never joined the NPT, maintains an undeclared nuclear capability. India, also outside the treaty framework, has openly tested nuclear weapons and entered into civilian nuclear agreements with other states. North Korea withdrew from the NPT and developed a nuclear arsenal in defiance of international norms. By contrast, Iran's transparency and compliance have not prevented sanctions, covert operations, or military threats. These discrepancies suggest that alignment with major powers and perceived threat levels may determine enforcement more than formal rules themselves.

From the perspective of the United States and several regional actors, Iran's nuclear program is not assessed in isolation but as part of a broader strategic posture that includes missile development, regional proxy relationships, and adversarial rhetoric toward neighboring states. Unlike Israel or India—whose nuclear trajectories are often interpreted within frameworks of deterrence against peer competitors—Iran is viewed by its critics as a revisionist actor capable of leveraging even latent nuclear capability to alter regional

balances. In this context, transparency measures, while technically valuable, are sometimes discounted when trust deficits persist and when verification is perceived as insufficient to constrain parallel strategic activities. As a result, enforcement asymmetries are often justified internally not as inconsistencies in rule application, but as risk-based prioritization shaped by threat perception, alliance commitments, and worst-case scenario planning. Whether or not this logic is ultimately sustainable or normatively defensible, it explains why Iran faces a higher evidentiary burden than other non-NPT or nuclear-armed states and why compliance alone has not translated into durable political normalization.

A series of informal lessons emerges from this pattern. First, allies receive exceptions; states closely aligned with powerful actors can face significantly lower enforcement pressure. Second, transparency without trust can be risky; inspection regimes may expose vulnerabilities if relationships are hostile or verification mechanisms are politicized. Third, capability changes strategic calculations; states that have developed sufficient expertise may face diminished external pressure due to the high risks associated with confrontation. Finally, rules are enforced selectively, reflecting power hierarchies rather than universal principles. These lessons, while implicit, shape state behavior and incentives more effectively than formal treaties alone.

Secrecy, privacy, and transparency are intimately connected in this context. Scientific knowledge is inherently cumulative and cannot be destroyed by external force. Transparency is necessary to verify compliance, but without trust it may expose vulnerabilities. Conversely, secrecy and privacy may appear suspect, yet for some states, they serve as mechanisms for survival, allowing research to continue without provoking preemptive intervention. In the case of Iran today, a return to clandestine nuclear development would carry a high probability of military escalation, with potentially catastrophic consequences. Under current strategic conditions, transparency therefore appears to be the least escalatory and most sustainable option, particularly when combined with a focus on limited civilian nuclear applications and parallel efforts to reduce strategic pressure. Such efforts may include diversification of energy sources, scientific collaboration, and regional engagement. While this approach does not eliminate external constraints, it reduces the likelihood of rapid escalation and preserves political space for longer-term adaptation.

Underlying this strategy is a recognition that domestic and international relationships are critical. Improving ties with neighboring states and the broader international community can reduce the perception of threat and create space for legitimate nuclear development under civilian oversight. As the adage goes: “A lone wolf cannot survive in a jungle.” Iran’s evolving political and institutional configuration, including the growing influence of security-oriented institutions relative to clerical authorities, may indicate a shift toward more centralized and pragmatic governance. From one perspective, this consolidation can facilitate policy implementation and strategic coherence. At the same time, it introduces new risks, including reduced institutional pluralism, increased exposure to sanctions targeting security actors, and heightened external skepticism. Managing these internal dynamics remains critical to avoiding civil unrest and preserving long-term adaptability. In the near term, most observable indicators point toward regime consolidation rather than widespread internal fragmentation. Despite ongoing economic pressures, Iran continues to exhibit relatively high levels of institutional capacity, administrative continuity, and elite coordination compared to fragile or conflict-prone states. However, longer-term stability remains sensitive to economic

performance, factional balance, and external pressure, and should not be treated as structurally guaranteed.

Iran can also examine aspects of Israel's experience, particularly the role of innovation, global partnerships, and soft-power projection in offsetting structural constraints, while recognizing that Israel's strategic environment, alliance network, and historical trajectory differ significantly and limit the direct transferability of its model. Iran, by contrast, operates under persistent global soft-power pressures—shaped by sanctions, reputational constraints, and regional tensions—that influence domestic decision-making and often compress policy time horizons in favor of short-term stabilization over long-term reform. A lone focus on ideological or isolated approaches risks creating a “fortress” mentality: insulated security may prevent immediate threats, but only durable relationships can reduce the likelihood of harm from external actors. A combined approach—fortress plus relationships—offers the potential to address complex domestic and international challenges more sustainably.

Challenging established global soft-power structures is difficult, requiring both institutional transformation and psychological adaptation at the national level. Iran has made steps to project cultural identity internationally, drawing on pre-Islamic heritage alongside modern state frameworks. Similarly, the relative rise of the IRGC may indicate a potential shift toward more pragmatic internal power dynamics, signaling opportunities for policy adaptation without destabilizing civil order. Sustainable progress requires careful balancing of domestic factions, avoidance of external interference advocating regime change, and the implementation of coordinated political, economic, and cultural strategies. Effective communication and trust-building remain central, as fragile relationships can evolve into more constructive, stable partnerships over time.

Several broader lessons emerge for policymakers:

1. Knowledge cannot be eliminated through coercion; incentives and verification matter more than punishment.
2. Consistency in the application of rules is crucial for credibility.
3. Relationships and trust shape intentions more effectively than technical limits alone.
4. Secrecy may protect research in insecure environments, but excessive opacity risks suspicion and escalation.
5. Inspection and verification regimes require long-term political durability to be effective.
6. Domestic political balance and institutional capacity are critical for sustainable strategy.
7. Soft-power management and pragmatic adaptation are essential to navigate global pressures and maintain autonomy.

In conclusion, the management of nuclear capability reveals the limits of coercive security approaches. Formal rules alone cannot ensure stability; outcomes depend on how power, transparency, and trust interact in practice. Iran's experience highlights both the constraints of the current system and the potential for risk reduction through pragmatic institutional balance and carefully managed transparency.