

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Iran and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

LTC René Berendsen, NLD Army, CCJ5-G (CSAG)

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.

1. **Subject:** Iran and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

2. **Purpose:** This paper presents the result of the CSAG's analysis of Iran's narrative surrounding a potential withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

3. **Introduction:**

The possibility of Iran withdrawing from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) represents one of the most serious threats to the international arms control order in decades. For over half a century, the NPT has served as the cornerstone of global non-proliferation efforts, seeking to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and preserve international security. Yet Iran, facing mounting external pressures and citing perceived violations of its sovereignty, has repeatedly signaled that it may no longer feel bound by its commitments. By situating Iran's response within the framework of the NPT, this paper explores the potential implication of Iran's possible withdrawal.

4. **The Non-Proliferation Treaty:**

- a. Against the backdrop of the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, U.S. President John F. Kennedy, in a 1963 News Conference said, "I see the possibility in the 1970's of the President of the United States having to face a world in which 15 or 20 or 25 nations may have these weapons. I regard that as the greatest possible danger and hazard."¹
- b. In 1968, the NPT was signed by several "nuclear-weapon State Parties" and "non-nuclear-weapon State Parties."² The NPT is equally written in five languages, and is made up of eleven articles. In general, the NPT contains 3 pillars:
 - (1) Non-proliferation: Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.
 - (2) Disarmament: Commitment by nuclear-armed countries to reduce their arsenals.
 - (3) Peaceful use: Allowing non-nuclear signatories to use nuclear energy for research and power, monitored by the International Atomic and Energy Agency (IAEA).
- c. North Korea is the only country that has formally withdrawn from the NPT, having announced its withdrawal in 2003 after previously suspending a withdrawal notice in 1993.³

5. Iran and the NPT:

- a. Iran signed the NPT in 1968 and became one of its original parties when the treaty entered into force in 1970.
- b. As a non-nuclear weapon state, Iran is prohibited from acquiring nuclear arms and from seeking or obtaining assistance in their development or production. Iran is obligated to accept IAEA safeguards, including international monitoring and inspections, on all of its peaceful nuclear activities. Accordingly, in 1974, Iran concluded a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the IAEA.⁴
- c. The IAEA Board of Governors has on two occasions determined that Iran failed to comply with its safeguards obligations.
 1. In 2005, because of Iran's extensive undeclared nuclear activities, including uranium enrichment.⁵
 2. In 2025, because Iran failed to provide credible explanations for traces of nuclear material discovered in 2019 and 2020 at three previously undeclared locations.⁶
 3. Not limited to the above mentioned, the "nuclear issues" with Iran eventually culminated in the E3 triggering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) snapback mechanism.⁷

6. Evolving Dynamics:

The current dynamic between Iran, the IAEA, and the U.S. reflects a cycle of confrontation, tactical compromise, and deep mistrust. Iran has swung between hardline moves, such as suspending cooperation with the IAEA, threatening to withdraw from the NPT, and declaring its refusal to abandon uranium enrichment, and limited concessions, such as agreeing to resume inspections under a technical deal with the IAEA.⁸ The U.S. and the E3 have responded with escalating pressure, exemplified by the E3's decision to trigger the JCPOA "snapback mechanism."⁹ The IAEA plays a mediating but fragile role, seeking to preserve oversight while navigating Iran's insistence on sovereignty and procedural control.¹⁰ Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei has drawn a firm line: Iran will not bow to external pressure or negotiate under current conditions, even while professing opposition to nuclear weapons.¹¹ This has created a precarious equilibrium where temporary technical arrangements coexist with entrenched political hostility, leaving the broader standoff unresolved and vulnerable to renewed crisis.

7. Potential Pathway If Iran Withdraws from the NPT:

- a. Loss of International Oversight/IAEA: Withdrawal would eliminate IAEA inspections and monitoring, drastically reducing transparency about Iran's nuclear activities.
- b. Use as Leverage for Negotiations: Iran may use the threat or actual withdrawal from the NPT as a bargaining tool to gain concessions such as sanctions relief or security guarantees. (the North Korean modus operandi)
- c. "Go for the Bomb": Freed from treaty constraints, Iran could pursue nuclear weapons development more aggressively, destabilizing the regional security environment.
- d. Proliferation: Iran's withdrawal could provoke regional countries to pursue their own nuclear capabilities, escalating regional tensions.

- e. Risk of Military Confrontation: Increased suspicion and fear of nuclear weapon development could lead to (renewed) preemptive strikes or military interventions against Iran.

8. Conclusion:

Current ambiguity around Iran's nuclear status is worsened by its suspension of IAEA inspections amid a deteriorating security environment compounded by advanced ballistic missile and space programs. At this stage, it remains unlikely that Iran will formally withdraw from the NPT, despite rising domestic pressures and the aftermath of the Twelve-Day War.

Drawing lessons from the North Korean precedent, Iran could use the NPT "umbrella" to cover its nuclear weapons acquisition plans by secretly soliciting technological support from allies such as China, Russia, or North Korea. This potential multilateral collaboration is dangerous for the future. It could significantly complicate the global strategic challenge Iran poses for the U.S. It would also undermine much of the international community's efforts to ensure nuclear nonproliferation in the Middle East and worldwide, complicating nonproliferation efforts and regional stability. Unchecked proliferation risks in Iran now sit at the nexus of U.S. deterrence and strategic competition, shaping CENTCOM's long-term battlespace. This threat cannot be resolved without a unified approach to political and military strategies with allies and partner nations in the region.

While none of the outcomes laid out here are a foredrawn conclusion, it is imperative we consider and plan for these possibilities. Otherwise, President Kennedy's dire prediction of rampant proliferation may well come to pass.

¹ President John F. Kennedy, “News Conference 52,” *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, March 21, 1963, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-52> (accessed September 23, 2025).

² United Nations, “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” July 1, 1968, <https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=08000002801d56c5> (accessed September 17, 2025).

³ Council on Foreign Relations, “1985–2024 North Korean Nuclear Negotiations,” <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations> (accessed September 25, 2025).

⁴ Mark Goodman and Mark Fitzpatrick, “What If Iran Withdraws From the NPT?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 25, 2025, <https://thebulletin.org/2025/06/what-if-iran-withdraws-from-the-npt/> (accessed September 22, 2025).

⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” September 24, 2005, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2005-77.pdf> (accessed September 22, 2025).

⁶ International Atomic Energy Agency, “NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran,” June 12, 2025, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2005-77.pdf> (accessed September 22, 2025).

⁷ Stephanie Liechtenstein, “Iran Faces ‘Snapback’ of Sanctions Over Its Nuclear Program. Here’s What That Means,” *Associated Press*, August 28, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-sanctions-snapback-nuclear-e3-explainer-49a5ccebbaeecc3578f3d19db318a42c> (accessed September 23, 2025).

⁸ Jashraj Sharma, “What is the NPT, and Why has Iran Threatened to Pull Out of the Treaty?” *Aljazeera*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/17/what-is-the-npt-and-why-has-iran-threatened-to-pull-out-of-the-treaty> (accessed September 22, 2025); Tom O’Connor, “Iran Considers Leaving Nuclear Treaty if Snapback Sanctions Triggered,” *Newsweek*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-considers-leaving-nuclear-treaty-if-snapback-sanctions-triggered-2102973> (accessed September 22, 2025).

⁹ Stephanie Liechtenstein, “Iran Faces ‘Snapback’ of Sanctions Over Its Nuclear Program. Here’s What That Means.”

¹⁰ United Nations, “IAEA / Iran Agreement,” September 10, 2025, <https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d344/d3446000> (accessed September 24, 2025).

¹¹ Vlad Schepkov, “Iran’s Khamenei Rejects Talks with U.S., Defends Uranium Enrichment,” *Yahoo!news*, September 23, 2025, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/iran-khamenei-rejects-talks-u-174739819.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGbxFTkrR3A1l6UugYPazcY-H0x_h4v4-UB4LhORjI34UA1UvLZjEp_pPpnRLkSkZCWNpCXMIhMhgri2xiB15OOeVzOzPxaY7HUyYZ-9HJ873U-2yEU2JLh59rPESNW_IreSF8zOEzTQLF8In2ZrundgTRR880ArSBSUOo2C_OP (accessed September 24, 2025).