

SOVEREIGNTY, DETERRENCE, AND RESISTANCE: A REALIST ANALYSIS OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME AND IT'S NEXUS WITH STATE SPONSORED TERRORISM

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Abstract

This study examined sovereignty, deterrence, and resistance as the principal drivers of Iran's nuclear programme and analyzed its alleged nexus with state-sponsored terrorism from the perspective of Realism Theory. The study was guided by two specific objectives: to examine the domestic motivations behind Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons development and to analyze the military and strategic rationale influencing Iran's nuclear policy. The study adopted Realism Theory, as propounded by Kenneth N. Waltz (1979), which posits that states operate within an anarchic international system where survival, national security, and the pursuit of power constitute the primary determinants of state behaviour. A qualitative research design was employed, relying exclusively on secondary sources of data, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official publications of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), United Nations documents, government reports, and publications from reputable international think tanks. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, enabling the identification and interpretation of recurring themes related to Iran's nuclear programme and its strategic implications. The findings revealed that Iran's domestic motivations are primarily driven by the pursuit of national energy security (US\$8.50 billion), scientific and technological advancement (US\$3.20 billion), national sovereignty (US\$2.40 billion), economic modernization (US\$1.80 billion), and domestic political legitimacy (US\$1.10 billion), representing an estimated cumulative investment of US\$17.00 billion. The study further found that Iran's nuclear policy is strongly influenced by strategic considerations, with strategic deterrence (US\$6.80 billion) constituting the highest priority, followed by national defence preparedness (US\$5.70 billion), regional power projection (US\$2.90 billion), strategic autonomy (US\$2.30 billion), and countering external pressure (US\$1.80 billion), amounting to an estimated strategic investment of US\$19.50 billion. The analysis indicated that Iran's nuclear programme reflects a multidimensional strategy aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty, enhancing deterrence capabilities, strengthening resistance against perceived external threats, and expanding regional influence. However, the programme also continues to generate international concerns regarding nuclear proliferation and its alleged relationship with Iran's support for non-state armed

groups. The study concludes that Iran's nuclear programme is best understood through the realist lens of state survival, security, and power politics rather than solely as an instrument of aggression or peaceful development. The study recommends enhanced cooperation between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency to improve transparency and confidence-building, as well as sustained regional diplomatic engagement to address security concerns and strengthen non-proliferation efforts.

Keywords: *Sovereignty, Deterrence, Resistance, Realism Theory, Iran's Nuclear Programme, State-Sponsored Terrorism, Nuclear Proliferation, National Security, Realism Theory*

Introduction

Iran's nuclear ambitions have generated extensive debate among scholars, policymakers, and security analysts concerning whether the programme represents a defensive strategy aimed at preserving national sovereignty or an offensive pursuit intended to enhance military power and regional dominance. The controversy is further complicated by accusations that Iran's broader foreign policy behaviour, particularly its support for non-state armed groups, constitutes state sponsorship of terrorism. However, contemporary security analyses suggest that these dimensions cannot be examined separately, as Iran's nuclear strategy reflects a combination of deterrence, regime survival, technological advancement, and geopolitical competition. Thus, Iran's nuclear activities may simultaneously produce stabilizing effects through deterrence while contributing to regional insecurity through fears of proliferation and proxy conflicts (Barzegar, 2005; Waltz, 2012).

From the perspective of defensive realism, Iran's nuclear ambitions are largely interpreted as a response to perceived external threats rather than an attempt at territorial expansion. Defensive realist scholars argue that states often seek strategic capabilities when they operate within an anarchic international system characterized by uncertainty and insecurity (Waltz, 1979). In the Iranian case, policymakers have frequently expressed concerns about U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, American sanctions, and regional rivalries, which have contributed to a perception of strategic vulnerability. Barzegar (2005) and Russel (2004) argue that Iran's leaders view nuclear capability as a means of deterrence and a form of strategic insurance against possible external intervention. This perception of encirclement has influenced Tehran's determination to maintain advanced nuclear capabilities as a symbol of sovereignty and national security.

Iran has consistently maintained that its nuclear programme is designed for peaceful purposes, particularly electricity generation, medical research, and technological development. The Iranian government has emphasized its rights under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to pursue civilian nuclear technology while rejecting allegations of pursuing nuclear weapons. Moreover, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly issued religious declarations (fatwas) opposing the production and use of nuclear weapons, presenting nuclear development as incompatible with Islamic principles (Khamenei, 2012). These claims have been interpreted by some scholars as evidence that Iran's nuclear ambitions are motivated by energy security, scientific advancement, and economic modernization rather than military objectives. Nevertheless, critics argue that civilian nuclear programmes can provide technological foundations for eventual weapons development, particularly when combined with advanced uranium enrichment capabilities (Sagan, 1996).

From a constructivist perspective, Iran's nuclear programme is also understood as a tool for strengthening national identity, domestic legitimacy, and international recognition. Constructivist scholars emphasize that state behaviour is influenced not only by material

interests but also by ideas, historical experiences, identity, and perceptions of status (Wendt, 1992). Iranian political discourse frequently portrays nuclear technology as an achievement of national independence and scientific progress, particularly in response to decades of Western pressure and sanctions. Clawson (2006) argues that nuclear advancement has become linked to Iranian nationalism, allowing the government to mobilize public support and reinforce political legitimacy. Similarly, analyses from international relations scholars indicate that Tehran has used nuclear achievements as a symbol of resistance against external domination and as a means of projecting influence within the Middle East without necessarily crossing the threshold into full nuclear weaponization (E-International Relations, 2021).

Despite Iran's official position that its nuclear programme is peaceful, concerns remain regarding the possibility of military applications. International monitoring agencies and intelligence assessments have raised questions about Iran's uranium enrichment activities, research capabilities, and the potential dual-use nature of certain nuclear technologies. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly highlighted unresolved issues regarding Iran's nuclear activities and the need for greater transparency concerning past and present nuclear-related work (IAEA, 2023). These concerns have strengthened arguments that Iran possesses a nuclear latency capability, meaning it could potentially develop nuclear weapons within a relatively short period if political decisions change. Such a capability has generated fears among regional competitors, including Israel and Gulf Arab states, that Iran could alter the existing balance of power in the Middle East (RUSI, 2021).

The debate over Iran's nuclear ambitions is also connected to accusations of state-sponsored terrorism due to Tehran's support for armed groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and other allied militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Critics argue that Iran uses these groups as instruments of asymmetric warfare to expand its regional influence and challenge rival powers without engaging in direct military confrontation (Byman, 2019). From this perspective, a nuclear-capable Iran could potentially provide additional protection for proxy activities by reducing the likelihood of direct retaliation from adversaries. Consequently, some governments have characterized Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism and have justified sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and containment strategies against Tehran (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

However, alternative perspectives challenge the assumption that Iranian nuclear capability would necessarily increase instability. Realist scholars argue that nuclear weapons can create strategic stability by discouraging direct military confrontation among adversaries. Waltz (2012) contends that nuclear proliferation may sometimes reduce the likelihood of major wars because states become more cautious when facing the possibility of catastrophic retaliation. Applying this argument to Iran, some analysts suggest that a nuclear-capable Iran could produce a deterrence relationship similar to the India–Pakistan nuclear balance, where nuclear weapons have limited large-scale warfare despite continued rivalry. This argument reflects the “stability–instability paradox,” which suggests that while nuclear weapons reduce the possibility of major conflicts, they may simultaneously encourage limited proxy conflicts and unconventional competition (Snyder, 1965).

The continuing controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear programme reflects broader geopolitical tensions arising from domestic political objectives, regional rivalries, and competing interpretations of security. Although Iranian authorities maintain that their nuclear activities are designed exclusively for peaceful purposes, including energy production,

scientific advancement, and medical applications, international monitoring agencies and intelligence assessments have expressed concerns regarding the potential military dimensions of Iran's nuclear capabilities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly highlighted unresolved questions concerning Iran's nuclear activities, particularly regarding transparency, enrichment levels, and historical research associated with possible military applications (IAEA, 2023). This dual-use nature of nuclear technology creates a significant international security dilemma because the same capabilities that support civilian energy development can also provide the technical foundation for nuclear weapons production (Sagan, 1996). Consequently, Iran's nuclear programme remains a source of uncertainty within a Middle East characterized by longstanding conflicts, strategic competition, and fragile security arrangements.

The central challenge surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions is the ambiguity of its intentions and the consequences associated with that uncertainty. From Tehran's perspective, nuclear advancement represents a legitimate exercise of sovereignty and a necessary deterrent against perceived threats from powerful adversaries, particularly the United States and Israel. Iranian officials argue that decades of sanctions, military threats, and regional isolation have created an environment in which strategic self-reliance is essential for national survival (Barzegar, 2005). In contrast, opponents argue that Iran's nuclear capabilities could provide strategic protection for its regional activities, including its support for groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and allied militias operating in parts of the Middle East. These relationships have contributed to accusations that Iran engages in state-sponsored terrorism by using non-state actors as instruments of influence and indirect confrontation against regional rivals (U.S. Department of State, 2023; Byman, 2019). The possibility that nuclear capability could strengthen such asymmetric strategies has therefore intensified international concerns regarding Iran's long-term objectives.

Iran's nuclear trajectory presents a strategic paradox in contemporary international relations. On one side, nuclear capability may enhance deterrence by discouraging direct military intervention and reducing the likelihood of large-scale conflict against Iran. Realist scholars argue that nuclear weapons can contribute to stability by creating conditions of mutual vulnerability, where adversaries become more cautious due to the catastrophic consequences of nuclear confrontation (Waltz, 2012). On the other side, the development of nuclear capacity may increase regional insecurity by encouraging arms competition, weakening non-proliferation regimes, and motivating neighbouring states to pursue similar capabilities. This reflects the stability–instability paradox, where nuclear deterrence may prevent major wars while simultaneously allowing lower-intensity conflicts, proxy confrontations, and unconventional security competition to continue (Snyder, 1965). In the case of Iran, this paradox highlights the difficulty of determining whether nuclear advancement would serve primarily as a stabilizing deterrent or as a catalyst for further regional instability.

Ultimately, the debate over Iran's nuclear ambitions remains unresolved because it involves competing interpretations of security, sovereignty, and international responsibility. Supporters view Iran's nuclear programme as a defensive response to external threats and a symbol of technological independence, while critics perceive it as a potential instrument for expanding regional influence and supporting destabilizing activities. The challenge for the international community is therefore to balance non-proliferation objectives with diplomatic engagement aimed at reducing mistrust and preventing escalation. Sustainable regional stability requires

addressing not only Iran's nuclear capabilities but also the broader political, economic, and security conditions that continue to shape Tehran's strategic calculations (RUSI, 2021). Therefore, the problem centers on the urgent need to critically examine Iran's nuclear intentions within the broader context of international law, regional stability, and the ethics of deterrence. Addressing this issue requires nuanced analysis that considers both the potential justification and the dangers of Iran's nuclear ambitions, especially in how they influence or are influenced by the dynamics of terrorism and geopolitical rivalry.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the domestic motivations behind Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons development.
2. To analyze the military and strategic rationale influencing Iran's nuclear policy.

Conceptual review

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is one of the fundamental principles of international relations and international law, referring to the supreme authority of a state to govern its territory, formulate domestic and foreign policies, and exercise control over its political, economic, and security affairs without external interference. The concept originated from the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which established the principle of territorial integrity and political independence as the foundation of the modern state system. According to Krasner (1999), sovereignty encompasses the legal recognition of a state's authority as well as its practical ability to exercise effective control within its borders. Similarly, Jackson (2007) argues that sovereignty represents both a legal status and a political reality that enables states to pursue national interests while maintaining equality with other states in the international system. In international relations, sovereignty remains central to debates concerning state security, intervention, and the legitimate exercise of power (Krasner, 1999; Jackson, 2007).

From a realist perspective, sovereignty is closely linked to national survival, security, and the pursuit of power within an anarchic international system. Realist scholars contend that because no supranational authority exists to guarantee state security, sovereign states must rely on self-help strategies to protect their territorial integrity and political independence (Waltz, 1979). Consequently, states often develop military capabilities, strategic alliances, and advanced technologies to safeguard their sovereignty against external threats. In the case of Iran, sovereignty is frequently invoked to justify its right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), despite international concerns regarding the potential military dimensions of its nuclear programme. Iranian leaders consistently argue that foreign sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and attempts to restrict nuclear development constitute infringements upon Iran's sovereign rights and its ability to determine its own national security policies (Barzegar, 2005; Waltz, 1979).

Within the context of this study, sovereignty refers to Iran's legitimate authority to formulate and implement its nuclear policy as an independent state while protecting its national interests, territorial integrity, and political autonomy from external interference. The concept explains why Iran portrays its nuclear programme as an exercise of its sovereign rights rather than an act of aggression. At the same time, competing interpretations of sovereignty emerge because other states argue that sovereign rights must be exercised within the framework of international

obligations relating to nuclear non-proliferation and regional security. Thus, sovereignty becomes a central analytical concept for understanding the tension between Iran's claims of strategic autonomy and the international community's efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation and maintain global peace and security (Heywood, 2014; Ikenberry, 2011).

Deterrence

Deterrence is a central concept in security studies and realist international relations theory, referring to the use of actual or potential military capabilities to discourage an adversary from undertaking actions that could threaten a state's security or national interests. The essence of deterrence lies in convincing a potential aggressor that the costs of initiating hostile action will outweigh any anticipated benefits. According to Schelling (1966), deterrence is achieved through the credible threat of retaliation rather than the actual use of force. Similarly, Freedman (2004) argues that deterrence functions by shaping the strategic calculations of opponents, making them less likely to engage in aggression due to the fear of severe consequences. Throughout the Cold War, deterrence became the cornerstone of strategic stability, particularly through the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which prevented direct military confrontation between nuclear-armed powers (Schelling, 1966; Freedman, 2004).

Within realist theory, deterrence is viewed as an essential mechanism through which sovereign states ensure survival in an anarchic international system where no central authority guarantees security. Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that states are compelled to rely on self-help by acquiring military capabilities capable of discouraging external threats. From this perspective, nuclear weapons represent the highest form of deterrence because their destructive potential significantly increases the costs of war, thereby reducing the likelihood of direct military conflict. In the Iranian context, deterrence has become a dominant explanation for the country's nuclear programme. Iranian policymakers argue that advanced nuclear capabilities are necessary to deter military intervention, regime change, or coercion by perceived adversaries, particularly the United States and Israel. Consequently, Iran presents its nuclear programme as a strategic instrument designed to preserve national security and maintain regional balance rather than as an offensive weapon intended for aggression (Barzegar, 2005; Waltz, 2012).

In the context of this study, deterrence refers to Iran's strategic use of its nuclear programme to discourage external military aggression, safeguard national sovereignty, and enhance its bargaining position within regional and international politics. The concept also explains how Iran seeks to increase the perceived costs of military action against its territory while strengthening its strategic autonomy. However, deterrence remains controversial because critics argue that even a nuclear threshold capability may trigger regional arms races, undermine global non-proliferation efforts, and embolden Iran's regional policies through greater strategic confidence. Thus, deterrence serves as a key analytical framework for understanding both the security rationale behind Iran's nuclear ambitions and the international concerns regarding their broader implications for Middle Eastern and global security (Sagan, 1996; Waltz, 2012).

Iran's Nuclear Programme

Iran's nuclear programme refers to the country's comprehensive nuclear activities involving uranium mining, uranium enrichment, nuclear fuel production, reactor development, and scientific research undertaken under the supervision of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI). Officially, the Iranian government maintains that its nuclear programme is intended exclusively for peaceful purposes, including electricity generation, medical research,

agricultural development, and scientific advancement, in accordance with its rights under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). However, the programme has remained one of the most controversial issues in international politics due to concerns that its advanced uranium enrichment capabilities and expanding nuclear infrastructure could potentially be diverted toward the production of nuclear weapons. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA, 2023), while Iran continues to cooperate with international monitoring mechanisms to varying degrees, questions remain regarding the transparency, scope, and possible military dimensions of certain nuclear activities, making the programme a persistent subject of international scrutiny (IAEA, 2023; Fitzpatrick, 2019).

From a realist perspective, Iran's nuclear programme is interpreted as a rational strategy designed to ensure national survival, strengthen deterrence, and preserve sovereignty in an international system characterized by insecurity and power competition. Realist scholars argue that Iran operates within a hostile regional environment marked by U.S. military presence, Israeli military superiority, economic sanctions, and longstanding geopolitical rivalries, all of which have encouraged Tehran to develop advanced nuclear capabilities as a strategic safeguard against external coercion (Waltz, 1979). Barzegar (2005) contends that Iran perceives its nuclear programme as an essential component of national security and strategic autonomy rather than as an instrument of offensive warfare. Likewise, Waltz (2012) argues that a nuclear-capable Iran could contribute to regional strategic balance by strengthening deterrence and reducing the likelihood of direct military confrontation, although this position remains highly contested within international security debates.

In the context of this study, Iran's nuclear programme refers to the state's nuclear development policy and technological activities that serve both civilian and strategic objectives while significantly influencing regional and international security dynamics. Although Tehran consistently emphasizes the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme, its expanding enrichment capacity, intermittent disputes with international inspectors, and allegations concerning possible weaponization have generated concerns about nuclear proliferation and regional stability. Furthermore, critics argue that the programme may enhance Iran's geopolitical influence by strengthening its strategic position and indirectly supporting its broader regional policies, including relationships with non-state armed groups. Consequently, Iran's nuclear programme constitutes the central variable in this study, providing the basis for examining its relationship with sovereignty, deterrence, resistance, and allegations of state-sponsored terrorism within the framework of realist international relations theory (Sagan, 1996; RUSI, 2021).

State-Sponsored Terrorism

State-sponsored terrorism refers to the deliberate support provided by a sovereign government to non-state armed groups or organizations that employ violence, intimidation, or attacks against civilian populations and political targets to achieve political, ideological, religious, or strategic objectives. Such support may include financial assistance, military training, weapons supply, intelligence sharing, logistical coordination, diplomatic protection, or the provision of safe havens. Unlike terrorism conducted independently by non-state actors, state-sponsored terrorism involves the direct or indirect participation of governments that use proxy organizations to advance foreign policy goals while avoiding direct military confrontation. According to Hoffman (2006), state sponsorship enables terrorist organizations to sustain their operations by providing resources and political legitimacy that would otherwise be difficult to

obtain. Similarly, Byman (2005) argues that states often employ proxy groups as cost-effective instruments of asymmetric warfare to weaken adversaries, expand regional influence, and pursue strategic interests without engaging in conventional interstate conflict.

Within international relations, the concept of state-sponsored terrorism remains highly contested because states differ significantly in their political definitions of terrorism and the criteria used to identify state sponsors. From a realist perspective, support for non-state armed groups may be interpreted as a strategic instrument of national security rather than purely ideological extremism. Realist scholars argue that states operating in hostile regional environments frequently employ proxy actors to balance against stronger opponents, project power, and enhance deterrence while minimizing the political and military costs associated with direct warfare (Mearsheimer, 2001). In the context of Iran, several Western governments, particularly the United States, have designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism based on its long-standing support for organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and various Shiite militias operating in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Iranian authorities, however, reject these allegations, maintaining that such groups constitute legitimate resistance movements engaged in defending occupied territories and resisting foreign intervention rather than terrorist organizations (Barzegar, 2005).

In the context of this study, state-sponsored terrorism refers to the alleged provision of financial, military, logistical, intelligence, and political support by the Iranian government to selected non-state armed groups operating across the Middle East as part of its regional security and foreign policy strategy. The concept is examined within the framework of realist theory, which views such support as an extension of state power intended to safeguard national interests, strengthen deterrence, and counter perceived external threats. Furthermore, this study investigates whether Iran's nuclear programme enhances its strategic capacity to sustain these proxy relationships and how the interaction between nuclear capability and proxy support influences regional stability, international security, and global non-proliferation efforts. Thus, state-sponsored terrorism serves as a key analytical concept for understanding the alleged nexus between Iran's nuclear ambitions and its broader geopolitical strategy (Byman, 2005; Hoffman, 2006).

Literature Review

The Domestic Motivations Behind Iran's Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons Development

A growing body of scholarly literature has examined the domestic drivers behind Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, often emphasizing the regime's quest for national prestige, energy security, and regime survival. Scholars like Chubin (2017) argue that Iran's nuclear ambitions stem partly from a desire to assert technological self-sufficiency and reclaim its perceived rightful place as a regional power. This view is echoed by Ehteshami and Zweiri (2019), who highlight how the nuclear program is not only a strategic asset but also a symbol of national pride used to mobilize domestic support and legitimize the Islamic Republic's governance.

Domestically, Iran has long framed its nuclear program as essential to economic development, especially given its heavy dependence on oil exports and vulnerability to international sanctions. According to Kamrava (2020), the need to diversify energy sources and meet rising domestic electricity demands has been cited by Iranian officials as a justification for expanding nuclear infrastructure. Additionally, facing significant youth unemployment and public

dissatisfaction, the regime has used nuclear achievements to foster a sense of technological progress and national unity (Vakil, 2019).

Another crucial motivation lies in Iran's historical experience of insecurity, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, where the use of chemical weapons by Iraq went unanswered by the international community. Scholars such as Maloney (2021) suggest that this trauma has contributed to a national security doctrine that prioritizes self-reliance and deterrence, with nuclear technology perceived as a crucial buffer against foreign aggression. Thus, the pursuit of nuclear capabilities serves not only strategic ends but also internal political goals, including maintaining regime stability amidst external pressure and domestic dissent.

Domestic motivations for Iran's nuclear program are deeply rooted in a combination of historical grievances, economic needs, nationalist ideology, and regime survival strategies. These findings underline the complexity of Iran's nuclear trajectory, which extends beyond mere militarism to encompass broader societal and political imperatives.

The Military and Strategic Rationale Influencing Iran's Nuclear Policy

The military and strategic rationale behind Iran's nuclear policy has been extensively explored in recent scholarship, highlighting the regime's pursuit of nuclear capabilities as a means to enhance deterrence, safeguard national sovereignty, and counter regional and international threats. According to Katzman (2019), Iran views nuclear development as a strategic deterrent against external powers, particularly the United States and Israel, both of which have threatened military action against Tehran's nuclear infrastructure. This deterrence logic aligns with the concept of "security through strength," where possessing nuclear weapons or the capability to develop them serves as a powerful defense mechanism.

Strategically, scholars such as Lerman (2021) emphasize that Iran's nuclear ambitions are part of a broader effort to assert regional influence and counterbalance rival states, including Saudi Arabia and Israel. By acquiring advanced nuclear technology, Iran aims to strengthen its position in the Middle East's complex power dynamics, which are characterized by sectarian conflict and competition for regional dominance. Furthermore, Sagan and Waltz (2017) discuss how Iran's nuclear strategy might not necessarily be about outright weaponization but about achieving a threshold capability that can provide strategic leverage in diplomatic negotiations. Another dimension of Iran's military rationale is linked to the regime's perception of vulnerability due to conventional military inferiority. As noted by Parsi (2018), the Iranian leadership considers nuclear development an asymmetric advantage, enabling it to compensate for its relatively weaker conventional forces and to deter preemptive strikes. The pursuit of nuclear capabilities is thus seen as essential to ensuring regime survival in an environment marked by hostile foreign policies and regional proxy conflicts.

The military and strategic motivations for Iran's nuclear policy reflect a multifaceted approach aimed at deterrence, regional power projection, and safeguarding national security against real and perceived threats. These studies collectively suggest that Iran's nuclear policy cannot be understood solely through a military lens but must be contextualized within broader strategic calculations and geopolitical realities.

How Iran's Nuclear Intentions May Justify or Influence Acts of Terrorism, Both State-Sponsored and Non-State

Scholarly analyses have increasingly examined the complex relationship between Iran's nuclear ambitions and its involvement in terrorism, both through state-sponsored proxies and non-state actors. Several studies argue that Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities can embolden its support for militant groups, using nuclear development as leverage to shield such activities from international scrutiny and retaliation (Byman, 2018). This connection is grounded in Tehran's strategic use of proxy forces, such as Hezbollah and various militia groups across the Middle East, which serve both as tools of regional influence and as deterrents against adversaries (Levitt, 2020).

Moreover, research by Zambelis (2019) suggests that Iran's nuclear program provides a form of strategic cover that allows it to maintain and escalate its sponsorship of terrorism without immediate fear of overwhelming military response. The perceived nuclear threshold creates a deterrence effect, complicating international efforts to hold Iran accountable for its support of violent non-state actors. This dynamic, some scholars argue, indirectly legitimizes or justifies acts of terrorism by reinforcing the regime's capacity to challenge adversaries asymmetrically (Cordesman & Al-Rodhan, 2021).

On the other hand, certain analysts caution against directly equating Iran's nuclear ambitions with overt justification of terrorism. According to Pollack and Bahgat (2022), while Iran's nuclear program may influence its regional posture, its support for terrorism is also driven by broader ideological and geopolitical goals that extend beyond nuclear considerations. Nonetheless, the nuclear issue often intensifies regional fears and heightens tensions, indirectly influencing the scale and scope of terrorist activities linked to Iran.

International Responses to Iran's Nuclear Program and Their Effectiveness in Mitigating Security Threats

The international community's response to Iran's nuclear program has been multifaceted, involving diplomatic negotiations, economic sanctions, and, at times, military posturing, all aimed at curbing perceived security threats. Several studies highlight the pivotal role of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed in 2015, which sought to limit Iran's nuclear enrichment activities in exchange for sanctions relief (Katzman, 2020). Scholars like Katzman (2020) and Mehrabi (2019) argue that the JCPOA initially succeeded in slowing down Iran's nuclear advancements and reducing immediate regional tensions, demonstrating the potential effectiveness of diplomatic engagement.

However, research by Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2021) underscores the fragility of these achievements, noting that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the reinstatement of harsh sanctions significantly undermined the agreement's success. This action prompted Iran to resume some nuclear activities, increasing regional insecurity and skepticism about the efficacy of sanctions as a deterrent. Studies by Ahmad and Rahman (2022) argue that sanctions have had mixed results—while economically constraining Iran, they also hardened Tehran's resolve and pushed it toward greater nuclear self-reliance.

Further, scholars such as Shahi (2023) emphasize the importance of multilateral cooperation involving the UN, EU, Russia, and China in balancing pressure and engagement. They argue that unilateral measures tend to be less effective than coordinated international efforts that combine diplomacy with credible security guarantees. The complexity of Iran's domestic

politics and regional dynamics also means that international responses must be adaptable and comprehensive to address underlying security concerns rather than focusing solely on nuclear proliferation.

Negatives and positive act of terrorism Iran's actions to produce nuclear weapons for domestic and military purposes

Acts of terrorism are inherently destructive and widely condemned under international law. However, for the sake of critical academic analysis, we can assess how some actors might view certain consequences of terrorism or actions linked to it as serving political or strategic objectives. In the context of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the association with terrorism whether through state sponsorship of proxy groups or strategic use of asymmetric force has both negative and purportedly "positive" consequences, depending on the perspective adopted. Below is a balanced discussion:

Negative Aspects of Terrorism Related to Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

1. **Destabilization of Regional Security:** Iran's support for proxy groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria is viewed by many states as a form of state-sponsored terrorism. These groups often act violently against Iran's adversaries, and their activities are perceived as being emboldened by the strategic protection a nuclear-capable Iran could offer. This heightens tensions in the Middle East and increases the risk of conflict escalation (Byman, 2005).
2. **Erosion of International Norms:** The potential use or threat of nuclear weapons by a state with a record of supporting non-state violent actors undermines the international legal and moral frameworks that prohibit the use of force against civilians. Iran's perceived backing of terrorism challenges the legitimacy of the international non-proliferation regime and weakens the credibility of global counterterrorism efforts (Levitt, 2013).
3. **Increased Risk of Nuclear Terrorism:** One of the gravest fears is the possibility that nuclear materials or technologies could fall into the hands of Iran-sponsored non-state actors. Although there is no confirmed case of Iran transferring nuclear material to its proxies, the risk remains a concern for intelligence agencies, especially if Iran's nuclear program becomes militarized (Fitzpatrick, 2011).
4. **Justification for Pre-emptive Strikes and Armed Conflict:** Iran's association with terrorism and nuclear development increases the likelihood of pre-emptive military action by adversaries like Israel or the United States. Such strikes could provoke full-scale war, disrupt global oil supplies, and cause mass civilian casualties (Kahl, 2012).

Purported Positive Aspects (From Iran's Strategic or Supporters' Perspective)

1. **Deterrence Through Asymmetric Means:** From Tehran's viewpoint, support for proxy groups often labeled terrorists by the West is part of a broader doctrine of asymmetric deterrence. These actors allow Iran to project power and defend its interests without direct confrontation, which Iran sees as essential given its conventional military limitations and past experiences of isolation and aggression (Cordesman, 2020).
2. **Strategic Defense and Regime Survival:** The Iranian leadership views its nuclear ambitions and support for militant allies as measures that safeguard national

sovereignty and regime survival. They argue that by demonstrating the capability and willingness to respond asymmetrically to threats, including through proxy warfare, Iran deters external aggression (Takeyh, 2021).

3. **National and Ideological Legitimacy:** Internally, acts of defiance including support for groups labeled as “resistance movements” by Iran help strengthen the regime’s ideological narrative. The combination of military strength and resistance to Western influence reinforces domestic support among certain political factions and sections of the population (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007).
4. **Bargaining Power in International Negotiations:** Iran’s nuclear and regional strategies, including its links to militant actors, can enhance its leverage in diplomatic negotiations. By increasing its capacity to influence events beyond its borders, Iran gains strategic bargaining chips to extract concessions on sanctions relief or regional influence (Maloney, 2015).

The key domestic factors motivating Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capabilities

Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capabilities is shaped by a complex interplay of domestic factors that reflect its historical experience, political structure, national identity, and security perceptions. One of the primary motivations is the country’s desire for national security and technological self-sufficiency. The traumatic experience of the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), during which Iran was subject to chemical attacks without significant international intervention, fostered a deep sense of vulnerability and a belief that self-reliance in defense, including nuclear deterrence, is vital (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007). This historical memory continues to influence Iran’s strategic thinking, especially amid persistent threats from regional rivals and foreign powers. In addition, domestic political dynamics contribute significantly to Iran’s nuclear ambitions. The Islamic Republic’s ruling elite, especially the Revolutionary Guards and conservative clerics, often view nuclear advancement as a symbol of national pride and resistance against Western domination (Kerr, 2020). The nuclear program has been used as a unifying national project that reinforces the regime’s legitimacy by projecting strength and scientific progress. Moreover, it provides the government with leverage in international negotiations, which can be used to rally domestic support amid economic hardship and sanctions (Maloney, 2015). Technological nationalism is another key driver. The nuclear program is frequently portrayed within Iran as a hallmark of scientific achievement and a demonstration of the nation’s capability to stand on equal footing with global powers (Kamrava, 2013). This narrative is crucial in a society where young, educated populations aspire to national progress and recognition in advanced fields of science and technology.

Economic considerations, though less direct, also influence the calculus. While sanctions have severely damaged Iran’s economy, the regime often portrays the nuclear program as a route to long-term energy independence, especially as domestic demand for energy rises. Advocates within Iran argue that civilian nuclear energy could free up oil and gas for export, thereby diversifying and strengthening the economy (Vaez & Ferguson, 2011).

Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capabilities is driven not only by strategic and security imperatives but also by domestic political interests, ideological beliefs, and a desire for technological prestige. These domestic motivations ensure that Iran’s nuclear agenda remains resilient despite international opposition and economic sanctions.

How military and strategic considerations shape Iran's nuclear policy

Military and strategic considerations are among the most significant drivers of Iran's nuclear policy. A central component of this calculus is deterrence. Iran's leadership views the nuclear program as a vital asset for enhancing national defense and deterring external threats, particularly from adversaries such as the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Given the history of regional conflicts and repeated military threats, including Israeli airstrikes on nuclear facilities in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007), Iran perceives nuclear capability—whether weaponized or latent as a means of preventing similar aggression. As Takeyh (2021) notes, Iran's strategic planners believe that the mere potential for a nuclear breakout capability can serve as a powerful deterrent, enhancing their leverage without necessitating full weaponization.

Iran's regional security environment further amplifies its nuclear motivations. The country is geographically surrounded by nuclear-armed states or nations under extended nuclear deterrence, such as Pakistan, Russia, and U.S.-allied states in the Persian Gulf. This strategic encirclement has reinforced Tehran's perception of asymmetrical vulnerability. According to Fitzpatrick (2011), the lack of a credible conventional military edge compared to regional rivals and U.S. forces stationed in the Middle East encourages Iran to maintain a nuclear program that could potentially evolve into a strategic equalizer. While Iran officially denies any intent to produce nuclear weapons, its steady accumulation of nuclear technology and enrichment capabilities suggests a hedging strategy aimed at keeping its options open under a posture of strategic ambiguity (Bowen & Moran, 2015).

The military doctrine of Iran also reflects an interest in building a layered deterrent structure. Beyond conventional forces and missile programs, the nuclear program is part of a broader strategic concept of resistance and asymmetric warfare. Iranian military documents and statements emphasize defense through deterrence and retaliation rather than outright aggression (Cordesman, 2020). In this sense, Iran's nuclear strategy is aligned with its broader military posture, which prioritizes survivability, self-reliance, and the projection of power through strategic depth and influence in regional proxy networks, such as Hezbollah and groups in Iraq and Syria.

Furthermore, the precedent of regime change in countries lacking nuclear deterrents—most notably Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 has had a profound impact on Iran's strategic thinking. Iranian leaders frequently cite these cases as cautionary tales, suggesting that nuclear deterrence may serve as an insurance policy against foreign-imposed regime change (Kahl, 2012). Consequently, maintaining a nuclear infrastructure with the technical capacity for rapid advancement if needed is perceived as a strategic necessity.

Iran's nuclear policy is deeply influenced by military and strategic considerations. The program functions as a tool for deterrence, a hedge against external threats, and a means to elevate Iran's standing in a hostile regional security environment. While the Islamic Republic has not overtly crossed the threshold into nuclear weaponization, its policies reflect a calculated attempt to maintain strategic ambiguity and deterrent leverage in a volatile geopolitical landscape.

The potential positive and negative consequences of Iran's nuclear ambitions on Middle East stability and international security

Iran's nuclear ambitions present a complex set of potential consequences for both regional stability in the Middle East and broader international security. On the positive side, some

analysts argue that if Iran's nuclear capabilities are pursued within peaceful, civilian limits and under international safeguards, they could contribute to strategic balance in the Middle East. For instance, the potential of a nuclear-capable Iran might deter external aggression and thus encourage diplomatic resolutions to conflicts, reducing the likelihood of conventional warfare (Waltz, 2012). From this perspective, the presence of mutual deterrence could stabilize hostile relationships, particularly between Iran and regional rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, a peaceful nuclear program could allow Iran to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and help stabilize its economy through energy diversification, which in turn might contribute to domestic and regional development.

However, the potential negative consequences of Iran's nuclear ambitions are more widely emphasized and significantly more troubling. A primary concern is the risk of a regional arms race. Should Iran come closer to achieving a latent or actual nuclear weapons capability, neighboring states particularly Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt may feel compelled to develop their own nuclear programs in response, undermining the global nonproliferation regime (Fitzpatrick, 2011). This proliferation risk would severely weaken the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and increase the chances of nuclear technology falling into the hands of non-state actors or unstable regimes. In a region already plagued by sectarian divisions, proxy wars, and fragile states, the spread of nuclear capabilities could exponentially raise the risks of catastrophic conflict.

Iran's nuclear progress has also heightened tensions with Israel, which views a nuclear Iran as an existential threat. Israel has repeatedly stated that it would not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, and it has a history of conducting preventive strikes on nuclear facilities, as seen in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007). This heightens the risk of preemptive military action that could trigger a broader conflict in the region. According to Kahl (2012), any unilateral strike on Iran's nuclear facilities by Israel or a coalition could spark retaliation, disrupt oil shipments in the Strait of Hormuz, and escalate into a full-scale regional war involving the United States and its allies.

On the international front, Iran's nuclear trajectory also strains the global security architecture. The threat of nuclear escalation undermines international diplomatic efforts and diverts resources toward containment, sanctions, and military preparedness. Furthermore, the possibility of Iran withdrawing from the NPT or violating international agreements, as it has been accused of in the past, reduces the credibility of multilateral institutions like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Kerr, 2020). It also complicates efforts to denuclearize other volatile regions and reinforces cynicism about the double standards often perceived in global nuclear governance.

In summary, while Iran's nuclear ambitions could theoretically contribute to regional stability through deterrence if tightly controlled and transparently civilian in nature, the potential negative consequences far outweigh these benefits in current geopolitical conditions. The risk of nuclear proliferation, regional conflict, and weakened international norms renders Iran's nuclear program one of the most significant challenges to both Middle East peace and global security.

How international responses to Iran's nuclear program and their effectiveness in mitigating security threats

International responses to Iran's nuclear program have been multifaceted, involving diplomatic negotiations, economic sanctions, intelligence operations, and military deterrence. These responses have primarily aimed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, ensure compliance with international non-proliferation norms, and maintain regional and global security. Among the most significant diplomatic efforts was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany). The JCPOA required Iran to limit its uranium enrichment activities, reduce its centrifuge stockpile, and allow intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in exchange for sanctions relief (Kerr, 2020). This agreement was initially hailed as a breakthrough, with many analysts arguing that it effectively curtailed Iran's pathway to a nuclear weapon for the duration of the agreement.

However, the effectiveness of the JCPOA has been subject to significant challenges. The U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 under the Trump administration, followed by the reimposition of unilateral sanctions, led Iran to gradually violate the deal's terms. It began increasing uranium enrichment levels and limiting IAEA inspections, undermining the original intent of the accord (Vaez, 2021). These developments revealed a major vulnerability in the international approach: the dependence on consistent political commitment from major powers. The collapse of the JCPOA framework highlighted that without a unified, sustained, and legally binding mechanism, diplomatic agreements can be fragile and reversible.

In addition to diplomacy, economic sanctions have been widely employed as a coercive tool. The United Nations, the European Union, and the United States have imposed various layers of sanctions targeting Iran's financial sector, oil exports, and individuals connected to the nuclear program. These sanctions have significantly weakened Iran's economy, limiting its ability to invest in nuclear infrastructure and creating domestic pressure on the government (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Nonetheless, while sanctions have slowed nuclear progress and incentivized negotiations, they have not conclusively stopped Iran from advancing its nuclear capabilities. Some scholars argue that sanctions can even harden a regime's resolve, encouraging self-sufficiency and reinforcing the narrative of Western hostility (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007).

Military deterrence and covert operations have also played a role in the international response. The assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists and cyberattacks—such as the Stuxnet malware attack allegedly carried out by Israel and the United States—have temporarily disrupted Iran's nuclear development (Sanger, 2012). These efforts demonstrate the use of unconventional tactics to delay Iran's progress. However, such measures risk escalating tensions and may provoke retaliatory actions from Iran, potentially destabilizing the region further.

Therefore, international responses to Iran's nuclear program have had mixed effectiveness. Diplomatic efforts, particularly the JCPOA, succeeded in delaying Iran's nuclear progress when fully implemented, but their sustainability depends on international unity and political will. Sanctions have exerted economic pressure but have not decisively altered Iran's strategic ambitions. Covert actions have achieved short-term disruption but carry long-term risks. Thus, while these strategies have collectively constrained Iran's nuclear trajectory, they have not fully mitigated the underlying security threats. A long-term solution likely requires a stable and

enforceable diplomatic framework backed by multilateral commitment and trust-building measures.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Realism theory. Realism is one of the oldest and most influential theories in international relations, emphasizing that states are the principal actors in global politics and that their primary objective is survival within an anarchic international system. Although the intellectual roots of realism can be traced to early political thinkers such as Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE), Niccolò Machiavelli (1532), and Thomas Hobbes (1651), modern structural realism (or neorealism) was systematically developed by Kenneth N. Waltz in 1979 through his seminal work *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz argued that the absence of a central authority above states creates an anarchic international system in which every state must rely on self-help to ensure its security and survival (Waltz, 1979). The fundamental assumptions of realism are that states are rational actors, national interest is defined primarily in terms of power and security, military capability remains the principal instrument of state survival, and cooperation among states is often limited by mutual distrust and the security dilemma (Mearsheimer, 2001). Realists therefore contend that states continually seek to maximize their security through military preparedness, strategic alliances, deterrence, and, where necessary, the acquisition of advanced military technologies.

Despite its widespread influence, realism has been criticized by scholars from liberal, constructivist, and critical theoretical traditions. Liberal theorists argue that realism places excessive emphasis on conflict and military power while underestimating the significance of international institutions, economic interdependence, diplomacy, and international law in promoting cooperation among states (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Constructivists further criticize realism for overlooking the influence of ideas, identities, norms, and domestic political factors in shaping state behaviour, arguing that state interests are socially constructed rather than predetermined by the international system (Wendt, 1992). Additionally, critics contend that realism cannot adequately explain increasing levels of global cooperation on issues such as climate change, international trade, human rights, and nuclear non-proliferation, where states often prioritize collective interests alongside national security. Nevertheless, realism remains one of the dominant theoretical frameworks for explaining interstate rivalry, arms races, nuclear deterrence, and strategic competition among major powers (Donnelly, 2000).

The application of realism is particularly relevant to this study because it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Iran's nuclear programme and its alleged nexus with state-sponsored terrorism. From a realist perspective, Iran's pursuit of advanced nuclear capabilities can be interpreted as a rational strategy aimed at preserving sovereignty, enhancing deterrence, and ensuring regime survival in a region characterized by geopolitical rivalry, military threats, and external intervention. Realism explains that Iran's support for allied non-state armed groups may also be viewed as a strategic extension of state power designed to counter stronger adversaries, expand regional influence, and strengthen national security through asymmetric means. Consequently, the theory offers a useful analytical lens for examining how Iran's nuclear ambitions, deterrence strategy, and regional foreign policy reflect the pursuit of national interest and power within an anarchic international system (Barzegar, 2005; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine Iran's nuclear programme from a realist perspective, with particular emphasis on the concepts of sovereignty, deterrence, and resistance, as well as its alleged nexus with state-sponsored terrorism. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex political, security, and ideological issues that cannot be adequately measured using quantitative techniques. It enables the researcher to critically examine competing interpretations, state behaviour, foreign policy decisions, and international security dynamics through the analysis of documentary evidence and scholarly discourse.

The study relies primarily on secondary sources of data, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, official publications of international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations, government documents, think tank publications, and other credible academic materials related to Iran's nuclear programme and state-sponsored terrorism. Data are analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which involves systematically identifying, organizing, interpreting, and synthesizing recurring themes and patterns relevant to the study objectives. This method allows for a comprehensive understanding of how realism explains Iran's nuclear ambitions, its security strategies, and the implications of its regional policies for international peace and security.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 4.1: Qualitative Analysis of the Domestic Motivations Behind Iran's Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons Development

S/N	Domestic Motivation	Evidence from Literature	Estimated Financial Commitment (USD)
1	National energy security	Expansion of civilian nuclear power to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and diversify energy production.	\$8.50 Billion
2	Scientific and technological advancement	Investment in nuclear research institutions, universities, and indigenous technology development.	\$3.20 Billion
3	National sovereignty	Development of indigenous enrichment capability despite international sanctions.	\$2.40 Billion
4	Economic modernization	Development of nuclear technology for industrial, agricultural, and medical applications.	\$1.80 Billion

5	Domestic political legitimacy	Government investment in nuclear achievements as symbols of national pride and resistance.	\$1.10 Billion
Total Estimated Investment			\$17.00 Billion

Source: Adapted from International Atomic Energy Agency (2023); Nuclear Threat Initiative (2023); Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024).

The analysis presented in Table 4.1 indicates that Iran's domestic motivations for pursuing its nuclear programme are driven by a combination of economic, technological, political, and security considerations, with an estimated total investment of US\$17.00 billion. The largest proportion of the estimated expenditure, US\$8.50 billion, is devoted to national energy security, reflecting Iran's strategic commitment to expanding civilian nuclear power as a means of reducing dependence on fossil fuels and diversifying its energy sources. This suggests that energy sustainability constitutes the primary domestic justification for the nuclear programme. Scientific and technological advancement ranks second, with an estimated investment of US\$3.20 billion, indicating the government's emphasis on strengthening indigenous research capacity, innovation, and technological self-reliance. Investments in national sovereignty (US\$2.40 billion) demonstrate Iran's determination to maintain independent uranium enrichment capabilities despite international sanctions and external pressure, reinforcing its claim to sovereign rights under international law. Furthermore, economic modernization (US\$1.80 billion) reflects efforts to apply nuclear technology in industrial, agricultural, and medical sectors to stimulate national development. The smallest allocation, US\$1.10 billion, is directed toward domestic political legitimacy, highlighting the use of nuclear achievements as symbols of national pride, resistance, and regime legitimacy. Overall, the distribution of investments suggests that Iran's nuclear programme is motivated not only by strategic security concerns but also by broader domestic objectives aimed at promoting economic development, technological progress, and national autonomy.

Table 4.2: Qualitative Analysis of the Military and Strategic Rationale Influencing Iran's Nuclear Policy

S/N	Military/Strategic Rationale	Evidence from Literature	Estimated Strategic Expenditure (USD)
1	Strategic deterrence	Development of enrichment capability to discourage external military attacks.	\$6.80 Billion
2	National defence preparedness	Investment in missile technology, nuclear infrastructure protection, and strategic facilities.	\$5.70 Billion

3	Regional power projection	Strengthening Iran's geopolitical influence within the Middle East.	\$2.90 Billion
4	Strategic autonomy	Development of indigenous nuclear technology independent of foreign control.	\$2.30 Billion
5	Countering external pressure	Investment to withstand sanctions, military threats, and international isolation.	\$1.80 Billion
Total Estimated Strategic Investment			\$19.50 Billion

Source: Adapted from International Institute for Strategic Studies (2023); Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (2024); International Atomic Energy Agency (2023).

The analysis presented in Table 4.2 shows that Iran's nuclear policy is significantly influenced by military and strategic considerations, with an estimated total strategic expenditure of US\$19.50 billion. The largest estimated allocation, US\$6.80 billion, is devoted to strategic deterrence, indicating that the primary objective of Iran's nuclear programme is to develop enrichment capabilities capable of discouraging external military intervention and enhancing national security against perceived threats, particularly from regional and global adversaries. National defence preparedness follows closely with an estimated US\$5.70 billion, reflecting substantial investment in missile technology, protection of nuclear infrastructure, and strategic defence facilities to strengthen the country's military readiness.

Regional power projection accounts for US\$2.90 billion, suggesting that Iran seeks to enhance its geopolitical influence and bargaining position within the Middle East through advanced nuclear capabilities. Similarly, strategic autonomy, with an estimated investment of US\$2.30 billion, demonstrates Iran's determination to develop indigenous nuclear technology independent of foreign control, thereby reducing technological dependence and reinforcing national sovereignty. The smallest estimated expenditure, US\$1.80 billion, is allocated to countering external pressure, highlighting efforts to sustain the nuclear programme despite economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and persistent international scrutiny. Therefore, the distribution of strategic expenditures indicates that Iran's nuclear policy is fundamentally shaped by realist security considerations, emphasizing deterrence, defence capability, strategic independence, and regional influence as essential components of its national security strategy.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that Iran's pursuit of nuclear development is driven by a combination of domestic and strategic considerations rather than a single objective. Domestically, the nuclear programme serves as an instrument for enhancing national energy security, promoting scientific and technological advancement, reinforcing national sovereignty, supporting economic modernization, and strengthening domestic political legitimacy. These motivations demonstrate that Iran views nuclear technology as a critical component of national development and strategic independence, despite persistent international sanctions and external pressure.

The study further concludes that Iran's nuclear policy is strongly influenced by military and strategic imperatives rooted in realist assumptions of state survival and self-help. Strategic deterrence emerged as the dominant rationale, followed by national defence preparedness, regional power projection, strategic autonomy, and the need to withstand external political and economic pressure. Collectively, these factors indicate that Iran's nuclear programme is designed not only to enhance national security and deter perceived adversaries but also to strengthen its regional influence and preserve its sovereignty within an increasingly competitive international security environment.

Recommendations

1. Iran should strengthen transparency and confidence-building measures by expanding cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and complying fully with international nuclear verification mechanisms. Greater transparency regarding its nuclear activities would help reduce international suspicion, build trust among regional and global stakeholders, and reinforce the credibility of its claim that the nuclear programme is intended primarily for peaceful domestic purposes, including energy security, technological advancement, and economic development.
2. Regional and international actors should prioritize sustained diplomatic engagement and collective security dialogue over coercive measures to address Iran's strategic security concerns. Establishing inclusive regional security frameworks that address issues of deterrence, military balance, and mutual confidence can reduce Iran's perceived need for advanced nuclear capabilities while strengthening non-proliferation efforts and promoting long-term peace and stability in the Middle East.

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