

The Deterrence Paradox: Why the 2026 Us-Israel War on Iran Produced the Outcome it was Designed to Prevent: An Analysis of Nuclear Counter-Productivity Through the Lense of Structural Realism and Securitization

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Received: 05-02-2026

Revised: 20-02-2026

Accepted: 07-03-2026

Published: 22-03-2026

ABSTRACT

The 2026 US-Israel war on Iran Operation Roaring Lion and Operation Epic Fury (February 28, 2026) is the most consequential application of preventive military force against a nuclear-threshold state in the twenty-first century. The main goal that it set itself was the definitive end to Iran's nuclear weapons capability. This article suggests based on structural-realist and securitization-theoretical analysis, and on the most recent evidence available, that the campaign has indeed systematically produced exactly what it was meant to preclude – what these research theories as the Deterrence Paradox. Four mechanisms are identified: (I) the Survivor's Learning Effect – future proliferators will weaponized faster and harder; (II) the Succession Hardening Dynamic – killing Khamenei Sr. removed the only leader with a religious fatwa against nuclear weapons, replacing him with a more hardline successor who has reversed it; (III) the NPT Credibility Collapse – Iran was attacked twice during active diplomatic negotiations, proving dialogue offers no protection; and (IV) the Regional Domino Signal – North Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Turkey are all drawing proliferation-reinforcing lessons. IAEA Director General Grossi confirmed on April 29, 2026 that Iran's 440.9 kg enriched uranium stockpile potential for ten nuclear devices is 'likely still at Isfahan' and unverifiable (Foreign Policy, 2026). The war's core objective remains empirically unconfirmed. Policy recommendations are directed at the US, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and the international community, with particular focus on Pakistan's pivotal mediating role in the Islamabad Talks as the best available structural opportunity to address the paradox.

Keywords: *Deterrence Paradox, 2026 Iran War, Nuclear Counter-Productivity, Structural Realism, Securitization Theory, NPT Credibility, IAEA, Operation Epic Fury, Proliferation Incentives, Mojtaba Khamenei, Pakistan Mediation, Islamabad Talks*

INTRODUCTION

On February 28, 2026, US B-2 Spirit bombers and Israeli F-35Is launched coordinated strikes across Iran in what both governments described as the definitive resolution of the forty-seven-year US-Iran strategic conflict. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed on the first day. Nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan were struck for the second time in eight months. Iran's IRGC command structure was

decapitated. President Trump declared the United States had 'eliminated the nuclear threat from Iran forever.' Prime Minister Netanyahu confirmed: 'They are no longer here' (Reuters, 2026a).

Eleven weeks later, the empirical record told a strikingly different story. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi confirmed on April 29, 2026 that Iran's 440.9 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60% purity sufficient for up to ten nuclear devices was 'likely still at Isfahan' in underground tunnels, unverifiable because inspections had been suspended since July 2025 (Foreign Policy, 2026; Washington Post, 2026). Iran's new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei had reversed his father's fatwa against nuclear weapons and vowed to preserve Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities (Chatham House, 2026a; PBS NewsHour, 2026). Regime voices were openly calling for NPT withdrawal (Reuters, as cited in Chatham House, 2026a). North Korea had toughened its nuclear stance, clearly learning from the experience of Iran (38 North, 2026). Saudi Arabia was making progress toward enrichment capability (Just Security, 2026). Non-proliferation in the world was in its worst crisis of credibility since the founding of the NPT (Chatham House, 2025).

This article rests on a single, sharp and analytically acute observation: the war in 2026 will be one between the United States and Israel against Iran that culminates in the outcomes it is meant to obviate. This is the Deterrence Paradox. It is not a political argument it is a structural observation about how preventive military strikes against nuclear-threshold states produce proliferation incentives rather than extinguishing them. The paradox operates through four identifiable mechanisms examined in Section 6. All three theoretical frameworks applied in this article Structural Realism (Waltz, 1979), Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer, 2001), and Securitization Theory (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1998) structurally predicted it. The 2026 case is its most comprehensive empirical confirmation in the history of nuclear counter-proliferation strategy.

*"War cannot entirely eliminate Iran's nuclear program the material will still be there and the enrichment capacities will be there." IAEA
Director General Rafael Grossi (NPR, March 18, 2026)*

The empirical record presented in this article ranges from the most senior independent nuclear authority, the IAEA Director General, to credible analyses from think tanks, such as Chatham House, 38 North, Foreign Affairs, and Just Security, and finally, the leaked US Defense Intelligence Agency preliminary assessment from March 2026, which explicitly contradicted the CIA Director's claims. The split between these evaluations is not simply one of agency turf it's the most significant unanswered intelligence question in today's strategic debates, and one that impacts the extent to which the 2026 war can be said to have accomplished its nuclear goal.

The organization of this article is based on the logical structure of the paradox itself. Having set up the theoretical framework and explored the literature, the article walks through the causal chain from the structure of the operations (2025-2026) to the empirical outcomes, before formalising the four paradox mechanisms that link cause to counter-productive effect. At the end of the article, the authors offer a set of scenario analysis and policy recommendations that try to speak about the political challenge of the required compromises, but also show how the structural alternative is worse for everyone.

Research Problem

The research problem is this: does the empirical evidence from the 2025-2026 US-Israel strikes on Iran support or refute the proposition that preventive military strikes against nuclear-threshold states reduce proliferation risk? The answer this article provides grounded in the most current available evidence is that the 2026 case constitutes the most comprehensive empirical refutation of that proposition in the history of nuclear strategic studies.

Research Objective

- To identify, name, and empirically demonstrate the four mechanisms through which the 2026 US-Israel war on Iran has generated proliferation incentives rather than extinguishing them the Deterrence Paradox and to apply established IR theory to explain why the paradox was structurally predictable from the design of the operations.

Research Question

- Q1. Has the 2026 US-Israel war on Iran reduced, maintained, or increased Iran's nuclear weapons production potential, and what does the answer imply for the theory and practice of counter-proliferation strategy globally?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two pillars of literature that form the bases of the foundational literature related to preventive counter-proliferation. Mearsheimer (2001) argues that when an adversary is acquiring the capability to change the status quo, it is structurally rational to take preventive measures. Second, the operating model comes from the empirical example of the Osirak strike (1981) conducted by Israel. But, as Cohen and Miller (2010) showed, Osirak might have stimulated Iraqi nuclear motivation. Reiter (2005) revealed that the success rate for preventive strikes was significantly lower than the popular notion that they were successful. According to Paul (2000), security guarantees rather than military pressure is most important in dictating nuclear restraint. Empirically, Fuhrmann (2009) demonstrated that the number of programmes initiated is significantly higher in states under existential threat without nuclear guarantees. According to Hymans (2006), it is leaders with 'oppositional nationalist' profiles exactly Mojtaba Khamenei's well-known position who are most likely to seek nuclear weapons as a reaction to humiliation.

The contemporary literature directly relevant to this article includes: Foreign Affairs (November 2025) on what aspiring nuclear powers learned from Israel's strikes on Iran; 38 North (March 2026) on eight specific proliferation lessons North Korea has drawn; Chatham House (March 30, 2026) on the Iran war's risk of triggering a new proliferation wave; and Just Security (February 2026) on the growing risk of nuclear proliferation in 2026. No peer-reviewed W-Category article has previously: (a) formally theorised the Deterrence Paradox as a structural mechanism; (b) applied it through combined structural-realist and securitization frameworks; (c) grounded it in the IAEA's April 2026 stockpile confirmation; or (d) systematically identified all four paradox mechanisms simultaneously. This article fills all four gaps.

The distinctive contribution of this article relative to all existing literature is not the identification of any single piece of evidence all the evidence cited herein is available in the public record. The formal theoretical synthesis (naming, structuring and empirical demonstration) is the contribution, and the Deterrence Paradox is no longer an ad hoc observation on a single case, but rather a reproducible structural mechanism. The theoretical formalisation is significant because it not only explains why the 2026 war failed to achieve its nuclear goals, but also warns that any future war of preemption against a nuclear threshold state in the absence of the security guarantee architecture described in Section 11 would likely lead to similar paradoxical outcomes, through a similar four-stage process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative research as a research strategy to explore the causal aspects and discursive aspects of the study problem and to interpret the meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The methodology combines three complementary analytical approaches. First, process tracing is used to

reconstruct the causal chain between military strikes and their geopolitical and programmatic results and is used to examine the mechanisms and sequencing in detail (George & Bennett, 2005). Secondly, patterns of convergence and divergence in the responses of states to external coercion are identified through a structured focused comparison of four country cases: Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea (George & Bennett, 2005). Thirdly, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is applied to deconstruct conflicting official, intelligence and institutional narratives, including disputed evaluations from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In this study only primary and credible secondary sources of data have been used. The official statements and reports from the IAEA Director General have the greatest evidentiary weight as primary sources, as they are the main independent international body responsible for monitoring nuclear compliance. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed analysis and policy commentary from well-known institutions such as Chatham House, 38 North, Foreign Affairs, and Just Security. Where primary documentation is unavailable credible investigative journalism is also used. In line with methodological transparency demanded by qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), all empirical claims are cited to specific, dated sources.

This multi-method design also allows for analytical triangulation, improves the internal validity of the results and puts the study in the context of a well-established tradition of qualitative comparative foreign policy analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three existing IR theories reach a similar conclusion regarding the structure of the prediction: for nuclear-threshold states, military preemptive strikes without credible security assurances can be more of an incentive to acquire than a disincentive.

Structural Realism (Waltz, 1979) sees the security dilemma as the working mechanism. When one state acts to enhance its security, other states' security is decreased, which in turn produces countermeasures that leave everyone less secure. The US-Israeli strikes that were supposed to neutralize a nuclear threat, have structurally raised the nuclear risk level by proving to all the observing world that a non-nuclear state with clear enrichment processes is existentially vulnerable to the world's strongest military. Waltz (2012) explicitly anticipated this result, claiming that the incentives to acquire would actually be strengthened by preventive strikes. This structural logic is validated by the empirical record after 2026.

The rational-actor microfoundation is that of Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer, 2001). Nuclear weapons are the ultimate equalizer of relative power and this is what states want. From Iran's new leadership point of view, the parallel is clear: North Korea (nuclear) was not attacked, Iraq and Libya (WMD-free or surrendered) were destroyed and Iran (threshold state) was bombed twice. The answer from the offensive-realists is loud and clear: get weapons-grade deterrence before they're attacked, not after.

According to Securitization Theory (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1998), it has not become easier, but harder, to reach a diplomatic solution after the war. Khamenei Sr's death took away the religious authority that allowed nuclear restraint from the IRGC hawks (Chatham House, 2026a) in the form of an institutional actor. Since he has been replaced by Mojtaba Khamenei whose political credibility is based on his opposition to the attacking force, the nuclear capability has become a fundamental revolutionary duty and the nuclear issue is not negotiable in Iran at present.

The three frames point towards a similar conclusion – a conclusion that not any single framework can make on its own: that the paradox is structural (logical to the international system), rational-actor (logical to each party's security calculations), and discursive (logical to the securitization dynamic that makes compromise

politically impossible). This three-way convergence is what makes the paradox so strong: It cannot be solved with improved military precision and targeting, sanctions, or diplomatic wordsmanship alone. The latter will have to be tackled all three at once, as is the case with the security-for-verification framework proposed in Section 11.

BACKGROUND: THE ROAD TO FEBRUARY 28, 2026

The 2026 war was the product of four accelerating developments that produced the structural conditions for it. In the first place, the October 2023 Hamas attack and Israeli operations imposed serious military setbacks on Iran and undermined it for the first time in decades by destroying Iran's Axis of Resistance proxy buffer (Hezbollah, Hamas and Iraqi Shia militias) and thereby removing Iran's forward deterrence system. Second, June 2025 saw the Twelve-Day War (Operation Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer), where damage was reported at both Natanz and Fordow, as well as Isfahan, but varied between CIA (several years to rebuild), leaked DIA (several months) and IAEA (damage was serious, but unverifiable). On July 2, 2025, just two days after the strikes were carried out while the sixth round of nuclear talks was taking place, Iran withdrew from all cooperations with the IAEA, and set a deadly precedent: “Dialogue is not a protection.” (Gulf News, 2025)

Third, Iran's economy and domestic situation collapsed in the face of maximum pressure sanctions, inciting widespread protests in early 2026. US and Israeli planners interpreted these as evidence that strikes could trigger popular uprising and regime change a calculation that proved structurally incorrect. Fourth, the February 2026 Oman indirect talks described by the Omani foreign minister as showing 'significant progress' were abruptly dismissed by Trump as unsatisfying, closing the last diplomatic channel. The Mossad plan, presented to Netanyahu and Trump officials in January 2026, envisaged 'decapitating the leadership of Iran and intelligence operations, leading to a mass uprising.' It was adopted. Its failure to produce regime change is the empirical foundation of the Deterrence Paradox.

Date	Event	Paradox Significance
June 2025 (Twelve-Day War)	U.S. and Israel conduct strikes on Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan. Iran suspends IAEA cooperation on July 2. Conflicting assessments of facility damage. Ceasefire reached after 12 days.	NPT Credibility Collapse begins: Iran attacked during negotiations; IAEA verification architecture begins to break down.
July – December 2025	Iran continues underground enrichment. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan sign mutual defence pact (September). North Korea and Saudi Arabia draw proliferation lessons. New START expires.	Regional Domino Signal & Survivor’s Learning Effect emerge: Other states revise cost–benefit calculations regarding nuclear hedging and deterrence.
February 2026	Oman-facilitated indirect talks dismissed by the Trump administration; last diplomatic off-ramp closes.	Dialogue Non-Protection Precedent: Diplomatic engagement fails to prevent escalation, locking in structural path to war.
28 February 2026	Operations Roaring Lion and Epic Fury: Khamenei killed; major nuclear sites re-	Succession Hardening Dynamic triggered: All four paradox mechanisms activate simultaneously.

	struck; IRGC leadership decapitated; regime-change declared an explicit objective.	
March – April 2026	Iran retaliates: missile attacks on Tel Aviv (28 killed, 8,590 injured). Strait of Hormuz closed. Oil reaches USD 126/barrel. Pakistan brokers ceasefire (April 7–8).	Paradox empirically confirmed: IAEA’s Rafael Grossi states (April 29) that Iran’s stockpile likely remains intact despite extensive strikes.

Table 1: Key events 2025-2026 and their role in generating the Deterrence Paradox mechanisms.
Sources: House of Commons Library CBP-10521, CBP-10637 (2026); Britannica (2026 Iran war); Gulf News (2025); Foreign Policy (Apr 29, 2026).

The structural conditions created by these four developments were recognized by serious analysts before the February 2026 strikes began. The Al Jazeera Centre for Studies (March 2026) would later observe that the 2025 Twelve-Day War had 'trapped US and Israel in a longer war' precisely because its 'defined scope left room for negotiations' while the 2026 expansion to leadership decapitation and regime change objectives 'eliminated that space entirely.' This observation, made in real time by analysts watching the conflict unfold, aligns precisely with what the securitization framework predicts: once an issue has been securitized to the point of targeting the adversary's head of state, desecuritization the return to normal diplomatic negotiation requires overcoming political barriers that become progressively harder to surmount the further the escalation has proceeded. The February 2026 operations crossed that threshold definitively.

THE FOUR MECHANISMS OF THE DETERRENCE PARADOX

The Deterrence Paradox operates through four distinct, empirically documented mechanisms. Together they constitute the original theoretical contribution of this article a structural theory of counter-productive counter-proliferation that no existing peer-reviewed work has previously formalized.

Mechanism I: The Survivor's Learning Effect

States observing a nuclear-threshold state attacked while below the weaponisation threshold draw an unambiguous structural lesson: transparent hedging is the most dangerous nuclear posture. The rational response is rapid, covert weaponisation. Foreign Affairs (November 2025) documented this precisely: 'For aspiring nuclear powers, the lesson was clear: advertising and brandishing a nuclear program against far stronger military powers, without yet having a nuclear bomb to deter a preventive attack, is a risky game... future proliferators will likely seek to weaponized as rapidly as they can and will do so covertly.' 38 North (March 2026) confirmed the mechanism's operation in North Korea: 'the Iran case shows North Korea the value of deployed nuclear weapons in deterring potential attacks from the United States... a nuclear force in being certainly has to appear more protective to the North than the nuclear hedging strategy that clearly failed for Tehran.'

Mechanism II: The Succession Hardening Dynamic

By killing Supreme Leader Khamenei Sr. who had issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons in 2003 and reportedly 'pushed back against senior Iranian military leaders who argued for the bomb' (Chatham House, 2026a) the operation removed the one Iranian actor who combined supreme authority with a religious commitment to nuclear abstinence. His replacement by Mojtaba Khamenei triggered exactly the mechanism the theory predicts. Chatham House (2026a) confirmed: 'Iran's new supreme leader is reported to be more hardline than his father and predecessor, who issued a fatwa against nuclear weapons... since the war, prominent voices within the Iranian regime are now arguing that Tehran should quit the NPT and develop

the bomb.' PBS NewsHour (2026) reported that Mojtaba Khamenei 'vowed to protect nuclear and missile capabilities.' The decapitation strategy did not merely fail to produce regime change it actively worsened the nuclear risk it was designed to eliminate.

Mechanism III: The NPT Credibility Collapse

The NPT's non-proliferation pillar rests on an implicit bargain: non-nuclear states forgo weapons in exchange for the implicit security that treaty membership and diplomatic engagement provide. The 2026 war shatters this bargain comprehensively. Iran was attacked by two nuclear-armed NPT members during active nuclear negotiations in June 2025 (two days before a scheduled sixth negotiating round) and again in February 2026 (during the Oman indirect talks process). Chatham House (2026a) stated directly: 'observers may take the lesson that Iran would not have been attacked if it had a nuclear deterrent already... dialogue did not protect Iran.' Just Security (February 2026) documented the immediate response: 'both South Korea and Saudi Arabia are poised to take steps toward acquiring fissile material production capabilities.' Saudi Crown Prince MBS's public commitment that 'if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible' (IFRI, 2026) creates a Gulf nuclear cascade logic that the existing non-proliferation architecture is entirely unprepared to manage.

Mechanism IV: The Regional Domino Signal

The Iran case has generated observable behavioral shifts toward nuclear acquisition in multiple states simultaneously. Chatham House (December 2025) documented the chain: Saudi Arabia signed a mutual defense agreement with nuclear-armed Pakistan in September 2025; Turkey and Poland showed shifting public opinion toward domestic nuclear capability; South Korea's nuclear-powered submarine programme was endorsed by Trump; China continued arsenal expansion; New START expired without replacement. 38 North (March 2026) enumerated eight lessons North Korea has drawn from the Iran conflict, each reinforcing nuclear non-negotiability. IFRI (2026) confirmed Saudi Arabia's nuclear calculations are now driven by the intersection of the Iran precedent and MBS's 'follow suit' commitment. The war designed to prevent nuclear proliferation has instead provided the most persuasive proliferation tutorial in the post-Cold War era.

Mechanism	Core Logic	Key Evidence (2025–2026)	States Most Affected
I. Survivor’s Learning Effect	Hedging is dangerously exposed; states conclude they must weaponized rapidly and covertly to survive.	– “Future proliferators will seek to weaponise as rapidly as possible and covertly” (Foreign Affairs, Nov 2025)	
– North Korea Lesson 1: “Nuclear weapons provide real protection” (38 North, Mar 2026)	Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey, Poland, UAE		

II. Succession Hardening Dynamic	Leadership decapitation removes moderating figure; successor becomes more hardline; nuclear restraint norms (fatwas) reversed.	– Mojtaba Khamenei reverses nuclear restraint fatwa; vows preservation of nuclear & missile program	
– NPT withdrawal publicly advocated (Chatham House, 2026a; PBS, 2026)	Iran (most acute and immediate case)		
III. NPT Credibility Collapse	Dialogue and legal commitments do not protect; NPT membership provides no security guarantee against nuclear-armed states.	– Iran attacked twice during active negotiations	
– “Dialogue did not protect Iran” (Chatham House, 2026a)			
– Saudi Arabia and South Korea advancing toward enrichment capability (Just Security, 2026)	All non-nuclear NPT member states; the global non-proliferation regime as a whole		
IV. Regional Domino Signal	Multi-state observable shift toward nuclear acquisition triggered by precedent of Iran being attacked despite compliance.	– Saudi–Pakistan defence pact (Sep 2025)	
– South Korea nuclear submarine push			
– Turkey and Poland pro-nuclear public opinion shift			
– North Korea posture hardening; New START expired			
(Chatham House, Dec 2025; 38 North, Mar 2026; IFRI, 2026)	North Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey, Poland, China		

Table 2: The Four Mechanisms of the Deterrence Paradox the original theoretical contribution of this article. Each mechanism is documented by specific, dated, credible 2025-2026 sources.

The four mechanisms do not operate independently they interact and reinforce each other in ways that make the overall paradox more durable than any single mechanism alone would produce. The Survivor's Learning Effect (Mechanism I) reinforces and intensifies the Succession Hardening Dynamic (Mechanism II) by providing a regional and global audience to which Mojtaba Khamenei's hardline stance is playing for an audience which includes Saudi Arabia, North Korea, and South Korea, who are watching to see whether Iran's defiance is rewarded or punished. The NPT Credibility Collapse (Mechanism III) reinforces the Regional Domino Signal (Mechanism IV) by dismantling the normative structure that has previously contained Saudi and South Korean quest for nuclear capability within the diplomatic logic of the NPT's security rationale. Policy measures focusing on a single mechanism will be swamped by others going on.

It is an interactive dynamic which has clear and sobering implications for the Islamabad Talks: a ceasefire agreement that doesn't resolve the nuclear verification question (Mechanism III) and doesn't come with a credible security guarantee for Iran's new leadership (Mechanism II) will not put an end to the Survivor's Learning Effect taking hold in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea (Mechanisms I and IV). The regional and global proliferation cascade that the 2026 war has initiated is not automatically reversed by an end to the immediate hostilities. It needs a holistic approach to tackle the structural dimensions of all four mechanisms.

THE NUCLEAR STOCKPILE PROBLEM: THE PARADOX CONFIRMED

The most decisive empirical evidence for the Deterrence Paradox is the survival in an unverified and unverifiable state of Iran's entire enriched uranium stockpile. According to the IAEA's last verified report (September 2025), Iran held 440.9 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60% purity, sufficient for up to ten nuclear devices if further enriched to weapons grade (Times of Israel, 2025). On June 9, 2025 four days before Israel's Twelve-Day War strikes 18 containers bearing this material entered a tunnel at Isfahan's nuclear complex, captured on IAEA satellite imagery. After June 2025 and February 2026 strikes on Isfahan, no IAEA inspection was possible. IAEA Director General Grossi confirmed on April 29, 2026: the material is 'likely still at Isfahan' 'we haven't been able to inspect or to reject that the material is there' (Foreign Policy, 2026; Washington Post, 2026). He added bluntly: 'War cannot entirely eliminate Iran's nuclear program the material will still be there' (NPR, 2026).

Three competing damage assessments have circulated. CIA Director Ratcliffe claimed 'severe damage... years to rebuild' (Euronews, 2025). A leaked US Defense Intelligence Agency preliminary assessment found Iran 'moved much of its stockpile before strikes' and that facilities were 'not collapsed', setting back the programme by 'only a matter of months' (Britannica, 2026 Iran war). The IAEA the highest independent authority assessed 'very serious damage' at Natanz and damage at Isfahan, but confirmed zero ability to verify stockpile status without inspection access. The analytical conclusion is inescapable: the war was conducted at enormous cost against a target whose post-strike nuclear status remains the world's most consequential unresolved question. Any agreement without IAEA inspection provisions, Grossi stated, is 'an illusion of an agreement' (House of Commons Library, CBP-10637, 2026).

Parameter	Pre-June 2025 Status	Status as of May 2026
Enriched uranium stockpile	440.9 kg at 60% purity; potential for up to 10 nuclear devices (IAEA, Sep 2025)	Likely intact in Isfahan tunnel complexes; IAEA unable to verify (Grossi, Apr 29, 2026)

Enrichment facilities — Natanz	Fully operational with advanced IR-4 and IR-6 centrifuges	“Very serious damage” (Grossi); U.S. claims “destroyed” — disputed; estimated setback ranges from months to years depending on source
IAEA inspection access	Limited but ongoing monitoring; last verified report Sep 2025	Fully suspended since July 2025 — over 11 months without independent verification; inspections described as “long overdue” (Times of Israel, Nov 2025)
Nuclear damage assessment	N/A	CIA: years to rebuild; DIA (leaked): months; IAEA: serious damage but unverifiable due to lack of access
New supreme leader’s nuclear posture	Khamenei Sr.: 2003 anti-nuclear fatwa; restrained IRGC hardliners (Chatham House, 2026a)	Mojtaba Khamenei: fatwa reversed; firm commitment to preserve/enhance nuclear capability; open discussion of NPT withdrawal (PBS, 2026; Reuters)

Table 3: Iran's nuclear material and infrastructure status before and after the 2025-2026 strikes. The survival of the fissile material stockpile in an unverified state directly contradicts the war's stated objective. Sources: Times of Israel (Nov 2025, Apr 2026); Foreign Policy (Apr 29, 2026); Grossi NPR (Mar 2026); Euronews (Jun 2025); Britannica (2026 Iran war); Chatham House (2026a).

COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

The Deterrence Paradox is not unique to the 2026 Iran case. A structured comparison across four counter-proliferation cases reveals a consistent pattern that significantly strengthens the article's structural argument.

Historical Cases Demonstrating the Deterrence Paradox

Case	Action Taken	Immediate Result	Deterrence Paradox Effect
Iraq — Osirak Strike (1981)	Israeli preventive strike on Osirak reactor	Programme temporarily delayed	Iraq intensified covert nuclear efforts post-1981; programme reached near-weaponisation by 1991. The Osirak attack reinforced incentives for clandestine nuclear acquisition.
Libya (2003–2011)	WMD programme surrendered under diplomatic pressure; Gaddafi accepted verified dismantlement	Compliant state received formal security assurances	Regime destroyed in 2011 despite compliance. Strongly confirmed that WMD surrender eliminates deterrence. Iran repeatedly cited Libya as the cautionary example.
North Korea	Agreed Framework, sanctions, diplomacy, U.S. military posturing; no	Nuclear programme continued; DPRK achieved operational nuclear weapons; no	DPRK explicitly draws from Iran 2026: “nuclear weapons provide real protection” (38 North, 2026). Non-attack on nuclear-armed

(1994–present)	preventive strike once nuclear capability grew	U.S. attack on nuclear-armed North Korea	DPRK validates the deterrent value of acquiring weapons.
Iran (2025–2026) — Primary Case	Twelve-Day War (Jun 2025) and Operation Epic Fury (Feb 2026); leadership decapitation; explicit regime-change objective	Nuclear facilities damaged but stockpile likely intact; hardline successor installed; nuclear fatwa reversed	All four paradox mechanisms confirmed: stockpile unverified; NPT withdrawal discussed; global domino effect observed; North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea adjusting nuclear posture.

Table 4, Historical Cases Demonstrating the Deterrence Paradox

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Five original findings emerge from this research, each empirically grounded.

Finding 1: The Deterrence Paradox is Empirically Confirmed: The 2026 war has generated proliferation incentives rather than reducing them. Iran's enriched stockpile likely survived intact (Grossi, Apr 29, 2026). The new supreme leader reversed the anti-weapons fatwa. NPT withdrawal is being advocated. North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea are hardening nuclear postures. Each outcome directly inverts the war's stated objectives.

Finding 2: The Nuclear Objective Has Not Yet Been Empirically Verified: The overarching goal of eliminating the potential for Iran to build nuclear weapons has not been empirically confirmed. According to the IAEA's best estimate, the stockpile (10 devices) was 440.9kg and 'likely intact at Isfahan'. The war was waged at great expense against a target that remains the world's most important unresolved nuclear question: What was the status of the nation after the war?

Finding 3: Decapitation of Nuclear-Restrained Leadership is Counter-Productive: Killing Khamenei Sr. eliminated the only institutional actor in Iran who had both supreme power and a religious fatwa against nuclear weapons. The Succession Hardening Dynamic in its most dangerous empirical form has taken place when he was replaced by a demonstrably more hardline successor who has reversed the fatwa. Decapitation strategies strip away moderating influences at a time when they are most needed.

Finding 4: The NPT Regime Has Suffered Potentially Irreversible Credibility Damage: The precedent that an NPT member can be attacked by nuclear armed NPT states during active negotiations that includes regime change objectives and no UNSC sanction, has fundamentally changed every non-nuclear state's cost-benefit calculation of membership in the NPT. Responses in Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey and Poland show how this credibility is breaking down.

Finding 5: Pakistan's Mediating Role is the Best Available Opportunity to Address the Paradox: Pakistan's ceasefire brokerage puts Islamabad in a unique structural position: trusted by both Washington and Tehran, credible to the Islamic world, and with firsthand knowledge of the dynamics of nuclear deterrence. The Islamabad Talks are the available best structure to address all four paradox mechanisms via a security-for-verification exchange mechanism.

SCENARIO ANALYSIS: THREE FUTURES FOR THE NUCLEAR QUESTION

Scenario	Conditions Required	Effect on the Paradox	Estimated Probability
A: Comprehensive Settlement (Islamabad Talks)	U.S. provides a legally binding regime-change security guarantee; Iran restores full IAEA access and accepts enrichment limits; Pakistan establishes a multilateral verification framework	Paradox Partially Reversed: verification restored; accountability for stockpile re-established; Succession Hardening Dynamic stabilised; partial repair of NPT credibility. Requires politically costly commitments by both Washington and Tehran.	Low–Medium (15–20%)
B: Prolonged Stalemate (Most Likely)	Negotiations continue without breakthrough; ceasefire intermittently holds; naval blockade persists; Iran's nuclear opacity remains; Mojtaba consolidates power but postpones a weaponisation decision	Paradox Intensifies Gradually: each month without inspections increases uncertainty; all four mechanisms operate at moderate intensity; Saudi and South Korean nuclear timelines quietly accelerate.	High (45–50%)
C: Renewed War / Overt Weaponisation	Talks collapse; U.S. resumes strikes; Iran declares NPT withdrawal and initiates overt weaponisation, possibly including a nuclear test	Paradox Fully and Irreversibly Realized: Iranian nuclear programme entrenched; Saudi Arabia and South Korea move decisively; North Korea accelerates expansion; NPT enters existential crisis. The war's intended goal (preventing weaponisation) becomes permanently unattainable.	Medium (30–35%)

Table 5: Three-scenario analysis of the Deterrence Paradox under different post-ceasefire futures. The elevated probability of Scenario C reflects the structural depth of paradox mechanisms. Probability estimates are qualitative structural assessments.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations address the four paradox mechanisms directly. They are grounded in structural logic, directed at specific actors, and bias-free with respect to the parties involved.

Actor	Recommendation	Mechanism Addressed	Urgency
United States	Provide a legally binding security guarantee against forced change of the regime as the main U.S. quid pro quo in the Islamabad Talks. No real deal is even conceivable without tackling Iran's main concern: its	II and III	Critical / Immediate

	fear that nuclear deals will be used for military attacks in the future. Libya is a case in point that proves that disarmament on its own can result in jeopardy of existence.		
United States	Make full restoration of access to IAEA inspectors with no restrictions one of the ceasefire terms. Any settlement without verification is “an illusion of an agreement”, Rafael Grossi said. Verification revives transparency at no strategic cost and lays the foundation for long-term diplomacy.	All four mechanisms	Critical / Immediate
Israel	Recognise the failure of the regime change goal and that a nuclear settlement of sorts — notwithstanding the political challenges — is more enduring than an endless war against a hardened successor leadership that has already rolled back nuclear restraint.	II and III	Short-term
Iran (Mojtaba Khamenei Government)	Show seriously good faith to resume IAEA access as early confidence building measure. The fact that the enriched stockpile is still in place in the Isfahan tunnel complex doesn't come at a strategic cost and improves Iran's diplomacy at the Islamabad Talks.	III and IV	Immediate
Pakistan (Islamabad Talks Host)	Structure the Islamabad Talks around a “security-for-verification” framework — not the failed JCPOA model of “nuclear limits for sanctions relief.” Iran’s core requirement is protection from regime change; the international community’s core requirement is restored IAEA verification. Both conditions can be met without immediate limitations on enrichment, the single issue that has historically collapsed negotiations.	All four mechanisms	Critical
Pakistan	Use the September 2025 Saudi–Pakistan mutual defence pact to launch a Gulf Nuclear Restraint Initiative: Gulf states renounce enrichment in exchange for a formal U.S. extended deterrence umbrella. This converts Pakistan’s bilateral influence into a regional non-proliferation architecture.	IV (Regional Domino)	Medium-term
International Community	Convene an emergency NPT Review Conference to address the loss of Article VI credibility following the 2026 war. Active institutional repair — rather than passive silence — is necessary to prevent further	III (NPT Credibility Collapse)	Medium-term

	erosion and restore confidence in the global non-proliferation regime.		
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Table 6: Structured policy recommendations by actor, paradox mechanism addressed, and urgency. All recommendations are structurally grounded and analytically bias-free.

The theoretical convergence of the three frameworks used in this article is of analytical importance in itself. At the very least, the convergence of the three theories, which share completely different ontological foundations – structural realism (Waltz), offensive realism (Mearsheimer), and securitization theory (Buzan et al.) – provides strong theoretical evidence that the paradox is a structural feature of the international system, and not a product of any particular theory or analytical approach.

This structural strength renders the paradox immune to tactical manipulations improved intelligence, more accurate strikes, tougher sanctions and indicates the essential structurality of the security guarantees' political architecture. Before June 2025, the international community possessed imperfect but functional monitoring of Iran's nuclear activities through IAEA inspection protocols. The strategic logic of preventive counter-proliferation requires, at minimum, being able to verify what the strikes achieved. The suspension of IAEA access since July 2025 has created a condition where neither the success nor the failure of the military operations can be independently verified a condition that is, paradoxically, more dangerous for non-proliferation purposes than the monitored-but-advancing programme that existed before the strikes. As Grossi noted in April 2026, any ceasefire agreement that does not restore IAEA access is 'an illusion of an agreement' not merely diplomatically, but in the structural sense that the most important variable in any nuclear settlement, the fissile material stockpile, remains unaccounted for.

Finally, it is necessary to provide analytical attention beyond the instrumental one accorded to the brokerage for the April 2026 ceasefire, to Pakistan's role in this structural environment. Pakistan is in a truly unique situation in the architecture of the possibility of a resolution to the paradox: it is the only state that is both a nuclear weapons state (and knows how to deter), and a Muslim-majority state with credibility in Tehran's religious-political system, and a state with sufficiently functioning ties to both Washington and Tehran, so as to be a good intermediary, rather than a partisan advocate. No other State in the current international system has this combination. The Islamabad Talks are the institutionalisation of this asset and their success or failure will be one of the most defining assets of Pakistani statecraft to international security in this generation.

CONCLUSION

The probability distribution across the three scenarios reflects the structural depth of the Deterrence Paradox mechanisms. Scenario B's dominance at 45-50% probability reflects a fundamental feature of the current equilibrium: both the US-Israeli side and the Iranian side have strong incentives to avoid the costs of full-scale war resumption (Scenario C) without having the political conditions for genuine compromise (Scenario A). This 'frozen conflict' equilibrium is uncomfortable but stable in the short term. Its danger lies in the long term: Mechanisms I, III, and IV continue operating during the stalemate, generating proliferation dynamics globally that progressively worsen the structural environment in which any eventual settlement must be negotiated. The longer the stalemate persists, the more difficult Scenario A becomes and the more likely Scenario C becomes a structural dynamic that provides the strongest argument for urgency in the Islamabad Talks.

This article set out to answer a precise empirical question: has the 2026 US-Israel war on Iran reduced, maintained, or increased Iran's nuclear weapons production potential? On the best available evidence as of May 2026, the answer is: maintained or increased it while simultaneously generating a cascade of

proliferation incentives in other states that threatens the foundational architecture of the global non-proliferation regime. This is the Deterrence Paradox, and the 2026 Iran war is its most comprehensive empirical confirmation in the history of preventive nuclear counter-proliferation strategy.

The paradox operates through four mechanisms: the Survivor's Learning Effect teaches aspiring proliferators to weaponise rapidly and covertly; the Succession Hardening Dynamic removed the Iranian actor who institutionally constrained nuclear weaponisation since 2003; the NPT Credibility Collapse signals that dialogue and treaty membership offer no protection; and the Regional Domino Signal produces observable proliferation-oriented shifts in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Turkey, and Poland. Each mechanism is documented by specific, dated, credible evidence. Together they constitute a structural explanation of why the 2026 war was not merely operationally incomplete its enriched uranium stockpile unverified, its regime change objective failed but structurally self-defeating at the systemic level of the global nuclear order.

The Deterrence Paradox is not a counsel of despair. It is a structural diagnosis pointing toward a structural cure: the security guarantee architecture that makes nuclear acquisition unnecessary for regime survival. Building that architecture is harder than building bunker-busting bombs. It requires the willingness to offer adversaries what they actually need credible guarantees against forcible regime change rather than what is politically convenient to offer. The Islamabad Talks, brokered by Pakistan in a moment of genuine diplomatic courage, are the best available structural opportunity to build that architecture. Whether that opportunity is seized or squandered will define not only the future of the Iran conflict but the integrity of the global non-proliferation regime for decades to come.

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