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The Use of Force in the Nuclear Age and the United States, Israel- Iran War

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Abstract

The evolution of the use of force in the nuclear age has fundamentally reshaped the logic, legality, and morality of warfare, particularly in conflicts involving nuclear-capable or near-nuclear states. In the nuclear age, the traditional concept of war as an instrument of policy has been constrained by the catastrophic consequences associated with nuclear weapons, giving rise to doctrines such as deterrence, mutually assured destruction (MAD), and anticipatory self-defense. The prohibition on the use of force under Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter and the exception of self-defense under Article 51 are interpreted and contested in the context of preemptive and preventive military actions against perceived nuclear threats. The US, Israel–Iran war, increasingly described as a "threshold war," reflects a strategic environment in which force is employed not merely in response to armed attack but to prevent nuclear proliferation and preserve regional power balances. The paper analyzes how the US, Israel-Iran war illustrates the complexities of using force in a nuclearized environment. The paper, which is qualitative and anchored on deterrence theory, argues that while nuclear weapons deter large-scale direct conflict, they simultaneously incentivize limited, covert, and technologically advanced uses of force below the nuclear threshold. This paper found that the nuclear age has not eliminated the use of force but has transformed it into a highly constrained, legally ambiguous, and strategically perilous instrument. The paper recommends the need to strengthen international legal frameworks and renewed diplomatic mechanisms to manage nuclear risks and prevent catastrophic escalation.

Keywords: *Use of Force, Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, Strategy, War*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of nuclear weapons in 1945 fundamentally transformed the nature, logic, and limits of the use of force in international relations. Classical realist thought, which views war as a rational instrument of state policy, has been significantly reshaped by the catastrophic potential of nuclear weapons. Scholars such as Thomas Schelling (1966) and Kenneth Waltz (1981) argue that nuclear weapons introduce a condition of deterrence in which the costs of war far outweigh any conceivable benefits, thereby discouraging direct conflict between nuclear-armed states. This condition, often conceptualized as mutually assured destruction (MAD), has produced what is sometimes described as the "long peace," characterized by the absence of direct great-power wars since World War II. However, the nuclear age has not eliminated the use of force; rather, it has transformed its modalities. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that while nuclear deterrence constrains large-scale war, it simultaneously incentivizes limited wars, proxy conflicts, and coercive strategies below the nuclear threshold. As Beres (2015) argues, nuclear weapons are effective primarily as instruments of deterrence "ex ante, not war fighting," meaning their value lies in preventing war rather than being used in it. This paradox, where nuclear weapons both prevent and indirectly sustain conflict, remains central to understanding modern international security dynamics.

The ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Iran provides a critical empirical context for examining these dynamics. The roots of the Iran–Israel rivalry can be traced to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, after which Iran adopted an explicitly hostile posture toward Israel, leading to decades of indirect confrontation through proxy actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Over time, this rivalry has evolved into a complex security dilemma shaped by ideological opposition, regional power competition, and, crucially, concerns over nuclear proliferation. At the heart of the US, Israel–Iran conflict lies the question of Iran's nuclear program and the broader issue of nuclear asymmetry in the Middle East. Israel is widely believed to possess a significant, though undeclared, nuclear arsenal, which has contributed to a regional imbalance and

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fueled Iran's strategic calculations. Scholars and analysts argue that this asymmetry creates a classic security dilemma: Israel views Iran's nuclear ambitions as an existential threat, while Iran perceives its nuclear program as a necessary deterrent against both Israel and the United States. This dynamic illustrates how nuclear weapons can simultaneously stabilize and destabilize regional security environments.

The escalation of hostilities into open conflict in 2026 further highlights the persistence of force as a policy tool in the nuclear age. The coordinated U.S.–Israeli military operation against Iranian targets, often framed as a preventive or preemptive strike, reflects a strategic logic aimed at halting nuclear proliferation before it reaches an irreversible stage. Preventive war doctrines, while controversial under international law, have gained renewed prominence in nuclear contexts where the acquisition of weapons by adversaries is perceived as intolerable. Recent developments in the ongoing war underscore the risks and complexities associated with the use of force under nuclear conditions. Despite extensive military strikes, Iran retains significant nuclear capabilities, including stockpiles of highly enriched uranium sufficient for multiple nuclear weapons, raising concerns that military action may have inadvertently accelerated proliferation risks rather than mitigated them. This aligns with critical perspectives in the literature, such as Porter (2014), who argues that threat inflation and coercive strategies can sometimes exacerbate rather than resolve nuclear crises.

Moreover, the conflict illustrates the continued relevance of deterrence, albeit in modified forms. Iran has relied heavily on asymmetric strategies, including missile attacks, proxy warfare, and economic disruption, to counterbalance the conventional military superiority of the United States and Israel. At the same time, the large-scale exchange of strikes and the targeting of critical infrastructure demonstrate how quickly escalation can occur even in a nuclear-constrained environment. Reports indicate significant casualties, widespread infrastructure damage, and disruptions to global energy supplies, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz, highlighting the global implications of regional conflicts in the nuclear age. Another important dimension of the nuclear age reflected in this conflict is the role of credibility, perception, and miscalculation. Deterrence is not merely a function of capability but also of perceived intent and resolve. Misperceptions about an adversary's intentions or red lines can lead to escalation, even when both sides seek to avoid full-scale war. The failure of diplomatic negotiations preceding the 2026 conflict underscores the limitations of coercive diplomacy and the challenges of maintaining strategic stability in a multipolar and highly volatile regional context.

In addition, the nuclear age has witnessed the increasing use of non-kinetic forms of force, including economic sanctions, cyber operations, and targeted killings. These tools are often employed as alternatives to conventional warfare, allowing states to exert pressure without crossing the threshold of full-scale war. Nevertheless, their cumulative effect can still contribute to escalation, as seen in the gradual intensification of hostilities between Iran, Israel, and the United States. Consequently, the nuclear age has fundamentally altered the character of the use of force, imposing constraints on large-scale warfare while simultaneously encouraging alternative forms of conflict. The ongoing U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict exemplifies these dynamics, highlighting the interplay between deterrence, proliferation, preventive war, and asymmetric strategies. This paper therefore seeks to critically examine how the logic of nuclear deterrence shapes the use of force in contemporary conflicts and to assess the implications of the U.S.–Israel–Iran war for international security in the 21st century.

Use of Force in the Nuclear Age and Interstate Conflict

The literature on the use of force in the nuclear age is largely anchored in deterrence theory, strategic studies, and contemporary debates on nuclear proliferation. Early foundational works emphasize the transformative impact of nuclear weapons on international conflict. For instance, Thomas Schelling (1966) conceptualizes nuclear weapons as tools of coercion and bargaining rather than instruments of battlefield use, arguing that their primary function lies in deterrence and compellence. Similarly, Kenneth Waltz (1981) posits that the spread of nuclear weapons may enhance stability by increasing the costs of war, a perspective often referred to as "nuclear optimism." Contrasting this view, scholars such as Scott Sagan (1993) highlight the risks associated with nuclear proliferation, including accidental war, miscalculation, and organizational failures. Sagan's work challenges the assumption that nuclear deterrence is inherently stable, emphasizing that the management of nuclear arsenals is subject to human and institutional limitations. This debate between nuclear optimists and pessimists forms a central axis in the literature and is directly relevant to the dynamics of the US, Israel–Iran conflict.

In examining the use of force under nuclear conditions, more recent scholarship has focused on the paradoxical relationship between nuclear deterrence and limited conflict. As argued by Louis René Beres (2015), nuclear weapons are most effective in preventing large-scale wars but do not eliminate lower-intensity conflicts. This perspective aligns with the stability–instability paradox, which suggests that while nuclear weapons deter full-scale war, they may encourage conventional or proxy conflicts below the nuclear threshold. The literature on Middle Eastern security further contextualizes these theoretical insights. Studies of the Iran–Israel rivalry emphasize the role of nuclear asymmetry and the resulting security dilemma. According to Avner Cohen (1998), Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has been central to its national security strategy, yet it also contributes to regional instability by incentivizing adversaries to pursue countervailing capabilities. In the same vein, Gareth Porter (2014) argues that the perceived threat of Iran's nuclear program has often been exaggerated for political purposes, thereby justifying coercive policies, including sanctions and military threats.

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Scholars have also examined the legitimacy and strategic logic of preventive and preemptive uses of force in nuclear contexts. Preventive war doctrines, particularly in Israeli and U.S. strategic thinking, are often justified as necessary to halt nuclear proliferation before it reaches a critical threshold. However, critics argue that such actions may undermine international law and exacerbate security dilemmas, increasing the likelihood of conflict rather than preventing it (Beres, 2015). Recent analyses of the ongoing US, Israel–Iran conflict highlight the evolving nature of warfare in the nuclear age. Contemporary studies emphasize the increasing reliance on asymmetric strategies, including proxy warfare, cyber operations, and economic coercion. These forms of force allow states to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding confrontation that could escalate into nuclear war. At the same time, scholars note that these indirect methods can produce cumulative escalation effects, blurring the line between war and peace.

Empirical reports from organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (2023) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024) underscore the persistent concerns about Iran's nuclear capabilities and the broader implications for regional and global security. These reports reinforce the argument that nuclear proliferation remains a central driver of conflict dynamics in the Middle East. In summary, the literature reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship between nuclear weapons and the use of force. While deterrence theory suggests that nuclear weapons constrain large-scale war, empirical evidence from the US, Israel–Iran conflict demonstrates that they do not eliminate conflict but instead reshape its form. The interplay between deterrence, proliferation, preventive war, and asymmetric strategies continues to define the contemporary security landscape, making this area of study both theoretically rich and policy-relevant.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on deterrence theory propounded by Bernard Brodie in 1946, popularized and advanced by scholars such as Thomas Schelling in 1966, in his seminal work titled "Arms and Influence" (1966), which conceptualizes deterrence as a form of coercive diplomacy. Schelling argues that the essence of deterrence lies in the ability to manipulate an adversary's expectations through credible threats. He highlights the importance of communication, signalling, and the "threat that leaves something to chance" in maintaining strategic stability. Bernard Brodie, who is often regarded as one of the earliest architects of nuclear deterrence theory, argues that the primary purpose of military forces in the nuclear age is not to win wars but to prevent them, marking a fundamental shift in strategic thinking. Kenneth Waltz (1981) also contributed to the advancement of the theory. Waltz (1981) contends that nuclear weapons promote international stability by raising the costs of war to unacceptable levels. His argument, often summarized as "more may be better," suggests that the spread of nuclear weapons could reinforce deterrence by making states more cautious. Bernard Brodie, who is often regarded as one of the earliest architects of nuclear deterrence theory, argues that the primary purpose of military forces in the nuclear age is not to win wars but to prevent them, marking a fundamental shift in strategic thinking. Deterrence theory is a central framework in strategic and security studies, particularly in explaining state behaviour in the nuclear age. It emerged prominently during the Cold War as scholars sought to understand how nuclear weapons could prevent rather than provoke war. The theory is primarily associated with realist thinkers who emphasize power, survival, and rational decision-making in international politics.

The theory assumes that states are rational actors that weigh costs and benefits before taking action. Decision-makers are expected to avoid actions that would lead to catastrophic consequences, particularly nuclear retaliation. This assumption is central to the idea that the threat of overwhelming punishment can prevent aggression. The theory also argues that for deterrence to be effective, threats must be credible. As Thomas Schelling emphasizes, an adversary must believe that a state has both the capability and the willingness to carry out its threats. Without credibility, deterrence fails because the opponent may doubt the consequences of its actions. Deterrence relies on the possession of sufficient military capability, particularly a secure second-strike capability or the ability to retaliate even after absorbing a first strike. This ensures that no adversary can eliminate a state's nuclear forces in a single attack, thereby maintaining mutual vulnerability. A central assumption is that the destructive power of nuclear weapons creates a shared understanding of unacceptable damage. This fear underpins the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which discourages states from initiating conflict. Deterrence theory further assumes that states are the primary actors in international relations and that they have centralized control over their military forces. This assumption simplifies the application of deterrence but becomes problematic in contexts involving non-state actors or decentralized command structures.

Theory Application

Deterrence theory remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the use of force in the nuclear age. Rooted in realist thought, the theory posits that states can prevent adversaries from taking unwanted actions by credibly threatening severe retaliation. Classical proponents such as Thomas Schelling (1966) emphasize that the power of nuclear weapons lies less in their actual use and more in their ability to shape an opponent's expectations through fear of unacceptable damage. Similarly, Kenneth Waltz (1981) argues that nuclear deterrence creates stability by making war irrational due to its catastrophic consequences. In the context of the US, Israel–Iran conflict, deterrence theory provides a useful lens for explaining why full-scale war, particularly nuclear war, has thus far been avoided despite intense hostility. The implicit presence of nuclear capabilities, especially Israel's widely assumed nuclear arsenal, contributes to a strategic environment in which escalation is carefully managed. Iran's actions, including its calibrated military responses and reliance on proxies, can be interpreted

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as attempts to avoid triggering overwhelming retaliation from the United States and Israel, consistent with deterrence logic. Moreover, deterrence theory helps explain the emphasis on signalling, credibility, and perception in the conflict. As Thomas Schelling notes, successful deterrence depends not only on military capability but also on the adversary's belief in a state's willingness to use force. The United States and Israel have repeatedly used military posturing, sanctions, and limited strikes to signal resolve and deter Iran from advancing its nuclear program. Conversely, Iran's missile tests and regional influence operations serve as deterrent signals aimed at discouraging attacks on its territory or regime.

Discussion of Findings

The US, Israel–Iran war can be best understood as a product of the transformed logic of the use of force in the nuclear age. Rather than eliminating war, nuclear weapons have reshaped how, when, and why force is used, often producing conditions that make limited or preventive wars more likely even as total war becomes less likely. A defining feature of the nuclear age is the fear of nuclear proliferation. States increasingly view the emergence of new nuclear powers as an existential threat that must be stopped before it materializes. In the case of Iran, its advancing nuclear program, especially after the breakdown of diplomatic agreements such as the 2015 nuclear deal, became a central trigger for military action. The United States and Israel adopted a preventive use of force strategy, targeting Iran's nuclear facilities and military infrastructure to halt its progress toward becoming a nuclear weapons state. This reflects a broader nuclear-age pattern: force is used not in response to immediate attack, but to prevent a future shift in the balance of power.

Similarly, deterrence theory suggests that the threat of retaliation should prevent war, yet the conflict reveals its limitations. Iran had developed a "threshold" nuclear capability, enough to raise concern but not enough to guarantee deterrence. This ambiguity weakened its deterrent effect and emboldened adversaries to act. Indeed, analysts note that Iran's status as a near-nuclear state failed to deter Israeli and U.S. strikes, demonstrating that incomplete or emerging nuclear capability may actually invite attack rather than prevent it. Thus, in the nuclear age, deterrence is not absolute; it is conditional on credibility, capability, and clarity. When these are lacking, the use of force becomes more, not less, likely. Also, the nuclear age creates what scholars call the stability–instability paradox: while nuclear weapons deter large-scale war, they encourage lower-level conflicts. This dynamic is clearly evident in the US, Israel–Iran war. Because all parties are aware of the catastrophic risks of nuclear escalation, they have largely avoided nuclear use. However, this restraint has made room for intensive conventional warfare, including airstrikes, cyber operations, and proxy engagements. For example, the war has involved targeted strikes on nuclear and military sites, leadership decapitation attempts, and missile exchanges as forms of force that remain below the nuclear threshold but still constitute significant warfare.

Another key factor is nuclear asymmetry and the security dilemma. Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons, while Iran does not officially have them but has pursued nuclear capabilities. This imbalance has intensified the security dilemma: Israel perceives a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, while Iran views Israel's nuclear capability (and U.S. support) as justification for its own nuclear ambitions. This partly explains why scholars and conflict experts argued that Israel's nuclear capability has likely incentivized Iran to pursue nuclear development, contributing to a regional arms race dynamic. This mutual suspicion creates a cycle where defensive actions by one side are interpreted as offensive threats by the other, ultimately leading to the use of force. Furthermore, in the nuclear age, diplomacy and verification regimes (such as inspections and treaties) are essential for maintaining stability. However, their breakdown significantly increases the likelihood of conflict. Before the war, negotiations over Iran's nuclear program failed, and monitoring mechanisms weakened, creating what analysts describe as a "verification vacuum." Without reliable information about Iran's nuclear activities, the United States and Israel faced increased uncertainty, which heightened threat perceptions and incentivized military action. Therefore, the use of force became a substitute for failed diplomacy, a common pattern in nuclear-era conflicts.

In the final analysis, the nuclear age does not prevent escalation; it reshapes it. The current war demonstrates how conflicts can intensify rapidly while remaining below the nuclear threshold. Recent reports indicate that despite heavy strikes, Iran has retained significant nuclear material and capabilities, raising concerns that military action may have worsened proliferation risks rather than eliminated them. At the same time, Iran has responded through asymmetric strategies, threatening global energy routes and leveraging regional networks, illustrating how weaker states adapt to nuclear-constrained environments. Ultimately, the US, Israel–Iran war highlights a central paradox: nuclear weapons discourage total war, but they encourage preventive war, limited conflict, and indirect confrontation. Therefore, the use of force in this context is shaped by fear of future nuclear capability rather than present military necessity. As a result, wars are fought not to defeat an opponent outright, but to manage risks, delay threats, and shape strategic outcomes.

In another development, the ongoing U.S.–Israel war with Iran (2026) has rapidly evolved from a regional conflict into a crisis with global economic, energy markets, diplomacy, international law, geopolitical realignments, and security consequences. Three key reasons for the war with Iran include: Iran must never be allowed to develop nuclear weapons, as Donald Trump vows to destroy and raze the Iranian missile industry to the ground, stating that the US has repeatedly sought to make a deal, but Iran rejected every opportunity to renounce its nuclear ambitions. Secondly, America's backing for regime change, and lastly, the US, Israel longstanding commitments to the security of their allies in the Middle East. Below is a structured analysis of the major global effects of the US-Israel war with Iran: The

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largest global effect is on the energy market because the conflict disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a route carrying about 20% of the world's oil supply. Similarly, Tanker traffic dropped dramatically, with many ships avoiding the region due to attacks and security risks. Also, Oil prices surged above $100 per barrel, briefly approaching $119–$126, creating fears of another global energy crisis. Consequently, this has led to higher fuel prices worldwide, increased electricity costs, and rising transport and shipping expenses. These shocks are similar to the global energy disruption caused by the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022.

Also, energy price spikes ripple into food production because, as energy costs rise, food prices increase globally, especially in import-dependent countries, such as low-income nations in Africa, and food-importing states in Asia and the Middle East. There is also the disruption of global trade and shipping because the Middle East is one of the world's most important energy and shipping hubs. Key disruptions include closure or reduced traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, increased shipping insurance costs, delays in oil, gas, and commodity deliveries, and rerouting of tankers and cargo ships. This is because major shipping companies temporarily suspended operations in the Gulf region, affecting supply chains globally. Furthermore, global financial markets reacted immediately with the following effects: stock market volatility, rising commodity prices, flight to "safe-haven" assets like gold, and increased risk of global recession if the war escalates. The conflict also triggered sharp fluctuations in global stock markets and currencies.

Similarly, the war has already triggered secondary conflicts across the Middle East, such as Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian retaliatory attacks on U.S.-allied Gulf states, and missile and drone strikes across the region. The conflict, therefore, risks evolving into a broader Middle East war involving multiple actors. The war has caused significant human suffering. For instance, Iran reports over 1,300 civilians killed and thousands of civilian sites damaged in the strikes, millions face displacement or economic hardship, and travel disruption has also been severe, for example, 20,000+ flights cancelled, major airports in the Gulf affected. The war has also resulted in diplomatic and geopolitical realignment, reshaping global alliances, and possible geopolitical shifts that include Russia and China increasing diplomatic support for Iran, Gulf states balancing between the U.S. and regional stability, western countries coordinating emergency energy strategies, and some governments are already preparing strategic oil reserve releases to stabilize markets. In summary, the war is affecting the world in five major ways, including energy crisis and oil price spikes, global inflation and rising food costs, disruption of trade and shipping, financial market instability, and risk of wider regional war and humanitarian crises.

Conclusion

The US, Israel–Iran war is not an anomaly but a reflection of how the use of force operates in the nuclear age. The presence (and potential spread) of nuclear weapons has shifted conflict toward preventive and preemptive strikes, exposed the limits of deterrence, especially for emerging nuclear states, reinforced the security dilemma in an asymmetric nuclear environment and increased reliance on limited and indirect forms of warfare. In this sense, the war is a direct outcome of nuclear-age strategic logic, a system where the fear of catastrophic war paradoxically makes smaller, yet still highly destructive, wars more likely.

Recommendations

on Addressing the US, Israel–Iran conflict and global implications, the paper recommends that:

i. The conflicting countries should pursue immediate diplomatic engagement, encouraging urgent multilateral talks under the United Nations, including all regional stakeholders and major powers such as China, Russia, and the EU, to reduce the risk of broader regional escalation and signal to Iran that a peaceful resolution remains viable. Diplomatic channels can also help protect global energy markets and prevent further civilian suffering.

ii. All parties must reaffirm non-proliferation commitments and avoid provocative strikes against nuclear infrastructure, boosting transparency in nuclear programs through independent monitoring to prevent the conflict from escalating into a nuclear confrontation and strengthening international security norms.

iii. Parties to the conflict should encourage regional security dialogue, initiating regional security frameworks that include Iran, Israel, Gulf states, and key external actors, and incorporate mechanisms for conflict de-escalation, early warning systems, and joint counter-terrorism efforts. This would build trust, reduce proxy escalation, and provide a foundation for long-term stability in the Middle East.

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