

## Iran's Nuclear Model: Japan or North Korea?

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Given Tehran's threat to scale up its enrichment efforts, how far might its nuclear program go post-JCPOA, and what lessons might it draw from U.S. discussions with Pyongyang?

Over the past week, Iran has responded to U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal by warning that it will drastically increase its uranium enrichment efforts unless other parties—presumably Europe—meet its demands for compensation. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has ordered the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to make immediate preparations for achieving 190,000 separative work units, the standard used for measuring the [output of its uranium centrifuges](#). Although he emphasized that the move remains within the limitations mandated by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), this number is almost forty times bigger than Iran's current enrichment capacity. If the regime follows through on this threat, it would represent another step in Iran's nuclear threshold strategy—that is, developing the materials needed for nuclear weapons as far as possible without actually producing said weapons or otherwise overtly violating the letter of international agreements.

Back in 2006, the peak of Iran's first nuclear crisis with the West, Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh analyzed Tehran's failing nuclear strategy in an op-ed that outlined ways to move forward. He argued that Iran had to choose between two different models for its nuclear future: Japan or North Korea. By going along with the JCPOA in 2015, Tehran seemingly chose Tokyo's model for becoming a nuclear threshold state in the long term. Yet President Trump's recent decisions to leave the JCPOA and pursue nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang may push Iranian leaders to revisit their choice.

### JAPAN'S MODEL: SHORT-TERM CONCESSIONS FOR THRESHOLD STATUS

Over the past two decades, various Iranian officials have looked upon Japan's nuclear status with envy. In their view, Tokyo has succeeded in gaining the international community's trust and building a nuclear fuel cycle despite its aggressive past. By doing so, it has become a threshold state capable of quickly producing nuclear weapons if it so desired.

As Aminzadeh described it in 2006, Japan's nuclear status after World War II was similar to Iran's current situation, but the island nation had since built fifty-five atomic power plants. In 2009, Iranian foreign minister Manoucher Motaki asserted that Japan had "spent many years to build confidence about its nuclear work...without suspending its [nuclear] activities." His predecessor, Kamal Kharrazi, conveyed the same idea in 2005, stating that "peaceful nuclear plants in Japan can serve as a model for Iran."

Yet such statements conveniently leave out the steep price Tokyo paid to gain international trust and reap these nuclear benefits. First, Japan had to change its foreign policy dramatically after the war, becoming a status quo power in East Asia and constitutionally proscribing future involvement in overseas conflicts. In contrast, Iran continues to export its Islamic Revolution and destabilize governments in the Middle East and beyond.

Second, the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki spurred Japan to vow that it would never seek nuclear weapons—in fact, it became a leading advocate of nuclear disarmament. Yet Iranian leaders have ordered covert weaponization work in past years, and at least one of them (the late Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) warned of Israel's potential nuclear destruction in a public speech—all this despite issuing religious prohibitions against weapons of mass destruction and being party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Third, as Aminzadeh noted in his article, Tokyo has cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency in good faith over the years, removing any fear that it might seek nuclear weapons. Iranian officials tried to make the international community believe that they too were fully cooperating, but IAEA reports from 2011-2015 clearly illustrate Tehran's illicit quest for a nuclear weapon. More recently, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu revealed that Iran had painstakingly maintained a large archive of weaponization data for the future, hiding it from IAEA inspectors for years after approving the JCPOA.

Indeed, Iran's decision to negotiate the nuclear deal and accept temporary caps on its program was clearly an attempt to reap the same advantages as Japan, but without adopting Tokyo's peaceful goals or aversion to weapons of mass destruction. In a 2014 television interview, AEOI director Ali Akbar Salehi defended the framework agreement that preceded the JCPOA by claiming that Iran's program would "be like Japan's" after the

deal, and that Tehran would then “enjoy its rights according to the NPT.” Yet while Japan has sought nuclear power as an end, Iran has shown time and again that it sees such capabilities as merely a means to achieving nuclear deterrence.

## **NORTH KOREA’S MODEL: ATTAINING NUCLEAR DETERRENCE UNDER PRESSURE**

Although many Iranian conservatives likely admire the Kim regime’s ability to produce nuclear weapons while holding onto political power, they are no doubt wary of the cost Pyongyang has paid. North Korea is one of the poorest and most totalitarian societies in the world. Its economic situation is hardly one that Iranian officials would aspire to copy, and given the Islamic Republic’s periodic bouts of unrest since the 1979 revolution, following the North Korean example could pose a great danger to the Supreme Leader’s public support.

Nevertheless, prominent hardliners have repeatedly urged the regime to consider that very idea. After North Korea’s inaugural nuclear test in 2006, the ultraconservative Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* published an editorial claiming that Pyongyang’s capabilities were “the product of persistence in the face of...great pressure” from the United States. The article concluded that if any country steadfastly commits to obtaining nuclear weapons, “it will ultimately succeed...even if the whole world is opposed.” Other newspapers affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have likewise praised North Korea’s defiance toward Washington, while a diplomacy think tank affiliated with the Foreign Ministry claimed in 2009 that Pyongyang’s lessons could be applicable to the Middle East.

Even so, Tehran chose to restrain itself, presumably because its nuclear strategy derived from the fundamental objective of preserving the regime by all means. Despite noting the merits of North Korea’s strategy (i.e., withdrawing from the NPT and breaking out to achieve nuclear deterrence), Iran took another path: adopting parts of the Japan model by advancing its enrichment program while engaging with the West, and later agreeing to the JCPOA, in part to alleviate heavy economic sanctions.

## **THE RETURN OF IRAN’S ASIAN DILEMMA**

President Trump’s decision to revoke the JCPOA and reimpose sanctions is a major blow to Iranian proponents of the Japanese model. President Hassan Rouhani is under heavy fire from Khamenei and other conservatives, who blame him for his role in pushing for the deal. If he cannot provide solutions to Iran’s resultant economic and political situation, some hardliners may press the government to follow through on the warnings it has issued in recent months—namely, to withdraw from the NPT if Washington leaves the JCPOA.

Simultaneously, President Trump has decided to meet with Kim Jong-un (as of this writing, a summit is scheduled for next week), raising the prospect of a U.S. nuclear deal with Pyongyang. Such possibilities may convince Tehran that Washington is finally willing to consent to the North Korean regime’s rule, likely leading some conservatives to claim that the only way to resist the West is by obtaining nuclear weapons and negotiating from a position of strength.

The next few months will therefore be crucial to Iran’s future, as its leaders decide between taking harsh action to deter U.S. pressure or playing the grievance card and restraining themselves to limited action. The dynamics between Iran, Washington, and Europe—especially the prospect of gaining economic compensation from the latter—will be the main factor in shaping this decision. Yet events in East Asia could also influence the regime’s behavior. If Trump and Kim’s negotiations result in an agreement, Tehran will no doubt examine it closely to determine whether Pyongyang’s strategy is worth pursuing. Should Iran decide to play hardball, it might adopt a brinkmanship strategy and covertly break out of the NPT in the hope of renegotiating terms with the international community.

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