

GLOBAL SECURITY

THE FRAYING NORM KEEPING NUCLEAR REACTORS OFF—LIMITS

BY STEVEN E. HENDRIX.



Johannes Plenio [via Pexels](#).

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Attacks near civilian nuclear plants are eroding a vital norm, with risks reaching far beyond any single conflict, writes Steven E. Hendrix.

One of the most important achievements of the nuclear age has been the gradual emergence of an international norm that civilian nuclear facilities should never become military objectives—a norm that, while never perfect, reflected a shared recognition that the consequences of miscalculation extend far beyond any battlefield. Recent military operations involving civilian nuclear facilities—from Ukraine to Iran—suggest that this norm may be weakening. The implications extend far beyond any single conflict.

Earlier this year, military strikes landed within meters of Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, the country's only operational civilian reactor. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported **impacts near the facility and warned that continued military activity could trigger a severe radiological accident** with consequences far beyond Iran's borders. The reactor itself was not hit. That is fortunate. It is also beside the point. International law does not wait for a catastrophe before it speaks.

The modern law of armed conflict, grounded in the Geneva Conventions and elaborated in Additional Protocol I, places nuclear power plants among a small category of specially protected objects known as works and installations containing dangerous forces. Article 56 of Additional Protocol I affords special protection to such facilities by **prohibiting attacks** that may cause the release of dangerous forces and severe losses among the civilian population.

This is not an abstract concern. A strike that disables cooling systems, damages containment structures, or disrupts power supply can trigger cascading failures with transboundary consequences. The rule reflects a deeper principle: the law of armed conflict is not only about regulating violence. It is about preventing irreversible harm. Even where a facility might be argued to have military relevance—a high bar in the case of a functioning civilian reactor—the attacker must still satisfy the **core requirements of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack**. A strike that risks a radiological release affecting millions would almost certainly fail that test.

The IAEA has been unequivocal that **nuclear power plant sites or nearby areas must never be attacked**. The reason is straightforward. Safety systems extend well beyond the reactor itself. Auxiliary buildings, power supplies, communications systems, and trained personnel all form part of the safety architecture that prevents catastrophe. The protections exist precisely to prevent such a breach.

The law does not require a meltdown to establish illegality. It requires a foreseeable risk of catastrophic civilian harm. For decades, the international community has worked—imperfectly—to build a norm that nuclear facilities are off-limits. That norm underpins the entire nonproliferation regime, from the **Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons** to the inspection and safeguards system overseen by the IAEA.

Iran is not unique. Since Russia's seizure and military occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, governments, the IAEA, and international organizations have repeatedly warned that military operations involving civilian nuclear facilities create risks unlike those associated with ordinary military objectives. The principle cannot depend upon the identity of the belligerent. If nuclear restraint is to survive, it must apply universally.

What happened near Bushehr sends a different message: that nuclear infrastructure is becoming just another category of military target. Even if no reactor is struck and no radiation is released, repeated military operations near nuclear facilities weaken one of the few international norms that nearly every major power still claims to support.

States inevitably draw lessons from precedent. If civilian nuclear facilities can no longer rely upon meaningful international restraint, governments will invest more heavily in hardening facilities, concealing capabilities, limiting international inspections, and relying upon nuclear deterrence. Ironically, actions intended to reduce nuclear threats may instead accelerate proliferation.

The law of armed conflict is sustained not by goodwill, but by reciprocity. When states appear willing to disregard restraints that they expect others to observe, those restraints weaken for everyone. Once the threshold of restraint erodes, it rarely returns.

The Bushehr episode was not a catastrophe. It was something more dangerous: a warning.

The law is clear. Civilian nuclear facilities enjoy special protection because attacks that risk the release of dangerous forces can produce catastrophic civilian consequences. The strategic logic is equally clear. Undermining that norm accelerates the very proliferation risks the international system has spent decades attempting to contain.

The lesson of Bushehr is not simply about one military operation. It is about what happens when legal restraint gives way to strategic expediency. Nuclear restraint was built over generations through treaties, diplomacy, technical cooperation, and the hard lessons of history. It can erode far more quickly than it was constructed. If civilian nuclear facilities become accepted military objectives, the world will not simply become less stable. It will become more heavily armed, less transparent, and ultimately more dangerous. Protecting civilian nuclear facilities is more than a legal obligation. It is an indispensable condition for preserving nuclear restraint itself.

About *Steven E. Hendrix*:

Steven E. Hendrix is an attorney and former senior U.S. diplomat and foreign assistance official who served in leadership positions at the U.S. Department of State and USAID.

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