

Diplomacy with Iran Still Possible, but Window Narrowing Fast

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I was recently in Tehran, where I had the rare opportunity to hear directly from senior Iranian officials, including President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, about Iran's position in the ongoing high-stakes negotiations with the United States. I also heard from influential former officials like Javad Zarif, Iran's former vice-president and foreign minister, as well as a central figure in the 2015 nuclear deal.

I was attending the 2025 Tehran Dialogue Forum, a high-powered regional security conference, with a small delegation of the Pugwash Council, the governing body of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. Pugwash was awarded the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize for its work on nuclear disarmament and fostering dialogue.

The stakes concerning Iran's nuclear program are remarkably high. Ongoing talks between American and Iranian officials may represent one of the final chances for diplomacy to avert major conflict with predictably dire regional, if not global, consequences.

That the United States is now led by Donald Trump, whose first-term administration unilaterally torpedoed the original deal, both adds a layer of irony and underscores the urgent need for a credible diplomatic solution. Diplomacy has come full circle.

Recent reports that Israel is preparing military strikes against Iranian sites have introduced a dangerous new level of volatility into an already fragile situation. Israel is reportedly ready to act if US-Iran talks collapse — and they are hanging by a thread.

The Enrichment Impasse

At the core of the impasse is a familiar red line. The Trump administration has stated it will not accept any domestic uranium enrichment by Iran. Iranian officials, meanwhile, have made it clear they will never relinquish their sovereign right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The standoff is serious, but not insurmountable.

Iranian officials do not describe their nuclear program in terms of weapons or deterrence, but as a matter of national dignity, scientific achievement, and sovereign rights. At the same time, they repeatedly affirm their willingness to provide credible assurances that Iran will not pursue nuclear weapons.

Diplomacy can succeed, they say, if the goal is to prevent weaponization. But if the objective is to deny rights enshrined in international law, there will be no deal.

Of course, Iran should not acquire a nuclear weapon. Such weapons do not enhance the security of Iran – or that of any other state. It is entirely reasonable for the international community to expect credible assurances from Iran in this regard. And Iran is expressing its willingness to provide them. This opportunity must not be squandered.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) already offered a durable, verifiable solution. It capped Iran's uranium enrichment at well below weapons-grade, reduced its

fissile material stockpile, and established the most intrusive verification regime in the history of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In return, Iran was granted relief from crippling economic sanctions.

Its collapse, triggered not by Iranian violations but unilateral US action, unnecessarily reignited tensions that diplomacy had succeeded in defusing, and significantly complicated efforts to contain Iran's nuclear program.

The agreement held until the United States unilaterally withdrew in 2018, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and despite the IAEA's certifications of Iran's compliance. Iran's nuclear program has expanded since, an expansion that Iranian officials do not deny. In fact, they cite it as evidence of the ineffectiveness of sanctions to achieve their intended policy objectives.

But the current political landscape is more tension-filled, with Iran's nuclear program more advanced, mutual trust more fragile, and conflicting signals emerging from the Trump administration – some demanding full dismantlement of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, others accepting capped enrichment with verification. Yet amid these tensions, recent discussions in Tehran suggest a government open to constructive international engagement, so long as it is based on fairness and mutual respect rather than coercion.

Sanctions, Pressure, and the Limits of Coercion

Western powers such as the United States have long favoured sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. Yet the effects of such use are highly questionable. Broad-based economic sanctions often punish entire populations while reinforcing the strategic logic of self-reliance and defiance.

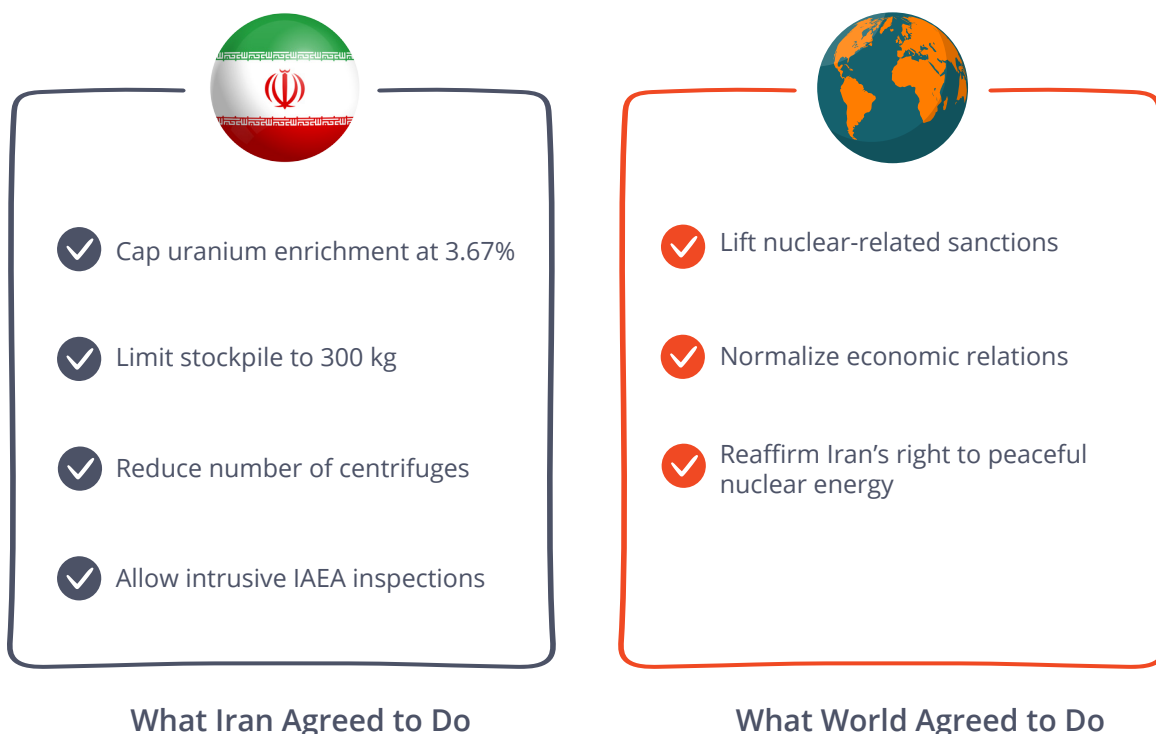
In Iran, sanctions have hindered access by ordinary citizens to medicine, employment, and basic goods, while contributing to conditions that have been conducive to the acceleration of the country's nuclear program and a continued distancing from the West. Still, Iran's leadership has expressed a readiness to provide assurances that it will not pursue a nuclear weapon, in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Sanctions relief was a central pillar of the JCPOA. In exchange for verifiable limits on its nuclear program, Iran received economic normalization. The result was a balanced incentive structure that made compliance politically and economically feasible for Tehran.

To be sustainable, nuclear non-proliferation must be supported by reciprocal economic measures, not just threats of punishment. When the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions, the incentive structure collapsed, and Iran's leaders lost any political rationale for continued adherence. If sanctions relief is not meaningfully reinstated in a revived agreement, Iran will have little incentive to comply.

It should be noted that the trade-offs involved in the pending nuclear agreement are fundamentally different for Iran and the United States. Iran is expected to make conces-

JCPOA Snapshot



sions on enrichment capacity, centrifuge development, and uranium-stockpile limits, likely setting its nuclear program back by years. But the United States could reimpose sanctions within hours, as we saw with the collapse of the JCPOA. This asymmetry can only reinforce Iran's deep skepticism about Western promises.

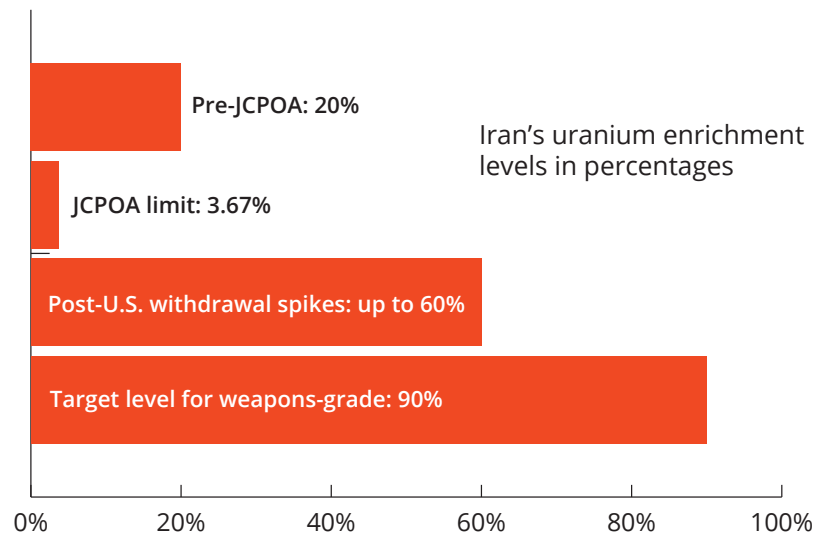
Iranian officials were frank about the toll sanctions have taken, not just economically, but on public health and access to essential goods. They also expressed dismay that, even when sanctions are lifted on paper, overcompliance by Western firms means that the benefits are largely theoretical. Sanctions relief, they argue, must be tangible.

Both sides are constrained by domestic politics. President Trump and his advisors will want to frame any deal as better than the JCPOA. Iran's leadership cannot appear to surrender its sovereign rights. Yet well-informed stakeholders, in Iran and the United States, tell me there is genuine interest on both sides in reaching a resolution. This is positive.

Back to Basics

Despite its imperfections, the JCPOA remains the most viable foundation for a renewed diplomatic agreement. Calls to expand a new agreement to include Iran's missile program,

Iran's Enrichment Levels Over Time



regional activities, or internal politics are politically unrealistic and strategically counterproductive. These demands transform a solvable problem — Iran's ability to produce a nuclear weapon — into an impossible-to-meet political wish list.

The JCPOA was never meant to be a comprehensive political settlement; it was a narrowly focused, pragmatic non-proliferation accord. Moving the goalposts now risks collapsing the entire process.

Talks currently being mediated by Oman are, in effect, an effort to reconstruct the core of the JCPOA. Iran has signaled its willingness to return to earlier enrichment caps. US negotiators have proposed updated verification mechanisms and even joint ventures to oversee enrichment. These ideas echo the very deal the first Trump administration discarded.

Some experts note that even a partial reset, which buys time, delays crises, and reduces tensions, would be a meaningful accomplishment. In a world of diminishing diplomatic wins, a restored JCPOA or JCPOA-like framework would once again show that dialogue alone can deliver concrete security benefits.

A workable path forward could involve a temporary suspension of enrichment for one or two years, without renouncing the right to enrich, in exchange for immediate, verifiable sanctions relief. Iran would retain infrastructure and accept expanded IAEA inspections. Such a deal could ease tensions and create space for a long-term solution.

At the end of the day, any viable agreement will likely resemble the JCPOA in substance, even if politically rebranded. The core trade-off — verifiable limits on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for meaningful economic normalization — remains the most realistic and effective approach.

Verification, Transparency, and Fair Application of Norms

One of the JCPOA's greatest strengths was its monitoring and verification regime. The IAEA was granted extensive access to Iran's facilities, including real-time surveillance and regular inspections. These mechanisms enabled swift detection of violations and significantly lowered the risk of clandestine weapons development.

Any current or future agreement must maintain or exceed this level of oversight. Iran has stated its openness to such additional verification measures as joint ventures to oversee enrichment, and the transferring of enriched uranium abroad. Such statements should become the basis for serious negotiations of new arrangements that could add another layer of transparency and reinforce Iran's claim that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes.

However, the global non-proliferation regime also hinges on the fair and consistent application of rules. While Iran, an NPT signatory, is subjected to intense scrutiny, another Middle Eastern state, Israel, operates a clandestine nuclear arsenal outside the NPT framework with no international oversight. It is the only country in the region with nuclear weapons, yet it faces no sanctions and continues to wield a disproportionate influence over Western nuclear policy.

Israel's loud opposition to the JCPOA helped to derail the original deal; now Israel is reportedly ready to take military action against Iran. That it has not acted so far is, at least in part, because, with the outcome of current talks uncertain, Washington has yet to signal full support for a unilateral strike.

It is true that Israel has legitimate concerns for its security; these concerns directly relate to Iran's regional activities and missile program. However, the fact that a nuclear-armed outlier helped to dismantle a deal designed to prevent another state from going nuclear must be acknowledged and scrutinized.

Selective enforcement of non-proliferation norms undermines the legitimacy of the entire regime. When some states do not comply but are shielded while others comply and are still punished, confidence in global governance must erode. For diplomacy to succeed, and for the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime to remain credible, rules must be applied equitably.

Spoilers threaten progress. A senior diplomat told me earlier this month at the UN that an "army of lobbyists" is working hard in Washington and elsewhere to derail diplomacy.

Iranian officials expressed deep frustration not just at the threats of military escalation, but at the international silence surrounding Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal. They also argued that Europe should rethink its adversarial posture, including constant threats of snapback sanctions, and decried the failure to preserve the JCPOA after the US withdrawal.

Avoiding Escalation, Expanding Dialogue

Current negotiations between Washington and Tehran are taking place in a broader geopolitical context that is increasingly volatile. US military deployments in the Middle East, Israeli airstrikes on Iranian-linked targets, and open threats of regional war all heighten the risk of miscalculation. One misstep could have devastating consequences.

The current talks offer a rare opportunity to dial back tensions, reaffirm global non-proliferation norms, and demonstrate that persistent engagement can still deliver results.

At the same time, current negotiations have assumed a more bilateral format, with the United States and Iran engaging directly while regional actors like Oman act as mediators. Key European powers, central to the original JCPOA, have been sidelined. Their exclusion raises valid concerns about the sustainability and legitimacy of any deal.

The 2015 agreement was a multilateral achievement, with the European Union (EU) and the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) playing indispensable roles. If the EU and E3 were added as partners in current negotiations, their experience, diplomatic credibility, and institutional memory could prove invaluable. All interested parties will be better served with more experienced negotiators to the table.

At this critical juncture, Europe, Canada, and other middle powers must not remain silent, even if not directly party to the ongoing talks. They should promote restraint, support a fair and durable agreement, and push back against efforts to sabotage negotiations.

The Road Ahead

The erosion of the JCPOA began in Washington. And while a current deal will not duplicate the original, it can still be based on principles that anchored the 2015 accord. Credible constraints on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for verifiable sanctions relief remain the only viable grounds for a durable solution.

Continued escalation of the development of nuclear weapons in the Middle East will not serve anyone's long-term security interests. A regional war could lead to widespread, global devastation. Only serious diplomacy can produce a workable solution.

Reviving the JCPOA framework is not an endorsement of Iran's behaviour as a regional power; it is a recognition that non-proliferation is too important to be held hostage to unrelated grievances. In an era of growing global insecurity, salvaging one of the few success stories of multilateral diplomacy is not only sensible but imperative.

The window for a peaceful resolution remains open, but just barely. What's needed now is urgency, creativity, and the political courage to prioritize diplomacy.

The alternative could well be war.



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