

How to End the Iran Crisis

Tehran Needs Positive Incentives, Not Just Pressure

Federica Mogherini and Sahil V. Shah

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Despite frantic, overnight negotiations, peace talks between Iran and the United States have broken down. The two sides had no shortage of dispute to settle, and so it was always going to be hard for them to forge a permanent settlement to their war. But one issue, above all, appears to be responsible for the failure: Iran's nuclear energy program. "The meeting went well, most points were agreed to," U.S. President Donald Trump wrote on social media. "But the only point that really mattered, NUCLEAR, was not."

It is not surprising that the nuclear issue is Trump's main focus, or that it is why talks collapsed. Managing Iran's nuclear ambitions has been a defining challenge of global diplomacy for decades. But during both of his terms in office, the United States has tried to force Iran to fully give up its nuclear program through economic strangulation and military action. And each time, it has failed. "We will ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon," Trump said on February 28—the day Washington began bombing Tehran. But six weeks later, the fundamental challenge remains. The war may have dealt immense damage to Iran, but it has not erased the country's underlying nuclear knowledge or its long-term capacity to rebuild the program.

This danger is now more acute politically, even if Iran's near-term technical capacity has been badly disrupted. The lesson many in Tehran may draw from the war is not that restraint brings security, but that vulnerability invites attack. That does not mean a rapid or covert sprint to a nuclear weapon is likely—any serious move to reconstitute such a capability would take time and would be highly detectable. It does mean, however, that the argument for retaining the option of a future deterrent is likely to have grown stronger.

These results confirm what should have been clear from the start: diplomacy is the only viable way to ensure that Iran's nuclear energy program is peaceful. It has, after all, worked before. For more than a decade, U.S. diplomats joined their counterparts from China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union to pursue a negotiated agreement with Iran on its program. The result was the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—in which Iran set verifiable limits on that program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. One of us, Mogherini, led the negotiations and implementation of that deal; the other, Shah, has spent years working on the policy architecture surrounding it. This diverse group of states negotiated with Tehran not because they trusted it or because they were naive about the complicated nature of the regime or because they believed diplomacy alone could resolve every concern they had. They did so because they understood that the alternative to diplomacy is the chaos and destruction playing out now.

The JCPOA, of course, did not last. Less than two years after taking office, in 2018, Trump unilaterally abrogated the deal even though the International Atomic Energy Agency certified that Iran was in compliance and even though every other party wanted it to last. But this failure is not a case against trying again. In fact, it means Washington must go further this time around by creating systems that make a deal more durable and thus much harder for any party to back out of it. Doing this may not please those who see Tehran as fundamentally untrustworthy and hope to bludgeon it into surrender. But this war has proved that Washington can't force Tehran into submission. To prevent the country from pursuing nuclear weapons, the United States has to reach an agreement with the Islamic Republic. And given that Iran might now be more incentivized than ever to get a deterrent, Washington must make sure that the next deal works.

PARADE OF FAILURES

The U.S.-Israeli war against Iran was, from the start, illegal and reckless. American and Israeli officials claimed that bombing the Islamic Republic was essential to ensuring it does not obtain a nuclear weapon. But there was no evidence that Tehran posed an imminent nuclear weapons threat or that diplomacy was ineffective. In fact, talks were actively underway, and multiple parties involved in the mediation assessed that both countries were making progress.

Even if Tehran had been on the precipice of changing direction and weaponizing its nuclear material, most serious analysts have contended that military strikes would do little to prevent it, especially in the long term. Iran is a country of over 90 million people, with deep scientific and industrial capacity that has borne its sophisticated nuclear energy program. Such knowledge cannot be bombed out of existence. Military action can destroy facilities, but facilities can be rebuilt deeper underground with greater resolve and with more domestic political support. There is a reason why analysts advised multiple U.S. administrations that striking Tehran would never fully destroy its program.

Instead, analysts predicted that going to war with Iran would empower the country's most conservative hard-liners, spread conflict across the region, and drive global energy prices to punishing levels. Those conclusions proved devastatingly accurate. Once attacked, Tehran promptly widened the war by firing missiles at Arab countries and closing the Strait of Hormuz to traffic. Energy prices, accordingly, skyrocketed. U.S. and Israeli strikes killed former Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, but he was quickly replaced by his son Mojtaba. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps lost much of its infrastructure, but its control over Iran tightened as the fighting went on. The war has not eliminated Iran's atomic expertise and all its capabilities. If anything, it has strengthened the argument among some of Iran's hard-liners that only a nuclear deterrent can guarantee the regime's survival. That is precisely why a negotiated agreement, reached quickly, matters more now than ever.

Negotiations, by contrast, have a proven track record of positively influencing Iranian behavior. The JCPOA remains the only time that Iran agreed to limit its nuclear stockpiles and capabilities, and so it remains the standard. But to succeed in the wake of this war, the United States and Iran will have to honestly confront the structural failures that have brought them here. Iran's nuclear program is complex and highly specific. It revolves around enrichment levels, centrifuge performance, and

stockpile management. Negotiating verifiable limits on that kind of system required an extraordinary technical knowledge, which the JCPOA's multinational negotiating teams had. The United States, for example, instructed its national laboratories to conduct scientific modeling to ensure limits on Iran's enrichment were calibrated to specific breakout timelines and that compliance was verifiable in real time through novel monitoring equipment.

U.S. pressure alone does not translate into leverage.

The delegations who conducted these talks also understood Iranian politics. For example, they knew that enrichment had become a matter of national scientific identity in the country—not merely a technical program—and that any agreement demanding its total elimination would be rejected by even reformist Iranian governments. They understood that Iranian negotiators operate within their country's factional politics and that compromises would need to reflect what each side could concede without losing domestic support. Most important, they grasped the difference between an opening position and a final offer—a distinction that requires experience and discipline to detect.

In the negotiations leading up to this conflict, this level of scientific and diplomatic wisdom was absent. The American team was built around personal and political proximity to Trump rather than subject-matter expertise, and the results reflected it. When that expertise is absent from the table, the consequences are predictable: concessions are misread as provocations, normal diplomatic pacing is interpreted as bad faith, and technical realities that any specialist would recognize are treated as suspicious or incomprehensible. During talks before the war, for instance, U.S. negotiators interpreted Iran's refusal to accept an offer of U.S.-supplied nuclear fuel as evidence that Tehran was not serious about a deal (according to reporting by the journalist Laura Rozen). But any negotiator familiar with the history of U.S.-Iranian relations would have understood that this was a long-standing, benign position. Similarly, Iran's proposal to suspend enrichment for a period of years and to forgo the accumulation of enriched uranium—which, if followed, could prevent weaponization—was treated as inadequate. And basic features of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, including facilities that have been under International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring for years, appear to have been misread by U.S. negotiators, leading to suspicions not shared by the nonproliferation community. To prevent this going forward, future negotiations must be staffed with the depth of expertise the task demands. There is no shortcut.

Negotiations also must offer incentives, rather than just pressure. Coercion without a credible diplomatic pathway is not leverage—it is escalation. Countries can use economic sanctions, military deployments, and diplomatic isolation to help pressure others. But the effectiveness of these mechanisms ultimately depends on how they are used and what they are meant to achieve. It also depends on whether states simultaneously offer positive, credible incentives to induce changes in behavior.

During the JCPOA negotiations, Iran's negotiating partners offered the country a structured pathway forward, starting with an interim agreement that led to a more comprehensive deal. These countries offered phased sanctions relief, access to frozen assets, and the prospect of fully normalized economic relations—each sequenced to Iranian steps. But in the lead-up to the current war, the United States relied almost exclusively on pressure, making maximalist demands and

applying coercive measures even as the two sides were exchanging proposals. It gave Tehran no credible vision of what the future could hold. The Iranians thus concluded that Washington was an unreliable partner. As Tehran sees it, agreements with the United States, including U.S. Senate-ratified treaties, are easily repudiated. There are no political and legal guarantees that U.S. commitments will be long-lasting, and engagement offers no protection against escalation. Under those conditions, U.S. pressure alone does not translate into leverage. It narrows the space for discussions and increases the risk of confrontation.

GETTING TO YES

The problem of trust in Iran negotiations was once thought of as one-sided. Western capitals had grown accustomed to treating Iranian reliability as the central variable—the question around which all agreement design must revolve. But that is no longer an honest accounting. The United States unilaterally discarded a deal that Iran was abiding by. It launched not one, but two rounds of military action during active negotiations. Iran has absorbed these facts, and it will remember them going forward.

Despite this record, Iran is willing to make concessions. The country's leadership is not monolithic, and some of its key senior figures understand that economic isolation and war are unsustainable. Iran will not give up its nuclear program, but relief from the sanctions and conflict that have hollowed out the country's economy is also a core interest. Tehran is thus willing to place limits on the former in exchange for an end to the latter.

Any future deal, however, will have to hold the United States mutually accountable. That means it must be built to endure political change. The collapse of the JCPOA after the U.S. exit in 2018 exposed a structural vulnerability. Iran front-loaded its most significant nonproliferation concessions—reducing enrichment capacity, shipping out stockpiles, accepting intrusive verification—but many of Washington's concessions came later. That meant when the United States pulled out, Iran had already delivered much of what it was supposed to, but the reciprocal economic benefits had yet to fully materialize. For an entire year after sanctions were reimposed, Iran continued to comply with the JCPOA terms in the hopes that other parties would be able to adequately fill the gap. Those countries, including ones in Europe, tried hard to do so, building several instruments and deploying an impressive amount of creativity. But their efforts could not yield sufficient results. Tehran thus concluded that complying with the terms of the deal did not ensure continuity and that domestic political change in Washington could override negotiated commitments made by multiple countries.

A future agreement will need to correct this imbalance at the level of design, not just sequencing. Economic commitments must be designed with deliberate institutional architecture and not left to market forces alone. Sanctions relief, in particular, must be treated as something to be actively delivered, not merely permitted. Both sides should also explore building so-called [technical guarantees](#)—or collaborative projects that create shared physical investments in the deal's continuation. These could include joint infrastructure development as Iran rebuilds after the war, regional nuclear fuel cycle cooperation, and energy modernization programs that benefit all parties but require sustained cooperation to maintain. Such projects demonstrate commitment through

concrete action, create domestic constituencies with stakes in the agreement's survival, and critically, raise the costs of withdrawal for all parties, not just Iran. For example, the JCPOA included extensive civil nuclear work with countries such as China, Russia, and the United Kingdom on reactor modernization—work that continued years after the U.S. withdrawal precisely because it had created shared physical and institutional investments that were costly to abandon. Economic commitments in any future agreement must be designed with the same deliberate institutional architecture and not left to market forces alone.

Building infrastructure of this kind will take deliberate effort. It will likely require more than a few days, or even a few weeks, to sketch out. But it is the only way to convince Iranian negotiators that this time will be different.

ONE WAY OUT

To get an agreement, Washington must pair pressure with genuine inducements, including a clearly articulated vision of what a final arrangement will deliver for Iran, the United States, and the wider world. The JCPOA's preamble envisioned a transformation in Iran's relationship with other countries, but that vision was never fully operationalized. A future agreement must go further and define not only the nuclear constraints Iran would accept but also the political and economic relationship it would gain in return. It must do so in terms concrete enough to gain domestic support on all sides.

To be sure, mistrust and domestic dynamics in both Washington and Tehran have made it harder for officials to compromise. The institutional frameworks that once provided the basis for multilateral engagement—such as the UN Security Council resolution that enshrined the JCPOA, the International Atomic Energy Agency's expanded verification arrangements in Iran, and the multilateral format that sustained engagement with Tehran—have been weakened. In this context, finding a sustainable diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program will be difficult.

But it is not impossible. The knowledge of how to build effective agreements still exists in governments, international organizations, and the wider nonproliferation community. That knowledge is a strategic asset. Governments preparing for the next round of negotiations should draw on that expertise now, as they design the frameworks and sequencing that could power an agreement.

The pursuit of diplomacy with Iran was never a favor to Tehran. It was an act of self-interest by international actors that wanted to avoid the alternative. Their reasoning has been vindicated by this terrible war, and it ought to inspire today's officials to avoid the mistakes of the past. The next chance for diplomacy has arrived. The question is whether the world will return to the table having learned anything at all