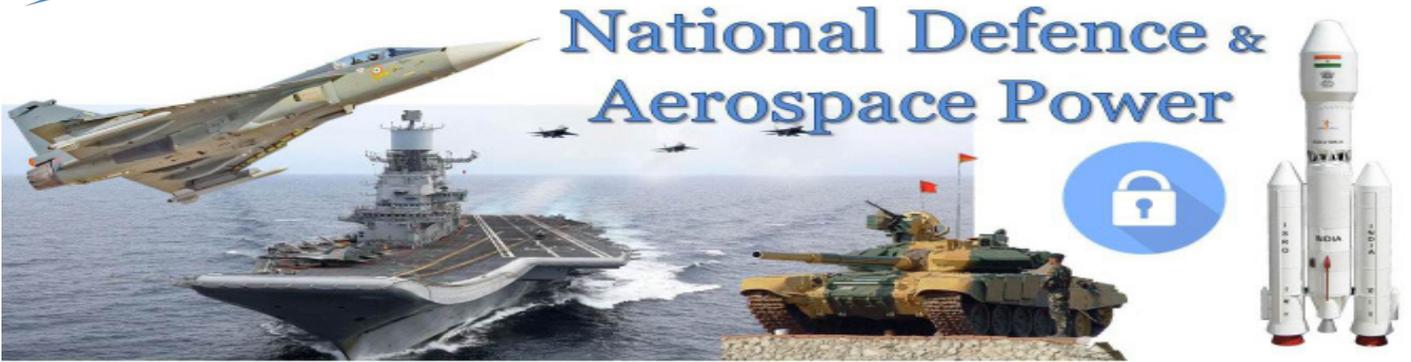




Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies



Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

ISSUE BRIEF

10/25

05 August 2025

IRAN'S NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY: NEGOTIATIONS UNDER DEADLINES

Mr Prahlad Kumar Singh

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



On July 25, 2025, an Iranian diplomat held a meeting with representatives from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, known as the E3, for the first time since recent military attacks on Iran's nuclear sites. The four-hour meeting took place at the Iranian consulate in Istanbul. It was a significant step forward in efforts to restart diplomatic talks on the nuclear issue. In June, Israeli airstrikes on the Iranian nuclear facility escalated the regional tensions. The strikes sparked a 12-day War in which the United States (US) bombed several of Iran's nuclear sites, which abruptly ended the US-Iran nuclear talks.¹

The negotiations lasted approximately four hours and were led by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi and senior diplomat Majid Takht-Ravanchi, representing Tehran. They described the talk as "serious, frank and detailed," focusing on sanction relief and the future of the 2015 nuclear agreement. Iran criticised the E3's position on the recent conflict and raised objections to the possible use of the United Nations' (UN) snapback mechanism. Although there was no breakthrough in the meeting, both sides agreed to continue discussing the matter. They exchanged detailed proposals, suggesting a possible turning point before key decisions are expected in the coming months.²

Snapback Mechanism

The "snapback mechanism" is one of the most powerful enforcement tools in Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It enables

any participant to quickly reinstate all UN sanctions against Iran if it is found to be in violation of its nuclear commitments. Initially proposed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the mechanism was incorporated in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231, which approved the JCPOA and eased earlier sanctions. The process is automatic and cannot be stopped by other permanent UN Security Council members.³

The "snapback mechanism" enables any participant to quickly reinstate all UN sanctions against Iran if it is found to be in violation of its nuclear commitments.

The snapback clause and other restrictive measures under the UNSC Resolution 2231 will automatically expire on October 18, 2025, as they were adopted for ten years. In this context, E3 countries have given Iran an August 2025 deadline to make progress on the talks or face sanctions through the snapback mechanism. Technically, once this October window closes, any sanction will require a UN Security Council Resolution, which Russia or China can veto. Iranian delegates questioned the legality of this mechanism and accused European powers of siding with the US and Israel.

Similarly, one week before the Istanbul talks, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi also categorically rejected the European threat to use the snapback mechanism. He claimed that the E3 has "absolutely no moral or legal grounds" to reactivate UN sanctions and asked them to reject what he called "worn-out policies of threat and pressure." Araghchi remarked that if Europe wants to play a positive role, it must act responsibly and support diplomacy rather than escalating tensions by unilateral action.⁴

Under the current negotiations, E3 countries are pressing Iran to meet several key conditions. These include a commitment to future talks with the US and the full restoration of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran is also expected to explain the whereabouts of about 400 kilograms of highly enriched uranium that went missing after the Israeli and the US airstrikes in June.⁵

Although the talks did not produce a breakthrough, the fact that they took place at all marks a significant step toward reviving nuclear diplomacy. This signals a shift away from last month's failed attempt to resolve the nuclear issue through military action, as the initial Pentagon intelligence assessment suggested that the attack damaged Iranian facilities but did not destroy the core component of the nuclear program. This potentially pushed back Iran's nuclear plan only for a few months.⁶ Therefore, a renewed attempt to use diplomatic means is a crucial

Iran has expressed its willingness to resume technical-level conversations with the IAEA, marking a cautious yet significant step.

step in the right direction.

Iran has also expressed its willingness to resume technical-level conversations with the IAEA, marking a cautious yet significant step. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi reported that Iran has expressed willingness to discuss how inspections could resume, even though initial discussions will focus on technical details and will not include site visits. Grossi emphasised the importance of transparency, noting that Iran should reveal the current state of its nuclear facilities. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi stated that a technical IAEA delegation will be permitted to visit in the coming weeks, but with limited access to nuclear sites.⁷

Tehran's Trilateral Nuclear Consultations

Besides negotiating with European countries, Tehran collaborates with friendly powers to expand its strategic options. On July 22, 2025, Iran hosted a trilateral meeting in Tehran with representatives from Russia and China.⁸ Just before the E3 meeting, the consultation aimed to coordinate positions on the nuclear issue and send a strategic signal to other powers.

One day before this meeting, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated, "We are in constant consultations with these two countries to prevent activation of snapback or mitigate its consequences." About coordination, he said, "We have aligned positions and good relations."⁹

The foundation for this meeting was laid during the Beijing Meeting on March 14, 2025. In their joint statement, China, Russia, and Iran reaffirmed their common stance against "unilateral sanctions." It called for "political and diplomatic engagement based on mutual respect" as the only viable option. In this declaration, both China and Russia supported Iran's right to civil nuclear energy.¹⁰

The consultation also builds upon an already existing strategic framework between Iran, Russia, and China. On January 17, 2025, Iran and Russia signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which aims to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in the defence and security sectors, both at the regional and global levels. For the nuclear sector, Article 23 of the Partnership Document clearly states both parties "shall promote the development of long-term and

China remains Iran's most crucial oil customer, taking roughly 90 per cent of its seaborne crude shipments, providing a lifeline for Tehran in the face of severe US sanctions...This significant energy reliance highlights the strategic importance of Iran-China cooperation and explains Tehran's ongoing diplomatic efforts to align with Beijing.

mutually beneficial relations to implement joint projects in the area of peaceful use of nuclear energy, including the construction of nuclear energy facilities."¹¹

Iran and China also have a 25-year strategic partnership agreement, signed on March 27, 2021. Under this agreement, China has agreed to invest approximately USD 400 billion in Iran over a 25-year period in exchange for a reliable Iranian oil supply. The partnership agreement also included provisions for cooperation in infrastructure, security, and the technology sector under the broader framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹²

China remains Iran's most crucial oil customer, taking roughly 90 per cent of its seaborne crude shipments, providing a lifeline for Tehran in the face of severe US sanctions. According to *Kpler*, China imported an average of 1.38 million Barrels Per Day (BPD) of Iranian oil in the first half of 2025. In 2024, Chinese purchases averaged 1.48 million barrels per day, accounting for roughly 14.6 per cent of total oil imports. This significant energy reliance highlights the strategic importance of Iran-China cooperation and explains Tehran's ongoing diplomatic efforts to align with Beijing.¹³

Conclusion

The latest diplomatic engagements over Iran's nuclear program have significant implications for the regional order. On the one hand, the meeting reflects a renewed attempt to use diplomacy to engage Tehran after the unsuccessful attempt to resolve the issue through the use of force. On the other hand, Iran's coordination with Russia and China reflects the power realignment in the region. The idea is to counter-balance the Western power with the help of Russia and China. However, Russia is unlikely to get directly involved due to its involvement in the Ukraine conflict, and China due to its economic and transactional approach towards the relationship. Iran can expect financial support, armament, and endorsement of its position at the United Nations and other multilateral forums.

Theoretically, if the action of a state or a major power is pushing its adversary towards greater cooperation, that is a strategic failure for the leading power; here, the US's action is pushing China and Russia to overcome their differences and move towards greater collaboration. In this context, how much agency European power will be able to assert will decide the credibility and future of future

India needs to diversify its energy import sources to avoid over-reliance on a particular region. Iran is critical for its connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. At the same time, a partnership with the US and European powers is crucial in technological developments.

negotiations.

These developments are another challenge for India in navigating the complex situation while maintaining strategic autonomy in its relationship with other countries, as India's energy security is closely tied to the development and stability in the region. India needs to engage with regional actors actively to secure its interests. At the same time, as we have seen in the past, India needs to diversify its energy import sources to avoid over-reliance on a particular region. Iran is critical for its connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. At the same time, a partnership with the US and European powers is crucial in technological developments. Therefore, India should continue with its multi-alignment policy to secure its interests.

Notes:

¹ Malu Cursino, "Iran Meets European Diplomats for Renewed Nuclear Talks," *BBC*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cnoqoz8zdzj90>. Accessed on July 26, 2025.

² "Iran Says It Pushed Back on Sanctions Threat in Europe Nuclear Talks," *Iranintl*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202507252031>. Accessed on July 27, 2025.

³ Faramarz Davar, "How the Snapback Mechanism Brings Back Sanctions on Iran," *Iranwire*, November 25, 2024, <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/136431-how-the-snapback-mechanism-brings-back-sanctions-on-iran/>. Accessed on July 26, 2025.

⁴ "Iran Says Europeans Have No Grounds to Trigger Sanctions Snapback," *The Hindu*, July 18, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/iran-says-europeans-have-no-grounds-to-trigger-sanctions-snapback/article69828139.ece>. Accessed on July 25, 2025.

⁵ "Iran, European Powers Hold First Direct Nuclear Talks since Airstrikes as UN Deadline Nears," *CNA*, July 26, 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/world/iran-european-powers-hold-first-direct-nuclear-talks-airstrikes-un-deadline-nears-5259246>. Accessed on July 27, 2025.

⁶ "Iran's Nuclear Facilities: Status Updates," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2025-06-25/irans-nuclear-facilities-status-updates>. Accessed on July 26, 2025.

⁷ Jun Yuan Yong, "U.N. Nuclear Watchdog Chief Says Iran Ready to Restart Technical Conversations," *Reuters*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-nuclear-watchdog-chief-says-iran-ready-restart-technical-conversations-2025-07-25/>. Accessed on July 27, 2025.

⁸ "Iran, Russia, China Meet in Tehran to Discuss Nuclear Program," *TASS*, July 23, 2025, <https://tass.com/world/1992863>. Accessed on July 27, 2025.

⁹ "Iran to Host Russia, China for Nuclear Talks to Counter Snapback Threat," *Iranintl*, July 21, 2025, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202507213245>. Accessed on July 24, 2025.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of China, "Joint Statement of the Beijing Meeting between China, Russia and Iran," March 14, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202503/t20250314_11575903.html. Accessed on July 20, 2025.

¹¹ The Office of the President of Iran, Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Full Text of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty," January 17, 2025, <https://president.ir/en/156874>. Accessed on July 20, 2025.

¹² "The Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Challenges and Prospects," Rasanah: International Institute for Iranian Studies, April 8, 2021, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/position-estimate/the-iran-china-25-year-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-challenges-and-prospects/>. Accessed on July 21, 2025.

¹³ "China's Heavy Reliance on Iranian Oil Imports," *Reuters*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/chinas-heavy-reliance-iranian-oil-imports-2025-06-24/>. Accessed on July 25, 2025.



**Centre for Aerospace Power
and Strategic Studies**

The Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Vice Marshal Anil Golani (Retd).

Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies
P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Priyadarshini Baruah and Mr Rohit Singh

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.