

Vladimir Putin as a Mediator between Iran and the United States: Russia's Return to the Middle East through the Iranian Door¹

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In a significant diplomatic move, Russian president Vladimir Putin has agreed to mediate between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, seeking to ease escalating tensions over Tehran's nuclear program and its support for regional anti-U.S. nonstate actors. This initiative follows a direct request from U.S. president Donald J. Trump during a phone call on 12 February 2025, with subsequent high-level discussions between U.S. and Russian officials in Saudi Arabia. The Kremlin has reaffirmed its commitment to fostering dialogue, with spokesman Dmitry Peskov emphasizing Russia's readiness to facilitate negotiations between Washington and Tehran.²

While multiple regional players, including Oman, Qatar, and more recently Saudi Arabia, have offered mediation services, Russia's involvement is unique. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with veto power and a key security partner of Iran, Russia wields considerable influence. Its deep ties to Iran's "deep state" give Putin leverage to pressure Iranian decision makers into nuclear concessions, potentially averting military escalation in the coming months.

Iran's Calculations: Opportunity or Strategic Challenge?

From Tehran's perspective, Russian mediation presents both opportunities and challenges. Under Moscow's diplomatic umbrella, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei may find it more difficult to pursue nuclear escalation strategies, such as threats to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and outright rejection of negotiations with the Trump administration. If Russia encourages Iran toward indirect dialogue with Washington, Tehran may adopt a more flexible stance.

Beyond nuclear policy, Russia's mediation aligns with Iran's strategic goal of avoiding war while maintaining minimal negotiations with the Trump administration during its second term (2025–29). By engaging Russia as a diplomatic buffer, Iran seeks to reduce the likelihood of a U.S.-backed Israeli military strike against its nuclear infrastructure. However, closer U.S.-Russia relations could also marginalize Iran, making it a bargaining chip in a broader Trump-Putin diplomatic dialogue. If ties between Washington and Moscow improve, Tehran risks losing strategic relevance in Russian foreign policy calculations.

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This trilateral dimension of Russo-Iranian relations is also evident in Sino-Iranian relations, with a possible influence from Washington on the evolution of these bilateral ties between Tehran and major international powers with veto rights at the UNSC. It is within this context that the 14 March 2025 meeting in Beijing on Iran’s nuclear issue, attended by both Russia’s and Iran’s deputy foreign ministers, should be understood.

Moreover, there is a noticeable complementarity between Beijing and Moscow regarding Iran’s nuclear program: the partnership with Russia is crucial for the Islamic Republic’s security survival, while the economic partnership with Beijing is vital for its economic survival. During this meeting, both Russia and China called for refraining from using the threat of military intervention and unilateral economic sanctions to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. These statements of support were welcomed by the Iranian official press.

The press, across all political leanings, has welcomed the deputy foreign ministers’ meeting in Beijing, which focused on Iran’s nuclear program. The parties issued a joint statement strongly condemning “unlawful unilateral sanctions” against Iran.³

Key press headlines regarding this trilateral meeting include the following:

- “Positive Signals from Beijing” (*Etemaad*)⁴
- “A Beijing Summit Marking Support for Iran” (*Arman*)⁵
- “Diplomacy against Trump’s Bullying” (*Vatan-e-Emrouz*)⁶
- “Moscow and Beijing’s Support for Tehran after Trump’s Letter” (*Javan*)⁷

Iran, Russia, and China have also completed joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman, marking the fifth consecutive year of such military exercises. According to China’s CGTN television network, the Marine Security Belt 2025 exercises began near the Iranian port of Chabahar on 12 March 2025 and aimed to strengthen “cooperation among the naval forces of the participating countries.”⁸

Together, the trilateral diplomatic meeting and military exercise send a message to the second Trump administration that Russia and China can collaborate on the Iranian nuclear issue, but they favor a political

resolution over a military one. This support could prove invaluable for the survival of the Islamic Republic. However, Tehran risks negotiating with these two non-Western powers from a position of weakness, especially under the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” strategy 2.0. This is a steep price to pay for Khamenei’s refusal to pursue direct talks with Washington, a stance shaped by historical experiences and compounded by current economic and military pressures.

Putin’s Mediation: A Shift in U.S.-Iran Relations?

Iran and Russia have deepened their partnership in recent years, particularly as both face significant pressure from Western sanctions and geopolitical isolation. In January 2025, just before Trump’s second inauguration, the two countries finalized a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, a 20-year agreement that enhances cooperation in areas such as defense, energy, and trade.⁹ The timing of this treaty, signed days before Trump took office, suggests Iran’s intent to bolster ties with Russia as a counterweight to anticipated U.S. pressure, including the reinstatement of Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear program and regional influence through stringent sanctions.¹⁰

This partnership is not merely symbolic. Iran has sought Russian support to rebuild its air defenses, particularly after Israeli strikes in October 2024 weakened its capabilities. Russia’s potential provision of advanced systems such as the S-400 mobile surface-to-air missile system could help Iran protect its nuclear facilities, a critical concern given Trump’s stated goal of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Additionally, Iran has become a key supplier of military technology such as drones and ballistic missiles to Russia for its war in Ukraine, further solidifying the two countries’ mutual reliance.¹¹

Iran’s strategy seems to align with a dual-track approach of “maximum interactions” and “maximum resistance.” While Iranian officials, such as Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, have expressed openness to dialogue with the Trump administration, they are simultaneously preparing for heightened U.S. pressure by strengthening ties with Russia and China. This partnership with Russia provides Iran with economic and

military lifelines such as oil trade routes and defense cooperation that could mitigate the impact of U.S. sanctions aimed at driving Iran’s oil exports to zero.

The approach of the second Trump administration, which includes leveraging sanctions to economically isolate Iran, faces a more complex landscape than during the president’s first term. Iran’s enhanced relationship with Russia, alongside its improved ties with China and neighbors, suggests that Tehran is actively building a network to bypass U.S. unilateral sanctions. Russia’s role as a potential backchannel for communication with the United States, as indicated by recent diplomatic engagements, further complicates the dynamic, offering Iran both a shield against sanctions and a possible avenue for negotiation.

A New Balance of Power?

Since the early 2020s, Iran has significantly advanced its uranium enrichment program, raising concerns over potential nuclear weapons development—an allegation that Tehran consistently denies. Meanwhile, Washington, committed to preventing an Iranian nuclear arsenal, continues close coordination with Israel. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) remains in crisis, particularly following the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 and Iran’s subsequent breaches of its commitments. A potential Russian-mediated agreement could temper Trump’s inclination to align with Israel’s hard-line approach, reducing the likelihood of unilateral military action against Iran.

Beyond nuclear and regional issues, Russia’s growing role in international diplomacy underscores its return as a key power broker in the post-7 October 2023 Middle East. A U.S.-Russia rapprochement and a potential ceasefire in Ukraine in 2025 could further enhance Moscow’s diplomatic clout. Discussions in Istanbul on 27 February 2025 regarding the restoration of direct U.S.-Russia air links and embassy operations signal a thaw in relations, with potential economic and diplomatic benefits.

Russia’s Double-edged Role: Partner or Broker?

Despite its role as a mediator, Russia’s growing partnership with Iran undermines its neutrality. The comprehensive 20-year strategic agreement between Moscow

and Tehran may constrain Russia’s ability to exert pressure on Tehran, particularly while the war in Ukraine persists. Moreover, although this pact strengthens bilateral ties, it could hinder Russia’s capacity to serve as an impartial broker in U.S.-Iran negotiations.

Looking ahead, Russia’s mediation could lead to renewed nuclear negotiations, possibly reviving or restructuring the JCPOA with stronger oversight mechanisms. Success, however, hinges on Washington and Tehran’s willingness to engage constructively and make necessary concessions. The trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations, especially in the event of a Ukrainian ceasefire, will be pivotal in shaping the outcome of these diplomatic efforts in the coming months.

ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this article can be found in Clément Therme, “Putin’s Mediation between U.S. and Iran Would Transform Nuclear Stand-off,” *Iran International*, 6 March 2025.
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3. “Joint Statement of the Beijing Meeting between China, Russia and Iran,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 14 March 2025.
4. “Sīgnāl-hāye mosbat az Pekin,” *Etemad*, 25 esfand 1403 (27 March 2025).
5. “Neshast-e Pekin bâ chāshni-ye hemāyat az Irān,” *Arman*, 25 esfand 1403 (27 March 2025).
6. “Diplomāsi alayhe qaldari-ye Trump,” *Vatan-e emrouz*, 25 esfand 1403 (27 March 2025).
7. “Hemāyat-e Moskow va Pekin az Tehrān pas az nāmeḥ-ye Trump,” *Javan*, 25 esfand 1403 (27 March 2025).
8. “Iran, Russia, China Conduct Joint Naval Drills in Gulf of Oman,” *Al-Jazeera*, 12 March 2025.
9. “Full Text of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty,” President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 17 January 2025.
10. “President Donald J. Trump Restores Maximum Pressure on Iran,” fact sheet, White House, 4 February 2025.
11. Clément Therme, “Behind Iran’s Surging Military Budget,” *War on the Rocks*, 14 November 2024.

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