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Diplomacy in Writing,  
Deterrence in Action:  
US and Iran Engage  
in a 'He Said-She Said'  
Battle of Messages  
&  
Military Threats

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# *Diplomacy in Writing, Deterrence in Action: US and Iran Engage in a 'He Said-She Said' Battle of Messages and Military Threats*

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## **Abstract**

*Amidst a standoff marked by sanctions and sabre-rattling, Tehran has responded to US President Donald Trump's letter on nuclear negotiations, signalling a narrow diplomatic opening—but conditions apply. As both sides trade ultimatums and threats of force, the urgency for a deal and the risk of a conflict are greater than ever.*

**Keywords:** Iran, Nuclear, Israel, JCPOA, Uranium Enrichment, Fordow, Natanz

On 06 March 2025, Trump sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei proposing direct negotiations with Tehran regarding a new nuclear deal. UAE senior official Anwar Gargash delivered the letter to Iranian authorities on March 12 (Chiacu, 2025). Iran issued its formal response weeks later, turning down the offer for direct talks but signalling openness to indirect engagement—"We replied to the US President through Oman, rejecting direct discussions, though we remain open to indirect negotiations", Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian stated on Sunday, 30 March (Khoie, 2025).

He emphasised that Iran is not opposed to negotiations in principle, but the course of any dialogue would depend on Washington's conduct—"it's the behaviour of the Americans that will determine the continuation of the negotiation process", he said (Khoie, 2025).

The correspondence is on its way to the US via Oman—a trusted friend of Iran. The Omanis have reportedly also briefed the US on the messages they received from Iran (Ravid, 2025) and will hand over the letter in coming days.

Following Pezeshkian's remarks refusing to engage in direct negotiations, Trump has issued an ultimatum threatening secondary tariffs and 'bombing the likes of which they [Iran] have never seen before'. "If they don't make a deal, there will be bombing", Trump said in a telephone interview with NBC News on Sunday, March 30 (Chiacu & Ljunggren, 2025). The President also

told the American news channel that US and Iran officials are in talks, but no further details were divulged.

Iran's Supreme Leader responded with a warning of his own— saying that the US will receive a “strong” response if it goes ahead with Trump's threats of bombing— "The enmity from the US and Israel has always been there. They threaten to attack us, which we don't think is very probable, but if they commit any mischief, they will surely receive a strong reciprocal blow", Khamenei said on Monday, March 31 (Reuters, 2025).

Khamenei's close adviser and former nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, has also responded to Trump's ultimatum and warned America that if they continue such pressure tactics, they will “force Iran” towards a nuclear weapon.

“I think the US is making a strategic mistake. We have stated that there is both a fatwa and that we are working under the supervision of the IAEA, and we are not moving toward weapons”, he said. “However, if you make a mistake regarding Iran's nuclear issue, you will force Iran to take that step. You are creating this situation with your own actions. Iran does not want to pursue this path, but when you apply pressure, it creates a secondary justification, and Iran may have no choice but to respond to public demands for security” (Tehran Times, 2025).

### **Iran's Reaction**

The first confirmation of Iran's response to the letter came on 27 March, when Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi told the state-run IRNA that a formal response detailing the Iranian viewpoint was on its way to Washington.

Talking to IRNA, Araqchi too doubled down on the Iranian stand of refusing any direct engagement with the US so long as the latter continued its policy of maximum pressure and military threat— “In circumstances where there is ‘maximum pressure’, no one in their sound mind would enter into direct talks”, he said. “For now, our tactic and method is to have indirect negotiations” (IRNA, 2025).

Iran has been engaging with European nations like France, Germany and the United Kingdom and discussing its nuclear capabilities. Araqchi commented that these are “essentially indirect talks with the United States” (IRNA, 2025).

Khamenei's key foreign policy adviser Kamal Kharrazi also reiterated Iran's scepticism about American intentions and accused the Trump administration of engaging in a "psychological war" with their "contradictory messages" around war and negotiations (Fassihi, 2025).

"The outcome of this strategy is nothing but the imposition of one party's demands on the other in an atmosphere of coercion and intimidation", Kharrazi said, according to IRNA (IRNA, 2025). Nonetheless, he also affirmed that Iran had not closed all doors and was "willing to begin indirect negotiations with the United States" (JNS, 2025).

No further details have been shared about the Iranian response.

### **Trump's letter**

In the early days of March, Trump revealed on Fox News that correspondence regarding nuclear negotiations was on its way to Iran. While the details of Trump's letter are still not public, news reports and scattered inputs allow us to paint a faint picture of what the letter includes (Gambrell, & Weissert, 2025).

US Middle East Envoy Steve Witkoff told American presenter, Tucker Carlson, that the letter broadly said, "We should talk, we should clear up the misconceptions, we should create a verification program so that nobody worries about weaponisation of your nuclear material" (Carlson & Witkoff, 2025).

A report from Arlington-based news website, Axios, gave further details on the matter and the tone of the letter. As per reports, the letter to Khamenei was "tough" and included a two-month deadline for reaching a new nuclear deal. American allies including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were also briefed on the contents of the letter before it was sent, the media outlet said (Ravid, 2025).

This isn't Trump's first time reaching out to the Ayatollah. He had made a similar effort in 2019, relaying a message through a mutual friend- Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The Iranian leader was quick to rebuff the US advance (Khamenei, 2019) then, and continues to do so now.

On 8 March, during a Ramadan meeting, Khamenei delivered a veiled rejection of the American outreach, saying Iran would not negotiate with "bullying countries", referring to the US. "Their negotiations are not aimed at solving problems, they aim at domination", he said (AFP,



2025). Addressing the issue more directly on 12 March, he reiterated his distrust of America and said, “When we know they won’t honour it, what’s the point of negotiating?” (Gritten, 2025).

### **China, Russia back Iran**

As Tehran weighed its response to Trump’s letter, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi met his Chinese and Russian counterparts in Beijing on 14 March to discuss Iran’s nuclear program.

Following the talks, the three nations issued a joint statement (The People’s Republic of China, 2025) reaffirming China and Russia’s support (Bradsher, & Wang, 2025) for Iran’s right to a peaceful nuclear program while implicitly urging Washington to reconsider its approach. “The three countries emphasized the necessity of terminating all unlawful unilateral sanctions”, the statement read. It further noted that “China and Russia welcomed Iran’s reiteration that its nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes and not for the development of nuclear weapons... and stressed the need to fully respect Iran’s right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy as a state party to the NPT”.

The meeting reflected Iran’s deepening ties with Beijing and Moscow amid escalating tensions with Washington, underscoring shifting geopolitical alignments. Just days earlier, the three nations had conducted joint naval exercises (Dowerah, 2025) in the Gulf of Oman—another sign of growing cooperation in the region. Experts caution that Trump’s hardline approach may be accelerating this realignment, potentially complicating US influence in the region.

### **Deterrence or Countdown?**

Trump’s stance is clear—he will not allow a nuclear Iran. He has maintained that failure to engage in talks will trigger a military response from the United States and reiterated this position on Friday, 28 March, telling reporters Iran must choose between negotiations or face “bad things” (Hernandez, 2025).

“I sent them a letter just recently, and I said, 'You're gonna have to make a decision one way or the other, and we're gonna either have to talk and talk it out, or very bad things are gonna happen to Iran.' And I don't want that to happen”, Trump said (sic) (Hernandez, 2025b). He added that he would much prefer working it out with Iran.

Iran, on the other hand, does not seem to be phased by these warnings. The country’s

Parliament Speaker Mohammad- Bagher Ghalibaf has clapped back with threats of their own, warning to strike regional bases of America and its allies if the US attacks Iran. “If the Americans attack the sanctity of Iran, the entire region will blow up like a spark in an ammunition dump”, Ghalibaf remarked. "Their bases and those of their allies will not be safe" (Reuters, 2025).

Tensions are escalating between Iran and the United States in the Middle East, as American strikes on Yemen’s Houthi rebels continue and Israel—Washington’s close ally and Tehran’s long-time adversary— attacks the Gaza Strip following the collapse of the ceasefire. While there has been no confrontation between Iran and the US, both sides are trying to assert deterrence across the region.

Over the past week, the US Air Force deployed its stealthiest big bombers (Faucon, 2025), the radar-evading B-2 Spirit bombers, to Diego Garcia— a key military outpost in the Indian Ocean. This deployment significantly boosts American capabilities in the region since these are the only aircraft capable of carrying the 30,000-pound GBU-57s, a “bunker-buster” bomb that could penetrate Iranian and Houthi deep bunker facilities.

Open source satellite imagery (Open Source Intel [@Osint613], 2025), produced by Planet Labs, has revealed the presence of up to seven USAF B-2s along with several KC-135 Stratotanker air refuelling aircraft and three C-17 transport planes at Diego Garcia (Kyiv Post, 2025).

Iran’s nuclear facilities are located deep underground and bombs like the GBU57 were built to target such concealed sites (Editorial Staff, 2024). These deployments, particularly of bunker busters and the refuelling aircraft, coupled with Trump’s recurrent warnings of military action have experts wondering (Malyasov, 2025) if the US is preparing for a military operation in the Middle East, particularly a strike on Iran. In light of reports of a US military buildup in the Indian Ocean, Iran is also putting its missile firepower on display.

On 25 March, the aerospace division of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) unveiled a “missile megacity” that houses top missiles of the republic. In a video shared by Iranian news outlets (X/@IranObserver0, 2025), the top brass of the IRGC, including Maj Gen Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, can be seen touring the facility. Powerful ballistic missiles, including Kheibar Shekan, Martyr Haj Qasem, Ghadr-110, Sejjil, and Emad were on full display as the senior IRGC leadership toured the facility.

Addressing the personnel of the facility, Bagheri said that Iran’s missile capabilities are “ten times stronger” now than during Operation True Promise II (Ahlawat, 2025), referring to

Iran's missile attack on Israel in April 2024. He added that Iran is outpacing its enemies (Tehran Times, 2025) in "developing its defensive might", indicating that the enhancements are continual and ongoing.

The IRGC claims that this is just one among hundreds of such facilities.

### **A Divided View of Iran's Nuclear Threat**

The US Strategic Command's top General, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 27 March, warned that Iran continues to "pursue nuclear enrichment" (US Department of Defense, 2025) and has reduced its "breakout time" to "presumably less than one week".

"The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to expand its nuclear program by increasing its stockpile of highly enriched uranium and deploying additional advanced centrifuges", Gen Anthony Cotton, Head of the US Strategic Command said. "Tehran has reduced the time required to produce sufficient weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear device from 10-15 days to presumably less than one week" (Cotton, 2025).

He added that Tehran continues to "proliferate advanced conventional weapons to non-state militia groups" across West Asia, hence posing a threat to US allies and interests in the region. These remarks come days after another, contrasting intelligence update (Ghazali, 2025) from the US saying Iran's not building a nuclear weapon.

On 25 March, Tulsi Gabbard, the US Director of National Intelligence said that as per the assessment of American Intelligence, Iran is not actively pursuing a nuclear weapon currently. "The IC continues to assess that Iran is not building a nuclear weapon and Supreme Leader Khamenei has not authorized the nuclear weapons program he suspended in 2003", she said during the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing (Daftari, 2025, para. 2). Gabbard further added, however, that Iran's enriched uranium stockpile is at its highest ever and the amount is "unprecedented for a state without nuclear weapons" (Daftari, 2025).

In the early days of March, the Head of the International Atomic Energy Agency also expressed concern over Iran's growing stockpile of 60% enriched uranium. "Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched up to 60% U-235 has increased to 275 kg, up from 182 kg in the past quarter", IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said in his statement to the agency's Board of

Governors. "Iran is the only non-nuclear-weapon State enriching to this level, causing me serious concern", he added. (IRNA, 2025a, March 3).

While Iran's growing stockpile of 60% uranium is concerning, it needs to be contextualised with the complex process required for weaponisation.

Building a nuclear warhead requires 90% enriched uranium. Iran has multiple centrifuges—including IR-2m, IR-4, and IR-6 models, installed at its nuclear sites in Natanz and Fordow making the process of further enriching uranium to 90% swifter. It is believed that it will take Iran about a week or two to enrich enough uranium to the 90% mark for five nuclear weapons (Lincy & Milhollin, 2025). This is the estimate of the shortest possible time Iran's known centrifuges would need, operating non-stop at their demonstrated or projected efficiency to complete the necessary enrichment work. The actual time could be greater.

Once Iran enriches enough uranium to 90%, it will have to carefully, and discreetly, be machined to form the fissile core of a bomb. This method of processing the enriched uranium into weapon components is more complicated, requiring precise calculation and time.

Even if Iran has the facilities and science required to complete this part, there's still one final stage left— assembling the warhead and then loading it onto a missile. Iran would also need to have perfected other components required for a working weapon, such as high explosives and firing circuit (Lincy & Milhollin, 2025), and then ensure these components were compatible and capable of working in unison to produce a successful nuclear explosion. This whole process can take anywhere from months to a year (Zhang, 2025).

However, countries like China have shown that production of non-nuclear components can occur in tandem with fuel enrichment processes allowing for swift weaponisation. When China was working on its nuclear weapon, it had all the other components ready by 1963 (Zhang, 2025), while its first batch of highly enriched uranium (HEU) was only ready in January 1964 (Albright & Hinderstein, 2005). Once they had enough HEU, it took them just few months to prepare their first bomb core, which was ready by May. In August, weapon engineers began the final assembly and in about three weeks, China had assembled its first bomb. Subsequently, after they did some initial assembly trials, they disassembled the bombs and prepared them for shipping to the Lop Nur test site in Xinjiang, where China finally conducted its first successful atomic bomb test in October 1964 (Zhang, 2025).



If China managed to weaponise its HEU so quickly in the sixties, experts are concerned regarding the possibilities available to Iran today, where technology is more advanced. In the 1980s and late 1990s, Pakistani physicist AQ Khan is also suspected to have supplied Iran with nuclear-related equipment and designs. Although experts who have analysed nuclear documents smuggled out of Tehran by Israeli operatives have dubbed Iran's bomb designs in the 2000s as "indigenous" (Warrick, 2021) it only goes to show sophistication of their nuclear program.

With threats of a military confrontation in West Asia and its vast network of deeply underground facilities, Iran could mobilise its nuclear program quickly and more discreetly, posing a serious risk to Western ambitions.

On 4 February, Trump signed a memorandum restoring maximum pressure on Iran to thwart the Persian nation's nuclear ambitions. Apart from severe economic sanctions, the memorandum also included a campaign to drop Iranian oil imports to zero. As a result of this tactic, Iran's currency has collapsed to a record low, as of 25 March (FDD, 2025).

Notably, Iran's nuclear activity saw a significant rise after the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to significantly limit its nuclear program, including uranium stockpiles and enrichment levels, in exchange for sanctions relief. It also agreed to allow international inspection of its nuclear projects. However, in 2018 President Trump withdrew US from the deal, claiming it was one of "the worst and most one-sided transactions" resulting in the upending of the JCPOA (Citrinowicz, 2024), renewal of American sanctions on Tehran and the Iranian state violating terms of the agreement by engaging in activities like developing advanced centrifuges and enriching uranium at up to 60%.

## Conclusion

After public withdrawal from the JCPOA, Trump is more determined than ever to secure a new deal with Iran—one he claims will be stronger and "better". To achieve this, he has unleashed just about every tool at his disposal viz. maximum pressure, military threats, sanctions and proxy diplomacy. However, these strategies seem only to be further alienating Tehran, pushing it closer to American adversaries like China and Russia.

For Iran, its nuclear program has become both an insurance policy and a bargaining tool (Plitsas, 2025) — building deterrence in a region ravaged by war while refusing to play by

Washington's rules. But the clock is ticking on diplomacy and if Iran does not act fast, the situation in the Middle East could unravel rapidly.

As both nations weigh their next move on the chessboard of war and diplomacy, a path to a nuclear breakthrough remains uncertain—but more urgent than ever.

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