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# Trump's chance for a major breakthrough in Iran-West relations

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian | November 27, 2024



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian speaks during a visit to the shrine of the Islamic Republic's founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Tehran on July 6, 2024. Pezeshkian, who advocates improved ties with the West, on July 6 won a runoff presidential election against ultraconservative Saeed Jalili, the interior ministry said. (Photo by ATTA KENARE / AFP via Getty Images)

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Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) **adopted** a resolution put forward by the UK, France, and Germany (the “EU3”). The resolution requires the IAEA’s director general to produce a “comprehensive and updated assessment” of Iran’s nuclear activities by spring 2025, to provide a basis for the EU3 to refer Iran to the UN Security Council, thereby triggering a reimposition of Security Council sanctions before October 2025, when the original 2015 Iran nuclear deal will expire.

In response, Iran has put a collection of new and advanced centrifuges into operation, expanding its ability to enrich uranium. This move was accompanied by an official **reassurance** that, “technical and safeguards cooperation with the IAEA will continue, as in the past, within the framework of the Safeguards Agreement”—that is, Iran is not exiting the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Nevertheless, Iran and the EU3 **agreed** to hold talks on Friday in Geneva, seeking a possible solution to the nuclear impasse over Iran’s nuclear program. (The United States **declined** to participate.) These new negotiations offer the incoming Trump administration a golden opportunity to resolve the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program and perhaps improve relations throughout the Middle East.

Two decades ago, I was the spokesperson for Iran’s first negotiations on its nuclear program, beginning in October 2003 with the EU3. By the spring of 2005, the negotiations were close to a final agreement, but the George W. Bush administration, through the UK, vetoed the agreement, because it would have allowed Iran to continue with a limited uranium enrichment program. Without that interference, “we could have actually settled the whole Iran nuclear dossier back in 2005, and we probably wouldn’t have had President Ahmadinejad as a consequence of the failure as well,” Jack Straw, the UK foreign minister at the time, later **said**. President Ahmadinejad, a hard-liner, was elected after President Khatami, a reformer, was discredited by the failure of his negotiations with the West.

After Ahmadinejad’s victory in the 2005 presidential elections, Iran resumed its enrichment program, and the IAEA referred Iran’s case to the United Nations Security Council, resulting in multiple sanctions **resolutions** against Iran. In response, Iran increased both its rate of enrichment and the level to which it was enriching uranium. By 2015, it could have produced enough weapon-grade uranium for a nuclear bomb within two months. Both Iran and the United States saw themselves in a no-win situation, and they entered direct negotiations in 2013, culminating in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which placed stringent inspection protocols on Iran’s nuclear facilities and increased

Iran's breakout time to a bomb to about 12 months.

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After President Trump took the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal, President Biden made that withdrawal into an issue in the 2020 campaign: "Five years ago, American-led diplomacy produced a deal that ensured it would take Iran at least a year to produce enough fissile material for one bomb. Now—because Trump let Iran off the hook from its obligations under the nuclear deal—Tehran's 'breakout time' is down to just a few months," Joe Biden **wrote** in September 2020. More recently, Biden warned that, if Iran gets the bomb, then Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt will follow.

"The deal was the strongest nuclear agreement that the United States has signed since the 1950s," former US Secretary of State John Kerry **said**. Iran adhered fully to its commitments under the JCPOA for three years until Trump withdrew from the agreement. This led to a renewed series of increased sanctions by the West—and higher enrichment levels by Iran. Since 2018, the United States and its allies have imposed thousands of sanctions on Iran, and in response, Iran has **become** a nuclear-weapon threshold state.

When Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, Europe tried to continue to implement the agreement, but due to US secondary sanctions on foreign businesses doing business with Iran, was unable to do so. Now, because Iran has sided with Russia and China on a number of issues, the West's **stance** against Iran has become even more hostile.

Europe is trying to revive the nuclear talks with Iran, but because it has lost leverage over Iran, those talks are likely to fail for five reasons:

- In 2003, Europe had extensive economic relations with Iran, but, as a result of US secondary sanctions, that relationship has been **transferred** to China.
- Oman and Qatar have taken on the **role of intermediaries** between Iran and the United States in recent years, further diminishing Europe's position.
- Internally, Europe is in political **turmoil**.
- Under the JCPOA, and in return for the lifting of sanctions, Iran **accepted** the strongest verification and transparency mechanisms in nuclear

nonproliferation history. Now, with the new IAEA resolution, the EU3 have requested that Iran return to the JCPOA's verification mechanisms—while Europe lacks the ability to offer reciprocal concessions that would lift key sanctions.

- And last but not least, Europe is expected to raise regional issues and Ukraine. But again, Europe has no leverage to offer reciprocal concessions to Iran if it were to agree to limit its support for Russia in Ukraine and for Iranian proxy groups in the Middle East.

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The start of new negotiations between Iran and the EU3 is a positive and necessary step, but, as I have been **insisting** for over two decades, in the absence of the United States, no agreement will be possible. The only way out of the current crisis depends on how the United States and Iran interact during Trump's presidency. If Trump returns to his previous policy of "maximum pressure" and Israel-Iran military confrontations continue, it is likely Iran will go over the edge, moving from being on the brink of nuclear capability to actually building nuclear weapons.

So Trump also has a golden opportunity—not only to resolve the nuclear crisis but to end 40 years of hostility between the West and Iran and resolve the current regional crisis. He can make history by following three principles:

The first would be for Washington and Tehran to reopen high-level direct negotiations.

The second is to achieve a sustainable nuclear deal that would be face saving and a win-win for both sides. Such a deal will require the full implementation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, with maximum transparency and verification of Iran's nuclear program, in return for the lifting of sanctions against Iran. Beyond that, and as the best long-term guarantee for nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, the eight countries around the Persian Gulf could sign a treaty establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Persian Gulf region within the framework of a larger agreement on collective security and cooperation.

The third is to have broad negotiations on not only the nuclear issue but also the

dangerous confrontations now occurring across the Middle East. An improvement in Iran-Saudi Arabia relations has **created** an opportunity for the United States to support a comprehensive deal between the eight countries around the Persian Gulf to establish a system of collective security and cooperation. President Trump also has an opportunity to end the military confrontations between Iran and Israel, and, by pressing Israel to implement UN resolutions calling for a two-state solution for Palestine, he could bring an end to the 80-year-old Palestinian crisis and realize the UN resolution on Middle East free from nuclear weapons.

Recently, in its electoral seesaw, Iran elected to its presidency a moderate politician. Masoud Pezeshkian is seeking a reconciliation with the West. This has created an opportunity that the United States and President Trump must not miss.

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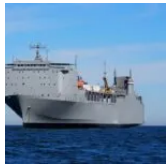
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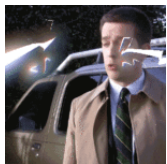
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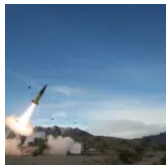
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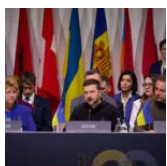
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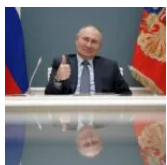
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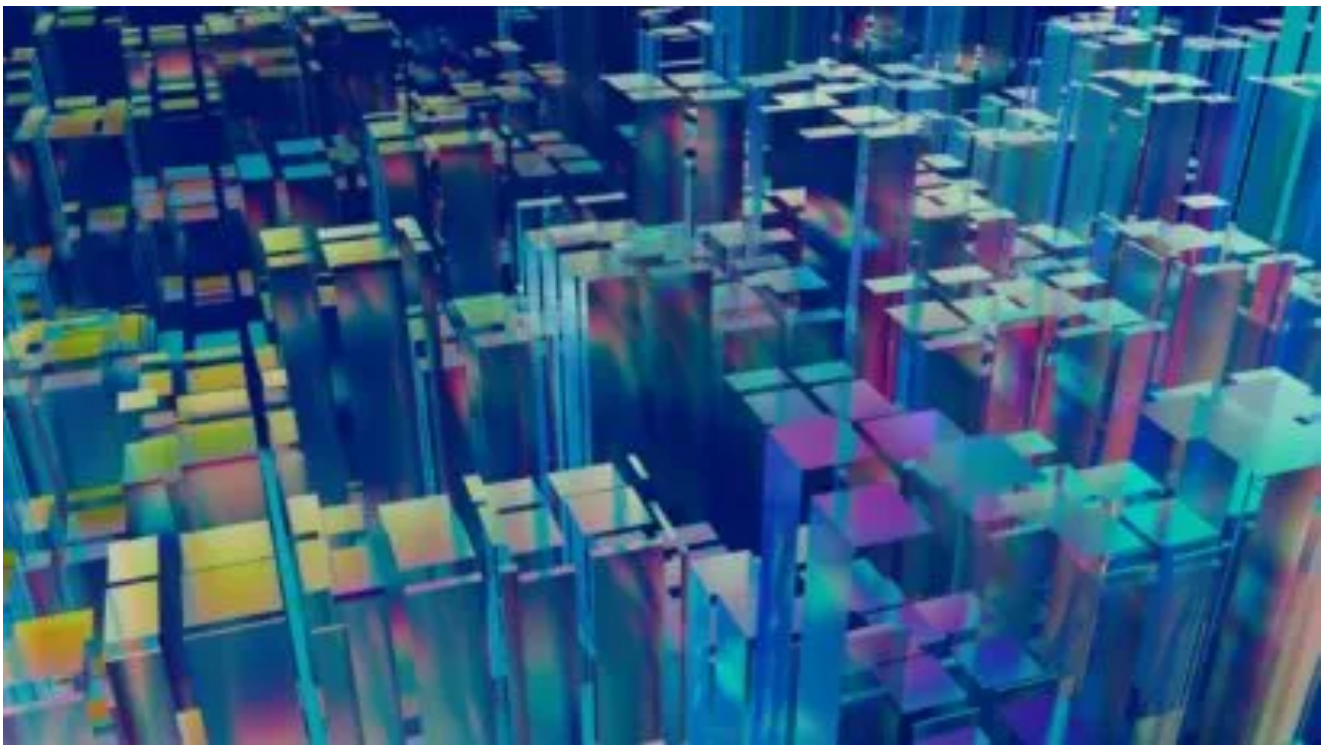
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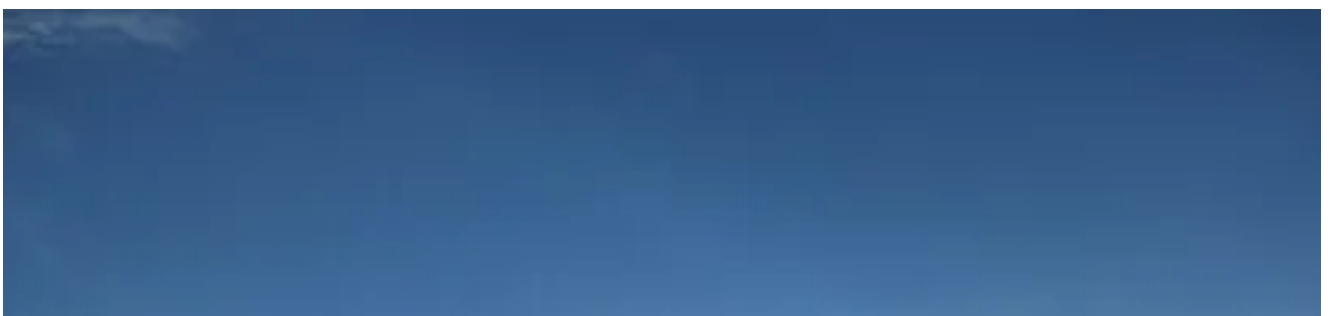
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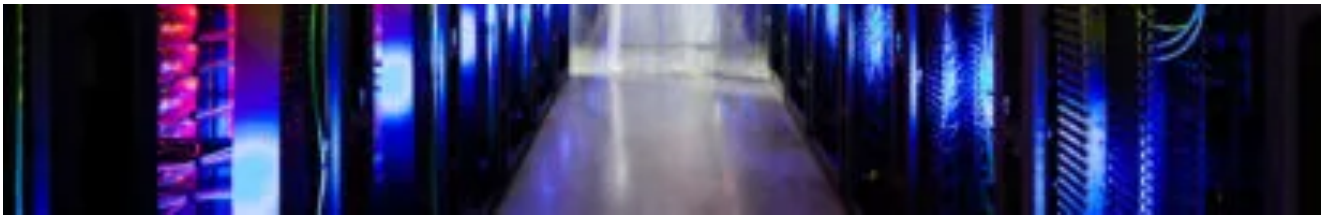
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