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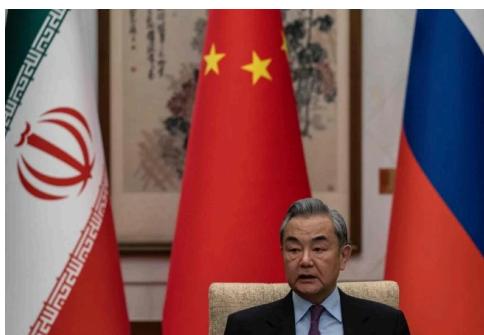
China / Diplomacy

Closer China-Iran ties could provoke US into 'harsher' response on nuclear issue

Beijing's successful multilateral talks with Tehran and Moscow may lead to more pressure from Washington, experts warned

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China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosts the trilateral meeting with Iran and Russia on March 14, which Beijing hopes will restart long-stalled negotiations on Tehran's nuclear programme. Photo: AFP

Analysts expect that Washington will ramp up pressure on Tehran in response to last week's [trilateral nuclear talks](#) between China, [Iran](#) and Russia – given the hardening consensus in the US against both the meeting's host Beijing and the Middle East nation.

Despite the pushback, China will continue to pursue multilateral negotiations on the nuclear issue, using them to reinforce its role as a key Middle East mediator and further expand its regional influence, the experts said.

At the Beijing talks on March 14, the three nations reaffirmed their commitment to non-proliferation and jointly condemned "sanctions, pressure, or the threat of force".

Foreign Minister Wang Yi also proposed a five-point plan for the settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue that included a commitment to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal that President Donald Trump pulled the US out of during his first term.

Tehran's positive response to the talks – which came just days after Trump sought to engage Iran in bilateral nuclear negotiations – was in stark contrast to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's swift rejection of the Washington proposal.

Khamenei said Tehran would not be bullied into negotiations after Trump announced he had written to Iran suggesting a restart to bilateral talks – followed by a declaration that the US would have to "go in militarily" if the Iranians did not want to negotiate.

Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched up to 60 per cent – a short step from the weapons-grade level of 90 per cent – was reported to be around 280kg (617lbs) in February – an increase of 90kg (198lbs) in only three months.

While Tehran's preference for Beijing's multilateral approach over Washington's bilateral outreach underscored its strategic positioning in an increasingly hostile diplomatic environment, it could provoke an even harsher response from the US.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosts the trilateral meeting between China, Iran and Russia in Beijing on March 14. Photo: Xinhua

"Trump must be upset with Russia and China's strategic support for Iran ... It is highly possible that Trump will impose some extra pressure on Tehran in the near future," said Middle East specialist Wen Shaobiao from Shanghai International Studies University.

Wen also observed that the US would be very unlikely to return to multilateral talks – "because Trump never believed multilateralism can solve problems".

Trump's recent approach to Iran mirrors the hardline stance of his first administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, followed by the imposition of sweeping economic sanctions under the so-called maximum pressure strategy.

Despite former president Joe Biden's efforts to revive negotiations during his term in office, the second Trump White House has made it clear that the maximum pressure strategy will continue for the next four years.

Yan Wei, deputy director at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at China's Northwest University, said it was possible that Beijing's deepening engagement in nuclear negotiations may further escalate tensions.

According to Yan, Beijing's engagement could potentially push Washington towards adopting a more aggressive stance on Iran, rather than seeking a balanced diplomatic solution.

"Amid growing Sino-US rivalry across the globe, Washington might conduct a further rightward policy to Iran. Meanwhile, Beijing is conducting a more stable approach towards the Iranian nuclear issue," he said.

Analysts also noted that China's engagement with Iran and Russia on the nuclear issue aligns with its broader diplomatic strategy in the Middle East, where Beijing is actively engaging with regional politics, after previously focusing primarily on economic ties.



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China's presence in the region has expanded significantly since the JCPOA was signed in 2015, with Beijing these days regarding the Middle East as a critical arena for its global ambitions.

In 2023, China brokered a landmark peace deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This was followed last year with negotiations in Beijing that brought together 14 Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Fatah.

"China's continued diplomacy in the Middle East would reflect its own calculus in portraying itself as an active player in the region," said Clemens Chay, a research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute.

According to Chay, hosting last week's trilateral discussions also allows Beijing to challenge what it views as coercive tactics by Washington. "China's calculus on hosting Iran's nuclear talks is also to seize the opportunity to denounce a bullying narrative of America."

Sun Degang, director of the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies at Fudan University, noted that even as a close partner, China is also working to prevent Iran's nuclear ambition – a stance that could drive Arab states, particularly in the Gulf, closer to Washington.

"If Iran keeps moving forward on the nuclear issue, it will upset the regional balance and push many Arab countries into the US, which is not in China's interest," Sun said.

"China is involved in the Iranian nuclear issue for regional balance ... It hopes that the Iranian nuclear issue can achieve a soft landing and avoid a confrontation between the US and Iran."

For the Gulf states, Iran remains the region's most pressing security concern. Several of the monarchies strengthened diplomatic ties with Israel during Trump's first term, motivated by the perceived Iranian threat.

In 2023, Saudi Arabia and the US were reportedly close to finalising a defence treaty aimed at countering Iran's regional power when the deal was stalled amid the outbreak of the Gaza war.