



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



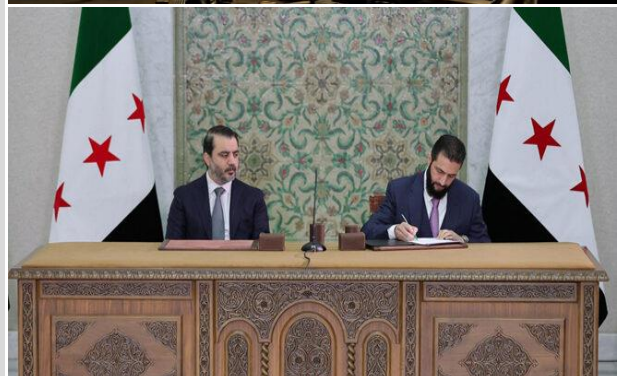
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Cover Image:

Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov Sergey Alexeevich of the Russian Federation and Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Beijing on March 14, 2025. Source: [Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China](#)

A US ship fires missiles at an undisclosed location after US President Donald Trump launched military strikes against Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis on March 15, 2025. Source: [X/@CENTCOM](#)

Syria's interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa in the presence of Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani signed a temporary constitution that will be in force for a five-year transitional period, on March 13, 2025. Source: [X/@SANAEnOfficial](#)

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West Asia Review

by

Amb. Gaddam Dharmendra

I. Overview

There is an uneasy calm in West Asia and the Levant as the US undertakes a well-publicized military build-up in the region, as well as a massive bombing campaign of Houthi positions in western Yemen. The Houthis have responded by launching missiles and drones, targeting US naval ships in the Red Sea / Bab al Mandab straits, as well as on Israel. In the Gaza Strip, the Hamas-Israel ceasefire collapsed as Israel resumed its military campaign. This followed Hamas's failure to release the remaining 59 Israeli hostages. The situation in Syria remains fragile, due mainly to rising sectarian violence against minorities, especially the Alawites. Syria adopted a new constitution. The United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran exchanged letters at the highest level, with both sides expressing a desire to resume talks. But both remained deadlocked on process issues, namely on whether to conduct direct or indirect talks. The agenda of the talks also remains contentious. Iran wants to restrict talks to its nuclear program and removal of US sanctions, while the US has put forward a more expansive agenda including Iran's missile program.

II. Developments

US President Trump announced his desire to negotiate with Iran in an interview with the Fox Business Network (March 7th). His messaging was typically mixed and came roughly a month after he signed a Presidential Memorandum (February 4th) continuing a policy of "maximum pressure" and imposing additional sanctions on Iran. Trump declared, "I hope you're going to negotiate, because it's going to be a lot better for Iran".

In turn, Supreme Leader Khamenei responded with a series of public statements, describing Trump's offer of talks as a "deception" and saying that the US cannot be trusted to fulfil its commitments. On the nuclear programme, Khamenei reiterated Iran's standard position: "If we had wanted to build nuclear weapons, the US wouldn't have been able to stop us. The fact that we neither possess nor seek nuclear weapons is because we ourselves don't want to." (March 12th)

Trump's letter to Khamenei was handed over in Tehran to Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi by the UAE's senior diplomatic adviser, Anwar Gargash (March 12th). The diplomatic one-upmanship started immediately thereafter. Iran pointedly chose to send its response through the Omanis instead of the Emiratis (March 27th-28th). Araghchi went to Muscat to deliver the Supreme Leader's response. In a subtle public snub to the Emiratis, the Iranians made clear their preference that the Omanis mediate the "indirect" talks. Araghchi said that "Iran decided to send its response through Oman because it served as a mediator with the US in the past, and the Iranian government trusts the Omanis." (Axios, March 28)

Neither side has publicly made available the contents of the correspondence. However, comments by senior officials on both sides provide an insight into their substance, and to the complex negotiations that lie ahead. Trump's Middle East Envoy Steve Witkoff, in an extensive online interview (March 22nd) with conservative TV commentator Tucker Carlson, revealed that Trump had written to the Iranians to say that he is the "president of peace" and that "there is no reason for this to turn military." Trump's focus was apparently on a "nuclear verification program so no one worries about weaponization". However, a day later, Trump's National Security Adviser Mike Waltz said that the American objective was the "full dismantlement" of Iran's nuclear enrichment program (CBS News, March 23rd).

These contradictory statements, on whether the US intention is verification or dismantlement of Iran's nuclear programme, interject uncertainty. The last time zero enrichment was on the table was during the Obama Administration. This was realistically dropped as, inter alia, it would be violative of a state-party's rights to uranium enrichment, as permitted under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran is a party.

Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi added another layer to the public discourse, saying that Iran would not negotiate in an atmosphere of threats and "maximum pressure". He disclosed that Trump's letter consisted of "threats and opportunities", and that a point-by-point response was given to all paragraphs in Trump's letter. He gave an insight into the US's "asks" by declaring that Iran is prepared to only clarify any concerns over its "peaceful" nuclear program and seek the removal of sanctions. He said that Iran's missile programme is not up for discussion, a position Iran fought hard to maintain during the previous negotiations with the Obama Administration. As regards Iran's support for its regional proxies, the so-called Axis of Resistance, Araghchi was dismissive, saying that these are

independent actors over whom Iran has no influence, and that the US should resolve its concerns by speaking to these entities directly.

Against the background of this very public back and forth between Iran and the US, Iran's Permanent Representative to the UN, in a letter to the UN Security Council (March 18), basically disavowed any Iranian control on the Houthis. He wrote that Yemen's "Ansarallah (Houthis) and (the) Yemeni authorities operate independently in their decision-making and actions" and "Iran warns that any act of aggression will have severe consequences, for which the US will bear full responsibility."

In a series of carefully orchestrated public comments, Araghchi consistently stayed on message, reiterating that Iran's nuclear program has always been peaceful and the question of weaponisation does not arise. He also made it clear that "We will NOT negotiate under pressure and intimidation. We will NOT even consider it, no matter what the subject may be". Citing the atmosphere of threats and maximum pressure, Araghchi said that Iran will not hold face-to-face discussions with the Americans but would only enter into "indirect talks". He said this position may change, subject to the US changing its approach (behaviour). President Masoud Pezeshkian also declared that it is "the US responsibility to rebuild trust with Iran, after Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018." (Axios, March 30th)

The tactic of "indirect" talks is, however, a characteristic Iranian negotiating strategy. They had successfully deployed this with the Biden Administration where several rounds of talks were held without any outcome. The process was arduous and time consuming, with messages being carried between two physically separated buildings where the US and Iranian delegations were staying. This essentially enables Iranian negotiators to stall and/or slow-walk outcomes that do not meet their expectations, namely on sanctions relief.

Trump, however, set a two-month deadline for completion of the negotiations, failing which, he held out the threat that Iran should be prepared to face potential military action. On multiple occasions he has repeated his message to the Iranians of "talk or get bombed". Trump has stated that "If they (Iran) don't make a deal there will be bombing. It will be bombing the likes of which they have never seen before" (Axios, March 30th).

Iranian President Pezeshkian's response to Trump's repeated threats has been equally blunt: "It is unacceptable for us that they (the US) give orders and make

threats. I won't even negotiate with you. Do whatever the hell you want" ("Reuters", March 11th). An Iranian MFA Spokesperson also posted on X: "An open threat of «bombing» by a Head of State against Iran is a shocking affront to the very essence of International Peace and Security. It violates the United Nations Charter and betrays the Safeguards under the IAEA. Violence breeds violence, peace begets peace. The US can choose the course...; and concede to CONSEQUENCES..." (@IRIMFA_SPOX)

Against above background, the following three developments are of interest.

First, **China** convened a trilateral meeting in Beijing of China, Iran and Russia at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers. The joint statement issued at the conclusion of the meeting (March 14th) declared that the three countries had "engaged in in-depth discussions" on the "nuclear issue and sanctions lifting" and "emphasised on the necessity of terminating all unlawful sanctions". They underlined the "importance of upholding the Treaty on Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)" and "welcomed Iran's reiteration that its nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes, and not for development of nuclear weapons".

The Beijing trilateral meeting was interesting, as China has traditionally restricted itself to a marginal role in the Iran nuclear negotiations, which for all practical purposes has been a bilateral US-Iran negotiation. China's latest posturing could be a sign that it is positioning itself to play a future role, including to counter US efforts to "snapback" sanctions or demands that China stop its lucrative oil trade with Iran. Prior to the Beijing meeting, the US had sanctioned independent Chinese importers of Iranian crude, an independent Chinese refinery and eight Chinese oil tankers, all of who were engaged in Iranian oil transfers and their refining.

Second, **Russian** President Vladimir Putin and President Trump held a telecon (March 18th). The White House spokesperson's readout of their discussion of the situation in the West Asia is of significance. Trump and Putin discussed possible coordination and cooperation: "The leaders spoke broadly about the Middle East as a region of potential cooperation to prevent future conflicts. They further discussed the need to stop proliferation of strategic weapons and will engage with others to ensure the broadest possible application. The two leaders shared the view that Iran should never be in a position to destroy Israel."

The third development was the release of the "**Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community**", by Tulsi Gabbard, Director of National Intelligence

(March 2025). On Iran's nuclear program, the DNI states: "*We continue to assess Iran is not building a nuclear weapon and that (Supreme Leader Ayatollah) Khamenei has not reauthorized the nuclear weapons program he suspended in 2003, though pressure has probably built on him to do so. In the past year, there has been an erosion of a decades-long taboo on discussing nuclear weapons in public that has emboldened nuclear weapons advocates within Iran's decision making apparatus. Khamenei remains the final decisionmaker over Iran's nuclear program, to include any decision to develop nuclear weapons.*"

Yemen's Houthis were subjected by the US to intense bombing attacks on targets inside Houthi controlled territories (beginning March 15th). The US CENTCOM posted on X (@Centcom) that US Forces have launched a "Large Scale Operation Against Iran-Backed Houthis in Yemen. On March 15, U.S. Central Command initiated a series of operations consisting of precision strikes against Iran-backed Houthi targets across Yemen to defend American interests, deter enemies, and restore freedom of navigation." The targets included the port of Hodeidah and "terrorist training sites, UAV infrastructure, weapons manufacturing, command & control centers...weapons storage facilities, and detection capabilities." (March 16th)

Ahead of the strikes, the US enhanced its regional military posture, publicising deployment of additional military assets to the region, including two aircraft carrier strike groups. It stationed B-2 stealth heavy bombers to its base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. The B-2 is capable of carrying extremely heavy payloads, of up to 20 tons of warheads, including the so-called bunker-busting deep-earth penetrating bomb.

Some observers assess that the US' attacks in Yemen were also meant as a signal to Iran. In fact, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said that US airstrikes on the Houthis was meant "to draw Iran's attention...the message is clear to Iran ... Your support of the Houthis needs to end immediately. We will hold you accountable as the sponsor of this proxy, and I echo [the president's] statement [that] we will not be nice about it." (defense.gov, March 17th). The Houthis are the last remnants of the Iran backed Axis of Resistance and their suppression will further weaken Iran's deterrence posture of "forward defense".

The US air force also flew some of its offensive sorties against the Houthis from the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and the Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE. This is significant, as Iran has threatened to counter-attack US bases in the region in the event of US deciding to launch strikes on Iranian territory.

The Houthis responded by hitting some targets deep inside Israel, as well as attempts to target US naval vessels in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and Bab-al-Mandab straits. The Houthis claimed that their attacks were in view of Israel violating the ceasefire, restarting armed conflict with the Hamas and preventing humanitarian aid deliveries. While their attacks largely failed, the Houthis did publish photographs of US MQ-9 Reaper drones they claimed to have downed.

An “**Arab Summit**” was convened in Cairo by **Egypt’s** President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (March 4th) to discuss plans for Gaza’s reconstruction. Egypt’s objective in convening the summit was to counter US President Trump’s proposal to relocate Gazans to other Arab countries pending the Strip’s reconstruction. A 23-para statement issued at the Summit declared “We support dialogue and understanding between religions, cultures, and civilizations, and promote global peace and stability” and called for the “deployment of a UN international protection and peacekeeping force in the occupied Palestinian territory until the two-state solution is implemented.” Significantly, the statement did not call on Hamas to release the remaining Israeli hostages.

In **Gaza**, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) renewed their military ingress into and operations in the Gaza Strip, following the failure of Hamas to hand over the remaining 59 hostage, including some US dual nationals. Reports have indicated that at least half of the hostages may have died during their captivity. Under the terms of the January ceasefire agreement, Hamas was required to release all hostages by March 1st and move into the second stage of the ceasefire. The US National Security Council Spokesman Brian Hughes said that “Hamas could have released hostages to extend the ceasefire but instead chose refusal and war” (Axios, March 18th).

Hamas inexplicably stalled for time, following which the IDF announced (on March 18th) that: “Following a situational assessment, changes will be made to the IDF Home Front Command’s defensive guidelines as of 02:00 today (Tuesday). As part of the changes, the areas of the communities near the Gaza Strip will change from Full Activity to Limited activity, meaning educational activity will not be allowed. The areas of the Western Negev and Western Lachish remains unchanged - Full Activity.”

Separately, Israel’s Defence Minister Israel Katz declared: “Residents of Gaza, this is your final warning. The first Sinwar destroyed Gaza, and the second Sinwar (referring to the new Hamas Chief, Sami Abu Zuhri) will bring upon it total ruin...If

all Israeli hostages are not released and Hamas is not kicked out of Gaza, Israel will act with force you have not known before. Take the advice of the US President: return the hostages and kick out Hamas, and new options will open up for you – including relocation to other parts of the world for those who choose. The alternative is destruction and total devastation” (March 19th).

On the other hand, the new Hamas leader Sami Abu Zuhri, who succeeded the slain Yahya Sinwar, squarely blamed Israel for the breakdown, saying that Israel's renewed ground operations destroyed the ceasefire agreement. He declared “We will not hand over our prisoners to the occupation unless it commits to a ceasefire and withdrawal from the Gaza Strip” (Al-Arabiya TV, March 19th).

In early March, there were some reports along with videos of anti-Hamas protests in Gaza, but these were quickly removed from major social media platforms and were also not covered by major news agencies. The videos showed anti-Hamas protests and sloganeering. Such protests are rare, given Hamas's tight control of the Gazans and its stranglehold on global messaging control.

Syria's interim government led by President Ahmed Al-Sharaa concluded an agreement with the US-backed Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The agreement entails integration of the SDF into a unified Syria. According to the Al-Monitor news portal, “The agreement was facilitated by the United States and greenlit by Turkey” (March 12th). US Secretary of State Marco Rubio welcomed the agreement to integrate the Kurdish led SDA with Syrian government forces (March 12th). Such an arrangement would, however, be at the cost of Türkiye's Syrian National Army (SNA). Ever since the fall of the Assad regime last November, the SDF and SNA have repeatedly clashed with each other.

Rubio also said that that the US “reaffirms its support for a political transition (in Syria) that demonstrates credible, non-sectarian governance as the best path to avoid further conflict. We will continue to watch the decisions made by the interim authorities, noting with concern the recent deadly violence against minorities.” The statement referred to the outbreak of a wave of sectarian violence in eastern Syria, targeting the minority Alawites. Rubio called on the Syrian government to take steps to stop the ethnic violence and attacks on Syria's minorities following the massacre of several hundred Alawites in the eastern Latakia province. Rubio said that “Syria's interim authorities must hold the perpetrators of these massacres against Syria's minority communities accountable”.

With regard to US sanctions, the Syrian government was granted conditional waivers from extensive US sanctions (Al-Monitor, March 26th). The conditions include the US demands for a renewed search for a missing American journalist, Austin Tice; elimination on Syrian territory of all weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and, severing links with Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad. The US also directed the Syrian government to ensure that no foreign fighters should be appointed to high government positions. The US is the single largest aid donor to Syria, but this aid currently stands suspended due to the Trump Administration's decision to suspend funding and operations of US AID.

China continued its outreach with the new Syrian dispensation in Damascus. The Chinese Ambassador to Syria, Shi Hongwei, called on Foreign Minister Assad Al-Shibani (SANA, March 26th) along with a Chinese delegation. He is reported to have offered China's cooperation in Syria's reconstruction. However, Chinese concerns pertain mainly to the presence of several thousand Uyghur fighters in Syria, all of whom are aligned with President Ahmed Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Shams (HTS). The news portal Al-Monitor reports that: "According to estimates from the Syrian and Chinese governments in 2018, there are roughly 2,000 to 5,000 Uyghur militants from the separatist Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria. Members of the TIP, many of whom have been in Syria for more than a decade, fought alongside Syrian rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to topple Assad, and some have now joined Syria's state forces."

Syria's interim President Al-Sharaa adopted a new constitution (on March 13th) that is to serve as a "governing document" during the current transition period. The interim government adopted Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia) as the "main source" of legislation and governance. This is a departure from the previous weaker provision which stated that Islamic jurisprudence shall be "one of the sources". The country's name also has been retained as "Syrian Arab Republic". The Kurds were apparently disappointed, as they were demanding that the word "Arab" be dropped and that the county should just be referred to as "Syrian Republic".

Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters crossed into Syria and kidnapped three government soldiers who were later publicly executed (March 17th). This led to a brief period of clashes by forces on both sides. On the other hand, Israeli forces continued to conduct raids into Syria. Israel described its actions as a defensive response to attacks on its troops from southern Syria (March 25th). Israeli operations were conducted close to the Jordanian border, prompting a response from Jordan's

Foreign Ministry, criticizing Israel. In a post on X : “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates condemned in the strongest terms the Israeli forces' incursion and shelling of the town of Koya, west of Daraa, in the sisterly Syrian Arab Republic, which resulted in the deaths and injuries of a number of people”.

Turkey and Iran got into a spat, a sign of their underlying historical tensions. On March 2nd, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Esmail Baghaei, criticised Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan’s comments that Iran should abandon its “expansionist policy” in the region. Baghaei instead called on Turkey to stop its covert aid to Israel’s regional expansionism. The two neighbours have a cold peace, competing in the Caucasus, where Iran is suspicious of Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan. However, in the Kurdish areas both sides cooperate so as to keep in check Kurdish independence elements.

India and Iran marked 75 years of the establishment bilateral diplomatic relations. Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi was effusive in his praise for bilateral ties, posting on X that “our shared history and cultural bonds go back centuries if not millennia, joining our nations at the hip. These ties have been paramount in paving the way for mutual growth & cooperation. Looking forward to further strengthening our partnership for the prosperity of our nations. Zindabad sarzameen” (March 15th).



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