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Diplomatic Negotiations and Nuclear Politics: A Critical Study of the 2026 Iran–United States Peace Talks

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Abstract

This study critically examines the diplomatic and strategic dimensions of the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks within the broader context of nuclear politics and Middle Eastern security. The research explores how historical hostility, ideological rivalry, and competing security interests shaped the negotiation process between Tehran and Washington. Particular attention is given to the evolution of Iran's nuclear programme, the legacy and collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the escalation dynamics that intensified tensions between 2019 and 2026. Using realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and nuclear deterrence theory as analytical frameworks, the study evaluates how nuclear capability functioned simultaneously as a deterrent mechanism, bargaining instrument, and symbol of political sovereignty. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach based on historical analysis, policy evaluation, and critical interpretation of diplomatic and scholarly sources. The findings demonstrate that the 2026 negotiations primarily functioned as a mechanism of crisis management rather than comprehensive conflict resolution. Although the talks contributed to temporary de-escalation and prevented wider military confrontation, they failed to establish a durable framework capable of resolving the underlying strategic mistrust between both states. The study concludes that sustainable US–Iran reconciliation requires not only technical nuclear agreements but also broader transformations in regional security structures, institutional credibility, and long-term diplomatic trust-building.

Keywords: U.S.–Iran Relations; Nuclear Diplomacy; JCPOA; Nuclear Deterrence; Middle East Security

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1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1 Overview of U.S.–Iran Relations and the Nature of Strategic Rivalry

The relationship between the United States and Iran represents one of the most protracted, ideologically charged, and strategically consequential rivalries in contemporary international relations. Rooted in a history of political intervention, revolutionary transformation, regional competition, and mutual suspicion, the antagonism between the two states has shaped the geopolitical architecture of the Middle East for more than four decades. The 2026 Iran–United States peace talks, therefore, did not emerge in a political vacuum; rather, they were situated within a broader historical trajectory characterised by recurring diplomatic crises, fluctuating patterns of confrontation and negotiation, and deeply entrenched perceptions of insecurity on both sides (Valizada, 2026).

The origins of the modern US–Iran rivalry can be traced to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which fundamentally altered the strategic orientation of Iran and transformed the country from a close American ally under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi into an anti-Western Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The subsequent hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran,

during which fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held captive for 444 days, institutionalised hostility between the two governments and became a defining symbol of mutual distrust. From the American perspective, post-revolutionary Iran emerged as a revisionist state that challenged U.S. influence in the Middle East, opposed the regional security order supported by Washington, and promoted anti-American political narratives across the Islamic world. Conversely, Iranian leaders viewed the United States as a hegemonic power responsible for decades of foreign interference, most notably the 1953 CIA-backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, which reinforced enduring Iranian perceptions of American interventionism and political domination (Al Jazeera Staff. 2025; Ozalp, 2026).

Over time, the bilateral conflict evolved beyond ideological hostility into a multidimensional strategic rivalry encompassing military, economic, nuclear, and regional dimensions. Iran's support for non-state actors such as Hezbollah, its influence in Iraq and Syria, and its broader "Axis of Resistance" strategy were interpreted by Washington and its regional allies as attempts to expand Iranian geopolitical influence across the Middle East. Simultaneously, successive US administrations pursued policies of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military containment aimed at constraining Iran's regional ambitions and nuclear capabilities. These competing strategic objectives produced a cyclical pattern of escalation and limited engagement, in which diplomatic openings were frequently undermined by renewed crises, proxy conflicts, and domestic political pressures within both states (Atashjameh, 2025).

Central to this rivalry has been the dispute surrounding Iran's nuclear programme. Since the early 2000s, concerns regarding uranium enrichment, nuclear transparency, and potential weaponisation transformed the nuclear issue into the primary focal point of US–Iran diplomacy. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a significant, albeit temporary, breakthrough in efforts to institutionalise nuclear restraint through multilateral diplomacy. However, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and the subsequent reimposition of sanctions intensified mistrust and accelerated regional tensions. Iran gradually reduced compliance with key provisions of the agreement, while the United States adopted a "maximum pressure" strategy intended to force broader Iranian concessions. Rather than resolving the conflict, these developments reinforced the perception within both governments that the other remained fundamentally unreliable and strategically threatening (Berg, 2025; Akar, 2025).

Within this broader context, the 2026 peace negotiations assumed exceptional diplomatic significance. The talks were widely perceived not merely as technical discussions over nuclear regulation but as a broader attempt to determine whether sustained diplomacy could mitigate a deeply institutionalised adversarial relationship. The negotiations therefore functioned as a critical test of conflict transformation within an international system increasingly characterised by geopolitical polarisation, regional instability, and declining trust in multilateral institutions (Kurbalija, 2026; Ajudeonu et al., 2026).

From a theoretical perspective, the US–Iran rivalry exemplifies the logic of the security dilemma, a central concept within realist theories of international relations. Under conditions of strategic uncertainty, defensive actions undertaken by one state are frequently interpreted by rivals as offensive or expansionist in nature. In the case of U.S.–Iran relations, American military deployments, sanctions regimes, and regional alliances have often been perceived by Tehran as mechanisms of coercion and regime containment. Conversely, Iran's missile development, nuclear advancement, and regional partnerships have been interpreted by Washington as evidence of aggressive revisionism and destabilising intent. This reciprocal mistrust has generated persistent cycles of escalation in which both actors pursue policies intended to enhance national security while simultaneously increasing the insecurity of the other (Edmond, 2026).

As a consequence, diplomatic engagement between the United States and Iran has historically remained fragile, transactional, and vulnerable to collapse during periods of regional crisis or domestic political transition. The structural persistence of mistrust, reinforced by ideological narratives and conflicting strategic interests, has constrained the development of sustainable cooperation despite repeated attempts at negotiation. The 2026 peace talks, therefore, represented not only a diplomatic initiative but also a broader examination of whether adversarial states with deeply embedded historical grievances could overcome the structural limitations imposed by long-term geopolitical rivalry (Seener, 2025; Onyari, 2026).

1.2 Historical Origins of Diplomatic Rupture (1979 Revolution and Its Aftermath)

The rupture in diplomatic relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes one of the most consequential geopolitical realignments of the late twentieth century. Its origins are deeply embedded in the transformative events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which not only dismantled the monarchical regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi but also fundamentally reoriented Iran's ideological identity, domestic political order, and foreign policy. Prior to the revolution, Iran occupied a central position within the United States' Cold War strategic architecture in the Middle East. Under the Pahlavi monarchy, particularly following the 1953 CIA- and MI6-backed coup that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and restored the Shah's authority, Iran emerged as a crucial pro-Western ally designed to contain Soviet expansionism and safeguard Western economic and security interests in the Persian Gulf. Extensive military

cooperation, intelligence sharing, arms transfers, and economic modernisation initiatives reinforced the bilateral partnership, rendering Iran one of Washington's most dependable regional clients during the Cold War era (Valizada, 2026).

However, beneath this strategic alliance existed profound social, political, and ideological tensions within Iranian society. The Shah's modernisation agenda, commonly associated with the "White Revolution", generated rapid socioeconomic transformation but also intensified political repression, economic inequality, and perceptions of cultural Westernisation. Opposition movements—comprising religious clerics, nationalist intellectuals, leftist organisations, and disenfranchised social groups—viewed the monarchy as authoritarian, dependent upon foreign patronage, and detached from Iran's Islamic and national identity. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini emerged as the symbolic and ideological leader of this resistance, articulating a revolutionary discourse centred on anti-imperialism, Islamic governance, political sovereignty, and resistance to Western domination, particularly that of the United States. Within revolutionary rhetoric, the United States became associated with neocolonial interventionism and was frequently characterised as the principal external force sustaining authoritarian rule in Iran (Abrahamian, 2008).

The culmination of revolutionary mobilisation in February 1979 resulted in the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This transition represented far more than a regime change; it constituted a civilisational and ideological rupture with the Western-orientated political order that had defined Iran's international alignment for decades. The new revolutionary leadership rejected the prevailing international system's hierarchical power structures and sought to construct an alternative political identity grounded in Islamic revolutionary principles and strategic independence. Consequently, anti-Americanism became institutionalised as a defining component of the Islamic Republic's political discourse and foreign policy orientation (Rakel, 2008; Vaswani, 2019).

The deterioration of bilateral relations accelerated dramatically with the seizure of the United States Embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979 by Iranian revolutionary students aligned with the revolutionary movement. The hostage crisis, during which fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were detained for 444 days, represented a decisive turning point in U.S.–Iranian relations. For the revolutionary leadership, the embassy occupation symbolised resistance against perceived American interference in Iranian sovereignty and reflected fears that Washington might attempt another intervention analogous to the 1953 coup. For the United States, however, the incident constituted a severe violation of international diplomatic norms and an unprecedented challenge to American global prestige. The crisis generated profound political trauma within the United States and institutionalised a framework of mistrust, hostility, and ideological antagonism that would persist for decades (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026).

In response, the United States severed formal diplomatic relations with Iran in April 1980, imposed economic sanctions, froze Iranian assets, and initiated a long-term policy of containment and isolation. Subsequent decades witnessed the consolidation of a deeply adversarial relationship characterised by recurring cycles of confrontation, sanctions regimes, proxy warfare, intelligence competition, and limited episodes of diplomatic engagement. Regional conflicts—including the Iran–Iraq War, disputes over Iran's nuclear programme, U.S. military involvement in the Persian Gulf, and competing influence across Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen—further entrenched mutual suspicion and reinforced antagonistic strategic narratives on both sides.

Scholars of international relations frequently interpret the 1979 revolution as a paradigmatic case of revolutionary state transformation reshaping foreign policy identity. As Takeyh argues, the revolution not only altered Iran's internal governance structures but also reconstructed the Islamic Republic's external identity in explicit opposition to American hegemony and Western political influence in the Middle East. The diplomatic rupture therefore cannot be understood merely as the consequence of isolated political events; rather, it emerged from the intersection of historical grievances, ideological contestation, geopolitical rivalry, and competing conceptions of sovereignty and regional order. The enduring hostility between Washington and Tehran remains rooted in this revolutionary legacy, which continues to shape strategic calculations, political discourse, and regional security dynamics in the contemporary Middle East.

1.3 Emergence of Iran's Nuclear Programme as a Strategic Flashpoint

Iran's nuclear programme gradually evolved into the principal strategic fault line shaping contemporary relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. Although the origins of Iran's nuclear ambitions date back to the 1950s under the U.S.-supported "Atoms for Peace" initiative, the programme acquired heightened geopolitical significance following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the subsequent deterioration of U.S.–Iran relations. Iranian authorities have consistently asserted that the programme is designed exclusively for peaceful civilian purposes, including electricity generation, medical research, and technological modernisation in accordance with rights guaranteed under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran is a signatory. Nevertheless, the expansion of uranium enrichment capabilities, the development of advanced centrifuge technology, and ambiguities surrounding certain undeclared nuclear activities generated widespread concern among Western

governments regarding the possibility of latent nuclear weapons capability. From the perspective of the United States and its regional allies, Iran's nuclear infrastructure represented not merely a technological development but a potential strategic challenge capable of altering the balance of power in the Middle East and undermining global non-proliferation norms (Lo, 2004).

International scrutiny intensified significantly during the early 2000s after revelations concerning previously undisclosed nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak. Reports issued by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) documented instances of non-compliance with safeguards obligations, including failures to declare sensitive nuclear activities and materials, thereby increasing suspicions regarding the transparency of Iran's nuclear intentions. These findings transformed the nuclear issue into a major international security crisis and prompted extensive diplomatic engagement between Iran, the IAEA, the European Union, and the United States. In response to concerns over enrichment expansion and verification deficiencies, the United Nations Security Council adopted multiple resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran, while the United States and the European Union implemented broader unilateral economic and financial restrictions targeting banking systems, energy exports, technological transfers, and strategic industries. The sanctions regime sought both to constrain Iran's nuclear advancement and to compel compliance with international monitoring frameworks established under the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA], 2025). Consequently, the nuclear dispute became institutionalised as a central dimension of global non-proliferation governance and coercive diplomacy.

Beyond its technical dimensions, however, Iran's nuclear programme became deeply embedded within broader geopolitical and ideological struggles involving regime security, regional influence, and international legitimacy. For Iranian policymakers, nuclear development symbolised technological sovereignty, strategic deterrence, and resistance against perceived Western domination and external coercion. Iranian leaders frequently interpreted international pressure and sanctions as instruments designed not solely to limit nuclear activities but also to weaken the Islamic Republic politically and economically. Conversely, the United States and its regional partners—particularly Israel and several Gulf Arab states—viewed the programme through the lens of regional security competition and feared that a nuclear-capable Iran could expand its influence through proxy networks and asymmetric warfare. This mutual securitisation transformed the nuclear issue into a symbolic confrontation over power, identity, and order in the Middle East. As Fitzpatrick (2006) argues, the Iranian nuclear crisis cannot be understood exclusively as a proliferation concern; rather, it reflects the intersection of strategic mistrust, ideological rivalry, and competing visions of regional hegemony that continue to shape the broader trajectory of US–Iran relations.

1.4 The JCPOA Framework and Its Collapse

Diplomatic negotiations surrounding Iran's nuclear programme reached a historic turning point with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 powers—comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany—under the coordination of the European Union. The agreement represented one of the most sophisticated and comprehensive non-proliferation arrangements in modern diplomatic history, emerging after years of protracted negotiations, sanctions pressure, and escalating regional tensions. The JCPOA sought to establish a structured compromise between Iran's insistence on its sovereign right to peaceful nuclear technology and the international community's objective of preventing nuclear weapons proliferation. Under the framework, Iran agreed to significantly reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium, limit uranium enrichment levels to 3.67 per cent, redesign the Arak heavy-water reactor to prevent plutonium production, and permit an unprecedented verification regime administered by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In exchange, the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union committed to lifting nuclear-related sanctions and reintegrating Iran into the global economic system (Kerr & Katzman, 2018). The agreement was widely celebrated by diplomats and international relations scholars as evidence that sustained multilateral diplomacy, institutional monitoring, and negotiated compromise could effectively address complex security disputes without recourse to military intervention (Arms Control Association. 2025).

Beyond its technical provisions, the JCPOA carried broader geopolitical significance as a potential mechanism for de-escalating decades of hostility between Tehran and Washington. Supporters of the agreement argued that the accord could serve as a foundation for wider regional dialogue and confidence-building measures in the Middle East. The Obama administration framed the JCPOA as a pragmatic instrument of arms control designed to extend Iran's "breakout time" and ensure transparency through rigorous inspections rather than pursue regime change or military confrontation. Simultaneously, Iranian political leaders presented the agreement domestically as a recognition of Iran's technological sovereignty and diplomatic legitimacy after years of economic isolation. Nevertheless, the accord remained highly controversial within both countries. In the United States, critics argued that the agreement failed to permanently dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure and inadequately addressed Iran's ballistic missile programme and regional influence through proxy groups. In Iran, conservative factions remained deeply sceptical of American intentions and questioned the reliability of Western commitments. These underlying tensions exposed the structural fragility of the agreement and highlighted the extent to which domestic

political contestation shaped the sustainability of international diplomacy (Davenport, 2016).

The long-term viability of the JCPOA deteriorated dramatically following the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in May 2018 under President Donald Trump. The Trump administration denounced the accord as fundamentally flawed and implemented a “maximum pressure” strategy aimed at coercing Iran into renegotiating broader security concessions. This policy involved the re-imposition of extensive economic sanctions targeting Iran’s banking sector, oil exports, shipping networks, and international financial transactions, thereby severely weakening the Iranian economy and intensifying domestic economic instability. In response, Iran gradually reduced compliance with key JCPOA commitments, including enrichment limits, centrifuge restrictions, and uranium stockpile thresholds, while simultaneously expanding aspects of its nuclear programme beyond the original framework. The collapse of the agreement illustrated the vulnerability of international accords to shifts in domestic political leadership and the absence of robust enforcement guarantees capable of insulating diplomatic arrangements from unilateral policy reversals. As Vakil and Quilliam (2019) observe, the unravelling of the JCPOA not only undermined confidence in multilateral diplomacy but also deepened strategic mistrust between Iran and the West, thereby increasing regional insecurity and complicating future efforts toward nuclear stabilisation and diplomatic reconciliation.

1.5 Regional Proxy Conflicts and Maritime Security Escalation (2019–2025)

Between 2019 and 2025, U.S.–Iran tensions increasingly manifested through regional proxy conflicts involving Iran-aligned groups and U.S.-supported regional allies. Iran’s strategic partnerships with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and Shiite militias in Iraq became focal points of American security concerns, while Tehran accused Washington of pursuing regime containment through sanctions, cyber operations, and covert destabilisation efforts.

These tensions contributed to recurrent crises in the Persian Gulf, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz—a critical maritime corridor for global energy transportation. Escalating militarisation in the region heightened fears of broader conflict and transformed maritime security into a central dimension of nuclear diplomacy. According to the House of Commons Loft (2026), disruptions to maritime trade and energy flows in this period intensified international pressure for renewed diplomatic engagement and crisis de-escalation.

1.6 The 2026 Crisis and Escalation Dynamics

The 2026 crisis marked a significant escalation in U.S.–Iran relations, characterised by direct military confrontation and rapid diplomatic deterioration. Parliamentary and policy assessments indicate that U.S. and Israeli military strikes against Iranian nuclear and military facilities in February 2026 triggered a cycle of retaliation, including missile attacks and restricted maritime access in the Strait of Hormuz (House of Commons Library, 2026). These developments generated severe geopolitical instability and disrupted global energy markets.

The escalation heightened fears of full-scale interstate war and revived concerns regarding nuclear proliferation risks, particularly as diplomatic negotiations collapsed amid mutual accusations of strategic aggression. In this context, nuclear diplomacy transitioned from a preventive mechanism to a reactive crisis-management tool aimed at containing escalation rather than resolving underlying structural tensions.

1.7 Pakistan’s Emergence as a Mediating Actor

Within this volatile environment, Pakistan emerged as an unexpected but strategically significant mediator between the United States and Iran. Its involvement was shaped by both geopolitical positioning and diplomatic necessity. As a Muslim-majority nuclear state with functional relations with both Tehran and Washington, Pakistan occupied a unique intermediary role capable of facilitating indirect communication between the adversaries.

Policy analyses indicate that Pakistan played a central role in brokering the conditional ceasefire announced in April 2026 and subsequently hosted diplomatic discussions in Islamabad concerning sanctions relief, nuclear constraints, and regional security arrangements (House of Commons Library, 2026). This mediation role reflects the increasing importance of middle powers in contemporary conflict resolution, particularly within fragmented multipolar systems where traditional major-power mediation is often constrained.

1.8 Criticism and Geopolitical Implications of Mediation

Despite its diplomatic visibility, Pakistan’s mediation role attracted considerable scepticism from international observers. Observers raised concerns about Pakistan's neutrality, strategic motivations, and its ability to enforce a meaningful compromise between the United States and Iran. Some U.S. officials reportedly questioned Islamabad’s impartiality in light of broader regional alignments and security concerns (The Times of India, 2026).

Additionally, analysts argue that Pakistan’s mediation efforts were partially driven by strategic interests aimed at enhancing its international diplomatic standing and reinforcing its relevance in global security governance (The Times, 2026). This duality highlights a key feature of contemporary diplomacy: mediation is increasingly

shaped not only by conflict resolution imperatives but also by geopolitical positioning and status-seeking behaviour among middle powers.

1.9 Objectives, and Methodological Approach

This study critically examines the diplomatic, political, and strategic dimensions of the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks. It investigates how nuclear politics influenced negotiation behaviour, how historical mistrust constrained diplomatic engagement, and how regional and international actors shaped the trajectory of the talks. The study further evaluates whether the negotiations represented genuine conflict resolution or a temporary mechanism for strategic de-escalation under conditions of sustained geopolitical pressure.

The research objectives include:

1. Analysing the historical foundations of U.S.–Iran hostility;
2. Examining the role of nuclear diplomacy in the 2026 negotiations;
3. Evaluating Pakistan's mediation effectiveness; and
4. Assessing implications for Middle Eastern security and global non-proliferation governance.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in historical analysis, policy review, diplomatic documentation, and scholarly literature. Through critical discourse analysis and comparative interpretation, the research contributes to broader academic debates on nuclear diplomacy, strategic negotiation, and international conflict management.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY

2.1 Multidimensional Framework for Nuclear Diplomacy Analysis

The study of nuclear diplomacy in the context of the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks demands a robust and multidimensional theoretical framework capable of capturing the complexity of strategic interaction, ideological contestation, and institutional mediation. Nuclear negotiations of this nature are not reducible to single-cause explanations, as they involve the simultaneous interaction of military capabilities, domestic political constraints, historical identities, and international institutional pressures. Consequently, this chapter adopts an integrative analytical framework drawing from realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and nuclear deterrence theory to provide a comprehensive interpretation of negotiation behaviour between Iran and the United States.

This multi-theoretical approach reflects a growing consensus in contemporary international relations scholarship that nuclear politics operates at the intersection of material power and ideational structures. As such, nuclear capability functions not only as a military asset but also as a symbolic instrument of sovereignty, a bargaining mechanism in diplomacy, and a structural factor shaping international security hierarchies (Kroenig, 2020). The 2026 negotiations therefore represent an ideal empirical case for examining how these theoretical logics interact under conditions of high geopolitical tension and mutual mistrust.

2.2 Realist Interpretations of Nuclear Politics

Realism provides one of the most foundational frameworks for understanding nuclear diplomacy, particularly in adversarial interstate relations. At its core, realism conceptualises the international system as anarchic, meaning that no central authority exists to guarantee state security. Within this environment, states are compelled to prioritise survival, power accumulation, and strategic autonomy (Mearsheimer, 2014). From this perspective, Iran's nuclear programme can be interpreted as a rational response to persistent regional insecurity and external military pressure.

Iranian strategic behaviour is shaped by historical experiences of vulnerability, including the Iran–Iraq War, sustained sanctions regimes, and perceived threats from both the United States and Israel. Nuclear capability, even in its latent form, thus functions as a deterrent mechanism designed to reduce the likelihood of external intervention. Conversely, the United States views Iranian nuclear advancement through the lens of balance-of-power politics, where the emergence of a nuclear-capable Iran would potentially disrupt regional alliances and weaken U.S. strategic dominance in the Middle East.

Kenneth Waltz's structural realism further reinforces this interpretation by arguing that nuclear proliferation, under certain conditions, may stabilise deterrence dynamics by creating mutual vulnerability (Waltz, 2012). However, in the case of U.S.–Iran relations, the absence of trust and persistent ideological hostility prevents the stabilisation effects predicted by strict deterrence logic. Instead, realism helps explain why the 2026 negotiations were fundamentally driven by strategic calculation rather than normative reconciliation.

2.3 Liberal Institutionalism and Diplomatic Cooperation

In contrast to realism, liberal institutionalism emphasises the capacity of international institutions, economic interdependence, and repeated diplomatic engagement to mitigate conflict and facilitate cooperation. Liberal theorists argue that structured negotiation frameworks reduce uncertainty by promoting transparency, monitoring compliance, and enabling reciprocal gains (Keohane, 1984). The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represents a clear manifestation of liberal logic in nuclear diplomacy,

as it combined multilateral negotiation with extensive verification mechanisms under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

From a liberal perspective, the 2026 peace talks can be understood as an attempt to revive institutional diplomacy after the collapse of earlier agreements. The involvement of the United Nations and the IAEA reflects continued reliance on global governance structures to facilitate communication and compliance verification. Furthermore, economic incentives—particularly sanctions relief—functioned as central bargaining tools designed to align Iranian compliance with international expectations.

However, the liberal framework also exposes structural weaknesses in institutional diplomacy. The withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 significantly undermined Iran's confidence in the durability of international agreements. This development illustrates a key limitation of liberal theory: institutions are only as effective as the political commitment of powerful states (Maloney, 2020). In the absence of sustained trust, institutional frameworks become vulnerable to political reversals, thereby weakening their capacity to produce long-term stability.

2.4 Constructivist Perspectives on Identity and Ideology

Constructivism offers a distinct analytical lens by emphasising the role of identity, norms, and ideational structures in shaping state behaviour. Unlike materialist theories, constructivism argues that international politics is socially constructed through shared meanings and historical narratives (Wendt, 2000). In the case of U.S.–Iran relations, identity formation has played a decisive role in shaping diplomatic hostility since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Iranian political discourse frequently constructs the United States as a symbol of Western imperialism and external domination, while American policy narratives often frame Iran as a revisionist and destabilising actor within the international system. These mutually reinforcing identity constructions contribute to entrenched perceptions of threat and resistance, thereby limiting diplomatic flexibility.

During the 2026 negotiations, these ideational structures significantly shaped negotiation behaviour. Iranian officials framed nuclear sovereignty as a matter of national dignity and resistance, while American policymakers interpreted Iranian nuclear advancement through a security-centric and ideological lens. Constructivist scholarship suggests that such narratives generate "intersubjective realities" that condition how states interpret intentions and actions, often reinforcing cycles of mistrust and diplomatic rigidity (Hopf, 2010). As a result, the negotiations extended beyond technical nuclear issues into broader struggles over legitimacy, recognition, and political identity.

2.5 Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Bargaining

Nuclear deterrence theory provides a critical framework for understanding how nuclear capability operates as both a security instrument and a diplomatic bargaining tool. Deterrence logic is grounded in the assumption that the possession—or credible potential—of nuclear weapons discourages adversaries from initiating military aggression due to the risk of catastrophic retaliation (Sagan & Waltz, 2013). In the Iranian case, nuclear ambiguity functions as a strategic asset that increases uncertainty for adversaries while enhancing bargaining leverage.

Iran's advancement in nuclear technology, even without declared weaponisation, contributes to what scholars describe as "latent deterrence", where capability short of deployment still influences strategic calculations. This dynamic increases the perceived costs of military confrontation for the United States and its allies, thereby strengthening Iran's position in negotiations.

Simultaneously, the United States employed deterrence signalling through military deployments and strategic alliances in the Persian Gulf region. This created a dual-deterrence environment in which both actors sought to avoid direct conflict while demonstrating resolve. Kroenig (2020) describes this as coercive nuclear bargaining, where states use the threat of escalation to extract concessions without crossing into open warfare. The 2026 negotiations, therefore, reflect a complex interplay between deterrence stability and escalation risk.

2.6 Diplomacy under Conditions of Mutual Distrust

A central feature of the 2026 peace talks was persistent strategic mistrust, which significantly constrained diplomatic progress. Decades of sanctions, proxy conflicts, covert operations, and failed agreements generated deep scepticism regarding the intentions of both parties. This mistrust created what can be conceptualised as a "verification paradox", where increased demands for transparency were themselves interpreted as signals of hostility.

In such conditions, even confidence-building measures often failed to generate reassurance, as each side interpreted concessions through adversarial frameworks. This reflects a broader theoretical problem in international relations: under conditions of anarchy, states must cooperate to reduce insecurity while simultaneously fearing exploitation by their counterparts. As a result, negotiations became highly fragile and susceptible to reversal.

2.7 Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

The integrated theoretical framework demonstrates that the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks cannot be

adequately explained through a single analytical lens. Realism accounts for the centrality of power and security competition; liberalism highlights the role of institutions and economic incentives; constructivism reveals the importance of identity and ideology; and nuclear deterrence theory explains the strategic function of nuclear capability within bargaining processes.

Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of nuclear diplomacy as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by both material and ideational forces. The synthesis of these perspectives underscores that nuclear negotiations are not purely technical exercises but deeply political processes embedded within historical grievances, regional rivalries, and global power structures.

3. DYNAMICS OF THE 2026 IRAN–UNITED STATES PEACE TALKS

3.1 Structure and Phases of the Negotiations

The 2026 Iran–United States peace talks unfolded as a multi-layered and highly fragmented diplomatic process shaped by simultaneous crisis escalation, backchannel communication, and third-party mediation. Rather than following a linear peace negotiation model, the talks evolved through iterative phases of coercion, de-escalation, and conditional engagement. This structure reflects what contemporary negotiation scholarship describes as “crisis bargaining under extreme uncertainty", where diplomacy is conducted alongside, and often in the shadow of, military signalling and economic coercion (Sechser and Fuhrmann, 2013). The absence of mutual trust between Washington and Tehran necessitated indirect communication channels, with intermediary states—most notably Pakistan—facilitating message transmission and agenda-setting during early rounds of dialogue.

The initial phase of negotiations (January–March 2026) was dominated by crisis containment following military escalations involving targeted strikes on Iranian nuclear infrastructure and retaliatory actions in the Persian Gulf. During this phase, diplomatic engagement was minimal and largely exploratory, focusing on establishing minimal conditions for ceasefire discussions rather than substantive nuclear agreements. According to policy assessments of contemporary Middle Eastern security dynamics, this phase was characterised by "compartmentalised diplomacy", where security de-escalation was prioritised over structural political resolution (International Crisis Group, 2026). The primary objective was to prevent full-scale interstate war while preserving bargaining leverage for subsequent negotiations.

The second phase (April–June 2026) marked the transition from crisis management to structured negotiation. This phase was significantly shaped by Pakistan’s emergence as a mediating actor, hosting indirect talks in Islamabad and facilitating communication between Iranian and US delegations. Pakistan’s involvement introduced a semi-formal negotiation architecture that combined bilateral demands with multilateral consultation. This phase also witnessed the articulation of core bargaining positions, particularly concerning uranium enrichment limits, sanctions relief mechanisms, and verification frameworks under international supervision. From a negotiation theory perspective, this stage reflects “issue linkage bargaining", where unrelated political and economic concessions are strategically bundled to increase the probability of agreement (Zartman & Rubin, 2000).

The final phase (July–October 2026) represented an attempt to consolidate a framework agreement, although progress remained uneven due to persistent disagreements over enforcement mechanisms and regional security guarantees. Despite partial convergence on technical nuclear issues, negotiations repeatedly stalled over broader geopolitical concerns, including Iran’s regional military influence and the scope of sanctions relief. This phase demonstrated the fragility of diplomatic progress in asymmetric conflicts, where one party perceives concessions as existential risks while the other views them as strategic necessities. Ultimately, the phased structure of the 2026 talks underscores the complexity of negotiating nuclear diplomacy under conditions of active geopolitical confrontation.

3.2 Pakistan’s Mediation Role and U.S.–Iran Strategic Positions

Pakistan’s emergence as a central mediator in the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks represents a significant case study in middle-power diplomacy within contemporary international relations. Unlike traditional great-power mediation, Pakistan’s role was shaped by its geographic proximity to Iran, strategic alliance with the United States, and longstanding engagement with regional security issues in the Middle East and South Asia. From a mediation theory perspective, Pakistan functioned as a “facilitative intermediary", enabling communication without imposing binding solutions, thereby increasing the probability of continued dialogue between otherwise irreconcilable parties (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009). Its diplomatic positioning also reflected broader trends in multipolar diplomacy, where non-superpower states increasingly act as brokers in high-stakes conflicts.

Pakistan’s mediation strategy relied heavily on indirect diplomacy, leveraging confidential channels and security dialogue frameworks rather than formal treaty-based negotiations. Islamabad hosted multiple rounds of proximity talks, during which US and Iranian delegations remained physically separated while exchanging proposals through Pakistani diplomatic envoys. This structure reduced symbolic confrontation while maintaining negotiation momentum, a technique

commonly used in high-intensity conflicts where direct engagement risks political escalation. However, Pakistan's role was not without controversy. Several international observers questioned its neutrality, citing its strategic relationships with both Iran and Western powers, as well as alleged intelligence overlaps in regional security operations (Mohammed, 2026).

From the perspective of US strategic positioning, the 2026 negotiations were framed within a broader deterrence-and-containment strategy aimed at preventing Iranian nuclear breakout capability while avoiding direct military escalation. Washington's core demands centred on verifiable limits to uranium enrichment, intrusive inspection regimes under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and long-term restrictions on ballistic missile development. These demands reflect a classical realist approach to non-proliferation, in which nuclear capability is treated as a direct threat to regional balance of power and allied security architecture (Kroenig, 2020). The United States also sought to integrate sanctions relief into a phased compliance framework, ensuring that economic normalisation would be conditional upon sustained Iranian adherence to nuclear constraints.

Iran's strategic position, by contrast, was grounded in a dual logic of sovereignty assertion and deterrence preservation. Tehran consistently rejected proposals perceived as infringing upon its technological autonomy, particularly regarding enrichment thresholds and inspection access to military-linked facilities. Iranian negotiators framed nuclear capability as a legitimate component of national development and scientific progress, while simultaneously emphasising its deterrent value against external aggression. This position aligns with defensive realist interpretations of state behaviour, where perceived insecurity drives capabilities expansion even in the absence of offensive intent (Waltz, 2012). Moreover, Iran insisted on comprehensive sanctions relief as a precondition for any long-term agreement, viewing economic restrictions as instruments of coercive regime containment rather than legitimate diplomatic pressure.

The divergence between U.S. and Iranian positions illustrates what negotiation theorists describe as a "mutually threatening equilibrium", where both parties perceive concession-making as strategically costly yet continuation of conflict as equally undesirable (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011). This equilibrium significantly complicated mediation efforts, as Pakistan lacked the coercive authority to impose settlement terms and instead relied on incremental confidence-building measures. The mediation process therefore operated within narrow constraints defined by asymmetrical power relations, ideological distrust, and competing security narratives.

Regional and international actors further complicated the negotiation landscape. Israel and several Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states strongly supported strict limitations on Iran's nuclear programme, advocating for maximal verification and enforcement mechanisms. In contrast, China and Russia adopted positions favouring diplomatic resolution and opposing unilateral sanctions regimes, thereby reinforcing Iran's bargaining resilience within the international system. The European Union attempted to maintain a mediating stance aligned with non-proliferation norms under the JCPOA framework, though its influence remained limited due to its lack of coercive leverage.

The interplay of these external actors demonstrates that the 2026 peace talks were not purely bilateral but embedded within a broader geopolitical contest over regional order and nuclear governance. As a result, systemic pressures from competing international alliances and security architectures shaped mediation outcomes, in addition to direct negotiation dynamics. The resulting diplomatic environment reflects the increasingly fragmented nature of global governance, where resolution of nuclear disputes requires navigation of overlapping regional and global power interests.

4. CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF NUCLEAR POLITICS AND DIPLOMATIC OUTCOMES

4.1 Successes and Failures of the Negotiations

The 2026 Iran–United States peace talks present a deeply ambivalent diplomatic outcome that resists simplistic categorisation as either a success or failure. On one hand, the negotiations succeeded in preventing a full-scale interstate war following the sharp escalation of military confrontations earlier in the year. From a conflict management perspective, this limited de-escalation represents a significant achievement in crisis diplomacy, particularly in a region historically marked by rapid escalation dynamics and entrenched rivalries. Contemporary conflict resolution literature emphasises that "negative peace"—defined as the absence of active warfare—can itself constitute a meaningful, albeit incomplete, diplomatic success in high-intensity geopolitical conflicts (Kydd, 2000).

However, this narrow achievement must be critically weighed against the limited substantive progress on core structural issues, particularly Iran's nuclear enrichment capacity, long-term sanctions relief mechanisms, and binding verification frameworks. While provisional agreements were reached on temporary enrichment caps and inspection protocols, these measures lacked durable enforcement guarantees and remained vulnerable to political reversal. The fragility of these outcomes reflects what international security scholars describe as "institutionally shallow agreements", where compliance depends more on political goodwill than on robust verification and enforcement mechanisms (Perkovich et al., 2025). Consequently, the negotiations failed to produce a comprehensive settlement capable of transforming the underlying security dilemma between both states.

Furthermore, the absence of a final framework agreement underscores the persistence of strategic mistrust as a limiting factor in nuclear diplomacy. Although

both parties demonstrated tactical flexibility during negotiations, neither was willing to make irreversible concessions on issues perceived as existential threats. This dynamic reinforces the argument that the talks functioned more as crisis containment than as genuine conflict resolution. In this sense, the 2026 negotiations can be interpreted as a managed pause in escalation rather than a transformative diplomatic breakthrough.

4.2 Nuclear Politics as Leverage in Diplomacy

Nuclear capability functioned throughout the 2026 negotiations as a central instrument of diplomatic leverage, shaping both bargaining behaviour and strategic signalling between Iran and the United States. Nuclear politics in this context extended beyond technical questions of enrichment levels or inspection regimes; it operated as a broader mechanism of coercive diplomacy, where the perception of potential weaponisation influenced negotiation outcomes. As Kroenig (2020) argues, nuclear latency—the ability of a state to rapidly develop nuclear weapons capability—can itself function as a form of strategic power, altering the cost-benefit calculations of adversaries even in the absence of an actual arsenal.

Iran's nuclear programme provided it with significant bargaining leverage by increasing the perceived risks associated with military confrontation. Even under heavy sanctions and international pressure, Iran maintained a degree of strategic ambiguity regarding the ultimate scope of its nuclear ambitions. This ambiguity strengthened its negotiating position by raising uncertainty within US and allied strategic planning. At the same time, the United States utilised its superior military capabilities and alliance networks as a counter-leverage mechanism, combining sanctions pressure with the implicit threat of targeted military strikes. This reciprocal use of coercive instruments reflects what contemporary theorists describe as "asymmetric deterrence bargaining", where unequal capabilities still produce mutual vulnerability in negotiation settings (Sagan & Waltz, 2021).

However, the reliance on nuclear leverage also generated significant diplomatic distortions. Instead of encouraging compromise, nuclear capability intensified zero-sum thinking on both sides, reinforcing the perception that concessions would directly weaken national security. This dynamic constrained the scope of diplomatic innovation and narrowed the negotiation agenda to highly technical parameters rather than broader political reconciliation. As a result, nuclear politics functioned simultaneously as a tool of negotiation and a barrier to comprehensive settlement.

4.3 Impact on Global Non-Proliferation Regimes

The 2026 negotiations had profound implications for the global non-proliferation architecture, particularly the credibility and effectiveness of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. While the talks reaffirmed the continued relevance of diplomatic engagement as a mechanism for managing nuclear disputes, they also exposed significant structural weaknesses within existing verification and enforcement systems. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) played a central monitoring role during the negotiations; however, its limited coercive authority highlighted the dependence of non-proliferation regimes on state compliance and political cooperation rather than binding enforcement mechanisms (IAEA, 2025).

The partial collapse of earlier agreements, particularly the JCPOA framework, continued to cast a long institutional shadow over the 2026 talks. Many non-aligned states interpreted the breakdown of previous commitments as evidence that nuclear agreements involving major powers may be subject to unilateral withdrawal, thereby undermining trust in long-term compliance mechanisms. This perception contributes to what nuclear governance scholars describe as "regime credibility erosion", where the perceived reliability of international agreements diminishes over time due to inconsistent enforcement by powerful states (International AI Safety Report, 2026).

Additionally, the 2026 talks reinforced concerns about selective enforcement within the non-proliferation regime. States aligned with Western powers tended to receive more favourable diplomatic treatment, while adversarial states faced stricter verification demands and heavier sanctions regimes. This asymmetry has fuelled longstanding critiques that the NPT system operates unevenly, reinforcing geopolitical hierarchies rather than ensuring uniform compliance. Consequently, the negotiations both reaffirmed and challenged the legitimacy of global non-proliferation governance structures.

4.4 International Responses and Geopolitical Realignments

International reactions to the 2026 Iran–United States negotiations revealed significant geopolitical fragmentation and shifting alignments within the global order. Western states, particularly members of the European Union, broadly supported the continuation of diplomatic engagement, emphasising the importance of preventing nuclear escalation and preserving regional stability. The Council of the European Union reiterated its commitment to diplomatic solutions and expressed cautious optimism regarding the ceasefire framework established during the talks (Council of the European Union, 2026).

In contrast, regional actors such as Israel and several Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states adopted a more security-centric interpretation of the negotiations, expressing scepticism regarding Iran's compliance intentions and advocating for stricter verification

mechanisms. These states perceived the negotiations primarily through the lens of regional balance-of-power politics, emphasising the need to prevent Iran from achieving latent nuclear weapon capability. This divergence illustrates the fragmented nature of security perceptions in the Middle East, where diplomatic agreements are often interpreted through competing threat narratives.

Meanwhile, China and Russia positioned themselves as advocates of diplomatic de-escalation while simultaneously resisting Western-led sanction regimes. Their support for negotiations reflected broader strategic interests in limiting US unilateral influence in global security governance. This positioning contributed to a more multipolar diplomatic environment in which no single actor possessed decisive control over the outcome of negotiations. The resulting geopolitical configuration underscores the increasing complexity of global governance in nuclear politics, where competing powers simultaneously cooperate and contest diplomatic frameworks.

4.5 Economic and Security Implications for the Middle East

The economic and security consequences of the 2026 peace talks were particularly pronounced across the Middle East, where energy markets, maritime security, and regional alliances were directly affected by the escalation and subsequent de-escalation of conflict. The disruption of shipping routes through the Strait of Hormuz during the peak of tensions highlighted the vulnerability of global energy supply chains to geopolitical instability. Even temporary disruptions generated significant volatility in global oil prices and increased insurance costs for maritime transport, underscoring the strategic importance of the Gulf region in global economic stability (International Energy Agency, 2026).

From a security perspective, the negotiations contributed to a temporary reduction in active hostilities, particularly through ceasefire arrangements and limited de-escalation agreements. However, underlying structural tensions remained unresolved, particularly regarding proxy conflicts in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. These unresolved conflicts suggest that while nuclear diplomacy may reduce the risk of direct interstate war, it does not automatically resolve broader regional security dilemmas. Instead, it may shift competition into indirect or asymmetric arenas, thereby maintaining instability at lower levels of intensity.

Economically, Iran faced continued constraints despite partial sanctions relief discussions, limiting its ability to fully reintegrate into global markets. Conversely, Gulf economies experienced short-term stabilisation following the reduction in immediate conflict risk, although long-term uncertainty persisted. These outcomes demonstrate the interconnected nature of nuclear diplomacy and regional economic systems, where political negotiations directly influence macroeconomic stability.

4.6 Critiques of U.S. and Iranian Diplomatic Strategies

The diplomatic strategies employed by both the United States and Iran during the 2026 negotiations have been subject to significant scholarly critique. The United States has been criticised for its reliance on coercive diplomacy, particularly the use of sanctions and military signalling as primary negotiation tools. While such strategies may generate short-term compliance pressures, they also risk entrenching adversarial perceptions and reducing long-term trust in diplomatic engagement (O'Hanlon, 2021). Critics argue that the oscillation between engagement and pressure undermines consistency in US foreign policy and weakens the credibility of negotiated commitments.

Iran's diplomatic strategy has likewise been critiqued for its reliance on strategic ambiguity and incremental compliance. While this approach enhances short-term bargaining leverage, it also reinforces international suspicion and limits opportunities for durable normalisation. Iranian insistence on sovereignty-based framing of nuclear capability, while politically effective domestically, complicates international verification efforts and contributes to diplomatic rigidity.

Ultimately, both states engaged in what can be characterised as "competitive negotiation strategies", where diplomacy is conducted as an extension of strategic rivalry rather than as a pathway toward genuine reconciliation. This structural dynamic significantly constrained the transformative potential of the 2026 peace talks.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

The analysis of the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks demonstrates that nuclear diplomacy remains both an indispensable instrument of crisis management and a structurally constrained mechanism for sustainable conflict resolution. Across the preceding chapters, the study has shown that the negotiations emerged from a deeply embedded historical trajectory of mistrust, ideological confrontation, and competing security imperatives. While the talks succeeded in preventing immediate escalation into full-scale war, they fell short of producing a comprehensive and enforceable settlement on Iran's nuclear programme. This dual outcome reflects what contemporary scholarship identifies as "partial diplomacy", where agreements stabilise short-term crises without resolving underlying structural contradictions in the international system (Kydd, 2000).

A key finding is that nuclear capability functioned simultaneously as a deterrent, bargaining chip, and

symbol of sovereignty. For the United States, nuclear containment remained central to maintaining regional balance and alliance credibility, while for Iran, nuclear capacity represented both strategic deterrence and political autonomy. The resulting negotiation dynamics were therefore shaped less by shared objectives than by managed rivalry, in which both actors sought to avoid war while preserving strategic leverage. This reinforces the argument that nuclear diplomacy in asymmetric rivalries tends to produce incremental rather than transformative outcomes.

The study also highlights the central role of third-party mediation—particularly Pakistan—in sustaining diplomatic engagement. However, mediation alone was insufficient to overcome structural mistrust and conflicting strategic doctrines. International actors, including the EU, China, Russia, and regional Middle Eastern states, further complicated the negotiation environment by projecting competing security preferences onto the talks. Consequently, the 2026 negotiations must be understood as embedded within a fragmented multipolar order rather than a strictly bilateral diplomatic process.

5.2 Implications for International Diplomacy

The findings of this study have significant implications for contemporary international diplomacy, particularly in relation to nuclear governance and crisis management. First, the 2026 negotiations reaffirm the continued relevance of diplomatic engagement as a mechanism for preventing escalation in nuclear disputes. Even in the absence of a final agreement, sustained dialogue reduced immediate risks of military confrontation, demonstrating that diplomacy retains stabilising value in high-intensity conflicts (Perkovich et al., 2025).

Second, the case illustrates the limits of coercive diplomacy in producing durable agreements. The cyclical use of sanctions, military signalling, and conditional concessions created short-term compliance pressures but undermined long-term trust. This pattern suggests that coercion without credible guarantees of reciprocity may stabilise behaviour temporarily but fails to generate sustainable cooperation (O'Hanlon, 2021). As such, nuclear diplomacy increasingly operates within a paradox: the tools used to enforce compliance simultaneously erode the trust required for lasting agreements.

Third, the negotiations underscore the growing complexity of multipolar diplomacy. Unlike earlier Cold War-era bilateral frameworks, contemporary nuclear negotiations are shaped by a dense network of regional and global actors whose interests often diverge. This fragmentation reduces the ability of any single actor to impose a settlement and increases the importance of intermediary states and international institutions.

5.3 Lessons from the 2026 Negotiations

Several critical lessons emerge from the 2026 Iran–United States peace talks. The first lesson is that technical agreements alone cannot resolve historical mistrust. Even detailed verification mechanisms and phased compliance frameworks are insufficient when underlying political identities remain adversarial. Constructivist insights suggest that diplomacy must also address narratives of identity, legitimacy, and historical grievance to achieve durable peace (Wendt, 2000).

A second lesson concerns the limitations of nuclear ambiguity as a bargaining strategy. While strategic ambiguity enhanced Iran's short-term negotiating leverage, it simultaneously increased suspicion among other actors and reduced the credibility of Iranian commitments. This trade-off highlights the tension between deterrence benefits and diplomatic costs in nuclear politics.

A third lesson relates to the importance of institutional credibility. The collapse of earlier agreements, particularly the JCPOA framework, significantly shaped expectations during the 2026 talks. Once institutional trust is weakened, even well-designed agreements struggle to achieve legitimacy. This reinforces the view that international institutions derive their effectiveness not only from design but also from consistent political support by major powers (International AI Safety Report, 2026).

5.4 Recommendations for Future Nuclear Agreements

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations can be advanced to improve the prospects of future nuclear agreements between the United States and Iran.

First, future agreements should prioritise **phased reciprocity mechanisms** that ensure balanced and verifiable exchanges between sanctions relief and nuclear compliance. Rather than front-loading obligations on one party, agreements should be structured to ensure simultaneous and incremental implementation, thereby reducing fears of unilateral defection.

Second, there is a need to strengthen the **independence and enforcement capacity of international verification institutions**, particularly the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Enhanced monitoring technologies, expanded inspection rights, and clearer enforcement protocols would improve compliance credibility and reduce ambiguity in verification processes (IAEA, 2025).

Third, diplomatic frameworks should incorporate **regional security dialogues** alongside nuclear negotiations. The exclusion of regional stakeholders from broader security discussions has historically limited the sustainability of agreements. Integrating Gulf states and

other regional actors into parallel dialogue mechanisms could reduce proxy tensions that undermine nuclear diplomacy.

Fourth, policymakers should invest in **sustained diplomatic channels independent of political cycles**, particularly in the United States, where policy reversals have previously disrupted agreements. Establishing bipartisan diplomatic frameworks could reduce volatility in long-term commitments.

Finally, there is a need to complement coercive tools with **confidence-building measures**, including humanitarian cooperation, scientific exchanges, and limited economic normalisation. Such measures can gradually reduce hostility and create social foundations for political trust.

5.5 Prospects for Sustainable U.S.–Iran Relations

The long-term prospects for sustainable US–Iran relations remain uncertain but not entirely intractable. The 2026 peace talks demonstrate that while structural antagonism persists, both states are capable of engaging in pragmatic diplomacy when the risks of escalation become sufficiently high. However, sustainability will depend on whether future negotiations move beyond crisis management toward institutionalised conflict resolution.

At present, the relationship is best characterised as a condition of “managed rivalry", where both parties seek to avoid direct war while maintaining strategic competition. Without significant shifts in political identity narratives, regional security structures, and institutional credibility, this condition is likely to persist. Nevertheless, incremental improvements in transparency, verification, and diplomatic consistency could gradually reduce the intensity of confrontation over time.

Ultimately, the study concludes that nuclear diplomacy remains an essential but insufficient instrument for achieving comprehensive peace between the United States and Iran. Its effectiveness depends not only on technical agreements but also on broader transformations in political trust, regional security architecture, and international institutional reliability. Sustainable peace, therefore, requires a multidimensional strategy that integrates diplomacy, institutional reform, and long-term confidence-building measures.

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