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Iran draws red line as Europe threatens nuclear ‘snapback’

As indirect US–Iran nuclear talks inch forward, Europe's fear of marginalization prompts a risky diplomatic maneuver in Istanbul.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

In the backdrop of indirect nuclear negotiations between Tehran and Washington, Iranian Deputy Foreign Ministers Majid Takht-Ravanchi and Kazem Gharibabadi met with their

European counterparts from France, Germany, and Britain – the so-called E3 of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – on 16 May in Istanbul.

The meeting, held at Iran's Consulate General and hosted by Türkiye, brought together EU Deputy Secretary-General for Political Affairs Enrique Mora and his colleague Olof Skoog, alongside Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Abdullah Celik. The discussions [focused](#) on the future of the 2015 nuclear agreement, the status of indirect Iran–US negotiations, and collective efforts to avert further escalation through diplomacy.

Although three earlier rounds of consultations between Tehran and the E3 occurred on 29 November 2024, 13 January, and 24 February 2025, the Istanbul session marked a pivotal moment: the first engagement since the revival of the Iran–US indirect dialogue.

Europe cut out of nuclear talks

Crucially, the EU, much like in the Ukraine peace process, found itself bypassed by Washington. This diplomatic exclusion has intensified Brussels's urgency to reclaim relevance within the nuclear negotiations framework - even, it appears, if this means acting as spoiler.

At the heart of the Istanbul summit lies the [snapback mechanism](#) – an instrument embedded in the JCPOA allowing any signatory to reimpose all UN sanctions that existed before the 2015 agreement. The clause, originally intended as a safeguard, now threatens to become a geopolitical cudgel.

With the JCPOA's expiration looming in October 2025, Tehran fears that the E3 may invoke the mechanism as early as this summer, citing Iran's alleged enrichment beyond 60 percent and its growing stockpile of enriched uranium.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot minced no words during a 28 April [address](#) to the UN Security Council, stating that if European security interests are compromised, France “will not hesitate for a single second to reapply all the sanctions that were lifted 10 years ago.” his statement, which reverberated through diplomatic circles, was widely interpreted in Tehran as a stark ultimatum.

Iran's permanent representative to the UN [responded](#) forcefully, accusing France of hypocrisy and warning that Paris's own breaches of the agreement render any activation of the snapback legally indefensible.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi echoed this stance in an op-ed for *Le Point*, characterizing the Istanbul discussions as “a fragile but promising beginning” while cautioning that “time is running out.” He [wrote](#):

“The decisions we make now will shape Iran–Europe relations in ways that go far beyond this agreement. Iran is prepared to move forward – we hope Europe is, too.”

Following the talks, Gharibabadi [wrote](#) on X: “We exchanged views and discussed the latest state of play on nuclear & sanctions lifting indirect negotiations. Iran and the E3 are determined to sustain and make best use of diplomacy. We will meet again, as appropriate, to continue our dialogue.”

British envoy Christian Turner [echoed](#) this sentiment, affirming the shared commitment to maintaining open channels of communication.

‘Trigger Plus’

Yet not all assessments of the Istanbul summit were diplomatic. Tehran-based daily [Farhikhtegan](#), aligned with Iran's conservative establishment, described the session as tense and combative.

According to its report, the E3 tabled severe threats, including a proposal for what they termed “trigger plus” – an augmentation of the original snapback mechanism that would allow preemptive punitive measures without requiring technical justification.

Iranian officials, the newspaper reported, dismissed this demand as not only illegal and baseless but also presented in an “inappropriate” tone. The Iranian side reiterated that while they remain open to EU participation in broader nuclear negotiations, any activation of the snapback mechanism would trigger an immediate Iranian withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Mohammad Ghaderi, former editor-in-chief of *Nour News* – a media outlet close to Iran’s Supreme National Security Council – [summarized](#) the stance bluntly on social media:

“In the tense talks with Iran on Friday, [the E3] while requesting to participate in Iran–US talks, made non-technical & illegal requests, calling it trigger plus. But Iran’s response: Emphasizing the activation of the Trigger Mechanism will lead to Iran’s withdrawal from the NPT.”

The Iranian Foreign Ministry, in characteristic fashion, neither confirmed nor denied these reports, opting for strategic ambiguity to maintain leverage over multiple negotiation tracks.

The October deadline: Strategic implications

As the October 2025 expiration date draws closer, Iran has accelerated efforts to engage the remaining members of the 4+1 framework – China, Russia, France, Britain, and Germany. Trilateral meetings with Moscow and Beijing have underscored Tehran’s strategy of building a multilateral diplomatic buffer against US-European pressure.

However, the snapback clause remains the most potent lever in the E3's arsenal. According to Article 36 of the JCPOA, any signatory can escalate a compliance dispute to the UN Security Council. Once initiated, this process does not require a vote or consensus, meaning that Russian and Chinese vetoes are nullified.

Should the snapback be triggered, all seven UN Security Council sanctions previously lifted would automatically be reinstated – a scenario with grave consequences for Iran's economy and its broader regional strategy.

Analysts suggest the E3 may push for this mechanism's activation as early as July or August, thereby maximizing diplomatic pressure while allowing time to shape global opinion. If that happens, Tehran's recourse to [NPT withdrawal](#) – a threat repeatedly made since 2019 – would likely materialize.

Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi [reinforced](#) this red line in response to a recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution: "If Europe implements snapback, our answer is to withdraw from the NPT." As Araghchi, writing again in *Le Point*, [stated](#) unequivocally:

"Iran has officially warned all JCPOA signatories that abuse of the snapback mechanism will lead to consequences – not only the end of Europe's role in the agreement but also an escalation of tensions that could become irreversible."

Europe's desperation for relevance

Europe's insistence on asserting itself in the JCPOA talks stems from its declining influence across global affairs. From the Ukraine war to the Persian Gulf, the EU has been reduced to a secondary actor. In the Iran file, this marginalization is especially stark.

While Washington and Tehran inch closer to a bilateral formula, Brussels finds itself largely ignored. Nosratollah Tajik, a former Iranian diplomat, [argues](#):

"Europe's main concern is that Iran and the United States will reach a bilateral agreement without considering European interests. Many of the Middle East [West Asian] crises spill over into Europe."

The lack of a coordinated EU Iran policy only compounds this anxiety. Theo Nencini, an Iran expert at Sciences Po Grenoble and Paris Catholic University, [concurs](#):

"The E3 countries have not yet managed to define a coherent and relevant 'Iran policy.' From Trump 1.0 to Biden, they have always been accustomed to flatly following American positions."

Nencini believes that unexpected US–Iran direct talks caught Europeans off guard, prompting them to scramble to get involved in the negotiation process despite the fact that “they have always maintained a very strict attitude towards Iran.”

Diplomacy or detonation?

The Istanbul talks, despite their challenges, represent one of the few remaining diplomatic lifelines between Tehran and the E3.

Should these efforts collapse, the consequences would be profound: Iran could withdraw from the NPT, revise its nuclear doctrine, and prompt potential military escalation involving the US and Israel.

Such a scenario would spell the total disintegration of the JCPOA framework and shatter the fragile architecture of non-proliferation diplomacy built over the past two decades.

With less than five months to avert this trajectory, the onus lies on both parties to preserve what little remains of mutual trust. Yet the margin for error continues to shrink by the day.

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