

Iran-US relations: A brief history of troubled ties in the past decade

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Current US President, Joe Biden initially made efforts towards reducing tensions with Iran and reviving the Iran nuclear deal

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Iran-US ties have witnessed a steady deterioration ever since the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal 2015, also referred to as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action JCPOA, during the Trump Administration in 2018. Current US President, Joe Biden initially made efforts towards reducing tensions with Iran and reviving the Iran nuclear deal. It would be pertinent to point out that the Biden administration had also turned a blind eye to Iran's sale of oil, in violation of US sanctions, in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Iran's violation of nuclear commitments made under JCPOA, supply of arms to Russia – during the Russia-Ukraine war and the current situation in the Middle East, where the Iran-Israel conflict could escalate further, has reduced the scope of reduction of tensions between Washington and Tehran. Biden also faced strong opposition domestically – especially from Republican policy makers – for his Iran policy. Donald Trump blamed Biden's decision of releasing \$6 billion for Iran for humanitarian purposes – in return for a prisoner swap – and relaxation of sanctions for the turmoil in the Middle East. The former US President said that the above decisions of the Biden administration were a blunder since they enabled Iran the space to provide financial assistance to Hamas (several other Republican lawmakers have criticised Biden's Iran policy).

The Biden administration denied that it had actually released the funds and also blamed Trump's Iran policy for pushing Iran towards accelerating its enriched uranium well beyond the limits set by the JCPOA. While commenting on sanctions imposed during his presidency, Joe Biden said: "During my Administration, the United States has sanctioned over 600 individuals and entities — including Iran and its proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah, the

Houthis, and Kataib Hezbollah. And we will keep at it. I've directed my team, including the Department of the Treasury, to continue to impose sanctions that further degrade Iran's military industries."

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With an eye on circumventing stringent US sanctions, Iran has also begun to explore de-dollarisation or the reduction of dependence upon the US Dollar for trade. Iran entered the BRICS+ grouping in January 2024 and has signed an agreement for conducting trade in local currencies with Russia.

Amidst the tensions, there have been important back channels between Iran and Washington DC. In January 2024, Oman had hosted a back channel between US and Iran where senior negotiators from both sides were present. Even amidst the recent Iran-Israel tensions, Oman has tried to intervene. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian had visited Muscat last month.

North Korean delegation's visit to Iran

The recent visit of a North Korean delegation to Iran will only enhance tensions between Tehran and Washington DC. A delegation led by Yun Jung Ho, North Korea's minister of external economic relations attended an Iranian expo in Tehran and discussed bilateral trade with Iranian government officials and explored potential avenues of cooperation with Iran's private sector.

Russia-Iran-North Korea axis

Iran dismissed allegations that both countries were exploring cooperation in "missile programs". North Korea and Tehran established diplomatic relations in 1973. During Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980's, North Korea provided support. The changing geopolitical situation in recent years has witnessed the strengthening of the Russia-Iran-North Korea axis. In 2020, North Korea had proposed that Iran's Trade Promotion Organization and the North Korean Trade Development Committee establish a Joint Trade Committee. In September 2023, North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un had visited Russia's Far East and met with Russian President, Vladimir Putin at President Vladimir Putin of Russia at the Vostochny Cosmodrome. Washington dubbed Putin's meeting with Kim Jong Un as an "act of desperation".

Kim Jong Un on his part offered Pyongyang's support for Moscow in what he described as the latter's "sacred fight" against hegemonic forces (the North Korean leader was alluding to the west). North Korea, like Iran, has been accused of providing support to Russia during the

Russia and Ukraine war. Pyongyang has also supported Iran during the Middle East conflict and categorically blames Israel for the current tensions in the Middle East. South Korea has stated that Hamas was using North Korean weapons against Israel.

In the current economic landscape, where all three are facing sanctions, they are bound to explore economic cooperation. The west, especially the US, has concerns regarding strategic cooperation between all three countries. While commenting on potential nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran, the US State Department expressed its concern and also said that it was keeping a close watch on military cooperation between both sides.

In conclusion, Iran's growing cooperation with North Korea is a strong reiteration of Tehran having clearly moved away from the west. The west would be clearly concerned about Iran's growing proximity with not just Beijing, but Russia and North Korea and ties between Washington and Tehran are only likely to go downhill as a result. While revival of the JCPOA now seems unlikely, and tensions between Washington and Tehran are unlikely to reduce given the current situation in the Middle East, the latter would be well advised to keep back channels with Tehran open.

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(Disclaimer: The views expressed above are the author's own and do not reflect those of DNA)

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