

Brussels-Tehran relations before, after Ukraine War



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EXCLUSIVE
OPINION

Has Europe, in reality, forfeited its salience in global politics? Certain analysts and politicians in the United States, Europe, and even Iran maintain that Europe no longer exercises its former function within the international order. The publication of the United States National Security Document in 2025 reinforced this conviction. It appears that, despite the relative attenuation of Europe's standing, Tehran nevertheless remains in need of equilibrated relations with Brussels. Iran, for multiple reasons, must prevent further degradation of bilateral and multilateral relations with European states. Previously, American officials in private settings spoke of Europe's decline, yet the 2025 United States National Security Document rendered this perspective public. This document, founded upon Trump's "America First" slogan, anchors future United States foreign policy in Trump's priorities, including concentration upon border security, migration control, narcotics trafficking suppression, prioritization of the Western Hemisphere, and the prevention of Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence in Latin America. It also pursues United States economic autonomy through the revitalization of domestic production, tariff warfare, and profit-oriented relations with China.

Does Europe no longer matter in global politics?

According to this document, the United States will reduce its commitments to Europe and will request that Brussels assume responsibility for its own defense through the allocation of 0.5% of gross domestic product to military expenditures by 2035. The United States is also opposed to the eastward expansion of NATO and supports direct negotiations between Brussels and Moscow. Beyond Europe, according to this document, the Middle East likewise no longer constitutes a United States energy or security priority; Washington will diminish direct intervention in this region and will resort to military action only in the event of threats to border security, energy, technology, or supply chains. In other words, not only Iran and the Middle East but also Europe have forfeited their former importance within the United States' strategy. Yet it should not be assumed that Europe's importance for Iran has similarly diminished.

Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 did not compel Europe to abandon this agreement; Europeans preserved the JCPOA and remained committed to it until Biden's return. However, Russia's attack on Ukraine and the allegation of Iranian drone support for Moscow complicated relations. Subsequently, with Trump's renewed victory in the United States and his maximum pressure policy, Europe



From left to right: European leaders Friedrich Merz, Keir Starmer, António Costa, Emmanuel Macron, and Giorgia Meloni meet with the Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney (2nd-R) at a G7 summit in Canada.

● SIMON DAWSON/
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also aligned with this approach in order to coerce Tehran into behavioral modification, which is, at a minimum, alteration of its support for Moscow on the Ukrainian front.

It should not be imagined that Iran's alleged military assistance to Russia constitutes the principal cause of the deterioration of Tehran-Brussels bilateral relations. A segment of the Iranian power structure, after Russia's attack on Ukraine, the Trump-Putin negotiations in Alaska, and the 2025 United States National Security Document, concluded that Europe had lost its effective influence in global equations and particularly in the Middle East; consequently, some in Tehran, after the Israeli attack and the imposed 12-day war, arrived at the conclusion that irrespective of paying attention to Europe, either direct negotiation with the United States must occur or the path of resistance must be adopted.

By contrast, Europeans are well aware that Iran, despite the weakening of the Resistance Axis, internal protests, and reduced regional influence, still possesses robust missile and drone capabilities, non-state allies in Yemen and Iraq, domestic support in the face of foreign attack, and firm relations with Russia and China.

The three European states, unlike the United States and Israel, favor the continuation of nuclear negotiations and, in the event of Iranian indifference, may choose the latter option between changing Tehran's behavior through negotiation or implicit alignment with an Israeli military attack.

Europe continues to experience anxiety regarding Iran's support for Russia and tensions in the Middle East and, even after Israel's attack on Iran, seeks the resumption of negotiations. However, Tehran demonstrated less inclination and prioritized negotiation with the United States. European countries, for the enhancement of eastern border security and the prevention of a flood of Middle Eastern migrants, endeavor to facilitate the groundwork for Tehran-Washington negotiations.

Iran-Europe relations after 12-day war

Europe, during Trump's maximum pressure period, preserved its mediatory function through adherence to the JCPOA. Yet two wars — the 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine and the 2025 Israeli attack on Iran — altered this role, and Europe moved toward the snapback mechanism. Europe, taking into account the escalation of regional tensions and the reduction of Iran's in-

fluence in the Middle East, concluded that it should abandon mediation and align with the maximum pressure policy and United States sanctions. Brussels perceived Iran's position as an opportunity to exert pressure upon Tehran's nuclear program and the human rights issue in Iran. Consequently Iran-Europe relations shifted from tense yet diplomatic to hostile with an opportunity for diplomatic pressure, and prospects for rapprochement diminished.

Why Europe remains important in global politics

A segment of the Iranian power structure believes that direct negotiation with the United States suffices, and that Europe no longer carries its former weight. Europe can serve as a successful mediator of direct or indirect Tehran-Washington negotiations. Conversely, it can amplify the effects of United Nations sanctions and Trump's pressure. Worse, it can implicitly align with Israel's military policy.

It must not be forgotten that Europe, despite all economic, energy, security, migratory, and political challenges, remains a credible and influential actor in international equations. It possesses a vast commercial market and geo-economic pow-

er. Through democratic values and effective presence in international institutions, it wields considerable soft power, and after the Ukraine war and the "geopolitical awakening," it has been able to advance within the multilateral global order with relative strategic autonomy.

Yes, Europe is not a military superpower, but it is influential in regulating technology, environmental, and digital trade norms, and overall, it can play a pivotal role in Iran's nuclear dossier vis-à-vis the West and in Tehran-Tel Aviv tensions. Whether Brussels, after the 12-day war, continues its mediation, or aligns with the United States through diplomatic pressure and sanctions, or worse, implicitly aligns with Israeli action against Iran, above all depends upon Tehran's choices and conduct.

Europe-Russia hostility, its impact on Iran

The longstanding Brussels-Moscow hostility intensified after 2022 and Russia's attack upon European soil. After the 12-day war, European concern regarding Tehran's alleged drone assistance to Moscow increased further, and, as a result, the activation of the snapback mechanism was proposed. Just as some in Tehran perceived Russia's attack on Europe as a sign of Brussels's decline, in Brussels, Israel's 2025 attack on Iran was regarded as a sign of Tehran's weakening. The continuation of this hostility will lead to greater Iran-Russia proximity, intensified Tehran-Brussels tensions, and a reduced European mediatory role. Sanctions will augment Iran-Russia bilateral cooperation and will, to the same extent, increase Europe's security concerns. Consequently, today, we witness a reduction in the level of mutual trust between European countries and Iran.

Given Europe's inclination toward continued negotiations, Iran can exploit Brussels's weight and utilize the opportunity created by the fissure in transatlantic relations with the United States. Negotiation with Europe can restrain the United States from full alignment with Israel, decelerate the momentum of United Nations sanctions, and distance Europe's Middle East policy from alignment with Israel.

Conversely, it must not be forgotten that Europe also possesses the capacity to intensify anti-Iranian policies in the United States and Israel, and the trivialization of European states' role can lead to their implicit alignment with Israeli and United States military action. Europeans, after the imposed 12-day war, deemed attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities a violation of adherence to international law, just as they remained within the JCPOA. Europe constitutes the diplomatic gateway of Iran's relations with the United States within the multipolar order. The preservation of relations with Europe enhances Iran's bargaining power vis-à-vis Russia, China, and the United States.



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Members of the United Nations Security Council vote against a resolution by Russia and China to delay by six months the reimposition of sanctions on Iran during the 80th UN General Assembly in New York City on September 26, 2025.

● EDUARDO MUNOZ/REUTERS

