

Lessons in Iran from Developments in Ukraine

Raz Zimmt | No. 1955 | March 5, 2025

Iran's responses to the talks between the United States and Russia on the future of the war in Ukraine, as well as the confrontation between Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy, reflect internal divisions within the country's two main political camps. The hardliners view the recent developments as reinforcing their position that the United States cannot be trusted. They argue that Iran must strengthen its strategic partnership with Russia and safeguard its strategic military assets, including its nuclear capabilities. In contrast, the pragmatic-reformists, who have previously expressed reservations about Iran's growing dependence on Russia and China, are increasingly concerned that closer ties between Moscow and Washington could come at Iran's expense. These reactions emerge as Tehran's leadership struggles with how to approach potential negotiations with the new administration in Washington and the future of its nuclear program. While recent global developments are unlikely to fundamentally alter Iranian decision-makers' core perceptions, the evolving US–Russia relationship—which will also be influenced by events in Ukraine—could influence Tehran's considerations as it approaches a critical juncture regarding a potential agreement with the United States and its nuclear program.

Recent discussions on the future of the Ukraine war—held in Saudi Arabia between American and Russian representatives—along with the public clashes between President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, culminating in their heated confrontation at the White House on February 28, have drawn significant attention in Iran. Reactions in Tehran to these developments reflect internal disagreements between the country's two main political camps—the hardliners and the pragmatic-reformists—particularly regarding foreign policy and national security issues. The hardliners view the developments surrounding the war in Ukraine as reinforcing their view that the United States is untrustworthy and unreliable. They have also emphasized Ukraine's decision to relinquish its nuclear weapons after the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a cautionary tale for Iran. In contrast, the pragmatic-reformists have expressed growing concerns that closer ties between Moscow and Washington might come at Iran's expense.

The strengthening of partnerships with Russia and China as part of Iran's "Look East" policy, which the Islamic Republic has pursued in recent years, remains a major point of contention between the Iranian political factions. While regime loyalists in the conservative camp strongly support this policy, those affiliated with the pragmatic-reformist faction have long warned against Iran's increasing dependence on Russia and China. They argue that these global powers might ultimately sacrifice Iran's national interests in favor of their own strategic objectives on the international stage. These differences of opinion were also evident in reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While the regime's leadership

expressed unequivocal support for Russia, the more moderate factions distanced themselves from the Russian offensive and cautioned Iran against aligning itself too closely with Moscow.

Against the backdrop of US–Russia negotiations over the Ukraine crisis, Iranian hardliners have framed President Trump’s harsh criticism of President Zelenskyy as further proof of the United States’ duplicity—even toward its own Western allies. The radical newspaper *Kayhan* argued that Ukraine’s dire predicament stems from its reliance on the United States. In an editorial published on February 19, *Kayhan* wrote that by depending on the Americans, Zelenskyy had turned his country into a “living hell.” According to the article, Ukraine is now in ruins, forced to hand over its natural resources to the United States, and even excluded from participating in the great powers’ discussions about its future. *Kayhan* concluded that the key takeaway from Ukraine’s fate is that any attempt to appease the United States—even by its own allies—will only lead to war and humiliation.

The Friday prayer leader in Karaj, Mohammad Mehdi Hosseini Hamedani, echoed this sentiment, asserting that Iran should learn from Ukraine’s experience. Addressing reformists who support dialogue with the United States and improved relations with Washington, the conservative cleric urged them to “look around, see what happened to Ukraine, and draw the necessary lessons.” Similar views were expressed by regime supporters on social media. One user on X (formerly Twitter) claimed that Ukraine’s reliance on the West had led to its “historic humiliation,” to the point that even its territorial sovereignty had become a subject of bargaining.

Moreover, according to Iranian hardliners, Russia’s rising influence amid recent developments in Ukraine validates the Iranian leadership’s decision to deepen its strategic partnership with Moscow. They argue that Iran is on the “right side of history” as the global order undergoes a transformation. *The Young Journalists Club* news site, affiliated with the hardliners, claimed that events in Ukraine reflect a global shift away from a unipolar world under US hegemony toward a multipolar system in which Russia and China play central roles. The site asserted that Iran has successfully leveraged the Ukraine war—by decisively aligning with Russia—to enhance its position in the global system and strengthen its strategic cooperation with both Moscow and Beijing.

Iranian hardliners have also pointed to recent developments as proof of the necessity of preserving strategic military capabilities, including nuclear weapons. In an opinion piece titled “The Lesson Learned,” the hardline daily *Vatan-e Emrooz* argued that Ukraine’s current predicament stems from its 1994 decision to relinquish its nuclear weapons under the Budapest Memorandum, in exchange for security assurances from the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom. The article further noted that after Russia’s 2022 invasion, President Zelenskyy himself acknowledged that had Ukraine retained its nuclear arsenal, no country would have dared to attack it. The paper concluded that Ukraine’s grim fate—becoming a battleground between Russia and the West—demonstrates the critical importance of maintaining military and defensive capabilities.

The *Young Journalists Club* also warned against repeating Ukraine’s mistake, emphasizing that if Ukraine had preserved its strategic military assets instead of relying on international

assurances, Russia likely would not have attacked—just as the United States refrains from attacking North Korea. The daily stressed that the global order is based on distrust, competition, and power—not on promises and agreements. It pointed to North Korea as an example of a country that has secured its safety through military strength and nuclear deterrence, whereas Ukraine surrendered its military capabilities, entrusted its fate to others, and paid a heavy price.

In contrast, voices from the pragmatic-reformist camp have raised concerns that Russia may prioritize an agreement with the United States over Iran's interests in the Ukraine conflict. These concerns persist despite recent positive developments in Iran–Russia relations, including the signing of a strategic cooperation agreement between the two nations during President Masoud Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow in January 2025 and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Tehran in late February. The reformist daily *Arman-e Emrooz* warned that closer ties between Moscow and Washington could jeopardize Iran's vital interests. It argued that both China and Iran are key targets of hostility from the new Trump administration, and a potential US–Russia deal could lead to Iran's isolation. The paper cautioned that if the United States were willing to halt its support for Ukraine, Russia might abandon Iran at a time when tensions between Tehran and Israel are reaching a boiling point. Similarly, *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, a newspaper that has adopted a more pragmatic stance in recent years, warned that Iran could become collateral damage in a potential agreement between Trump and Putin. The paper suggested that Putin might grant Trump unrestricted freedom of action in the Middle East in exchange for territorial gains in Ukraine, potentially turning a blind eye to any US measures against Iran. It called on Iranian authorities to act swiftly to mitigate the negative consequences of a possible US–Russia deal.

Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, a former member of the Majles Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, also warned that Russia might sacrifice Iran in favor of a settlement in Ukraine. Falahatpisheh, who has repeatedly expressed skepticism about closer Iran–Russia ties, stated in an interview with *Aftab News* that relations between Tehran and Moscow have never been truly strategic. He accused Russia of pursuing a duplicitous policy toward Iran, citing Moscow's ambiguous stance on the disputed three islands between Iran and the UAE and persistent delays in delivering Sukhoi-35 fighter jets and advanced air defense systems to Iran.

Nevertheless, following the heated confrontation between Presidents Trump and Zelenskyy at the White House, even some reformist figures expressed reservations about negotiating with the United States. Mohammad Ali Abtahi, former vice president under reformist President Mohammad Khatami, who had previously supported talks with Trump, reacted to the incident in a post on X. He wrote that Trump's behavior proved negotiations with him were futile and would not benefit the Iranian people. His remarks triggered reactions from pro-regime's hardliners, who claimed that even reformists were now—albeit belatedly—acknowledging that talks with the United States were pointless.

Iranian reactions to developments surrounding the Ukraine war come amid an intensifying debate within Tehran's leadership over the appropriate strategy regarding negotiations with

the new US administration and the future of Iran's nuclear program. The pragmatic faction advocates for a more conciliatory approach toward Washington, pushing for renewed negotiations in hopes of securing sanctions relief. In contrast, hardliners staunchly oppose any concessions to the United States. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself recently reiterated his belief in the futility of negotiations with Washington.

Both political camps in Iran appear to be leveraging global developments to reinforce and justify their long-standing views on the United States, Russia, and Iran's nuclear policy. For hardliners, recent events reaffirm their belief that the United States is fundamentally untrustworthy and that Iran must preserve its strategic capabilities—particularly its nuclear program—to ensure security and deterrence. The more moderate factions, however, argue that growing US–Russia cooperation could pose a serious challenge to Iran, further underscoring the need to seek an agreement with Washington.

It remains unlikely that these global shifts will fundamentally alter the core positions of Iran's decision-makers. However, the evolving relationship between Russia and the United States, shaped by the war in Ukraine, could influence Tehran's strategic calculations as it approaches a critical juncture regarding potential negotiations with the United States and the future of its nuclear program.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg