

Before Visiting China: Why Did Trump Escalate His Tone Against Iran?



U.S. President Donald Trump once again hinted at the possibility of returning to the military option against Iran during his meeting with his national security team on Monday, May 11, amid stalled negotiations between the two sides following Iran's response to the U.S. proposal put forward to end the war, a response Trump described as "unacceptable."

According to a report by "Axios", citing three U.S. officials, Trump is now leaning toward carrying out military action against Tehran in order to intensify pressure and extract concessions related to its nuclear program, while Iran continues to threaten a harsh response to any potential U.S. military move.

Although this is not the first time Trump has used the card of military threats in response to Iran's insistence on its negotiating red lines, what is notable this time is that the American escalation comes ahead of an expected visit by the U.S. president to China a visit in which the Iran file is likely to feature prominently, alongside many other economic issues, given the growing repercussions of the continuing war on the global economy and energy markets, as well as its impact on the president's domestic popularity and the mounting criticism over his handling of the confrontation.

This raises growing questions over whether Washington is indeed moving toward a qualitative military action that could pave the way for rescuing Trump from his

current political predicament and allow him to climb down from a tree he no longer knows how to descend from, or whether this is merely another use of deterrent rhetoric and political pressure in an attempt to improve negotiating terms, despite the declining effectiveness of such rhetoric in influencing Iran's position in the recent period.

Iranian Rejection and Warning

Iran's response to the U.S. proposal to end the war did not align with Trump's expectations. He openly rejected that response, calling it "unacceptable" and saying it failed to meet the U.S. conditions on the table. In contrast, Iranian state television described the U.S. demands as an attempt to impose surrender on Iran rather than reach a balanced settlement.

Among the main points of contention in the proposal and the response submitted is the future of Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium. Trump spoke of prior Iranian approval to relinquish this stockpile to the United States, while Iranian officials categorically denied that account, stressing that there is no plan whatsoever to transfer uranium to Washington.

In the context of the mutual escalation, Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf stressed that any settlement that does not begin with recognition of the rights of the Iranian people, as stated in the 14-point Iranian proposal, is doomed to fail and will lead only to further complications and political setbacks. At the same time, he warned that the continuation of the current U.S. approach would impose a greater cost on the United States over time, both politically and economically.

At the same time, Ghalibaf's remarks carried clear deterrent messages, as he affirmed the readiness of Iran's armed forces to respond "forcefully and decisively" to any U.S. military move, stressing that Tehran is prepared for all scenarios. This came in addition to threats to raise enrichment levels to 90% in the event of any new attack, reflecting both sides' continued adherence to a policy of mutual pressure and the rising level of regional tension.

Trump in a Predicament

The U.S. president's position regarding the war with Iran appears to be growing more complicated by the day, as Tehran continues to show a high degree of resilience in the face of various American pressure tools. Despite the intensive military strikes that targeted prominent first-tier leaders, and the accompanying U.S. bets on causing a shock within the structure of the Iranian regime, current indicators suggest that the regime has managed to preserve its internal cohesion to a degree exceeding initial American estimates. Some assessments even hold that the war has strengthened the cohesion of its political and security

institutions rather than weakened them.

The same applies to other pressure tools, foremost among them the naval blockade and tighter monitoring of Iranian ports, which have failed to achieve the results Washington had hoped for. Tehran has managed to partially circumvent those restrictions through unofficial channels and outlets, despite the clear economic pressure they have caused.

The same also applies to the American rhetoric linked to what Trump described as the “Freedom Project” and reopening the Strait of Hormuz by force, which Washington appears to have backed away from pushing directly under international pressure and fears over the war’s repercussions for energy markets and the global economy.

By contrast, Tehran believes Washington is trying through the negotiating track to extract political gains it failed to achieve militarily, while also benefiting from the rising domestic criticism Trump faces over his management of the war. This is pushing the Iranian leadership to harden its positions and try to deny him any political victory that could be used domestically.

Between Deterrent Rhetoric and the Military Option

There are two main readings through which Trump’s recent threats and renewed signaling of the military option against Iran can be understood. The first sees Washington as still operating within the framework of “political deterrence” and trying to raise the ceiling of negotiations by intensifying psychological and political pressure on Tehran, while also sending messages of firmness to the American public and the “Israel”i ally that the U.S. administration still retains the option of force and that the president remains capable of escalation whenever he chooses.

This approach is based on the U.S. administration’s awareness of the enormous cost resulting from the continuation of the war, whether at the level of the global economy, energy markets, or even Washington’s international image. This was quickly reflected in the markets, as mere U.S. signaling of military action caused disruption in the oil market and pushed Brent crude futures up by around 3% within just a few hours.

The second reading, however, holds that the U.S. administration may indeed move toward carrying out limited military operations if Tehran continues to cling to its current positions, such as targeting military facilities or sites linked to the missile and drone program, in addition to expanding cyber and intelligence operations and tightening the naval blockade on Iranian ports, and perhaps taking limited steps related to what is known as the “Freedom Project” or imposing severe economic sanctions on Iranians abroad.

Even so, this scenario remains closer to “calibrated military pressure” than to engagement in a full-scale war, as it could give Trump an opportunity to achieve limited field or political gains that would allow him to end the confrontation in a face-saving manner domestically, even if no comprehensive agreement is reached with Tehran, by marketing those moves as a “victory” that achieved U.S. deterrence objectives.

Beijing... Could It Be the Savior?

Trump’s hardline rhetoric toward the Iranian response ahead of his anticipated visit to China did not come in isolation from the political and strategic calculations tied to the Iran file. Washington understands that Beijing is Tehran’s largest economic partner and the main importer of Iranian oil, and views it as the party most capable of exerting meaningful economic and diplomatic pressure on the Iranian leadership.

From this perspective, Trump’s description of the Iranian response as “unacceptable” can be understood as part of a strategy aimed at raising the ceiling of negotiations and sending dual pressure messages to both Tehran and Beijing: that the United States still retains the option of escalation if political tracks reach a dead end.

In this context, Trump is likely during his visit to seek to persuade China to play a more effective role in pressuring Iran to show greater flexibility, especially regarding the enriched uranium file, amid growing fears over the economic repercussions of the continuing war on the global economy and energy markets repercussions that directly affect Chinese interests despite whatever relative gains Beijing may achieve from the continuation of tensions.

The embattled U.S. president is also betting on the possibility of extracting a “negotiating achievement” with Tehran that would give him a political and symbolic gain surpassing Barack Obama’s 2015 agreement, which he has long criticized and described as a weak deal before Washington later withdrew from it.

In this regard, according to what “Axios” reported, U.S. officials ruled out Trump making a decision on military action against Iran before the end of his visit to China, noting that a number of senior U.S. officials—including J.D. Vance, Marco Rubio, Pete Hegseth, and the CIA director—would take part in meetings related to the Iran file during the visit.

In sum, there is no doubt that Trump is racing against time to close the war file as soon as possible, amid growing awareness within the U.S. administration that prolonging the confrontation could turn into a heavy political burden on the Republican Party ahead of the upcoming electoral contests.

As domestic criticism rises and anxiety among American citizens widens because of the war's economic and security repercussions, pressure on the White House is increasing—especially since a broad segment of public opinion has not been fully convinced by the justifications the administration offered for entering this confrontation from the outset.

By contrast, Tehran—despite the notable flexibility it has shown compared with the past—does not appear ready so far to make the concessions that would allow Trump to market any settlement as a “political victory” consistent with the rhetoric of triumph he adopted from the first days of the war. This has placed him in a complex predicament between the need to preserve an image of strength and firmness on the one hand, and the search for a political exit that reduces the cost of continuing the war on the other.

Between the rising cost of the military option, Iran's adherence to its positions, and its clear investment in the state of American embarrassment, Trump appears to be searching for a formula that would allow him to end the confrontation and leave the scene with the fewest possible political and strategic losses.