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By: TA | AP Insight

Can European diplomacy help Washington put pressure on Iran?

Faced with an increasingly bellicose Iran as talks to end the war have stalled, the Trump administration appears to be reaching out to a broader swath of countries that might be able to help pressure Tehran or ease its hardline position where traditional mediators have not succeeded so far.

While discussions between Iran and Oman, as well as between Iran and Pakistan, Turkey and Qatar, persist at an uneven and unpredictable pace, the U.S. administration quietly has expanded its outreach to include perhaps unlikely interlocutors in Europe.

Just this week, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met in person in Washington with the foreign minister of Austria on Tuesday and held a call with the foreign minister of Greece on Wednesday.

Those interactions were not notable beyond the normal course of relations between the U.S. and two close European allies.

The official State Department readouts of the discussions were bland and vague and did not mention Iran by name as a topic of conversation.

But it then emerged that both foreign ministers — almost immediately after their talks with Rubio — spoke Thursday with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

The apparent new tack to break the negotiation logjam comes as the U.S. and Iran are both pushing for control of the Strait of Hormuz, the crucial oil shipping corridor.

President Donald Trump faces little wiggle room in his next steps as the economic fallout from the war and dwindling stockpiles of key weapons pose political problems for Republicans ahead of November's midterm congressional elections.

A desperate push is on to break the diplomatic logjam between the US and Iran

The entry by Austria and Greece is likely less of a formal mediation attempt, analysts say, and more reflective of a desperate push to halt the conflict because of the impact it has on an increasing number of countries, beyond those in the Middle East.

"Everyone is just urging both sides to stop this reckless game of chicken," said Ali Vaez, Iran project director at the International Crisis Group.

It also shows how much Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has forced countries, which otherwise were neutral bystanders to the larger conflict, to exercise any diplomatic sway they may have on their Iranian and American counterparts to kick-start a lasting resolution.

> While the calls to both sides may entail encouraging both Iran and the U.S. back to the negotiating table, such efforts fall short of mediation - Mona Yacoubian

Mona Yacoubian, director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, warned that any efforts by Greece, Austria or any other non-mediating country could prove to be futile.

"While the calls to both sides may entail encouraging both Iran and the U.S. back to the negotiating table, such efforts fall short of mediation, which is a very complex endeavor and requires trust to be built by the mediator with both sides," Yacoubian said.

She added that it's not something that any country can "just jump into."

Rubio discussed Iran with his Austrian and Greek counterparts

The State Department said Friday that it could not comment on the timing of calls by other

countries' foreign ministers and maintained that Rubio had made no requests of either to get in touch with Iran or pass messages to Araghchi.

One European diplomat, who was briefed on the matter and spoke on condition of anonymity to detail sensitive diplomatic conversations, said the timing of the calls was not an accident.

The State Department did allow, however, that Iran had been a topic of conversation in Rubio's discussions, which occurred as Trump is facing serious political headwinds over a war for which he has offered shifting objectives.

> That's goal number one: keep oil and gas cheap for Americans all over our country - JD Vance

No longer purely about making Iran incapable of producing a nuclear weapon, the immediate goal has become reopening the Strait of Hormuz, where a fifth of the world's oil usually passes through and which was open before the U.S. and Israel launched attacks on Iran on Feb. 28.

"That's goal number one: keep oil and gas cheap for Americans all over our country," Vice President JD Vance said in an interview Thursday on Fox News Channel. But he did not say anything about the strait being open and toll-free for transiting ships, as he had in the past.

The second goal, Vance said, is to ensure that Iran will never get a nuclear weapon.

The two European countries have key connections to the war's fallout

Austria and Greece may not be obvious choices to assist on the Iran portfolio, but Vienna is home to the International Atomic Energy Agency, which will play a key role in any resolution to the Iran's nuclear program, and hosted the final negotiations that resulted in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Greece is a major maritime nation in the Mediterranean and has significant shipping interests in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea.

The Austrian foreign ministry offered Austria's services as a venue for further potential talks with Iran - Beate Meinl-Reisinger

In statements from the Austrian, Greek and Iranian foreign ministries, it was clear that Iran had been a top topic in all of the conversations this week.

The Greek foreign ministry said Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis had been briefed by Araghchi on "regional developments, and in particular on the ongoing talks regarding the Strait of Hormuz."

It said Gerapetritis "underlined the importance of freedom of navigation and maritime security."

The Austrian foreign ministry offered Austria's services as a venue for further potential talks with Iran and said Foreign Minister Beate Meinl-Reisinger had stressed to Araghchi "the urgency of restoring stability in the region through serious diplomatic efforts."

"There can be no military solution," it said. "A diplomatic solution remains possible. Our priority is to safeguard freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz."

Iran's foreign ministry, expectedly, took a different tack in explaining the calls.

It said Friday that in Araghchi's calls with his European counterparts they discussed "mechanisms for the future management of the Strait of Hormuz," which he said had been disrupted by the "unlawful aggression by the United States and the Israeli regime against Iran."

In both calls, he accused the U.S. of violating the interim deal signed by both sides in June to end the immediate hostilities and begin broader talks to end the war.