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Between Russia & Iran All's Well That Ends Well

M.K. Bhadrakumar mulls over Putin's hastily arranged meeting with Pezeshkian in Turkmenistan last week, shortly before they are due to reconvene on the sidelines of the upcoming BRICS summit.



Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan, on Oct. 11. (Alexander Shcherbak, TASS)

The mystery about the hastily-arranged "working meeting" between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian at Ashgabat, Turkmenistan,

has only deepened after the event. This was their first-ever meeting. Putin didn't even have the post-event presser.

Why such a meeting last Friday was considered necessary becomes an intriguing thought, as the two leaders are to meet in Kazan, Russia, within days on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit on Oct. 22-24.

Russia and Iran have had a difficult relationship through centuries. It remains complicated, as the protracted negotiations over their strategic partnership treaty have shown. They have serious conflict of interests, as the controversial idea of Zangezur Corridor makes plain.

The two countries are potential competitors in Europe's energy market. Both are tough practitioners of strategic autonomy. Their partnership in a future multipolar world order belies an overall prediction.

At Ashgabat, Pezeshkian pointedly suggested to Putin that the signing of their proposed strategic treaty should be speeded up. Putin is known to have approved the draft agreement as far back as Sept. 18. What is holding back the signing ceremony begs an explanation. Pezeshkian proposed that the ceremony could take place in Kazan. But the Russian side is dragging its feet.

The ambivalence is reminiscent of the inordinate delay some years ago in Russia's transfer of S-300 mobile surface-to-air missile system to Iran even after Tehran had made payment for the system. In sheer exasperation, Iran filed a \$4 billion lawsuit against Russia's defence export agency and embarked on the manufacture of its own long-range, mobile air defence system, the Bavar-373.

Simply put, Russia came under U.S.-Israeli pressure. Geopolitical considerations continue to prevail in Russia's arms transfers with Iran. Pezeshkian, after his return to Tehran disclosed to the media that he had told Putin that Russia should "act more effectively in relation to the crimes committed by the Zionist regime in Gaza and Lebanon."



Pezeshkian in Ashgabat during the meeting with Putin on Oct. 11. (Alexander Shcherbak, TASS)

Apparently, the tense exchange at Ashgabat provoked a frank remark later by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov to Tass, the state news agency. Ryabkov said:

“We are closely and anxiously following the events [in the Israel-Iran standoff], the risk of a large-scale conflict is indeed high. The tendency to escalate into a full-scale conflict is a real danger. We **call on all parties** to exercise restraint. We are in intensive dialogue with the countries of the region. And once again — a major war can be avoided, but **everyone must show restraint.**” [Emphasis added.]

Indeed, Moscow is pragmatically continuing with its “neutrality,” which of course does not help Tehran. At the same time, Putin reportedly did not take a call recently from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Presumably, Russian-Israeli cogitations have disappeared underground.

That is understandable, as Russia keenly monitors the trajectory of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. The paradox is, while powerful strikes on Iran’s infrastructure is impossible without U.S. help and any Israeli plan to attack Iran requires preliminary discussions with the Pentagon, the Biden administration is hoping with bated breath that Netanyahu keeps it in the loop about planned military actions.

[*The Washington Post* reported Tuesday that under U.S. pressure, Israel has decided to only strike Iranian military targets instead before the U.S. election.]

On the other hand, the U.S.’ willingness to assist in planning an offensive against Iran is also iffy. Last week, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* newspaper quoted a Russian analyst, Vladimir Frolov, who used to be an employee of the Russian embassy in the U.S.:

“I think Biden and company do not want an escalation [with Iran.] Israel’s relations with Biden are irreparably damaged. Netanyahu is just lying to him... Netanyahu is waiting for Donald Trump.”

That makes it a twosome. Like the duo in Samuel Beckett’s existential play *Waiting for Godot*, Putin and Netanyahu are waiting for Trump who may not even show up at the end of the day. What happens then? Quite obviously, while Russia prefers a Trump presidency to mend the broken ties with the U.S., Iran will be far more comfortable with Kamala Harris.

On Sunday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei Hamaneh repeated that Tehran is resolved to pursue its right to prosecute the perpetrators of Lt. General Qassem Soleimani’s assassination.

To quote Baghaei Hamaneh,

“This cowardly wrongful act, recognised as unlawful and arbitrary by the United Nations, entails international responsibility of the United States government as well as individual

criminal responsibility of the perpetrators. Iran is resolved to pursue its right to prosecute the perpetrators, as the proceedings are going on in a Tehran court.”



Iran’s Soleimani, left, with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iraqi commander, in 2017 in Tehran. The same U.S. targeted drone strike killed both of them on Jan. 3, 2020. (Fars News Agency, CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons)

On the other hand, there is a sense of uneasiness in Moscow about the intentions of the Pezeshkian government, which has prioritised the resumption of negotiations with the West. The high-level diplomatic traffic between Tehran and Moscow is no longer as dense as it used to be during the presidency of the late Ebrahim Raisi.

Last week, top U.S. officials went out of the way to affirm that despite tensions with Israel, Tehran is not “upgrading” its nuclear doctrine. A spokesperson for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in Washington added to the public remarks earlier in the week by C.I.A. Director William Burns who said the U.S. had not seen any evidence of Iran’s supreme leader reversing his 2003 decision to suspend the weaponisation programme.

Interestingly, *Nournews*, which is identified with the security establishment in Tehran, commented that the U.S. intelligence assessment “could help explain the U.S. opposition to any Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear program in retaliation” — that is to say, the U.S. could still be keeping an eye on future nuclear negotiations with Iran.

At the Ashgabat meeting, Pezeshkian told Putin that Iran and Russia have good mutual and complementary potentials and can help each other. Pezeshkian stressed that Iran’s ties with

Russia are “sincere and strategic.” He added, “Our positions on global matters are much closer to each other than to those of many other countries.”

According to the [Kremlin transcript](#), Putin told Pezeshkian,

“Our relationship with Iran is a priority for us, and it is developing very successfully... We are actively cooperating on the international arena, and often share close or even converging assessments of the ongoing developments.”

However, on his part, Pezeshkian remarked that:

“... we must ensure that our relations improve and become stronger moving forward. We have many opportunities to achieve this objective, and it is our duty to assist one another in these efforts. We share similar visions, and there are many similarities in terms of our respective international standing.”

When it comes to the Ukraine conflict, Tehran’s stance is similar to India’s approach. Interestingly, in a post on X in the weekend, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi wrote that in his recent interactions in New York with top EU officials, he categorically told them:

“Iran-Russia military cooperation is not new; it has a history, long before the Ukrainian crisis began... I clearly said, and reiterate once again: we’ve NOT provided ballistic missiles to Russia. If Europe needs a case to appease Israel’s blackmail, better find another story.”

Significantly, at the Ashgabat meeting, neither Putin nor Pezeshkian claimed a strategic convergence in the two countries’ respective foreign policies. Pezeshkian, nonetheless, assured Putin that he looked forward to attending the upcoming BRICS summit and “we will do everything needed to approve and sign the documents on its agenda.”

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