Pepe Escobar: Iran's 3 Non-Negotiable Demands: The New Red Line

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#Nima

Particular meeting, the last step of, you know, the tour that Arafat had, the foreign minister of Iran had in St. Petersburg. What was that, and what was the importance of this meeting? Because the Iranians wanted to update the Russian part. They wanted to talk. And what is your understanding? Before Iran went to Moscow, Araghchi went to Islamabad, then Muscat, and later on the last trip was to, the last visit was to St. Petersburg. What do we know about that?

#Pepe

Well, it was immensely, meticulously well-planned, Nima. And this was, let's say, a mini tour of three cities in different stages. So Araghchi actually first went to Islamabad to talk to the Pakistani mediators. So what was he doing? He was basically restressing the ten points, which apparently were read by the President of the United States, and obviously he didn't understand what he was reading. He even posted saying that he more or less agreed to it. We don't know what he read—if it was lost in translation, if it was a summary, if it was somebody yapping in his ear, whatever.

Anyway, so Araghchi actually had to tell the Pakistani mediators, look, the ten points are still our position, but now we are refining it, assuming that with the Americans, there's no negotiation—especially coming from Dumb and Dumber, Tweedledum and Tweedledee with Kofa Kushner. And from the Iranian point of view, the only possible negotiator from now on is advance. Well, so after Islamabad, Araghchi went to Oman, where he was personally received by the Emir. Very, very important. There were no leaks about what they discussed, but we can basically have a very good idea that it also involved the next setup for the Strait of Hormuz, which the Iranians and Omanis are already trying to organize. So maybe we could have, let's say, a toll booth on the Iranian side and another toll booth on the Omani side.

After all, these are not international waters. Once again, we have to repeat it. This is 21 nautical miles, the distance from the Iranian shore to the Omani shore. If you have 12 nautical miles for each country, that's 24—basic math. So their territorial waters are larger than the strait itself. So it's their territorial waters. So Iran has the perfect right to install a toll booth on Hormuz. And now they are

discussing with the Omanis what's going to be on Omani territorial waters. After that, he went back to Islamabad. He didn't go straight to Moscow. He went back to Islamabad because he was refining the three key conditions by Iran if we're going to have any meaningful negotiations from now on.

And that's when things start to get really, really interesting, because they turn the chessboard upside down, essentially. Number one, the war has to end for good, with written assurances, with written guarantees, with big powers guaranteeing it. And if it goes to that useless UN Security Council, approved by the UN Security Council. Number two, we're going to discuss what's going to happen to the Strait of Hormuz. Iran will have a new setup installed in the Strait of Hormuz, very similar to the one already now. It has already been essentially approved by the Iranian parliament. There will be a toll booth, and payment in Iranian rials.

So the Iranian currency can at least stop being devalued. And number three, which is the third and last stage, let's start discussing a new nuclear deal. Which, if it happens... I would say the best possible case is a sort of diluted JCPOA, which, by the way, was killed by Trump himself. He's not going to get a better JCPOA, better from an American point of view than the original JCPOA discussed and clinched in 2015 in Vienna and then approved by the United Nations. So this is the order of discussions. Now, obviously, the Americans, when they looked at that, they freaked out completely. Trump already rejected it.

So the problem is he already rejected it, but as we know, everybody knows, as I would say, camels in the middle of the Gobi Desert already know, anything he does, there's no way out for him. So he can assume, he can admit the strategic defeat, which he'll never do. He can't restart the war, which is going to be a major disaster. And even his own generals told him it's going to be a major disaster. Or he can try to find a compromise. But with the illegal, murderous blockade on, the Iranians said, no way. We only start discussing if the blockade is out. And Trump is basically saying, first we have to discuss the nuclear deal and then the rest. So, Nima, we are in the middle of a horrible strategic impasse, and we don't know the way out of all that for the moment.

#Nima

It looks pretty bleak.

#Pepe

After all that, the last stage of the trip, which was the icing on the cake: Araxi gets to St. Petersburg on a Mirage Airlines flight, a normal commercial flight. And the title of this inscribed on the fuselage of the plane — this flight was the Minab 168 flight — a direct homage to the girls killed by the two-tap Tomahawk assault on the Minab school. He was received not only by his counterpart, Grandmaster Sergei Lavrov, but by President Putin in person. One hour and a half of discussions. Many of us will not remember Putin receiving not a head of state, and even with heads of state, that's very rare. He usually talks for, they usually talk for half an hour, exploding 40 minutes. He was

talking to a foreign minister and his team for one hour and a half. So obviously the leaks that we have are very vague.

But this is what I got — three key points that I stressed in my column. Some of the things that Putin said were absolutely outstanding. Let me see if I can find the key points here, Nima. Yes, here they are. Because I want to re-stress for you and for our audience how sophisticated and, at the same time, sharp as a dagger Putin was when addressing Araxi. Point number one: total respect for the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mostafa Khamenei. Putin said, last week I received a message from the Supreme Leader of Iran. And then he said, please, please convey my most sincere words of gratitude, confirm that Russia, just like Iran, intends to continue our strategic partnership. Please convey to the Supreme Leader words of gratitude for this message and wishes of the best health and well-being. So it's the total opposite of how Ayatollah Mostafa Khamenei is treated by the Americans.

By Russia, it's total respect. Point number two: Iran is fighting everything. The whole fight of Iran is about two key items — independence and sovereignty. These are words of Putin himself. We see how courageously and heroically the people of Iran are fighting for their independence and sovereignty. Amazing. And point number three, which is the absolute killer — and obviously the Americans are completely freaking out about it, because now it comes from Putin's own words — we will do everything that serves our interests and the interests of all peoples in the region. So this means he was addressing Araxi, but he was addressing everybody else in the Persian Gulf to ensure that this peace is achieved as soon as possible. Meaning Russia is now directly involved in the diplomatic solution for the war.

And the last thing he said, Nima, which was a killer — this is Putin telling in action — you know our position well. Wow. So when you put this all together, what do we see? First of all, that Iran turned the chessboard upside down, and now it's showing to the Americans: if you don't follow these three conditions, this war is not going to end. And they know that Trump needs an off-ramp, and he needs this war to end. This war is immensely unpopular in the United States, and Trump's numbers are absolutely appalling, and they will continue to go down. And number two, Iran and Russia announced to the whole planet that they are in this together to find a solution. So Russia has got Iran's back. And this comes directly from Putin.

Now, try to explain this to the Abston syndicate. Now they're going to have to deal not only with Ayatollah Mostafa Khamenei, but with Vladimir Putin as well, if they want a solution for the war that they started illegally and murderously against Iran. So that's why, Nima, this trip was something – this was a game-changing trip, really, really. No hyperbole – no, this was the real thing. It was very well planned, very organized. Araxi was absolutely impeccable. And in the end, of course, they had to finish in Russia with, I would say, showing not only to the Eurasian environment, to the Global South as a whole, that this is very, very clear, that not only Tehran, but Moscow and also Beijing, which was just observing from a distance – this is a war against Russia.

Eurasian integration against BRICS, against the SCO, against the Global South. And obviously, Russia has to be on the side of Iran. Obviously, Nima, none of that will be accepted in Washington or in Warlago. So we still don't know how the American response is going to be as it stands. He decided to prolong the naval blockade indefinitely. This means he's not capitulating, which is something that he could do. He could just proclaim victory and walk away. And then, in terms of a strategic defeat, the defeat of the Americans would be very clear for the whole planet. Or he can restart the war, which is going to be an absolute disaster.

So he decided to prolong the blockade, and we know that the rest of the world, sooner or later, is going to explode against the blockade. This blockade cannot last for weeks, not to mention months. Let's say it could last for another two, three weeks maximum. After that, when people start seeing the absolutely horrendous effects across the global economy, there's going to be a movement, and a concerted movement, especially from the Global South to Europe, to turn this thing around. And Iran, they have time on their side once again. Okay, Nima, this is more or less the summary of these very fateful days between Islamabad, Muscat, and St. Petersburg.

#Nima

I think, considering the behavior of the United States as a country for such a long time in Iraq and Afghanistan, we've seen that they continue their agenda in those countries as long as it takes. And then someday they decide that there is nothing there anymore and just leave it. And the problem here, by the way, with the war against Iran, is that the global economy is under tremendous pressure, as with the case of Israel, foremost. Nobody knew the importance of the— even here in the mainstream media, in the alternative media, we didn't know the scale of dependence on the Strait of Hormuz before this war started and how this could influence the global economy and put pressure on many countries. Look at Japan today, what is happening in Japan. That's why, you know, look at South Korea. Look at what is happening right now in Europe.

They're desperate. The situation is getting worse as time goes by. And this is not Iraq. That's why I think this is not Iraq and Afghanistan, to stay there for 10 years, 20 years, and let's see what would happen. This is something, you know, different. And the United States is not going to be able to stay there in that region. This blockade somehow is getting, you know, it's... they're not getting anything positive from this blockade, in my opinion. The United States is not getting anything positive. And on the other hand, they're convincing Iranians that the United States is not serious in the way that they're talking about negotiations or anything of that sort. That's why Iranians really feel that this next round of war is going to happen soon, anytime soon. And your understanding of that, Pepe.

#Pepe

It's a very, very, very long story because even allies of the U.S. are negotiating with the Iranians to have a passage through Hormuz. Of course, for Japan and South Korea, no problem. As long as their tankers can go through, no problem. Other Iranian tankers, for instance, they found a way already

to dribble the American blockade. It's to navigate very close to territorial waters in Iran, in Pakistan, and all the way to Mumbai. It can be done. If you stay within the 12 nautical miles, the Americans theoretically are not going to attack you. Lots of tankers are passing through one way or another. So it's not an ironclad blockade.

Once in a while, we have a Hollywood-ish Netflix production where the Americans say, we boarded, the Marines boarded so and so, and then it had to go back. And then we made a mistake because the sergeant was going to Iran and he's not, blah, blah, blah. So it's inefficient. Obviously, they cannot patrol the whole Arabian Sea and the southern Indian Ocean. Absolutely out of the question. So they are in, I would say, more or less. And by the way, nobody went to actually check how many warships are in the Arabian Sea, in the southern Indian Ocean, and what they are actually doing. So we rely on CENTCOM and INDOPACOM, blah, blah, blah. And these people lie all the time.

So we don't know for sure what's really happening. Anyway, is this going to work? No. Is this going to actually change Iran's mind in terms of the control that they exercise on the Strait of Hormuz? No. Is Iran dribbling the blockade? Of course, they are dribbling over land. Iran is a crossroads, not only maritime but over land, historically, zillions of years. So, for instance, what do we have? Pakistan, they opened six overland corridors to Iran. So Iran, they can move now even oil. Of course, the quantities are not the same as if you're moving oil by tankers, but a certain amount of oil is already being moved by railway on the China-Iran railway, which arrives 20 kilometers outside of Tehran with no problem.

They need to step up their game. Of course, they need to find, they need to dribble the technical problems of exporting larger amounts of oil by rail to China. They will find a way. The Iranians are always, they're masters at improvisation. On top of it, there's gas, for instance. Gas can go through the Turkmenistan to Xinjiang gas pipeline. They can do swaps with Turkmenistan and export some extra gas via this pipeline going straight to Western China. So there are other options. These are products that need to arrive from China to Iran. Now it's not a problem anymore because of these six overland corridors unblocked by Pakistan. For instance, there were, I think, at least 3,000 containers that were stranded in Karachi. They could not move.

Now they are moving overland to Iran with essentially Chinese products. So Iran is not going to be starved out of Chinese products, merchandise, goods, etc. So there are many ways to dribble the Americans, of course. And the Caspian — the Caspian is more complicated. For instance, for Iran to sell oil via the Caspian, the problem is the infrastructure of the Iranian ports in the Caspian. You know that, Nima. It's not very good. And it's not something they can do in a matter of a few weeks. It requires a lot of investment as well. But they can also use the Caspian — from the Caspian, for instance, to Kazakhstan, to Aktau in Kazakhstan in the Caspian, and from Aktau to China. Also possible. Smaller volumes, but also possible.

There is one key question which I would like to ask you about, Nima. There's an enormous, blah, blah, blah, basically on hearsay and numbers that cannot be fully checked, that Iran has only a few

days before they reach maximum storage capacity, especially in Kharg — in fact, everywhere. And then there are going to have to be shut-ins in the oil fields. What is your analysis about that, Nima? Because everything that we hear is from EFS and syndicate sources, but not from Iran, not from official sources from the National Iranian Oil Company, for instance. They're not talking about that yet. Please tell us, is Iran going to be in dire straits in a matter of, what, a few days, because they don't have any more oil storage capacity?

#Nima

No. Nothing. I love your answer. No. No, that's not the case, because they had this experience long before these sorts of problems happened in Iran. Because of the sanctions, there were years that Iran couldn't export any oil to other countries. And they managed. They knew how to manage the situation, you know, with the wells, with the oil, with gas, everything. They have managed that. They have experience because it happened before because of the sanctions, not because of the blockade. That's why they know — the engineers in Iran who are working in this field — they know what the alternatives are and how they can manage the situation with these sorts of difficulties, sudden difficulties, I would say. This is because the blockade is some sort of surprise for Iran. But it's not that much of a surprise that is not manageable for Iranians. They know how to deal with it, I think. And they... So right now, it's not even one of the biggest issues in Iran. Nobody's talking about it.

#Pepe

You look at that. That's why it's a hoax.

#Nima

They're not making something happen.

#Pepe

Nothing, nothing. So this means it's not a real problem?

#Nima

They're making this sort of rhetoric, Pepe. It's not just about this, because they're making it seem like there is some sort of fracture in Iranian leadership, that they're fighting each other in Iran. Donald Trump says, "They called me. They said that we are collapsing here." They're making these things up because they want to influence. Basically, their audience is in the West — it's not in the East, it's not in Iran. Iranians know what is happening. They know the reality on the battleground. They know the reality with the case of energy, the shortage that they have. You know, the economy, how it works these days — they totally understand the reality of what's going on. But I

think what we are basically talking about is what is happening in the West, in the mainstream media, in the way that the Trump administration tries to picture the situation for the Western audience, in my opinion.

I don't see any sort of difficulty, any sort of, somehow, crushing difficulties for Iran. These are difficulties for the Iranian economy, for Iranian energy. Nobody can ignore that. But they know how to deal with that. This is the basic problem. That's why they're not talking about it — in the mainstream media, in the alternative media in Iran — because many people think that Iran has just one-sided media. No, it's not that. You can find the worst critics of the Iranian government in Iran, living in Iran. They're not outside of Iran. Many people don't understand that, and that's why nobody's talking about this in Iran. That's not the major issue right now. The major issue right now for Iranians is how nobody can talk, because they're talking about this fracture in the leadership — you know, the left and right.

I don't know what is happening in the mind of Donald Trump. But these people, the basics, they have different tactics for negotiation, for how to deal with the United States. But the strategy remains the same. They know that nobody would let the United States control the Strait of Hormuz. Nobody would dictate anything to Iranians anymore. And if, because of the sanctions, they were able to force Iran for such a long time, to force Iran into some positions, it wasn't a serious position to force Iran to accept something, but they were trying to put a lot of pressure on the Iranian economy to force them into something. That's not happening anymore. Everybody's saying that that's enough. That's not going to happen anymore. This is the outcome of what Donald Trump has achieved so far in Iran.

#Pepe

And this is reflected by the way they turn the game around, where the most important, the key imperative now is not, and it never was, the nuclear dossier. It's to end the war for good, so there will not be a repeat of the war. With guarantees, with guarantors at the level of big powers like Russia and China, then discuss Hormuz, and at the end of the whole thing, discuss JCPOA 2.0. Let's put it this way. And Iran can do that because, for all practical purposes, they are winning this war. Everybody knows that. It's the Americans that wanted this stupid ceasefire. It's the Americans who are trying to find an off-ramp, which they can't. And this strategic defeat is obvious because zero of their initial objectives were achieved. There you go. So no wonder Iran is feeling confident.

#Nima

And nobody wants anything similar or close to the JCPOA anymore. Exactly. That's the point for the Trump administration.

#Pepe

Exactly.