

# John Helmer: How Tehran Plays Moscow Against Washington

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## #Nima

Iranian foreign minister's visit to Moscow. He went to Islamabad, then to Moscow. He got back again to Islamabad to update the Iranian proposal to the United States, it seems, and then to Moscow. What is your understanding of this visit to Moscow, and how do you see the significance of that?

## #John

Let's put it into two contexts. The first one, it's very important, the visit. Very important. It couldn't be more important as the world tries to cope with this war. And it's now a global war in the economic sense. So it's very important to notice that there's been a Russian media blackout. Blackout. Mr. Rakhchi went to the Kremlin, and something very important happened there, which I'll come to in a minute. But for the time being, the state media have almost blacked out what happened. Apart from reporting that the foreign minister, Ambassador Jalali, and the deputy foreign minister of Iran attended, there's been no commentary, no analysis in RIA Novosti, in RT, and in TASS reports.

The Kremlin communiqué, and I'll just read it, makes a couple of important points buried in the language. First, President Putin says he received a message from the Supreme Leader of Iran, and please convey to him my best wishes for his good health and well-being. What does that mean? It means that President Putin is saying Mojtaba Khamenei is alive, and he hopes he's well. And that's intended to respond to the United States media and White House claims that the Supreme Leader is ill and unable to talk. First thing. Second, Putin says, and I'm looking down to quote it to get it exact so we can interpret what it really means.

We see, says President Putin, how courageously and heroically the Iranian people are fighting for their independence and sovereignty. Of course, we very much hope that, relying on this courage and determination, the Iranian people, under the leadership of their new leader, will go through this difficult period of trials and peace will come. That's a message that Russia respects the unity,

independence, and sovereignty of Iran. Contrast that with statements from President Trump attempting to make it appear that Iran is breaking up into leadership pieces. There's no leadership. All of the things that Trump is saying, President Putin is rebutting in the politest way.

Then we've got a crucial operational point. Putin says, we will do everything that meets your interests and then the interests of all peoples in the region in order to ensure this peace is achieved as quickly as possible. Now, he's saying we will do everything that meets your interests. Please tell us, Mr. Araghi, what you want. This is very important. Now, who was he talking to? As you can see from the photographs of the Kremlin on the website, the most important figure in that meeting was the head of Russian military intelligence, the GRU, Admiral Igor Kostyukov. And that's not commented on anywhere.

It's not the first time Kostyukov has attended a meeting at the Kremlin with Putin and Mr. Araghi. It happened also when Araghi came to meet Putin in the Kremlin in June 2025 after the American attack on the nuclear sites. Now, to have the Russian head of military intelligence there is very important. Let's just use our imaginations, because there's no Russian press reporting of this. And for obvious reasons, the head of military intelligence, the senior intelligence service now that Russia's been at war for four years, does not talk to the press. So what do you think this man is there to talk about? Answer: he's going to say what Russia's military intelligence assessment is of current U.S. deployments, the movement of U.S. forces—both Marines, landing forces, amphibious forces, naval forces, air forces, and so forth and so on.

He's going to give Araghi the latest Russian satellite and all-intelligence summary of not only what U.S. capabilities are, but what their targets appear to be and what their intention is. That's why you have a senior intelligence officer of the country meeting. Second, he's going to discuss what the Russian side thinks Iran can do to neutralize and defend, remembering that President Putin is saying officially, we will do everything that meets your interests. So then we come to the question, what can Russia do to assist the Iranian side? You can imagine then Mr. Araghi, who hasn't got a military person with him. He's got Ambassador Jalali and a deputy foreign minister. No military, no intelligence, no strategic—not the leader of the Iranian delegation, Mr. Ghalibaf, a former military officer.

So what is being discussed here is what can Russia do now on intelligence, on defense, defense electronics, satellite—we don't need to go through the details—a resupply of what Iran might be needing, attempts to break the blockade that Iran might be wanting. And a key issue: how can the Russian-Iranian partnership, which Mr. Araghi then emphasizes both in his recorded Kremlin communiqué and in the tweet, what can that combination do to deter the United States from whatever they've discussed as possible U.S. intentions? Now, that's a big menu. It's very important. And it's surprising to see that the Russian state media are not reporting anything like I've just said. I've just said the obvious. Yes, I'm a Russian correspondent.

But why don't they do the obvious? The answer is that there is a serious problem on the Russian side. And they—Mr. Yuri Ushakov, the president's foreign affairs spokesman and advisor, former Russian ambassador to the United States—spells it out. And I'll try and explain it. What Ushakov has said in a brief remark to Pavel Zarubin—Zarubin is one of those Russian TV correspondents who's very close to and personally favored by the president—and he gets two or three minutes of camera and film with Putin and anyone else Putin allows, in this case Ushakov, to explain what's really going on. Only it's what they want to explain. What Ushakov said is very interesting. What he says is, and this is in TASS, so I'm reading it.

Zarubin asked Ushakov, what does he think the meeting with Araghchi and Putin might be interpreted as in the United States? Just think about that for a minute. Russia is in a partnership discussion run by the head of military intelligence in Russia at this point of the war. And a Russian correspondent says, do you think the United States might be offended? That's what he said. That was the question. Here's the answer. No, says Mr. Ushakov, the Americans shouldn't be offended. No one has voiced anything negative about it. Why should they? This is part, I'm still quoting Ushakov, of regular diplomatic work.

Plus, bearing in mind Russia's involvement in the Iranian settlement issue, it's only natural that we meet with Araghchi—not mister—who has something to tell us, I guess. Now, he said a bit more. He went on to tell Zarubin, I'm quoting, "...we will analyze what he will say and analyze against the background of today's conversation the signals that we have received from both the Americans and the Israelis, and then we will see what to do." In other words, Ushakov is saying, we're not so strategically partnered with Iran and we're not so determined to meet all of their needs as to deny that we will balance between the United States, Israel, and Iran in this war. Excuse me, are we all listening here?

The spokesman for the president of Russia said, we are going to balance what we will do between the United States, Israel, and Iran. But wait a minute, isn't the Russian position, as clearly expressed by the foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, repeatedly by the foreign ministry, by everyone, that there is no balance here? The United States and Israel launched an unprovoked aggression, violating just about every rule of the United Nations Charter, international law, human rights law, etc., etc., etc., with genocidal intentions. And yet, Ushakov is saying, we're going to balance what we've heard from the Americans, from the Israelis, making them equal. Now, this is a serious point that needs to be understood here.

So what's then to be understood is that President Putin is delegating the management of support for Iran to the Russian General Staff. And Ushakov is saying Putin is still managing to be as appeasing, ingratiating with Trump as is possible to be. How do we know how appeasing and ingratiating? Because we have the word of Kirill Dmitriev, the president's special negotiator for the Americans, in

particular for Vekselberg and Kushner, the two negotiators Iran is reluctant to even talk to for very good reason. Okay? So Dmitriev has totally ignored every aspect of this war and keeps hammering the Europeans in the first place and endorsing and supporting President Trump in the second place.

So what we've got here then is a very, very mixed response. And it's been, there's a balance at the Putin level and a commitment to Iran at the military level. And let me just try to explain something of a very general kind that tends to be forgotten when one's looking at the news. The other day, the 24th of April, Sergei Lavrov, who's increasingly on the military side in this, let's call it Moscow faction fight, faction difference, said in a question and answer for one of the press, a local press, I'll just quote it. This is very important to understand the mentality in Moscow now.

Lavrov said, the Russian president has repeatedly said that the weak are beaten. That's all there is to say about it. So you have to be strong. Russia is a very strong country, strong in spirit, the strongest country in its natural resources. Now, that first part of what Lavrov said is an intentional echo of the very famous Melian Dialogue that Thucydides described in the Peloponnesian War text more than 1,500 years ago. We have to remember the context. So I'm going to read out exactly what was said by Thucydides in a dialogue that preceded a genocide. The Athenians murdered everybody on Melos. Everybody.

What was actually said was, the Athenians are saying, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel, and that, in fact, the strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they must. That's the most famous extract of that particular history. The strong do what they can, the weak accept what they must. What Lavrov was trying to say is Putin doesn't like getting beaten. Only the weak get beaten. Russia will not be beaten. It's very different, very different. And I'll just go back to Thucydides to make the point: the standard of justice, the Athenians, who were the murderers, the genocidalists in this case, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel.

How to apply that to what's just happened? Answer: the Russian side does not accept that it's weak in relation to the United States. President Putin does not accept that Russia has the equality of power to compel. No, that's what Dmitry continually argues: Russia must appease, ingratiate, make deals with Trump, not deter Trump, not use power to compel Trump, not even offend Trump by showing the power to compel. So if we go back 2,500 years to the Melian genocide, and we bring it forward to today, and we look at what happened in the Kremlin on Monday, we see the Foreign Minister of Iran trying to say, we are strong together, and together we will deter the Americans from coming on, as Admiral Kostyukov had just explained.

Strength to compel, equality of power to deter and compel. That's not Putin's message. And Putin is increasingly isolated in Moscow in the way he deals with both the Ukrainian war and, in this case, the Iranian war. But, and this is the very important but, the Russian military commitment to equality of power to compel, equality of power to deter, that remains. That's strong. And in that respect, Araghchi's statement that we are partners at the highest level and are capable of deterring the

Americans from resuming the war, that's the message that the Russian military and the Iranian side have taken away from Monday's meetings.

## **#Nima**

John, you talk about these two sides of Russian foreign policy. One of them is by the officials, I would say, the main players in Russia's foreign policy, Sergei Lavrov, and the other part is Kirill Dmitriev and the people close to Kirill Dmitriev. Do you think, after all, when it comes to foreign policy, how important are these people like Kirill Dmitriev? I don't see them as being, you know, somehow making strategies for Russia. It seems that they're using them as some sort of, you know, people who are trying to implement, you know, talks because he has some sort of ability to talk, to negotiate.

He knows the language of these people, like Witkoff and Jared Kushner. That's why he's close to them. But Russia doesn't care that much about how close Kirill Dmitriev is to these people. They want to use Kirill Dmitriev to do something, but so far that has failed, in my opinion. And what has been the outcome of that so far for the foreign policy of Russia? These people I'm talking about, the way Kirill Dmitriev is trying to make the connections.

## **#John**

Very good points, and I agree with your observations. Kirill Dmitriev has been a near total failure, and I think the last time we looked at his performance, he went to meet, earlier this month, earlier in April, he went to meet Witkoff, Kushner, and the U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, and the particular purpose was to try to get the U.S. Treasury to extend the relief of sanctions so that Russian oil continued to be sold in the international market. And he failed. But subsequently, though not for his reasons, the Treasury reversed what Bessent had said would be no extension. So I agree with you. Dmitriev's negotiations have proven an absolute failure so far.

However, and this is important to understand how we move on towards the Russian election, which comes in September before the U.S. elections. Dmitriev is not simply the mouthpiece of his own ambition, maybe to be prime minister, maybe even one day to be a presidential candidate. He is representing the oligarchy in Russia, which is much more powerful than he is, which has continued to dominate Russia's economic policy. He is an ally of the central bank governor, Elvira Nabiullina, who keeps on pushing very high central bank interest rates. And even when she announced last week a reduction of 50 basis points, I think from 15 to 14.5%, and an ending to the discounted or special favorable interest rates, she said the interest rate may have to go up.

Now, President Putin, facing what Nabiullina is doing with his support, has said, yes, Russia—and he said it in the meeting with the economic ministers last week—Russia is in a recession, minus, let's see, 1.8% loss of GDP year on year in the months of January and February. But he said, President Putin said, experts tell me, tell us, this is the result of weather conditions, weather conditions. You

don't go to an election telling people suffering far worse than minus 1.5% negative growth that what they're suffering from is the weather. You don't tell Russians in January, February, or March that you are suffering because of the weather. What President Putin said to defend Nabiullina, he is also saying to defend Dmitriev. He is also saying to defend the oligarchs. And the oligarchs are getting more and more prosperous.

They are becoming stronger in capital value on the Russian stock market. They are becoming richer in cash as part of the war. So what I'm saying when we talk about Dmitriev is, practically, he's a failure with the Americans, but he represents a powerful, powerful political organization that's determined to keep Putin in power, whether the elections create a majority against these economic policies. That's Dmitriev's strength. It's the strength of the Russian oligarchy under Putin. And Putin continues to say the miseries inflicted on Russia now are due to the weather. Now, nobody believes that, and he certainly doesn't. But to say that, to say such a thing in defiance of common sense, of the normal muzhik on the street, that tells you something about how defensive the Kremlin is going into the election campaign this year.