

Attack Iran and you attack Russia

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The barely reported highlight of Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Tehran for the Caspian Sea summit last week was a key face-to-face meeting with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

A high-level diplomatic source in Tehran tells Asia Times Online that essentially Putin and the Supreme Leader have agreed on a plan to nullify the George W Bush administration's relentless drive towards launching a preemptive attack, perhaps a tactical nuclear strike, against Iran. An American attack on Iran will be viewed by Moscow as an attack on Russia.

But then, as if this were not enough of a political bombshell, came the abrupt resignation of Ali Larijani as top Iranian nuclear negotiator. Early this week in Rome, Larijani told the IRNA news agency that "Iran's nuclear policies are stable and will not change with the replacement of the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council [SNSC]." Larijani will keep attending SNSC meetings, now as a representative of the Supreme Leader. He even took time to remind the West that in the Islamic Republic all key decisions regarding the civilian nuclear program are made by the Supreme Leader. Larijani actually went to Rome to meet with the European Union's Javier Solana alongside Iran's new negotiator, Saeed Jalili, a former member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), just like President Mahmud Ahmadinejad.

In itself, the Putin-Khamenei meeting was extraordinary, because the Supreme Leader rarely receives foreign statesmen for closed talks, even one as crucial as Putin. The Russian president, according to the diplomatic source, told the Supreme Leader he may hold the ultimate solution regarding the endlessly controversial Iranian nuclear dossier. According to IRNA, the Supreme Leader, after stressing that the Iranian civilian nuclear program will continue unabated, said, "We will ponder your words and proposal."

Larijani himself had told the Iranian media that Putin had a "special plan" and the Supreme Leader observed that the plan was "ponderable". The problem is that Ahmadinejad publicly denied the Russians had volunteered a new plan.

Iranian hawks close to Ahmadinejad are spinning that Putin's proposal involves Iran temporarily suspending uranium enrichment in exchange for no more United Nations sanctions. That's essentially what International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohammad ElBaradei has been working on all along. The key issue is what - in practical terms - will Iran get in return. Obviously it's not the EU's Solana who will have the answer. But as far as Russia is concerned, strategically nothing will appease it except a political/diplomatic solution for the Iranian nuclear dossier.

US Vice President Dick Cheney – who even Senator Hillary Clinton now refers to as Darth Vader – must be foaming at the mouth; but the fact is that after the Caspian summit, Iran and Russia are officially entangled in a strategic partnership. World War III, for them, is definitely not on the cards.

Let's read from the same script

The apparent internal controversy on how exactly Putin and the Supreme Leader are on the same wavelength belies a serious rift in the higher spheres of the Islamic Republic. The replacement of Larijani, a realist hawk, by Jalili, an unknown quantity with an even more hawkish background, might spell an Ahmadinejad victory. It's not that simple.

The powerful Ali Akbar Velayati, the diplomatic adviser to the Supreme Leader, said he didn't like the replacement one bit. Even worse: regarding the appalling record of the Ahmadinejad presidency when it comes to the economy, all-out criticism is now the norm. Another former nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rowhani, told the Etemad-e Melli newspaper, "The effects of the [UN] sanctions are visible. Our situation gets worse day by day."

Ahmadinejad for the past two months has been placing his former IRGC brothers-in-arms in key posts, like the presidency of the central bank and the Oil, Industry and Interior ministries. Internal repression is rife. On Sunday, hundreds of students protested at the Amir-Kabir University in Tehran, calling for "Death to the dictator".

The wily, ultimate pragmatist Hashemi Rafsanjani, now leader of the Council of Experts and in practice a much more powerful figure than Ahmadinejad, took no time to publicly reflect that "we can't bend people's thoughts with dictatorial regimes".

This week, the Supreme Leader himself intervened, saying, "I approve of this government, but this does not mean that I approve of everything they do." Under the currently explosive circumstances, this also amounts to a political bombshell.

As if anyone needed to be reminded, the buck – or rial – stops with the Supreme Leader, whose last wish on earth is to furnish a pretext for the Bush administration to launch World War III. If Ahmadinejad now deviates from a carefully crafted strategic script, the Supreme Leader may simply get rid of him.

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