

Caspian Summit: Putin Puts Forward A War-Avoidance Plan

Putin has grasped the fact that what the Cheney Crowd is threatening is World War

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The visit to Tehran on Oct. 16, by Russian President Vladimir Putin was officially billed as his participation in the second summit of the Caspian Sea littoral nations, convoked to deal with legal and other aspects of resource-sharing in the oil-rich waters. Although that summit did take place as scheduled, and important decisions were reached by the leaders of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Iran, the main thrust of Putin's visit was another: The Russian President's trip—the first of a Russian head of state since the 1943 Tehran conference of war-time powers—was geared to register his government's commitment to prevent a new war in the region, at all costs. That new war is the one on the strategic agenda of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, against Iran.

Putin's participation in the summit, especially, his extensive personal meetings with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, constituted a spectacular gesture manifesting Russian support for war-avoidance factions in the Iranian government, in their showdown with Cheney's neocon war party. As one Iranian political source put it, Putin's visit was tantamount to saying to Washington: If you want to start a war against Iran, then you have to reckon with me, and that means, with Russia, a nuclear superpower. Perhaps not coincidentally, Putin right after his return to Moscow, stated in a worldwide webcast press interview, that his nation was developing new nuclear capabilities. His Iran visit was, as one Arab diplomat told me, a message to the warmongers in Washington, that Russia is still (or again) a superpower, and is treating the Iran dossier as a test for its status as a great power.

The Caspian Sea summit was, in and of itself, productive. Although the legal status governing the sharing of the sea's resources, was not solved, the points agreed upon in the final document of the summit constitute a great step forward in cooperation among the participating countries. Most important, the summit explicitly rejected the possibility that any one of its countries could be used for mounting aggressive acts against Iran, or any other country. It also explicitly endorsed the right of all countries to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. There was no mention of "concerns in the international community" about possible military applications of Tehran's program, or the like.

Putin's main point, which he reiterated at every possible opportunity, was: Conflicts can and must be solved through diplomatic, peaceful means. In his address to the summit on Oct. 16, Putin praised the Caspian Sea countries' problem-solving formulae, "respecting each other's interests and sovereignty, and refraining not only from any use of force whatsoever, but even from mentioning the use of force." Putin went on to explain: "This is very

important, as it is also important that we talk about the impossibility of allowing our own territory to be used by other countries in the event of aggression or any military actions against any one of the Caspian littoral states.” In short: The U.S. cannot count on Azerbaijan, as a launching pad for operations against Iran.

The final document also announced the decision to form a Caspian Sea Cooperation organization.

But, even more important than the summit itself, were the bilateral meetings that Putin held with Iran’s President and Supreme Leader, who is the ultimate authority in the country. Ayatollah Khamenei does not routinely receive foreign visitors to Iran, thus his meeting with the Russian President took on a special significance. During their meeting, Putin reportedly presented Khamenei with a proposal for reaching a solution to the conflict over Iran’s nuclear program. According to the Iranian state news agency IRNA, Khamenei told Putin: “We will ponder your words and proposal.”

Although details of the proposal have not been made public, some news outlets reported that Iranian “hardliners” had said the proposal called for a “time-out” on UN sanctions if Iran were to suspend uranium enrichment. “The main reason for Putin’s visit to Iran was to convey this message personally to the ultimate power in Iran,” one Iranian official was quoted as saying. Khamenei reportedly told Putin that Iran was serious about continuing its nuclear energy program, including enrichment, but was not interested in “adventurism.” If Putin did propose a “time-out,” that would be coherent with what International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director Mohammad ElBaradei has been campaigning for. It may be that Moscow’s offer went beyond that of the IAEA chief.

The {Tehran Times} reported that Ali Larijani, head of the Supreme National Security Council and chief negotiator on the nuclear issue, told reporters that Putin had made a “special proposal,” and that Khamenei said it was “ponderable.”

According to a well-informed Iranian source I spoke to, Tehran would be willing to suspend its enrichment program, on condition that it received something tangible in return. This, would be a significant shift, since Iran has, to date, refused any such idea. Iran would {not}, however, be willing to give up its nuclear program as North Korea has done. Suspension of enrichment activities would be temporary, in order to facilitate negotiations, which should be oriented towards tangible results, said this source.

Whether or not this was Putin’s message is unclear. Larijani’s surprise announcement on October 20, that he was resigning, cast shadows over the situation. After Larijani had reported on the Russian president’s proposal, Ahmadinejad denied any such had been made. This led to a series of wild speculations in the press, that the “hardliners,” on orders from Ahmadinejad, were ousting Larijani and rejecting the proposal from Moscow. It must be remembered, however, that the ultimate decisions are made by Ayatollah Khamenei, and that Larijani, according to Iranian wires, will continue to attend meetings of the Supreme National Security Council, in the capacity of representative of the Supreme Leader.

In addition, Russia’s state radio RUVR reported on Oct. 16, that Putin proposed that the so-called North Korean recipe be used to settle Iran’s nuclear problem. But what he meant was perhaps not the same recipe in formal terms. His remarks were reported, just before his meeting with Ahmadinejad. Putin argued, convincingly, that U.S. threats to use armed force

against North Korea had proven futile. Such threats would hardly prove efficient with regard to Iran either, he said. Trying to frighten anyone, the Iranian leaders in this case, Putin said, is a waste of time. "They are not afraid, believe me." What should be done, he continued, is to arm oneself with patience and search for a settlement. But this is hardly possible without a dialogue with the people of Iran and Iran's leadership. If we do have a chance to maintain direct contact, we shall do it in a bid to achieve a positive joint, let me stress it, joint result, the Russian leader said in conclusion. Thus, Putin may not have been proposing that an approach be adopted exactly like that used for North Korea — which, had already tested a nuclear weapon— but that the diplomatic process used with Korea also be used with Iran.

- Strategic Understanding Between Tehran and Moscow -

Whatever was agreed upon behind the scenes between Putin and his high ranking Iranian counterparts, the official, rather extraordinary bilateral statement which was released after their talks, speaks volumes about Russia's commitment to a peaceful solution to the Iran crisis.

The joint statement, in the version translated by Itar-Tass on Oct. 17, was not just a list of points of agreement, but, taken as a whole, constitutes a far-reaching commitment by both sides, to strengthen what has become a strategic understanding between Moscow and Tehran, clearly oriented towards a war-avoidance policy. The statement begins with the assertion that, "The sides confirmed that mutually beneficial cooperation in the political, economic, cultural and other areas, as well as cooperation on the international stage, meet the national interests of the two sides and play an important role in supporting peace and stability in the region and beyond." Economic cooperation is central in this regard, especially as concerns the energy sector: "The sides spoke in favor of increasing efforts to further expand economic ties between the two countries, especially in areas like the oil and gas, nuclear power, electricity, processing and aircraft-building industries, banking and transport."

As for nuclear energy—the issue being manipulated as a pretext for war—the statement says: "The sides noted bilateral cooperation in the area of peaceful nuclear energy and confirmed that it will continue in full compliance with the requirements of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In this regard they also noted that the construction and launch of the Bushehr nuclear power plant will be carried out in accordance with the agreed timetable."

In addition, the joint statement noted a contract for five Tu-204-100 aircraft to be supplied to Iran, as well as the need to create the conditions for advancing joint investment in Russia and Iran. Regarding regional infrastructure projects, the statement asserted the agreement "to continue work on the development of the north-south international transport corridor, including its automobile, rail and maritime components, in the interest of further strengthening trade and economic ties between Russia and Iran, as well as other countries of the region.

The two sides also reached agreement on "pressing regional problems," and stressed cooperation to achieve stability and security in Central Asia. Here the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Iran is an observer, was highlighted.

As for the Caspian Sea region, the statement asserts that "the relevant norms of the agreements of 1921 and 1940 between Iran and the former Soviet Union remain in force

until there is a convention on the legal status of the Caspian Sea.” Furthermore, the two sides “advocate the exclusion from the Caspian of military presence of non-Caspian littoral states,” a clear rejection of any U.S. intentions to establish a presence in the region.

The joint statement also declared an identity of views between Tehran and Moscow on crucial foreign policy issues. They called for “building a fairer and more democratic world order which would ensure global and regional security and create favorable conditions for stable development ... based on collective principles and the supremacy of international law with the United Nations Organization playing a central coordinating role....” They explicitly ruled out Cheney-style saber-rattling: “The sides confirmed their refusal to use force or threat of force to resolve contentious issues, and their respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states.”

In the context of statements of their commitment to fight terrorism, the two sides also addressed the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, and “confirmed Russia’s and Iran’s intention to continue to take part in the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan, and are interested in strengthening its statehood and the process of that country becoming a peaceful, democratic, independent and flourishing state.”

Iraq was also an important feature of the agreement. The two sides “expressed vigorous support for Iraq’s territorial integrity and sovereignty and for an end to foreign military presence in that country on the basis of the relevant schedule.” It should be noted that Putin, in his international webcast on his to Moscow, made this a central point of his polemic against Washington. Also, the joint statement called for a “just settlement” to the Middle East conflict, which may indicate renewed flexibility on Iran’s part, to accept agreements which the Palestinians (united) might make.

Finally, in a short but clear paragraph, the two “noted the need to settle the issue of Iran’s nuclear program as soon as possible by political and diplomatic means through talks and dialogue and expressed hope that a long-term comprehensive solution will be found.”

In sum, the joint statement goes far beyond any earlier definition of relations between Russia and Iran, and sends a clear message to the war party in Washington and London, that they can no longer consider Iran in isolation, but must recognize that the country has become a strategic partner of Russia, whose leadership is determined to prevent war.

- Europeans Should Know Better -

What Putin achieved in Tehran must have sent shivers up and down the spines of Cheney and his de facto sympathizers at home and in Europe. President Bush indulged in one of his typical ranting sessions Oct. 18, in remarks to the press, in which he threatened that were Iran to achieve the knowledge required to build a bomb, then that would mean World War III were just around the corner. In Europe, members of the coalition of the spineless, had already weighed in against Putin, even attempting to dissuade the Russian leader from going to Iran. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have pressured Putin, during their Moscow visit, to join them in threatening Iran with new sanctions, if it did not meet their expectations on the nuclear issue. French President Nicolas Sarkozy had delivered a similar message. During his visit to Wiesbaden, Germany, for the Petersburg Dialogue, on Oct. 14-15, Putin was again besieged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and others, with demands he get tough with Tehran.

And, in case the message had not registered, a wild story was circulated internationally, that a team of suicide bombers was primed to blow themselves and Putin up, as soon as he set foot on Iranian soil. While Iranian officials denounced the obvious psywar attributed to “foreign” intelligence services, Putin tossed the story off with a laugh, saying, were he to heed such warnings, he would never leave his home.

The point to be made is that Putin—unlike his European interlocutors—has grasped the fact that what the Cheney crowd is threatening is world war, not some political power play, and has therefore stuck to his guns. That Russia has been aware of the dangers inherent in Cheney’s planned Iran war, is nothing new. In his speech to the Munich Wehrkunde meeting early in 2007, Putin had lashed out in most undiplomatic terms, against the pretensions of the would-be leader of a presumed unipolar world, to dictate world affairs through military fiat. And, regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, Russia has been consistent in stating its position that if, 1) Iran abides by international commitments to the NPT and IAEA regime, then 2) Iran’s right to the peaceful use of nuclear technology must be guaranteed, and 3) that program must not be misconstrued as a weapons program, and thus used as a pretext for military aggression.

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