

Putin's Summits Next Week Will Strengthen Ties with Iran, Turkey

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The Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced in Moscow on Tuesday that President Vladimir Putin will travel to Tehran on July 19, to take part in a tripartite meeting with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts as part of the Astana peace process to end the war in Syria as well as hold a bilateral meeting with Turkish President Recep Erdogan.

Such a [summit was long expected](#) but the pandemic and the Ukraine conflict delayed matters. The current impasse in Syria is fraught with risks. Turkey has plans to launch another military incursion into Syria's northern border regions that are under the control of Kurdish groups, who, Ankara alleges, are linked to the separatist PKK and also happen to be Pentagon's inseparable allies.

Damascus, Moscow and Tehran — and Washington — disfavour the Turkish move as potentially destabilising, but Erdogan is keeping plans in a state of suspended animation, while tactfully dialling down the threatening rhetoric and acknowledging he's “in no rush.”

For want of green lights from its Astana partners, presumably, Erdogan is unlikely to launch the military incursion, but Russia and Iran are wary that the incursion could complicate their presence and political influence in Syria and risk confrontation between Turkish troops and Syrian government forces.

However, Syria apart, Putin's trip has much wider ramifications. What transpires in his bilateral meetings with Erdogan and Iranian leaders are certainly the more important templates to watch. Clearly, Turkey and Iran are emerging as two of the most consequential relationships of Russian foreign policies and diplomacy. And Putin's visit comes at a highly transformative period in the US' approach toward both Turkey and Iran.

Erdogan's hopes of a rapprochement with the US have been dashed as Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told reporters on June 30 that Athens had submitted a letter of request “in recent days” to the US government for a squadron of 20 F-35s, with options to buy an

additional squadron. The [Greek announcement](#) came just a day after President Joe Biden had assured Erdogan on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Madrid that he backed the latter's pending request for F-16s to Turkey.

Erdogan should have known that Biden's long, successful career has been inextricably linked with the powerful Greek lobby in America, which is a big source of election funding for aspiring politicians. Therefore, Greece's F-35 deal is certain to be approved and it could further drive a wedge between the already strained relationship of the US and Turkey — and will only reinforce Ankara's suspicion that Washington is using Greece as a pawn to control Turkey. Conceivably, the deal could change the military balance in Eastern Mediterranean, taking into account Greece's alliance with Cyprus and Israel as well.

Suffice to say, Putin's conversation with Erdogan comes at a time of uncertainties in Turkish-American relations. In immediate terms, therefore, the circumstances are most conducive for establishing a Black Sea naval corridor to export grain from Ukraine. There is a strategic convergence between Moscow's keenness to prove it has not caused the global grain crisis, and Turkey's desire to project its strategic autonomy, although a NATO member country.

Turkish defence minister Akar [announced on July 13](#) that a consensus has been reached on the establishment of a coordination centre in Istanbul with the participation of all the parties, and the Russian and Ukrainian sides also agreed on joint control of the ships in both entering and exiting the ports as well as on maritime security. It is a signal victory for Turkish mediation. In the process, we may trust the strong relationship between Erdogan and Putin to harness fresh energy for deepening Turkish-Russian political-economic relations. Turkey has a unique role to play, as Moscow navigates its way around the western sanctions.

Equally, Putin's talks with the Iranian leadership also has a big geopolitical setting. The US President Joe Biden would have just finished his trip to Saudi Arabia, an event that impacts Iran's core interests at a crucial juncture when the nuclear negotiations are adrift and Teheran-Riyadh normalisation talks have made progress.

The US National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan's theatrical disclosure on Monday of Iran supplying "several hundred UAVs, including weapons-capable UAVs on an expedited timeline" and of Russian personnel undergoing training in Iran in this connection, etc. appear to have been timed carefully.

The important thing to be noted here is that Sullivan's story overlaps secret parleys reportedly between Riyadh and Jerusalem on defence technology exchanges, specifically related to Saudi concerns about Iranian drones!

Furthermore, Sullivan's loose talk comes against the backdrop of the announcement by Israel last month of the formation of a mutual air defence coalition that is expected to involve, among others, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

To be sure, Sullivan's revelation right before Biden's trip to Riyadh comes with a political aspect, as it puts pressure on Saudi Arabia to rethink both its blossoming relationship with Russia as well as its normalisation talks with Iran.

Moscow understands that Biden's primary purpose in the Middle eastern tour is to put together a front against Russia and China. Indeed, Biden wrote in an op-Ed in the

Washington Post last week on his Middle East tour, “We need to counter Russian aggression, be in a better position to win the competition with China, and work to strengthen stability in an important region of the world. To do this, we need to interact directly with countries that can influence the results of such work. Saudi Arabia is one of those countries.”

Biden hopes to bring Saudi Arabia into some sort of format with Israel beneath an overarching binding strategic defence cooperation pact that goes beyond anything the US has agreed to before. This, inevitably, requires the demonising of Iran as a common threat. Simply put, Biden is reviving a failed American strategy — namely, organising the region around the goal of isolating and containing Iran.

Indeed, if history is any guide, Biden’s idea of creating a collective security system is doomed to fail. Such attempts previously met with fierce resistance from regional states. Also, Russia has certain advantages here, having pursued a diplomacy with the regional states that is firmly anchored in mutual respect and mutual benefit, and predictability and reliability. During Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia, a certain understanding was reached, which Riyadh is unlikely to disown.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia and Russia have a convergence of interests with regard to the oil market. At any rate, expert opinion is that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have very limited spare capacity. The expectation is that Saudi Arabia will most likely agree to loosen the oil taps on the back of the Biden visit, but the leadership will still strive to find a way to do it within the context of the current OPEC+ agreement (with Russia) that extends through December by, say, compensating for the production underperformance of struggling OPEC states such as Nigeria and Angola. (The OPEC+ capacity is already well below the level implied in the agreement.)

Fundamentally, as the executive president of Quincy Institute Trista Parsi noted recently, “any reduction in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a threat to the durability of the Abraham Accords... That means in order for Israel and Saudi Arabia and the UAE to continue to have enough strategic incentives to collaborate and have relations and all jointly forget about Palestinian suffering, there needs to be a threat from Iran. Otherwise the whole house of cards falls apart.”

Iran understands that the JCPOA talks are neither dead nor alive but in a comatose state, which may perish soon unless salvaged — depending on the degree of success or failure of Biden’s talks in Saudi Arabia. But all signs are that Tehran is pressing the pedal on strengthening the ties with Moscow. Its SCO membership is through, while it is now seeking BRICS membership. The compass for Iran’s foreign policy trajectory is set. Surely, from such a perspective, Putin has a lot to discuss in Tehran with the Iranian leadership as the new world order is taking shape.

Even with regard to Sullivan’s drone story, although Iran has issued [a pro forma rebuttal](#), we may not have heard the last word. The fact of the matter is that Iran is among the top five world leaders in the development and production of UAVs that may interest Russia — Shahed strike systems, Mohajer tactical drones, various versions of Karrar reconnaissance and strike UAVs with range of 500-1000 kms, Arash kamikaze drones, etc. Interestingly, Iran’s MFA spokesman alluded to the existing framework of Iran-Russia military-technical cooperation that predates the war in Ukraine.

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Featured image: Iran's underground base for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (popularly known as Drone) at an undisclosed location (File photo)

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