

US Internationalises Iran's Unrest

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The ongoing unrest in Iran since mid-September following the death of a Kurdish woman in police custody shows no signs of abating as of now. The unrest has drawn support from all social strata and assumed anti-government overtones. The efficacy of suppressing the unrest is doubtful. Iran is entering a period of turmoil.

Indeed, the government faces no imminent threat but seems cognisant of the imperative need to address the hijab policy to pacify the protestors. As the protests continue, many women are walking on the streets of cities across Iran, especially in Tehran, without head coverings.

There is a long history of Western countries fuelling public unrest in Iran. Regime change agenda must be there in the western calculus but, curiously, Washington is also signalling interest in reaching an accommodation with Tehran under certain conditions relating to the regime's foreign and security policies in the present international milieu.

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian stated explicitly on Monday that the US and a number of other Western countries have incited riots, because "one of the US' objectives was to force Iran to make big concessions at the negotiating table" for the revival of the JCPOA. Amirabdollahian's remark followed some megaphone diplomacy by Rob Malley, the US special envoy on Iran last weekend.

Speaking in Rome, Malley connected the dots and outlined the linkages in the matrix. He said:

"The more Iran represses, the more there will be sanctions; the more there are sanctions, the more Iran feels isolated. The more isolated they feel [isolated], the more they turn to Russia; the more they turn to Russia, the more sanctions there will be, the more the climate deteriorates, the less likely there will be nuclear diplomacy. So it is true right now the vicious cycles are all self-reinforcing. The repression of the protests and Iran's support for Russia's war in Ukraine is where our focus is because that is where things are happening, and where we want to make a difference."

In effect, Malley admitted that the Biden Administration is a stakeholder in the ongoing protests in Iran. Importantly, he also hinted that although Iran has taken a series of fateful decisions that make a full revival of the nuclear deal and a lifting of some economic sanctions a political impossibility for now, the door to diplomacy is not shut if only Iran's leadership changed course on relations with Russia.

In further remarks to Bloomberg on Saturday, Malley said that "Right now we can make a difference in trying to deter and disrupt the provision of weapons to Russia and trying to support the fundamental aspirations of the Iranian people."

As he put it, Washington now aims to "disrupt, delay, deter and sanction" Iran's weapon deliveries to Russia, and any supplies of missiles or assistance in the construction of military production facilities in Russia "would be crossing new lines."

In sum, Malley has linked the US approach toward Iran's protests with Tehran's foreign and security policies in regard of Russia and its war in Ukraine.

The first signs that the US intelligence was focusing on Iran-Russia military ties — in tandem with its Israeli counterpart, of course — appeared in late July, when the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made an allegation during a media briefing at the White House that Iran wanted to sell weapons-capable unmanned aerial vehicles to Moscow.

Sullivan claimed that Iran was already training Russian personnel in using the drones. Within the week, Sullivan doubled down on that allegation.

The timing of Sullivan's disclosure must be noted carefully — coinciding with a visit to Tehran by Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 19. Putin's talks with the Iranian leadership messaged a strategic polarisation under way between Moscow and Tehran with far-reaching consequences for regional and international politics.

Putin's discussions ranged from the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria to the legality of Western-led sanctions regimes, de-dollarisation, geopolitics of energy, the International North-South Transport Corridor, defence cooperation and so on, anchored on the congruent interests of the two countries on a number of important strategic and normative issues.

Following up Putin's discussions, Iran's armed forces Chief of Staff, General Mohammad Bagheri travelled to Moscow in mid-October. Gen. Bagheri met Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, which signalled that the military relations between the two countries was [acquiring an irreversible momentum](#).

A fortnight after Gen. Bagheri's visit, Russian Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev came to Tehran to discuss "various issues of Russian-Iranian cooperation in the field of security, as well as a number of international problems," according to Interfax news agency.

Russian state media said Patrushev discussed the situation in Ukraine and measures to combat "Western interference" in both countries' internal affairs with his Iranian security counterpart Ali Shamkhani. Patrushev also met with Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi.

Meanwhile, Washington senses that there is disharmony within the Iranian establishment on how to handle the protests, and, in turn, this is sharpening the internal Iranian debate about

the wisdom of growing alliance with Russia vis-a-vis re-engaging with the West in a fresh attempt to revive the nuclear deal.

Clearly, Malley's remarks hinted that amidst the US' support for protests in Iran, it still remains open to doing business with Tehran if the latter rolls back its deepening strategic partnership with Moscow and refrains from any involvement in the conflict in Ukraine.

In fact, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Rafael Grossi (who holds Washington's brief) also chipped in with a remark on Monday that the UN watchdog has no evidence that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon programme, implying that the resumption of negotiations in Vienna faces no "systemic" block.

That said, Tehran's cooperation with Moscow on foreign and security policy policies is of long-term consequence to Iran and there is no question of the Iranian leadership putting all its eggs in the American basket. For Russia, too, the partnership with Iran is of strategic importance in the conditions of multipolarity.

Significantly, Iranian media has [reported](#) that Iran's nuclear negotiator and deputy foreign minister Ali Bagheri Kani visited Moscow last weekend and met his Russian counterpart Sergei Ryabkov in Moscow to "discuss the prospects of full-scale implementation" of the JCPOA (2015 nuclear deal) "in order to strengthen the approach of multilateralism and confront unilateralism and adhere to the principles contained in the United Nations Charter" as well as the two countries' "efforts to prevent instrumental political abuse and selective treatment of human rights issues by Western powers."

The official news agency IRNA later reported from Tehran quoting Bagheri Kani that the two sides "reviewed bilateral relations over the past months and created frameworks and mechanisms in agreement with each other for developing relations." He mentioned Syria, South Caucasus and Afghanistan as areas of cooperation between Tehran and Moscow.

Most certainly, the latest round of Iran-Russia consultations was noted in Washington. On Saturday, the Director of National Intelligence in the Biden Administration Avril Haines [held out a veiled threat](#) that while Iranian leaders may not see the protests as a threat now, they could face more unrest because of high inflation and economic uncertainty. She said, "We see some kind of controversies even within them about exactly how to respond — within the government."

On the other hand, Bagheri Kani's consultations in Moscow would have taken into account the large-scale [US-Israeli air exercises last Tuesday](#) simulating strikes on the Iranian nuclear program. The Israeli military said in a statement that joint flights of four Israeli F-35i Adir stealth fighter jets that accompanied four US F-15 fighter jets through Israel's skies simulated "an operational scenario and long-distance flights."

The statement added, "These exercises are a key component of the two militaries' increasing strategic cooperation in response to shared concerns in the Middle East, particularly those posed by Iran."

The US-Israeli exercises underscores the criticality in the situation surrounding Iran. Tehran's shift to enrichment at 60% causes disquiet in Washington. But a military strike on Iran is fraught with unpredictable consequences not only for West Asian region but also the global oil market, which is facing uncertainties due to the US attempt to put a price cap on

Russian oil.

The bottom line is that the protests in Iran are assuming the proportions of a casus belli. The US has internationalised Iran's internal upheaval.

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