



Russia's Complex Relationships With Iran and Israel w/ John Helmer

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Dimitri Lascaris (DL): Good day, this is Dimitri Lascaris coming to you for Reason2Resist on June 26th, 2025, from Montreal, Canada. This past week has seen some truly extraordinary developments in West Asia. On June 22, the US Air Force reportedly bombed nuclear facilities in Iran. I say reportedly because some experts are expressing doubt about exactly what happened on that day. Nonetheless, shortly after the bombing, Donald Trump emerged from the White House to declare that the attack had totally obliterated Iran's nuclear facilities. On the following day, Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, met in Moscow with Russian president Vladimir Putin and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, amongst other Russian officials. On that same day, Iran retaliated against the US strikes on its nuclear facilities by launching missiles at the massive Al Udaid US Air Force Base in Qatar. There are strong indications that the Iranian retaliation was orchestrated in such a way as to minimise damage to the US base. Within hours of the Iranian Retaliation, Donald Trump declared that the US, Israel and Iran had agreed to what he termed a ceasefire. Since the morning of Tuesday, June 24th, there appear to have been no further bombings or missile strikes by Iran on Israel or Israel on Iran. The United States as well appears to have stayed out of the fray. The fact that these developments occurred at a moment when Iran's foreign minister was meeting with Vladimir Putin raises an interesting question. What role, if any, did the Russian government play in bringing about this suspension of hostilities?

Now here to discuss this with us is John Helmer. John is the longest continuously serving foreign correspondent in Russia and the only Western journalist to direct his own bureau, independent of national or commercial ties. Born and educated in Australia, then at Harvard, John has also been a professor of political science, sociology, and journalism, and an advisor to governments, including those of Greece and Australia. He's also published several books on military and political topics, his latest being *Long Live Novichok: The British Poison Which Fooled The World*. Thank you for joining us again on Reason2Resist, John.

John Helmer (JH): Thank you for having me, Dimitri. Good to be here.

DL: So, John, it's been reported that when the Iranian foreign minister met with Russia's president in Moscow on Monday, he handed to Vladimir Putin a letter from Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Do we have any idea what was in that letter? First of all, do we know that such a letter was conveyed to the president of Russia? And do you have any idea what's in it?

JH: I've seen the pictures of the meeting in the Kremlin. One key person you left out in your opening, and I agree with all that you said, was Admiral Igor Kostyukov. This Navy Admiral is the head of the group, the General Staff Military Intelligence Agency. It's the first time that General Kostyukov, representing both the General Staff and the military intelligence service, has been beside the president at such an important meeting. Yes, Foreign Minister Lavrov was there, Putin's regular foreign policy assistant, Yuri Ushakov was there. But General Kostyakov's presence means that there was a very significant military discussion. A discussion of the extent to which Iran had suffered significant military damage in the war to date and the extent to which Iran had inflicted significant military damage on Israel and what the consequences would be for Iran and Russia in its strategic cooperation pact signed since January 2025, so that I would expect – and looking at the pictures on the table, the Iranian side had notebooks and the Russian side accordingly, but I didn't see a particular letter. Of course that's a diplomatic formula for Ayatollah Khamenei to state or to ask or to present a formal proposal from Iran at the highest level. And that's what I think one could assume to have happened: a formal Iranian proposal that included military aspects that required overall approval by President Putin. Second, required military assessment and discussion of the military dimensions at that meeting. So that's about all we can learn from the presentation.

We also know a little bit, which I've gone into if our audience wants to read the fine detail of what the difference was between what President Putin said and what Foreign Minister Araghchi said. Now, it is quite important that we understand what Foreign Minister Araghchi then did. He left Moscow – that's the easy bit – but he landed in Turkmenistan on his way home. Why? Well, the role of Turkmenistan is key to the future resupply of Iran. Turkmenistan would be the rail terminal, the end point for rail shipments of all sorts of cargo from China, and through the Chinese railroad to Turkmenistan, arm shipments both from China and from North Korea. And Turkmenbashi, the Turkmen port on the Caspian Sea, would also represent a significant loading and unloading point if Russia decides to start shipping military cargo or resupply of Iran's military needs during the ceasefire period from Russia directly. But up to my last look, there had been no significant change in Russian maritime links to Turkmenbashi, no indication that they had accelerated the Russian cargo shipments, and no indication that the road link between Turkmenistan and Iran was showing unusually high density of truck movements. So for the time being, but this can change very quickly, that's a key area. And that's where Araghchi went on his way between Moscow and Tehran. So what we can infer – one should be cautious, this is war, and these things must remain secret – the Iranian side has sought an acceleration of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean support during the ceasefire period and the post-war period. That's the first side.

The second is very important, and I've just been able to put some of this in print in *Dances with Bears*, the website I produced, and that is that the real urgency in the ceasefire came from Israel. And the reason for that was that, as indicated in the story, a very recent military analysis by independent US analysts shows that Israel had been expanding THAAD missiles, Arrow Missiles. It would be expending all its stock of weapons in its anti-ballistic missile systems dotted across Israel at a faster rate than it was being resupplied. In other words, Israel was very quickly running out of ammunition. In that situation, it's simple arithmetic. Iran's, whose stocks of missiles, particularly the hypersonic ones, are secret and not well known but let's suppose that the standard US published data show Iranian missile stocks for firing at Israel were around 3,000 at the beginning of the war. They were nowhere near depleted when Israel began to run out. So the analysis that I've put in print indicates, based on open source photography and inferential intelligence assessment, that the real urgency – and this is obviously top secret and it's also equally obviously not covered in the US press or in any of the mainstream press of the world, and for as far as I can tell not much on in the alt media podcast – the real pressure for Trump to act quickly came from Israel and not from Iran. And we also know, in partial collaboration, that on the Iranian side they were not consulted before Trump published the ceasefire in the form of a tweet. And then, in a series of tweets over the following 12 hours, found it difficult to call back [Israeli] aircrafts from their attacks on Iran. So the first violations during this ambiguous period of 6 to 12 hours, which appears in Trump's first tweet, the first violation came from Israel. Second, Foreign Minister Araghchi announced to the effect that "we haven't been consulted by anyone" and he was implying that not even the Qataris which had been mediating, or the Omanis which have been mediating between Iran and the United States up until that point, neither the mediators informed Iran nor was there direct contact between the US and Iran before Trump announced his ceasefire proposal. So I take that as corroboration for this simple point that's not well understood. Israel was running out of ammunition. Had they run out, what would have happened would have been that the Iranians would have accelerated their missile attacks and aiming at the further and much more comprehensive destruction of Israel's energy infrastructure first of all, its ports through which it's to be resupplied with virtually everything that the Israeli economy depends on, and so forth.

DL: So, just to put in context your comments about the depletion of Israel's missile stocks and the relative abundance on the Iranian side, my understanding, John, is that this estimate that we often hear of about 3,000 ballistic missiles, that this came from a US General, I believe it was 2022, or perhaps 2023. And what he actually said was more than 3,000 ballistic missiles.

JH: Yeah.

DL: And this did not include Iran's cruise missiles. And my understanding is they didn't use cruise missiles in significant quantities during this 12 day war. Also, they didn't use a lot of drones, which is another category of arsenal weapons that they could deploy against Israel. According to the Israeli media, as of Monday, Iran had fired 550 ballistic missiles at Israel and only 100 drones. So even if some significant portion of the ballistic missile arsenal was

destroyed by Israel, they would still have quite a few missiles, ballistic missiles left, quite a few cruise missiles and a whole lot of drones. Certainly, there is no indication, I think you're absolutely correct, there's really no indication that Iran was anywhere close to running out of any of those things, ballistic missiles or cruise missiles. Now, I just want to be clear, when you're talking about the depletion on the Israeli side, are you referring to air defence missiles or offence missiles?

JH: Air defence, yes.

DL: Air defence, correct, right. And even with the abundant use of air defence missiles, we saw that quite a few of those ballistic missiles penetrated Israel's air defence, right?

JH: Yes.

DL: So I think this is an important context for everybody to understand in terms of the balance of power towards the end of this 12-day conflict. But it's still unclear to me, John, I'm sure it's not entirely clear to you either – did Russia's president, and just because we have so little information, and I'm curious whether you have any sources who've enlightened you about this, did Russia's president or the government, any official of the Russian government, play any kind of a role in bringing about this ceasefire? For example, putting pressure on the Iranian side to accept it, or putting pressure on the Israeli side or both, or perhaps having a friendly conversation with Donald Trump and suggesting to him that it's really in Israel's interests and the interests of the United States of this be brought to a close. Do we have any reason to believe that the Russian government played that kind of a role in bringing about the ceasefire?

JH: We have no reason to believe that. On the other hand, looking for reasons to understand what has happened, we can say something like this: President Putin has demonstrably, in public, announced that he made, at the beginning of the war, telephone calls to President Pezeshkian of Iran and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel. And for the first time I have ever seen the Kremlin communiqué record, the two calls were announced and described in a single communiqué. This has never happened before, it's completely unnecessary, but it's signalled that President Putin balanced Israel and Iran at the same time. Now, that symbol was then further reinforced by the president in statements he made last Thursday and Friday in St. Petersburg. First, very late on Thursday, around midnight, so heading into Friday morning, the president had a press meeting, a meeting with heads of foreign news agencies chaired by the head of TASS. On his left was the Chinese press agency head, and on his right, I've forgotten who exactly was on his right. But the symbolism at the time was to show considerable support and closeness with China. In the meeting, he was asked whether to respond to reports that Russia had not done everything that it was committed and obligated to do for Iran in the run-up to the war, according to the January Treaty. The president then said, and repeated it, that there was no military provision in the January 2025 pact. That's false. Article 4, and I've described this recently, and then in January when the pact was signed, Article 4 of the new treaty, like the old strategic treaty 20 years earlier of strategic

cooperation between the two countries, clearly provided an obligation for both sides to cooperate with each other.

Now, cooperation is the term used. And in the most recent pact, very unusually, it comes in three languages, three official languages. English is one of them. Now, English is not an official language of either Russia or Iran, but was the intention of both Pezeshkian and Putin, that the Americans should read it in English, so that means the rest of us can understand what the English word "cooperation" means. And it means cooperation at the intelligence sharing level and cooperation at the military level. And it provides for off-agreement agreements worked out through military group, intelligence group, and the usual official working groups to provide particulars of cooperation. And yet there was a president of Russia saying that this didn't exist. Well, it did. And it does. Why then was he more than balancing? Why was he denying a level of cooperation which either existed or had been violated on the Russian side? This was so serious an implication – and I stress the word implication – that Russian officials close to the president, including former president Dmitry Medvedev, who's the deputy secretary of the Security Council, which is the collective body that combines intelligence agencies, military agencies, the foreign ministry, and the presidency in making consensus decision for the president. These groups criticised the president's statement, which implied something which didn't appear to be true, or worse, implied that the Russians had violated the obligation. So later on the same day, during the plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, a major international event, President Putin took a question and tried to explain that Russia honours its obligations and has honoured its obligations to Iran. Nonetheless, he made a claim that Russia had to balance between Israel and Iran. Nonetheless, he accepted that there'd be an attack on Iranian sovereignty. Without going into the fine words, which is one of the ways which analysts like you and me try to report what exactly is happening, the president showed a greater sympathy for Israel than most Russian public opinion and than Russian official policy justifies.

On the other hand, there's no sign that the presidential lie reflected itself in anything like what you've just said. Was there a call to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in which Putin suggested a ceasefire? There's nothing like that and no reason that President Putin would have done so or that Netanyahu would have listened to it. There is plenty of evidence that Netanyahu did speak on the telephone with Trump after Trump began to be angry that having announced the ceasefire, which he thought had been asked for with urgency by the Israelis in circumstances I've just explained, it appeared that the Israeli forces were violating it. And Trump has, in subsequent tweets, revealed he sent Ambassador Michael Huckabee to prevail on the Israeli Defence Ministry and the Prime Ministry to pull back and honour the ceasefire that they themselves had requested with urgency. There's every sign that the ceasefire was a bilateral arrangement. Now, from the Russian point of view, both foreign ministry statements, Kremlin statements, and President Putin's particular personal statements all indicate that Russia has sought to achieve a cessation of the conflict. There's no doubt about that. Second, former President Dmitry Medvedev had publicly issued a Telegram statement of 10 points in which he more explicitly attacked the United States and Israel for attacking Iran than

President Putin himself. That in turn had caused Trump to issue a very unusual tweet attacking Medvedev and saying, who the hell's this chap and what is he doing?

DL: This chap said that there were several states that were willing to provide nuclear warheads to Iran.

JH: I'm sorry, I didn't get to that point.

DL: Yeah, sorry.

JH: Medvedev implied that Russia supported nuclear weaponization for Iran, but that Russia in particular could not, because it's the signatory of the NPT, the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. Could not. But there were other states that could. There's no doubt who he meant. It's North Korea.

DL: Although he used the plural.

JH: He used the plural and that implies a number of things that lead people to speculation about North Korea, Pakistan and some others. Yes, so what you see isn't a split in Russian policy so much as a significant public surfacing of the difference of assessment. First, how the conflict threatened Russia, because Iran or Persia has been for hundreds of years a platform Russia understands to be a launching platform for attacks on Russia through its southern front. That's as clear in the 19th century as it's clear when Stalin sent Soviet forces to occupy the Azeri part of Iran immediately after World War II, immediately after the Tehran Conference, in fact, and used those forces and that occupation to protect the Soviet Union against an Anglo-American takeover through the then Shah of Iran to threaten the southern borders of the Soviet Union, as the Americans and the British clearly intended at the time. So Russian policy towards Iran is very complicated. Iranian policy is, in counterpoint, equally complicated and mixed of, first, suspicion, conflict, and misunderstanding, to deal with the rhetoric, but let's deal with the political structures. There's a whole daisy chain of media podcasters trying to pretend that Iran's leadership is not factionalized. All politics is factional. People have differences of opinion. People have different professional approaches. People read the strategic clock differently. Iran is no different on this score than Russia itself. So there are factional differences. They aren't killing each other. They aren't throwing each other in prison. And they don't insult each other quite the way the Americans are doing it by tweet and by force in Washington D.C.

So there are factional differences on the Russian side and factional differences on the Iranian side about what the cooperation should have been in the run-up to the war. President Putin has implied that the Iranian side did not ask for a level of military assistance in the air defence system category. He referred to the air defence system as distinct from air defence batteries, missile battery equipment. He's referring to some combination of hardware, software, intelligence, and command control coordination. It's unclear what he meant and it's unclear what he refers to. What he also had revealed, and this was a serious source of debate

privately in Moscow, President Putin revealed that he had spoken to Netanyahu and the Israelis to obtain their assurance they would not attack the Bushehr nuclear reactor where President Putin said there were more than 200 Russian technicians. Now, in making that admission, President Putin revealed that once the war had started he did not tell Netanyahu not to attack. He did tell Netanyahu "don't attack my people". This is pretty significant in Russian terms, as it was in Russian public opinion, to the extent that this is a highly sensitive issue, and it's mostly talked about in private.

DL: I want to come back to that. I want to ask you about those private discussions. You've intimated before that there are considerable differences of opinion within the Russian political and military elite about the posture that Russia ought to assume with respect to Israel. And the president is relatively speaking a dove in that regard. But I want to come back to that in a moment. I just want to focus on this claim that Vladimir Putin made that the Iranians had not sought help, at least not with respect to air defences. You pointed out in a recent article that an Iranian publication, which apparently has a connection or relationship with the Iranian military, I believe it's called Sepahi News, had posted a photograph of the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and the Russian president, with a very interesting and pointed comment. The Google translation of that comment is: "We may forget the words of our enemies, but we will never forget the silence of our friends. Undoubtedly, after passing through these critical circumstances, relations with some countries will be seriously reconsidered". Now, that seems to imply that the Iranians did want military assistance from the Russian Federation and that they were unhappy with the level of assistance they received, whereas Vladimir Putin seems to be saying, well, they didn't ask. And he also, as I understand it, left open the question, well, what would you have done if they had asked?

Now, one thing that occurred to me, John, you know, a lot of people have said they've just assumed that what the Russian President is saying is accurate. And I've heard people say, well, if it wasn't accurate, why haven't the Iranians said otherwise publicly? Why haven't they said, well, actually we did ask for assistance and our request was declined. One possible explanation is that Vladimir Putin is not telling the whole story, but that the Iranian government doesn't want to have a public spat about this at this particularly sensitive time. They don't agree with his characterisation of events but they just don't want to make a public show of disagreeing with him. Another may be that they just have an honest difference of opinion about what actually transpired in their discussions. And, you know, Putin has a certain perception and they have a different perception. And again, they've just decided they're not going to air the differences in those perceptions. What do you make of all of this? Particularly this post that you referenced in one of your recent articles from this Iranian publication.

JH: Thank you for asking me about that, because I have subsequently looked into what this Sepahii News actually is as a Telegram account, and relying on Iranian sources, I now am told Sepahi news is neither an official publication associated with the IRGC, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, nor is it a genuine expression of Iranian opinion. It's a fake. That's what my reliable Iranian friends tell me. It's not what you can find out about Sepahi

News if you look at Wikipedia or other open sources. Now, saying it's a fake casts doubt on that particular posting, but it doesn't necessarily discredit the underlying suspicion by factions aiming at each other in Iran and in Moscow over what should be Russia's posture towards Iran and Israel and the United States when they're at war on Russia's southern flank. So, to say that that particular piece I quoted lacks the significance I attributed to it at the time as an official IRGC mouthpiece is one thing, and I'm sorry I fell for the fake if that's what I did. However, I agree with the way you've constructed the possible explanations of people in a relationship of goodwill disagreeing on a number of issues: how to deter Israeli-American attack, how to deter Israeli-American war aims, which we know to be on the one hand Iran's Nuclear Program, on the other, regime change. Regime change is a level of escalation of US and Israeli war aims that threatens Russia, no doubt about it. Because regime change would immediately destabilise Iran and destabilise Russia's security in the south. And Russia's very clearly against that. What to do about it?

At the same time, Russia is at war with the United States and its European allies, in fact, its global allies on its western front in Ukraine. Russia has that prior war to deal with, in which Iran has been extremely helpful, providing military assistance to Russia, particularly in the area of drone technology. Now, it's inconceivable that the level of military assistance Iran has provided Russia in the war on Russia's western front would not have been reciprocated. It's inconceivable. On the other hand, you've seen especially with the so-called pro-Russian podcasters in the United States who wanted to believe that Russia had supplied a very high level of anti-aircraft deterrence capability on the Iranian side to prevent deterrence and shoot down Israeli or American aircraft approaching the Iranian border. Now, it's very unclear, as you pointed out, exactly whether Israeli aircraft have actually gone into Iran. Most of the damage that we've seen affected inside Iran has been done by sabotage teams and so-called terrorist teams, Israeli directed teams on the ground. The Israeli air force appears to have been limited. That means deterred by Iranian air defence, by sticking to Iraqi airspace, possibly Syrian airspace to launch their missile attacks. On the other hand, as you said at the beginning, it's not quite clear how the B-2 Armada that was launched to drop bombs on the three nuclear sites in Iran, exactly what their route was, though they appear to have flown from west to east. It's not clear what their exit route was. They appear to have gone across Iranian airspace. And in the Pentagon presentation by General Caine they were accompanied by, in advance and on the flanks, by a variety of US Air Force fighters, who all of whom refuelled en route in, and en route out, by US Air force and possibly NATO tankers operating possibly in Iranian airspace but probably not in Iranian space.

So what we also know is that the Iranians were given advanced warning and they did not attempt to engage this armada. So what we know to be false is General Caine's claim not to have seen and that they were not seen while they came over. How could it be? It's ludicrous to say we weren't seen when we announced in advance what we were going to do with the understanding that we would not be engaged. There would be no defence. There would be no deterrence put up. Wherever that route was, the United States was seen but not engaged by Russian-supplied Iranian-manned anti-aircraft systems. Okay? Israel seems to have been deterred, so we don't really know the level of Russian, Chinese, and North Korean deterrence

capability that the Iranians operated on the ground. We do know that there's a faction disagreement over how to integrate this over the systems of command and control that the Iranian's use. We also know the Israelis went to a great deal of trouble and some success in decapitating that command and control system, both by cyber methods and by ground, drones and bombings. Okay? And we know that the Iranian command control system was expected to be paralysed, but recovered quickly. We also have to say that everyone learns lessons in this kind of war, and the Russians learn lessons faster than most, the United States slower than most. And the Israelis never admit to learning a lesson because they never admit they need to be taught a lesson by anybody but themselves.

DL: Now, in terms of air defence capability, I would just add that we also know that the Iranians shot down at least two, possibly three Hermes 900 drones from the Israeli Air Force. So, clearly they have some air defence capacity.

JH: Yes.

DL: It's just not true that they're, they were –

JH: Defense.

DL: Yeah. Let's talk about, uh, Vladimir Putin's attitude towards Israel. Even in the past you've offered to explain where you think this is all coming from. He clearly has, shall we say, a higher level of tolerance for Israel's hyper-aggressive behaviour than others in the Russian Federation political and military elite. And I just want to say before you explain where this is all coming from, I find this remarkable, John, absolutely remarkable that he would have any patience whatsoever for Israel, because it's very clear on whose side Israel is aligned. Israel is 100% in the camp of the United States, and the United States, as you've indicated quite rightly, is effectively waging war on the Russian Federation. Israel, I don't think, is ever – it's entirely dependent upon US military support, not just the \$4 billion a year or almost \$4 billion in military aid it receives. It's the largest recipient of US military aid in history, but it's assisted by the United States in a myriad of other ways. It receives basically legal protection, political protection, it receives economic aid, vetoes at the UN Security Council. So it ain't going to cross the United States in order to accommodate requests or demands of the Russian Federation. So I really don't get why Vladimir Putin would have any hesitation in viewing Israel as, perhaps not an adversary, but as being antagonistic to the interests of the Russian Federation. What is going on here, John? And why does he have some apparent affection for the genocidal entity?

JH: Let me try to answer this way. First, this is not discussed in Russia. It's a highly sensitive issue. Why? Because President Putin has a level of philo-Semitism which is unprecedented in Russian history. Second, Stalin supported the creation of the Zionist entity, supported the creation of the State of Israel ahead of some of the Western allies for an anti-imperialist strategic reason. At the time, Soviet concern was that in the post-war settlement, a combination of the British Empire, the French Empire and the rising US Empire would seek

to establish strategic control over the Middle East, over its oil and over its military base territory and use a combination of oil control and military bases to threaten the Soviet Union. As we know from many sources, General Curtis LeMay intended as the head of the United States Air Force Strategic Bomber Command to use bases in Libya, bases in Saudi Arabia, to launch nuclear warfare bombing raids against the Soviet Union. That was ultimately deterred by the development of the Soviet nuclear capacity and the development of mutual assured destruction as a deterrent, stabilising doctrine, that has been accepted by both sides until recently, President Trump has reasserted the Golden Dome notion, which blows that doctrine out of existence. So the Soviet policy is also the Russian policy, as I've just said. The destruction of Arab regimes, the destruction of Arab nationalism and also Persian nationalism, Iranian nationalism, by the Anglo-American interests has always been contested in Moscow.

So we come back to your question, how can it be with a history like that, that President Putin uniquely sees Israel differently? That requires a combination of his personal history, his psychological relationships as a young man in very tough circumstances in Leningrad, and the relationship he had with Jewish boys when he was himself a boy. I know that there have been various attempts to explain at the Brookings Institute and others, that President Putin had particularly good relations and dependent relations as a young man, as a boy, with a Jewish schoolteacher and with other Jewish individuals. And that this has led to a long-term affection for Jewish people. And that in turn has led, when those Jewish people emigrated from the Soviet Union, emigrated from Russia to Israel, that has led him to believe that he has a special relationship, which is expressed both personally and strategically with the Russian speakers of Israel. Notwithstanding the fact that he knows perfectly well that many of his enemies, many of the enemies of the Kremlin, many of the regime opposition forces base themselves in Israel. For example, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's partner, Leonid Nevzlin, operates from Israel. And there are Russian oligarch relationships with Israel, which have both Jewish ethnicity and Israeli territorial background and the use of Israeli passports as a safety check, an exit visa from Russia when they're personally threatened, since they can always hide out in Israel, there's no repatriation, and extradition from Israel, and so forth. So there are a range of, let's call it, special relationships between Russians like President Putin and their growing up period, and Jews who speak Russian in Israel. President Putin has personally demonstrated a level of loyalty to his Jewish friends from that time, whether they live in Israel, whether they have palaces in Sardinia, whether they have hotels in the south of France or wherever, he continues to show a level of personal loyalty. That creates a particular problem with some of the issues you've raised. It creates a personal difficulty when the strategic problem in Israel as a US aircraft carrier in the region threatens Russia, and that's happened.

There was an incident, I documented it at the time, and pardon me for having too many dates in my head. Not to get the exact dates right, but let me just say the incident happened when the Israeli Air Force in attacking Syria shot down – sorry, they didn't shoot down a Russian reconnaissance aircraft that was coming into Khmeimim Airbase in Syria, the Syrian missile crew that thought they were defending against an Israeli air force attacker coming in from the

Mediterranean, fired and by mistake shot down the Russian aircraft, killing all 15 airmen aboard. There was no doubt at the time, and the defence ministry led at the time by Sergei Shoigu, and the general staff issued statements directly blaming Israel for spoofing the Syrian S-300 missile battery into firing and destroying the Russian aeroplane and causing the Russian casualties. They made public this attack on Israel, but President Putin met personally, without an interpreter, in Paris with Netanyahu to resolve the issue at the personal level, and has never explained what was said at the time or why the Israelis were let off the hook. They're not the only ones to have been let off the hook. The Turkish government was deeply involved in assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara and failed to cooperate in the prosecution of the plot to kill him. And that was, let's say, glossed over in the interest of Russia's strategic relationship with the Turks. But Russia does not have a strategic relationship with Israel, suspects Israel of being favourable to and supplying military assistance to the regime in Kiev. They're potentially an enemy on the Ukraine battlefield, and they are in fact so allied with the United States that they are an enemy in the present war. But that's to wander away from the subtleties of Putin's personal relationship with Jewish people, and the sensitivity around that, you'll remember, goes to the question of whether Russia and the Soviet Union had a fundamental antisemitic policy, which the Jackson-Vanik Amendment in the US Congress attempted to deal with, trading Soviet release of Jews to lead the Soviet Union in return for trading advantages or a lifting of sanctions against US trade with the Soviet Union at the time. So there were two, let's call them, legs of Russian sensitivity to Jews. First, the Western allegation of antisemitism, which has always been more true of the Tsarist regime than the Communist regime. When this is raised with me, I've always said that Russians hate all ethnic groups equally, including themselves, and not Jews especially. That's now. That's recent. But the anti-Semitism issue was a significant element of Soviet relationship with Washington. Second, there was always the Soviet calculation that to have a good relationship with Washington you had to have the Jewish lobby in Washington either neutral towards Moscow or pro-Moscow. So pro-Israel in Moscow used to mean a lobbying technique, a lobbying tactic for Washington. That's no longer relevant. .

DL: Right.

JH: It's no longer relevant, if you like, because the Israel lobby now rules Washington. And to some extent, you need to see a Russian calculation that you can't be anti-Israel in Washington and hope to make any deal with President Trump. Now, we can argue the merits—

DL: That assumes that President Trump is capable of making a deal and actually respecting it. That's just quite an assumption.

JH: Well, that's a very good point, Dimitri. And that's the core of the current Russian problem. The current Russian problem is that we have gone to the limit – and President Putin has gone to the limit – of being friendly, non-confrontational, concessional with President Trump since February. He offered a ceasefire on energy infrastructure in Ukraine. The Ukrainians violated it. Russia has stuck to it. He's offered a variety of ceasefires since then. He offered a meeting with Trump. He has wanted to, as it were, give Trump every

opportunity to show that he wants to make a deal. And Trump keeps saying, I want to make a deal, but the most recent [inaudible] has been that he's disappointed in President Putin, whom he described in the Netherlands the other day as "misguided". One can't take seriously this kind of examining the droppings from the animal to see which way he was going in the jungle. The issue remains a strategic one for Russia. It's not what Trump's droppings look like. It was and is the test of the Istanbul negotiation. There are 33 terms on the table from Russia and the priority is Trump has to agree to stop US arms supplies to Ukraine that will be used against Russia. And second, he has to stop intelligence sharing that directs and informs and guides the Ukrainian targeting on the battlefield fronts and internal Russia. And third, which is part of the denazification objective of the special military operation, there must be elections in the Ukraine. That means Zelensky can be removed by election. Those three terms Trump no longer seems ready to agree to. If he doesn't agree, there can be no summit meeting with President Putin and no tweet, no Trump dropping that he's now achieved the peace that he claims to be achieving everywhere else in the world.

Exactly as you said, Dimitri, what does this last record of this last week show the Russian side about what value to place in anything Trump does? And what lesson is there to be learned from a Russian side in how to wage the war to its conclusion in Ukraine? There's no doubt from a Russian point of view that Trump is clear Russia is winning the war. Second, there are two Russian approaches that are being debated differently, you can call that factionalization, you call it a goodwill argument, you can call it a normal democratic government process. Two approaches: the slow road to victory or the fast road to victory. We just saw, from a Russian point of view, Trump claiming credit for the fast approach to ending the war in Iran. He had a massive armada drop unique bombs, he said, down the ventilation holes of a mountain under which Iran is operating its nuclear program – let's leave entirely separate whether any of that's true except that bombers did drop bombs and created holes in the in the mountainside. Call that the American equivalent of the Oreshnik moment in Russia. The fast way, the fast option, to end the war with Ukraine is to use this devastating missile against which there is no defence, which has been demonstrated in action already, use it to decapitate the Ukrainian regime in Kiev and Lviv so that it will cease to fight and come to terms that way.

Hasn't the US demonstrated that this is its approach in Iran? One, a massive, unique weapon to be launched and two, decapitation. Isn't that what Israel just did? Isn't that what the United States supports Israel to have done on the ground in Tehran and throughout the military command structure of Iran? Wasn't the purpose of that to accomplish a US war and that is to end not only nuclear weaponization but all threats to Israel? Wasn't that the purpose? If that was the purpose the Americans agreed to, shouldn't the Russian approach be to do the same in Ukraine to achieve a quick war end? It's what I've been calling an Oreshnik moment. Or a slow one. Why slow? Because President Putin has said: Chaps, we've got to give Trump the best opportunity we can to reach a deal that reduces the escalation of war threats on the northern front, that's outside the Ukrainian battlefield, Poland, the Baltic states, the Baltic Sea, Finland, up to Greenland, across the Arctic Sea to the East. Don't we have to give him the maximum opportunity? Because he has offered an opportunity which wasn't there with

the Biden administration. We've explained that principle through Putin's representative in Istanbul. We fight while we negotiate. We will negotiate while we fight, but that means the slow approach to ending the war. Now there's another aspect that's important domestically. Russia takes serious casualties as it moves westward. If it goes faster it loses Russian lives. No president of Russia wants to accept the level of casualties which has already occurred and the public opinion and public support for the president is very high and very stable in the belief that the military approach is achieving victory with lowest sacrifice. There's an argument for going faster, to end the war quicker, with less blood, Russian blood, and there's an argument for going slower in order to see whether Trump will offer the level of sanctions relief at the same time as surrender on the terms that Russia began this operation: demilitarisation, denazification. I don't think they are terms that Trump understands. But you can see that as a complex set of issues for decision, as fast into war, slow into war, as Putin must deal with, he must at the same time – must – balance and be seen to balancing his approach to the Jewish question that dominates Trump in Washington. And people of goodwill and people with minds that are capable of accepting they've made mistakes and learn from their mistakes, that's a characteristic of Russia that isn't a characteristic of the Americans in Washington.

DL: So I have one last question for you, John, about this whole notion of giving Trump maximum opportunity to do a deal. Let's park the question of whether any deal that he does could possibly be reliable.

JH: Yes.

DL: Okay, let's just put that aside for a second. Remarkably, astonishingly, the NATO governments have just agreed to increase their military spending to five percent of GDP annually. And I must say when Trump first issued this demand, I thought it was a negotiating position, which is to say I thought that he didn't expect that they would actually agree to five percent, but that maybe he could get them to go to three or 3.5 percent and that he was prepared to do some haggling. I didn't imagine that they would just – and within six months, during which time, they've clearly not had enough time, in my opinion, to really analyse the long-term budgetary implications of this and to have a robust public debate about it, which is obviously going to have dramatic impacts on the finances of these governments. They've almost rushed to accept, without any kind of apparent negotiation, "well, let's make it somewhere between two and five percent, Donald". No, they just took the five percent.

JH: Yeah.

DL: And in the background, there's this speech that Pete Hegseth gave to the Ukraine Contact Group, the US defence secretary in February, in which he said: You guys got to increase your military spending and you have to now bear the primary burden for supporting the Ukrainian war effort and we're going to reallocate our military assets elsewhere and we're going to have a division of labour. That's the way he put it. So, when I add it all up – and then of course, there's also this attack within Russia on the strategic bombers and the fact that

something very similar was done in Iran just a few days later so it looks like the US and Britain and perhaps other NATO countries are behind both of these attacks in Russia and so forth. I mean when you add it all up, I can't understand why the Russian government, and particularly the president who I think is a very sophisticated person who's learned some painful lessons in his dealings with the West over the course of his political career, why he doesn't think that the maximum opportunity has already been given. Let me just qualify my question to you by saying I enthusiastically support the idea that no matter what the relations are between the US and the Russian government, they should communicate. So I'm not an opponent of communication at all. And I think that was a terrible thing that the Biden administration did with the support of NATO allies to just basically sever communications with the Russian Federation. So they should definitely continue talking. But why is he still giving Trump an opportunity? Hasn't Trump exhausted all of his political credibility now? I mean, I just don't get it. I'm a bit mystified by this.

JH: Well, you're a very wise man, Dimitri, and you've put it in very clear courtroom terms. So let's see how I can answer at the standard you've just set me. First thing, the Trump administration has cancelled, virtually cancelled, the talking on the improvement of relations between the Russian Foreign Ministry and the State Department. On the Russian side this is called the negotiations on the irritants. That's to say the issues that make it impossible to talk because each side has put limits on their embassies because the United States has seized consular and diplomatic properties belonging to Russia in Seattle and in Virginia and each side has gone tit-for-tat and created a level of irritation that makes it impossible to talk. They had two rounds run on the US side by a deputy assistant secretary of state named Coulter, and led by, on the foreign ministry side by the new Russian ambassador to the United States. And the US never agreed to talk on particulars except to agree on the next meeting. And that passed. And then they had agreed to meet in each other's capitals instead of in foreign countries and there will be no new meeting. The reason is the Trump administration, Marco Rubio – who sits under two hats he can hardly wear, his head's too small, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor – has not issued any instruction to his negotiating team, led by Coulter, to agree to anything with the Russians. So it's off.

Now, this is not a Biden initiative. It's a Trump initiative. We're six months almost into his term, and he just – he, Rubio – ordered the cessation of the negotiations on the irritants. And, as you said, if you can't talk on that level, what can you talk to the Trump administration about? Even if you did talk and you put some credibility and veracity in what they say or what they signed, except they haven't signed anything. That's one issue and it obviously is a submission to President Putin from the Foreign Ministry. These guys have turned this off. So let's stop. There's no point. First. Second, as I've indicated, there are these serious strategic objectives that Trump has been asked to address and he gets the Russian commitment to a summit meeting announcing his peacemaking role, if he agrees, but he hasn't shown any readiness to come to the 33 points or even a subset of those on Ukraine. But you mentioned the issue of the five percent. So let's look at what that means and what the NATO powers along with Trump have just agreed. I agree with you, Dimitri, I have never seen in the history of NATO, so many tongues out licking the shoes of the United States president. Of course,

you need a Dutchman to lick the shoes blacker and shinier than almost any other nationality in that group.

DL: He just called him "Daddy". Wow. Oh, sorry, go ahead, John.

JH: Let's not waste time on the former Dutch Prime Minister, noting that Trump visited Geert Wilders, the opposition leader in the Netherlands, now that there's to be a new election in the Netherlands. And he visited Wilders and then justified himself for having done that. He hasn't done that in England and he hasn't done it in France. But he did it there. Okay, let's leave out that small, significant intervention in Dutch politics. Okay, let's leave that out. What have the NATO powers actually done in their communiqué? Now, one of my US friends, podcast colleagues, has pointed to the NATO communiqué this time around, the other day, as being a significant breakthrough in the readiness of the United States to abandon Ukraine. And if you look at the 2025 communiqué, it's got a few hundred words. You can fit it into a single page. You look at how it compares with the Biden communiqué of 2024, which runs for four and a half thousand words. Four and a half thousand – I've forgotten how many pages it runs for. Nearly ten. There's particular, specific mentions of Ukraine in the 2024 Biden communiqué, which shows a level of comprehensive support for Ukraine. Not this time.

Second, this time repeats that Russia's the principal enemy of the NATO alliance, exactly as was featured in the previous one. This is short. Why is it short? Does it mean that Trump and NATO are abandoning Ukraine? No, no, no. I don't think so. What it means is they were so busy with their tongues licking the Trump shoes on the five percent, there wasn't time, there wasn't a purpose in trying to negotiate a more particular language. And why's that? Well, there's the deal. It's a Trump deal that the NATO allies are comfortable with. And we began this presentation by my pointing out that the US has run out of money. There is no more money authorised in Trump's military budget to resupply Israel at the level of resupplying anti-aircraft missile defence needs than it has right now. Trump has to go back to Congress. If he goes back to Congress for that, he's got another problem with his big, beautiful bill, doesn't he? Now, we don't have to go into all of these little particulars. But if we see what Trump wanted out of the summit, he wanted the following deal: I want you guys to spend more on procurement from me to fight the Ukraine war while I get on with supporting Israel, which you fellows all agree with, while they commit genocide against the Palestinians, and they end the strategic threat that Iran and its resistance poses to the rest of the civilised world. I want you to pay for that one, and I'll pay for this one. But we're all short of money, so here's the deal: You announce that instead of 2 % GDP, it'll be 3.5 % plus 1.5 %, which will be what you will give to Ukraine, total 5 % over 10 years. I mean, 10 years in a politician's life, it's so far in the future, it doesn't matter. Most politicians don't get re-elected for 10 years. So a 10-year programme is fiction. But it's a deal to pay. It's an accounting requirement. These chaps are running out of cash to pay for their wars.

So, from a Trump point of view, and from a rutter and shoe licking point of view, they've come to an agreement on a very brief communiqué that covers what they want. From a Russian point of view, what they want is to continue the war. What Trump wants is to

continue the war, but not at my expense but at my profit. You'll buy my arms. Poland will buy my arms. Everybody will buy my arms, some of which you will give, particularly the new mini Führer of Germany, Freddie Merz. You will buy mine arms and you will use them against Russia. Fine, you'll continue that war. I will cover my financial obligations and my moral obligations and my political obligations to Israel, and we will go on sequencing the wars to the best of our financial ability. It's a simple financial deal as I understand it, which they can't admit to. Why? Because the public opinion on each of these countries is going rather negatively against spending on more military and less on domestic welfare. Each of these countries, especially the Netherlands, is facing the crack-up of very weak leadership coalitions. Finland, the Netherlands, Poland. I mean you name it, France, England, certainly Germany. Merz has a 26% mandate. 26% to fight a new war, a new World War, a new war in Europe. 26%. Hitler started with 34, got up to 40 before he became a serious Führer for the world. These are weakling governments. They're not stupid. They are weak. And public opinion can't tolerate either a combination of their weakness, or their vacillation, or the loss of domestic benefits.

So what did you see happen? Trump attacked Spain for saying, hey, wait a minute, we don't want to commit to this level of spending at the expense of our people. That doesn't play very well, I'm not going to get re-elected, says the Prime Minister of Spain privately, not publicly. So what we saw is a shoe-licking performance by the NATO weaklings to cover the real cost of wars they think put them in power, that they want to continue to keep themselves in power. And I'm not talking about Prime Minister Carney of Canada who has particular problems too and does not exactly have a strong mandate. But in any case, let's not talk about Canada now. They're all in the same boat – this collection of weaklings. And they decided, in our boat, what is the easiest thing for us to do? And it's to give dear Donald what he comes for, and then go on with our war-making on the side after he's left us. And that's exactly what happened.

DL: And interestingly, these weaklings began their joint communiqué by claiming yet again, that NATO is the strongest alliance. Remarkable. Always a pleasure to speak with you, John, and look forward to our next conversation. For now, this is Dimitri Lascaris signing off from Montreal, Canada on June 26th 2025.

JH: Thank you.

END

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