

Trump's ingenuity vis-à-vis Russia and Iran

by M.K. Bhadrakumar,* India



M. K. Bhadrakumar
(Picture ma)

Through the past three-year period, Moscow claimed that it faced an existential threat from the US-led proxy war in Ukraine. But in the past six weeks, this threat perception has largely dissipated. The US President Donald Trump has made a heroic

attempt to change his country's image to a portmanteau of "friend" and "enemy" with whom Moscow can be friendly despite the backlog of a fundamental dislike or suspicion.

Last week, *Donald Trump* turned to the Iran question for what could be a potentially similar leap of faith. There are similarities in the two situations. Both Russian President *Vladimir Putin* and Iranian president *Masoud Pezeshkian* are quintessential nationalists and modernisers who are open to westernism. Both Russia and Iran face US sanctions. Both seek a rollback of sanctions that may open up opportunities to integrate their economies with the world market.

The Russian and Iranian elites alike can be described as "westernists". Through their history, both Russia and Iran have experienced the West as a source of modernity to "upgrade" their civilisation states. In such a paradigm, Trump is holding a stick in one hand and a carrot on the other, offering reconciliation or retribution depending on their choice. Is that a wise approach? Isn't a reset without coercion possible at all?

In the Russian perception, the threat from the US has significantly eased lately, as the Trump

administration unambiguously signalled a strategy to engage with Russia and normalise the relationship – even holding out the prospects for a mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

So far, Russia has had a roller coaster ride with Trump (who even threatened Russia with more sanctions) whose prescriptions of a ceasefire to bring the conflict in Ukraine to an end creates unease in the Russian mind. However, Trump also slammed the door shut on Ukraine's NATO membership; rejected altogether any US military deployment in Ukraine; absolved Russia of responsibility for triggering the Ukraine conflict and instead placed the blame squarely on the Biden administration; openly acknowledged Russia's desire for an end to the conflict; and took note of Moscow's willingness to enter into negotiations – even conceded that the conflict itself is indeed a proxy war.

At a practical level, Trump signalled readiness to restore the normal functioning of the Russian embassy. If reports are to be believed, the two countries have frozen their offensive intelligence activities in cyber space.

Again, during the recent voting on a UN Security Council resolution on Ukraine, the US and Russia found themselves arrayed against Washington's European allies who joined hands with Kiev. Presumably, Russian and American diplomats in New York made coordinated moves.

It comes as no surprise that there is panic in the European capitals and Kiev that Washington and Moscow are directly in contact, and they are not in the loop. Even as the comfort level in Moscow has perceptively risen, the gloom in the European mind is only thickening, embodying the confusion and foreboding that permeated significant moments of their struggle.

All in all, Trump has conceded the legitimacy of the Russian position even before negotiations have commenced. Is an out-of-the-box thinking conceivable regarding Iran as well?

Out-of-the-box thinking regarding Iran

In substantive terms, from the Russian perspective, the remaining "loose ends" are:

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First, a regime change in Kiev that ensures the emergence of a neutral friendly neighbour; second, removal of US sanctions; and third, talks on arms control and disarmament attuned to present-day conditions for ensuring European and global balance and stability.

As regards Iran, these are early days, but a far less demanding situation prevails. True, the two countries have been locked in an adversarial relationship for decades. But it can be attributed entirely to the American interference in Iran's politics, economy, society and culture; an unremitting mutual hostility was never the lodestar, historically.

A constituency of "westernists" exists within Iran who root for normalisation with the US as the pathway leading to the country's economic recovery. Of course, like in Russia, super hawks and dogmatists in Iran also have vested interests in the status quo. The military-industrial complex in both countries are an influential voice.

The big difference today is that the external environment in Eurasia thrives on US-Russia tensions whereas, the intra-regional alignments in the Gulf region are conducive to US-Iran detente. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, a steady and largely mellowing of Iran's politics of resistance, Saudi Arabia's abandonment of jihadi groups as geopolitical tool and its refocus on development and reform as national strategies – all these mould the *zeitgeist*, which abhors US-Iran confrontation.

This historic transformation renders the old US strategy to isolate and "contain" Iran rather obsolete. Meanwhile, there is a growing realisation within the US itself that American interests in West Asia no longer overlap Israel's. Trump cannot but be conscious of it.

Equally, Iran's deterrence capability today is a compelling reality. By attacking Iran, the US can at best score a pyrrhic victory at the cost of Israel's destruction. Trump will find it impossible to extricate the US from the ensuing quagmire during his presidency, which, in fact, may define his legacy.

The US-Russia negotiations are likely to be protracted. Having come this far, Russia is in no mood to freeze the conflict till it takes full control of Donbass region – and, possibly, the eastern side of Dniepr river (including Odessa, Kharkov, etc.)

But in Iran's case, time is running out. Something has to give way in another six months



Tehran. (Picture ma)

when the hourglass empties and the October deadline arrives for the snapback mechanism of the 2015 JCPOA¹ to reimpose UN resolutions to "suspend all reprocessing, heavy water-related, and enrichment-related activities" by Tehran.

Trump will be called upon to take a momentous decision on Iran. Make no mistake, if push comes to shove, Tehran may quit the NPT [*Treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons*] altogether. Trump said Wednesday that he sent a letter to *Ali Khamenei*, Iran's supreme leader, calling for an agreement to replace the JCPOA. He suggested, without specifics, that the issue could quickly lead to conflict with Iran, but also signalled that a nuclear deal with Iran could emerge in the near future.

Later on Friday [7 March], Trump told reporters in the Oval Office that the US is "down to the final moments" negotiating with Iran, and he hoped military intervention would prove unnecessary. As he put it,

"It's an interesting time in the history of the world. But we have a situation with Iran that something is going to happen very soon, very, very soon. You'll be talking about that pretty soon, I guess. Hopefully, we can have a peace deal. I'm not speaking out of strength or weakness; I'm just saying I'd rather see a peace deal than the other. But the other will solve the problem. We're at final moments. We can't let them have a nuclear weapon."

Trump aims at generating peace dividends out of any normalisation with Russia and Iran, two energy superpowers, that could give momentum to his MAGA project. But cobwebs must be swept away first. Myths and misconceptions have shaped contemporary Western thinking on Russia and Iran. Trump should not fall for the phobia of Russia's "imperialistic" ambitions or Iran's "clandestine" nuclear programme.

If the first one was the narrative of the liberal-globalist neocon camp, the second one is a fabrication by the Israeli lobby. Both are self-serving narratives. In the process, the difference between westernisation and modernisation got lost. Westernisation is the adoption of western culture and society, whereas modernisation is the development of one's own culture and society. Westernisation can at best be only a sub-process of modernisation in countries such as Russia and Iran.

Trump's ingenuity, therefore, lies in ending the US' proxy wars with Russia and Iran by creating synergy out of the Russian-Iranian strategic partnership. If the US' proxy wars only has drawn Russia and Iran closer than ever in their turbulent history as quasi-allies lately, their common interest today also lies in Trump's ingenuity to take help from Putin to normalise the US-Iran ties. If anyone can pull off such an audacious, magical rope trick, it is only Donald Trump who can.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/trumps-ingenuity-vis-a-vis-russia-iran/>, 10 March 2025

¹ Translator's note: The *snapback mechanism* in the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA, 2015 nuclear



The Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan.
(Picture hr)

deal) was designed to automatically reinstate previous UN sanctions if Iran were to violate its commitments. The nuclear deal was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015), which lifted previous sanctions. However, Annex B, paragraphs 11–12 of Resolution 2231 provided for a snapback if any JCPOA participant believed that Iran was not complying with the agreement.