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Why so tame?

The US-Israeli attack on Iran puts Russia in an extremely difficult position — and yet, Moscow's response has been rather reserved

The American-Israeli attack on Iran puts Russia in an extremely difficult position. The Russian Foreign Ministry verbally condemned the actions of the US and Israel as a 'planned and unprovoked act of armed aggression'. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin responded to the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, only privately, in a condolence telegram to his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian. The Russian president described it as a 'cynical violation of all norms of human morality and international law'. He did not, however, name the assassins or those behind them. Why so tame?

On the one hand, Moscow has lost its third ally within fifteen months. First, Bashar al-Assad was overthrown in Syria, then Nicolás Maduro was kidnapped in Venezuela, and now there has been an attack on Iran and the assassination of Khamenei. In the latter two cases, the US is the main player.

On the other hand, the Kremlin wants to strengthen its relations with the US. Moscow is actively negotiating with Washington, including on Ukraine. Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2024 was a real stroke of luck for Putin, as he is pursuing a much more Kremlin-friendly course than previous administrations. That is why the Kremlin chief cannot afford to criticise the US as harshly as he did in 2011, when Putin, then Russian Prime Minister, called Barack Obama's military operation in Libya to depose long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi a 'new crusade'.

Putin's weakness

Today, the Kremlin leader is in a much more vulnerable position. Last May, he signed a strategic partnership agreement with Maduro. But Putin refrained from commenting on Maduro's abduction himself.

Putin will undoubtedly be forced to take sides in the Middle East conflict

in the end. But for Russia, which, despite various differences of opinion, maintains normal relations with both Iran and the United States and Israel, it would be desirable to avoid this for as long as possible.

The Kremlin also has no interest in further escalation between the Islamic Republic and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Since the start of the war against Ukraine, Moscow has further strengthened its relations with the Arab world due to its isolation by Western sanctions. Trade between Russia and the United Arab Emirates in particular grew by 68 per cent to 9 billion US dollars in 2022. By 2025, it is expected to exceed $12 billion. The Emirates have become one of Moscow's ten largest trading partners.

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The volume of Russian-Iranian economic relations is only $4 to $5 billion, but Iran became Russia's most important arms supplier immediately after the invasion of Ukraine. Among other things, the Kremlin has begun purchasing Iranian Shahed-136 drones. In return, Tehran has been content with Russian diplomatic support in various international forums, including the UN Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Moscow has no military obligations to Tehran. The Russian-Iranian cooperation has not developed into a military alliance. According to the comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between Russia and Iran signed in January 2025, the only obligation of the contracting parties in the event of war is not to take sides with each other's enemy. Unlike North Korea, Iran has not sent troops to the war in Ukraine. In fact, Iran has not even officially confirmed that it is supplying Moscow with weapons for its war against Kyiv, and repeatedly emphasises its commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Conversely, since last year's war between Iran and Israel, Tehran also knows that it can hope for diplomatic support from Russia at best. Arms deliveries to Iran are limited because Moscow itself needs modern weapon systems to achieve its goals in Ukraine. And the Russian weapons that Iran receives are not capable of influencing the course of the military conflict between the Islamic Republic and its opponents.

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Last year, Iranian officials even accused Russia of deliberately restricting deliveries or failing to fulfil its obligations altogether. They wanted to

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prove that the Kremlin was supporting Israel and not Iran. These allegations were partly justified, as Moscow did indeed want to prevent Russian weapons from causing significant damage to Israeli or American infrastructure.

In recent years, Russia has announced the formation of a new international order in various forums, including the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), of which Iran is a member, in which the so-called Global South is to play a special role. In reality, however, it is clear that the US can eliminate leaders of Global South countries with impunity, while Moscow, which aspires to a leading role in this part of the world, stands idly by. Neither in the case of Maduro's abduction nor in the assassination of Khamenei was there a unified line among the countries of the Global South.

In the Middle East, demonstrations of strength are the only thing that is truly respected. Ten years ago, Putin proudly presented the successes of Russian weapons in Syria when he came to the aid of his ally Assad. At that time, Moscow and Washington jointly determined the future of Syria and the entire region. Today, Putin is demonstrating weakness. He is no longer able to stand by his allies or negotiate with the US on equal terms. The Kremlin's persistent silence towards Trump and Putin's inability to openly oppose the White House mean a serious loss of face for Moscow. And the longer the armed conflict between Iran, the US and Israel continues, the more devastating it will end with a defeat for the mullahs, the more serious the damage to the Kremlin's image will be.



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