

Blinken Gets Bibi to Bend on Ukraine

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The United States and Israel make quite a pair. They tango, they align, they scratch each other's back, they can be bitchy toward each other, and have a Faustian deal but are also lone rangers — and Israel lets the Big Brother feel he's the one taking all major decisions.

Which of the above templates is currently at work is a moot question, as the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday to persuade the latter not to press ahead with the UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate halt to Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank.

The proposed resolution, drafted by the UAE is in response to the announcement by the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last Sunday that it would be "legalising" nine outposts and advancing future plans for creating around 10,000 new settlement homes in the West Bank. It demands that Israel "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory."

Consistent with the US doublespeak on the Palestinian problem, the Biden Administration spoke on record against Jerusalem's plans but is also [pushing back against the Palestinian effort](#) to bring the resolution to a vote. If push comes shove, US won't hesitate to veto the resolution but its optics will be very damaging at a time when Biden is holding high the banner of democracy, human rights, UN Charter, rules-based order, etc.

Blinken later also called Netanyahu to update him on his conversation with Abbas. There is nothing new in this pattern. But an interesting coincidence merits attention — Blinken's activism came just two days after the visit by Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen to Kiev and his meeting with President Vladimir Zelensky on Thursday.

This is the first visit by a Israeli foreign minister to Ukraine since the Russian special operations began and during this period, some chill had descended on the Ukraine-Israel

relations as Tel Aviv stood neutral on the conflict in Ukraine and refused to criticise Russia or supply Ukraine with military hardware, the US entreaties notwithstanding.

Blinken must be pleased about the development. He can take credit for it, since a subtle shift in the Israeli stance on Ukraine began appearing following his visit to Israel on January 30 and his meeting with Netanyahu.

At the joint press conference of with Blinken, Netanyahu made a cryptic remark about how Iran has begun “export[ing] aggression beyond its border and beyond the Middle East.” And Blinken completed with alacrity the ellipsis in Netanyahu’s articulation:

“Just as Iran has long supported terrorists that attack Israelis and others, the regime is now providing drones that Russia is using to kill innocent Ukrainian civilians. In turn, Russia is providing sophisticated weaponries to Iran. It’s a two-way street.”

Blinken went on to disclose that

“Russia’s ongoing atrocities only underscore the importance of providing support for all of Ukraine’s needs — humanitarian, economic, and security — as it bravely defends its people and its very right to exist, a topic that we also discussed today. One of the most effective ways to make Israel more secure is to continue to build bridges in the region and even well beyond the region.”

Ukraine issue and the Iran question have become intertwined in the US-Israeli talking points. But this is not so much because Iranian drones are being used by Russia to attack Ukrainian targets, but the alchemy of Russia-Iran relations has dramatically changed since the drone deal. A strategic axis is taking shape between the two countries with a robust military and economic content to it, which has the potential to radically change the balance of forces in Israel’s security environment.

Netanyahu appreciates that the Biden Administration is determined to use all options on the table to contain Iran and that includes regime change. No American president has gone thus far. This was also the impression created by the White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan when he met Netanyahu on January 19 (ahead of Blinken’s visit) — albeit Sullivan’s visit was packaged as consultations over the new Israeli government’s [judicial overhaul plan](#) and Biden’s concerns over “the effect it might have on Israel’s democratic institutions.”

Israel’s dependence on US to contain Iran is more critical than ever before. Tensions are spiralling since the drone attack on the Iranian assets in Isfahan on January 28. Two Israeli officers have since been killed; an Israeli tanker attacked. On Saturday, there was a [missile attack on the US base](#) near Al-Omar oil field in Deir Ezzor (Syria), and early Sunday, central Damascus came under Israeli missile attack. Meanwhile, the US has begun a renewed attempt to incite anti-government protests in Iran.

In sum, the US and Israel realise that Iran has gained huge strategic depth during the past year in the geopolitical realignment triggered by the Ukraine conflict. Thus, During the [state visit of President Ebrahim Raisi to China](#) last week, President Xi Jinping voiced strong support for Iran against US interference in its internal affairs and for Iran’s nuclear brief.

In a highly significant statement, the Chinese Communist Party daily Global Times wrote that “Iran’s ‘Look to the East’ policy meant the transition from its policy of negative

balancing and non-alignment to building alliances with non-western world powers that have similar political structures to Iran, such as Russia and China.”

Since his return to Tehran, Raisi disclosed that Xi has supported Iran’s BRICS membership. Iran recently became a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, too.

Now, what form the Israeli shift on Ukraine conflict will take remains to be seen. Israel participates in the Pentagon’s Ukraine Defence Contact Group. But [Cohen gave few details](#) after his meeting with Zelensky other than that they agreed to step up cooperation in a shared struggle against Iran. He was evasive: “We spoke about deepening cooperation with Ukraine against the Iranian threat in the international arena.”

Cohen said Israel would provide \$200 million in loan guarantees to build hospitals in Ukraine and reiterated an Israeli pledge to give Ukraine a sophisticated air-defence warning system. But he was not specific when that system might be delivered; nor did he make any mention of Russia or how Israel would respond to Ukrainian appeals for Israeli arms.

Cohen said, “Israel, as stated in the past, stands firmly in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and remains committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.” He refused to answer questions on intelligence cooperation.

The big question is whether Israel will continue to walk a tightrope between assisting Ukraine and avoiding friction with Russia with which it has strategic regional interests. But Ukraine conflict has shown the potential to reshape global alliances and [Russia has warned Israel](#) against supplying weapons to Ukraine.

The [Russian ambassador in Tel Aviv told](#) Jerusalem Post on Friday that Moscow has taken “serious note” of Israel’s “diplomatic and balanced position” and would hope that “this position ... will remain unchanged and there will be no weapons components provided by the Israeli authorities to Ukraine.”

Israel’s understanding with Russia is far from limited to Syria. It is a multifaceted relationship where “Russia holds many important cards,” as a [commentary in Middle East Monitor](#) took note even as Cohen was travelling to Kiev.

Netanyahu would have to convince himself first about the wisdom of jettisoning Israel’s neutrality, as he’d know that with all his ingenuity, it will be difficult to characterise any Israeli move to supply weaponry to fight Russian forces in Ukraine as an act directed against Iran.

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Featured image: Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky (L) with Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, Kiev, Feb. 16, 2023 (Source: IP)

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