

Iran's Failing Eastward Pivot? The Limits and Risks of Russia-China Alignment

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Brief Analysis

Since the June war, Tehran has hastily doubled down on Russian and Chinese partnerships to weather sanctions and deter future attacks, but Moscow and Beijing are hesitant to invest deeply in return—and Washington should make sure they stay that way.

When Iranian leaders assisted Russia's war on Ukraine by providing diplomatic support, ammunition, and thousands of lethal Shahed suicide drones, they probably believed Moscow would reciprocate by coming to their aid at a future time of need. Similarly, when they supplied China with bargain-basement crude oil—discounted as low as **\$14 per barrel (<https://dcjournal.com/the-hidden-price-of-chinas-cheap-oil-from-iran-and-russia/>)**, for total savings of around \$7 billion per year—they likely thought they would be allowed to buy some of the same top-of-the-line weapons that Beijing provides to other partners (e.g., the modern fighter jets, early warning and control aircraft, submarines, frigates, and air defense systems sent to Pakistan; or the advanced ballistic missile systems and main battle tanks sent to Bangladesh).

Yet despite Iran's public relations effort to portray Russia and China as strategic partners, the interest is not reciprocal in practice—at least not yet. For example, the substantial Shahed (aka Geran) drone production line that Tehran helped Russia build in Tatarstan now operates largely without Iranian involvement, and the latest models recovered in Ukraine have been equipped with Chinese rather than Iranian engines. Similarly, Moscow has switched to North Korea as its main supplier of ammunition and short-range ballistic missiles.

These dynamics can shift on a dime, however, as shown by the recent **emergence (<https://www.twz.com/air/russia-now-using-iranian-shahed-107-drones-to-strike-beyond-the-front-lines>)** of Iranian-made Shahed-107 loitering munitions at the frontlines in Ukraine. Accordingly, the United States would benefit from a deeper understanding of military and dual-use dealings between Iran, Russia, and China—not just to assess their current scope and future threat potential, but also to diligently monitor, dissuade, and disrupt them when necessary.

Differing Perspectives and Limitations

In recent years, Iran has sought to formalize its eastward pivot by joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2023) and BRICS (2024), by reaching a comprehensive strategic partnership [agreement \(https://mfa.gov.ir/files/mfa/PDF/■■■ ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■.pdf\)](https://mfa.gov.ir/files/mfa/PDF/■■■ ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■.pdf) with China (signed in 2016, formalized in 2021), and by signing a twenty-year comprehensive strategic partnership [treaty \(https://president.ir/en/156874\)](https://president.ir/en/156874) with Russia in January 2025. Notably, the Chinese agreement is one level below the “all-weather” bilateral treaties Beijing has signed with Pakistan and certain other countries, while Russia has yet to designate Iran as a “Tier 1” partner (<https://idrw.org/india-interested-in-s-500-yet-russia-indicates-extended-wait-due-to-domestic-needs/>) at the level of Belarus, India, or even Algeria. Both of the Iranian agreements did codify deeper cooperation on economics, defense, and security, including intelligence sharing, joint military training/exercises, and expanded “military-technical” links (which could mean arms sales and defense-industrial collaboration). Yet they stopped short of any mutual defense clause.

Russia and China’s reasons for hesitating seem to differ in significant ways. For Moscow, the main hindrance is Iran’s inability to pay for its military wish list—which means that the Kremlin may be willing to proceed with expanded sales of strategic weapons and deeper cooperation whenever Tehran manages to improve its budgetary situation. For instance, after Iran reportedly made initial advance payments on its 2022 order of Sukhoi Su-35 multirole fighter jets, Russian military industries [began working \(https://united24media.com/world/russia-is-building-su-35-fighter-jets-for-iran-secret-files-reveal-the-numbers-and-delivery-timeline-13844\)](https://united24media.com/world/russia-is-building-su-35-fighter-jets-for-iran-secret-files-reveal-the-numbers-and-delivery-timeline-13844) to produce 16 of the 48 aircraft ordered for delivery by 2027. Yet Iran’s expectations go well beyond three or four jet squadrons, and Russia still falls short of the regime’s practical requirement for a “total solution provider.” In Tehran’s future vision of an integrated air and missile defense network, modern fighters and early warning/electronic support aircraft would play an integral role, and more modern jet trainers would likely be required as well. The regime’s Russian-made submarines are also near the end of their service life, and its mechanized and armor units are in abysmal shape. Another near-term barrier is Russia’s military industrial capacity, which has grown significantly during the Ukraine war but is still [limited by delays \(https://idrw.org/india-interested-in-s-500-yet-russia-indicates-extended-wait-due-to-domestic-needs/\)](https://idrw.org/india-interested-in-s-500-yet-russia-indicates-extended-wait-due-to-domestic-needs/) in high-demand sectors like air defense.

Given these Russian constraints—not to mention China’s more advanced and diverse product line—Tehran has also been eyeing Beijing as a possible total solution provider. China’s traditional role as a heavy buyer of Iranian crude also opens attractive weapons-for-oil [barter options \(https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/China-and-Iran-Seal-Oil-for-Infrastructure-Deal-to-Bypass-US-Sanctions.html\)](https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/China-and-Iran-Seal-Oil-for-Infrastructure-Deal-to-Bypass-US-Sanctions.html). Yet despite Tehran’s eager outreach, Beijing still views the Islamic Republic as a [high-risk \(https://www.pbc.gov.cn/fanxiqianju/135153/135267/135279/5601494/index.html\)](https://www.pbc.gov.cn/fanxiqianju/135153/135267/135279/5601494/index.html) country for deeper investments.

This includes direct military sales. Although Beijing has allowed continuous [shipments \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0313\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0313) of dual-use drone components and missile propellant precursors to Tehran, it remains reluctant to deliver any game-changing hardware. Past Iranian inquiries about fighter jets never reached the contract stage, while any air defense sales would likely be limited to short-range systems that are only useful against drones and cruise missiles. Other rumored Iranian requests—such as the longer-range [HQ-9 defense system \(https://4795492.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/4795492/Metis%20Insights%20CHINA-IRAN%20TRADE%20LOOP.pdf\)](https://4795492.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/4795492/Metis%20Insights%20CHINA-IRAN%20TRADE%20LOOP.pdf) and highly capable antiship missiles—would require a major shift in Chinese policy. For now, Beijing can be expected to continue with its post-1978 habit of not selling arms to countries that are under foreign sanctions and/or in direct confrontation with the United States.

Whether or not Iran can change this calculus, one thing is clear: its current stable of mostly Russian air defense systems failed to engage a single target successfully during the twelve-day war with Israel and the United States this June, and most of them were destroyed or disabled. In addition, American and Israeli forces are quite familiar with the performance of Russian systems in general and know how to counter them, so Iranian forces are unlikely to gain much from deeper air defense cooperation with Moscow or its close partner Belarus. Even so, Russia **can be expected** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-defense-ties-middle-east-poised-rebound>) to set its sights on the international arms market in the coming years, offering its surplus wartime capacity of high- and low-end weapons to a wide range of merchants and states—including Iran. And despite its tattered economy, Tehran might still find different ways to invest significant funds in procuring weapons it cannot produce domestically.

Iran could gain the most from a Pakistan-style military cooperation relationship with China, potentially encompassing all categories of weapons, command-and-control capabilities, intelligence systems, joint research and development activities, co-production, and so forth. For its part, Beijing would benefit by gaining a firm foothold in West Asia's most strategically placed country. Of course, the proponents of such an alliance inside both governments would first need to overcome all of the barriers, internal opposition, and skepticism discussed above. Yet this Chinese-Iranian "total" scenario is still the one Washington should be most concerned about and most focused on preventing.

Policy Recommendations

In addition to closely monitoring any shifts in the above dynamics, the United States should take concrete preventive action on several fronts—in some cases immediately given the potential policy and security risks:

- Increase relevant sanctions pressure, which includes: expanding the unilateral U.S. sanctions regime targeting Iran's weapons procurement mechanisms with Russia and China; urging allies to help choke off Tehran's rearmament funds via new sanctions and other pressures on Chinese banks and companies that abet Iranian oil exports; and reinstating international arms sanctions via the UN snapback mechanism ([see here for a detailed account \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/8232\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/8232) of now-reactivated Security Council restrictions on Iranian arms transfers, and how Tehran and its suppliers often circumvented them).
- Privately warn Beijing and Moscow that propping up Iran's military capabilities is a proven route to regional escalation, particularly if Israel perceives these capabilities as a direct threat. Washington should also consider surging naval and air assets into the Middle East again as a deterrent if advanced weapons transfers to Iran seem imminent.
- Expand and maintain the U.S. military and intelligence-collection capabilities needed to help monitor and intercept any sanctioned cargoes that travel through the Middle East en route to Iran. These efforts should focus on components and materials related to the regime's weapons programs, as [reportedly happened \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-forces-raid-ship-seize-cargo-headed-to-iran-from-china-35a1e2ac\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-forces-raid-ship-seize-cargo-headed-to-iran-from-china-35a1e2ac) in the Indian Ocean in November. Ultimately, however, regional countries must take the lead enforcement role if such efforts are to be effective in the long term, so Washington should do what it can to prepare them for that responsibility and push them to assume it, reminding them that they benefit greatly from a subdued Iranian regime.
- Ask Gulf partners to use their economic leverage to deter China and Russia from sending Tehran advanced weapons, military technology, or materials that can be used to produce missiles or drones capable of reaching Gulf targets.
- As part of broader peace negotiations over Ukraine, ask Russia to include caps on any postwar sales of advanced weapons to Iran (or, ideally, prohibit them entirely).
- Talk with Beijing about its problematic provision of dual-use materials to Iran, highlighted recently by large shipments of sodium perchlorate, a precursor for missile propellant (see below).
- Use novel U.S. tools—such as new [unmanned capabilities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-)

[analysis/new-navy-task-force-aims-deter-iran-unmanned-systems](#)), selective disclosure of intelligence, and media leaks—to put a brighter spotlight on transfers of dual-use materials to and from Iran (e.g., see [this January 2025 Financial Times](#) article (<https://www.ft.com/content/f0bc9fcc-11b3-4615-bd24-163f8938f2a5>) on sodium perchlorate shipments from China to Iran, or various Defense Intelligence Agency [threat reports](#) (<https://www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications/>) on Iranian weapons shipments to the Yemeni Houthis and Russia).

- Leverage China’s desire for cheap oil imports by demonstrating that the United States has multiple ways of influencing the flow and price of crude shipments from Iran. For example, Washington could pressure the wide range of intermediaries in the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Hong Kong, and elsewhere that help keep the lucrative oil “shadow fleet” in operation, such as insurance firms, classification societies, bunkering operators, and terminal inspection agencies. U.S. officials should also continue targeting the Chinese “teapot refineries” that buy most of Iran’s cheap crude, especially if some have not yet received [direct, systematic attention](#) (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/05/09/u-s-imposes-third-round-of-sanctions-on-chinese-teapot-refineries-importing-iranian-oil/>) from the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control.
- Continue to voice support for the frustrated Iranian people, in part because [various polls](#) (<https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/GAMAAN-IR-Survey-English-Report-Final.pdf>) and [analyses](#) (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/despite-official-hype-strategic-partnership-iranian-public-skeptical-russia>) suggest that the majority of them are strongly suspicious of Russian and Chinese intentions in their country and prefer friendly relations with the West.

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