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The Drivers of and Outlook for Russian-Iranian Cooperation

The ongoing war in Ukraine has shed new light on the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran. Although the countries' close relationship predated Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the conflict has spurred greater defense and economic cooperation and raised new questions about their ability to surmount tensions within what remains an unequal partnership. Long the junior partner in this relationship, Iran has assumed a new role as a key military supplier to Russia, providing hundreds of unmanned aerial systems (UASs) and reportedly considering a Russian request to purchase Iranian-made surface-to-surface ballistic missiles.¹ In exchange, Russia has offered Tehran what senior British diplomats have characterized as “an unprecedented level of military and technical support” to advance Iranian weapons capabilities, including the provision of multi-role aircraft; air defense; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and cyber capabilities.² Russia and Iran's ability to maintain a cohesive partnership and overcome sources of tension and competition will be a major determinant in both Russia's ability to sustain its military operations in Ukraine and the United States' ability to advance its interests in the Middle East.

To inform assessments of the implications of Iran’s military assistance to Russia, we describe the factors that drive Russian-Iranian cooperation and examine how the relationship might evolve. Drawing on press reports, public statements by Iranian, Russian, U.S., and British government officials, and other open-source analysis, we first briefly survey Russian-Iranian relations from 1979 to 2022 and describe Tehran’s initial response to Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine. We next examine how the bilateral relationship has evolved since the summer of 2022, exploring how the Ukraine conflict has deepened ties between the two countries. Lastly, we identify indicators to assess the degree of cohesion within the Russian-Iranian relationship as it evolves in the coming months and years. Derived from historical trends in the relationship, these indicators offer analysts and planners a basis to monitor trendlines and anticipate changes in the relationship.

Abbreviations

EU	European Union
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAS	unmanned aerial system
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations

Building a Partnership of Convenience, 1979–2022

The relationship between Russia and Iran is commonly characterized as a partnership of convenience.³ Since the late 1980s, the countries have increased their military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation based on a shared antipathy toward the United States, a hostility toward Western-led regional and international governance structures, and growing economic interdependencies. Iranian and Russian leaders see the United States as responsible for color revolutions (e.g., the 2009 Green Movement in Iran or the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia) in their respective spheres of influence, and they have sought to reduce the U.S. military presence and to challenge U.S. influence in the Middle East. These common interests are reinforced by the countries’ geographic proximity (while they do not share a border, the Caspian Sea provides direct access between them) and isolation from the international community, factors that provide both opportunities and incentives to collaborate economically, diplomatically, and militarily.⁴

Yet a combination of mistrust and conflicting political interests has also limited Russian-Iranian cooperation and disincentivized the establishment of a formal alliance. In periods of heightened tensions with the United States or internal unrest in the Middle East, Iran and Russia have proven willing to transcend their disagreements and collaborate to advance broad areas of common interest. Nonetheless, cooperation during these periods has fallen short of expectations for a comprehensive strategic partnership. Given their historical experiences and ongoing economic and political competitions, both sides have resisted options

that limit their strategic autonomy or improve the other's capacity to pursue an independent foreign policy in the Middle East. Over the last three decades, leaders in both countries have also demonstrated a willingness to use their relationship as leverage in third-party negotiations, a trend that has contributed to periodic ruptures and enduring mistrust.⁵ As a result, the degree of cohesion between Iran and Russia has varied over time and been punctuated by periodic crises of confidence.

Tehran's turn toward Moscow was not preordained. Iranians recall how Russia gained control of Iranian territory over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries through conflict, occupation, and unequal treaties. During both World War I and World War II, Russian and then Soviet forces occupied large portions of Iran and established puppet governments in secessionist provinces.⁶ This legacy contributed to Iran's efforts to counterbalance Soviet and communist influence in the Middle East by cooperating with the United States from the 1950s until the 1979 revolution.⁷ Although the Soviet Union was the first state to recognize the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran in February 1979, relations deteriorated after the Iranian regime prosecuted communist elements within the country and the Soviet Union supplied Iraq with large quantities of conventional weapons during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988.⁸ Over the next decade, Iran pursued a policy of nonalignment, exemplified by the slogan of “Neither East nor West,” and the pursuit of economic, social, and military self-reliance.⁹

In the late 1980s, however, Iran began to reconsider its approach to the Soviet Union. By improving relations with Moscow while continuing to pursue self-sufficiency, Iran hoped to counterbalance U.S. influence in the Middle East

and to improve its access to the raw goods, commodities, and technology it needed to satisfy domestic needs and pursue military reconstitution and modernization.¹⁰ Beginning in 1989, the countries agreed to increase commercial, cultural, technical, military, and civilian nuclear cooperation.¹¹ Iran pointedly did not condemn Russia's military operations in Chechnya and cooperated with Moscow to support the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and to negotiate an end to the 1992–1997 civil war in Tajikistan.¹² As relations between Iran and the United States deteriorated, influential regime officials argued that Iran should revise its historic neutrality and “look east” by improving ties with Russia, China, and other Asian powers.¹³ In addition to the material, economic, and security benefits of cooperation, these ties would provide Iran leverage in future negotiations with the United States, Europe, and regional rivals while fulfilling the country's preference for balancing great powers against one another. Iran also benefitted

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from an uptick in arms sales from Russia and former Soviet republics; by the end of the decade, Russia had emerged as the primary supplier of Iranian military imports.¹⁴ In addition, Iran sought Russian technical assistance with its indigenous missile development programs.¹⁵

Russian assistance to Iran's civil nuclear program began during this period. In January 1995, the Russian nuclear agency signed a contract to build a light-water reactor for a planned nuclear power station at Bushehr, despite U.S. concerns that the program posed multiple proliferation risks.¹⁶ That August, Russia entered into a 10-year contract to supply nuclear fuel for the plant. Under the terms of these agreements, Iranian physicists and engineers received training at Russian nuclear research centers in Moscow and a nuclear power station at Novovoronezh.¹⁷

Despite the gradual expansion of Russian-Iranian cooperation, persistent mistrust and divergent strategic interests continued to restrain the relationship. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and establishment of three new littoral states triggered new disputes over the division of natural resources in the Caspian Sea and competition for new transit routes and energy markets.¹⁸ Russia and Iran continued to pursue joint energy projects in the Caspian Sea and together sought to block U.S. efforts to establish alternate pipelines to European energy markets, but the prospects for true economic integration were limited by their common dependence on hydrocarbons and metal production.¹⁹ These conflicting national interests drove Iran to sign a series of energy, transportation, and trade agreements with Central Asian and the South Caucasus natural gas and oil producers over the 1990s that would have reduced Russian influence over regional and European energy markets, although their efficacy was under-

cut by Tehran's increasing diplomatic isolation and financial challenges.²⁰

Iran's nuclear and military ambitions also raised concerns in Russia and prompted a series of high-profile policy reversals. In 1995, for instance, Russia agreed to limit its nuclear assistance and suspend its sale of advanced conventional weapons to Iran in return for a U.S. pledge not to impose economic penalties for selling advanced weaponry to designated state sponsors of terrorism, as required under a 1992 law.²¹ Although Russia's record of compliance with the so-called Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement is checked, the episode demonstrated the country's willingness to cooperate with the United States on nonproliferation and reinforced Iranian perceptions of Russian perfidy.²² A decade later, substantial delays in the completion of the Bushehr plant, Russia's failure to veto a series of United Nations (UN) sanctions resolutions against Iran, Russia's public denunciation of Iran's suspension of the Additional Protocol, and Russia's decision to cancel an agreement to sell S-300 air defense missile systems angered Iranian leaders and further contributed to the perception that Russia would side against Iran when convenient.²³ The gap between Russian and Iranian positions on nuclear proliferation widened again in 2010 when Russia voted for UN sanctions after Iran rejected a fuel-swap proposal that would have allowed Iran to fulfill its domestic civilian requirements for nuclear fuels.²⁴

For much of the 1990s and 2000s, Russia sought to maximize areas of established agreement while preserving Russian flexibility to pursue its national interests—including more stable relations with the United States—independently. For Russia's Eurasianists, proponents of a distinct Russian civilizational identity who have gained

influence in the Kremlin under the rule of Russian president Vladimir Putin, Iran's historical status, geographic position, and regional influence make it a natural strategic partner.²⁵ Russian strategists are attuned to Iran's geographic proximity, and they have sought to ensure that the government remains stable, friendly, and, in a word, anti-American. Iranian territory also offers Russia alternate access routes to Armenia, Russia's primary ally in the South Caucasus, and a potential transportation corridor to the Indian Ocean.²⁶ Russia also recognizes the economic opportunities offered by Iran's large population and location.²⁷ Because international sanctions inhibit other alternatives, Iran presents an enticing market for the Russian defense industry and energy firms, which have sought to develop Iranian natural gas reserves.²⁸

This history lends a transactional quality to the Russian-Iranian relationship that inhibits the development of a broader strategic partnership. Following the outbreak of civil conflict in Syria, Russia and Iran embarked on a new period of direct military cooperation that superseded, but did not resolve, underlying conflicts within their relationship.²⁹ The conflict in Syria, which grew out of protests against the Assad regime, was seen as emblematic of the threat that U.S. intervention posed to internal stability in the Middle East and further evidence that the United States is committed to regime change in Tehran and Moscow.³⁰ Russia and Iran therefore agreed on the importance of close security cooperation and reexamined prior restrictions on the relationship. In 2016, for instance, Iran granted Russia permission to conduct air operations in Syria from the Shahid Nojeh Air Base, and permitted Russia to use Iranian airspace for cruise missile strikes in Syria.³¹ Rus-

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sian air power provided crucial support to Iranian-backed militias operating in Syria.³²

Yet the Syria conflict also demonstrated important differences in each country's approaches and objectives. Iranian distrust of Russia stems from Russia's historical role as an occupier, including of neighboring Afghanistan, and the perception that Russia has "often use[d] Iran as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the United States."³³ Barely a week after it had granted Russian forces access to Shahid Nojeh Air Base in 2016, Iran annulled the agreement on the grounds that the Kremlin's public statements had described the deal as a "betrayal of trust" and "ungentlemanly."³⁴ For its part, Russia sought to preserve its influence in Syria and to deny what it views as Western-engineered attempts at regime change, but it was more ambivalent toward whether the Assad regime should retain long-term control.³⁵ Russian military officials expressed clear preferences for working with Syrian government forces, rather than with Hezbollah fighters and the anti-regime nongovernmental forces that Iran favored.³⁶ Russia has also sought to distance itself from Iranian antagonism of Israel as well as

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Iran's efforts to develop its Axis of Resistance, including Shi'a militias in Iraq, the Levant, and Yemen.³⁷

Even as events in Syria prompted extraordinary military cooperation, Russia and Iran pursued differing approaches to other issues. Although supportive of Iran's position on civilian nuclear development, Russia cooperated with the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany (P5+1) to negotiate limitations on Iranian nuclear activities under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and did not shy away from public recriminations.³⁸ Iran's subsequent reentry into global energy markets, which coincided with a renewed European desire to reduce energy dependency on Russia following its 2014 invasion of Ukraine, also generated political and economic tension between the partners.³⁹ Russia continued to engage Israel and to cooperate with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to manipulate oil prices to Iran's detriment.⁴⁰

Moscow fiercely criticized the U.S. decision to withdraw from the agreement in 2018 but reemerged as a major proponent of a restored nuclear deal after 2021.⁴¹ Russian diplomats have expressed public frustration with Iranian intransigence when presented with what Moscow viewed as reasonable diplomatic offers and have urged Tehran "to show restraint and a responsible approach."⁴²

So long as both countries' relations with the United States remain strained, both sides continue to perceive a common interest in cooperation. Soon after his election in 2021, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi indicated that strengthening relations with Russia would be one of his top foreign policy priorities. During a phone call with President Putin in August 2021, he called for the conclusion of a "comprehensive agreement on bilateral cooperation," noting that the countries' "successful experience" in Syria "opened new windows for the two sides to increase Tehran-Moscow interaction."⁴³ The following January, President Raisi travelled to Moscow for his first official bilateral visit during which he transmitted a draft 20-year cooperation agreement.⁴⁴

From Wary to Wartime Partners, 2022–2023

Since February 2022, the Russian war in Ukraine has increased Russian and Iranian strategic alignment and incentivized expanded cooperation. In conjunction with internal unrest within Iran and diminished prospects for renewal of the 2015 JCPOA, the conflict has heightened Russian and Iranian awareness of areas of strategic alignment and created new incentives for cooperation. Accordingly, the countries have demonstrated an increased will—

and capacity—to cooperate to advance shared interests in contesting U.S. influence, suppressing internal threats, and improving their national resilience to economic sanctions and pressure. (For a summary, see Table 1.)

Focused on negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran’s initial reaction to the war in Ukraine was cautious.⁴⁵ In public statements, senior governmental officials sought to assign responsibility for the fighting to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which they alleged had provoked the “crisis,” but sought to distance themselves from Moscow’s actions.⁴⁶ In a tweet published on

February 24, 2022, for instance, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian alleged that “the #Ukraine crisis is rooted in NATO’s provocations” but added that Iran does not “believe that resorting to war is a solution.”⁴⁷

The war in Ukraine erupted at a pivotal moment for then-ongoing international negotiations to return the United States to the JCPOA and bring Iran back into compliance with the deal. After three months of intense discussions, the parties had reached a draft text by late February.⁴⁸ On March 5, however, Russia added a new demand, apparently without Iranian concurrence, that the United

TABLE 1
Russian-Iranian Strategic Alignment (February 2022–June 2023)

Issue	Direction	Recent Trends
Desire to contest U.S. global position	Expanding cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced military cooperation in multiple domains Coordinated international messaging, including criticism of alleged U.S. and NATO provocations Russia-China-Iran staging of combined naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman
Desire to promote alternatives to Western governance norms and institutions	Expanding cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian-Chinese support for Iran bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a permanent member
Desire to reduce U.S. influence and presence in the Middle East	Continued cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian shipment of U.S.-origin weapons captured in Ukraine to Iran for exploitation Expanded air defense, missile cooperation History of coordination in the Syria conflict
Interest in weakening U.S. and international sanctions regimes	Expanding cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connection of interbank communication and transfer systems Joint investment in new transit routes Iranian knowledge transfer on sanctions evasion
Desire to ensure survival of existing Iranian and Russian leadership	Expanding cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian technical assistance and advising to quell internal instability in Iran Russian provision of digital surveillance and censorship systems, reversing prior prohibition on sharing offensive cyber capabilities

SOURCES: Bozorgmehr, “Sanctions-Hit Russian Businessmen Seek Tips from Iran”; Vazquez, “White House Claims US Is Seeing Signs Russia May Be Advising Iran on How to Crack Down on Protests”; Tirone and Motevalli, “Russia and Iran Are Building a Trade Route That Defies Sanctions”; “Iran, Russia Link Banking Systems Amid Western Sanction”; U.S. Department of Defense, “Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Holds a Joint Press Conference with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant”; Bertrand, “Russia Has Been Sending Some US-Provided Weapons Captured in Ukraine to Iran, Sources Say”; Superville, “China, Russia, Iran Hold Joint Naval Drills in Gulf of Oman”; Lieber, Faucon, and Amon, “Russia Supplies Iran with Cyber Weapons as Military Cooperation Grows.”

States provide written guarantees that any sanctions related to the war in Ukraine would not affect Russian commercial or economic activities with Iran.⁴⁹ Although Russia withdrew the demand shortly after, European participants had already suspended in-person negotiations.⁵⁰ The move provoked substantial criticism within Iran, where it was received as further evidence of Russia's disregard for Iran's interests and its willingness to exploit the relationship as negotiating leverage with the West.⁵¹

Yet as the war progressed and hopes for a nuclear deal dimmed, Iran began to adopt a stance that was more supportive of Russia. The failure of attempts to restart nuclear talks in June 2022 coincided with indications of a greater willingness from Tehran to align publicly with Moscow. This likely reflected an Iranian perception that the United States was not a reliable partner that could be trusted to negotiate in good faith, and therefore that an alliance with Russia was a preferable option. According to the International Crisis Group,

[the war] empowered the JCPOA's opponents in Tehran, who concluded they had room to press for advantage in the talks [and...] argued that Moscow would now join Iran in sanctions busting and that international buyers facing tight supplies and high prices would want Iranian oil.⁵²

In July, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei welcomed Putin to Tehran in the Russian president's first trip beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union since the war began. During this meeting, Khamenei reportedly called for increased cooperation between Iran and Russia and offered his implicit support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, telling Putin that the West would have

“caused a war on its own initiative” had Russia not initiated the conflict.⁵³

This rhetorical support coincided with evidence that Iran was providing Russia with military supplies and assistance with sanctions evasion.⁵⁴ In a statement days before Putin's visit to Tehran, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan warned that Russian defense officials had visited Iran to arrange for the purchase of “several hundred” Iranian UASs “on an expedited timeline.”⁵⁵ Although the Iranian Foreign Ministry denied the allegations, evidence of growing defense cooperation accumulated over the late summer and fall.⁵⁶ In August, Russia launched an Iranian remote-sensing satellite into orbit, fulfilling the terms of a space cooperation agreement signed in 2015.⁵⁷ Although Iran's space agency maintained the satellite would be used for civilian purposes, social media posts by affiliates of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) celebrated the improvement in Tehran's ability to monitor potential U.S. and Israeli military targets.⁵⁸

By the fall, the nature of Iranian support to Russia in Ukraine had become more unambiguous. In the early morning of October 17, 2022, Russia carried out strikes on Kyiv using Iranian-made drones; one struck an apartment building and killed four civilians.⁵⁹ Since then, Russia has continued to operate Iranian-manufactured Shahed-136 and Mohajer-6 UASs to target Ukraine's electrical infrastructure and might have modified the warheads to maximize the damage inflicted on infrastructure targets.⁶⁰ In November 2022, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian admitted that Iran had sent a limited number of UASs to Russia, although he insisted that the shipments had been made before Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁶¹ In response, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy

accused Iran of lying about the timing and quantity of its shipments to Russia.⁶²

In December 2022, U.S. government officials began to describe the close ties between Iran and Russia as warming to “a full-fledged defense partnership.”⁶³ On January 6, 2023, the United States designated six executives and board members of Qods Aviation Industries, an Iranian state-owned enterprise that designs and manufactures UASs, for their involvement in the production and transfer of equipment used by Russian forces against Ukraine.⁶⁴ The action, which occurred six months after senior U.S. government officials first publicly announced that Iran was preparing to provide Russia with UASs, marked the second of a series of sanctions intended to hold Iran accountable and to reduce Russian access to military equipment for use against Ukraine.⁶⁵ In an accompanying statement, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken alleged that Tehran’s military support to Russia “fuels the conflict in Ukraine,” and cautioned that “Iran has now become Russia’s top military backer.”⁶⁶ Additional U.S. designations, export controls, and advisories targeting Russian, Iranian, Chinese, and other third-country entities involved in the production and transfer of Iranian UASs have continued through June 2023; for a timeline of these actions, see the box on the next page.

Despite U.S. efforts to reveal and increase the costs of Russian-Iranian military cooperation, Russian and Iranian leaders reportedly continue to explore avenues to expand their partnership. According to British government statements and press reports, Russia reportedly has considered purchasing Iranian Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar short-range ballistic missiles and has received shipments of ammunition, mortars, machine guns, spare airplane and motor

vehicle parts, and other military equipment and supplies transported via the Caspian Sea.⁶⁷ In exchange, Russia has reportedly agreed to provide Iran with advanced Russian Sukhoi-35 fighter jets as soon as 2023,⁶⁸ and has offered what U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin described as “unprecedented defense cooperation” on missiles and air defense.⁶⁹ In March 2023, CNN reported that Russia might have shipped U.S.-origin weapons captured in Ukraine to Iran for exploitation, raising the prospect that Iran might attempt to reverse-engineer the systems.⁷⁰ These reportedly have included Javelin anti-tank and Stinger anti-aircraft systems.⁷¹ Iranian and Russian naval forces also staged joint drills with Chinese forces in the Gulf of Oman in what a Chinese Defense Ministry statement described as an exercise to advance “practical cooperation . . . and inject positive energy into regional peace and stability.”⁷² All the while, cooperation on military drone production has continued to deepen. In June 2023, the White House released evidence of Iranian UAS shipments to Russia across the Caspian Sea and of Russian-Iranian cooperation to manufacture the systems in factories within Russia’s Alabuga special economic zone.⁷³

Russian-Iranian cooperation on internal defense issues has advanced as well. After Iran requested Russian assistance to quell the nationwide demonstrations that erupted following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, senior Iranian and Russian judicial officials met in Tehran to sign a memorandum on judicial cooperation.⁷⁴ Russia has also provided Iran with “communication-surveillance capabilities as well as eavesdropping devices, advanced photography devices and lie detectors,” according to U.S. press reports.⁷⁵ Although Russia has long resisted providing offensive cyber capabilities out of concern that Iran

Timeline of U.S. Economic Sanctions Targeting Russian-Iranian UAS Transfers

- September 8, 2022 The United States sanctioned four Iranian companies and one Iranian national involved in the production or transportation of UASs for Russian use in Ukraine.
- November 15, 2022 Following Russian UAS strikes on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and cities, the United States imposed sanctions on three Iranian entities involved in the manufacture of Iranian-origin Shahed-136s and Mohajer-6s. Two UAE-based transportation firms, the IRGC Aerospace force, Russian Private Military Company Wagner, and two Russian nationals involved in Wagner's procurement of Iranian drones were also sanctioned.
- December 19, 2022 Responding to growing Russian-Iranian defense cooperation, the United States imposed sanctions on three Russian entities involved in the procurement of Iranian UASs: the Russian Aerospace Forces (the beneficiary of Iranian support), 924th State Center for Unmanned Aviation (whose personnel received UAS training in Iran), and the Command of the Military Transport Aviation (which was involved in the transfer).
- January 6, 2023 The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated six senior members of Qods Aviation Industries, a sanctioned Iranian defense manufacturer responsible for the design and production of UASs transferred to Russia, and designated the director of Iran's Aerospace Industries Organization, which oversees Iran's ballistic missile programs.
- February 3, 2023 To disrupt and delay Iranian transfers to Russia and impose costs on actors providing support, the U.S. State Department designated eight Iranian individuals in leadership roles at Paravar Pars, an Iran-based producer of UASs transferred to Russia that was previously sanctioned by the United States and European Union (EU) for producing UASs for the IRGC. The United States also identified two vessels, the IRIS *Makran* and IRIS *Dena*, as property in which the Government of Iran has an interest.
- February 23, 2023 As part of a package of new export rules to reduce third country support to the Russian defense industrial base and military, the U.S. Department of Commerce imposed new export control measures on Iran.
- March 9, 2023 In a step to degrade the international network supporting Iranian procurement and transfers of UASs, the United States designated five entities and one individual based in the People's Republic of China responsible for the sale and shipment of components used in Shahed-series UASs.
- March 21, 2023 Expanding its effort to disrupt Iranian UAS production, the United States designated four entities and three individuals in Turkey and Iran for their involvement in procuring equipment in support of Iranian UAS and other weapons programs.

Timeline of U.S. Economic Sanctions Targeting Russian-Iranian UAS Transfers—Continued

May 19, 2023	To degrade Russian-Iranian maritime logistics networks, the U.S. Department of State designated five Iranian shipping companies, subsidiaries, and maritime service providers for operating or having operated in the marine sector of the Russian Federation economy.
June 9, 2023	The U.S. Departments of State, Justice, Treasury, and Commerce issued joint advisories to global manufacturing, electronics, and shipping businesses about the military threats posed by Iran's UAS programs and the penalties for violating U.S. export controls.

SOURCES: Blinken, "Imposing Sanctions on Entities and Individuals in Response to Iran's Transfer of Military UAVs to Russia"; Blinken, "The United States Imposes Sanctions on Russian Entities Involved in UAV Deal with Iran"; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Suppliers of Iranian UAVs Used to Target Ukraine's Civilian Infrastructure"; Blinken, "U.S. Sanctions Leadership of Iranian UAV Manufacturer"; U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Imposes Additional Export Restrictions in Response to Russia's Brutal War on Ukraine"; Blinken, "Sanctioning a Network Supporting Iran's Procurement and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles Activities"; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Continues to Sanction Procurement Networks for Iran's UAV and Weapons Programs"; Blinken, "United States Imposes Additional Sanctions and Export Controls on Russia in Coordination with International Partners"; U.S. Department of State, "Guidance to Industry on Iran's UAV-Related Activities."

might share or sell the capabilities, Russian firms reportedly have also assisted the Iranian development of capabilities "to directly monitor, intercept, redirect, degrade or deny all Iranians' mobile communications, including those who are presently challenging the regime."⁷⁶

Concurrently, Iran and Russia have embarked on a sustained program to bolster their ability to withstand international sanctions related to the war in Ukraine and Iran's continued nuclear enrichment activities. Russia and Iran have invested in ground, rail, and sea-based infrastructure to expand and accelerate the volume of cargo that can be transported from the Caspian Sea to the Indian Ocean, a 3,000-kilometer passage that would improve both countries' access to foreign markets and enable greater sanctions evasion.⁷⁷ In September 2022, Iran, Russia, and Azerbaijan signed a declaration renewing their commitment to the development of the International North-South Transport Corridor and setting a target to increase the volume of cargo transiting the route to 30 million tons by 2030.

During a May 2023 signing ceremony for an agreement to finalize a long-delayed stretch of a railway, President Raisi praised the initiative as "an important strategic step on the path of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation."⁷⁸ Although progress on the multimodal corridor has lagged since the project was first declared in 2000, further investment would shorten the costs and time required to transport goods between India and the Persian Gulf.⁷⁹

Prior to the war in Ukraine, concerns about U.S. sanctions dissuaded many Russian firms from investing in Iran. Since 2022, however, private sector cooperation has grown as access to other permissive markets has decreased. In July 2022, for instance, the National Iranian Oil Company and Gazprom signed a \$40 billion agreement to develop oil and gas fields in Iran.⁸⁰ In January 2023, a representative of Iran's central bank confirmed that the countries had also taken steps toward integrating their banking systems after their disconnection from SWIFT, the Belgium-based

global messaging service that facilitates transactions among more than 11,000 financial institutions around the world. Iranian officials have alleged that the move would connect 700 Russian banks with 106 banks based in at least 13 other countries.⁸¹ In addition, Iranian and Russian private and government entities have signed draft agreements to increase trade between the countries and—in a measure intended to bypass restrictions on the use of global financial systems—to conduct transactions in rials and rubles.⁸²

These trends indicate that the war in Ukraine has resulted in enhanced defense cooperation between Russia and Iran. However, this cooperation has largely been undertaken out of necessity and has not altered the transactional nature of the relationship. Despite this recent warming of relations, several outstanding conflicts of interest that have historically limited the scope and strength of their partnership remain unaddressed. These range from issues of high and persistent importance to one or both of the countries (such as matters related to Iran's nuclear program) to lower-level disputes that might be subordinated in the countries' regular interactions but have emerged as periodic flashpoints in the relationship. Table 2 highlights five categories where tensions have recently been observed.

The first issue is the systemic mistrust between Russia and Iran that has arisen from—and contributes to—disagreements about the nature of the partnership and Iran's status within it. While some Iranian leaders have welcomed closer relations with Russia, concerns about fostering dependence on a foreign power have made others more reticent. Iran has interpreted prior Russian actions related to Iran's nuclear program and Russia's relations with the United States as a betrayal of the partnership; Iran perceives that Russia has used its influence with Iran as a

chit in past international negotiations. This dynamic was illustrated by both the negative reaction of some elements of the Iranian government to Russia's announcement of new terms for nuclear negotiations in March as well as Iranian officials' public attempts to refute reports that the countries had agreed to establish joint production facilities in Russia.⁸³ More subtle diplomatic slights, such as when Iran's Foreign Minister was forced to wait in a car for his Russian counterpart, have also provoked anger among Iranians who believe Russia has not treated Iran with sufficient respect.⁸⁴

For the moment, the Iranian government appears to have determined that it can preserve its strategic autonomy while exploiting the benefits of Russia's growing desperation for military supplies. Iran has lent some support to Russian narratives regarding NATO provocations but has continued to avoid providing a full-throated defense of its partner's actions in Ukraine. In statements on February 7, 2023, for instance, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani denounced reports that the countries were establishing joint UAS production lines in Russia as “completely untrue” and stated that “Iran is not interfering in the Ukraine war and is not siding with any party.”⁸⁵ Likewise, Iran has refused to recognize Moscow's territorial annexation of Crimea and Donbas, even as Iranian personnel reportedly have provided training to Russian forces operating in Crimea.⁸⁶

Iran has also continued to pursue an independent policy toward friendly and adversarial third parties. Such a dynamic is already apparent in Armenia, where Yerevan's dissatisfaction with Moscow's defense commitments has led it to diversify its military and foreign policy relations. Since February 2022, Iran has established a new Iranian

TABLE 2

Russian-Iranian Friction Points (February 2022–June 2023)

Issue	Direction	Recent Trends
Relative status within the partnership	Potential friction, currently stable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iranian leadership statements contain inconsistent references to the war in Ukraine and do not support Russian territorial claims Increased frequency of high-level visits by Russian officials to Iran Revised Russian foreign policy concept calls for “full-scale and trustful cooperation” with Iran^a
Competition for markets (e.g., energy, small arms)	Expanding friction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for increased competition with Russia for a limited number of permissive jurisdictions, as seen early in the Russian war in Ukraine Russian firms’ attempts to undersell Iranian exports
Relations with third parties	Expanding friction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Degradation of Iran-EU ties post-UAS deliveries complicates the prospects of return to a nuclear deal Israeli military activity in Syria, intensified anti-Iran rhetoric (following the International Atomic Energy Agency’s discovery that 84 percent enrichment might strain Iranian patience with Russian efforts to preserve positive relations with Israel and minimize Israeli support to Ukraine) Iranian steps toward normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE reduces point of tension for Russian regional relationships
Influence in the South Caucasus	Emerging friction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Armenian efforts to diversify military and foreign policy relations because of dissatisfaction with Russian commitments has contributed to increased outreach to Iran Intensification of Iran-Turkey-Azerbaijan tensions complicates Russian attempts at neutrality
Iran’s nuclear program	Emerging friction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public statements by Iranian officials criticizing Russian conditions on nuclear talks Diminished chances for a nuclear deal contributing to greater Iranian dependence on Russian economic assistance Public Israeli warnings might be worsening Iran’s sense of vulnerability, creating both new incentives for military cooperation with Russia and generating pressure on Russian-Israeli relations

SOURCES: Karimi and Isachenkov, “Putin, in Tehran, Gets Strong Support from Iran over Ukraine”; “Russia and Sanctions Evasion”; Matthews, “European Ties Become a Casualty of Iran’s Military Support for Russia”; Gavin, “Iran Is Filling Armenia’s Power Vacuum”; Zaman, “Turkey Rises, Russia Fades as Iran and Azerbaijan Clash over Armenia”; Avdaliani, “Armenia—Russia’s Disgruntled Ally”; Bronner, “Israel’s Window to Strike Iran Narrows as Putin Enters Equation.”

^a President of Russia, Decree on Approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation.

consulate in Kapan, committed to increased bilateral trade, and staged military exercises along its border with Azerbaijan.⁸⁷ Iran’s hostile relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE also continue to present challenges for Russia, even as the restoration of Iran-Saudi diplomatic relations in March 2023 has provided some additional flexibility.⁸⁸ All three countries have expressed concerns about Iran’s missile capabilities and can be expected to continue to pressure

Moscow to limit assistance that would substantially alter the regional balance.⁸⁹

Economic fissures also complicate Russian-Iranian efforts to deepen economic cooperation.⁹⁰ Russia’s search for new trade partners has disrupted Iranian revenue streams and extenuated the rivalry between the two hydrocarbon-dependent economies. Even as political leaders in Tehran have championed increased economic coop-

The extraordinary events in Ukraine have subsumed—but not resolved—disagreements between Russia and Iran.

eration, some Iranian business leaders have warned that the new competition for buyers is weakening Iranian commodity sales and undermining its ability to evade sanctions. “[Russian firms] are destroying the market,” summarized Hamid Hosseini, the spokesman for the Iranian Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Products Exporters Union.⁹¹ As of July 2023, Iranian officials confirmed that the country was offering a \$30 discount per barrel to buyers in Latin America, Africa, and Asia to compete with Russian and other Persian Gulf producers.⁹² In a surge that endangers Russian efforts to prop up prices by limiting OPEC production, Iranian oil exports have climbed since 2022.⁹³

The extraordinary events in Ukraine have subsumed—but not resolved—these disagreements. For the moment, leaders in Tehran and Moscow likely perceive significant benefits from continued cooperation on defense and economic issues. In the following sections, we assess the near-term implications of this cooperation for Russia, Iran, and the United States, and evaluate the fractures that could impede further growth. Increasing economic cooperation between the two countries, which has been institutional-

ized through the signing of new trade and financial agreements, might create linkages that will be more difficult to reverse. Any knowledge transferred from Iran to Russia regarding sanctions evasion techniques, moreover, will be permanent. If either Russia or Iran perceives that the risks of defense cooperation outweigh the benefits, they might seek to limit the continued growth of their relationship in this area. We turn to the implications of these trends in the next section.

Implications of Enhanced Cooperation

It is too soon to assess the full consequences of Russia and Iran’s move toward strengthened cooperation since the beginning of the Ukraine war. Nonetheless, it is clear that a strengthened partnership has benefitted both countries by influencing the course of the war in Ukraine and recasting Iran as an arms supplier—rather than client—in the relationship. In this section, we consider the likely impacts of the evolving Russian-Iranian relationship. A summary of the positive and negative implications for Iran, Russia, and the United States is presented in Table 3.

Implications for Iran

Iran has benefitted politically from Russia’s war in Ukraine, which has altered the balance of power within the relationship and granted Tehran greater leverage over a sometimes recalcitrant partner. Although aspects of Russian-Iranian defense cooperation predate the start of the war, the timing and nature of recent agreements suggest that Iran has successfully exploited Russia’s need for

TABLE 3

Implications of Strengthened Russian-Iranian Ties for Iran, Russia, and the United States

	Iran	Russia	United States
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved ability to withstand, evade international sanctions Increased revenue from defense exports Opportunity to market UASs to new customers Opportunity for exploitation of U.S.-origin equipment captured in Ukraine Increased Russian assistance to enhance offensive kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities Increased trade, commercial cooperation with Russia Increased technical knowledge transfer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to weapons, munitions for use in Ukraine Alternative, low-cost means to hold targets outside Ukraine at risk Assistance with sanctions evasion from Iran Increased production of some categories of defense products Increased leverage in shaping contours of U.S.-Iran nuclear talks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to observe performance of Russian and Iranian systems against Western-origin systems
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced likelihood of reviving 2015 nuclear deal Deterioration of political, economic relations with Europe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreased leverage to deny and/or resist Iranian requests for additional aid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased difficulty in enforcing sanctions Increased threat to U.S., partner forces in Syria, Persian Gulf Increased cost of operating in the Middle East

armaments to secure previously unavailable assistance. Iran's improved relationship with Russia has also augmented its ability to address internal and external threats to the regime.

In addition to the limited materiel assistance observed between February 2022 and June 2023, cooperation with Russia could provide Iran with a greater opportunity to acquire new weapons systems and technical knowledge.⁹⁴ The Sukhoi-35 sale is indicative of Iran's attempt to capitalize on the opportunity to redress long-standing shortfalls in its force structure and industrial base. The new aircraft represent a significant enhancement to Iran's fighter fleet, which is largely comprised of aging U.S.-origin aircraft that are reliant on foreign-manufactured components.⁹⁵ The multi-role fighters would enhance Iran's ability to respond to airborne threats and would provide

an additional long-range strike capability if armed with the requisite long-range munitions.⁹⁶ Even so, the transfer of a few aircraft will not significantly alter the regional military balance given existing deficiencies in Iranian air power. Iran has also sought to obtain not only Russian helicopters, but also assistance from Russia in developing a domestic helicopter production line or pursuing a jointly developed helicopter.⁹⁷

Through the direct experience of Iranian trainers deployed to Crimea and information-sharing arrangements with the Russian military, Iran is also likely to gain tactical and technical knowledge about the performance of U.S.- and European-manufactured air defense systems employed by Ukrainian forces, which it might use to refine future operations.⁹⁸ Likewise, enhanced knowledge sharing between Iranian and Russian drone

engineers might allow Iran to improve its capabilities.⁹⁹ On the other hand, Iran has also provided the United States, European allies, and other international observers an opportunity to observe and exploit Iranian captured equipment, identify vulnerabilities in its technology, and develop solutions to counter or mitigate its strengths.¹⁰⁰ Given the role of Iranian-made drones in the destruction of civilian lives and infrastructure in Ukraine, it is likely that Iran's arms transfers to Russia will result in lasting damage to its ties with the EU, which will diminish the likelihood of restarting multilateral nuclear talks. Indicating the deterioration of this relationship, the European Council included seven Iranian entities in its package of sanctions adopted on the one-year anniversary of Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰¹ As of June 2023, European diplomats had reportedly informed Iran that the EU would retain sanctions against its ballistic missile program that are set to expire in October 2023 under the terms of the 2015 JCPOA.¹⁰²

Beyond Europe, Iran's UAS sales to Russia might further its ambitions in expanding Iranian global influence in other theaters.¹⁰³ Iran views drone exports as a means of "deepening its strategic influence" by demonstrating a unique Iranian capability that could be deployed in a future conflict with the United States.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Iran's UAS sales to Russia might further its ambitions to expand defense exports to states that do not adhere to international sanctions, which is a prospect that could provide the regime with a much-needed infusion of hard currency while bolstering its status as a regional power. Ninety countries, including China, Armenia, and Serbia, are reportedly seeking to import Iranian-made drones.¹⁰⁵ Some experts have cautioned, however, that if Iranian-made drones do

not "win the war in Ukraine" for Russia, their limitations will become well known, which could reduce the potential market for their export.¹⁰⁶

Beyond these considerations, the future trajectory of the relationship between Russia and Iran is one of a multitude of factors that could influence the course of any renewed nuclear negotiations. Iranian leaders recall that Russia has joined the United States and other countries in calling for limitations on its nuclear program in the past, and they are sensitive to signs that Russia could use its relationship with Iran as leverage in negotiations with the United States or Europe on other matters. As its assistance to Russia grows, Iran likely will expect greater Russian allegiance and might become more sensitive to perceived slights. Both U.S. and European policymakers should closely monitor the impact of closer Russian-Iranian ties on Iran's negotiating stance as Russia's war in Ukraine continues.

Implications for Russia

Iran's provision of UASs and other materiel assistance has helped to replenish and reduce pressure on Russian military stockpiles.¹⁰⁷ In particular, Iranian UAS provide Russia with a precise but expendable means to target Ukrainian critical infrastructure (particularly energy infrastructure) and a counterweight to the influx of Western assistance to Ukraine.¹⁰⁸ UASs have also challenged Ukrainian air defenses. Due to their range and precision, these low-cost systems have supplemented Russia's diminishing inventory of cruise missiles.¹⁰⁹ Iran might also be planning to expand its defense exports to Russia in October 2023 when certain missile-related provisions of United

Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, which bars Iran from exporting drones and short-range ballistic missiles with ranges exceeding 300 kilometers, expire.¹¹⁰

Russia also stands to benefit from close economic cooperation with Iran. Although the Iranian economy cannot compensate for the loss of Russian access to European and U.S. markets, Russian investments reveal Moscow's interest in securing access to trade corridors through Iran that would provide Russian firms better access to legitimate and illicit commercial networks in India, the Persian Gulf, and the African continent that could lessen the damage inflicted by Western sanctions.¹¹¹ Iranian officials have also shared with their Russian counterparts lessons learned from their decades of experience with sanctions evasion and, according to one press account, might provide Russian firms access to illicit financial and commercial networks.¹¹² Analysts have already noted that Russia appears to be emulating evasive techniques pioneered by Iran to skirt restrictions on its oil trade.¹¹³ Likewise, Russia stands to benefit from an understanding of how Iran has continued to sustain, and in some areas expand, indigenous production of defense capabilities despite international sanctions restricting access to requisite components and technologies.¹¹⁴

Implications for the United States

Statements by U.S. government officials indicate that a reassessment of the threat posed by Iran is underway. In a departure from prior U.S. assessments that described the country as a “regional menace,” Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Dana Stroul warned in a press call on February 2023 that “Iranian threats are no longer specific to the

Russia stands to benefit from Iran's ability to sustain, and in some areas expand, indigenous production of defense capabilities despite international sanctions.

Middle East, but a global challenge.”¹¹⁵ While Iran's ability to conduct long-range conventional attacks is still severely limited, its support to Russia has demonstrated its limited ability to supply partners operating outside the Persian Gulf and could portend an increase in Iranian defense exports. By bolstering Russian capacity, Iran could also augment Russian options to target other European countries in the event of a wider conflict.¹¹⁶

U.S. government officials and private analysts have also expressed concern that Russia might reconsider its restrictions on training, advising, and military sales to Iran as the situation in Ukraine worsens and pressure on its domestic industrial base increases. Particular attention has been paid to Russia's reported consideration of an existing Iranian request for S-400 air defense systems,¹¹⁷ as well as Iranian requests for rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft.¹¹⁸ If fulfilled, such assistance could help to redress gaps in Iran's

current inventory, lessen pressure on its aging air fleet, and augment Iran's air defenses. Yet as some U.S. observers have noted, Iran's economic struggles curtail its ability to purchase the volume of equipment required to fundamentally transform its forces.¹¹⁹ Iran will still confront challenges in absorbing and maintaining Russian systems. The trend line is not favorable for the United States, but a transformation of Iranian military power will not occur quickly.

The more immediate concern is that Iranian learning from the war in Ukraine could inspire improvements in Iranian tactics, techniques, or procedures for employing existing systems to surveil or threaten the United States, Israel, and other U.S. partners in the region. The potential for improvement in Iranian military capabilities has led the United States to rethink the adequacy of existing sanctions for disrupting and degrading Iranian supply chains. Recent press reporting suggests that U.S. and EU export controls and sanctions did not prevent Iran from acquiring and using U.S.-origin components in indigenous UAS manufacturing. Indeed, a majority of downed platforms of Iranian origin were found to contain components manufactured in the United States, Europe, and other allied countries.¹²⁰ While preventing the transfer of dual-use technologies is a notoriously difficult task, it might be time to reexamine U.S. and allied reliance on export controls and sanctions as its primary tools to counter malign Iranian activities.

Looking Ahead: Prospects for Russian-Iranian Cooperation

Russia and Iran's recent cooperation regarding Ukraine has engendered serious concerns that the once wary partners

might be moving toward a more comprehensive, strategic partnership. Such a prospect could have significant consequences for the United States' ability to safeguard its interests in the Middle East and would introduce new questions about how best to pursue and enforce limitations on Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore, the prospect of continued Iranian provision of asymmetric capabilities to Russia might require U.S. military planners to rethink their assumptions regarding Russian capabilities and intent. Greater cooperation could also provide Russia with potential access to a large and diverse supply of Iran-manufactured ballistic and cruise missiles, either for use in Ukraine or to replenish depleting inventories kept in reserve.¹²¹

The findings summarized in Table 2 suggest that the Russian-Iranian partnership still has room to grow. Since February 2022, multiple factors have deepened Russia and Iran's international isolation, increased mutual dependencies, heightened awareness of areas of common interests, and lent new urgency to their partnership. The costs of the war in Ukraine have driven Russia to search for new sources of materiel and economic assistance, resulting in a reversal of its position with formerly client states like Iran. At the same time, Russia and Iran's longstanding interest in developing financial and commercial alternatives to bolster their economies' resilience against international sanctions has gained new salience, as demonstrated by their unprecedented effort to link financial networks and coordinate investments in transportation routes. In this push, Russia has benefitted from the Iranian regime's own heightened sense of vulnerability as it confronts serious internal challenges arising from uncontrolled, inflated, and sustained civil unrest since the death of Mahsa Amini in Septem-

ber 2022. These internal factors have reinforced Iranian leaders' preexisting suspicions that the United States and other foreign governments are seeking to interfere in Iran's internal affairs, deepened the regime's sense of isolation, and increased its need for technical and materiel assistance to manage internal instability. Russian and Iranian leaders therefore possess both a heightened sensitivity to their shared interests and an increased incentive to collaborate that might lend them the requisite momentum to either surmount or temporarily set aside differences in approach or areas of competition.

Yet it is still too soon to declare that the Russian-Iranian relationship has undergone a fundamental transformation. As of June 2023, the relationship has fluctuated considerably in the past despite the states' sharing broad areas of interest. Leaders in both countries have long recognized a common interest in cooperating to reduce U.S. influence and to advance financial, commercial, and political alternatives. However, conflicting—and at times competing—national interests have contributed to periodic downturns and persistent mistrust in the relationship that has precluded more expansive cooperation. The ongoing war in Ukraine, recent unrest within Iran, and the stagnation of JCPOA nuclear talks have lent new urgency to Russia and Iran's attempts to collaborate to advance their shared interests, but fault lines in the relationship remain. One significant fault line relates to Israel; Russia has historically cultivated a good working relationship with Israel, whereas Iranian rhetoric and national security policy characterizes Israel as one of the country's primary enemies. These disagreements could still resurface and impose new limitations on the relationship because of events beyond Russian or Iranian leaders' control, or

because of deliberate decisions by Moscow or Tehran to prioritize divergent national interests.

To help policymakers anticipate how the Russian-Iranian relationship might evolve, Figure 1 introduces a set of indicators for monitoring the dynamics that might either increase cooperation or disunity between the two countries. Derived from historical trends, these friction points represent a sample of long-standing challenges in the Russian-Iranian relationship rather than a comprehensive survey of major policy areas. For each friction point, we identified illustrative examples of events or decisions that might weaken Russian-Iranian cohesion. Monitoring these irritants can guide efforts to understand and forecast the status of Russian-Iranian cooperation and to identify opportunities to exploit fissures or anticipate areas of worrisome collaboration.

Over the long term, the consequences of the war in Ukraine could heighten—rather than resolve—disagreements and competition between Russia and Iran. As of June 2023, the Iranian leadership appears to have determined that cooperation serves Iranian security

It is still too soon to declare that the Russian-Iranian relationship has undergone a fundamental transformation.

FIGURE 1
 Future Drivers of Dissension Between Russia and Iran



interests. However, *the balance within the Iranian leadership could change if Russian inventory shortfalls, defense production challenges, or concerns about U.S., European, or Israeli retaliation lead Russia to reduce or delay delivery of its military commitments.* The divide within the Iranian leadership is premised on divergent assessments of Russia's value as a strategic partner, and skeptics of further dependence on Russia might use such incidents as further

evidence of Russian duplicity or unreliability.¹²² Despite reportedly stalled talks on exchanging Russian weaponry for ballistic missiles, the countries' continued progress towards expanded defense cooperation suggests that there is sufficient confidence in the partnership to withstand such disagreements at the time of writing.¹²³ However, *Russia's tendency to exploit international disagreements over the Iranian missile and nuclear programs to distract from or*

lessen its own disputes with the West might strain relations between Moscow and Tehran.

Conversely, Iran's success in eliciting support from Russia since the war began could lead it to overreach, opening a new fissure in the relationship. Should Iranian leaders overestimate their leverage and introduce conditions that Russia is unable or unwilling to accept, they might push Russia to reassess the costs of the relationship or to attempt to reassert dominance. In such a scenario, it will be difficult for Iranian leaders to walk back their demands without strengthening domestic critics of the country's relationship with Russia. *Russia might also reconsider the value of the partnership if it perceives that it can receive greater assistance from more powerful countries, such as China, or if its position in Ukraine improves and the pressure on its industrial base is reduced.* In either event, cooperation with Russia could become a wedge issue among key members of the regime, particularly if Russia were to pursue an independent strategy on a high-priority issue for Iran such as its nuclear program or proxy networks.¹²⁴

Iran and Russia's economic isolation makes them dependent on a limited set of commercial networks, financial institutions, trade routes, and foreign markets that likely will cause competition in the near term. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that they export and import similar goods and therefore will be reliant on the same few suppliers and markets.¹²⁵ Such a competition might play out in relation to countries that do not participate in the U.S. and European sanctions campaign, such as India, or across the clandestine markets Iran has long fostered to secure essential military or scientific technology.¹²⁶ Increased collaboration also increases the risk that U.S. and European enforcers might identify and attempt to close loopholes that Iran has

relied on, creating an incentive for it to limit cooperation or restrict knowledge sharing.

As of June 2023, the trend towards coordinated investment in expanding trade routes and integrating Russian and Iranian financial systems suggests that leaders in Moscow and Tehran currently believe that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the risks. Both countries profit from collaboration on currency transfers, for instance, while Iran can benefit from Russian commitments to establishing alternative banking arrangements. Several factors could change this calculus, however. First, *increased competition for access to markets in Asia could reduce Iranian revenue streams to the point that the leadership is no longer able to deny the effect on Iran's economy.* Already, Iran's oil exports are estimated to have declined by 50 percent between February and July 2022 because of increased competition with Russia for Asian buyers, while Russian steel manufacturers have attempted to undercut Iranian firms operating in Afghanistan, China, South Korea, and Thailand.¹²⁷ While this trend has since reversed, the potential for future reductions in Iranian oil exports remains. Alternatively, *Iran could seek to exploit Russia's loss of access to European markets by attempting to negotiate an arrangement in which it exchanges Iranian oil or natural gas for a reduction in U.S. or European sanctions.*¹²⁸ While this attempt is not likely to succeed, it could become more attractive if Russia's economic crisis forces Moscow to reduce its economic assistance to Iran.

Iran could also conclude that Russia has not properly safeguarded information regarding its preferred means of sanctions evasion. Such an event could deepen mistrust between the countries and would reinforce the position of those who argue for greater caution when engaging Russia.

Relatedly, *either Iran or Russia could seek to develop exclusive relationships at the other's direct expense.* For instance, Russia's need to increase domestic production of cruise and ballistic missiles could lead it to drain the clandestine market's supply—either deliberately or inadvertently—at the expense of Iran's missile production capacity.

Lastly, *Iran and Russia's pursuit of influence outside the partnership could exacerbate tensions between the two countries, particularly if Iran perceives that the war in Ukraine has created new opportunities to improve its standing at Russia's expense.* Given Armenia's status as a key Russian ally in the South Caucasus, growing Iranian influence in the country could be perceived as an infringement of Russia's sphere of influence and a potential threat to its status in the region.

The Ukraine war has revitalized the Russian-Iranian partnership and created powerful incentives for the countries to continue expanding their cooperation. However,

Whether Moscow and Tehran can build a stable partnership depends on their ability to navigate conflicting interests and manage emerging tensions with third parties.

whether leaders in Moscow and Tehran can build a stable partnership will depend on their ability to navigate conflicting national interests and manage emerging tensions with third parties. On the one hand, *Iran faces the possibility of catastrophic success if Russian demand for Iranian capabilities exceeds the latter's production capacity or if it emboldens Iran to pursue risky policies based on miscalculations of Russian security guarantees.* For example, an escalation of tensions between Iran and Israel might drive Iran to request assistance from Russia that Russia is unwilling to provide. On the other hand, *Russia runs the risk of overpromising and underdelivering as it seeks to secure near-term Iranian assistance, creating a future scenario in which Russia must either backtrack on its promises or delay delivery of certain capabilities to Iran.*

In addition to the friction points delineated above, we note that *an eventual resolution of the war in Ukraine could reduce incentives for cooperation between Russia and Iran.*

Conclusion

Since February 2022, Russia and Iran have demonstrated increasing resolve to cooperate to advance their shared interest in contesting U.S. influence, suppressing internal threats to the stability of their regimes, and mitigating their vulnerability to international economic sanctions and foreign economic pressure. The war in Ukraine has heightened Russian and Iranian awareness of areas of strategic alignment and created new incentives for cooperation, although growing cooperation between the two countries is not solely a function of the war. Absent significant changes in U.S. policy or domestic politics within Russia and Iran, leaders in both countries are likely to continue to perceive

significant benefits from continued cooperation on defense and economic issues.

While there is still room for Russia and Iran to continue to expand their cooperation, transforming a tactical, transactional partnership into a strategic alliance will be difficult. It will require that underlying conditions continue to favor cooperation between the two countries and that both sides employ skilled statecraft to manage existing and emerging areas of competition within the bilateral relationship. If Russia perceives that it can obtain more benefit from partnering with other countries, if Iran perceives that sharing sanctions evasion techniques exposes

the Iranian regime to increased risk, or if regional disputes in the Middle East or South Caucasus create conflicting national imperatives, there could be a rupture in the relationship. There is still a substantial degree of mistrust between the two countries; as their cooperative relationship expands, there will be new opportunities for either side to misstep, particularly if they move too fast. It is too soon to declare the beginning of a new era for the Russian-Iranian relationship, but it is time to begin thinking about what closer ties between the two states might mean for U.S. operations and strategy.

Notes

1 Nichols, “Russia Trying to Get Ballistic Missiles from Iran, Says Britain.”

2 Nichols, “Russia Trying to Get Ballistic Missiles from Iran, Says Britain”; Barnes and Koettl, “A Drone Factory That Iran Is Helping Russia Build Could Be Operational Next Year, the U.S. Says.”

3 See, for example, Esfandiary, “Axis of Convenience.”

4 Divsallar, “The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence”; Tabatabai and Esfandiary, *Triple-Axis*.

5 For several illustrative examples, see Milani, “Iran and Russia’s Uncomfortable Alliance.”

6 Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat*.

7 On Iran’s importance to U.S. Cold War strategy, see Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah*.

8 For a discussion of the Soviet Union’s role in the conflict, see Kalinovsky, “The Soviet Union and the Iran-Iraq War.” For a discussion of Soviet military support for Iraq, see also Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*.

9 Tabatabai, *Iran’s National Security Debate*.

10 Tabatabai and Esfandiary, *Triple-Axis*; Freedman, “Russia and Iran,” pp. 100–101.

11 Freedman, “Russia and Iran,” pp. 100–103.

12 Trenin, “Russia and Iran.”

13 The extent to which the “look east” policy has been operationalized has varied under successive Iranian presidential administrations. President Mohammad Khatami, for example, sought to improve Iranian ties with the West, while President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pursued a more isolationist foreign policy while retaining some partnerships. More recently, President Hassan Rouhani sought to reconcile elements from both approaches following what one expert has called a “perceived Western failure to deliver on the [terms of] the JCPOS” (Tabatabai, *Iran’s National Security Debate*, p. 21). Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei has long sought to foster Iranian relations with the East, and in recent years, the Raisi administration has prioritized efforts to “look east.”

14 From 1989 to 1991, Iran and the Soviet Union (later the Russian Federation) signed a series of agreements that included MiG-29 and SU-24

aircraft, S-200 air defense complexes, diesel submarines, and large numbers of tanks, armored vehicles, and air-to-air munitions. The majority were delivered to Iran between 1992 and 1996. Kassianova, “PONARS Policy Memo 427—Russian Weapons Sales to Iran.”

15 Congressional Research Service, *Russian Missile Technology and Nuclear Reactor Transfers to Iran*, pp. 4–10.

16 Congressional Research Service, *Russian Missile Technology and Nuclear Reactor Transfers to Iran*, p. 13.

17 Wehling, “Russian Nuclear and Missile Exports to Iran,” pp. 135–137.

18 Bahgat, “Splitting Water,” pp. 273–292; Becker, “Russia and Caspian Oil,” pp. 92–93, 98.

19 See, for instance, Russian and Iranian opposition to the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. Freedman, “Russian–Iranian Relations in the 1990s.”

20 Vatanka, “Iran and the Black Sea Region.”

21 The White House, “US-Russian Missile Export Controls Agreement”; Speier et al., “Iran-Russia Missile Cooperation”; Congressional Research Service, *Russian Missile Technology and Nuclear Reactor Transfers to Iran*.

22 Katz, “Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era,” pp. 204–205. On Russian violations, see Broder, “Despite a Secret Pact by Gore in ’95, Russian Arms Sales to Iran Go On.”

23 Pikayev, “Why Russia Supported Sanctions Against Iran”; Katz, “Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era,” pp. 204–206.

24 Notte and Azizi, “Where Are Russia’s Red Lines on Iran’s Nuclear Brinkmanship?”; Poneman and Nowrouzadeh, “The Deal That Got Away.”

25 Berman, “Why Russia Won’t Help Trump on Iran.”

26 Pikayev, “Why Russia Supported Sanctions Against Iran.”

27 Trenin, “Russia and Iran: Historical Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership.”

28 For an example of joint initiatives during this period, see Macalister, “Russia, Iran and Qatar Announce Cartel That Will Control 60% of World’s Gas Supplies.”

²⁹ Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria.”

³⁰ Tabaar, “Iran’s Russia Turn.” For a discussion of Russia and Iran’s shared threat perceptions, see Divsallar, “The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence,” pp. 114–115.

³¹ Choksy and Choksy, “Iran Needs the Nuclear Deal to Keep Russia and China at Bay”; MacFarquhar and Sanger, “Russia Sends Bombers to Syria Using Base in Iran.” This was controversial given the Iranian constitutional prohibition on the establishment of foreign military bases on Iranian soil.

³² Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria.”

³³ For example, in 1995, U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin struck a deal that would end Russian sales of conventional weapons to Iran within four years in exchange for a pledge that the United States would not impose penalties on Russia for contravening a U.S. law that requires that sanctions be imposed on states that sold weapons to Iran. Iranian distrust of Russia also can be traced to 2006, when Russia failed to exercise its veto power during deliberations at the United Nations regarding the imposition of sanctions on Iran in connection with its nuclear program. See Milani, “Iran and Russia’s Uncomfortable Alliance.”

³⁴ Barnard and Kramer, “Iran Revokes Russia’s Use of Air Base, Saying Moscow ‘Betrayed Trust.’” However, some analysts have noted that Russia continued to use Shahid Nojeh for air operations after the annulment of this agreement. See Simpson et al., *Road to Damascus*, pp. 59–60; and Milani, “Iran and Russia’s Uncomfortable Alliance.”

³⁵ Milani, “Iran and Russia’s Uncomfortable Alliance”; Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria.”

³⁶ Barnard and Kramer, “Iran Revokes Russia’s Use of Air Base, Saying Moscow ‘Betrayed Trust.’”

³⁷ Milani, “Iran and Russia’s Uncomfortable Alliance.” Notably, Russia has taken a permissive attitude toward Israeli airstrikes on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) positions in Syria.

³⁸ See, for instance, Kramer, “Russia Reaches Deal with Iran to Construct Nuclear Plants.”

³⁹ See, for instance, Saul and Gloystein, “EU Plans for Iran Gas Imports if Sanctions Go.”

⁴⁰ “Iran OPEC Chief.”

⁴¹ For a discussion of Russian nuclear diplomacy, see Notte, *Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine*, pp. 2–4.

⁴² “France, Russia Urge Iran ‘Restraint’ After New Nuclear Breach”; Notte, *Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine*, pp. 3–4.

⁴³ President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, “Ayatollah Raisi in a Phone Call with the President of Russia.”

⁴⁴ TASS, “Tehran Hands Over to Moscow Draft Agreement on Strategic Cooperation for 20 years—Raisi.”

⁴⁵ On February 23, 2022, Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran’s chief negotiator, returned to Tehran for final consultations on a draft agreement to revive the nuclear deal and provide limited sanctions relief. In a sentiment echoed by other participants in the proceeding Vienna negotiations, Enrique Mora, the EU representative to the talks, tweeted “[w]e are nearing the end.” See DeYoung, “Negotiations over the Iran Nuclear Deal Are Close to the End, and a Deal Appears Possible.”

⁴⁶ See, for example, Khamenei, “Iran Supports Ending the War in Ukraine; US Root of Ukraine Crisis.”

⁴⁷ Amir-Abdollahian, “The #Ukraine crisis is rooted in NATO’s provocations.”

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, “Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?” pp. 3–4.

⁴⁹ Hafezi and Murphy, “Russia’s Demand for US Guarantees May Hit Nuclear Talks, Iran Official Says.”

⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, “Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?” p. 4.

⁵¹ Bassiri Tabrizi, “Friends with Benefits: Iran and Russia After the Ukraine Invasion.”

⁵² International Crisis Group, “Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?” p. 12.

⁵³ Faulconbridge and Hafezi, “Putin Forges Ties with Iran’s Supreme Leader in Tehran Talks.”

⁵⁴ Gramer and Mackinnon, “Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before.”

- 55 The White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.”
- 56 Trofimov and Nissenbaum, “Russia’s Use of Iranian Kamikaze Drones Creates New Dangers for Ukrainian Troops.”
- 57 “Russia Puts Iranian Satellite into Orbit.”
- 58 MacFarquhar, Bergman, and Fassihi, “Russia Launches Iranian Satellite, a Sign of Closer Cooperation”; Warrick and Nakashima, “Russia to Launch Spy Satellite for Iran but Use It First Over Ukraine.”
- 59 MacFarquhar, “Drones Embody an Iran-Russia Alliance Built on Hostility to the U.S.”
- 60 Ismay, “The Iranian Drones in Ukraine’s Already Crowded Skies”; Bertrand, “Iranian Drones Appear to Contain Modified Explosives Designed for Maximum Damage to Ukrainian Infrastructure, Report Finds.” See also, U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iranian UAVs in Ukraine*.
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About This Perspective

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This Perspective documents research and analysis undertaken to inform U.S. Army strategic planning and the decisions of defense leaders by identifying potential drivers and limitations on defense cooperation between Russia and Iran.

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