

Russian-Iranian Cooperation and Threats to U.S. Interests

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Articles & Testimony

A former senior Pentagon official assesses how the growing alliance between the two regimes could create problems on multiple fronts, from exchanging know-how on U.S. defense technology to facilitating nuclear proliferation, sanctions evasion, and domestic oppression.

The following are prepared remarks submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Committee for a joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Europe and the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

Chairmen Wilson and Kean, Ranking Members Phillips and Keating, and honorable members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia and the Subcommittee on Europe. I am honored to testify before you on the critical issue of Russian-Iranian strategic cooperation. Despite longstanding historical animosity and ideological differences between Moscow and Tehran, the current strategic environment—Russia as an adversary in the European theater and Iran as an adversary in the Middle East theater—incentivizes both governments to more closely cooperate in a manner that threatens the objectives and interests of the United States and its network of allies and partners. The U.S. view is that the People’s Republic of China is the strategic competitor willing and able to reshape the current global order, and Iran-Russia cooperation is quickly evolving into Iran-Russia-China cooperation. The risk of a Russia-Iran-China revisionist axis challenging the security and sovereignty of the U.S. network of allies and partners is one of the most pressing and urgent security priorities of this century.

Iran-Russia cooperation existed before Moscow’s watershed 2015 decision to militarily coordinate with Tehran and intervene in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime. But it has now evolved from tactical cooperation to a full-fledged defense partnership. Those focused on the Middle East have long clung to the assumption that Russia is the dominant player in the bilateral relationship and therefore can be relied upon to influence and moderate Iran’s

destabilizing actions, from its illicit nuclear weapons program to its proliferation of advanced weapons to nonstate actors. That assumption is no longer valid following Russia's unprovoked assault on Ukraine and its increased reliance on Iran for weapons and other forms of support. In order to develop and execute a strategy that diminishes the threat of Russian-Iranian cooperation, those who seek to uphold and reinforce the current international order need to update their assumptions regarding the balance of leverage and influence in this relationship. It is also critical for policymakers to acknowledge that this partnership is not tactical, temporary, or opportunistic—it reflects a convergence between the two governments of worldview and deliberately planned actions to counter U.S. and partner efforts to isolate and punish the malign actions of both.

Motivations and worldviews that drive increasing Iranian-Russian cooperation include:

- Animosity toward “Western” values-based global engagement (including representative governance and rights-based agendas), which is viewed as threatening to regime survival.
- Focus on internal resilience in the face of international pressure through sanctions and economic decoupling.
- Discontent with the current rules-based international order and a shared desire to challenge and reshape it, particularly through proactive engagement in Africa, Latin America, and with China.

This strategic orientation of “resistance” drives cooperation in the following areas:

- **Military coordination:** Two-way military transfers and defense technology exchanges that threaten the security of U.S. partners in Europe and the Middle East. Citizens in Ukraine and across the Middle East are suffering from the same Iranian-origin attack drones.
- **Nuclear nonproliferation:** Russia is unlikely to oppose, and more likely to facilitate, Iran's continued creep toward nuclear weapons threshold status.
- **Sanctions:** As the two most sanctioned countries in the world, Tehran and Moscow are actively engaged in activities to circumvent and weaken the potency of Western sanctions.
- **Diplomacy:** Russia is using its seat on the UN Security Council to shield Iran from accountability for its destabilizing actions and violations of international law.
- **Domestic suppression:** Iran and Russia are exchanging best practices to crush protests, undermine citizen organization efforts, and maintain mass surveillance programs against their own people.

Russia and Iran signed a twenty-year strategic agreement in 2001, well before the invasion of Ukraine. Recently, the two concluded a memorandum of understanding that updated this agreement. Today, the nonmilitary aspects of this relationship are bearing fruit: Russia is the biggest foreign investor in Iran; Moscow is using the Islamic Republic to store Russian oil; there are direct links between the two countries' banking systems; state-owned energy firms are locking in agreements to develop Iran's oil and natural gas fields; and both countries are working to update infrastructure and increase trade. The risk is that these deepening energy, trade, infrastructure, and defense ties will enhance the resilience of Iran, Russia, China, and others—unilaterally and multilaterally—to challenge and reshape the rules-based international order. The United States benefits from this order. One need not look further than the enthusiasm of Iran to join the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) for a telling example: this grouping has the potential to play a significant geostrategic role far beyond economic cooperation.

Iran's complex, direct attack against Israel on April 13 is remarkably similar to Russian-perpetrated attacks on Ukraine, employing one-way attack drones as well as cruise and ballistic missiles. It is critical that the United States and like-minded partners urgently address the transfer of tactics and techniques from the European theater to the Middle East one—Iran is extracting from Russia lessons in combined strike packages as well as insights into the strengths and weaknesses of Western-origin air and missile defense systems. Iran is also directly enabling Russia to

continue its war in Ukraine, including the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure. Although Iran's state-on-state attack against Israel failed, there is every reason to expect that Moscow and Tehran will exchange lessons learned and apply these insights to improve military operations against Ukraine, Israel, and others in the Middle East going forward.

The remainder of this testimony provides additional assessments of the most problematic areas of Russia-Iran cooperation and offers recommendations for how the United States can most effectively counter it.

Russia-Iran military cooperation and exchange of defense technology poses challenges for the security of U.S.-origin defense equipment transferred to partners globally, and will require a fresh look at existing U.S. military plans for various contingencies. Currently, Iran supplies Russia with drones, air-to-ground munitions, and artillery ammunition for use in Ukraine, and is building a drone production factory inside Russian territory. In November 2023, the U.S. government disclosed downgraded intelligence that Iran was contemplating providing Russia with ballistic missiles. In return, Moscow appears willing to provide Su-35 fighter aircraft and upgrade Iran's air defense systems. There are also indications that the military technology exchange extends to electronics, other radars, and attack helicopters.

In the medium-to-long term, this level of military exchange has implications for the security of U.S.-origin defense equipment transferred to partners in multiple theaters as well as the global balance of military power, and will require military planners to reassess existing war plans. For example, Russian upgrades of Iranian air defense radars may require the United States and Israel to update their plans should Iran cross the nuclear weapon threshold. Similarly, the United States and its Arab partners all maintain defensive plans in response to external attack, which will require updating if Tehran acquires more sophisticated military equipment. Russian upgrades of Iran's conventional military capabilities should spur reexamination of the assumptions and order of battle for U.S. and Israeli military plans; it should also prompt long-term planning with partners on Foreign Military Sales. The long-term risks of such cooperation are significant: together, Russia and Iran are using Ukraine and the Middle East as battlefield laboratories to improve their weapons and develop techniques to overcome U.S. and allied defensive systems and defeat offensive capabilities. As NATO continues to support Ukraine, there is a risk that NATO-origin systems captured by Russia will be transferred to Iran for exploitation.

As the military relationship grows, Russia is increasingly a diplomatic shield for Iran at the UN Security Council and other international forums. In 2018, for example, Russia rejected a draft resolution that would have highlighted Iran's role in violating the Yemen arms embargo by supplying lethal weaponry to the Houthis. It has also consistently vetoed resolutions that called for additional crossings into Syria for humanitarian aid delivery, largely because such measures would have undermined plans by the Assad regime and its Iranian and Russian backers to reassert control over all of Syrian territory and compel the international community to reintegrate Bashar al-Assad without any behavior changes or accountability. Moreover, since 2022, Russia has shielded Iran against demands from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to let inspectors access suspected nuclear sites. Russia also blocked a 2023 vote to hold Iran accountable for its supply of attack drones for use in Ukraine.

Although Russia played a helpful role in past international efforts to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions, its reliance on Iranian military support will erode its willingness to enforce global nuclear nonproliferation norms. Moscow should not only be discounted as a helpful interlocutor regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program, it is also likely to play the spoiler in any Western-led effort to hold Tehran accountable for violating UN Security Council Resolution 2231 or its commitments to the IAEA. During the period leading up to implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and during the 2021-22 negotiations for mutual reentry into the agreement, Russia provided diplomatic muscle to soften Iranian negotiators and offered critical technical assistance toward implementation. That cooperative approach ended with the invasion of Ukraine. The Bushehr power plant in Iran

still gives Russia leverage over the trajectory of Tehran's nuclear program, leaving the regime reliant on Moscow for some nuclear technology, expertise, and equipment. It has also been reported that Russia will build two additional atomic power reactors for Iran. Going forward, nuclear nonproliferation policy should account for the growing possibility that Russia will block U.S. and European efforts to constrain and walk back Iran's steps toward nuclear threshold status.

As the two most sanctioned countries in the world, Iran and Russia are collaborating to weaken U.S.-led sanctions regimes. In response to the U.S.-led economic pressure, Iran is providing Russia with critical advice to evade sanctions, such as the use of front companies and money exchange houses. In addition, both countries have hydrocarbon-based economies, so Iran is sharing expertise in ship-to-ship oil transfers at sea with location devices turned off. The two governments are also working to de-dollarize their trade, and Russia provides credit card services to Iran. Even more concerning is the effort to link their banking systems through alternatives to the SWIFT international financial messaging system. The medium-to-long-term implications of this economic cooperation are particularly worrisome. As the United States and its allies use sanctions as their preferred nonmilitary coercive tool of choice, other governments under sanctions—China, Syria, North Korea, Venezuela—are being pushed to deepen cooperation with Russia and Iran in order to evade this pressure. The result could be an alignment of governments able to withstand Western pressure, and the erosion of sanctions as a U.S. option to impose costs on adversaries for destabilizing behavior.

Russian-Iranian cooperation also aims to challenge the values and norms that the United States has long viewed as critical for global stability: human rights, representative governments, leaders responsive to the desires of their citizens, and transparency. Moscow and Tehran are not only exchanging techniques for suppressing their citizens at home, they are also exporting their governance model to other authoritarians and autocrats. Moreover, they are both working to undermine democratic processes through election interference and disinformation. The most relevant example for U.S. interests is, of course, their meddling in the 2020 U.S. elections. Elsewhere, Iranian interference in Iraq's electoral processes has consistently undermined the ability of Iraqi citizens to exercise their rights. The United States should confront increasing Iranian-Russian cooperation on this front by (1) coordinating a whole-of-government approach to push back, undermine, and impose costs, with help from allies and partners, and (2) doubling down on a positive vision for U.S.-led global order that does not rely on disruptive, revisionist regimes.

The most immediate U.S. action relies on Congress. Passing the national security supplemental would not only allow critical security support and defense equipment to flow to Israel, Ukraine, and Taiwan—the partners most at risk from adversary actions—it would also support U.S. military, diplomatic, and assistance specialists working in these arenas. The supplemental's funding for U.S. defense industry expansion would enable Washington to be a more reliable and speedy provider of defense equipment to partners who will inevitably face increased threats from Russian-Iranian military cooperation.

Additional lines of effort include:

- **Continue sanctions enforcement.** Russia is unlikely to be able to sustain its commitments to Iran while simultaneously maintaining payment schedules and providing Tehran and other owners of Russian-origin military equipment with spare parts. U.S. sanctions in recent years have targeted Russian and Iranian ministries and companies involved in transferring drones and other weapons.
- **Engage the private sector.** Beyond sanctions compliance, many private-sector and industrial producers are simply unaware of the dual-use nature of some products, or that U.S. and Western parts are ending up in Iranian-manufactured attack drones. More education and outreach by Washington and its partners will help ensure compliance with sanctions and raise awareness of customers seeking to acquire off-the-shelf commercial products

for lethal purposes. Such outreach informed the White House’s 2022 decision to form an interagency task force to organize the government’s efforts to issue advisors and coordinate internationally. This work should continue.

- **Continue selective downgrading of intelligence.** The Biden administration’s approach to downgrading intelligence to expose Russian-Iranian cooperation—particularly as a way to provide early warning of their aggression—underscores America’s value as a reliable actor committed to defending the sovereignty and security of its partners. Downgraded intelligence has also been particularly effective in shining light on Iran’s supply of attack drones to Russia, and in revealing that Tehran was considering the transfer of ballistic missiles.
- **Emphasize the benefits of U.S. partnership and coalitions.** The performance of European and Arab partners working together to disrupt Iran’s April 13 attack on Israel is the clearest proof of concept that the United States should remain the partner of choice for countries who benefit from the current rules-based order. The U.S. military is capable of operationally integrating its partners, informed by unparalleled intelligence and unmatched technology, to defend the security of citizens and territory from Russian and Iranian aggression.
- **Increase public diplomacy.** The United States and its partners are falling behind in efforts to counter Iranian and Russian misinformation and propaganda.
- **Maintain programs that seek to reach civil society in Iran and Russia.** It is critical that the United States distinguish between the destabilizing actions of the regimes in Moscow and Tehran and the people of these countries. The good news is that European officials acknowledge the intersection of anti-Semitism and terrorism in Europe. The bad news is that Europe—and the world—face a significant threat from both anti-Semitic and terrorist activities in the weeks and months to come.



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