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## Iran's Support for Russia and Lessons Learned from Ukraine

Statement before the  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Congressman Wilson, distinguished Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The current U.S. conflict with Iran seeks to address the gravity of the threat the Iranian regime poses to the United States, America's regional partners, and the international community at large. It has also, in many ways, become a "stress test" of Iran's contemporary international partnerships—most prominent among them Iran's evolving entente with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Over the past seven weeks, Russia has materially aided the Iranian regime in its fight against the U.S. and Israel in a number of ways.

- It has provided Iran with vital intelligence that has improved the regime's targeting of Israel as well as U.S. forces and installations in the region.<sup>1</sup> This intelligence sharing is believed to have aided several high-profile Iranian strikes, including on a U.S. THAAD early warning radar in Jordan as well as installations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.
- It has supplied Iran with upgraded *Shahed* drone components designed to improve navigation, targeting, and resistance to electronic jamming, which are innovations developed through Russia's own experience deploying drones in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

- It has provided tactical advice, including guidance on how many drones to deploy per strike and at what altitudes, mirroring the mass-drone swarm tactics it uses in Ukraine. Indeed, analysts have noted that Iranian strike patterns closely resemble Russian operations, with waves of drones targeting infrastructure and radar, followed by precision missile strikes on command-and-control systems.<sup>3</sup>

This assistance reflects the depth and vibrancy of the contemporary Russo-Iranian relationship. It is a partnership that has become a defining feature of Iranian foreign policy, as well as of the emerging “axis of upheaval” now arrayed against the United States.<sup>4</sup>

## EVOLUTION OF THE ENTENTE

Contemporary contacts between Tehran and Moscow can be traced back to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s 1979 Islamic Revolution, which transformed Iran from a pro-Western monarchy into an ideological anti-American revolutionary state—and, by extension, into a potential partner for the USSR. Nevertheless, bilateral ties between the two countries remained transactional and episodic throughout the Cold War. During that time, Soviet leaders viewed Iran’s revolutionary Shi’a ideology with deep suspicion, while Iran’s regime distrusted Moscow as an atheistic imperial power with a long history of interference in Persian affairs.<sup>5</sup> The present-day Russo-Iranian relationship is therefore best understood as a post-Soviet construct that emerged in the 1990s out of overlapping practical and ideological considerations.

One was Russian worries over the spread of Islamic extremism. The collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed powerful ethnic and religious forces across the former Soviet space, particularly in the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia and the North Caucasus. These currents posed an existential challenge to Russia’s internal stability, as well as its influence in the “near abroad.” Here, Iran had the potential to play the role of a spoiler, given its well-established pedigree of exporting revolutionary ideology (which had destabilized large parts of the Middle East during the 1980s). Russian policymakers feared that, unless it was constructively engaged, Tehran could do the same in the “near abroad.”

Another was Russia’s own commercial needs. By the early 1990s, Russia’s defense-industrial base – a source of regime stability during the Soviet era—was in severe decline and in dire need of new customers.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Iranian need for military hardware was acute; the eight-year Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) had left the country’s armed forces depleted, technologically backward, and isolated from Western suppliers. Arms sales thus became the backbone of early Russo–Iranian cooperation, with Iran receiving nearly \$2 billion in Russian-origin arms between 1990 and 1993, including warplanes, tanks and submarines.<sup>7</sup>

This pragmatic alignment was reinforced by Russia’s evolving post-Cold War foreign policy. Under the guidance of then-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, Moscow articulated a vision

of multipolarity explicitly designed to dilute U.S. global dominance.<sup>8</sup> Russian policymakers grasped that partnership with Iran could rejuvenate their country's influence in the Middle East, while at the same time complicating American policy there. Iranian officials, meanwhile, viewed this agenda as broadly compatible with their own revolutionary anti-Western posture, thereby laying the groundwork for a deeper political convergence.

Over time, this initial meeting of the minds evolved into a more ambitious partnership aimed at reshaping the global balance of power. As part of that shift, Russia emerged as a critical enabler of Iran's strategic ambitions. Regionally, this included facilitating Iran's power projection (both directly and via proxy actors), which Moscow aided and abetted by forging close ties to Iranian-supported proxy groups.<sup>9</sup> Internationally, this entailed assistance to the Islamic Republic in the circumvention of Western sanctions.<sup>10</sup> But where Moscow's assistance was most pronounced was in the nuclear domain. Russia constructed and subsequently administered the nuclear reactor in the southern Iranian port city of Bushehr, thereby providing the Iranian regime with early technical expertise and diplomatic cover for its nuclear advances.

Significantly, this support has not remained purely instrumental. Neo-imperialist and Eurasianist thinkers in Moscow have long conceptualized that Iran, if properly harnessed, could serve as an important cornerstone of a broader anti-Western bloc. Influential Eurasianist ideologue Alexander Dugin's vision of a Moscow–Tehran axis, articulated in his 1997 opus *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, encapsulates this logic: Iran is framed as Russia's gateway to warm waters and a vital western anchor of a resurrected Eurasian empire.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Russian public intellectuals like Aleksandr Panarin and Dmitri Trenin have argued that Iran represents the Middle East's most capable actor, and insisted that Moscow needs to cultivate this potential—including as a counterweight to America.<sup>12</sup>

Those views are mirrored in Tehran. Hardliners and revolutionary ideologues in Tehran have long envisioned that Moscow, if properly strategically aligned, could be a vital pillar in erecting a multipolar front against Western hegemony. This is visible in the enthusiastic embrace of Dugin's Eurasianism by Iranian conservatives in recent years, and their promotion of his ideas through both state-linked media and public conferences.<sup>13</sup>

The culmination of this trend came in early 2025, when Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian traveled to Moscow on a highly public state visit. The result was the conclusion of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement codifying expanded cooperation between the two countries across a range of sectors, from defense to energy to technology and security.<sup>14</sup>

## UKRAINE AS EQUALIZER

Nevertheless, the Russo–Iranian partnership has historically been deeply asymmetrical in nature. For decades, Russia functioned as its senior partner, supplying advanced

technology, providing diplomatic cover, and facilitating economic access for a far weaker and more isolated Iran.

However, Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered this dynamic. Battlefield setbacks, industrial shortfalls, and sustained Western military support for Kyiv in the months that followed forced Moscow to seek external aid for its war effort. That quest helped transform the Islamic Republic from a junior client of the Kremlin into an indispensable enabler for Russian foreign policy.

The support Iran has provided to Russia over the past four years has been both extensive and consequential. Tehran has supplied Russia's military with short-range ballistic missiles, artillery ammunition, small arms, and associated logistics.<sup>15</sup> Most impactfully, Iran has provided large numbers of unmanned aerial vehicles—particularly *Shahed*-series attack drones—which have become a central feature of Russia's targeting of Ukrainian infrastructure and population centers.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in late 2023, this cooperation deepened further with the establishment of a dedicated drone production facility in Russia's Tatarstan region, thereby enabling the mass domestic manufacturing of Iranian-designed systems.<sup>17</sup> These capabilities that have significantly augmented both the lethality and the effectiveness of the Russian war effort.

Iran has reaped substantial benefits from this new balance. Even before the current conflict, U.S. intelligence assessments were indicating that, in return for its wartime assistance, Tehran had received Russian help in upgrading its missile forces, intelligence collection, and cyber capabilities.<sup>18</sup> The April 2025 ratification of the 20-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between the two countries served to codify this new dynamic. And now that a new Middle Eastern conflict is underway, the Kremlin has taken an active role in buttressing both Iran's offensive and defensive capabilities.

## LESSONS FOR WASHINGTON

Over the past quarter-century, the Russo-Iranian relationship has proven remarkably durable. For nearly as long as the partnership has existed, Western governments have held out hope that it might be possible to somehow “flip” Moscow and get the Kremlin to bring Iran's ayatollahs to heel, but to little avail. (Such hopes were particularly prevalent during Russia's so-called “pragmatic phase,” roughly coinciding with the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev from 2008 to 2012.) Such a prospect is even less likely now; the past four years of the Ukraine war have deepened cooperation between Moscow and Tehran even further, as Russia has become reliant on Iranian technology to augment its “special military operation” against Kyiv.

In turn, the evolution and dynamics of this relationship hold important lessons for the United States.

The first is that the Kremlin cannot be counted on as a partner in containing Iran. Russian officials have consistently sought to present their government as a constructive actor in this regard, and are doing so again now. Recent days have seen the Kremlin offer to serve as a mediator between Washington and Tehran, and to take custody of Iran's enriched uranium as a way of breaking the diplomatic impasse between the two sides.<sup>19</sup> But the history is instructive; for both strategic and ideological reasons, Moscow has consistently prioritized its partnership with Iran's clerical regime above and beyond any potential benefits that might accrue from collaboration with the West. Today, those calculations are even more compelling in light of Russia's growing international isolation and its dwindling list of international partners.

Second, Russo-Iranian cooperation rests on fragile foundations. Russian elites have never fully discarded their fears of Iranian ideological penetration into the Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union. Those worries have intensified over the past decade-and-a-half, as Iran's regional profile and activities increased against the backdrop of the "Arab Spring" and regional strategic shifts in the Middle East and North Africa. For their part, Iran's leaders and experts remain deeply conscious of Russia's history of opportunism and its willingness to trade Iranian interests for tactical advantage with the West. Understanding these inherent tensions, and how they can be used to limit Russo-Iranian cooperation, is important for Washington as it works to secure durable settlements in Ukraine and the Persian Gulf.

Indeed, across a number of domains, including the Middle East and the Caucasus, Russia and Iran are natural strategic competitors. As such, while their interests can often overlap—as they do today—they do not completely align. For instance, in Syria, Moscow and Tehran coordinated closely in their backing of the Assad regime against assorted opposition forces. However, following Assad's fall in late 2024, Russia quickly engaged with the new, Sunni rebel-led government in Damascus to preserve its military footprint in the country, showing limited commitment to Iranian proxies or to the Islamic Republic's larger stake in the Syrian state. Similarly, in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Iran and Russia are now competing for influence, transit routes, and political leverage. Both likewise rely heavily on oil and natural gas exports and target many of the same markets, particularly in Asia, and that competition is likely to intensify depending on the sanctions and other pressure applied by the West.

Finally, Iran's involvement in the Ukraine conflict and Russia's reciprocal involvement in the current Iran war reflect the fact that today's conflicts are a common fight. While Washington has long debated whether the challenges posed Russia and Iran (as well as China) should be dealt with separately or as a whole, that debate has been conclusively settled among those countries themselves. Current collaboration between Russia and Iran—and the broader political, military, economic and informational coordination now visible across the "axis"—reflects the fact that America's adversaries are committed to each other's survival in the face of Western pressure, and willing to extend significant assistance to one another if imperiled. As a result, success or failure on one front will

inevitably help to shape others, as America's adversaries draw conclusions regarding U.S. capabilities, American resolve, and their own strategic agendas.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Grove, Milan Czerny and Benoit Faucon, "Russia Is Sharing Satellite Imagery and Drone Technology With Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-is-sharing-satellite-imagery-and-drone-technology-with-iran-0dd95e49?mod=djemalertNEWS>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid; "Russia is supplying Iran with Shahed drones, Zelenskiy says," Reuters, March 15, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-is-supplying-iran-with-shahed-drones-zelenskiy-says-2026-03-15/>

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Grove, "Why Russia Is Stepping Up Its Support for an Embattled Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, Marh 29, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/why-russia-is-stepping-up-its-support-for-an-embattled-iran-e3dcf8ee>; Elina Ribakova and Alicia Garcia-Herrero, "How Russia and China are winning the war in Iran," Peterson Institute for International Economics, March 30, 2026, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2026/how-russia-and-china-are-winning-war-iran>.

<sup>4</sup> The term was first coined in Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The New Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>.

<sup>5</sup> Ismagil Gubbadulin, "СОВЕТСКАЯ ИСТОРИОГРАФИЯ ИСЛАМСКОЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ В ИРАНЕ: ПРОБЛЕМА ИЗУЧЕНИЯ РЕЛИГИОЗНОИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ АСПЕКТОВ [Soviet historiography of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: the problem of studying ideological aspects]," *Vlast* no. 10, October 2010, [https://www.elibrary.az/docs/jurnal/jrn2010\\_1262.pdf](https://www.elibrary.az/docs/jurnal/jrn2010_1262.pdf); Mark N. Katz, "Iran Primer: Iran and Russia," PBS

*Tehran Bureau*, October 29, 2010, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-iran-and-russia.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, David R. Stone, "Rosvooruzhenie and Russia's return to the world arms market," Institute on East Central Europe, March 1997, <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/conf/ece01/ece01std.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, "Iran and Russia: Burgeoning Military Ties," USIP *Iran Primer*, September 5, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/may/18/iran-russia-burgeoning-military-ties>.

<sup>8</sup> Ariel Cohen, "The 'Primakov Doctrine': Russia's Zero Sum Game with the United States," Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* no. 167, December 15, 1997, <https://www.heritage.org/report/the-primakov-doctrine-russias-zero-sum-game-the-united-states>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Emil Avdaliani, "Russia Increases Ties with Iran's Axis of Resistance," Jamestown Foundation *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, iss. 173, November 26, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/russias-increases-ties-with-irans-axis-of-resistance/>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, "Exclusive: Iran, Russia negotiating big oil-for-goods deal," Reuters, January 10, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-iran-russia-negotiating-big-oil-for-goods-deal-idUSBREA090DK/>.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Dugin, *Osnovy Geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoye Budushiye Rossiyi* [The Foundations of Geopolitics: Russia's Geopolitical Future] (Arktogaia-center, 2000), 241. (Author's translation)

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandr Panarin, *The Revenge of the World*, as cited in Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of Empire* (Johns Hopkins, 2022), 145-147; Dmitri Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership," Carnegie Moscow Center, August 18, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/2016/08/18/russia-and-iran-historic-mistrust-and-contemporary-partnership-pub-64365>.

<sup>13</sup> Reza Haghighatnejad, "'Putin's Brain,' the Darling of Iran's Hardliners," *IranWire*, November 14, 2017, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/64975/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Khomenko, "Russia and Iran Become Official Allies as Putin Ratifies Strategic Partnership Agreement," *United 24 Media*, April 21, 2025, <https://united24media.com/latest-news/russia-and-iran-become-official-allies-as-putin-ratifies-strategic-partnership-agreement-7754>.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "Iran-Russia Defense Cooperation: Current Realities and Future Horizons," Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, *CNS Occasional Paper* no. 61,

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August 2024, [https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/op61-RSI\\_Russia-Iran\\_Notte-Lamson\\_CNS-Occasional-Paper.pdf](https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/op61-RSI_Russia-Iran_Notte-Lamson_CNS-Occasional-Paper.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Tuqa Khalid, “Moscow enhancing Iran-made Shahed drones with Russian weapons modifications: UK,” *Al Arabiya*, December 6, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/12/07/Moscow-enhancing-Iran-made-Shahed-drones-with-Russian-weapons-modifications-UK>.

<sup>17</sup> Benoit Faucon, Nicholas Bariyo and Matthew Luxmoore, “The Russian Drone Plant That Could Shape the War in Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/the-russian-drone-plant-that-could-shape-the-war-in-ukraine-7abd5616>.

<sup>18</sup> Tulsi Gabbard, Statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, March 25, 2025, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Testimony-As-Prepared.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> “Kremlin Repeats Offer to Take Iran’s Highly Enriched Uranium,” *The Moscow Times*, April 13, 2026, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/04/13/kremlin-repeats-offer-to-take-irans-highly-enriched-uranium-a92483>.