

## The Evolving Russia-Iran Relationship

### *Political, Military, and Economic Dimensions of an Improving Partnership*

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## Abstract

The Russia-Iran relationship has changed significantly during the course of the last decade, with considerable dynamism evident across several dimensions of cooperation. Improvements to the relationship have been especially notable since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. This report examines cooperation between Russia and Iran across political, military, and economic dimensions of the relationship. Measuring a set of detailed indicators, the report finds that although the relationship has traditionally been characterized by a mix of competition, cooperation, and suspicion, it has improved from the 2010s onward. Since the start of the war, the relationship has deepened significantly and pivoted from caution to fuller collaboration across all dimensions as relationship drivers become more important relative to remaining constraints. The Russia-Iran relationship has therefore moved beyond mere transactionalism and is now evolving into a sustained partnership that could very well last into the medium and long term.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The relationship between Russia and Iran has changed significantly over the course of the past decade, with considerable dynamism evident, especially since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. This report examines the relationship in both temporal and thematic dimensions. To do so, we examine a variety of indicators that characterize trends in political, military, and economic cooperation. This report presents shifts in these three relationship dimensions in light of both historical trends and the recent past. In doing so, it identifies a series of constraints and drivers of the relationship and then introduces an indicator-based method to make controlled comparisons across and within relationship dimensions.

Major categories for these indicators include the following: political indicators, such as policy coordination mechanisms, public diplomacy, and interactive engagements; military indicators, such as military diplomacy, military cooperation, technical cooperation, exercises and training, coordination and information sharing, and access, basing, and overflight; and economic indicators, such as economic coordination, institutional linkages, cross-border trade, investments, loans, and engagement in strategic sectors.

## Summary of key findings

The bilateral Russia-Iran relationship has been traditionally characterized as a mix of cooperation, competition, and suspicion. Since the early 1990s, the relationship has improved considerably. By the mid-2010s, a more varied baseline emerged, marked by growing cooperation in military affairs as well as some moderate alignment of economic interests.

Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, the bilateral relationship has deepened significantly and pivoted from cautious engagement to fuller collaboration across a range of dimensions. This evolution can be traced partially to the prewar period, when Russia and Iran cooperated in regard to the Syrian Civil War, as well as in the wake of the fallout from the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which ended in 2018.

The current Ukrainian and earlier Syrian conflicts, coupled with the effect of Western sanctions on Russia and Iran, have served as the major impetus for the improvement in the bilateral relationship. Prior constraints on Moscow's engagement with Tehran (on nuclear issues and secondary sanctions especially) have diminished, although Moscow remains cautious. It is likely that the Israel-Hamas war will reinforce the trend of improved bilateral relations over the short to medium term.

On the political dimension, Russia and Iran share an increasing geopolitical alignment through the use of "civilizationist" and anti-Western rhetoric, coupled with increased contact points between government figures through high-level meetings and newly signed memoranda of understanding across a range of issue areas. Notably, senior political elites, rather than just diplomatic elites, are now partaking frequently in regularly scheduled public meetings.

On the military dimension, we observed a significant number of official engagements by senior-level officers and government officials displaying wide-ranging cooperation. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the scale of arms transfers between Russia and Iran, including sales and coproduction of

military equipment and related training, increased. The evidence we reviewed also suggests a high incidence of dark port calls in support of growing arms transfers between the two states. Bilateral and multilateral exercises also increased, which had not occurred in prior years. Military ties in other areas, however, remain more limited.

Economic ties traditionally have been a weak point in the Russia-Iran relationship; however, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow and Tehran have begun to invest substantially in the development of bilateral economic ties. This collaboration has included new trade agreements, closer integration of the banking sectors, increased cross-border trade, and increased investment in several strategic sectors. Nevertheless, the inherent incompatibility and natural competition between the two economies are likely to limit the long-term growth of economic relations.

### Analytic implications

The Russia-Iran relationship is likely to continue deepening over time, especially as long as both countries remain in an antagonistic and oppositional position vis-à-vis Western states and Western-dominated international organizations. Nevertheless, full rapprochement with Russia remains controversial for Iranian officials, who have the potential to moderate this trend toward closer bilateral ties.

Although mistrust remains in some areas, a sharp break between Russia and Iran in the short to medium term is unlikely. As long as the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the pressing demand by the Russian military for Iranian munitions and drones will ensure that relations are kept on track by Russia's political leadership. It should also be assumed that Russia and Iran will continue to find a compelling logic in maintaining good relations, even if only for purely instrumental reasons.

The Russia-Iran relationship is a bilateral dynamic nested in a wider context of Russia's shifting, anti-Western alignment, with other factors involved—most notably with China. Nevertheless, political engagement between Russia and Iran does not necessarily mean trilateral engagement or coordination, and policy-makers should be wary of assuming a united “axis” across the three countries. Rather, the Eurasian international environment must be understood as a series of interlocking but separate bilateral relationships, with aligned interests in broad terms and relevant intergovernmental fora—such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—that can provide a sense of geopolitical cohesion.

The threat of US sanctions on countries found to be violating the terms of the JCPOA was traditionally a deterrent to deeper Russian economic engagement with Iran. Since 2022 and the onslaught of US and Western sanctions on Russia (combined with US and Western military support for Ukraine), this threat no longer applies. US economic statecraft no longer deters Russian officials or Russian businesses from investing in and engaging with the Iranian economy—many Russians already face severe sanctions and see little left to fear.

Although Russia has historically provided Iran with many sought-after industrial goods, the relationship has now flipped or at least begun to balance out. Iran now provides Russia with vital industrial goods that help Russia address wartime constraints. Such support helps prolong Russia's ability to wage war in Ukraine. Furthermore, closer Russia-Iran economic relations have led to Iran instructing Russian officials on how to evade sanctions. This type of collaboration can affect the long-term viability of the sanctions imposed by the US and other Western nations.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Russia-Iran relationship has changed significantly over the course of the past decade, with considerable dynamism evident across several dimensions of cooperation—especially since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. To date, however, a full characterization of the changes and current state of the relationship has not been developed.

Considering this need, and at the request of US European Command’s Russian Strategic Initiative, this report examines the Russia-Iran relationship’s temporal and thematic dimensions.<sup>1</sup> To do so, the report identifies and then measures a variety of indicators that characterize trends in political, military, and economic cooperation. This method allows the research team to track developments over time. It uses a variety of qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure the health and depth of the bilateral relationship. Our framework takes cues from the general diplomatic, informational, military, economic (DIME) framework, which is widely used in political-military and strategic analysis to delineate the core set of “instruments” or dimensions of “national power” available to states.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, a tripartite political-military-economic division is used to structure the overall characterization of the relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Our introduction continues with a summary of key research findings, followed by a short discussion of the study’s conceptual framework and methodology. The next section provides a baseline

narrative of the historical and more contemporary bilateral relationship between Russia and Iran. It is followed by three larger empirical sections situating the political, military, and economic dimensions of the relationship from the 2010s to the present, with an emphasis on measuring developments in the immediate pre- and post-2022 period. These sections use the indicators discussed in detail below to track changes in the nature of the Russia-Iran relationship over time. A final section concludes with key insights, implications, and recommendations for policy-makers and researchers.

## Key findings

The report’s key findings are the following:

- The Russia-Iran relationship has traditionally been characterized by hesitant cooperation, competition, and suspicion. Since the early 1990s, the relationship has experienced considerable improvement. By the mid-2010s, a more varied baseline emerged, marked by growing cooperation in both military affairs and in the alignment of economic interests. Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, however, the bilateral relationship has deepened significantly and pivoted from caution to fuller collaboration across a range of dimensions. This change can be traced partially to the prewar period,

<sup>1</sup> Note that this report uses “Russia-Iran” and “Russian-Iranian” descriptors interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine Note 1-18, Strategy, 2018, p. vii, [https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jdn1\\_18.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jdn1_18.pdf). For a brief discussion of expansions to this framework, see, for example, Cesar Augusto Rodriguez, Timothy Charles Walton, and Hyong Chu, “Putting the ‘FIL’ into ‘DIME’: Growing Joint Understanding of the Instruments of Power,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 97 (2nd quarter, 2020), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2106566/putting-the-fil-into-dime-growing-joint-understanding-of-the-instruments-of-pow/>.

<sup>3</sup> In practice, this means that the diplomatic and informational components of the DIME framework have been merged into the political dimension alongside a more general emphasis on geopolitical cooperation, while military diplomacy has been subsumed into the military dimension.

when Russia and Iran cooperated in the Syrian Civil War, and to the end of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the expiration of the United Nations (UN) arms embargo on Iran in 2020.

- The conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, coupled with the effect of Western sanctions, have served as the major impetus for the improvement in the bilateral relationship. Prior constraints on Moscow's engagement with Tehran (on the nuclear issue and secondary sanctions, especially) have diminished, although Moscow remains cautious. It is likely that the Israel-Hamas war will foster closer cooperation between Russia and Iran over the short to medium term.
- On the political dimension, there is increasing geopolitical alignment using civilizationist and anti-Western rhetoric, as well as increased key leader engagements across government figures. It is especially notable that high-level political elites, rather than just diplomats, are partaking more frequently in regularly scheduled public meetings.
- Russian-Iranian military ties have grown significantly since the start of the 2010s, underpinned by extensive arms sales, coproduction of weapon systems, joint training, and increasing engagement by officials at senior levels. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a high incidence of dark port calls in support of arms transfers were also observed.<sup>4</sup> Military ties in other areas, however, remain more limited.
- Although economic ties have traditionally been a weak point in the bilateral relationship, even since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow and Tehran

have begun to invest substantially in the development of bilateral economic ties. This collaboration includes new trade agreements, closer integration of the banking sector, increased cross-border trade, and growing investment in several strategic sectors. Nevertheless, the inherent incompatibility and natural competition between the two economies is likely to limit the long-term growth of economic relations.

- The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has precipitated a deepening of political, economic, and military ties between Russia and Iran in the short term. Drivers include an interest from both countries in reducing their international isolation, mutual support in sanctions evasion, and a shared need for arms transfers. Nevertheless, the constraints to their partnership have been considerable, including the history of Moscow's occupation of Iranian territory, dissatisfaction with the quality of Russian military technology and Russia's reliability as a partner, and Tehran's longstanding concern about maintaining a nonaligned foreign policy.
- In the medium term, support in Iran for closer ties to Russia depends on the continued political domination by conservatives and the marginalization of moderates who have criticized closer ties to Russia. Similarly, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will shape Russia's options for foreign and military partners, including with Iran.

<sup>4</sup> *Dark port calls* is a term for covert maritime arms trading that takes place while transiting vessels have turned off tracking signals.

### Report goals and guiding research questions

The goal of this report is to examine Russia’s evolving relationship with Iran, focusing on political, military, and economic dimensions of cooperation. In doing so, it addresses both changes over time and the degree and depth of ties across the different dimensions. To illuminate the contours of this relationship, the report is anchored with the following motivating questions to structure its broad analytic frame:

- Is the Russia-Iran relationship a short-term alignment based on tactical considerations—sometimes called a “partnership” or “alliance of convenience”—or is it morphing into something more strategic and substantial? Is there evidence that Tehran and Moscow are committed to long-term collaboration and cooperation?
- Historically, there have been many impediments to their relationship. Have Russian and Iranian officials put these aside in the interest of strategic cooperation, and, if so, what contextual factors changed to allow these adjustments to occur?
- Which factors drive and constrain ties between Moscow and Tehran?
- How are technology and intelligence sharing being used to address capability gaps in both countries?
- How are the two countries enabling sanctions evasion and supporting military operations?
- What do trends tell us about the overall trajectory of the relationship?

These questions are particularly relevant as the US and other countries begin to think about termination plans for the Russia-Ukraine war. When the conflict ends, the world will be in a very different place. Which changes are temporary and which are more

permanent or set along paths that will be difficult to modify in the future? Without a doubt, global dynamics and alliances will have changed when the war finally ends.

These changing dynamics and a new geostrategic landscape will influence which policy options Ukrainian, US, and European officials have at their disposal to bring the war to a close. The Russia-Ukraine war has generated far-reaching second- and third-order effects. Answers to these questions will help shed light on the nature of these changes and highlight opportunities and constraints to continued US engagement on these issues.

### Relationship constraints and drivers

The Russia-Iran relationship can be studied productively by breaking it into distinct components. Although a single measure of the overall relationship is certainly possible, it assumes that a single level of cooperation is stable across a variety of dimensions. This is likely a false assumption and would require so many caveats that it would distract from any general characterization. On the other hand, a deeply nuanced study of the bilateral relationship with no attempt at simplification would similarly provide a tremendously complex picture that could be described only with difficulty.

This study takes a middle-road approach, assuming that the relationship may indeed vary across major domains of interest (political, military, and economic), but that this greater specificity can be measured productively and at least qualitatively compared as subcategories that can inform a general characterization effort. The relationship is not theorized to be static. Furthermore, by analyzing the distinct dimensions of the relationship and then dividing these dimensions into categories, the study achieves greater explanatory power, allowing us to

explore key aspects of the relationship within the context of the broader framework. Consequently, the study aims to get a better sense of both the general status of the relationship and the positive and negative pressures on it that may provide insight into its future short-, medium-, and long-term trajectory across multiple dimensions.

To that end, we argue that the Russia-Iran relationship is influenced by **constraints** and **drivers**. Constraints are limiting features that work against deeper cooperation or contour the nature of the relationship along certain dimensions. A driver is an environmental factor or internal motivation

to propel the relationship toward closer alignment. Table 1 shows selected constraints and drivers of the Russia-Iran relationship in recent years, derived from a review of the secondary literature as well as inductively from the indicator case studies in this report.<sup>5</sup> These components are not cross-comparable and represent qualitatively distinct elements to the push-pull dynamic of the relationship. Similarly, they are not exhaustive but rather are meant to illustrate key recurring elements that contour the relationship in significant ways.

Furthermore, drivers can be subdivided into “push” factors and “pull” factors that form distinct drivers

Table 1. Selected relationship constraints and drivers in the Russia-Iran relationship

Major Relationship Constraints	Major Relationship Drivers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>History of Moscow’s occupation of Iranian territory</li> <li>Dissatisfaction with the quality and provision of Russian military technology</li> <li>Russia’s reliability as a partner</li> <li>Tehran’s concern over maintaining a nonaligned foreign policy</li> <li>Russia’s need to balance ties with other Middle Eastern states, especially Saudi Arabia and those in the Caspian Sea basin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mutual support in sanctions evasion (<i>push factors</i>)</li> <li>Shared need for advanced military technology and arms transfers (<i>push factors</i>)</li> <li>Both countries’ interest in reducing their international isolation (<i>pull factors</i>)</li> <li>Ideological alignment (<i>pull factors</i>)</li> </ul>

Source: CNA.

<sup>5</sup> For a selection of important reports that provide explicit or implicit claims about constraints and drivers in the Russia-Iran relationship, see, for example, Erika Holmquist and Ismail Khan, *Isolated Together: Russia-Iran Military Cooperation*, FOI (Russia and Eurasia Studies Programme), May 2024, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208528>; Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Jemima Baar, *Iran-Russia M-DIME Report*, Foreign Military Studies Office, TRADOC G-2, IRAN-RUSSIA-MDIME-FINAL-6-DEC-23-2, Dec. 2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/russian-military-influence-in-iran-m-dime-report/>; Michelle Grisé and Alexandra T. Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*, RAND, Oct. 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2829-1.html>; and Ellie Geranmayeh and Nicole Grajewski, *Alone Together: How the War in Ukraine Shapes the Russia-Iran Relationship*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Sept. 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-together-how-the-war-in-ukraine-shapes-the-russia-iran-relationship/>.

of the relationship. Push drivers create incentives for cooperation because of requirements and necessities arising from a changing geopolitical environment. Pull factors develop organically within each given country among its own political, military, or economic elites and are not per se required by the international environment. Pull factors may also be considered “supply-based” drivers because they are supplied internally rather than generated through external pressures and the wider global context.

Among the major relationship drivers identified in the table below, push drivers include the need for arms transfers and support for sanctions evasion, which are both prompted by the requirements of fighting the Russia-Ukraine war and dealing with new rounds of Western sanctions. Meanwhile, growing ideological alignment or views on international positions are supplied by Russian and Iranian elites themselves, who may have shifting views on these matters; these are therefore new pull factors that have developed over time.

These subdivisions are relevant because they provide greater granularity to the environmental conditions within which the Russia-Iran relationship is situated, allowing for greater analytic flexibility when observing change over time.

### Indicator methodology

Characterizing a bilateral interstate relationship is difficult because it can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. A positive and substantive relationship will be similarly contextual—not all relationships require strategic defensive alliances to be important and geopolitically meaningful, for example. Furthermore, an interstate relationship has distinct components that nevertheless overlap and influence each other regularly and dynamically, both at the same time and across longer temporal periods. Therefore, studies of interstate relationships tend toward holistic,

qualitative assessments anchored in close subject matter expertise and contextual nuance.

This report attempts to buttress such valuable characterizations with a methodological intervention that allows for partially controlled tracking of the bilateral relationship across component categories. In doing so, it identifies these categories within the wider political, military, and economic dimensions of the relationship and operationalizes them as a set of indicators. The goal of assigning values to these indicators is to characterize the relationship and provide signpost measurements from which specific debates about the nature of the interstate relationship can continue. For this report, measurement focuses on the immediate pre- and intra-war period (January 2020 to May 2024), although data from 2013 onward, when available, are incorporated to provide a wider horizon of roughly one decade from this report’s drafting.

This methodological approach allows us to better identify the boundaries, tension points, and areas of common interest with an eye toward context and nuance. It also lends itself to easy updates, and analysts are encouraged to modify and update the indicator assessment as changes to the bilateral relationship occur or new components are identified. The framework used here is therefore intended as a starting point for providing a more rigorous and controlled means of making sense of the highly nuanced and contingent understanding of a shifting, bilateral interstate relationship.

The report’s empirical sections highlight changes to the relationship during the past 10 years, with special emphasis on the period immediately before and up to the current stage of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. It presents a set of 14 categories that conceptualize dimensions of the political, economic, and military relationship. These categories are not exhaustive, but they allow for a more detailed accounting of each pillar of the relationship overall.

It should be noted that these categories (and the indicators within them) are not equivalent in terms of their relative weight within the given dimension. That is, some indicators of the relationship dimensions “matter” much more than others do. For example, a strategic defensive alliance (one such indicator) is much more important than noting that signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) have increased in number. This is to be expected, and ultimately these relationship indicators are only as useful as their interpretation, which is holistic and contextual rather than quantitatively aggregate or arithmetical. It would be improper simply to add up these values. Thus, we do not do so, but rather we allow them to guide the overall interpretation of the relationship, its various components, and its general direction.

This methodological approach has been developed in previous CNA reports and modified as needed to align with the research questions relevant to the Russia-Iran problem set. A complementary assessment from December 2023, published by the US Army’s Foreign Military Studies Office, also explored the topic using a related approach in a truncated format.<sup>6</sup> That study corroborates the value of our methodological choice and similarly finds a growing and deepening relationship while employing distinct metrics and a different interpretive framework, with data collected through summer 2023.

For this report, the political relationship is conceptualized to include policy coordination mechanisms, public diplomacy, and interactive engagements. The military relationship includes military diplomacy, military cooperation, technical cooperation, basing and access, exercises and training, and coordination and information sharing. The economic relationship includes economic coordination, institutional links, trade, investment, loans, and engagement in strategic sectors. The categories and indicators are listed in Table 2.

These categories are then operationalized into a set of 33 individual indicators that can be measured quantitatively or through ordinal or nominal qualitative metrics. We rely on Russian- and Persian-language sources as well as secondary English-language reporting and ongoing open-source data collection projects to corroborate each indicator value. The data take a variety of forms, including official statements, policy papers, trade data, sanctions statements, defense industry reporting, conflict reporting, and news reporting. See Appendix A: Indicator Metrics for specific information on the operationalization of these indicators and how they are assigned values.

These indicators are given holistic “low-medium-high” scores, which are presented in tables within each empirical section. Furthermore, as the score itself is largely static and measured relative to May 2024 in light of the prewar period, each value is also assigned a directional value of “upward trend,” “no change,” or “downward trend” to provide a temporal dynamic to the score. Every “high” score should be understood not as the best possible status of the relationship but rather as a component that is considerable, notable, and relevant to an overall assessment of the relationship.

The following section of the report provides a brief overall narrative account of Russia-Iran cooperation in historical and more recent perspective, which provides background relevant to a better understanding of recent changing dynamics. The three sections that follow detail the three relationship dimensions and the indicator assessments.

<sup>6</sup> Winter, Warner, and Baar, *Iran-Russia M-DIME Report*.

Table 2. Key selected relationship indicators

Dimension of National Power	Category	Indicators
<b>Political</b>	<i>Policy coordination mechanisms</i>	Treaties
		MOUs
		Security pact
	<i>Public diplomacy</i>	Rhetorical alignment
		Joint statements
	<i>Interactive engagements</i>	Key leader engagements
<b>Military</b>	<i>Military diplomacy</i>	Key leader engagements
		Naval port calls
	<i>Military cooperation</i>	Joint or coordinated operations
	<i>Technical cooperation</i>	Military sales (Russia)
		Military sales (Iran)
		Technology sharing, assistance
		Joint/licensed production
	<i>Dark port calls</i>	Dark port calls
	<i>Basing and access</i>	Bases, airfields, ports, and facilities
		Access, basing, overflight, logistics agreements
	<i>Exercises and training</i>	Bilateral or multilateral exercises
		Training or professional military education
<i>Coordination and information sharing</i>	Intelligence-sharing mechanisms	
<b>Economic</b>	<i>Economic coordination</i>	Bilateral and multilateral economic fora
		Key leader engagements
	<i>Institutional links and trade</i>	Banking/currency exchange arrangements
		Trade agreements
		Bilateral trade, by value
		Bilateral trade, as % of GDP
	<i>Trade partner ranking compared to top 5 nations (by trade value)</i>	Trade partner ranking compared to top 5 nations (by trade value)
	<i>Investment</i>	Bilateral foreign direct investment (FDI)
	<i>Loans</i>	Russian loans to Iran
	<i>Strategic sectors</i>	Communications
		Infrastructure
		Oil and gas
		Aerospace
Nuclear energy		

Source: CNA.

# OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIA-IRAN RELATIONSHIP

This section provides a general characterization of changes in Russian-Iranian cooperation dynamics. It first notes the broader historical background of the relationship between Russia and Iran, before providing overviews of Russian-Iranian cooperation in the recent past and how it has changed in broad terms since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.

This brief discussion is designed to introduce the subsequent sections that detail dimensional assessments for the relationship using the indicator framework. This section also provides background relevant to the contextual constraints and drivers that inform the Russia-Iran relationship over the long term and in more recent years.

## Russia-Iran cooperation in historical perspective

Russia and Iran have a long history of dynamic interaction stretching back to previous periods of

statehood. Early contact in the medieval period evolved into a longstanding rivalry over the Caucasus, the Caspian Basin, and stretches of Central Asia from the 1700s through the collapse of the Russian Empire in the early 20th century.<sup>7</sup> Earlier points of tension included a brief Russian-Persian War from 1651–1653.<sup>8</sup>

Further wars occurred with some regularity, including the Russian-Persian Wars of 1722–1723, 1796, 1804–1813, and 1826–1828.<sup>9</sup> These wars led successive Iranian dynasties to cede large swathes of territory in Transcaucasia to Russia.<sup>10</sup> Although dynamic over time, the Qajar Shahdom was considered part of the Russian imperial sphere of influence through much of the 19th century; however, this perspective was contested by British imperial interests.<sup>11</sup> In 1907, the Anglo-Russian Convention partitioned Iran into explicit spheres of influence, confirming Russian imperial influence over northern Persia while acknowledging British influence in the south.<sup>12</sup> Two

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of these events, see, for example, Guive Mirfendereski, *A Diplomatic History of the Caspian Sea: Treaties, Diaries and Other Stories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Firuz Kazemzadeh, "Iranian Relations with Russia and the Soviet Union to 1921," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 314–49; and Goodarz Rashtiani, "Iranian-Russian Relations in the Eighteenth Century," in *Crisis, Collapse, Militarism and Civil War: The History and Historiography of 18th Century Iran*, ed. Michael Axworthy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See Rudi Matthee, *Persia in Crisis: Safavid Decline and the Fall of Isfahan* (I. B. Tauris, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> See Muriel Atkin, *Russia and Iran, 1780-1828* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> See Rudi Matthee, "Facing a Rude and Barbarous Neighbor: Iranian Perceptions of Russia and the Russians from the Safavids to the Qajars," in *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 99–124.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Moritz Deutschmann, "'All Rulers Are Brothers': Russian Relations with the Iranian Monarchy in the Nineteenth Century," *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2013), pp. 401–13; Uzi Rabi and Nugzar Ter-Oganov, "The Russian Military Mission and the Birth of the Persian Cossack Brigade: 1879–1894," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2009), pp. 445–63; and Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864–1914: A Study in Imperialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> For discussion, see Ali Ansari, "Iran to 1919," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Michael Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Ewen W. Edwards, "The Far Eastern Agreements of 1907," *Journal of Modern History* 26, no. 4 (1954), pp. 340–55.



years later, in 1909, Russia intervened militarily to help quell political disturbances inside Iran.<sup>13</sup> This intervention brought Russian power into the internal contest over the Persian Constitutional Revolution, which would end with the constitutionalists ousted, but the Iranian regime on its last legs.<sup>14</sup>

For the next several decades, Soviet-Iranian relations would follow these same patterns of influence, intervention, and contestation, including continued great power conflicts with Britain and the US over influence in the region and within Iran itself.<sup>15</sup> A short-lived Iranian Soviet Socialist Republic (also known as the Persian Socialist Soviet Republic or the Socialist Soviet Republic of Gilan) emerged in 1920 with support from the Soviet Red Army, although it quickly failed.<sup>16</sup> Soviet accommodation to British interests led to an undeclared joint invasion of Iran in 1941 during the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> After Soviet attempts to support new socialist regimes in 1946, the relationship would turn hostile as the US became the dominant supporter of Iran's monarchy.<sup>18</sup>

After the declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, US-Iranian relations became

openly antagonistic. Although the break between Washington and Tehran led to some marginal improvement in the Russia-Iran relationship, the Soviet Union's position as an atheist power kept it fundamentally misaligned with the new Iranian regime's ideology.<sup>19</sup> This value misalignment ultimately acted as a severe constraint on the Russia-Iran relationship during this period. Although Iran was now an antagonist to the US, the Soviet Union was still an atheist power antithetical to the Iranian regime's new ideology.<sup>20</sup> Later, during the Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet Union supplied Iraq with most of its weaponry, while Iran backed select elements of the Afghan mujahideen in their war against the Soviets. With the end of the war, the Soviet Union penned an arms deal with Iran in 1989 that laid the groundwork for future cooperation in the 1990s, including the sale of three Kilo-class diesel submarines to the Islamic Republic of Iran's Navy.<sup>21</sup>

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a qualitative, if cautious, change in the interstate relationship, which many scholars characterized as a form of "strategic partnership."<sup>22</sup> Russia, for example,

<sup>13</sup> Kazemzadeh, "Iranian Relations with Russia and the Soviet Union to 1921."

<sup>14</sup> See, among others, Kazemzadeh, "Iranian Relations with Russia and the Soviet Union to 1921"; James D. Clark, "Constitutionalists and Cossacks: The Constitutional Movement and Russian Intervention in Tabriz, 1907–11," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006), pp. 199–225.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Alisa Shablovskaia, "'Islam Says We Are All Equal': The Islamic Turn in Soviet Propaganda in Iran, 1921–25," *Iranian Studies* 55, no. 4 (2022), pp. 973–92; Yuriy A. Demin, "Soviet Diplomacy and Its Role in Creation and Activity of the National Bloc in Iran (1922–1924)," *Vestnik Volgogradskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta, Seriya 4, Istoriiia Regionovedenie, Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia* 22, no. 4 (2017); Arlyn B. Wasserberg, "Politics of Soviet Interference: Soviet Foreign Policy Towards Iran," thesis (City University of New York, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> See Kayhan A. Nejad, "Provincial Revolution and Regional Anti-Colonialism: The Soviets in Iran, 1920–1921," *Slavic Review* 82, no. 2 (2023), pp. 378–400; Pezhmann Dailami, "The First Congress of Peoples of the East and The Iranian Soviet Republic of Gilan, 1920–21," in *Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (Routledge, 2013), pp. 85–117.

<sup>17</sup> Richard A. Stewart, "Soviet Military Intervention in Iran, 1920–46," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1981), p. 35; Miron Rezun, *The Soviet Union and Iran: Soviet Policy in Iran from the Beginnings of the Pahlavi Dynasty Until the Soviet Invasion in 1941*, Vol. 8 (Brill Archive, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Ahmad Ghoreichi, *Soviet Foreign Policy in Iran 1917–1960* (Boulder: University of Colorado, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> For an overview, see Robert G. Irani, "Changes in Soviet Policy Toward Iran," in *The Soviet Union in the Third World*, ed. Robert H. Donaldson (Routledge, 2022), pp. 192–209.

<sup>20</sup> Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "The Soviet Union and Iran Under Khomeini," *International Affairs* 57, no. 4 (1981), pp. 599–617.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Dobbs, "Soviets Agree to Strengthen Iran's Military," *Washington Post*, June 22, 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/06/23/soviets-agree-to-strengthen-irans-military/949c9c68-f810-4448-a75d-b87f6abaa21c/>.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Tarock, "Russo-Iranian Relations in the Post-Soviet Era," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 28, no. 3 (2017), pp. 518–37; Robert O. Freedman, "Russia-Iran Relations in the 1990s," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2000), p. 68.

supported Iran’s effort to complete the nuclear reactor plant at Bushehr in the mid-1990s. This upswing in cooperation continued from the Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin eras, with Moscow inviting Iran to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2007, although it never joined. By the mid-2000s, Iran was Russia’s seventh-largest trading partner. Economic agreements also appeared in the late 2000s, with a telecommunications contract (2008) followed by an agricultural agreement (2009) and an energy sector cooperation framework (2010).<sup>23</sup> This last agreement included a joint oil exchange that produced up to 15 million barrels of oil per day.

## Russia-Iran cooperation since the 2010s

Russia-Iran cooperation continued into the 2010s, with additional shifts toward cooperation and rapprochement. Notable instances include cooperation between the two states during the Syrian Civil War in 2015 and increased diplomatic engagements over events in Central Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> The Syrian War was a particularly important turning point. During this conflict, Russia and Iran developed considerably closer military-to-military ties based on the need to coordinate operations on the ground.<sup>25</sup>

During this time, according to one report,

The Russian and Iranian campaign in support of the Syrian government developed an “integrated grouping” of irregular armed formations under the command of the Russian Armed Forces...[during which] liaison elements from Syrian intelligence, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) combat detachments, Hezbollah, Al-Quds, and National Defense Forces were placed at the Russian command post in Khmeimim.<sup>26</sup>

This action would bear further fruit in terms of military-to-military ties over time. Just before the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, relations continued to find fruit in the military dimension. Since 2019, Russia, Iran, and China have held annual trilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Oman.

But military cooperation was not the only component of the changing Russia-Iran relationship during this period. The 2010s broadly suggested some sustained limits to cooperation dynamics, in part because of Russia’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear program. This mistrust also hindered other areas of agreement. In 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev canceled the delivery of S-300 missile systems to Iran as part of the “reset” period in US-Russian relations, and Russia joined the UN sanctions regime against Iran

<sup>23</sup> Ariel Farrar-Wellman, “Russia-Iran Foreign Relations,” Critical Threats Project, Aug. 2010, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russia-iran-foreign-relations>; “Iran, Russia Strike Cooperation Deals,” *Tehran Times*, Dec. 1, 2009, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/209011/Iran-Russia-strike-cooperation-deals>; Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Plan to Help Iran Challenges Sanctions,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/15/world/europe/15russia.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Tom O’Connor, “China, Russia Bring Iran, Pakistan into Fold to Face Afghanistan Crisis Together,” *Newsweek*, Sept. 16, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-russia-bring-iran-pakistan-fold-face-afghanistan-1629992>.

<sup>25</sup> Babak Rezvani, “Russian Foreign Policy and Geopolitics in the Post-Soviet Space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 6 (2020), pp. 878–99; David Maher and Moritz Pieper, “Russian Intervention in Syria: Exploring the Nexus Between Regime Consolidation and Energy Transnationalisation,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 4 (2021), pp. 944–64; Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria*, RAND, RR3180, Oct. 2019, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3180.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html).

<sup>26</sup> Nicole Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria,” CSIS, Nov. 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria>.

during this period.<sup>27</sup> After the collapse in Russian relations with the West following the annexation of Crimea, Russia-Iran relations began to improve again. In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin resumed the S-300 delivery plan and followed up in 2016 with further arms agreements.

In the economic realm, points of contact similarly grew. In 2014, a \$20 billion “oil for goods” deal was reached, which also spurred further investment from Russian energy companies, including Gazprom and Lukoil. A year later, an interim free trade agreement was made between the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and Iran.<sup>28</sup> Yet despite these developments, the economic relationship remained largely limited during this period. Continual fluctuations in Western sanctions toward Iran—largely in the context of the JCPOA—left many Russians hesitant to engage economically with Iran, as such ventures were viewed as too risky.

The relationship between Russia and Iran has strengthened across several dimensions since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>29</sup> On the political front, high-level ties have increased and deepened. Military relations have similarly increased, with Iran supplying large numbers of drones and munitions for Russia’s war effort. Economically, the two countries have sought to improve their trade ties and engage in mutually beneficial infrastructure development, not least because of their now-shared status as nations heavily sanctioned by Western states.

The following sections focus on the immediate pre- and intra-war period, detailing the change in relations across three dimensions of national power: political, military, and economic. The goal of the following sections is to provide more structure to qualitative and interpretive assessments of the changing Russia-Iran relationship in the immediate period surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war and its overall shock to the international order.

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<sup>27</sup> Ramyar D. Rossoukh, ed., “Iran’s Eastward Turn to Russia and China: A Conversation with Nicole Grajewski, Nader Habibi, and Gary Samore,” *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/crown-conversations/cc-22.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Eurasian Economic Union, “Interim Agreement Leading to Formation of a Free Trade Area Between the Eurasian Economic Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, of the Other Part,” Dec. 2015, [https://eec.eaeunion.org/upload/medialibrary/7bc/Interim-Agreement-EAEU\\_Iran\\_final.pdf](https://eec.eaeunion.org/upload/medialibrary/7bc/Interim-Agreement-EAEU_Iran_final.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Holmquist and Khan, *Isolated Together*; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

# THE POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP

This section reviews the Russia-Iran political relationship. Political ties are understood as both diplomatic interactions and policy alignment, as well as elite-level engagements and the broader change toward a cooperative and bilateral strategic outlook. This section identifies key developments in the relationship within the past 10 years, with special focus on the immediate period before and after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. The political relationship is conceptualized in a public and official sense; this section is thus limited to open-source and publicly available data.

The rest of this section presents the indicator-based assessment of the relationship and then synthesizes these findings in a brief conclusion relevant to the political dimension. Because the political relationship is characterized through meetings, official documents, joint statements, and other forms of public interaction that are often bound to specific substantive issue areas, such as military engagements, economic agreements, or scientific cooperation, this section is shorter and more holistic than the detailed data presented in the next two sections.

The evidence provided here confirms the overall Western assessment by researchers and policy observers that the political relationship between Russia and Iran has improved both generally since the early 2010s and more specifically since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. A positive political relationship provides the interlinkages and interactions, as well as strategic context, through which substantive military and economic relationships develop across concrete issue areas.

We provide baseline evidence for an improving political relationship through increasing elite- and institutional-level contacts, as well as a reorientation toward overall strategic partnership. The indicators collected here under the political dimension characterize a broadly upward and positive dynamic in the political relationship, especially regarding general diplomatic rapprochement, increasing rhetorical coordination along civilizationist and anti-Western ideological lines, and substantive interactions through political and diplomatic actor meetings and MOUs in both bilateral and multilateral formats (see Table 3).




## Characterizing Russia-Iran political cooperation, 2014–2024

The political dimension of Russia-Iran cooperation has grown in the past 10 years, with a sharp uptick since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, the relationship started a positive dynamic earlier—aligned with increased interactions due to cooperation during the Syrian Civil War, starting in 2015, as well as US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the end of the UN arms embargo on Iran in 2020.<sup>30</sup>

The Iranian presidential election in 2021, which excluded moderates, brought to power President Ebrahim Raisi, who helped cement a pro-Russian tilt in Iranian politics. The election of Masoud Pezeshkian on July 5, 2024, is unlikely to change this trajectory, although he has been portrayed as a relative moderate. Although anti-Americanism has been a defining feature of Iranian foreign policy

<sup>30</sup> For previous work on these dynamics, see Holmquist and Khan, *Isolated Together*; Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

Table 3. Summary of political relationship findings

Category	Indicators	Relationship Characterization	Trend Direction
 <b>POLICY COORDINATION MECHANISMS</b>	Treaties	MEDIUM	↗
	Memoranda of Understanding	HIGH	↗
	Security Pact	MEDIUM	↗
 <b>PUBLIC DIPLOMACY</b>	Rhetorical Alignment	HIGH	↗
	Joint Statements	HIGH	↗
 <b>INTERACTIVE ENGAGEMENTS</b>	Key Leader Engagements	HIGH	↗

Source: CNA.

since the 1979 revolution, more moderate politicians had argued for a balanced foreign policy approach and were critical of closer ties to Russia (and China). The Trump administration’s withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal dashed hopes of reengagement with Europe, which moderates had sought.

Reports and studies in the Western research community from the mid-2010s onward generally refer to a renewal of Russian-Iranian ties that plausibly began with Putin’s return to the Russian presidency in 2012 and the subsequent return to arms and nuclear talks. Growing ties resulting from collaborative interests in Syria and the US withdrawal from the JCPOA would be new and greater steps

toward overall cooperative relations.<sup>31</sup> In general terms, Russian views on Iran grew less standoffish over the period, with growing interest in collaboration expressed in the military domain especially.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the specifically political—and strategic or geopolitical—relationship achieved a major boost with the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. As highlighted elsewhere in this report, the relationship has improved in many ways, from military ties to new economic investments. However, politically, the war provided a strong impetus to move from reticence to directly conducting business at the highest levels between the two states. Even during the years of some rapprochement and military

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Nikolay Kozhanov, “Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance,” in *Foreign Policy of Iran Under President Hassan Rouhani’s First Term (2013–2017)*, ed. Luciano Zaccara, (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 131–56; Alireza Samoudi and Amirhossein Norouzi Shahtouri, “Iran-Russia Military and Security Relations After the JCPOA,” *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018), pp. 77–92; and Nansi Paulraj, “The JCPOA and Changing Dimensions of the Russia–Iran Relations,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3, no. 1 (2016), pp. 95–110.

<sup>32</sup> John W. Parker, “Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria,” *INSS Strategic Perspectives* no. 27 (2019), <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1723239/between-russia-and-iran-room-to-pursue-american-interests-in-syria/>; Julie Wilhelmsen, “Putin’s Power Revisited: How Identity Positions and Great Power Interaction Condition Strategic Cooperation on Syria,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 7 (2019), pp. 1091–1121; Ephraim Kam, “Iran-Russia-Syria: A Threefold Cord Is Not Quickly Broken,” in *Iran in a Changing Strategic Environment*, ed. Meir Litvak, Emily B. Landau, and Ephraim Kam (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2018).

connections, Russia still partially adhered to the broader counter-Iran coalition regarding Iran’s nuclear program, for example.<sup>33</sup>

“Since the signing of the current treaty, the international context has changed and relations between the two countries are experiencing an unprecedented upswing.”<sup>34</sup>

–Maria Zakharova, Russian Press Secretary

As suggested in the relationship drivers framework presented in the previous section, both push and pull drivers existed prior to the war but intensified to a much higher and deeper level after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The pull of ideological and geopolitical factors toward alignment grew during the immediate pre- and postwar period, primarily through developments on the Russian side. This alignment was less evident in the 2010s, with more cautious engagement overall in the political relationship, even after the start of somewhat deeper cooperation during the Syrian Civil War.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, push factors related to the war (e.g., bypassing sanctions and the increasing need for arms transfers to support the war effort) overcame previous constraints that had led to prior hesitance as well. Instead of seeking a monocausal answer to which driver is most important, we suggest that the several explanations offered here are not mutually exclusive, but rather they have reinforced each other since 2022.

According to a recent report by Ellie Geranmayeh and Nicole Grajewski, one particular reason for the growing political closeness between Russia and Iran since the start of the war is “the rise of hardliners and the deep state in monopolizing decision-making” in both Iran and Russia, which has “directly influenced Iran’s decision to support Russia.”<sup>36</sup> The authors note that “Russian eagerness to cooperate with Iran coincides with a notable tilt in Iranian domestic politics away from seeking normalization with the West.”<sup>37</sup> This is borne out in our indicator variables, which indeed show a qualitative difference in both the kind of rhetoric used by both sides as well as increasing contacts at the political-actor level.

Other reports have suggested that the drivers for political collaboration are less the result of domestic political dynamics than of the push factors that emerged because of Russia’s sudden isolation after the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> These explanations are not

<sup>33</sup> For varied perspectives on cooperation and contention over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, see, for example, Hanna Notte, “Russia, the Global South and the Mechanics of the Nuclear Order,” *Survival* 66, no. 3 (2024), pp. 49–57; Nicole Grajewski, “An Illusory Entente: The Myth of a Russia-China-Iran ‘Axis,’” *Asian Affairs* 53, no. 1 (2022), pp. 164–83; Anatoly S. Diyakov, “Iran’s Nuclear Program—Past, Present and Uncertain Future,” *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia* 64, no. 12 (2020), pp. 15–24; Kozhanov, “Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance”; John W. Parker, “Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?,” *Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) Strategic Perspectives* no. 9 (Mar. 2012), <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-9.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> “Putin and Iran’s Raisi to Sign New Interstate Treaty Soon – Russia,” Reuters, Jan. 17, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-irans-raisi-sign-new-interstate-treaty-soon-russia-2024-01-17/>.

<sup>35</sup> Nicole Grajewski, “The Iran-Russia Friendship Won’t Wither Under Raisi’s Successor,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 21, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/05/raisi-death-iran-russia-relationship>.

<sup>36</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>37</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Gris  and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*; Holmquist and Khan, *Isolated Together*.

mutually exclusive, and they underline our report's framework of both externally imposed requirements for Russia's war efforts as well as the growing pull of strategic opportunities for the relationship.

For example, some Iranian observers caution that these deepening ties are largely opportunistic and temporary and fall short of an alliance in which the two countries would pledge to defend one another in case of aggression.<sup>39</sup> Another Iranian analysis accuses Russia of "zigzag and contradictory behavior," such as cooperating with Iran against ISIS in Syria but turning a blind eye to Israeli attacks on Iranian forces there.<sup>40</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov concurs, stating that "it is difficult to conclude that Russia-Iran relations will be durable." In his view, the growing alignment between Russia and Iran will have excessively high geopolitical costs, especially for Iran. For Kozhanov, the relationship between the two has exacerbated tensions between Iran and Israel, drawing the US further into ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, other Iranian experts see the positives in engaging with Russia as outweighing the negatives and depict a growing alignment between Russia and Iran on the broader geopolitical issues while differing on some specific regional and bilateral interests.<sup>42</sup> Abdolrasool Divsallar of the Institute of Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran contends that Iran and Russia share a sense of international "misrecognition" that creates a deep insecurity and

leads them to consider one another "indispensable powers."<sup>43</sup> Although Divsallar admits that mistrust, disagreements, and rivalries persist in Russia-Iran relations and raises doubts about their sustainability, he contends that shared threat perceptions will outweigh these differences.<sup>44</sup>

The section below details the set of political indicators and submetrics that provide us with a greater sense of the change in the Russia-Iran political relationship. The data are taken from a variety of public sources from the 2010s to the present day, with a special focus on change during the past five years. Data sources include publicly reported meetings, speeches, official documents, and other material, including secondary sources that analyze specific aspects of political alignment. Most data sources are cited here in their English versions for ease of future research, although Russian- and Persian-language versions also exist for the majority of the data used here.<sup>45</sup> As military and economic interactions—which in many cases predate the true uptick in political ties—are covered elsewhere, this section largely looks to the immediate years before and after the Russia-Ukraine war's onset to measure the relationship trajectory.

### Methods for assessment

To understand the Russia-Iran political relationship, CNA used three primary categories with six indicators

<sup>39</sup> Akbar Valizadeh and Somayeh Kademi, "The Influence of Strategic Culture Components on Bilateral and Regional Relations Between Iran and Russia," *Journal of Central Eurasia Studies* (Iran) 15, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2022), p. 404.

<sup>40</sup> Mohammad Ali Hozhabri, "Iran-Russia Relations Within the Framework of the Prisoner's Dilemma," Mehr News Agency, July 19, 2019, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/147137/Iran-Russia-relations-within-the-framework-of-Prisoner-s-Dilemma>.

<sup>41</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Putin's War in Ukraine and Prospects for Russia-Iran Relations," PeaceRep, Apr. 4, 2023, [https://peacerep.org/2023/04/04/putin-ukraine-Russia-Iran-relations/#\\_edn1](https://peacerep.org/2023/04/04/putin-ukraine-Russia-Iran-relations/#_edn1).

<sup>42</sup> Ali Omid, "Russia-Iranian Ties: Strategic Alliance, Strategic Coalition, or Strategic Alignment (Partnership)," *Russian Politics* 7, no. 3 (2022), p. 341–65.

<sup>43</sup> Abdolrasool Divsallar, "The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence," *International Spectator* 54, no. 3 (2019), p. 112.

<sup>44</sup> Divsallar, "The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence," p. 118.

<sup>45</sup> For example, all public MOUs have been reported on in English, often in both official Russian and Iranian state media as well as through Western reporting. They are also all published on the respective Ministry of Foreign Affairs or presidential office websites for both countries in English as well as Russian or Persian, respectively.

to assess analytically meaningful changes within it. The primary categories—cooperation mechanisms, public diplomacy, and political engagements between key state actors—are distinct but related conceptual elements bounded within the political side of the relationship.

The **cooperation mechanisms** category looks at the degree to which procedures, processes, written documents, and public or private agreements institutionalize, sustain, and support the bilateral relationship. Indicators include signing or negotiating treaties, signing or negotiating MOUs, and the existence of security pacts relevant to the bilateral relationship. To assess these indicators, we drew heavily on public reporting of MOU and treaty signings as well as information on reported intentions between the two sides. The number of issue areas under discussion, the frequency of those discussions, and discussions of potential formal agreements are proxies that indicate growing mechanisms and means of sustained interstate cooperation.

The **public diplomacy** category captures the degree to which diplomatic and informational components of the relationship are signaled publicly and in what ways. Indicators include the number, content, and timing of joint statements, as well as rhetorical shifts or alignments between both state parties. To assess these indicators, this subsection relied on qualitative analysis of major speeches by key officials, a survey of the existing academic and think-tank literature on ideological transformations (especially in Russia), and collected data on joint statements. Greater alignment in the public diplomacy category suggests less friction and easier means to understand one another—or at least public efforts to do so—which may further the political relationship.

The **interactive engagements** category identifies the degree to which the bilateral relationship is defined

by personal meetings between upper-tier elite actors between both state parties. Indicators include the frequency and type of high-level meetings and visits as well as which elites are interacting at these levels. To assess these indicators, this subsection relied on public data on bilateral and multilateral meetings.

As noted above, the political relationship represents an overall set of interactions, assertions, contact points, and strategic outlooks that inform concrete military and economic decisions. The indicators for the political relationship are operationalized in multiple ways, reflecting the diversity of components within each category. The majority are assessed qualitatively and holistically through content analysis, although some can be measured at least partially in descriptive, quantitative terms. Table 3 lists the categories, indicators, and overall ratings for each.<sup>46</sup>

### Assessment of political indicators

The following provides more detail on the nature of this changing political relationship. We find that political cooperation between Russia and Iran has increased markedly since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. Most notably, there are significantly expanded contact points and regular interactions through meetings, MOUs, and public statements. In addition, we find strong alignment in public diplomacy. What is most lacking remains the formalization of a bilateral strategic partnership, although even here there is movement.

### Cooperation mechanisms

Formal cooperation mechanisms between Russia and Iran consist of treaties, MOUs, and other signed official documents. There has been little movement regarding formal treaties, suggesting that these most

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix A: Indicator Metrics for details on the individual indicator metrics and coding criteria.



institutionalized elements of the political relationship remain less comprehensive and under negotiation. Critically, despite other notable increases in the Russia-Iran relationship, no formal defense treaty has been signed, and a renewed “strategic partnership” interstate treaty remains under negotiation as of summer 2024. This suggests that limits and constraints in the relationship remain important.

On the other hand, MOUs have increased considerably since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. These indicate both sides’ interest in deepening the partnership across a range of issues, especially military, technical, and economic ties. However, they signify only a general direction in the relationship and do not imply that the agreement has been fulfilled or that the states are under the legal obligations that interstate treaties provide for.

### Treaties

Formal treaty-style documents between Russia and Iran are relatively few, although the two states signed a 20-year strategic cooperation agreement in March 2001, termed “The Treaty on the Basis of Mutual Relations and Principles of Cooperation Between Iran and Russia.”<sup>47</sup> This agreement included general articles on cooperation related to energy transportation, nuclear cooperation, and economic issues and explicitly aligned with talks on major arms deals. It was the first treaty signed between the two countries since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran

and was perceived at the time to counter US-led efforts to continue isolating Iran from the global arms market and nuclear technology.<sup>48</sup> Writing at the time, Ali Jalali suggested that the cooperation and the arms deal associated with it “consolidate[s] the evolving partnership between Russia and Iran at a time of strategic congruence of the two countries’ national interests. Prompted mostly by transnational factors, the alliance places strong emphasis on political and security issues.”<sup>49</sup>

Since this period, Russia and Iran have been limited thus far in the degree to which new treaties have been signed. In January 2024, Presidents Putin and Raisi announced they were working on a new interstate treaty that would provide a framework for a full strategic cooperation agreement and official partnership.<sup>50</sup> Russia’s foreign ministry spokeswoman offered a statement at the time: “Since the signing of the current treaty, the international context has changed and relations between the two countries are experiencing an unprecedented upswing.”<sup>51</sup> According to one report about its contents, Russia may have extracted many concessions from Iran on pricing of manufactured goods, including weapons, and has a wish list for greater access to Iranian ports and airbases for dual-use purposes, including an agreement for a joint aerospace command for Iran’s part of the Caspian Sea.<sup>52</sup> As of early summer 2024, however, this treaty had not been officially unveiled.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> “The Treaty on the Basis of Mutual Relations and Principles of Cooperation Between Iran and Russia,” UN Treaty Database, Registration No. 38860, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280080a13>.

<sup>48</sup> Susan B. Glasser, “Russia, Iran Renew Alliance Meant to Boost Arms Trade,” *The Washington Post*, Mar. 13, 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/03/13/russia-iran-renew-alliance-meant-to-boost-arms-trade/3f27a335-537e-4325-a0c1-cde2c07b2e49/>.

<sup>49</sup> Ali A. Jalali, “The Strategic Partnership of Russia and Iran,” *Parameters* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2001), pp. 98–111, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2063&context=parameters>.

<sup>50</sup> “Putin and Iran’s Raisi to Sign New Interstate Treaty Soon – Russia.”

<sup>51</sup> “Putin and Iran’s Raisi to Sign New Interstate Treaty Soon – Russia.”

<sup>52</sup> Simon Watkins, “Russia and Iran Finalize a 20-Year Deal That Will Change the Middle East Forever,” *OilPrice.com*, Jan. 22, 2024, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Russia-And-Iran-Finalize-20-Year-Deal-That-Will-Change-The-Middle-East-Forever.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Emil Avdaliani, “Iran and Russia Enter a New Level of Military Cooperation,” *Stimson Commentary*, Mar. 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/>.

On June 11, 2024, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the “process of work on the agreement was suspended because of problems with Iranian partners,” but that the “updated comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between Russia and Iran is undergoing a new approval process due to amendments from the Iranian side.”<sup>54</sup> The Russian side publicly signaled that, despite this setback, intentions remained united to find a way to work through the issues and conclude the agreement in due course, which the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs referred to as a “strategic decision.”<sup>55</sup> Whether and when this will take place is beyond the scope of this report, but as of June 2024, no agreement had been announced and no date had been set for a potential signing.

### Memoranda of understanding

There has been a considerable uptick in the number of MOUs since the start of the war, as shown in Figure 1. These capture a variety of topic areas ranging from bilateral military agreements to new economic frameworks and technical research ventures. A full list of MOUs and their topics from 2021 to 2024 can be found in Appendix B: Meetings and Memoranda of Understanding. Although MOUs have increased from 2022, the majority of MOUs were signed in 2023 as the war continued and the strategic partnership began to deepen.

The increasing economic cooperation between Russia and Iran is particularly noteworthy. At the end of February 2024 alone, Russia and Iran signed 19 MOUs in a joint economic committee session that discussed cooperation, focusing particularly on oil and gas but also on automakers and airlines.<sup>56</sup> Cooperation on oil and gas goes back to at least July 2022, when Russian state-owned Gazprom signed an investment memorandum with the National Iranian Oil Company.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, in December 2023, Iran signed a free trade agreement with the Russia-backed Eurasia Economic Union, and a month later, Iran attended its first official BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) meeting.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the biggest joint undertaking economically has been the effort to combat Western sanctions, first through closer economic cooperation and now through a north-south transport corridor that will give Russia easier access to the Persian Gulf, which is seen by some observers as a means to rival the Suez Canal in relevance.<sup>59</sup>

The other major area of political cooperation is defense and security. On April 24, 2024, Russian and Iranian National Security Councils signed an MOU on increased cooperation and relations between the two institutions related to security matters.<sup>60</sup> This comes after many discussions between the two nations

<sup>54</sup> “The Foreign Ministry Called the Cooperation Agreement with Iran a Strategic Decision [МИД назвал договор о сотрудничестве с Ираном стратегическим решением],” *RIA Novosti*, June 11, 2024, <https://ria.ru/20240611/iran-1952093767.html>.

<sup>55</sup> “The Foreign Ministry Called the Cooperation Agreement with Iran a Strategic Decision.”

<sup>56</sup> “Iran, Russia Ink Several Co-op MOUs to Wrap Up 17th Joint Economic Commission,” *Tehran Times*, Feb. 28, 2024, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/495520/Iran-Russia-ink-several-co-op-MOUs-to-wrap-up-17th-Joint-Economic>.

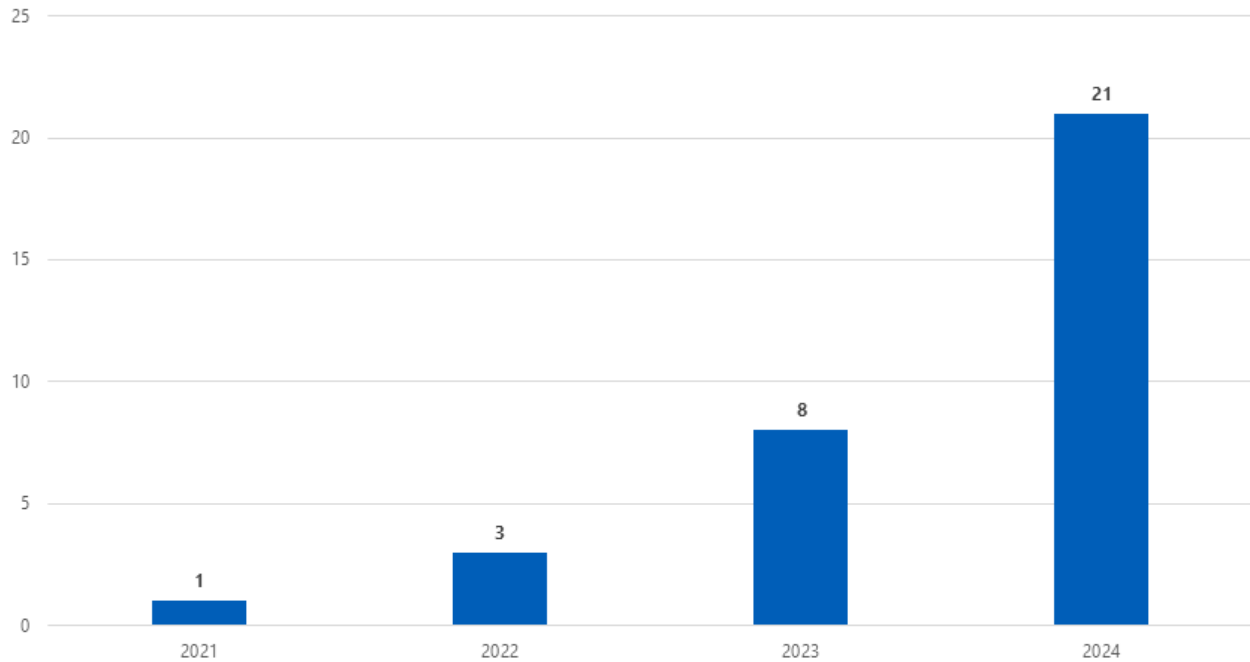
<sup>57</sup> “Russia Signs \$40Bln Investment Agreement with Iran National Oil Company,” *The Cradle*, July 19, 2022, <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/3396>; “Gazprom Invests \$40 Bln in Iran Oil Sector,” *Al-Mayadeen*, July 19, 2022, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/economics/gazprom-invests-40-bln-in-iran-oil-sector>.

<sup>58</sup> “First BRICS Meeting with Official Iran Presence Kicks Off,” Mehr News Agency, Jan. 30, 2024, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/211478/First-BRICS-meeting-with-official-Iran-presence-kicks-off>; “Russian-Backed Union Signs Free Trade Pact with Iran,” Reuters, Dec. 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-backed-union-signs-free-trade-pact-with-iran-2023-12-25/>.

<sup>59</sup> Olesya Astakhova and Parisa Hafezi, “Russia and Iran Sign Rail Deal for Corridor Intended to Rival Suez Canal,” Reuters, May 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-putin-irans-raisi-oversee-railway-deal-signing-2023-05-17/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Top Iran, Russia Security Officials Sign MoU for Cooperation,” Mehr News Agency, Apr. 24, 2024, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/214345/Top-Iran-Russia-security-officials-sign-MOU-for-cooperation>.

Figure 1. MOUs signed (count by year), Jan. 2021–May 2024



Source: CNA.

on cybersecurity, police cooperation, the ethics of artificial intelligence, and many other security areas.<sup>61</sup> They have discussed not only internal security (in the wake of the June 2023 Prigozhin Rebellion) but also regional politics and spheres of influence, including Afghanistan, Yemen, and Israel-Gaza.<sup>62</sup>

### Security pacts

Iran has joined several broader intergovernmental security pacts in recent years, most importantly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2022.

The process for formally joining the organization is still ongoing, but Iran signed a memorandum of obligation that puts the country on a path to full membership.<sup>63</sup> Notably, this occurred only after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, although it had been a point of interest for Iran—and Russia—for many years prior; Iran had applied for membership in 2021.<sup>64</sup>

It is important to note that joining the SCO is as much a sign of Iran’s growing bilateral relationship with China, Central Asian states, and India as it is with

<sup>61</sup> “Iran and Russia Sign Memorandum of Understanding to Cooperate on Ethics in Artificial Intelligence,” TV Brics, Mar. 12, 2024, <https://tvbrics.com/en/news/iran-and-russia-sign-memorandum-of-understanding-to-cooperate-on-ethics-in-artificial-intelligence/>; Omree Wechsler, “The Iran-Russia Cyber Agreement and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Mar. 15, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/iran-russia-cyber-agreement-and-us-strategy-middle-east>.

<sup>62</sup> “Maziar Motamedi, Iran to Host Multilateral Conference on Afghanistan on October 27,” Al-Jazeera, Oct. 18, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/18/tehran-to-host-multilateral-conference-on-afghanistan>; “Russia, Iran Condemn Strikes by US, UK in Yemen,” *Middle East Monitor*, Jan. 15, 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240115-russia-iran-condemn-strikes-by-us-uk-in-yemen/>; “Russia’s Lavrov Talks Middle East with Iran, Turkey, Lebanon,” Reuters, Jan. 22, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russias-lavrov-talks-middle-east-with-iran-turkey-lebanon-2024-01-23/>.

<sup>63</sup> Parisa Hafezi, “Iran to Join Asian Security Body Led by Russia, China,” Reuters, Sept. 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-signs-memorandum-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-tass-2022-09-15/>.

<sup>64</sup> Aamna Khan, “What Does Iran’s Membership in the SCO Mean for the Region?” *The Diplomat*, Sept. 20, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/what-does-irans-membership-in-the-sco-mean-for-the-region/>.

Russia. As a result, this observation should be taken as part of a broader regional trend of Iran integrating with Eurasian security structures rather than a choice targeting only Russia specifically. Nevertheless, joining the SCO provides further institutional, diplomatic, and elite ties that will strengthen the Russia-Iran relationship, not least by providing a regional organizational hub through which to further align on issues, as well as a justification and impetus for military exercises and training.

The other key regional security pact is the CSTO, a post-Soviet military alliance led by Russia. So far, Iran has not sought to join the group, although commentary regularly appears in Russian media about the potential for cooperation in the future.<sup>65</sup> As early as 2007, CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha had suggested that the organization was open to the possibility, although there were no further developments.<sup>66</sup> One reason for a lack of movement on this topic would be concern about making multilateral mutual defense commitments, leading to the perception of CSTO membership as potentially too risky to undertake seriously.

## Public diplomacy

In the public sphere, the Russia-Iran relationship has seen a particularly notable uptick in coordination and alignment. This uptick can be captured in both institutional and general terms. Joint statements on points of interest, including geopolitical collaboration, stances on the Russia-Ukraine war, and the prospects for future cooperation, have all

been observed in the past two years especially. These joint statements mark the continuation of a trend that began with the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012. Rhetorical shifts of a more general nature have also been observed, although they closely follow the qualitative relationship change after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

## Rhetorical shifts

Political rhetoric in Russia and Iran has increasingly aligned in the past two years. New emphases on a civilizationist turn in global politics, regular positive references to the importance of the “Global South” as a bulwark of anti-Western reaction, and substantive coordination on the importance of traditional values and cultural specificity have marked this component of the rhetorical landscape.<sup>67</sup> This phenomenon has been noted widely by researchers, who often term the ideological component of this rhetoric a form of “illiberalism.”<sup>68</sup>

This growing alignment on ideological orientation is an important means of making political rhetoric and value claims in each country legible and understandable; in this way, it is an enabler to further justify and legitimize improving relations. Furthermore, by stressing the importance of civilization as a key unit of global order, rather than either nation-state or general international unity, illiberal rhetoric imparts a specific, normative vision of international politics that opposes liberal universalism and stresses cultural particularity as a core legitimating principle and justification for spheres of influence or assertions of sovereignty.

<sup>65</sup> “Iran, Other States Might Become Observers at CSTO Parliamentary Assembly — Naryshkin,” TASS, Nov. 6, 2014, <https://tass.com/world/758407>.

<sup>66</sup> Giovanni Valvo, “Syria, Iran and The Future of the CSTO,” *Eurasia Review*, Dec. 2012, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/14122012-syria-iran-and-the-future-of-the-csto-analysis/>.

<sup>67</sup> In Russian terminology, this macro-bloc is sometimes referred to as the “World Majority” or “Global Majority.” See, for example, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority,” Dec. 2023, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/reports/1923234/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/reports/1923234/); Angela Stent, “Russia, the West, and the ‘World Majority,’” *Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies Insights*, Jan. 2024, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/russia-west-and-world-majority>.

<sup>68</sup> Julian G. Waller, “Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study,” *Political Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (2024), pp. 365–86.

In Iran, illiberal reaction to Western liberalism is longstanding and part of the official ideology of the Islamic Republic. It was a core component of the 1979 revolution, as well as subsequent domestic political developments. Iranian illiberalism stresses both its Islamic-theocratic elements as well as a broader Islamic-civilizationist discourse.<sup>69</sup> In Russia, illiberalism is now the de facto state ideology as expressed through the public speeches of President Putin and other upper-tier Russian elites, including those in the Russian Orthodox Church and related institutions.<sup>70</sup> It has been increasingly institutionalized through Russian higher educational programs and state working groups on Russian values and traditions, and it is actively discussed in Russia's authoritarian parliament as an area of future statutory legislation.<sup>71</sup>

Although Iranian political and diplomatic elites have long framed their public statements in line with official illiberal ideology, the Russian turn toward similar emphases is newer.<sup>72</sup> Although it can be tracked as early as 2012, high-level state rhetoric has grown considerably from 2020 onward. Russian elites now regularly discuss foreign policy in these terms,

with an eye toward legitimating their cooperation with longstanding illiberal states such as Iran.<sup>73</sup> Russia's newest Foreign Policy Concept, announced in March 2023 as a presidential decree, states that "formation of a more equitable multipolar world order is underway" and that Western resistance to this development suggests that the "logical response to the crisis of the world order is the strengthening of cooperation between the states that are subject to external pressure."<sup>74</sup>

The Concept also integrates Russia's civilizationist rhetoric in a new way, stating that the

harmonious coexistence of different peoples, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups on one common territory, which has been developed over many centuries, determine Russia's special position as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Saeid Golkar and Asha Sawhney, "Dictators and Civilizational Thinking in Iran: From the Great Civilization to Islamic Civilization," Middle East Institute, Sept. 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/dictators-and-civilizational-thinking-iran-great-civilization-islamic-civilization>; Ali M. Ansari, "Civilizational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran," in *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, ed. Brenda Shaffer (The MIT Press, 2006), pp. 241–62; Susan Zickmund, "Constructing Political Identity: Religious Radicalism and the Rhetoric of the Iranian Revolution," *Poroi* 2, no. 2 (2003); D. Ray Heisey and J. David Trebing, "A Comparison of the Rhetorical Visions and Strategies of the Shah's White Revolution and the Ayatollah's Islamic Revolution," *Communications Monographs* 50, no. 2 (1983), pp. 158–74.

<sup>70</sup> Julian G. Waller, "Elites and Institutions in the Russian Thermidor: Regime Instrumentalism, Entrepreneurial Signaling, and Inherent Illiberalism," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–23.

<sup>71</sup> Dima Kortukov and Julian G. Waller, "The Foundations of Russian Statehood: The *Pentabasis*, National History, and Civic Values in Wartime Russia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (Sept. 16, 2024), pp. 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1525/cpcs.2024.2271407>; Sergey V. Perevezentsev and Dmitry A. Ananiev, "Axiological Foundations of Russian Statehood: 'Truth' and 'Justice' in the Domestic Ideological and Political Discourse," *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2023), pp. 21–37; Zigmund A. Stankevich, "A 'Moral State' or a New Theocracy After All? Polemical Notes in Connection with the New Concept of Russian Statehood," *Pravoprimerenie: Law Enforcement Review* 5, no. 2 (2021), pp. 238–45.

<sup>72</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (2020), p. 115; Waller, "Elites and Institutions in the Russian Thermidor."

<sup>73</sup> Laruelle, "Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism," p. 115; Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020), pp. 95–139; Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, "Illiberal Geographies: Popular Geopolitics and Russian Biopolitical Regionalism," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 1 (2018), pp. 51–72.

<sup>74</sup> "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, No. 299, Mar. 31, 2023, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/).

<sup>75</sup> "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation."

Elsewhere, it states that the “equitable world order” requires recognition of the

diversity of cultures, civilizations and models of social organization, nonimposition on other countries by all states of their models of development, ideology and values, and reliance on a spiritual and moral guideline that is common for all world traditional religions and secular ethical systems.<sup>76</sup>

The focus on non-Western civilizational separateness is a through-line of recent speeches by Putin since the start of the war. For example, in a speech to the World Russian People’s Council, he made special mention of Russia’s multiethnic cultural mix as opposed to Western neo-colonialism and imperialism:

Russophobia and other forms of racism and neo-Nazism have almost become the official ideology of Western ruling elites. They are directed not only against ethnic Russians, but against all groups living in Russia: Tatars, Chechens, Avars, Tuvinians, Bashkirs, Buryats, Yakuts, Ossetians, Jews, Ingush, Mari and Altai. There are many of us, I might not be able to name every group now, but again, the threat is directed against all the peoples of Russia. The West has no need for such a large and multiethnic country as Russia as a matter of principle. Our diversity and unity

of cultures, traditions, languages, and ethnicities simply do not fit into the logic of Western racists and colonisers, into their cruel plans for total depersonalisation, separation, suppression, and exploitation.<sup>77</sup>

Iran had been pursuing this rhetorical line prior to the war as well. For example, in a speech to Russia’s parliament in January 2022, just before the war, then-Iranian President Raisi stated that the goal of Russia-Iran bilateral relations and renewed cooperation was “to fulfill the common interests of people, as well as to create a global civilized society. Such cooperation is possible only through implementation and commitment to justice, morality and spirituality.”<sup>78</sup> Iranian leaders had therefore already been supplying rhetorical cues to Russia—which in turn would be especially reciprocated after the war broke out.

This approach in general has provided an elite rhetorical environment that broadly aligns in anti-Westernism and support for traditional values—contextually understood within the framework of a pluralist, “civilizational” approach. In doing so, rhetorical alignment has allowed elite statements to be increasingly coherent and legible for both sides and justifies a narrative of geopolitical unity through civilizational blocs that fits with characterizations that are increasingly common across non-Western audiences.<sup>79</sup>

### Joint statements

Because of the growing contacts and meetings between Russian and Iranian political elites, joint statements by both sides have also increased. Most

<sup>76</sup> “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.”

<sup>77</sup> “Plenary Session of the World Russian People’s Council,” President of Russia, Nov. 28, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72863>.

<sup>78</sup> “President of Iran Addressed Members of the State Duma,” State Duma, Jan. 20, 2022, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/53251/>.

<sup>79</sup> Zeno Leoni and Sarah Tzinieris, “The Return of Geopolitical Blocs,” *Survival* 66, no. 2 (2024), pp. 37–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0396338.2024.2332056>; Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, “A Critical Juncture: Russia, Ukraine and the Global South,” *Survival* 66, no. 2 (2024), pp. 19–36, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2024.2332055.

official meetings end in a joint statement, and regional formats also often lead to joint statements. When they are not bilateral, joint statements have been used particularly with Chinese and Turkish partners as well, because of the frequency of meetings over Syria, the JCPOA, and economic and security cooperation via BRICS and SCO summits.<sup>80</sup>

According to data from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, at least 1,098 joint statements have been issued by Russia and Iran either in a bilateral or multilateral format since 2003. Of these statements, 155 were made after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war (i.e., nearly 15 percent of the total in just in two and a half years).<sup>81</sup> The previous five years (February 2017–February 2022) had a total of 496 joint statements, according to the same data source. These data may very well be an undercount of the total number of joint statements and provide only a rough indicator of general diplomatic engagement.

Joint statements and general diplomatic engagement should be seen in the light of stated foreign policy directions announced by both parties in recent years. Former Iranian president Raisi continued a “Look East” policy, first adopted by the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration in 2005, which emphasized ties to Russia, China, and other rising powers.<sup>82</sup> Pezeshkian,

Raisi’s successor, has called Russia “a valued strategic ally” and vowed to continue to expand and enhance cooperation with Moscow.<sup>83</sup> This Eastern-focused approach stems from Iran’s anti-Western orientation as well as a reappraisal of the international environment that foresees the decline of the West and new opportunities for engaging with Eurasian states and China. As noted above, since 2021, Iran has entered into a comprehensive strategic partnership with China (March 2021), joined the SCO (September 2022), and deepened official statements of cooperation with Russia.<sup>84</sup> With Russia providing some support to Iran’s military allies in the Middle East, such as the Syrian regime, Iranian leaders have been able to unite two pillars of their resistance to the US—support for anti-US armed allies and rising powers in the East—in their rapprochement with Russia.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, President Putin has also developed a “Turn to the East Policy,” which his full-scale invasion of Ukraine and subsequent isolation from the West has made a necessity. Putin visited Tehran in July 2022 and received strong support from Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who echoed Russian propaganda suggesting that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is responsible for the war in Ukraine. Khamenei told Putin, “Concerning Ukraine, if you had not taken

<sup>80</sup> For example, see President of Russia, “Joint Statement by Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey,” Nov. 22, 20217, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5256>; Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement on Behalf of the People’s Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation Under the Agenda Item 6 of the Session of the IAEA Board of Governors «Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)», Vienna, June 4, 2024,” June 6, 2024, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1954844/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1954844/); Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement by the Representatives of Iran, Russia and Türkiye on the 20th International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format, Astana, 20-21 June 2023,” June 21, 2023, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/1889846/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1889846/).

<sup>81</sup> Data collected from the public search function on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, including all joint statements with Iran and/or any other partner nation; see <https://mid.ru/en/search/>.

<sup>82</sup> Pierre Pahlavi, “The Origins and Foundations of Iran’s Look East Policy,” Australian Outlook, Australian Institute of International Affairs, Oct. 4, 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-origins-and-foundations-of-irans-look-east-policy/>.

<sup>83</sup> Masoud Pezeshkian, “My Message to the New World,” *Tehran Times*, July 12, 2024, <https://tehrantimes.com/news/501077/My-message-to-the-new-world>.

<sup>84</sup> Hamidreza Azizi, “The Ukraine War: The View from Iran,” *Cairo Journal of World Affairs* 46 (Winter 2023), p. 24, [https://fount.aucegypt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6163&context=faculty\\_journal\\_articles](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6163&context=faculty_journal_articles).

<sup>85</sup> Azizi, “The Ukraine War,” p. 25.

the initiative, the other side would have done so and initiated a war.”<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, because of the history of Russian occupation of Iranian territory and ongoing concern about border security, especially in ethnically diverse regions that are seen as vulnerable to potential annexation, Iran has never recognized Russia’s annexation of Crimea or the territories in eastern Ukraine.

### *Interactive engagements*

The tempo of political engagements between Russian and Iranian elites has increased since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. This can be demonstrated not only with the growing frequency of such visits, but also their type and the relative importance of the engaging elites. Increasing engagements suggest interest on both sides in deepening the existing relationship and provide new touch points and mechanisms for coordination. Many of these engagements are related to developments in the economic and military dimensions of the relationship, which are dealt with in other chapters in this report. Here, we provide basic information on the scale of these new engagements.

### **Key leader engagements**

The overall number of meetings between Russia and Iran has grown considerably since the war’s onset. These meetings can be broken into bilateral and multilateral meetings, the latter including meetings that involve third parties as well as broader formats such as BRICS. We count at least 21 high-level official meetings over the 2021–2024 period, using public reporting data officially announced by one or the other party and reported in the press. A full list of meetings and their topics from 2021 to 2024 can be found in Appendix B: Meetings and Memoranda

of Understanding. It is likely that this number may be higher, and this count excludes informal or otherwise unannounced meetings. A high-level meeting involves political principals (presidents, parliamentary speakers, and ministerial or agency-level meetings), which naturally also implies lower level background meetings and virtual connections.

Putin’s first trip abroad since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war was to Iran in July 2022.<sup>87</sup> Overall, officially reported meetings have increased markedly. The largest spike in the past four years occurred in 2023 as other elements of the relationship were already deepening because of the consequences of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Many of these meetings were also part of efforts to sign MOUs and joint agreements, so there is an inevitable correlation across these indicators.

It is relevant to note that not all meetings between Russian and Iranian political and diplomatic figures are bilateral; they also take place in joint or multilateral settings. Multilateral meetings are a relatively weaker signal of close relationships because the reason for these meetings is more diffuse and may not necessarily involve pure bilateral interests. Still, bilateral meetings are double the number of multilateral meetings between 2021 and the first half of 2024, as shown in Figure 2.

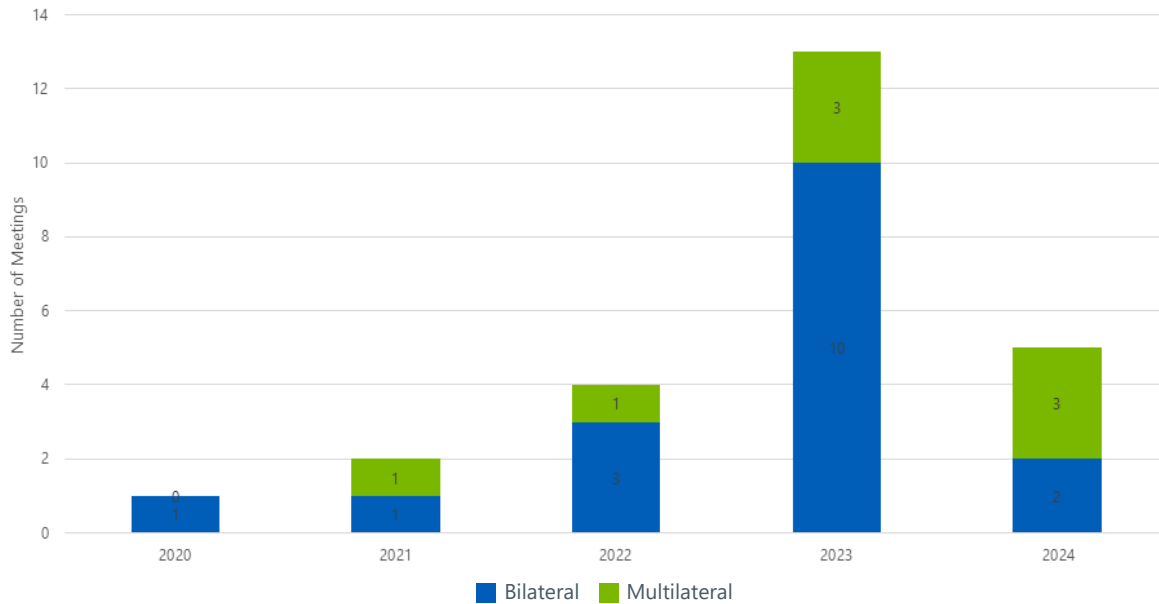
These meetings all involve Russian and Iranian elites, including the presidents of the respective countries, key presidential aides, foreign ministers and their deputies, chiefs of their respective general staffs, defense ministers, and security council heads. Two key meetings stand out since the war’s onset: first, the visit of then-Iranian President Raisi to Moscow, which corresponded with major discussions about a future security cooperation treaty; and second, the

<sup>86</sup> “Putin on Visit to Iran Gets Iran’s Backing for War in Ukraine,” Axios, July 19, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/07/19/putin-iran-khamenei-erdogan-russia-war-ukraine>.

<sup>87</sup> Mathieu Droin and Nicole Grajewski, “Iran, Russia, and the Challenges of ‘Inter-Pariah Solidarity,’” War on the Rocks, July 11, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/07/iran-russia-and-the-challenges-of-inter-pariah-solidarity/>.



Figure 2. Officially reported meetings (count by year), Jan. 2020–May 2024



Source: CNA.

Note: 2024 count runs only through May 2024.

regular interactions of Russia’s and Iran’s national security councils at the leadership level.

The increase in security council points of contact and the possibility of a more institutionalized relationship between these two bodies is of potentially special interest. The Russian Security Council is an important “constitutional consultative” conciliar body within Russia’s authoritarian political order. It collects key decision-influencing political and governmental figures in a direct forum with the Russian president.<sup>88</sup> Until May 2024, its secretary was the longtime presidential confidante—and rumored de facto “second-in-command”—Nikolai Patrushev.<sup>89</sup> Its new head, former Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, is

a similar heavy-hitter figure in the Russian political-military field.

In addition, the Russian Security Council has an important role in drafting and incubating major policy concepts within the Russian national security establishment. It is, therefore, much more than simply an advisory body; it is an important part of the autocratic political-security state within Russia. Outside the presidential administration itself, it is the most important national security institution in Russia.

The Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) is one of several key voices in the Islamic Republic’s national security establishment, which is connected to the Iranian president and the Supreme

<sup>88</sup> Ekaterina Schulmann and Mark Galeotti, “A Tale of Two Councils: The Changing Roles of the Security and State Councils During the Transformation Period of Modern Russian Politics,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37 (5), pp. 453–69; Russian Security Council, “Security Council of the Russian Federation [Совет безопасности Российской Федерации],” <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/about/history/>.

<sup>89</sup> On Patrushev, see, for example, Leon Aron, “What Putin’s No. 2 Believes About the West,” *The Atlantic*, Apr. 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/patrushev-putin-paranoia-propaganda/678220/>; Filip Kovačević, “The Second Most Powerful Man In Russia,” *New Lines Magazine*, Mar. 2022, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-second-most-powerful-man-in-russia/>.

Leader.<sup>90</sup> It acts as “principal forum and clearinghouse for defense and security coordination” and is formed from a membership of high-ranking officials, similar to its Russian counterpart.<sup>91</sup> Iran’s SNSC has been involved particularly in its nuclear program, and one analyst has argued that in the 2000s, although “political and technical matters would remain the responsibility of the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] and the [Atomic Energy Organization of Iran], respectively...a more centralized decision-making structure was to be put into place via the SNSC,” giving it considerable institutional heft.<sup>92</sup>

The SNSC is headed by the Iranian president with a powerful secretariat position, as is the Russian Security Council. However, the Iranian president is only the second-most important public official in Iran, so the comparison is not exact. Similarly, it is believed that the informal national security decision-making and primary influence still comes from the informal advisors around the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, so the SNSC does not have the singular preeminence in national security issues the way its Russian partner arguably does. Nonetheless, deeper and regular connections between the two security councils would still imply a considerable institutionalization of the political and security relationship at the highest levels.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusions

Overall, political cooperation between Russia and Iran has increased markedly since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, although a more varied relationship developed during the 2010s

that set the stage for this noticeable public uptick. The relationship in the years immediately prior to 2022 had been defined by growing but cautious engagement related to the Syrian Civil War and the fallout from the JCPOA’s collapse in 2018. But with the war in Ukraine, the relationship’s political interactions grew significantly.

Political alignment has taken various forms, most notably through increased contacts via meetings, MOUs, and various public statements, underlining these as part of a broader framework of political and geopolitical cooperation. The lack of data on internal Russian or Iranian decision-making, and the subsequent reliance on public-facing observations and media reporting, remains a challenge when analyzing the evolving political relationship.

Furthermore, domestic political dynamics in both Iran and Russia mean that various contextual factors influence the relationship in ways that are difficult to capture fully. Nevertheless, the data presented here provide initial supporting evidence for the overall analytic line common across Western observers, which is that Russia and Iran are experiencing a deeper political relationship than they have in previous years. This is an overall trajectory worthy of note.

The political relationship is ultimately an expression of general closeness and alignment, which is then operationalized largely through military, technical, and economic ties. The following sections describe these developments in greater detail and provide a holistic assessment of the state of these ties as they have changed during the past 10 years.

<sup>90</sup> Hassan Sadranian, “Evaluation of the Role of the National Security Council in the Structure of the National Security Governance of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2021), pp. 111–46.

<sup>91</sup> Kevjn Lim, “National Security Decision-Making in Iran,” *Comparative Strategy* 34, no. 2 (2015), p. 154.

<sup>92</sup> Lim, “National Security Decision-Making in Iran,” p. 155.

<sup>93</sup> Nicole Grajewski, “The Iran-Russia Friendship Won’t Wither Under Raisi’s Successor,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 21, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/05/raisi-death-iran-russia-relationship?lang=en>.

# THE MILITARY RELATIONSHIP

This section reviews the Russia-Iran military relationship. In doing so, it briefly puts military relations in historical perspective before identifying key changes in the 2010s and since the onset of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. It then provides data for the indicator-based assessment of relationship dynamics before synthesizing these findings in a brief conclusion assessing the constraints and drivers of the military relationship.

## Summary of the military relationship

Military cooperation between Iran and Russia dates to 1967, when the Iranian government signed the first of two arms deals with Moscow worth \$705 million (the second arms sale occurred in 1976) in an effort to pressure Washington to sell more weapons to Tehran. Because Iran was a regional partner of the US at the time, these deals with Moscow had little military significance, according to one Iranian scholar.<sup>94</sup> They involved items such as BTR-60 and 270 BTR-50 armored personnel carriers and 122mm antiaircraft guns. Observers suggest that their relatively low cost may have been a factor in these transactions, and an effort by Iran to reduce the potential for Soviet interference in the Kurdish regions of the country and support for the Iranian Tudeh (communist) party.<sup>95</sup>

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (which Iran opposed) and Soviet support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, there was no further military cooperation until 1989. At that time, Iranian leaders sought to engage with the Soviet Union to reduce Iran's international isolation, which had begun during the fallout of the Iranian revolution. This desire for engagement led to several arms deals between the Soviet Union and Iran, including sales to Iran of 20 Mig-29 fighter jets, 4 Mig-29-UB combat-training fighter jets, 12 SU-24-MK frontline bombers, and 2 S-200-Vega-E long-range air defense systems.<sup>96</sup>

In the first half of the 1990s, military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran developed a regular rhythm, with Iran spending up to half a billion in USD annually on military equipment from the Soviet Union or Russia.<sup>97</sup> This level of arms agreements would rise, decline, and rise again over the course of the 1990s. According to one report from the Council on Foreign Relations, "The value of arms transfer agreements between Iran and Russia ballooned from \$300 million between 1998 and 2001 to \$1.7 billion between 2002 and 2005."<sup>98</sup> In addition to aircraft and air defense systems, Iran began buying air-launched missiles, antitank missiles, diesel submarines, tanks, and various small arms.<sup>99</sup> These arms deals had ceased in 1995 when the Yeltsin government secretly pledged to the US that it would no longer

<sup>94</sup> Divsallar, "The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence," p. 108.

<sup>95</sup> Hoshimjon Mahmudov and Muhammad Yaseen Naseem, "Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation: Past and Present," *Journal of Iranian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018), pp. 91–119.

<sup>96</sup> Mahmudov and Naseem, "Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation," p. 97.

<sup>97</sup> Mahmudov and Naseem, "Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation," p. 98.

<sup>98</sup> Lionel Beehner, "Russia-Iran Arms Trade," Council on Foreign Relations, Nov. 1, 2006, <https://www.cfr.org/background/russia-iran-arms-trade>.

<sup>99</sup> Mahmudov and Naseem, "Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation," p. 98.

sell weapons to Iran, but sales rose again at the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s.<sup>100</sup> In 1997, a publicly available Israeli report contended, conversely, that Russia and China were secretly assisting with Iran’s missile program, a charge that they denied.<sup>101</sup>

## *Relations between Iran and Russia since 2000*

When Putin came to power in 2000, he ended Russia’s self-imposed ban on arms sales to Iran, and sales rebounded by 2006 when Iran purchased \$368 million in fighter aircraft, helicopters, and defense systems.<sup>102</sup> Because of its growing production capabilities and sanctions (as of 2010), Iran imported only a small percentage of its weapons, but of those, a large number came from Russia.<sup>103</sup> According to Rosoboronexport, during the first half of the 2000s, Iran accounted for just 5.4 percent of Russian arms purchases.<sup>104</sup>

Despite this trend toward deepening military cooperation in the early 2000s, there was considerable dissatisfaction within Iran over the quality of Russian weapons.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, Russia reneged on a promised

2007 sale of S-300 air defense systems because of a UN arms embargo on Iran.<sup>106</sup> When Iran agreed to the 2015 deal—for the JCPOA to limit activities at its nuclear facilities—the sale of the air defense systems subsequently went ahead in 2016.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, Russia reportedly shelved a \$10 billion arms deal with Iran at that time because of the continuing UN arms embargo against Iran.<sup>108</sup> Concerned about Russia’s reliability as an arms supplier, Iran instead relied on its domestic arms industry, and purchases from Russia fell to less than \$3 million annually through 2020.<sup>109</sup>

In an interview leaked just before the June 2021 Iranian presidential election, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif blamed Russia for colluding with conservative forces in Iran, especially the Qods Force within the IRGC, to disrupt Iranian nuclear negotiations with the West. In Zarif’s view, Russia sought to deflect attention from itself by emphasizing that Iran was still the top security threat to the West. Zarif also complained that Iran’s relations with Russia were unequal and contended that it was Moscow that urged Iranian ground forces to fight in Syria

<sup>100</sup> Wade Boese, “Congress Levies Accusations on Gore-Chernomyrdin Deal,” *Arms Control Today*, Oct. 2000, [https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000\\_10/gorechern](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000_10/gorechern).

<sup>101</sup> “Russian-Iran Ties Remain Issue at Gore-Chernomyrdin Meeting,” *Arms Control Today*, Sept. 1997, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-09/press-releases/russian-iran-ties-remain-issue-gore-chernomyrdin-meeting>.

<sup>102</sup> “Iran & Russia: Burgeoning Military Ties,” *The Iran Primer*, Sept. 5, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/may/18/iran-russia-burgeoning-military-ties>.

<sup>103</sup> Peter D. Wieszman and Alexandra Kuimova, “Military Spending and Arms Exports by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE,” SIPRI Fact Sheet, May 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-fact-sheets/military-spending-and-arms-imports-iran-saudi-arabia-qatar-and-uae>.

<sup>104</sup> Mahmudov and Naseem, “Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation,” p. 101.

<sup>105</sup> Mahmudov and Naseem, “Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation,” p. 102.

<sup>106</sup> “UN Arms Embargo on Iran,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Apr. 7, 2021, [https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un\\_arms\\_embargoes/iran](https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/iran).

<sup>107</sup> April Brady, “Russia Completes S-300 Delivery to Iran,” *Arms Control Today*, Dec. 2016, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news-briefs/russia-completes-s-300-delivery-iran>.

<sup>108</sup> Mahmudov and Naseem, “Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation,” p. 102.

<sup>109</sup> “Iran & Russia: Burgeoning Military Ties.”

in 2015.<sup>110</sup> Russia expert Mark Katz points out that evidence of hardliners in Moscow trying to scuttle the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 lends support to the assertions in Zarif's leaked interview.<sup>111</sup>

### Methods for assessment

To understand the parameters of the military relationship between Iran and Russia, we broke down this dimension into a series of categories: military diplomacy, military cooperation, technical cooperation, basing and access, exercises and training, and coordination and information sharing. These categories included exchanges of visits by high-level security officials, the prevalence of (dark) port calls, the nature of Russian involvement with Iran-supported groups in the Middle East, arms sales, military training, basing access, cooperation in logistics, and evidence of intelligence sharing. The open-source material used in this study comes from Western, Russian, Iranian, and Chinese media, and academic literature.

The **military diplomacy** category includes regular military consultations, which focus primarily on discussions of bilateral issues by top officials and lower level engagements involving mid-level personnel regarding functional cooperation. By contrast, we observed a high level of military diplomacy by top officials involving high-profile exchanges of visits by senior levels displaying wide-ranging cooperation. Port calls occur as a part of military exercises and are, therefore, related to—although distinct from—a separate category of **military cooperation**. We rely on publicly reported meetings and visits available in journalistic sources. Participation in combined operations looks at Russian and Iranian joint

involvement in Syria. At a high level, joint action would indicate shared goals and activities.

The **technical cooperation** category involves various indicators, including military sales by both countries, technology sharing and assistance, joint or licensed production agreements, and dark port calls. These rely on data acquired through secondary sources, trade data, economic reports, and think-tank reports. We put particular emphasis on the prevalence of dark port calls (visits by ships without required tracking signals to hide military transfers). We used Lloyd's List statistics to document a growing pattern of this activity, including an especially high incidence of it after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The **basing and access** category refers to joint activities to develop infrastructure for joint economic use or military cooperation, in terms of permanent or temporary facilities and access and logistics arrangements. We rely on public data for these indicators and focus on Caspian Sea transportation efforts designed to facilitate military (and ultimately economic) cooperation.







The **exercises and training** category identifies bilateral and multilateral military exercises in which Russia and Iran participate, training relationships, and any professional military education (PME) opportunities being developed between the two sides.

Finally, the **coordination and information-sharing** category includes primarily intelligence sharing. We focus on the degree to which these dynamics have been institutionalized, regularized, and made comprehensive, as data on their actual substance are understandably difficult to acquire.

<sup>110</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, "The Zarif Tape: Revelation on Russia, the Qods Force, and Iran's Election," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch, 3478, Apr. 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/zarif-tape-revelations-russia-qods-force-and-irans-election>.

<sup>111</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Russian Anxieties About the Iranian Nuclear Accord," Lobe Log, Aug. 25, 2015, <https://lobelog.com/russian-anxieties-about-the-iranian-nuclear-accord/>; Mark N. Katz, "Russia Secretly Feared the Iran Nuclear Deal: Here's Why," The Atlantic Council, Apr. 28, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/russia-secretly-feared-the-iran-nuclear-deal-heres-why/>.

Table 4. Summary of military relationship findings

Category	Indicators	Relationship Characterization	Trend Direction
 <b>MILITARY DIPLOMACY</b>	Key Leader Engagements	HIGH	↗
	Naval Port Calls	MEDIUM	↗
 <b>MILITARY COOPERATION</b>	Joint or Coordinated Operations	MEDIUM	↗
 <b>TECHNICAL COOPERATION</b>	Military Sales (Russia)	HIGH	↗
	Military Sales (Iran)	HIGH	↗
	Technology Sharing, Assistance	HIGH	↗
	Joint/Licensed Production	MEDIUM	↗
	Dark Port Calls	HIGH	↗
 <b>BASING AND ACCESS</b>	Bases, Airfields, Ports, and Facilities	MEDIUM	→
	Access, Basing, Overflight, Logistics Agreements	MEDIUM	→
 <b>EXERCISES AND TRAINING</b>	Bilateral or Multilateral Exercises	MEDIUM	↗
	Training or Professional Military Education	MEDIUM	↗
 <b>COORDINATION AND INFORMATION SHARING</b>	Intelligence Sharing Mechanisms	MEDIUM	↗

Source: CNA.

As noted earlier, the military relationship is informed by the political relationship and the broader international environment and is made concrete through deals, transfers, arrangements, information sharing, and trade dynamics. Many of these indicators can be given basic quantitative values, although we take a holistic approach to assess their relative weight as indicating a low, medium, or high level of cooperation and deepening relations. Table 4 lists the categories, indicators, and overall ratings for each.<sup>112</sup>

### Assessment of military indicators

We ranked military diplomacy, arms sales, and (dark) port calls between Russia and Iran as indicating a high level of military cooperation, while we found that basing access, combined operations, logistics, training, and intelligence sharing exhibited a medium level of military cooperation. These findings emphasize the need to put the high level of arms sales and military diplomacy into perspective.

<sup>112</sup> See Appendix A: Indicator Metrics for details on the individual indicator metrics and coding criteria.

Observers need to factor in the political motivations of the conservative leadership in Iran and the IRGC and the motivations within the Putin regime to avoid portraying a closer military partnership than may actually exist.

In Iran, political divisions between the conservative leaders in power and moderates in society, and between the IRGC aligned with the conservatives and the Iranian military, set limits to some aspects of Russia-Iran military cooperation, especially for basing. Even arms sales have proven controversial in Iran, which denied selling drones to Russia, despite evidence to the contrary, and sought to portray itself as neutral on the Russia-Ukraine war. Economic factors and logistical issues complicate their arms trade, and Iran has complained repeatedly about the quality of Russian weapons.

Training needs to be viewed as necessary to resolve difficulties in the interoperability of weapons systems rather than to provide evidence of greater jointness. Combined operations in Syria revealed that Iran and Russia are motivated by sometimes overlapping but not identical interests. Military exercises, which are increasingly staged with China, have a political purpose in creating an impression of an axis that may not exist because of different interests among the three states and the roles they are choosing to play in the Middle East.

### *High-level military diplomacy*

Since 2022, there has been a series of high-level exchanges between top Russian and Iranian military leaders and security officials. On January 24, 2024, IRGC Rear Admiral Ali-Akbar Ahmadian, secretary of the Iranian SNSC, met with then-Russian Security Council head Patrushev in Moscow, where they discussed cybersecurity, economic security, and counterterrorism.<sup>113</sup>

Noting that a cooperation agreement between the two countries was nearing completion, Patrushev stated that “relations between Russia and Iran continue to strengthen, reaching a qualitatively new level across the whole range of areas.”<sup>114</sup> Then-Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Tehran in September and toured a display of Iranian missiles and drones, fueling speculation about an imminent missile deal between the two countries.<sup>115</sup> Shoigu met with Iran’s Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, head of the IRGC Aerospace Force Amir Ali Hajizadeh, secretary of the SNSC Ahmadian, and Major General Mohammad Bagheri, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces. In Bagheri’s view, military relations between Iran and Russia are the “vanguard” of their relationship.<sup>116</sup>

Shoigu first visited Iran in 2015, but the Russian Ministry of Defense emphasized in 2023 that “recently, the intensity of meetings at the highest level and at the level of the leadership of military departments has increased significantly.”<sup>117</sup> Discussions included

<sup>113</sup> Brendan Cole, “Iran and Russia Strengthen Ties in Partnership Against the West,” *Newsweek*, Jan. 25, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-russia-patrushev-ties-partnership-west-1863843>.

<sup>114</sup> “Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Nikolai Patrushev in Meeting with Iranian Counterpart: Relations Between Our Countries Continue to Grow Stronger; We Are Working on a Long-Term Treaty with Iran,” TASS, Jan. 24, 2024, <https://www.memri.org/tv/nikolai-patrushev-sec-russia-security-council-meeting-iran-counterpart-relations-countries-strong>.

<sup>115</sup> Michael R. Gordon, Gordon Lubold, and Benoit Faucon, “Russia Moves Forward with Plans to Buy Iranian Ballistic Missiles,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 4, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-moves-forward-with-plans-to-buy-iranian-ballistic-missiles-cf3560e4>.

<sup>116</sup> Maziar Motamedi, “Russian Defence Minister Shoigu Tours Missile Drone Display on Iran Visit,” *Al-Jazeera*, Sept. 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/russian-defence-minister-shoigu-tours-missile-drone-display-on-iran-visit>.

<sup>117</sup> Yuri Gavrilov, “Shoigu Discussed Military Cooperation in Iran, as Well as the Situation in Syria and Afghanistan [Шойгу обсудил в Иране военное сотрудничество, а также ситуацию в Сирии и Афганистане],” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Sept. 19, 2023, <https://rg.ru/2023/09/19/strategiia-partnerstva.html>.

future joint exercises and visits, exchanges in military education, and regional conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Shoigu referred to Iran as Russia's strategic partner in the Middle East and praised the dynamic development of military relations between the two countries.<sup>118</sup>

In July 2023, Brigadier General Sardar Ahmadreza Radan, Iran's top law enforcement officer, visited Moscow to meet with Patrushev, First Deputy Interior Minister Alexander Gorovoy, and the director of the Russian National Guard, Viktor Zolotov. They discussed cooperation between the intelligence and law enforcement agencies of the two countries in combating terrorism, weapons and drug trafficking, and organized crime.<sup>119</sup>

Patrushev visited Iran in November 2022, just days after Iran acknowledged sending drones to Russia for use in Ukraine—though Iran insisted at the time that only a small number had been sent before the full-scale invasion.<sup>120</sup> The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* reported that despite the shared positions against Western sanctions and interference in their domestic affairs, the use of Iranian drones in Ukraine remains controversial in Iran. The Russian newspaper cited a front-page article by Masih Mohajeri, the editor of the conservative Iranian newspaper *Jomhuri-e-Eslami*, who criticized the Iranian government for allowing Russia to use Iranian drones in Ukraine, failing to condemn Russia for starting the war, and not doing enough to mediate the situation. Mohajeri urged the government not to “put all its eggs in the

Russian basket,” as this contradicted Iran's aim to pursue an independent foreign policy.<sup>121</sup>

“Concerning Ukraine, if you had not taken the initiative, the other side would have done so and initiated a war.”<sup>122</sup>

—Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

Even so, in July 2022 Putin visited Tehran and received strong support from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who echoed Russia's stated position regarding NATO's responsibility for the war in Ukraine. Khamenei told Putin, “Concerning Ukraine, if you had not taken the initiative, the other side would have done so and initiated a war.”<sup>123</sup>

Iran's reluctance to admit to shipments of drones and other weapons transfers to Russia provides a sharp contrast to the high-level military diplomacy in evidence and lofty statements of parallel interests. A former Iranian ambassador to Russia explained the apparent discrepancy as a lack of professionalism by Iran's Foreign Ministry but also admitted that Iranian support for Russia's war in Ukraine ran counter to

<sup>118</sup> Gavrillov, “Shoigu Discussed Military Cooperation in Iran.”

<sup>119</sup> “Patrushev Met in Moscow with the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Law and Order Forces [Патрушев встретился в Москве с главнокомандующим силами правопорядка Ирана],” *Vedomosti*, July 28, 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2023/06/28/982698-patrushev-vstretilsya-moskve-glavnokomanduyuschim-silami-pravoporyadka-irana>; “Iran, Russia's Police Forces to Cooperate on Strengthening Nations' Security,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-748489>.

<sup>120</sup> Marianna Belen'kaya, “The Security Councils of the Russian Federation and Iran Spoke the Same Language [Совбезы РФ и Ирана поговорили на одном языке],” *Kommersant*, Nov. 9, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5653639>.

<sup>121</sup> Cited in Belen'kaya, “The Security Councils of the Russian Federation and Iran Spoke the Same Language.”

<sup>122</sup> “Putin on Visit to Iran Gets Iran's Backing for War in Ukraine.”

<sup>123</sup> “Putin on Visit to Iran Gets Iran's Backing for War in Ukraine.”



Tehran’s own interests.<sup>124</sup> For example, in an article from April 2024 on a website suggested to be close to some sources in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, the argument was made that Iranian society is divided on Ukraine, with one segment distrusting Russia for historical reasons and blaming the rapprochement with Russia for obstructing Iranian economic development and engagement with Western countries, although officially the Iranian government views Russia as a reliable partner.<sup>125</sup> Without adjudicating this claim itself, it represents a potential observation of at least some bureaucratic resistance or trepidation over the nature of the relationship.

### Naval port calls

Port calls by Russian and Iranian ships have increased in the past three years. This trend is closely related to the increase in joint bilateral and multilateral naval exercises.<sup>126</sup> Port calls have, therefore, occurred every year since the Russia-Ukraine war began but started to become more frequent at least since 2021. For example, on the 325th anniversary of the founding of the Russian navy, Russia held various naval parades that included Iranian vessel participation.<sup>127</sup> Because of its high correlation with exercises, this indicator is of relatively limited use but is included for completeness.

## Combined operations

### Syria

Although Russia and Iran have different goals in Syria, it was the threat of the collapse of the Assad regime and the Syrian state itself that led to a greater Russian role in Syria and closer military ties between Russia and Iran. Shoigu’s first visit to Tehran in 2015—the first time a Russian defense minister visited Iran in 15 years—occurred in the context of ongoing discussions with Iranian officials regarding events in Syria.

Exchanges of visits between Iranian and Russian officials throughout that year led to an expanded Russian military role in Syria (including basing access, which is detailed in a later section).<sup>128</sup> The two countries developed an effective exchange of labor, which shored up Assad’s hold on power. Russia provided diplomatic support at the UN, air cover, small contingents of troops and Wagner forces, missiles, and artillery. Iran supplied drones and the IRGC-commanded militias.<sup>129</sup>

In 2015, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria also established a joint intelligence sharing center in Baghdad, which aimed to improve intelligence coordination against ISIS.<sup>130</sup> As this center began to play a greater role in mission planning, tactical disagreements emerged over Iran’s desire to take command of military operations. Russia also faced pressure from Israel

<sup>124</sup> “Ex-Diplomat: Iranian Foreign Ministry Has Lost Its Clout,” Iran Front Page, Dec. 29, 2022, <https://ifpnews.com/ex-diplomat-iranian-foreign-ministry-lost-clout/>; Maryam Sinaiee, “Teheran Nervously Watches Events in Russia as Dissidents Celebrate,” Iran International, June 24, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202306243009>.

<sup>125</sup> “Most Iranians Oppose Russia in Ukraine Because of Historical Distrust,” *Iran International*, Apr. 18, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202204185573>.

<sup>126</sup> “Iran to Host Joint Naval Exercises with Russia, China,” Al-Monitor, Jan. 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/iran-host-joint-naval-exercises-russia-china>.

<sup>127</sup> “Russia Marks Navy’s 325th Anniversary, Iranian Ship Joins In,” Associated Press, July 21, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-government-and-politics-russia-iran-ebec50f2bbcb4790c2c34df95d5a9adf>.

<sup>128</sup> Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria.”

<sup>129</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, “IISS Roundtable—Russia and Iran: Isolated from the West and Drawing Closer,” Oct. 12, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/10/russia-and-iran-isolated-from-the-west-and-drawing-closer/>.

<sup>130</sup> “Iran & Russia: Burgeoning Military Ties.”

to limit pro-Iranian forces from positions on its borders but ultimately failed to achieve this. On the other hand, Russian deployments also were unable to deter US and Israeli airstrikes on Iranian forces in February 2021.<sup>131</sup>

Despite some speculation that the war in Ukraine would lead Russia to reduce its focus on Syria, this has not occurred beyond the withdrawal of some Wagner forces and police units and the redeployment of some S-300 batteries (though these were replaced with the superior S-400s).<sup>132</sup> To the contrary, Putin has leveraged Russian involvement in Syria to obtain diplomatic support for his policies in Ukraine from Bashar al-Assad and military aid from Iran, as well as to deter Israel from overtly supporting Ukraine.

### Support for Hezbollah

Hezbollah, backed by Iran, has been supporting the Assad government in Syria. According to research by Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), in November 2018, the US Department of the Treasury accused Russia of involvement in a complex oil smuggling operation that enabled it to evade sanctions to sell oil to Syria in exchange for \$63 million in cash payments to Hezbollah. In 2021, a delegation from Hezbollah made a highly publicized visit to Russia where representatives met with top Russian

officials. In 2022, Treasury implicated senior Russian government officials in continuing to support this smuggling network.<sup>133</sup>

Russia's support for Hezbollah potentially threatens US forces and Israel. In November 2023, Hezbollah revealed that it had acquired Russian Yakhont antiship missiles (also known as P-800 Oniks) with a range of 300 km. Originally, Russia sold the missiles to Syria, which then gave them to Hezbollah.<sup>134</sup> US intelligence publicly reported that Syria is considering providing the group with the Russian SA-22 surface-to-air defense system via the Wagner Group.<sup>135</sup> This may be part of an effort by Russia to deter Israel from attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>136</sup>

### Support for Hamas

Hamas officials first paid a visit to Moscow in March 2006 after taking power in Gaza and have been in regular contact with Russian officials since. Russia does not label Hamas a terrorist group. In March 2023, Putin invited Hamas leaders to Moscow, which led to some speculation about a potential effort by Russia to use the group to open a "second front" against the West as the war in Ukraine continued.<sup>137</sup> Russia's role in arming Hamas is controversial in open sources. Some Ukrainian officials allege that Russia is transferring weapons seized on the battlefield in Ukraine to Hamas.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Grajewski, "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria."

<sup>132</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Treacherous Triangle of Syria, Iran, and Russia," *Middle East Forum* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2023), <https://www.meforum.org/64208/treacherous-triangle-of-syria-iran-and-russia>.

<sup>133</sup> Aurora Ortega and Matthew Levitt, "Hizbullah and Russia's Nascent Alliance," RUSI, May 23, 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/hizbullah-and-russias-nascent-alliance>.

<sup>134</sup> Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "Hezbollah's Anti-Ship Missiles Bolster Its Threat to US Navy," Reuters, Nov. 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hezbollahs-anti-ship-missiles-bolster-its-threat-us-navy-2023-11-08/>.

<sup>135</sup> Natasha Bertrand, Zachary Cohen, and Katie Bo Lillis, "US Intel Suggests Syria's Assad Agreed to Send Russian Missile System to Hezbollah with Wagner Group Help," CNN, Nov. 2, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/02/politics/syrias-assad-hezbollah-wagner-missile-system/index.html>.

<sup>136</sup> John Hardie, "Russia's Wagner Group to Transfer Air Defense System to Hezbollah, US Intel Says," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Nov. 7, 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/11/07/russias-wagner-group-to-transfer-air-defense-system-to-hezbollah-u-s-intel-says/>.

<sup>137</sup> Jonathan M. Winer, "Essential Questions about the Russia-Hamas Link: The Evidence and Its Implications," Middle East Institute, Nov. 28, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/essential-questions-about-russia-hamas-link-evidence-and-its-implications>.

<sup>138</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, "Unfounded Rumours of Russia Arming Hamas Persist, as War Rages in Gaza," Aljazeera, Nov. 14, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/14/unverified-rumours-of-russia-arming-hamas-persist-as-war-rages-in-gaza>.

What has been documented is that a Russian cryptocurrency exchange contributed to Hamas financing before the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel.<sup>139</sup> For its part, Russia claims it is playing a role in negotiating with Hamas to release remaining hostages, including three Russian nationals.<sup>140</sup> Despite a history of friendship with Israel (which notably refrained from joining in sanctions against Russia over Ukraine), Russia has been sharply critical of the Benjamin Netanyahu government's handling of the response to the Hamas attack as a part of a broader effort to improve its standing with the Global South.<sup>141</sup>

Military cooperation between Russia and Iran has led to combined operations in Syria and to Russian support for Iranian proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah. At time of this writing, their combined operations remain confined to Middle East conflicts with Iranian involvement, although Russia may be leveraging its participation to achieve arms transfers from Iran for use in Ukraine.

### Arms sales

#### Iranian weapons sales to Russia

Despite repeated denials from Iranian officials, Iran has been an important source of weapons and training

for Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>142</sup> Nikolai Kozhanov, a former Russian diplomat stationed in Tehran, noted that Russia will become more dependent on Iran for weapons in the coming years, leading to a more equal partnership between the two countries.<sup>143</sup> Iran sells drones, ammunition, and artillery shells to Russia, and they are also coproducing drones. Talks continue about the sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia.

Beginning in September 2022, Iran has been selling three types of drones to Russia: Shahed-131 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which the Russians renamed Geran-1; Shahed-136 UAVs, renamed Geran-2; and Mohajer 6 Multirole UAV.<sup>144</sup> Iran may have sold as many as 1,700 drones to Russia, which it uses to attack Ukrainian military targets and civilian infrastructure. Iran initially denied selling drones to Russia for use in the conflict, then claimed falsely that they were sent to Russia before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was able to identify the Iranian provenance of the drones by comparing drones downed in Ukraine with UAVs found on other battlefields in the Middle East. DIA assesses that Russia purchased the Iranian drones in mid-2022 after using up most of its prewar stockpiles of precision-guided munitions.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Milàn Czerny and Dan Storyev, "Why Russia and Hamas Are Growing Closer," *Carnegie Politika*, Oct. 27, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/10/why-russia-and-hamas-are-growing-closer>.

<sup>140</sup> "Russia Says It Pressed Hamas to Free Hostages During Moscow Delegation Visit," Reuters, Jan. 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-it-pressed-hamas-free-hostages-during-moscow-delegation-visit-2024-01-19/>.

<sup>141</sup> Max Bergmann, et al., "Collaboration for a Price: Russian Military-Technical Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea," CSIS, May 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/collaboration-price-russian-military-technical-cooperation-china-iran-and-north-korea>; Czerny and Storyev, "Why Russia and Hamas Are Growing Closer."

<sup>142</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "Iran's Indispensable Role for Russia in the Ukraine War," *Gulf International Forum*, Feb. 24, 2023, <https://gulfif.org/irans-indispensable-role-for-russia-in-the-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>143</sup> Kozhanov, "Putin's War in Ukraine and Prospects for Russia-Iran Relations."

<sup>144</sup> Steven Feldstein, "Larger Geopolitical Shift Behind Iran's Drone Sales to Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Oct. 26, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/26/larger-geopolitical-shift-behind-iran-s-drone-sales-to-russia-pub-88268>; Mohammad Eslami, "Iran's Drone Supply to Russia and Changing Dynamics of the Ukraine War," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5 no. 2 (2022), p. 514; "Iran's Drone Team: Past, Present, Future," *Foreign Affairs Insights and Review* (FAIR), Apr. 9, 2023, <https://fairbd.net/iran-drone-industry-history/>.

<sup>145</sup> DIA, *Iranian UAVs in Ukraine: A Visual Comparison*, Aug. 2023 Update, p. 3, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military\\_Power\\_Publications/UAV\\_Book.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/UAV_Book.pdf).

There are some reports that Iranian production of UAVs is struggling to meet Russian demand, and coproduction in Russia may be a partial solution.<sup>146</sup> According to US intelligence officials, the drone coproduction deal already had a major effect on the war in Ukraine and provided a significant boost to Russian capabilities.<sup>147</sup>

Reportedly, there are plans to produce as many as 6,000 Shahid-136 drones by 2025 at a facility in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan's Alabuga Special Economic Zone. Coproduction in Russia will produce more drones than Iran alone would be capable of producing and also will facilitate improving quality control and making other upgrades, such as developing an autonomous swarming capacity.<sup>148</sup> Coproduction began in January 2023 with the Russian plant fully assembling disassembled drones from Iran.

After training from Iran, the Russian plant will begin assembling the drones on site with Iran with the aim of localizing 80 percent of the production. Russia will import many electronic components.<sup>149</sup> Production was at least one month behind schedule as of August 2023, raising doubts about the 2025 completion date.<sup>150</sup> Iran's military exports to Russia

as calculated by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) are presented in Figure 3.

### Ballistic missiles

Russia may be interested in purchasing ballistic missiles from Iran, such as the Fateh-110 with a range of 300 km and the Zolfaghar, capable of hitting targets 700 km away, which would put all of Ukraine in range and overwhelm its air defenses.<sup>151</sup> If such a deal is reached, Russia could receive the missiles in 2024 in exchange for far-reaching defense cooperation between Iran and Russia. This cooperation could include missiles, electronic equipment, and air defense, though Iran reportedly was also interested in attack helicopters, radar, and combat trainer aircraft.<sup>152</sup> Thus far, external political pressure and domestic Iranian opposition to a deepening commitment to Russia have posed obstacles to such a deal.<sup>153</sup>

However, because UN controls on Iranian missile exports expired in October 2023, ongoing talks between Russia and Iran may get a boost. US officials continue to warn Iran against proceeding with the missile deal, described as "imminent," but there is no publicly available evidence that the missiles have been transferred to Russia as of summer 2024.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>146</sup> "Russia Receives New Batch of Iranian Drones – UKR Official," Iran International, Dec. 19, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212199035>.

<sup>147</sup> Natasha Bertrand, "Iran Helping Russia Build Drone Stockpile That Is Expected to Be 'Orders of Magnitude Larger' Than Previous Arsenal, US Says," CNN, July 25, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/25/politics/us-russia-iran-drones/index.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Dalton Bennett and Mary Ilyushina, "Inside the Russian Effort to Build 6,000 Attack Drones with Iran's Help," *Washington Post*, Aug. 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/08/17/russia-iran-drone-shahed-alabuga/>.

<sup>149</sup> David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Spencer Faragasso, "Highlights of Institute Assessment of the Alabuga Drone Documents Supplied by Dalton Bennett and the Washington Post," Institute for Science and International Security, Aug. 17, 2023, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/highlights-of-institute-assessment-of-alabuga-drone-documents>.

<sup>150</sup> Bennett and Ilyushina, "Inside the Russian Effort to Build 6,000 Attack Drones with Iran's Help."

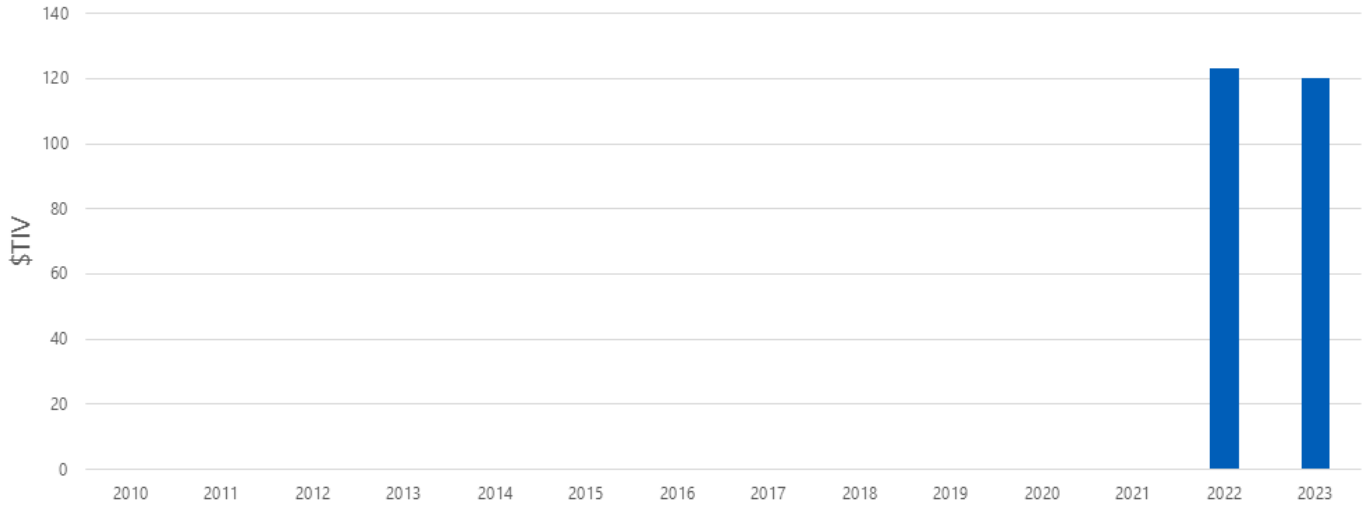
<sup>151</sup> Bohdan Tuzov, "Analysis: The Iranian Missiles Could Soon Be Heading to Russia," *Kyiv Post*, Oct. 12, 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/analysis/22648>; Gordon, Lubold, and Faucon, "Russia Moves Forward with Plans to Buy Iranian Ballistic Missiles."

<sup>152</sup> Jeff Mason and Steve Holland, "White House: Iran May Be Considering Providing Ballistic Missiles to Russia," Reuters, Nov. 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/white-house-iran-may-be-considering-providing-ballistic-missiles-russia-2023-11-21/>.

<sup>153</sup> Julian Borger, Peter Beaumont, and Dan Sabbagh, "Iran Has Not Sent Ballistic Missiles to Russia So Far, Says Ukrainian Official," *Guardian*, Dec. 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/06/mikhailo-podolyak-iran-has-not-sent-ballistic-missiles-to-russia-so-far-says-ukrainian-official>.

<sup>154</sup> Ahmer Madani, "US, G-7 Allies Warn Iran to Back off Deal to Provide Russia Ballistic Missiles or Face New Sanctions," Associated Press, Mar. 15, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russian-iran-ballistic-missiles-ukraine-f12dc454b04f7cbe671d2c401e31390c>.

Figure 3. Iran military exports to Russia, 2010–2023



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, accessed June 1, 2023.

Note: \$TIV represents the trend-indicator value for the trade in millions of TIV units. See “Sources and Methods,” SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, accessed July 19, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods> for more information.

In a September 10, 2024, briefing, the US confirmed reports that Iran shipped Fath 360 short-range ballistic missiles to Russia, although the exact number is unknown and Iran may not have shipped launchers along with the missiles.<sup>155</sup>

### Ammunition and artillery shells

Iran also supplies Russia with ammunition and artillery shells—as many as one million rounds of ammunition and 300,000 artillery shells may have been shipped to Russia via the Caspian Sea from November 2022 through April 2023.<sup>156</sup> According

to documents obtained by the UK’s Sky News, Iran is charging a premium price and taking advantage of Russia’s need for the ammunition.<sup>157</sup> Although the 2018 Treaty on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea asserts that it should be used only for peaceful purposes, Russia’s Central Asian littoral neighbors have not directly pushed back against the use of the sea for illicit Russian-Iranian ammunition or other arms transfers for use in conflict zones.<sup>158</sup>

Nevertheless, two of their Caspian neighbors—Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan—plus Tajikistan and

<sup>155</sup> Todd Lopez, “Iran Gives Russia Short-Range Missiles, While U.S., Partners Expect to keep Bolstering Ukrainian Air Defense,” DOD News, Sept. 10, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3901774/iran-gives-russia-short-range-missiles-while-us-partners-expect-to-keep-bolster>.

<sup>156</sup> Dion Nissenbaum and Benoit Faucon, “Iran Ships Ammunition to Russia by Caspian Sea to Aid Invasion of Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 24, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-ships-ammunition-to-russia-by-caspian-sea-to-aid-invasion-of-ukraine-e74e8585>.

<sup>157</sup> “Iran Cashes in on Russia Running Low on Munition,” Iran International, June 5, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202306052171>; Deborah Haynes, “Arms Contract Shows Iran Has Sold Russia Ammunition for Ukraine War, Says Security Source,” SkyNews, June 5, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/arms-contract-shows-iran-has-sold-russia-ammunition-for-ukraine-war-says-security-source-12896127>.

<sup>158</sup> Kremlin, “Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea,” Aug. 12, 2018, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5328>.

Uzbekistan are planning military drills in July 2024 on Kazakhstan's Caspian coast; Russia and Iran are not included.<sup>159</sup> The growing use of the Caspian for arms transfers between Russia and Iran also has led the US to engage with Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan on maritime security issues. Experts urge Washington to do more to inhibit illicit Russian-Iranian trade along the Caspian littoral.<sup>160</sup>

### *Russian arms sales to Iran*

With the removal of the UN arms embargo on Iran in 2020, Iranian military modernization has the potential to transform the military situation in the Middle East. Iran currently lags behind other Gulf states and is once again looking to Russia, especially to modernize its fleet of fighter planes.<sup>161</sup> On November 28, 2023, Iran's Deputy Defense Minister Brigadier General Mahdi Farahi told Tasnim, an Iranian media outlet, that Tehran would receive military equipment from Russia, including 24 Su-35 fighter aircraft, Mi-28 attack helicopters, and Yak-130 jet trainers.

In September 2023, the Iranian Air Force received the first two Russian-made Yak-130 jet trainers,

which will enable Iranian pilots to train to fly more advanced aircraft.<sup>162</sup> The Yak-130s were the first new aircraft the Iranians purchased from Russia since they bought several Su-25UBK attack aircraft from 2003 to 2006.<sup>163</sup> Reportedly, Russia agreed to provide the Su-35s in exchange for Iranian kamikaze drones. The Su-35s were originally to be sold to Egypt, which later canceled the deal under US pressure after 15 had already been assembled.<sup>164</sup>

Iran has expressed interest in purchasing Russian ships to improve its naval capacity. This could also involve production in Russia of customized ships for Iran. Israeli sources point out that disagreement in Iran between the IRGC—which needs smaller craft for use by militant groups—and the Iranian navy—which aims to project power regionally—coupled with tradeoffs between developing naval or missile capabilities will likely delay any naval modernization plans.<sup>165</sup>

Russia may also be considering plans to assist Iran with its long-range missile program. The Russian Foreign Ministry announced that the expiration of limitations imposed on Iran by the UN Security Council in October 2023 meant that Russia could potentially provide such

<sup>159</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Caspian Drills that Exclude Russia and Iran Have Some People in Moscow Asking Questions," *Intellinews*, Apr. 12, 2024, <https://www.intellinews.com/pannier-caspian-military-drills-that-exclude-russia-and-iran-have-some-people-in-moscow-asking-questions-320850/>.

<sup>160</sup> Luke Coffey, "NATO's Black Sea Frontier Is the Southern Shore of the Caspian," *Hudson Institute*, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.hudson.org/security-alliances/natos-black-sea-frontier-southern-shore-caspian-sea>.

<sup>161</sup> Il'ya Lakstygol, "Iran Confirmed Receipt of Russian Combat Aircraft and Helicopters [Иран подтвердил получение российских боевых самолетов и вертолетов]," *Vedomosti*, Nov. 29, 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/11/29/1008252-iran-podtverdil-poluchenie-rossiiskih-boevih-samoletov-i-vertoletov>; "Iran Says It Finalized Deal to Buy Russian Aircraft," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, Nov. 29, 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/11/29/iran-says-it-finalized-deal-to-buy-russian-aircraft/>.

<sup>162</sup> "Deal Done, Iran to Get Mil Mi-28 Chopper, Sukhoi Su-35 Jet," *Tasnim News*, Nov. 28, 2023, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/11/28/2996773/deal-done-iran-to-get-mil-mi-28-chopper-sukhoi-su-35-jet>; "No Limits on Exports and Imports of Military Equipment: Defense Chief," *Tehran Times*, May 28, 2023, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/485228/No-limits-on-exports-and-imports-of-military-equipment-defense>.

<sup>163</sup> Lakstygol, "Iran Confirmed Receipt of Russian Combat Aircraft and Helicopters."

<sup>164</sup> "Iran Admits Purchase of Russian Su-35 Fighter Jets [Иран признал покупку российских истребителей Су-35]," *Moscow Times*, Jan. 15, 2023, <https://www.moscowtimes.io/2023/01/15/iran-poluchit-rossiiskie-istrebiteli-su-35-v-obmen-na-droni-a30847>; Lakstygol, "Iran Confirmed Receipt of Russian Combat Aircraft and Helicopters."

<sup>165</sup> Arie Egozi, "Iran Asking Russia to Sell Military Ships, Help Build New Designs: Israeli Sources," *Breaking Defense*, Dec. 15, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/12/iran-asking-russia-to-sell-military-ships-help-build-new-designs-israeli-sources/>.

technology but did not announce any immediate plans to do so.<sup>166</sup> This would also complicate Russia's adherence to the Missile Technology Control Regime. Russia could provide S-400 technology to Iran for protection against attacks on its missile and nuclear facilities, though the Iranian military may be more interested in acquiring the technology to produce its own defensive systems.<sup>167</sup>

### Dark port calls

Patterns of covert maritime arms trade facilitate Iranian denials of military aid to Russia. A pattern of dark port calls has characterized maritime relations between Iran and Russia.<sup>168</sup> Iranian and Russian vessels transiting the Caspian Sea are turning off their tracking signals—commonly referred to as “going dark”—to hide their maritime weapons trade in violation of requirements set by the International Maritime Organization for all vessels to use an Automatic Identification System (AIS) in international waters (see Figure 4 for a map of the Caspian region).<sup>169</sup>

Lloyd's List Intelligence first detected a spike in the number of gaps of tracking data in the Caspian in September 2022, just after the US and Ukraine detected Iranian drones on the battlefield.<sup>170</sup> According to these data, most of the gaps were identified near Iranian and Russian ports, especially Astrakhan.<sup>171</sup>

Iran has been investing in this port, which connects the Caspian to the Sea of Azov via the 63-mile Volga-Don Canal.<sup>172</sup> Through this route, Iran facilitated maritime transit of drones, artillery shells, and ammunition to Russia's frontlines during the spring and summer of 2022.<sup>173</sup> Shipping along the Volga-Don Canal increased by 42 percent in 2022 compared to 2021.<sup>174</sup> There also has been a sharp increase in the number of ships going dark along this canal, according to Lloyd's data.<sup>175</sup> In June 2023, the US National Security Council released a map (see Figure 5) detailing how Iranian drones transit the Caspian Sea for use by Russia in Ukraine.<sup>176</sup>

Lloyd's first detected the increase in AIS gaps in 2022, when gaps were observed 159 times on

<sup>166</sup> “Russia Says It Need No Longer Obey UN Restriction on Missile Technology for Iran,” Reuters, Oct. 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-need-no-longer-obey-un-restriction-missile-technology-iran-2023-10-17/>.

<sup>167</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>168</sup> According to a recent report, Iran received 130 “post-invasion logged port calls, until December 31, 2022, by Russian vessels linked to arms transfers”; see Hanna Notte, *Dangerous Decline: Russia's Military and Security Influence in the Global South and the Implications for the United States*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, CNS Occasional Paper, Nov. 2023, p. 12, [https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RSI-Short-Report\\_Notte\\_2023\\_OP\\_CNS2.pdf](https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/RSI-Short-Report_Notte_2023_OP_CNS2.pdf).

<sup>169</sup> Haley Nelson, “Dark Deals on the Caspian: How Iran Ships Drones to Russia,” Caspian Policy Center, Aug. 21, 2023, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/dark-deals-on-the-caspian-how-iran-ships-drones-to-russia>.

<sup>170</sup> “Vessel AIS Gaps Linked to Suspected Russia-Iran Arms Trade,” Lloyd's List Intelligence, Sept. 2022, <https://www.lloydslistintelligence.com/knowledge-hub/data-storytelling/vessel-ais-gaps-linked-to-suspected-russia-iran-arms-trade>.

<sup>171</sup> Lauren Kent and Salma Abdelaziz, “Iran Has a Direct Route to Send Russia Weapons—And Western Powers Can Do Little to Stop the Shipments,” CNN, May 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/26/europe/iran-russia-shipments-caspian-sea-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>172</sup> “Russia Invests in Volga-Don Canal as Trade with Iran Booms,” Maritime Executive, Dec. 21, 2022, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/russia-invests-in-volga-don-canal-as-trade-with-iran-booms>.

<sup>173</sup> Nelson, “Dark Deals on the Caspian: How Iran Ships Drones to Russia.”

<sup>174</sup> “Russia's Year-Long Invasion Impacts Maritime Ecosystem and Global Economy,” Windward, n.d., <https://windward.ai/content/the-impact-of-russias-year-long-invasion-on-the-maritime-ecosystem-global-economy/>.

<sup>175</sup> “Vessel AIS Gaps Linked to Suspected Russia-Iran Arms Trade.”

<sup>176</sup> Vivian Salama and Gordon Lubold, “Tehran Ships Drones to Russia over Caspian Sea for Deployment on Ukraine Front, U.S. Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tehran-ships-drones-to-russia-over-caspian-sea-for-deployment-on-ukraine-front-u-s-says-a4935e1b>.

Figure 4. Map of Caspian region



Source: CNA.

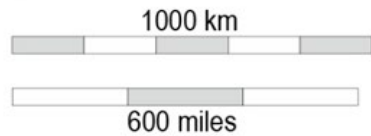


Figure 5. US National Security Council map of Caspian drone transit routes

**Iranian drone transfer to Russia**

- 1 Iranian drones built in Tehran
- 2 Iranian drones transferred to Amirabad
- 3 Drones loaded onto Russian ship to cross the Caspian Sea
- 4 Drones transported within Russia to Sescha and Primorsko-Akhtarsk
- 5 Drones used operationally against Ukraine by Russia

Route arrows are notional and do not indicate the actual path of transport and operational use.



Source: CNA, derived from Vivian Salama and Gordon Lubold, "Tehran Ships Drones over Caspian Sea for Deployment on Ukraine Front, U.S. Says," *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2023.

Table 5. Instances of Russian and Iranian ships experiencing AIS gaps May–July 2023

Country	Month/Year	Number of Ships	Number of AIS Gaps
Russia	May 2023	138	657
	June 2023	160	625
	July 2023	157	630
Iran	May 2023	48	199
	June 2023	47	218
	July 2023	47	192

Source: Data from Lloyd’s List Intelligence, cited by Haley Nelson, "Dark Deals on the Caspian: How Iran Ships Drones to Russia," Caspian Policy Center, Aug. 21, 2023; and Elizabeth Braw, "The Caspian Sea is a Sanctions-Busting Paradise," *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 14, 2023.

Russian ships in May, 135 times in June, and 138 times in July. By comparison, there were nearly four times as many gaps in AIS use on Russian-flagged ships in 2023 compared to the prior year, showing a significant increase in illicit maritime trade between Russia and Iran (see Table 5).<sup>177</sup>

## *Basing and access*

In January 2016, Iran agreed to grant Russia access to its Nojeh air base for use in Syria-related missions. Nojeh, located near Hamadan to the southwest of Tehran, was designed originally by the US in the 1960s. Because the base is much closer to Syria than those in Russia, use of Nojeh for refueling enabled Russian Tu-22M3 bombers to load up on munitions rather than fuel to attack rebel positions. Before using Nojeh, Russian planes had to fly 2,000 km from Mozdok to Syria; using the Iranian base reduced the distance to just 700 km. The arrangement was controversial, and Iran wanted it kept secret because domestic critics claimed it violated Article 146 of the Iranian constitution, which prohibits “the establishment of any foreign military base in Iran, even for peaceful purposes.”<sup>178</sup>

When Russia revealed that its planes had stayed overnight to refuel, this further inflamed disagreements within Iran over their basing access, and within a week of the first Russian use of the base, the Iranian government prohibited the Russian planes from using the base to refuel.<sup>179</sup> By mid-2017, Iranian officials rethought their outright ban on

Russia’s use of the base and said they would consider requests for use of bases in Iran for refueling on a case-by-case basis.<sup>180</sup>

Although there is no new evidence of Russian access to bases in Iran today (or Iranian access in Russia), an Israeli source reports that from May to June 2023, Russia may have allowed Iranian planes to land at Hmeimim Airport, a part of the Latakia base under Russian control in northwest Syria. According to this report from the Alma Research and Education Center, the Iranian planes may have been used to transport military equipment bound for Russia and Syria.<sup>181</sup>

## *Logistics arrangements*

Iranian ships can now travel along the Volga-Don Canal. In October 2022, Russian Deputy Transport Ministry Dmitry Azarov traveled to Tehran and agreed with Ali-Akbar Safaei, the head of Iranian Ports and Maritime Administration, that Iranian ships could sail on the Volga River, where foreign vessels had previously been prohibited. Before this agreement, Iranian cargo destined for the Black Sea had to be unloaded and reloaded onto Russian ships in Astrakhan. Despite the change in Russia’s position, Iran lacks enough small cargo ships (below 5,000 tons) and will need to buy or lease additional ships from Russia to serve this route.

Moreover, the Volga-Don Canal remains frozen from November to April, limiting the available time for shipping. Nevertheless, this route facilitated the dark

<sup>177</sup> Elizabeth Braw, “The Caspian Sea Is a Sanctions-Busting Paradise,” *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 14, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/14/russia-iran-caspian-sea-sanctions-busting-paradise/>.

<sup>178</sup> Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, *Triple Axis: Iran’s Relations with China and Russia* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 142.

<sup>179</sup> Tabatabai and Esfandiary, p. 143.

<sup>180</sup> Tabatabai and Esfandiary, p. 144; Amid Majidyar, “Iran Will Allow Russia Limited Use of Iranian Bases for Syrian Strikes,” Middle East Institute, Mar. 28, 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-will-allow-russia-limited-use-iranian-air-bases-syria-strikes>; Mehdi Khalaji and Farzin Nadimi, “Russia Uses an Iranian Air Base: Two Essays,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2675, Aug. 2016, [https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-uses-iranian-air-base-two-essays-0\\_](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-uses-iranian-air-base-two-essays-0_).

<sup>181</sup> “Syria: Why Are Iranian Planes Landing At The Russian Base—Hmeimim?,” Alma Research and Education Center (israel-alma.org), June 18, 2023, <https://israel-alma.org/2023/06/18/syria-why-are-iranian-planes-landing-at-the-russian-base-hmeimim/>.

trade military equipment discussed here.<sup>182</sup> Iran has long been interested in this shipping route, and Khazar Sea Shipping Lines, a subsidiary of Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, purchased a 53 percent stake in the port of Solyanka, the largest in Astrakhan Oblast, in 2010 to facilitate future shipments.<sup>183</sup>

Although in May 2023 Iran and Russia signed an agreement to complete the Rasht-Astara line, the last section of a north-south transit rail corridor connecting Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran, the Iranian government lacks the funds for the project, which will depend on Russian financing. Even if financed, the rail line is not slated for completion until 2027, making Caspian transport a more viable option, at least until then.<sup>184</sup>

More recently, in July 2023, the head of the Russian telecommunications regulatory agency met with Iranian telecommunications officials. During their meeting, they discussed a wide range of issues, including coordination of national positions at the International Telecommunication Union, cooperation on frequency spectrums (which would allow for an improved quality of internet access), and opportunities to increase the Iranian telecommunications presence in Russian markets. In addition, the Russia-Iran free trade agreement, which the Russian State Duma recently ratified, opens new opportunities for cooperation in the telecommunications industry.

Although the extent and nature of this cooperation as facilitated by the agreement is yet to be seen, the emphasis on this sector within the agreement indicates its growing importance to both countries. All these developments demonstrate that despite existing constraints on telecommunications infrastructure development, and despite Russia's overall limited role in the Iranian telecommunications sector, Russian and Iranian officials are still finding opportunities to boost engagement in this sphere.

### *Joint military exercises*

Iran and Russia began holding bilateral and multilateral exercises a decade ago. These exercises are largely an expression of mutual political support rather than a demonstration of joint military planning.

### **Bilateral naval exercises**

Russia and Iran have undertaken a series of joint exercises in the Caspian Sea, highlighting their deepening cooperation in this waterway and its increasing strategic value to both countries since the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. In October 2014, Russian warships visited the Iranian port of Anzali on the Caspian Sea for the first time since 2007 and conducted a joint exercise.<sup>185</sup> Two Russian warships returned to Anzali in August 2015 for another joint exercise.<sup>186</sup>

After several subsequent exchanges of visits with Iranian ships, a Russian flotilla returned to Anzali for exercises in July 2017.<sup>187</sup> Iranian naval units also

<sup>182</sup> Vali Kaleji, "Russia Ready to Allow Iranian Ships Access to the Volga River and Volga Canal," Eurasia Daily Monitor 19, no. 170 (Nov. 14, 2022), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-ready-to-allow-iranian-ships-access-to-the-volga-river-and-volga-don-canal/>.

<sup>183</sup> "Iran Begins Shipping Cargos to Russia via Solyanka Port," Port News, Jan. 22, 2024, <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/iran-begins-shipping-cargos-to-russia-via-solyanka-port/>.

<sup>184</sup> Nikita Smagin, "A North-South Corridor on Putin's Dime: Why Russia Is Bankrolling Iran's Infrastructure," Carnegie Politika, June 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89973>.

<sup>185</sup> Associated Press, "Iran, Russia Hold Joint Naval Exercise," *Times of Israel*, Oct. 17, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-russia-hold-joint-naval-exercise/>.

<sup>186</sup> "Russian Navy Fleet Leaves Anzali Port for Baku," Islamic Republic News Agency, Aug. 11, 2015, <https://en.irna.ir/news/81716093/Russian-navy-fleet-leaves-Anzali-Port-for-Baku>.

<sup>187</sup> "Iranian, Russian Caspian Forces Hold Joint Naval Exercise," Tasnim News, July 15, 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/07/15/1465040/iranian-russian-caspian-forces-hold-joint-naval-exercise>.

participated in bilateral exercises with Russian forces in the Caspian Sea as a part of Russia's Kavkaz-2020 exercises in the Caucasus region.<sup>188</sup> Most recently, on July 22, 2024, Russia and Iran undertook a joint rescue exercise on the Caspian Sea labeled the "Joint Caspian Sea Search and Rescue Exercise" (or CASAREX24).<sup>189</sup>

### Multilateral naval exercises

Beginning in 2019, Russia, Iran, and China began a series of Maritime Security Belt military exercises. In December 2019, the first trilateral drill took place in the northern part of the Indian Ocean. The three countries claimed to be preparing to deal with threats from terrorists and pirates. However, at the time, Iran was seeking to bolster support after sanctions were reimposed and the US boosted military aid to Saudi Arabia after it faced attacks on its oil industry from the Iran-sponsored Houthis.<sup>190</sup> Analysis of the trilateral drills by People's Republic of China (PRC) experts also emphasized the importance of messaging to the US about Chinese and Russian support for Iran in these drills.<sup>191</sup>

In 2021, Iran and Russia took part in the second Maritime Security Belt exercise in the northern Indian Ocean, which also focused on counterterrorism and anti-piracy training. India and China did not join as expected. Units from the Iranian military and IRGC

and three ships from Russia's Baltic fleet participated in the exercise.<sup>192</sup>

Iran, Russia, and China took part in the third Maritime Security Belt exercise in January 2022, focusing on tactical exercises such as releasing a hijacked ship, rescuing a burning vessel, and practicing shooting air targets at night.<sup>193</sup> The fourth Maritime Security Belt exercise was held in 2023, involving search and rescue, anti-piracy, and counterterrorism operations in the Gulf of Oman. China's Nanning destroyer, Russia's Admiral Gorshkov frigate, and Iran's Jamaran destroyer participated in the exercise.<sup>194</sup>

In March 2024, Iran, Russia, and China held a fifth Maritime Security Belt exercise in the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz. Pakistan, Brazil, Oman, India, South Africa, and some neighboring Caspian Sea countries were invited as observers. As with previous exercises, this was a tactical exercise focusing on a hostage rescue mission and did not display complex interoperability.<sup>195</sup>

### Training

Arms transfers by Russia and Iran have included training. In 2023, Iran sent experts on manufacturing drones to the Alabuga plant where Russia and Iran are coproducing drones. In October 2022, Iran

<sup>188</sup> Mason Clark et al., "Warning: Russia's Kavkaz-2020 Military Exercise," Institute for the Study of War, Sept. 25, 2020, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/warning-russia%E2%80%99s-kavkaz-2020-military-exercise>.

<sup>189</sup> Nigar Bayramli, "Iran, Russia Conduct Joint Maritime Security & Rescue Drills in Caspian Sea," *Caspian News*, July 22, 2024, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-russia-conduct-joint-maritime-security-rescue-drills-in-caspian-sea-2024-7-22-0/>.

<sup>190</sup> Nasser Karimi, "Iran to Conduct Naval Drills with China and Russia," *Navy Times*, Dec. 25, 2019, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/12/25/iran-to-conduct-naval-drills-with-china-and-russia/>.

<sup>191</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg et al., *Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation*, CNA, Mar. 2023, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/05/russian-chinese-military-cooperation>.

<sup>192</sup> Dorian Archus, "Russia & Iran Conduct Maritime Security Belt-2021 Exercise," *Naval Post*, Feb. 16, 2021, <https://navalpost.com/russia-iran-conducts-maritime-security-belt-2021-exercise/>.

<sup>193</sup> "Iran, China and Russia Hold Naval Drills in North Indian Ocean," *Reuters*, Jan. 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/iran-china-russia-hold-naval-drills-north-indian-ocean-2022-01-21/>.

<sup>194</sup> Li Wei, "Security Belt-2023 Joint Maritime Exercise Concludes," *China Military Online*, Mar. 22, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/Exercises/News\\_209184/16211197.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Exercises/News_209184/16211197.html).

<sup>195</sup> Lucas Winter, Jemima Baar, and Jason Warner, "The Axis Off Kilter: An Iran-China-Russia 'Axis' Is Shakier than Meets the Eye," *War on the Rocks*, April 19, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/the-axis-off-kilter-why-an-iran-russia-china-axis-is-shakier-than-meets-the-eye/>.

reportedly dispatched a small contingent from the IRGC to Crimea to assist Russian troops in using Iranian-made UAVs.<sup>196</sup> Initially, Russian personnel were sent to Iran for training, but when they began operating the Iranian drones, they experienced considerable technical difficulties. The Iranians were then sent to Crimea to provide additional training.<sup>197</sup>

Also in 2022, Iranian pilots began training in Russia on the Su-35, the first fighter aircraft Iran has purchased in many years.<sup>198</sup> Russia also provided training for the S-300s, aircraft, and other weapons that Iran bought in earlier decades. This training also reflected some difficulties Iran experienced with Russian equipment and complaints regarding its quality.<sup>199</sup>

Although data are sparse, there is evidence that Iranian trainers have deployed to occupied Crimea. A recent report noted that Iran may also collect information from the Russia-Ukraine war:

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.<sup>200</sup>

Although there is little evidence that this has been fully institutionalized or regularized, data from the Foreign Military Studies Office in December 2023 suggest that at least partial contacts do exist, although information is limited.<sup>201</sup> Other reporting, including an announcement by the Russian Ministry of Defense in August 2023 that representatives of Iran's ground forces would visit PME facilities for Russia's respective ground forces during a visit by Iranian Brigadier General Kioumars Heydari, adds weight to the inconsistent but rising evidence of at least an effort at connections.<sup>202</sup>

### *Intelligence sharing*

In 2015, Iran, Russia, Syria, and Iraq set up a joint intelligence center in Baghdad, sometimes called the Quartet Information Exchange and Coordination Center, to keep one another informed about their separate operations against ISIS.<sup>203</sup> Although it is unclear how much intelligence sharing took place under this framework, the center does provide a vehicle for potential cooperation.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>196</sup> Aamer Madhani and Zeke Miller, "US: Iranian Troops in Crimea Backing Russian Drone Strikes," AP, Oct. 20, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/government-and-politics-8b085070758120c31d421f68a65e4b14>.

<sup>197</sup> Julian E. Barnes, "Iran Sends Drone Trainers to Crimea to Aid Russian Military," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/18/us/politics/iran-drones-russia-ukraine.html>.

<sup>198</sup> Joseph Trevithick, "Russian Su-35s Could Soon Be Delivered to Iran, Pilots Trained Last Spring," *The War Zone*, Dec. 9, 2022, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/pilot-training-indicates-russia-will-deliver-su-35s-to-iran-next-year>.

<sup>199</sup> "Iran & Russia: Burgeoning Military Ties."

<sup>200</sup> Gris  and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>201</sup> Winter, Warner, and Baar, *Iran-Russia M-DIME Report*.

<sup>202</sup> "Russia and Iran Deepen Military Cooperation," Foundation for Defense of Democracies Flash Brief, Aug. 22, 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/08/22/russia-and-iran-deepen-military-cooperation/>.

<sup>203</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iraq Using Info from New Intelligence Center to Bomb Islamic State: Official," Reuters, Oct. 15, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-russia-iran/iraq-using-info-from-new-intelligence-center-to-bomb-islamic-state-official-idUSKCN0S71JC20151013/>.

<sup>204</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Iraq's Partnership with Russia Persists Despite International Pressure," *Gulf International Forum*, Apr. 2, 2023, <https://gulffif.org/iraqs-partnership-with-russia-persists-despite-international-pressure/>.

More recently, Russia and Iran have developed greater bilateral cooperation on counterintelligence. Since 2021, Russia has provided Iran with surveillance equipment and censorship and lie detector technology for use against domestic opponents.<sup>205</sup> There is some concern about potential cooperation between Russia and Iran in cyberattacks against US interests.<sup>206</sup>

Russia and Iran signed an agreement on cybersecurity in 2021 that deepened their cooperation on cyberdefense. Iran's Tasnim News reported at the time that the director of the Iran Civil Defense Organization had discussed ideas "for joint cooperation focusing on the exchange of intelligence, interaction against threats, and joint defense."<sup>207</sup> Although the Iranian Parliament approved the bilateral cybersecurity agreement between Russia and Iran, some legislators opposed the move because of differing security interests in the two countries and the vagueness of the proposed cooperation.<sup>208</sup>

## Conclusions

The Russia-Ukraine war has provided a new impetus for Russia-Iran military cooperation at a time when both countries face international sanctions and are involved in military conflicts in the Middle East. Dialogue between top officials in the countries and

the removal of UN sanctions on conventional arms transfers to Iran facilitate this deepening cooperation, which has featured arms sales, dark port calls on the Caspian Sea, and coproduction of drones in Russia.

Nevertheless, other aspects of Russia-Iran military cooperation—such as basing access, military exercises, training, logistical access, combined operations in Syria—face some constraints because of the differing security interests in Russia and Iran. Although international sanctions and authoritarian political systems create commonalities of interests, there are political forces within each country that have argued for limits to their military cooperation. In general, although the data here suggest growing military cooperation, this particular dimension of the relationship will remain subject to considerable constraints because of competing interests and the sensitivity of the issue.

In addition, logistical difficulties in carrying out arms transfers, interoperability issues, and some evidence of dissatisfaction (especially in Iran) with the quality of weapons obtained from each other create further constraints. In the short term, Russia and Iran have narrowed some of their security differences, especially in the Middle East, but it would be premature to conclude that an enduring military axis is developing.

<sup>205</sup> Dov Lieber, Benoit Faucon, and Michael Amon, "Russia Supplies Iran with Cyber Weapons as Military Cooperation Grows," *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 27, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-supplies-iran-with-cyber-weapons-as-military-cooperation-grows-b14b94cd>.

<sup>206</sup> Jason Blessing, "The Growing Threat of Cyber Cooperation Between Russia and Iran," *The Dispatch*, May 16, 2023, <https://thedispatch.com/article/the-growing-threat-of-cyber-cooperation-between-russia-and-iran/>.

<sup>207</sup> Ardavan Koshnood, "Russia and Iran Sign an Intelligence Pact," *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, Mar. 4, 2021, <https://besacenter.org/russia-iran-intelligence-pact/>; "Russia, Iran Ink Cybersecurity Pact," *Tasnim News*, Jan. 26, 2021, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/01/26/2440530/iran-russia-ink-cybersecurity-cooperation-pact>.

<sup>208</sup> "Iranian Parliament Approves Information Security Deal with Russia," *Iran International*, Dec. 10, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312105187>.

# THE ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP

This section reviews the Russia-Iran economic relationship. In doing so, it briefly situates economic relations in historical perspective before identifying key changes in the 2010s and especially since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. It then provides data for the indicator-based assessment of relationship dynamics before synthesizing these findings in a brief conclusion relevant to the economic dimension.

## Summary of the economic relationship

The Russia-Iran economic relationship fluctuated greatly over the past two decades. For much of the 2010s, there was hesitant cooperation marked by periods of closer economic engagement. The decade was also characterized by periods of Russian withdrawal from economic engagement with Iran as Moscow responded to US sanctions or failed to invest in Iran in a sustainable fashion. Economic engagement during this period was inconsistent and never evolved into meaningful interactions oriented toward a long-term relationship; there were few incentives to pursue this type of deeper economic relationship.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, Russian and Iranian officials have begun to put in considerable effort toward improving economic ties—traditionally a key weakness in the relationship.<sup>209</sup> The war created several new incentives, or drivers, toward a deeper relationship, and the resulting incentive structure led Russia to redouble its efforts to invest in the economic relationship in a more coherent fashion. This included several short-term, often war-related efforts (push

factors) and longer term, more ideologically driven investments in the relationship (pull factors).

Iran, meanwhile, has been interested in developing new economic partnerships and gaining access to new markets since it was ostracized from the global economy. As a result of these supply-based drivers, Tehran has seized the opportunity brought on by the war in Ukraine to engage with Russia and has begun to dedicate energy and resources into building the bilateral economic relationship. Although several natural constraints to the relationship remain—such as how to integrate two largely incompatible economies—Iran and Russia are actively working to boost bilateral banking ties, increase bilateral trade, build connecting transit infrastructure, and pivot toward engagement as energy collaborators. This cooperation marks a notable transformation from past economic engagement (see Table 6 for a visualization of this section’s summary).

## Changes in the Russia-Iran economic relationship: 2010–2023






### *Economic relationship, 2010–2022*

The 2010s were characterized by tension and collaboration in the bilateral economic relationship. Two key touchpoints deserve special mention.

First was Russia-Iran engagement in the context of the Syrian conflict. Despite the military collaboration between Russia and Iran in Syria, these closer military ties did not translate into a stronger economic

<sup>209</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

Table 6. Summary of economic relationship findings

Category	Indicators	Relationship Characterization	Trend Direction
 <b>ECONOMIC COORDINATION</b>	Bilateral and Multilateral Economic Fora	MEDIUM	↗
	Key leader engagements	MEDIUM	↗
 <b>INSTITUTIONAL LINKS</b>	Banking	MEDIUM	↗
	Currency Arrangements and Exchange Rates	LOW	→
 <b>TRADE</b>	Free Trade Agreements	HIGH	↗
	Bilateral Trade as Dollar Amount	MEDIUM	↗
	Bilateral Trade as % of Iran's GDP	MEDIUM	↗
	Bilateral Trade as % of Russia's GDP	LOW	↗
	Iran: Trade Partner Ranking Compared to Top 5 Nations (By Trade Value)	HIGH	↗
	Russia: Trade Partner Ranking Compared to Top 5 Nations (By Trade Value)	LOW	→
 <b>INVESTMENT</b>	Bilateral FDI	HIGH	↗
 <b>LOANS</b>	Russian Loans to Iran	LOW	→
 <b>STRATEGIC SECTORS</b>	Communications	MEDIUM	↗
	Infrastructure	HIGH	↗
	Oil and gas	HIGH	↗
	Aerospace	MEDIUM	↗
	Nuclear energy	MEDIUM	↗

Source: CNA.



“The degree of cohesion between Iran and Russia has varied over time and been punctuated by periodic crises of confidence.”<sup>210</sup>

—Michelle Gris  and Alexandra T. Evans, analysts

relationship.<sup>211</sup> In fact, as the Syrian conflict began to subside in 2018, economic tension reemerged between Russia and Iran, as the incompatibility between the two countries’ economic goals served as a notable constraint to the relationship.<sup>212</sup> These disagreements included, for example, friction over economic reconstruction in Syria and other traditional areas of economic competition between Russia and Iran.<sup>213</sup>

Second was fluctuations in the economic relationship in the context of the JCPOA. When the agreement was first signed in 2015, it removed a significant sanctions barrier that had previously deterred Russian businesses from engaging with Iran.<sup>214</sup> In the immediate months after the signing of the agreement, Russia-Iran trade dramatically increased

as Russia sent previously sanctioned goods into the Iranian economy (see Figure 6). Foreign direct investment (FDI) also increased sharply and began to draw the two economies together.

But when the Donald Trump administration reinstated sanctions in 2018 following the collapse of the JCPOA, Russia pulled back its investment from Iran, many Russian businesses terminated engagement with Iranian customers, and trade flows adjusted accordingly.<sup>215</sup> This episode demonstrated that despite Iran’s efforts to evade the impact of Western sanctions and the desire by Russian and Iranian officials to strengthen bilateral economic ties, US and Western economic policy significantly shaped the trajectory of Russia-Iran economic relations in the 2010s and continued to serve as a constraining factor in the Russia-Iran economic relationship.

Russia and Iran had some basic strategic interests in building stronger economic ties during the 2010s. Russia was looking to increase its non-Western trade, and, traditionally, engagement with the Middle East had been an underutilized option.<sup>216</sup> Ties with Iran were also helpful for Moscow as it tried to balance its relations with the region at-large.<sup>217</sup> Iran had some similar motivations. Economic engagement could bring much-needed trade and investment into the country, facilitating necessary economic growth while seeking to circumvent Western sanctions. It

<sup>210</sup> Gris  and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>211</sup> Aron Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Feb. 2019; see also Hamidreza Azizi, *Close But Complicated: Iran-Russia Relations in the Middle East Amid the War in Ukraine* (Fredrich Ebert Stiftung, Feb. 2023).

<sup>212</sup> Azizi, *Close But Complicated*.

<sup>213</sup> Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria.”

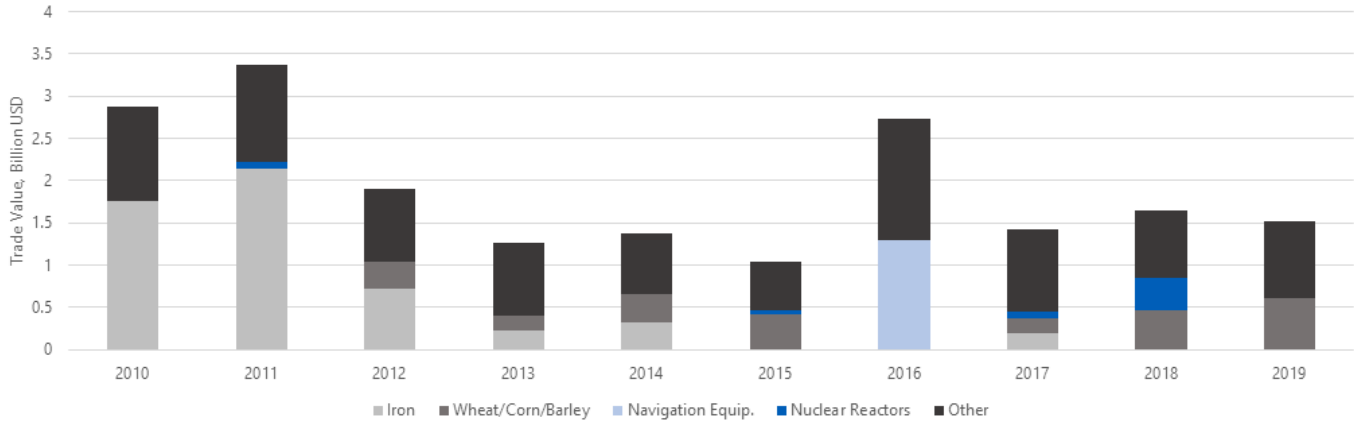
<sup>214</sup> Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*.

<sup>215</sup> Clement Therme, “The Russia-Iran Partnership in a Multipolar World,” *French Institute of International Relations, Russie.NEI.Reports*, no. 37 (Mar. 2022); Alex Vatanka and Abdolrasool Divsallar, *Can the West Stop Russia-Iran Convergence?*, Middle East Institute, Apr. 2023; Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership,” Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, Aug. 18, 2016, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2016/08/18/russia-and-iran-historic-mistrust-and-contemporary-partnership-pub-64365>.

<sup>216</sup> Lund, *Russia in the Middle East*.

<sup>217</sup> Ellie Geranmayeh and Kadri Liik, *The New Power Couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East* (European Council on Foreign Relations, Sept. 13, 2016), [https://ecfr.eu/publication/iran\\_and\\_russia\\_middle\\_east\\_power\\_couple\\_7113/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/iran_and_russia_middle_east_power_couple_7113/).

Figure 6. Russian exports to Iran



Source: “What Does Russia Export to Iran?,” Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) World, accessed June 8, 2024.  
 Note: Select categories of exports highlighted.

was also simply another part of an effort to engender positive relations with Moscow, as Russia could help Iran protect its regional security interests.<sup>218</sup>

Nevertheless, there were exogenous and endogenous factors that constrained the development of economic ties during this period. Western sanctions served as an exogenous factor. During periods such as the early 2010s and after the 2018 sanctions, they constrained the economic relationship even if Russians and Iranians wanted to engage with each other.<sup>219</sup>

At the same time, poorly developed transit infrastructure and competition for markets acted as endogenous constraints on the relationship.<sup>220</sup> Moscow chose to view Iran as a competitor for

certain markets—especially when it pertained to oil and gas markets.<sup>221</sup> Both countries also opted to underinvest in shared transit infrastructure, failing to see the strategic necessity of such an endeavor. For economic relations to deepen, these exogenous and endogenous factors would need to be addressed.

### *Economic relationship, 2022–present*

The Russia-Ukraine war has unequivocally served as a turning point in the Russia-Iran economic relationship because it has fundamentally altered Russia’s calculus toward economic engagement with Iran.<sup>222</sup> There are three key, specific ways in which the relationship has changed: (1) US sanctions no

<sup>218</sup> Geranmayeh and Liik, *The New Power Couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East*.

<sup>219</sup> Geranmayeh and Liik, *The New Power Couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East*; Vatanka and Divsallar, *Can the West Stop Russia-Iran Convergence?*; Trenin, “Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership”; Therme, “The Russia-Iran Partnership in a Multipolar World.”

<sup>220</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>221</sup> The Iran Primer, “Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows,” May 18, 2023, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/may/18/iran-and-russia-gyrating-trade-grows>.

<sup>222</sup> Azizi, *Close But Complicated*; Vatanka and Divsallar, *Can the West Stop Russia-Iran Convergence?*; Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

longer deter Russian businesses from engaging with Iran, (2) Russia is interested in finding new economic partners, and (3) Russia is now fully committed to its pivot to Asia, in the hopes of revising long-term trade patterns.

First, the threat of US sanctions no longer deters Russian businesses from engaging with Iran; in other words, a key constraint to the bilateral economic relationship has been removed. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia joined Iran as one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world. Russian businesses and investors no longer fear the fallout from economic engagement with Iran because they are already so heavily sanctioned.<sup>223</sup> As a result, investment and trade have flourished and show no signs of abating in the near or medium term.

Second, Russia is looking for new economic partners. With the war, Russia lost access to other, more permissive markets and began to look for new economic partners. Iran proved to be a willing partner that was poised to benefit from deeper engagement.<sup>224</sup>

Third, the war cemented Russia's pivot to Asia, and Iran is a key part of that vision.<sup>225</sup> Iran could serve as an additional gateway for Russia's trade with India and East Asia, although at present Russia's trade with East Asia is mostly via China and the Pacific. If Russia can strengthen economic ties and develop transit infrastructure through Iran, it can more easily and cost-effectively access Indian and Asian markets.

This will become increasingly important for Russia's strategic calculus as it loses access to European markets.

Despite the changing thinking within Moscow, Iranian officials are split over whether to support Russia's wartime effort.<sup>226</sup> Some hardliner factions view strong ties with the Kremlin as necessary for regime survival and to counterbalance the US presence near Iran. Other more moderate or reformist factions see Russia as an important neighbor but want to avoid close ties to preserve Tehran's ability to reengage with the West and to avoid getting dragged into the "quagmire" in Ukraine.<sup>227</sup> To date, the economic calculus and the increasing dominance of the hardliners in Tehran has meant that Iran is increasingly pursuing a closer economic relationship with Russia, and even the death of Iranian President Raisi in May 2024 does not appear likely to derail deeper economic cooperation.<sup>228</sup>

### Methods for assessment

To understand the Russian-Iranian economic relationship, we examined coordination mechanisms including participation in bilateral and multilateral fora and key leader engagements, institutional linkages through the banking sector as well as currency arrangements and exchange rates, bilateral trade with a focus on free trade agreements and the amount of trade placed in context of GDP figures and other bilateral trade partners, bilateral FDI, Russian loans

<sup>223</sup> Robbie Gramer and Amy Mackinnon, "Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, January 5, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/05/iran-russia-drones-ukraine-war-military-cooperation/>.

<sup>224</sup> Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>225</sup> Gramer and Mackinnon, *Iran and Russia Are Closer Than Ever Before*.

<sup>226</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>227</sup> Faezeh Foroutan, "Suspicious Bind: Iran's Relationship with Russia," Sept. 2, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/suspicious-bind-irans-relationship-with-russia/>; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>228</sup> Nikita Smagin, "President Raisi's Death Shows the Russia-Iran Partnership Is Inescapable," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 24, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/russia-without-iran-raisi?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia>; Grajewski, "The Iran-Russia Friendship Won't Wither Under Raisi's Successor."

to Iran, and investment in strategic sectors such as communications, infrastructure, oil and gas, aerospace, and nuclear energy. The open-source material used in this section comes from Western, Russian, and Iranian media as well as academic literature.

The **coordination** category looks at whether the high-level structures and mechanisms are in place to coordinate strategic-level goals and the trajectory of the bilateral economic relationship. A higher presence of engagement via bilateral and multilateral economic fora as well as increased frequency of key leader engagements suggest a more coordinated approach to economic relations rather than ad hoc investment and engagement. To assess these indicators, this section drew heavily on media reporting and think tank and research institution assessments and reports.

The **institutional links** category assesses the presence of underlying mechanisms that play a key enabling role in bilateral relations. Deeper development of these mechanisms can facilitate a deeper bilateral economic engagement, especially over time. The analysis in this section draws on media reports and analysis from research institutions.

The **trade** category focuses on a variety of indicators of the bilateral trade relationship. Increased bilateral trade—especially relative to trade with other partners—suggests that deeper economic relations are developing and moving beyond high-level rhetoric. An ideal assessment of the bilateral trade relationship would draw on trade data up through early 2024, facilitating an accurate assessment of trends over time and in response to the war in Ukraine. Data of this type in a verified and published form, however, do not yet exist for the entirety of this period.

There are detailed data on trade before 2022, and this report uses the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) World database and data visualization tools, which draw from the UN Comtrade database, for this period. These data are supplemented with secondary literature from research institutions, government reports, and media reporting. Post-2022 data are more incomplete. This report pieces together that part of the picture from a variety of sources, including media reports and government press releases. The incomplete nature of these data can limit trend analysis, but the following sections discuss these limitations and the surrounding context to present the most accurate and complete picture possible.

Like trade, **investment and loan** data show another form of the operationalized economic relationship. A higher level of investment or the presence of bilateral loans indicates a deeper and more developed economic relationship and an interest in developing relations over the long term. Data to support an assessment of these indicators come from World Bank databases, government and research institution reports, and media reporting.

The final category focuses on economic engagement in five **strategic sectors**. A higher level of involvement and investment in these sectors indicates deeper economic engagement and a desire by both countries to build the relationship over the long term. Data to support the analysis of these indicators come from government press releases, research institution reports, and media reporting. Table 4 lists the categories, indicators, and overall ratings for each.<sup>229</sup>

## Assessment of economic indicators

The following paragraphs provide more detail on the nature of this changing economic relationship.

<sup>229</sup> See Appendix A: Indicator Metrics for details on the individual indicator metrics and coding criteria.

They highlight six categories of economic variables, showing the variations and historical fluctuations across these main economic metrics.

### Coordination

Deeper economic engagement between Russia and Iran depends on the presence and strength of several high-level coordination mechanisms. The following paragraphs discuss Moscow and Tehran's increasing engagement via bilateral and multilateral economic fora as well as key leader engagements. These types of engagements can shape the overall direction and trajectory of economic relations.

### Bilateral and multilateral economic fora

Russia and Iran are both increasingly a part of international fora designed to counter Western economic and geopolitical influence. In the context of economic engagement, the two countries have recently increased cooperation via several bodies.

First is through BRICS, a geopolitical bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. In summer 2023, these countries announced the expansion of BRICS, and Iran was one of many countries invited to join—a decision that surprised many observers.<sup>230</sup> Accession to the body would provide both Iran and Russia another venue in which to expand economic engagement. It would also help Iran surmount its status as an international outcast, highlighting the close relationship it has with some of the world's most powerful countries.

However, the exact nature of this collaboration and how BRICS influences Russia-Iran economic engagement remain to be seen. For example, secondary US sanctions and the ongoing Western isolation of Iran would likely limit Tehran's ability to receive a loan from the BRICS development bank, showing that the US and its Western allies still have the capacity to limit the benefits that membership in international fora could provide to Iran.<sup>231</sup>

Second, in 2023, Iran became a full member of the SCO, a regional geopolitical and economic bloc led by Russia and China that is also committed to de-dollarization efforts—or the push by many countries to reduce the global economy's dependence on the US dollar—although its primary goals lie in regional security issues. In the economic realm, SCO membership helps link Iran with other economies in Central Asia, highlights Tehran's willingness to link publicly with the Russia-China axis, and helps counter Iran's economic isolation.<sup>232</sup>

But both Moscow and Tehran view Iran's admission to the body primarily through a geopolitical lens; it helps both countries in their quest for greater engagement with Eurasia. Russia's interests go even further. It views Iran's admission as a useful opportunity to monitor Tehran's growing relationship with Beijing, as well as other Central Asian countries and India. Simultaneously, Russia wants to limit Beijing's ability to create a China-centered economic bloc within the SCO to prevent it from becoming a meaningful alternative to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a customs union that seeks

<sup>230</sup> Farnaz Fassihi, "With BRICS Invite, Iran Shrugs Off Outcast Status in the West," *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 2023, accessed Jan. 3, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/25/world/middleeast/iran-brics.html>.

<sup>231</sup> Fassihi, "With BRICS Invite, Iran Shrugs Off Outcast Status in the West."

<sup>232</sup> Aamna Khan, "What Does Iran's Membership in the SCO Mean for the Region?," *The Diplomat*, Sept. 20, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/what-does-irans-membership-in-the-sco-mean-for-the-region/>; Brenda Shaffer, "Iran's Policy Toward the Caucasus and Central Asia," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, Aug. 17, 2022, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/08/17/irans-policy-caucasus-central-asia/>; Therme, "The Russia-Iran Partnership in a Multipolar World"; The Iran Primer, "Iran to Join BRICS Alliance," Aug. 24, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/aug/24/iran-join-brics-alliance>.

to anchor some former Soviet states to the Russian economy.<sup>233</sup> What these economic dynamics look like in practice given the relatively recent admission of Iran remains to be seen.

Overall, several observers note that the effect of these admissions is likely to be limited because of the threat of secondary US sanctions for other third-party countries (e.g., the PRC). Iranian admission to these bodies arguably serves as more of a political win for Iranian leadership than a sign of deeper economic cooperation with Russia and Central Asia more broadly.<sup>234</sup>

### Key leader engagements

Senior Russian and Iranian economic leaders are not yet having annual, bilateral engagements but have had a notable number of high-level meetings to facilitate or support the signing of a variety of bilateral economic agreements, marking an increase from previous years. For example, in April 2022, the Russian and Iranian ministers for transportation met in Moscow to sign an agreement facilitating increased investment and bilateral coordination on air, sea, and rail transportation.<sup>235</sup>

Similarly, Russian and Iranian ministers responsible for information and communications technology met in Tehran in November 2022 to discuss increased cooperation on communications technology infrastructure in Iran.<sup>236</sup> More recently, in 2023, the governors of the Russian and Iranian central banks met to discuss trade in national currencies

and deeper engagement in the banking sector.<sup>237</sup> Although only a few of these kinds of meetings have taken place, they highlight the growing high-level engagement that both Moscow and Tehran are pursuing to coordinate and operationalize the deepening economic partnership—even if they do not yet occur on an annualized basis.

### Institutional links

Although coordination via bilateral and multilateral fora and key leader engagements can set the course and direction of Russia-Iran economic relations, institutional links serve as critical mechanisms for implementing the goals outlined in these meetings and fora. This section focuses on banking linkages and currency arrangements between Russia and Iran.

### Banking

Many countries are drawn to de-dollarization policies in hopes of reducing their economy's vulnerability to the economic impact of US monetary policy. Russia and Iran, however, pursue de-dollarization primarily to avoid the impact of US and European sanctions and to target US global economic leadership. Developing alternative mechanisms and banking infrastructure is thus a necessary prerequisite to growing bilateral economic relations and to transferring money between the two heavily sanctioned countries.

To support this development and establish mechanisms for trade in non-dollar-denominated

<sup>233</sup> Li-Chen Sim and Nicole Grajewski, "What Does Russia Get Out of Iran's Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?," Oct. 29, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/what-does-russia-get-out-of-irans-membership-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>.

<sup>234</sup> "Iran to Join BRICS Alliance."

<sup>235</sup> "Iran, Russia Ink Comprehensive Transport Agreement," *Tehran Times*, Apr. 29, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/472175/Iran-Russia-ink-comprehensive-transport-agreement>.

<sup>236</sup> "Russia Seeks to Develop Communications Infrastructure in Iran," *Tehran Times*, Nov. 23, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/478986/Russia-seeks-to-develop-communications-infrastructure-in-Iran>.

<sup>237</sup> "Iran, Russia Agree to Ditch Dollar, Trade in National Currencies," Islamic Republic News Agency, Dec. 27, 2023, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85335790/Iran-Russia-agree-to-ditch-dollar-trade-in-national-currencies>.

transactions, Russian and Iranian officials have advanced several efforts. In August 2022, they created a rial-ruble exchange to allow the two countries to trade without relying on the US dollar.<sup>238</sup> In January 2023, media reports indicated that the two countries had directly connected their banks via an interbanking agreement and connected their national financial messaging services, allowing them to bypass the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) messaging platform.<sup>239</sup> In late December 2023, governors of the Iranian and Russian central banks signed an agreement to trade in local currencies.<sup>240</sup> The two countries also have a bilateral currency agreement.<sup>241</sup> As of May 2023, about 80 percent of Russia-Iran settlements were conducted via national currencies given constraints on the use of other currencies for payments and transactions.<sup>242</sup>

Although this agreement marks notable progress—especially for Iran—in expanding non-US dollar banking transactions between Iran and Russia, in practice, it faces many limitations. Most practically, it is limited by the lack of liquidity in the ruble and rial foreign exchange markets. The two countries simply do not have enough of the other country's reserve currency to support large-scale transactions on a regular basis.<sup>243</sup> Russia, for example, had little incentive to hold rials because most of the world

refused to conduct transactions in Iran's currency because of secondary sanction risks.

For large-scale bilateral payments to become a reliable feature, the two countries will need to find a reliable non-US dollar and non-rial/ruble alternative currency. The Chinese renminbi offers one possibility. At present, renminbi financial infrastructure is already present in Russia. Russia has the necessary bilateral swap line with the People's Bank of China and a Chinese state-owned renminbi clearing bank. There is also a direct Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, a Chinese payment system offering clearing and settlement services for cross-border renminbi payments, present within Russia. Iran, meanwhile, lacks all three aspects of the necessary financial infrastructure.<sup>244</sup> Nevertheless, it should be noted that new sanctions have made Chinese financial institutions more wary of dealing with Russian customers, and there have been delays in payments.

To date, China has been hesitant to engage with Iran in this context because of the threat of secondary sanctions and potential blowback Chinese banks could receive in other parts of the world.<sup>245</sup> Thus, unless the PRC becomes more willing to engage with Iran—and BRICS could facilitate this type of engagement if geopolitical conditions and de-

<sup>238</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>239</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*; "Iran, Russia Link Banking Systems amid Western Sanction," Reuters, Jan. 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/iran-russia-link-banking-systems-amid-western-sanction-2023-01-30/>; Vali Kaleji, "Western Sanctions Challenge and Restrict Ruble-Rial Trade Between Iran and Russia," Jamestown Foundation, Jan. 11, 2024.

<sup>240</sup> "Iran, Russia to Trade in Local Currencies Instead of US Dollar - State Media," Reuters, Dec. 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-russia-trade-local-currencies-instead-us-dollar-state-media-2023-12-27/>.

<sup>241</sup> Xu Wenhong, "Dedollarization as a Direction of Russia's Financial Policy in Current Conditions," *Studies on Russian Economic Development* 34, no. 1 (2023), doi: 10.1134/S1075700723010185.

<sup>242</sup> "Russia and Iran Conducting Around 80% of Settlements in National Currencies, Considered Yuan," Interfax, May 17, 2023, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/90588/>.

<sup>243</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>244</sup> Robert Greene, *The Difficult Realities of the BRICS' Dedollarization Efforts—and the Renminbi's Role*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dec. 5, 2023.

<sup>245</sup> Greene, *The Difficult Realities of the BRICS' Dedollarization Efforts*.

dollarization efforts align—the renminbi option will continue to be unviable.

### Currency arrangements and exchange rates

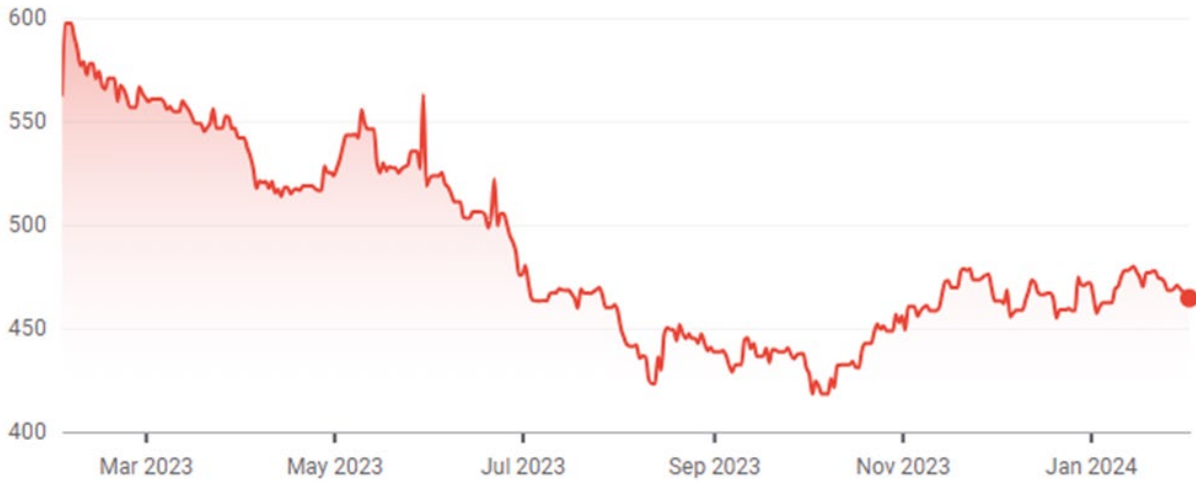
The use of the rial and ruble has increased by roughly 60 percent in recent years as Russia and Iran have tried to use the bilateral economic relationship to decrease their reliance on the dollar.<sup>246</sup> The ability, however, of Tehran and Moscow to rely on local currencies as a viable alternative to the dollar is limited by the high volatility in the bilateral exchange rate, shown in Figure 7.

Vali Kaleji, an Iran analyst at the Jamestown Foundation, highlights three distinct challenges. First, the bilateral trade imbalance has led to a large ruble deficit for Iran. The demand for rubles is high and cannot be adequately met.

Second, devaluations in both the ruble and rial, coupled with extreme volatility in exchange rates, have limited the transition away from the dollar. To avoid the unpredictability of dealing with local currencies, most businesspeople negotiate in dollar-denominated figures before converting to local currencies once negotiations are complete.

Third, the simple process of exchanging rubles into rials is complicated by the fact that there is no single exchange rate in Iran. There is an official rate and a free-market rate, and these rates differ substantially. Such differences significantly decrease the attractiveness of this transaction method for businesses on both sides of the relationship and, at times, can serve as a constraint on economic ties.<sup>247</sup>

Figure 7. Russian ruble to Iranian rial exchange rates, March 2023–February 2024



Source: “Russian Ruble to Iranian Rial,” Google Finance, accessed Feb. 2024.

<sup>246</sup> “Russian Firms Invest \$2.7 Billion in Iran’s Oil Industry: Official,” Tasnim News Agency, June 2, 2023, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/06/02/2905345/russian-firms-invest-2-7-billion-in-iran-s-oil-industry-official>.

<sup>247</sup> Kaleji, “Western Sanctions Challenge and Restrict Ruble-Rial Trade Between Iran and Russia.”



## Trade

One of the foremost ways that the goals discussed in high-level engagements are actualized is via bilateral trade. Although trade has become a key area of focus for the bilateral economic relationship, the true scale of recent changes has, at times, been overstated by observers. This section details several components of the bilateral trade relationship and places recent changes in the context of Russia and Iran's historic trade relationship as well as each country's engagement with other economies.

### Free trade agreements

Iran and the Russian-led EEU signed a free trade agreement in December 2023. This new agreement replaces the temporary 2019 version, establishes a preferential trade regime between Iran and the EEU, and eliminates customs duties on roughly 90 percent of traded goods.<sup>248</sup> Thanks to this agreement, the bilateral trade relationship between Russia and Iran has expanded significantly.

On May 28, 2024, the Russian Duma ratified the trade agreement.<sup>249</sup> Approval by the Iranian parliament and other members of the EEU is expected later this summer.<sup>250</sup> The Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei

Overchuk anticipates that the agreement should be ready to take effect in early 2025.<sup>251</sup>

As the agreement has yet to be implemented, its economic impact remains uncertain.<sup>252</sup> That being said, the temporary 2019 version of the agreement contributed to an increase in trade from \$2.4 billion in 2019 to \$6.2 billion in 2022, highlighting the potential effect this new agreement could have on bilateral trade relations. The prospects for this agreement, coupled with other efforts to expand and grow the bilateral relationship, suggest that the new free trade agreement could expand bilateral trade relations in a substantial fashion.

### Bilateral trade

For much of the early 2010s, the UN sanctions regime and the 2012 decision to cut Iran off from SWIFT severely limited Russia-Iran trade. Trade hovered around \$1.5 billion per year and was mainly limited to food, which was exempt from sanctions.<sup>253</sup> Bilateral trade between Russia and Iran during this period consisted primarily of interindustry trade rather than intra-industry (two-way) trade. As a result, there is only limited trade involving distributed supply chains and high value-add growth opportunities. More specifically, analyzing trade data at the HS4 level<sup>254</sup>

<sup>248</sup> "Russian-Backed Union Signs Free Trade Pact with Iran," Reuters, Dec. 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-backed-union-signs-free-trade-pact-with-iran-2023-12-25/>; Kevjn Lim, "Iran's Eurasian Wager," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Apr. 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-eurasian-wager>; Kaleji, "Western Sanctions Challenge and Restrict Ruble-Rial Trade Between Iran and Russia."

<sup>249</sup> "Russian State Duma Ratifies Free Trade Agreement Between EAEU, Iran," TASS, May 28, 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1794479>.

<sup>250</sup> "Iran-EAEU FTA Agreement Expected to Be Communicated Next Year: TPOI," Tasnim News Agency, Jan. 23, 2024, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2024/01/23/3027752/iran-eaeu-fta-agreement-expected-to-be-communicated-next-year-tpoi>.

<sup>251</sup> "Iran-EAEU Free-Trade Zone Due to be Launched in 2025 – Russian Deputy PM," Interfax, June 6, 2024, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/103060/>.

<sup>252</sup> "Iran-EAEU FTA Agreement Expected to Be Communicated Next Year: TPOI."

<sup>253</sup> "Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows"; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>254</sup> Harmonized System (HS) codes are an internationally standardized way to numerically classify and categorize various export and import products. The number of digits within the code indicates the level of specificity for the product. HS2 codes, for example, are very broad categories whereas HS4 or even HS6 codes offer a greater degree of specificity. For more information, see US Department of Commerce International Trade Administration, "Understanding HS Codes and the Schedule B," accessed June 7, 2024, <https://www.trade.gov/harmonized-system-hs-codes>.

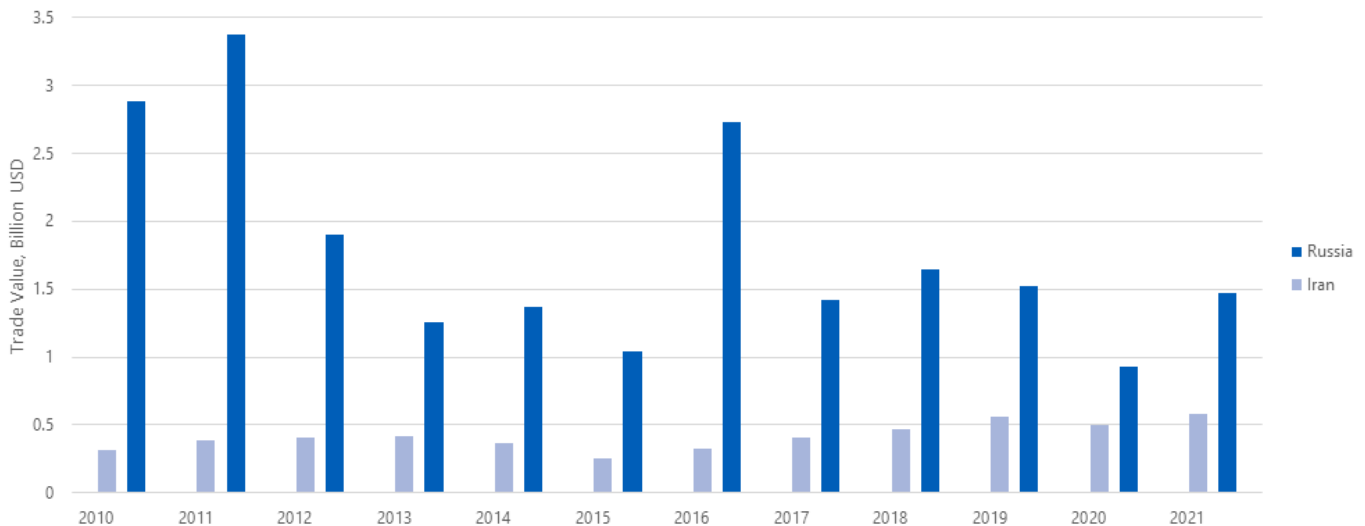
between 2010 and 2019 shows that there is no significant two-way trade between the two countries during this period and that the two economies largely traded goods to access new products they were unable to produce themselves.<sup>255</sup>

In 2016, things began to change in terms of interindustry trade. The JCPOA went into effect, trade sharply increased, and previously restricted goods, such as navigation equipment, began to flow into Iran. This trade growth, however, was ultimately restricted because of logistical and financial constraints (i.e., limited shipping capacities and disputes over currency transactions), and bilateral trade began to return to roughly pre-JCPOA values

(see Figure 8 depicting Russian and Iranian exports to each other).<sup>256</sup>

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in trade relations, and for the first time, Russian and Iranian officials began to focus seriously on boosting bilateral trade. Officials signed several agreements to kick-start the process, and by the end of 2022, Russia had become Iran’s fifth-largest trade partner.<sup>257</sup> Statements from Russian and Iranian officials claim that bilateral trade grew by roughly 20 percent between 2021 and 2022, reaching a total of \$5 billion. International Monetary Fund data, however, show figures at roughly half this amount, although this discrepancy could be a result

Figure 8. Russia-Iran trade, 2010–2021



Source: OEC World.

<sup>255</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “What Does Russia Export to Iran?,” [https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree\\_map/hs92/export/rus/irn/show/2019](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/rus/irn/show/2019).

<sup>256</sup> “Iran and Russia: Gyating Trade Grows.”

<sup>257</sup> “Iran and Russia: Gyating Trade Grows.”

of non–publicly disclosed trade from programs such as oil swap deals and military trade.<sup>258</sup> Even with the uncertain nature of some of the data, there is clearly increased trade between the two countries, as evidenced by the 120 percent increase in container shipping in the Caspian Sea compared to 2021.<sup>259</sup>

The 2022 trade data also indicate that for the first time, Russia imported more industrial goods from Iran than Iran purchased from Russia, highlighting a notable shift in the bilateral trade relationship.<sup>260</sup> This trade has involved products such as auto parts, gas turbines, and other materials necessary for Russian aircraft but found in short supply because of the ongoing war.<sup>261</sup> Iran is also adopting the new role of arms supplier, as it provides Russia with military arms.<sup>262</sup> However, these are still relatively small trade figures. Non-oil Iranian trade with the PRC, for example, reached \$15.8 billion in 2022, showing some of the limits to continued growth in Russia-Iran bilateral trade.<sup>263</sup>

Nevertheless, the increased trade flow between Russia and Iran marks a notable transformation in Russian thinking and the Russian approach to the relationship. Russia and Iran are not natural trading partners; they often compete for the same markets and produce many of the same goods.<sup>264</sup> They also are still unable to compensate each other for the lost access to Western markets.<sup>265</sup> But with the ongoing

war, changing nature of geopolitics, and continued Western sanctions, bilateral trade is becoming increasingly attractive for both countries.

As such, both Russian and Iranian officials have publicly stated that the goal is to boost bilateral (nonmilitary) trade to \$40 billion per year, an ambitious target given current trade volumes.<sup>266</sup> One observer responded to these figures, noting that the goal is likely “unrealistic, given historically modest trade volumes, economic headwinds in both countries, and the fact that Russia and Iran produce similar goods.”<sup>267</sup>

### Bilateral trade as percent of GDP

Although bilateral trade between Russia and Iran has been growing, it is still a relatively small percentage of each country’s GDP. Between 2017 and 2021, Russia-Iran trade averaged \$1.9 billion per year, a figure comparable with the \$2 billion annual total over the previous five-year period (2012 to 2016). This trade accounted for roughly 0.6 percent of Iran’s GDP over the 2017 to 2021 period and 0.1 percent of Russia’s GDP.

For 2022, Iranian and Russian officials reported that bilateral trade increased to \$5 billion, a figure some Western observers suggest is high. Even using this higher end estimate, bilateral trade would only account for 1.2 percent of Iran’s GDP and

<sup>258</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>259</sup> “Iran and Russia: Gyating Trade Grows.”

<sup>260</sup> “Iran and Russia: Gyating Trade Grows.”

<sup>261</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>262</sup> Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>263</sup> “Iran Deepens Ties with China,” *The Iran Primer*, Feb. 15, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/feb/15/president-raisi-visits-china>.

<sup>264</sup> “Iran and Russia: Gyating Trade Grows.”

<sup>265</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>266</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>267</sup> “Iran and Russia: Gyating Trade Grows.”

0.2 percent of Russia's 2022 GDP.<sup>268</sup> Although this marks a notable increase compared to the 2017 to 2021 period and boosts Russia into Iran's top five trading partners for the first time in years, it remains a fraction of each country's bilateral trade with the PRC—the country that served as both countries' top trade partner across this entire period.

During the first five-year period (2012 to 2016), Iran's trade with the PRC averaged around 7.7 percent of Iran's GDP, and Russia's trade with the PRC averaged roughly 5.0 percent of Russia's GDP during the same period. Between 2017 and 2021, PRC-Iranian trade remained at 7.7 percent of Iran's GDP, but PRC-Russian trade rose to 6.5 percent of Russia's GDP during the same period.<sup>269</sup> More recently, in 2022, bilateral PRC-Iranian trade was \$15.16 billion, a relatively low figure in the bilateral relationship but still 3.7 percent of Iran's GDP. Meanwhile, bilateral PRC-Russian trade in 2022 hit \$176.4 billion, a record high and almost 7.9 percent of Russia's GDP.<sup>270</sup>

Such figures indicate that despite increased Russia-Iran trade, the bilateral trade relationship remains a small fraction of Russia's GDP; Russian trade with the PRC and its other trade partners dwarfs the size of its trade with Iran. For Iran, bilateral trade with Russia also remains a relatively small percentage of its GDP, but that figure has seen notable growth since 2022. New trade agreements and mechanisms to boost bilateral trade suggest that this figure could grow in the coming years, further cementing Russia's role as one of Iran's top trading partners.

### Trade partner ranking

In the 10 years before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, neither Russia nor Iran was positioned as a top five trade partner for the other country. Throughout this period, the PRC was both countries' top trade partner, accounting for roughly 7.7 percent of Iran's GDP during this period and 5.7 percent of Russia's GDP. Russia-Iran trade, meanwhile, accounted for a much smaller fraction of each country's GDP during the same period (see Figure 9 and Figure 10 for reference).

Although detailed trade data on Russia and Iran's bilateral trade with economies around the world are not yet available for 2022 and 2023, reports from Russian and Iranian officials indicate that Russia has now become Iran's fifth-largest trade partner.<sup>271</sup> Iran, meanwhile, does not have a similar place within Russia's top trade partners; it continues to be outpaced by the PRC, Türkiye, India, and other countries.<sup>272</sup>

Russia is expected to continue playing a prominent role as one of Iran's top trade partners in the coming years as new agreements take effect and the impacts of new Russian investments in the Iranian economy begin to be seen.

### Investments

For many years, US and Western sanctions severely limited Russia's ability to invest in the Iranian economy. The collapse of the JCPOA and the changing geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war are beginning to provide some renewed opportunities for engagement in this space.

<sup>268</sup> "Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows"; "GDP (current US\$) – Russian Federation," World Bank, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU>; "GDP (current US\$) – Iran, Islamic Rep.," World Bank, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=IR>.

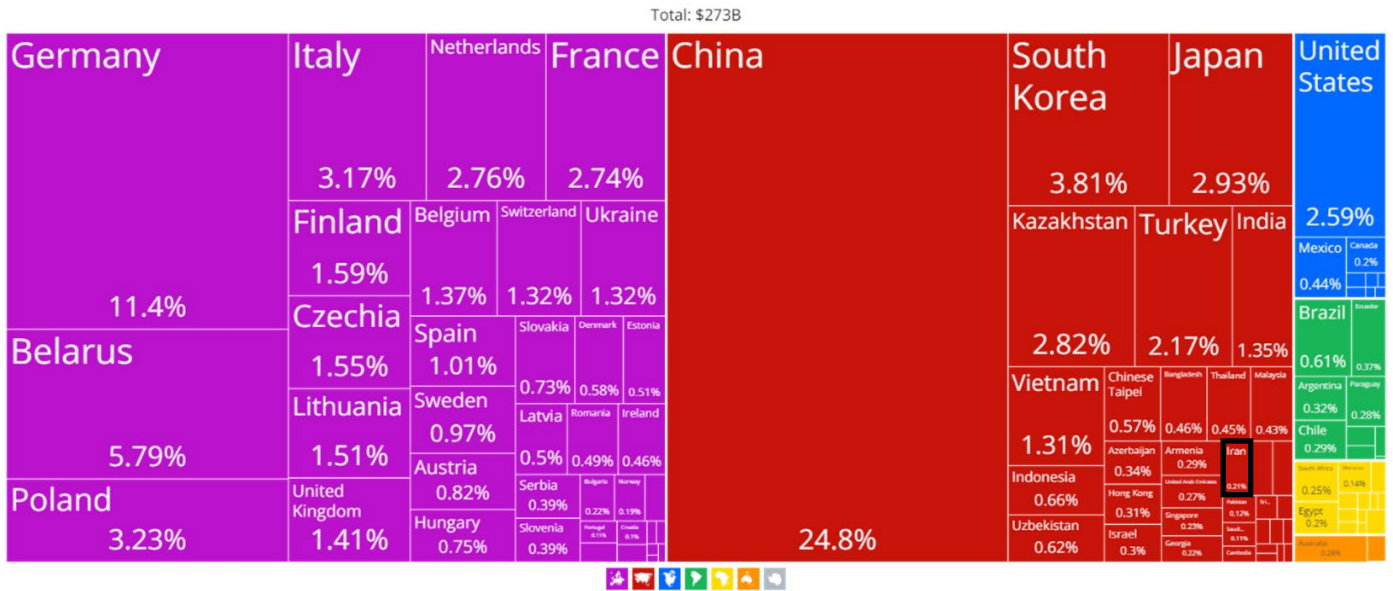
<sup>269</sup> OEC World database, accessed June 11, 2024.

<sup>270</sup> OEC World database, accessed June 12, 2024.

<sup>271</sup> "Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows."

<sup>272</sup> OEC World database, accessed June 12, 2024.

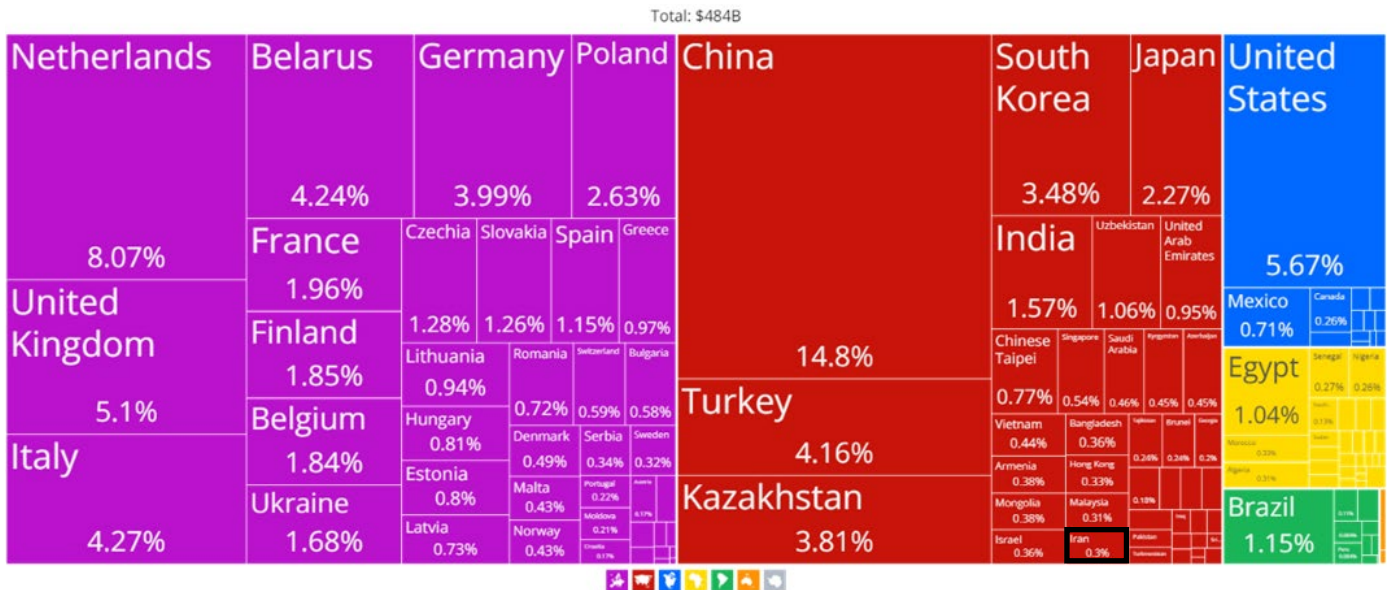
Figure 9. Snapshot of countries from which Russia imports goods (2021)



Source: "Where Does Russia Import From? (2021)," OEC World, accessed June 12, 2024, [https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree\\_map/hs92/import/rus/show/all/2021](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/rus/show/all/2021) with author additions.

Note: Iran's share of Russian imports is highlighted with the black box.

Figure 10. Snapshot of countries to which Russia exports goods (2021)



Source: "Where Does Russia Import From? (2021)," OEC World, accessed June 12, 2024, [https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree\\_map/hs92/import/rus/show/all/2021](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/rus/show/all/2021) with author additions.

Note: Iran's share of Russian imports is highlighted with the black box.

## Bilateral foreign direct investment

Although many have focused on the PRC's increased investment in Iran, Russian investment in Iran has recently outpaced PRC investment significantly. In 2022, Russia became Iran's largest investor, investing \$2.76 billion for projects in sectors such as industry, mining, and transport between March 2022 and March 2023.<sup>273</sup> This accounted for roughly two-thirds of total FDI in Iran for that year, dwarfing the PRC's \$131 million of investment during the same period, as illustrated in Figure 11.<sup>274</sup> It also dwarfs the amount from Afghanistan, Iran's second-largest foreign investor after Russia in 2022; during 2022, Afghanistan invested \$315 million, according to Iran's finance ministry.<sup>275</sup>

The war, however, is severely limiting Russia's ability to invest in Iran to the necessary degree, and Iran is only capable of "provid[ing] part of the solution" in filling the investment void Russia faces in the wake of Western backlash from the war.<sup>276</sup> In addition, issues such as the lack of sufficient marketing information, limited numbers of trade consultants, and Iran's limited exhibitions in Russia further constrain bilateral investment.<sup>277</sup> Nevertheless, businesses on both sides of the relationship continue to investigate opportunities to establish joint ventures in a variety of strategic sectors (e.g., mechanical engineering, aircraft construction, shipbuilding, railway transport, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals), as will be

discussed further in a later section, which marks a notable departure from the 2010s.<sup>278</sup>

## Loans

Loans are another indicator of the strength of the bilateral economic relationship. This section focuses on the loan flow from Russia to Iran, as there are no loans flowing in the opposite direction, at least according to open-source reporting.

### Russian loans to Iran

As with many other endeavors, Russian loans to Iran have been historically either inconsistent or outright terminated because of US sanctions. For example, in 2015, Russia promised to provide a \$5 billion state export loan to support a variety of joint projects in Iran. In February 2019, Russia backed out of one of the primary projects because of the threat of US sanctions.<sup>279</sup> Russia did, however, provide Iran with \$2.5 billion in loans in the summer of 2016, and in November 2019, Iran requested an additional \$2 billion in loans for a variety of infrastructure and energy projects.<sup>280</sup> Notably, the Russia-Ukraine war has not led to a recent increase in Russian loans to Iran.

## Strategic sectors

Russian engagement with Iran in strategic sectors is focused primarily on transportation infrastructure

<sup>273</sup> "Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows"; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*; Andrew England and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran's Finance Minister Highlights Surge in Investment from Russia," *Financial Times*, Mar. 23, 2023.

<sup>274</sup> "Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows"; England and Bozorgmehr, "Iran's Finance Minister Highlights Surge in Investment from Russia."

<sup>275</sup> "Russia Becomes Iran's Largest Foreign Investor: Iranian Finance Minister," Alarabuya News, Mar. 23, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/03/23/Russia-becomes-Iran-s-largest-foreign-investor-Iranian-finance-minister>.

<sup>276</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

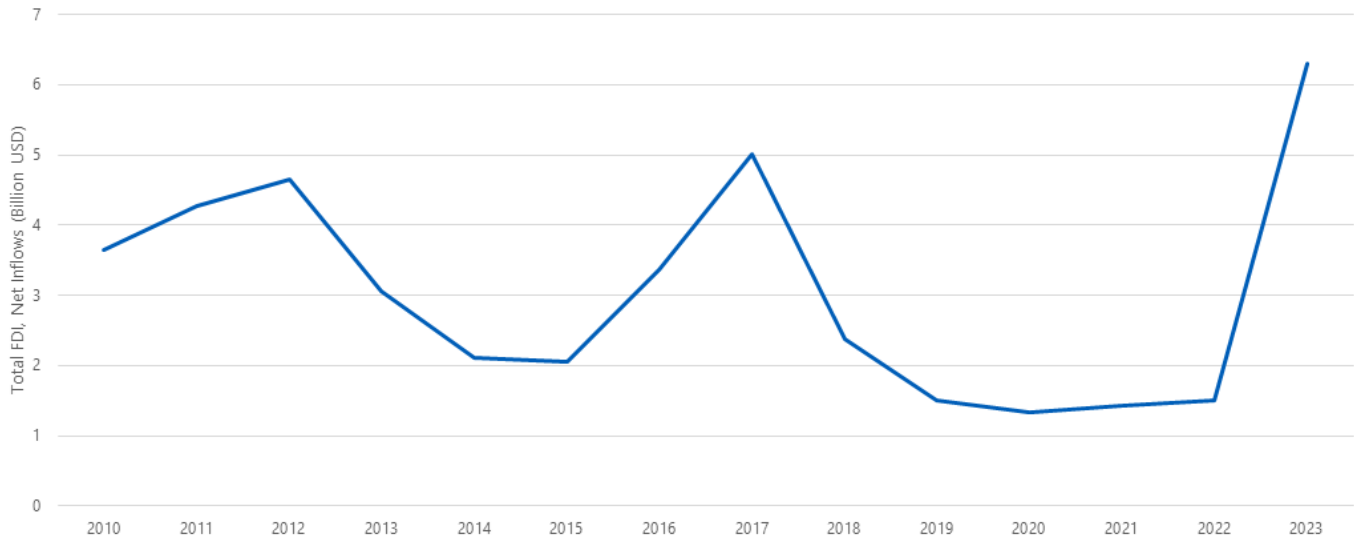
<sup>277</sup> *Strategies for the Development of Relations Between Iran and Russia*, Ensani, <http://ensani.ir/file/download/article/1638350414-10404-1400-22.pdf>.

<sup>278</sup> Alexander Maryasov, "Russia-Iran Relations Amid a New Geopolitical Reality," Valdai Discussion Club, Feb. 3, 2023.

<sup>279</sup> Nicole Grajewski, *Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Mar. 2020.

<sup>280</sup> Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership"; "Iran Asks Russia to Provide \$2 Billion Loan for Power Plants, Railroads: Russian Energy Minister," Reuters, Nov. 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-loan-idUSKBN1XX0CQ/>.

Figure 11. Total FDI in Iran, 2010–2022



Source: 2010–2022 data from “Foreign Direct Investment, Net Inflows (BoP, current US\$) – Iran, Islamic Rep,” World Bank, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?end=2022&locations=IR&start=2010>; 2023 data from Andrew England and Najmeh Bozorgmehr, “Iran’s Finance Minister Highlights Surge in Investment from Russia,” *Financial Times*, Mar. 23, 2023.

and the oil and gas industries. This marks a notable pivot from previous years when Russia did not prioritize investment in Iranian infrastructure because it was not viewed as a strategic necessity, and Russia previously saw Iran as a competitor for European energy markets. The following sections provide more detail on these new engagements while also highlighting limited interactions in other strategic sectors.

### Communications

In November 2022, the Russian deputy minister of digital development, communications, and mass media, along with several Russian business leaders, met with the Iranian minister of information and communications technology to express interest

in developing telecommunications infrastructure within Iran. This development, however, requires access to sanctioned goods, and until Russia can develop alternative domestic production capabilities, its telecommunications investment will be severely limited.<sup>281</sup>

More recently, in July 2023, the head of the Russian telecommunications regulator agency met with Iranian telecommunications officials. During the meeting, they discussed a wide range of issues, including coordination of national positions at the International Telecommunication Union, cooperation on frequency spectrums (which would allow for an improved quality of internet access), and opportunities to increase the Iranian

<sup>281</sup> “Russia Seeks to Develop Communications Infrastructure in Iran,” *Tehran Times*, Nov. 23, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/478986/Russia-seeks-to-develop-communications-infrastructure-in-iran>.

telecommunications presence in Russian markets.<sup>282</sup> In addition, the Russia-Iran free trade agreement that the Russian State Duma recently ratified also opens new opportunities for cooperation in the telecommunications industry.<sup>283</sup>

Although the extent and nature of this cooperation, as facilitated by the agreement, is yet to be seen, the emphasis on this sector within the agreement indicates its growing importance to both countries. These developments demonstrate that despite existing constraints on telecommunications infrastructure development, and despite Russia's overall limited role in the Iranian telecommunications sector, Russian and Iranian officials are still finding opportunities to boost engagement in this sphere.

### Infrastructure

Although most of Russia and Iran's current investment and engagement in the infrastructure realm focuses on transit and transportation, both countries have historically underinvested in regional transit infrastructure. Such underinvestment has largely been the result of US sanctions and the lack of prioritization from Russia.<sup>284</sup> The ongoing war in Ukraine, however, changed Russian and Iranian officials' calculus and approach toward this long-term investment. Russia now sees a greater imperative to invest in expanded transportation networks through Iran. Most critically, this would provide Russia with greater access to Asian markets, helping the country diversify its economy away from the West.<sup>285</sup> Expanded transportation infrastructure

in the region would also provide Russia with a key opportunity to strengthen relations with India through increased trade.<sup>286</sup>

Iran is motivated by similar goals. It is poised to benefit from serving as a transit hub, offering an alternative source of income for the country and the ability to increase regional influence by serving as an export outlet for trade traversing the landlocked Caspian region.<sup>287</sup>

Russia and Iran's increased interest in developing transportation infrastructure has manifested itself most concretely in a renewed focus on the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC is shown in wider geographic context in Figure 12.

Originally launched in 2000 as a joint effort between Russia, Iran, and India, the INSTC was designed to serve as a land, sea, and rail transportation corridor throughout the region and ultimately to connect trade as far north as the Arctic Sea. It was meant to include three primary parts.

First was the land-and-sea route, or the Trans-Caspian segment. It was designed to connect northern Russia to the Caspian Sea and southern Iran, supporting the movement of goods from internal markets to the Strait of Hormuz for shipment into the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Second was a rail-and-road land route, or the Western branch. This segment was designed to connect northern Russia via Azerbaijan and northern Iran, making this connection via a

<sup>282</sup> "Iranian, Russian Officials Discuss Internet Issues in Tehran," Tasnim News Agency, July 24, 2023, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/07/24/2930555/iranian-russian-officials-discuss-internet-issues-in-tehran>.

<sup>283</sup> "Russia State Duma Ratifies Launch of FTA Between EAEU, Iran."

<sup>284</sup> "Iran & Russia: New Land & Sea Networks," The Iran Primer, May 18, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/may/18/iran-russia-new-network-land-sea-routes>. For example, the reinstatement of US sanctions following the collapse of the JCPOA led Russia to withdraw billions invested in the electrification of the Garmsar-Inche Burun railway line.

<sup>285</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>286</sup> Yunis Sharifli, "Growing Russia-Iran Partnership Along the North-South Corridor," The Jamestown Foundation, June 7, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/growing-russia-iran-partnership-along-the-north-south-corridor/>.

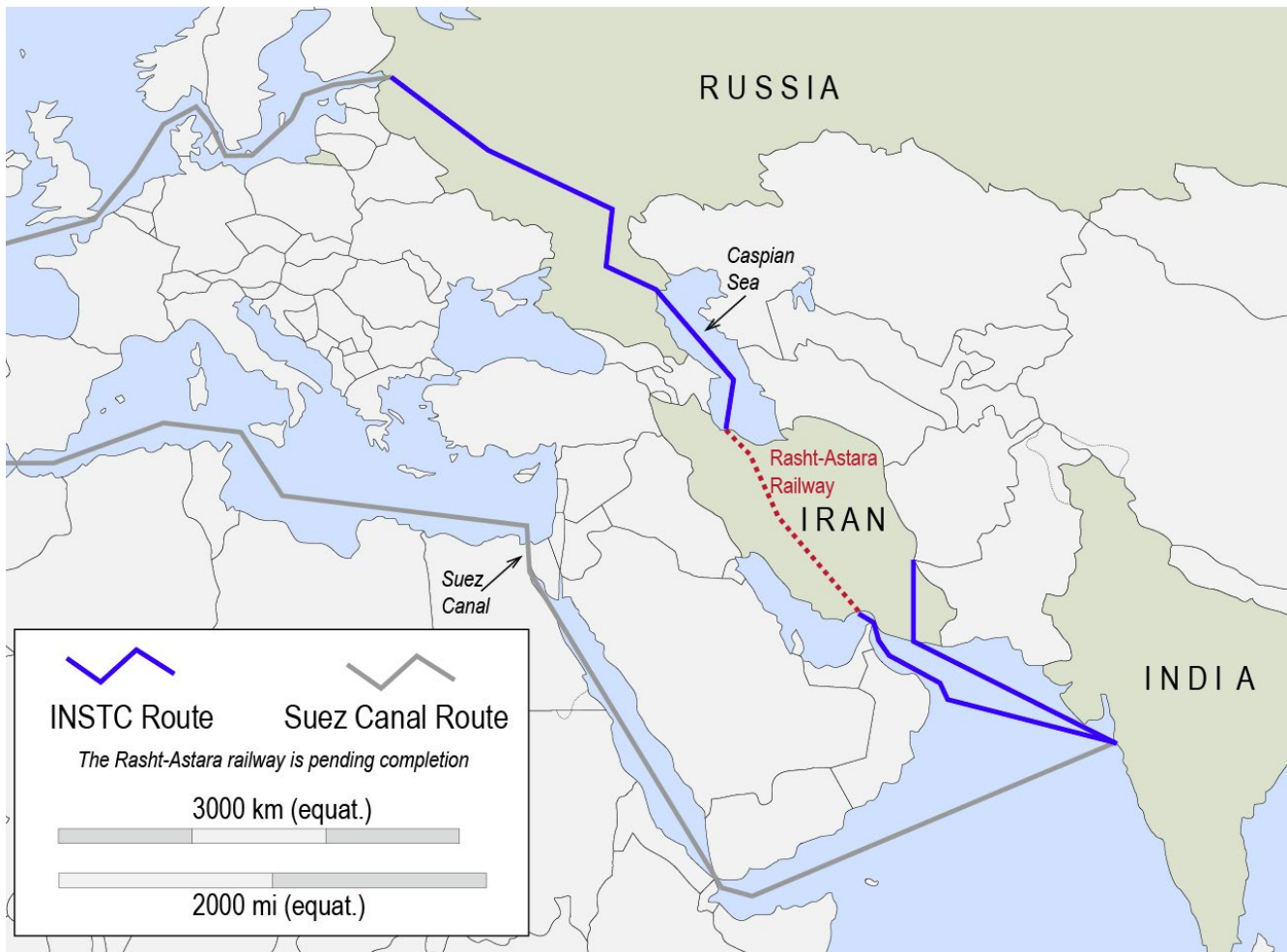
<sup>287</sup> Shaffer, "Iran's Policy Toward the Caucasus and Central Asia."



southern Iranian port on the Persian Gulf. Third was the newest rail-and-road route, or the Eastern branch. The Eastern branch was designed to link northern Russia and the Arctic Sea to the south via Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, once again moving goods for shipment into the Arabian Sea or the Indian Ocean.<sup>288</sup>

During the early 2000s, several other Central Asian countries joined the INSTC, and construction began to develop the necessary transportation infrastructure.<sup>289</sup> As with much of the other infrastructure investment during this period, it was far from consistent. Russia did not see the project as a strategic necessity and thus allocated investment funds in an “erratic” fashion.<sup>290</sup> US and

Figure 12. International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)



Source: CNA, derived from Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>288</sup> “Iran & Russia: New Land & Sea Networks.”

<sup>289</sup> “Iran & Russia: New Land & Sea Networks.”

<sup>290</sup> “Iran & Russia: New Land & Sea Networks.”

Western sanctions also deterred and limited outside investment in the Iranian segments of the project.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war, however, Russia and Iran have redirected their attention to the project in a focused fashion. Closing this transit gap would help both countries diversify their economies away from Europe and offer alternative pathways for trade.<sup>291</sup> In September 2022, Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan announced their recommitment to developing the INSTC and plan to increase the volume of cargo transiting the region from 8 million to 30 million tons by 2030.<sup>292</sup> Later, in May 2023, Russia advanced these plans by signing a \$1.7 billion agreement to pay for railway construction connecting Iran and Azerbaijan, a key part of the corridor commonly referred to as the Rasht-Astara railway. If the project proceeds according to plan, construction should be completed by 2027.<sup>293</sup>

Reports suggest that recent investments are already facilitating increased trade along the corridor. Successful completion of the Rasht-Astara railway would increase this further, as the project's completion would reduce transit times by half compared to transit via the Suez Canal.<sup>294</sup> It would also generate significant income for Iran. One estimate posits that associated transit fees could generate \$100 per ton of goods passing through Iran, a figure comparable to the cost of a barrel of oil.<sup>295</sup>

### Successful completion of the Rasht-Astara railway

<sup>291</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>292</sup> "Iran & Russia: New Land & Sea Networks"; Gris  and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>293</sup> "Iran & Russia: New Land & Sea Networks."

<sup>294</sup> Emil Avdaliani, "Russia-Iran Ties Are Transactional—And Warming Fast," *Moscow Times*, June 9, 2023.

<sup>295</sup> Sharifli, "Growing Russia-Iran Partnership Along the North-South Corridor"; "Iran and Russia: Gyration Trade Grows"; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>296</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>297</sup> Sharifli, "Growing Russia-Iran Partnership Along the North-South Corridor."

<sup>298</sup> Nima Khorrami, "INSTC: Pipeline Dream or a Counterweight to Western Sanctions and China's BRI?," *The Diplomat*, June 21, 2023, <http://thediplomat.com/2023/06/instc-pipeline-dream-or-a-counterweight-to-western-sanctions-and-chinas-bri>.

<sup>299</sup> Umud Shokri, "North-South Transport Corridor: Iran-Russia New Railway to Circumvent Western Pressure," Gulf International Forum, accessed June 8, 2024, <http://gulifif.org/north-south-transport-corridor-iran-russia-new-railway-to-circumvent-western-pressure>.

project, however, is not guaranteed. The Russian-backed Eurasian Development Bank estimates that completion of the corridor will require an additional \$26 billion in investment—a high figure for a country already facing strains on revenue from the war.<sup>296</sup> In addition, technical differences between Iran and Russia on hard infrastructure (such as the size of track gauges), the absence of a single window system for customs control, and the lack of harmonization of procedures will complicate completion of the project.<sup>297</sup>

There are also several strategic and security considerations at play. Other countries in the region may view the transit corridor as a threat to their economic interests. The PRC, for example, may view it as a competitor to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should INSTC trade take off. Depending on the nature of China's evolving relations in the region, this could affect Russia, Iran, or India's willingness to advance the network as an alternative to the BRI.<sup>298</sup> Similarly, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and T rkiye may see the corridor as a competitor to their own transit networks. This could motivate them to impose restrictions on routes transiting their territory or push for higher transit fees.

Critically, the INSTC also passes through areas vulnerable to security threats, such as those with a high risk of terrorism. This could affect insurance costs and the economic viability of this route as an alternative to transit via the Suez Canal.<sup>299</sup> Thus,

although the INSTC offers several economic and strategic benefits for Iran and Russia, success is far from guaranteed given the range of technical, economic, and strategic challenges the countries face in advancing its development.

### Oil and gas

Traditionally, Russia and Iran have been competitors in oil and gas markets—specifically over who would provide gas to Europe. Russia, as the stronger and more powerful partner in the relationship, actively worked to block Iran from becoming an alternative supplier of energy for Europe. Russian officials blocked both Iranian projects that would have allowed Iranian energy to reach the continent and gas projects in other Central Asian countries that would have transited through Iran en route to Europe.<sup>300</sup>

The collapse of the JCPOA and the ongoing war in Ukraine are changing Russia's calculus. Moscow is no longer concerned about Iranian competition for European markets.<sup>301</sup> The two countries are pivoting from competitors to collaborators, as evidenced by energy swap deals and increased Russian investment in Iran's energy sector.<sup>302</sup>

This investment is taking several forms. For example, Lukoil, Russia's largely privately owned oil company, is working to take on a bigger role in Iran's oil and gas sector.<sup>303</sup> In addition, in July 2022—a few months after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war—Gazprom announced plans to invest \$40 billion in the Iranian energy sector. This included development of Iranian oil

and gas fields and the construction of gas pipelines.<sup>304</sup>

The investment would also include efforts to upgrade existing infrastructure within Iran's oil and gas industry. This would include \$10 billion of investment for the North Pars gas field, which could deliver gas as early as 2026. Russia had previously invested in this project but pulled out following the reinstatement of sanctions by the Trump administration in 2018.<sup>305</sup> Although previous Russian investments have been unpredictable, many observers expect that the changing geopolitical realities and increased scientific and technological cooperation will ensure continued Russia-Iran cooperation in the oil and gas sector.<sup>306</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia continues to maintain the upper hand in energy engagement. The recently signed 20-year deal between the two countries grants Russia the right of first extraction from the Caspian Sea. In addition, the agreement formalized the price for all manufactured items traded between the two countries—including energy hardware—and these rates heavily favor Moscow.<sup>307</sup> Such developments indicate that despite the changing nature of energy engagement between the two countries, Russia continues to act as the senior partner in the relationship.

### Aerospace

Russia and Iran have attempted to cooperate in civilian aerospace for several years. The Russian aerospace industry, for example, is looking for new export markets, and Iran has been interested in purchasing Russian jets. In 2018, Iran announced

<sup>300</sup> Vatanka and Divsallar, *Can the West Stop Russia-Iran Convergence?*; Shaffer, "Iran's Policy Toward the Caucasus and Central Asia."

<sup>301</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>302</sup> Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership"; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>303</sup> Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership."

<sup>304</sup> Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>305</sup> Vatanka and Divsallar, *Can the West Stop Russia-Iran Convergence?*

<sup>306</sup> Maryasov, "Russia-Iran Relations amid a New Geopolitical Reality"; Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*.

<sup>307</sup> Simon Watkins, "Russia and Iran Finalize 20-Year Deal That Will Change the Middle East Forever," OilPrice.com, Jan. 22, 2024, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/Russia-And-Iran-Finalize-20-Year-Deal-That-Will-Change-The-Middle-East-Forever.html>.

plans to purchase 40 Sukhoi Superjets from Russia for \$2 billion, but the deal collapsed because of US sanctions.<sup>308</sup>

Most of the recent aerospace cooperation, however, has been in the drone industry. In early 2023, Russia and Iran agreed to build a joint factory in Russia capable of producing Iranian-designed drones as part of a \$1 billion deal. To illustrate their commitment to this vision, an Iranian delegation—including the head of the IRGC Aerospace Force Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization and the chief executive of the Qods Aviation Industry—visited the future factory site.<sup>309</sup>

Iran is also providing key materials for the factory's construction. US estimates anticipated that the factory would be operational by early 2024 and that it would allow Russia to produce "orders of magnitude" more drones than previous Iranian deliveries allowed, although this has not been confirmed.<sup>310</sup> To date, this appears to be the only instance of joint drone production, although the outcome of the war in Ukraine could influence the long-term trajectory of this relationship. (See The

Military Relationship section for more information about Russia-Iran engagement over drones.)

## Nuclear energy

Traditionally, work in the nuclear energy space has been an area of friction.<sup>311</sup> But more recently, Russia has increased its cooperation with Iranian civilian nuclear energy use in the context of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant. In June 2017, Rosatom, a Russian company, signed a contract to deliver reserve fuel for the plant, highlighting continued nuclear cooperation between the two countries.<sup>312</sup> Russia is also supporting the construction of two additional reactors at Bushehr.<sup>313</sup> In 2022, the Iranian economy minister stated in an interview with a Russian media outlet that Iran is ready to expand cooperation with Russia in the development of peaceful nuclear energy.<sup>314</sup> What this cooperation looks like in practice is yet to be seen. It could involve covert or open technology transfers and assistance as well as diplomatic cover as Iran advances its programs.<sup>315</sup> For more information about Russia-Iran nuclear collaboration, see The Military Relationship section.

<sup>308</sup> Therme, "The Russia-Iran Partnership in a Multipolar World"; Clement Charpentreau, "Russia Signs Deal with Iran in Bid to Boost Aircraft Sales," Aerotime Hub, Sept. 7, 2021, <https://www.aerotime.aero/articles/28820-russia-signs-deal-with-iran-in-bid-to-boost-aircraft-sales>; Dominic Dudley, "Russia Turns To Iran For Assistance With Aviation Sanctions, But Can It Do Much To Help?," *Forbes*, Mar. 23, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2022/03/23/russia-turns-to-iran-for-assistance-with-aviation-sanctions-but-can-it-do-much-to-help/?sh=1b6232204ad9>; Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership."

<sup>309</sup> Dion Nissenbaum and Warren P. Strobel, "Moscow, Tehran Advance Plans for Iranian-Designed Drone Facility in Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 5, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/moscow-tehran-advance-plans-for-iranian-designed-drone-facility-in-russia-11675609087>.

<sup>310</sup> Geranmayeh and Grajewski, *Alone Together*; Julian E. Barnes and Christoph Koettl, "A Drone Factory That Iran Is Helping Russia Build Could Be Operational Next Year, the U.S. Says," *New York Times*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/09/world/europe/iran-russia-drone-factory.html>.

<sup>311</sup> Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>312</sup> Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP)," James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, <https://www.nti.org/education-center/facilities/bushehr-nuclear-power-plant-bnpp/>.

<sup>313</sup> Louis Dugit-Gros et al., "After Ukraine: Russia's Potential Military and Nuclear Compensation to Iran," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Jan. 20, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-russias-potential-military-and-nuclear-compensation-iran>.

<sup>314</sup> "Iran Minister Tells RIA Interested in Developing 'Peaceful' Nuclear Energy with Russia," Reuters, Mar. 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-iran-nuclear-idUSL4N35TORG/>.

<sup>315</sup> Dugit-Gros et al., "After Ukraine."

## Conclusions

When assessing the changing Russia-Iran economic relationship, there are two key questions to consider. First, do the changes indicate that Moscow and Tehran are invested in a long-term vision of economic cooperation? Based on the assessment of the economic indicators, this appears to be the case. Both countries have strategic interests in bolstering economic ties. Iran needs access to new markets and would benefit greatly from technical knowledge transfers and increased commercial cooperation. Russia would benefit from Iranian insights on sanctions evasion and would derive many benefits for its ongoing war in Ukraine.<sup>316</sup>

Several indicators suggest the two countries are committed to this long-term vision. On the public-facing side, Iran is increasingly aligning with Russian and PRC international organizations, making it harder for Iran to do an about-face and reengage with Western institutions if geopolitical conditions should permit. Less in the public eye, the two countries' increasing banking and transit ties suggest Russian and Iranian leaders are focused on making long-term cooperation possible. These changes do not produce many immediate results and are more oriented toward smoothing long-term economic engagement. Such developments suggest, however, that Russia and Iran are committed to a long-term vision of economic cooperation.

Second, can this long-term vision be effective? How much can the bilateral economic relationship reasonably grow? Observers note several constraints

despite Moscow and Tehran's interest in building bilateral economic ties. For example, Western sanctions and international ostracization still have the power to influence bilateral economic development.<sup>317</sup> Economic isolation leaves the two countries dependent on a limited set of commercial networks, financial institutions, and foreign markets. This constrained ecosystem, coupled with similarities in their export products, will likely cause competition in the relationship given the small number of available markets.<sup>318</sup>

In addition, it remains to be seen to what extent economic cooperation continues after the war in Ukraine ends. Depending on the nature of the conflict's end, existing efforts to bolster ties could be significantly disrupted, and at least in their present form, the two economies are largely noncomplementary.<sup>319</sup> On the other hand, the major reorientation of Russia's economic ties toward the Asia-Pacific region and the Global South in light of the war in Ukraine are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon, giving further impetus to preserving and expanding economic relations with Iran.

Ultimately, the war in Ukraine has fundamentally altered the traditional trajectory of Russia-Iran economic relations. The countries are working together in an unprecedented fashion and are laying the groundwork for longer term cooperation. Nevertheless, the fundamental lack of compatibility between the two economies and the broader geopolitical dynamics could constrain Russian and Iranian abilities to make the bilateral economic relationship last for decades to come.

<sup>316</sup> Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>317</sup> Droin and Grajewski, "Iran, Russia, and the Challenges of 'Inter-Pariah Solidarity.'"

<sup>318</sup> Grisé and Evans, *The Drivers of and Outlook for Russia-Iran Cooperation*.

<sup>319</sup> "The Relations Between Iran and Russia Do Not Fit in a Strategic Format," Khabar Online, <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1719044>.

# KEY INSIGHTS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has found overall that the Russia-Iran relationship has been improving across all primary aspects of national power—political, military, and economic—although there remains considerable variation across these dimensions, at least given the operationalization of the indicators used here. Nevertheless, in almost all cases, the relationship has been improving at least to some degree. In many cases, it has indeed been deepening or otherwise becoming “thicker,” with increased ties, touch points, and interactions over time, across issue areas, and between institutions. This section concludes the report with a few selected key insights for researchers and implications for policy-makers in light of the report’s findings.

## Insights for researchers

### *Political relationship insights*

The Russia-Iran political relationship has been on a path toward closer alignment since the early 2010s and has deepened considerably since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. Most critically, there has been a notable increase in direct leader engagements across a wide range of official positions and on a large variety of topics, as well as an uptick in officially announced MOUs and other public documents signed between the two states.

Where the relationship continues to lag—in agreeing to a comprehensive security cooperation agreement, let alone full defensive alliance—leaders on both sides continued to signal their interest in at least “talking about talking” or otherwise continuing to engage in a positive and

constructive direction. Although a defensive alliance is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to imagine, more curtailed but productive forms of continued high-level engagement and diplomatic alignment remain perfectly plausible. A comprehensive security cooperation agreement, even if its specific wording may be somewhat vague and open to multiple interpretations, is increasingly likely to be unveiled in the near to medium term.

Shifting a geopolitical relationship in official terms from one of partial to more robust cooperation is often a difficult objective regardless of the states involved. Thus, it is important to capture both official and unofficial, or contextual, changes in the way key government actors perceive the relationship. In the Russia-Iran case, it is clear that Russia is more interested in sustained relations than it has been in the past. This is evident not only in the frequency of meetings and new public agreements but also in the way Russian political elites talk about Russia in the world and Russia and Iran’s mutual interests.

Similarly, while rhetoric does not determine formal alliance, it does provide a broader contextual environment within which diplomatic and political actors interact, engage, and learn from each other. Aligned rhetoric can further a sense of mutual interest and trust. In this way, the growth in a common supply of civilizationist and anti-Western ideological production and discourse in both countries makes it easier for elites to feel like they are “speaking the same language” and understanding each other’s frames of reference. It no longer reads as strange to hear of alignment between Iranian and Russian politicians, although considerable cultural distance still exists.

Indeed, the particular nature of the civilizationist approach to international politics that Russian elites have been aggressively pushing in recent years is actually helpful, as it justifies general strategic alignment (against the West, in favor of a set of traditional values) that nevertheless is expected to vary across said civilizations. In this way, there is no requirement that Russians must be like Iranians (and vice versa) in all ways, or that Shia Islamic rhetoric must cohere in detail with Russian Orthodoxy or Russia's legacy of conservative, post-Soviet secularism within its security services, for example. Similarity at that level of specificity is not necessary to nevertheless frame the relationship as complementary and legible by both sides vis-à-vis the West.

### *Military relationship insights*

Russia-Iran relations display a high level of military diplomacy, increased arms sales (including coproduction), and dark port calls to carry out the arms transfers. These are all signs of a notable improvement in the military dimension of the relationship. However, there are limits to Russia's basing access in Iran, and their combined operations in Syria paper over different interests. Although we saw greater cooperation in logistics, training, and intelligence sharing, these were mission-specific and not indicative of deeper coordination in these areas.

These findings emphasize the need to put the high level of arms sales and military diplomacy in perspective and factor in the political motivations of the conservative leadership in Iran, the IRGC, and the Putin regime in portraying a closer partnership than what may actually exist. In Iran, political divisions between the conservative leaders in power and moderates in society as well as between the IRGC aligned with the conservatives and the Iranian military have set limits to some aspects of Russia-Iran military cooperation due to sovereignty concerns and residual mistrust, especially with regard to basing.

Even arms sales have proven somewhat controversial in Iran, which has denied selling drones to Russia, despite clear and convincing evidence to the contrary. Iran has also sought to portray itself as neutral on Russia's war in Ukraine. Economic factors and logistical issues complicate their arms trade, and Iran has complained repeatedly about the quality of Russian weapons. Training needs are viewed as necessary to resolve difficulties in interoperability of weapons systems rather than evidence of greater jointness. Combined operations in Syria reveal that Iran and Russia are motivated by sometimes overlapping, but not identical, interests. Military exercises, which are increasingly staged with China, have a political purpose in creating an impression of an axis that may not exist because of the different interests among the three states and the roles they are choosing to play in the Middle East.

### *Economic relationship insights*

Traditionally, economic engagement has been a point of tension within the Russia-Iran bilateral relationship. Strategic-level goals often did not overlap, and the threat and effect of US sanctions in the context of the JCPOA often meant Russian investment in Iran was erratic and inconsistent. As a result, Russia never developed a consistent economic presence in Iranian markets. Even higher levels of political and military coordination during the Syrian conflict never translated into sustained economic engagement. The threat of US sanctions was too prohibitive, and the two countries' economic goals were often in competition with each other.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, has fundamentally altered each country's strategic calculus. Since 2022, Russia and Iran have pivoted from market competitors to collaborators, and their strategic-level economic goals now move towards greater overlap. Both countries need access to new markets, a way to break out of international isolation, and sanctions relief.

The war has also furthered and incentivized Russia's attempt at a general economic pivot to Asia. Russia is interested in expanding into Asian markets and wants closer collaboration with China and the broader Global South. Iran is integral to this vision. Iranian geography means that the country has a key role to play in connecting internal Russian markets with India and regional sea routes. In this way, Iran could be a key component of the pivot to Asia, via the South-North transit route, in addition to the rising potential for a sustained energy partnership. These factors all come together to generate strong incentives for deeper collaboration across both short-term and long-term considerations, and both Russia and Iran are investing heavily in the infrastructure and systems needed to make these goals a reality.

However, the movement toward economic alignment and potential partnership does not mean the two countries' economies are suddenly compatible and ready to fully integrate. Russia and Iran still produce many of the same goods, and over time, they are still likely to encounter competition for export markets. In addition, existing limitations in transit and banking infrastructure are likely to continue acting as a constraint to deeper collaboration, particularly in the short term.

## Implications for policy-makers

### *Political implications*

- Although mistrust continues to exist in some areas, it is unlikely that there will be a sharp break between Russia and Iran in the short to medium term. As long as the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the pressing demand by the Russian military for Iranian munitions and drones will ensure that Russia's political leadership keeps relations with Iran on track. It should be assumed that Russia and Iran

will continue to find a compelling logic in maintaining good relations, even if only for purely instrumental reasons.

- The most important stumbling block for further political alignment remains the complicated geopolitical environment of the Middle East. Russia must continue to balance its interest in deepening the Russia-Iran relationship with managing stable relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. This is made more complicated because of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, although signs suggest that Russian elites have grown more comfortable with not taking a fully pro-Israel position in light of their broader turn toward supporting the Global South—what they term rhetorically the “world majority.” Indeed, increasingly they have taken a neutral or even anti-Israel position, which provides some enabling conditions for further easing the constraints on Russia-Iran relations that the complicated politics in the Middle East have tended to produce.
- The Russia-Iran relationship is a bilateral dynamic nested in a wider regional context of anti-Western alignment, most notably with regard to China. Nevertheless, political engagement between Russia and Iran does not necessarily mean trilateral engagement or coordination, and policy-makers should be wary of assuming a united axis across these countries. Rather, the Eurasian international environment must be understood as a series of interlocking but separate bilateral relationships, with aligned interests in broad terms, and with relevant intergovernmental fora such as the SCO that aim to provide a vision of geopolitical cohesion.



### *Military implications*

- Deepening military relations between Russia and Iran contribute to Russia's ability to sustain its war effort in Ukraine. Conversely, the Russia-Ukraine war has provided a new impetus for Russia-Iran military cooperation at a time when both countries face international sanctions and are involved in military conflicts in the Middle East. Dialogue between top officials in the two countries and the removal of UN sanctions on conventional arms transfers to Iran facilitate this deepening cooperation, which has featured arms sales, carried out via dark port calls on the Caspian Sea, and the coproduction of drones in Russia.
- Russian arms transfers to Iran affect the balance of power in the Middle East, but combined operations in Syria reveal that Iran and Russia are motivated by sometimes overlapping but not identical interests. This is also true of Iranian arms transfers to Russia for the war in Ukraine, which supports the anti-Western line of the current Iranian leadership but which may exacerbate social divisions within the country.
- Iran and Russia have held occasional bilateral military exercises for more than a decade. Multilateral military exercises—increasingly staged with China—have been occurring since 2019. Although these exercises provide an appearance of trilateralism, they have limited operational value and their purpose is largely political—to create an impression of an axis that may not exist—as a result of the different interests among the three states and the roles they choose to play in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that both sides will likely remain interested in

expanding their joint exercise repertoire over the short to medium term.

- Domestic politics in Iran potentially serve as a major constraint on the deepening partnership with Russia, as there is evidence of wariness about this course of action, especially among moderates, who continue to be sidelined politically. In the short and even medium term, however, there is little chance of any leadership change in either country that would lead to a fundamental shift in political direction. Such an outcome in the future would naturally have a significant effect on the future trajectory of Russia-Iran military relations.

### *Economic implications*

- The threat of US sanctions on countries found to be violating the terms of the JCPOA was traditionally a deterrent to deeper Russian economic engagement with Iran. Since 2022 and the onslaught of US and Western sanctions on Russia, this no longer applies. US economic statecraft no longer deters Russian officials or Russian businesses from investing in and engaging with the Iranian economy; many Russians already face severe sanctions and see little left to fear.
- China has an important role to play in the future of Russia-Iran relations; it can either serve as a further enabling factor or a constraint on deeper economic relations. At present, China fears the global economic fallout of enabling the Russia-Iran economic relationship. If, however, conditions change and China is no longer deterred by the threat of secondary sanctions and tarnishing its global image, it may provide some of the investment and banking infrastructure

needed to advance the Russia-Iran economic relationship even further. However, relations between Iran and China are also not trouble free and will set limits to any incipient trilateral efforts with Russia and Iran.

- Although Russia historically provided Iran with many sought-after industrial goods, the relationship has since flipped or at least begun to balance out. Iran now provides Russia with vital industrial goods that help Russia address wartime constraints. Such support helps prolong Russia's ability to wage war in Ukraine.
- Closer Russia-Iran economic relations have resulted in Iran instructing Russian officials on how to evade sanctions. This type of collaboration can affect the long-term viability of the US and Western sanctions regime.

### Recommendations

- The paucity of reliable data documenting the implementation of officially announced agreements, MOUs, and other public examples of Russian-Iranian alignment is a major impediment to understanding the depth of the relationship and identifying actual concrete changes. More investment in tracking institutional cooperation, grant programs, educational collaborations, economic, trade, production, and other figures is needed—especially if this line of effort can be brought into the open-source.
- The US and its partners should increase security cooperation with Caspian littoral states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan) when possible. This should be viewed as a means to try and increase sea-based capacity for these states, which

in turn will enable greater potential to disrupt or interdict illicit arms shipments between Russia and Iran in the future. Technology transfers and training exchanges to increase capacity may also be targeted at the drug trade and at improving the capabilities of coast guards to encourage interest from these littoral states. In doing so, US European Command and US Central Command should work on establishing joint working groups focused on the Caspian littoral specifically to coordinate efforts and ensure unified purpose.

- Outreach, incentives, and even threats to third-party countries may be a way to constrain the Russia-Iran relationship. For example, India, Türkiye, and Central Asian countries have a key role to play in expanding transit infrastructure, facilitating energy flows, and absorbing Russia's redirected trade toward the East. Encouraging transport patterns that bypass or take traffic away from Russian-Iranian corridors will weaken the economic value of investments in such infrastructure. Investment in the Middle Corridor project is one such example.
- Russia and Iran have traditionally competed for similar markets. Their pivot to the East does not suddenly remedy this issue. Maintaining a certain degree of competitiveness in regional markets (either from the United States itself or US allies in the region) may help recreate and foster some of the natural economic tension between Russia and Iran.
- Because the capacity to influence the Russia-Iran relationship is limited from the outside, efforts should be made to hinder

the deepening and institutionalization of ties wherever possible. Diplomatic efforts should be made to obstruct action on integrating Iran into the CSTO, SCO, and BRICS at any major level and to slow down bureaucratic processes of accession and cooperation wherever possible. This would take the form of convincing other member-states to request extended procedures, meetings, and other forms of diplomatic and intergovernmental obstruction—a difficult and delicate diplomatic task, but with potentially greater influence than targeting symbolic UN voting, for example. Using Western diplomatic and political influence to slow down and gum up internal processes within these intergovernmental organizations may be effective in Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan for the CSTO; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan for the SCO; and Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates for BRICS.

- US and Western policy-makers should be aware of how their economic statecraft can backfire. Continued sanctions pressure has further pulled the Russian and Iranian economies closer together and has

encouraged other countries around the world to engage in de-dollarization efforts. Although sanctions alone are not the sole causal factor, the use of sanctions against adversaries in the future must be made with an eye to how they change the cost-benefit calculation that can shift bilateral and regional economic patterns.

- Western messaging narratives targeted at both elites and populations in the Global South must take care to engage with and be actively sensitive to local preferences on social, cultural, and sovereignty-oriented issues. A policy of positively using the language of civilizationist paradigms but reframed in favor of Western support for cultural diversity, norms of tolerance, and pluralism may act as more effective counterprogramming than a policy that directly rejects or denies Russian and Iranian narratives of US cultural hegemony and imperialism. Insofar as it is possible to divorce Western messaging narratives from universalism (especially elements perceived as internally destabilizing or culturally alien), this should be attempted in favor of recrafting civilizationist impulses and frameworks to work for US interests.

# APPENDIX A: INDICATOR METRICS

This section provides more methodological detail to the indicators and the metrics used to assess their rating. Table 7 displays all metrics for political relationship dimension indicators, Table 8 does

so for military relationship dimension indicators, and Table 9 does so for economic relationship dimension indicators.

Table 7. Metrics for political relationship dimension indicators

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Policy coordination mechanisms	Treaties	<p><b>High:</b> Security treaty signed.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Treaty under negotiation.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> No treaty under negotiation.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, qualitative assessment suggests treaty activity has increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, qualitative assessment suggests treaty activity has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, qualitative assessment suggests treaty activity has decreased.</p>
	Memoranda of understanding	<p><b>High:</b> Significant increase in number of MOUs.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Same or similar number of MOUs signed per year.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Fewer number of MOUs signed per year.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, MOU quantity has increased or content is qualitatively substantial.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, MOU quantity or content has remained constant or unchanged.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, MOU quantity or substantial content has decreased.</p>
	Security pact	<p><b>High:</b> Mutual parties to a bilateral or multilateral security pact.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Bilateral or multilateral security pact under negotiation.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Not members of a mutual security pact.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, qualitative assessment of security pact suggests increase or deepening.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, qualitative assessment of security pact suggests no change.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, qualitative assessment of security pact suggests weakening or lessening.</p>

Table 7. Metrics for political relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
<b>Public diplomacy</b>	<b>Rhetorical alignment</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Notable substantive alignment in word choice, ideational coherence, and ideological compatibility across speeches by key state actors assessed qualitatively.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Some substantive alignment in word choice, ideational coherence, and ideological compatibility across speeches by key state actors assessed qualitatively.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Notable nonalignment or incompatibility in word choice, ideational coherence, and ideological compatibility across speeches by key state actors assessed qualitatively.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, rhetorical alignment has increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, rhetorical alignment has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, rhetorical alignment has decreased.</p>
	<b>Joint statements</b>	<p><b>High:</b> More than 50 joint statements between the two states per year on average among key officials, including diplomatic officers.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Between 25 and 50 joint statements between the two states per year on average among key officials, including diplomatic officers.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Fewer than 25 joint statements between the two states per year on average among key officials, including diplomatic officers.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, the number of joint statements has increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, the number of joint statements has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, the number of joint statements has decreased.</p>
<b>Interactive engagements</b>	<b>Key leader engagements</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Regular (at least annual) in-person meetings by senior political leadership (presidents, Iranian Supreme Leader, Russian prime minister, foreign affairs ministers) within three most recent years. Third-party locations included.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> At least one meeting by senior political leadership with counterparts within three most recent years.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Irregular meetings by senior political leadership (at least one in past five years).</p> <p><b>Negligible:</b> No meetings by senior political leadership in past five years.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, key leader engagements have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, key leader engagements have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, key leader engagements have decreased.</p>

Source: CNA.

Table 8. Metrics for military relationship dimension indicators

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Military diplomacy	Key leader engagements	<p><b>High:</b> Regular (at least annual) in-person meetings by senior military leadership (minister of defense or armed forces general staff chief) within three most recent years. Third-party locations included.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> At least one meeting by senior military leadership with counterparts within three most recent years.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Irregular meetings by senior military leadership (at least one in past five years).</p> <p><b>Negligible:</b> No meetings by senior military leadership in past five years.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, key leader engagements have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, key leader engagements have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, key leader engagements have decreased.</p>
	Naval port calls	<p><b>High:</b> Regular (at least annual) port calls by either country's naval forces within past three years.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> At least one port call by either country's naval forces within past three years.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Irregular port calls (at least one in past five years).</p> <p><b>Negligible:</b> No port calls for five years or more.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, naval port calls have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, naval port calls have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, naval port calls have decreased.</p>
Military cooperation	Joint or coordinated operations	<p><b>High:</b> Multiple joint bilateral or multilateral operations between military or security services, or private military contractors, within past five years.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Joint bilateral or multilateral operations between military or security services, or private military contractors, within past five years.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> No joint operations within past five years.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, joint or coordinated operations have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, joint or coordinated operations have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, joint or coordinated operations have decreased.</p>

Table 8. Metrics for military relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Technical cooperation	Military sales (Russia)	<p><b>High:</b> Trend indicator value (TIV: SIPRI) of arms imports from Iran as a percentage of total TIV of arms imports averaged across five years &gt;25% as well as qualitative assessment.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> TIV: SIPRI of arms imports from Iran as a percentage of total TIV of arms imports averaged across five years between 5%–25% as well as qualitative assessment.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> TIV: SIPRI of arms imports from Iran as a percentage of total TIV of arms imports averaged across five years between 1%–5% as well as qualitative assessment.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, military sales have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, military sales have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, military sales have decreased.</p>
	Military sales (Iran)	<p><b>High:</b> TIV: SIPRI of arms imports from Russia as a percentage of total TIV of arms imports averaged across five years &gt;25% as well as qualitative</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> TIV: SIPRI of arms imports from Iran as a percentage of total TIV of arms imports averaged across five years between 5%–25% as well as qualitative assessment.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> TIV: SIPRI of arms imports from Iran as a percentage of total TIV of arms imports averaged across five years between 1%–5% as well as qualitative assessment.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, military sales have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, military sales have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, military sales have decreased.</p>

Table 8. Metrics for military relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
	<b>Technology sharing, assistance</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Extensive, current tech sharing and assistance across multiple sectors or warfare areas.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Extensive, current tech sharing in one sector or warfare area.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Intermittent tech sharing and assistance within past five years.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, tech sharing has increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, tech sharing has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, tech sharing has decreased.</p>
	<b>Joint or licensed production</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Current joint or licensed production across multiple sectors or warfare areas.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Current joint or licensed production in one sector or warfare area.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Intermittent joint or licensed production within past five years. <b>Negligible:</b> No joint or licensed production for at least five years.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, joint or licensed production has increased</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, joint or licensed production has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, joint or licensed production has decreased.</p>
	<b>Dark port calls</b>	<p><b>High:</b> More than 20 dark port calls within a year.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> 5–20 dark port calls within a year.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Fewer than five dark port calls.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, dark port calls have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, dark port calls have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, dark port calls have decreased.</p>



Table 8. Metrics for military relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Basing and access	Bases, airfields, ports, and facilities	<p><b>High:</b> Current Russian or Iranian staffed or operated bases, airfields, ports, or military facilities in opposite country.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Talks or nonpermanent Russian or Iranian staffed or operated bases, airfields, ports, or military facilities in opposite country.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> No current Russian or Iranian staffed or operated bases, airfields, ports, or military facilities in opposite country.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, basing rights have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, basing rights have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, basing rights have been rescinded.</p>
	Access, basing, overflight, logistics agreements	<p><b>High:</b> Agreements for Russia or Iran to base military units or war matériel in opposite country for contingencies or to access the country's territory (including air- and waterspace) for the purpose of transit.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Partial or preliminary agreements for Russia or Iran to base military units or war matériel in opposite country for contingencies or to access the country's territory.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> No access, basing, or logistics agreements.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, basing agreements dynamics have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, basing agreement dynamics have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, basing agreements have decreased or been rescinded.</p>

Table 8. Metrics for military relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Exercises and training	Bilateral or multilateral exercises	<p><b>High:</b> One or more bilateral or multilateral military exercises annually, measured across the three most recent years.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> At least one bilateral or multilateral military exercise within the three most recent years.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> At least one bilateral or multilateral military exercise within the five most recent years.</p> <p><b>Negligible:</b> No bilateral or multilateral military exercises.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, exercises have increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, exercises have remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, exercises have decreased.</p>
	Training or professional military education (PME)	<p><b>High:</b> Regular, institutionalized PME or training exchanges.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Intermittent (i.e., not institutionalized) PME or training exchanges.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Short-term, onsite, tactical training only (e.g., ship riders or training on newly purchased weapon systems).</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, PME training has increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, PME training has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, PME training has decreased.</p>
Coordination and information sharing	Intelligence-sharing mechanisms	<p><b>High:</b> Routine, institutionalized intelligence sharing mechanisms.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Some semiroutine intelligence sharing mechanisms.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> No routine, institutionalized intelligence sharing mechanisms. Intelligence sharing is ad hoc.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, intelligence sharing has increased.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, intelligence sharing has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, intelligence sharing has decreased.</p>

Source: CNA.

Table 9. Metrics for economic relationship dimension indicators

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Coordination	<b>Bilateral and multilateral economic fora</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Both countries are parties to bilateral and multilateral fora focused specifically on economic issues. Both countries are active parties in these fora.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Both countries are parties to bilateral and multilateral fora where economic issues are one of several points of focus. Both countries are at least members of these fora.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Only one or neither country is a member of bilateral and multilateral economic fora.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, coordination via bilateral and multilateral economic fora is increasing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, coordination via bilateral and multilateral economic fora has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, coordination via bilateral and multilateral economic fora has decreased.</p>
	<b>Key leader engagements</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Regular (at least annual) in-person meetings by senior economic leadership (ministers of finance, trade and industry, or energy, and/or Central Bank governors) within the past three years. Third-party locations included.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Several meetings by senior economic leadership with counterparts within the past three years.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Irregular or no meetings by senior economic leadership (at least one meeting in the past five years).</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, the number of key leader engagements is increasing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, the number of key leader engagements has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 engagement, the number of key leader engagements is decreasing.</p>
<b>Institutional links and trade</b>	<b>Banking</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Advanced more than three new efforts to support trade in non-dollar-denominated transactions.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Advanced only one to two small efforts to support trade in non-dollar-denominated transactions.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Advanced no new efforts to support trade in non-dollar-denominated transactions.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 banking ties, there is a continuing trend to deepen banking linkages.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 banking ties, the pace of deepening banking linkages has remained constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 banking ties, there has been a weakened effort to deepen banking linkages.</p>

Table 9. Metrics for economic relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
	<b>Currency arrangements and exchange rates</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Official and unofficial exchange rate are highly comparable; relatively high level of stability in the exchange rate between rials and rubles.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Official and unofficial exchange rate are moderately comparable; relatively moderate level of stability in the exchange rate between rials and rubles.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Official and unofficial exchange rate are widely different; relatively low level of stability in the exchange rate between rials and rubles.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 patterns, the exchange rate is becoming more stable.</p> <p><b>No Change:</b> Compared to pre-2022 patterns, there have been no adjustments.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022 patterns, the exchange rate has become more volatile and unpredictable.</p>
<b>Trade</b>	<b>Free trade agreements</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Signed a substantial bilateral trade agreement.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> In the process of negotiating a substantial bilateral trade agreement.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> No indication of work on signing a bilateral trade agreement.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, moving toward deeper trade alignment via free trade agreements.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, moving at the same pace on deepening trade alignment via free trade agreements.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, moving away from deeper trade alignment via free trade agreements.</p>
	<b>Bilateral trade as dollar amount</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Bilateral trade is greater than \$5 billion each year.<sup>a</sup></p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Bilateral trade is between \$2 billion and \$5 billion each year.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Bilateral trade is less than \$2 billion each year.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, bilateral trade is increasing each year.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, bilateral trade has remained constant each year.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, bilateral trade is decreasing each year.</p>
	<b>Bilateral trade as % of Iran's gross domestic product (GDP)</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Bilateral trade with Russia makes up more than 5% of Iran's GDP.<sup>b</sup></p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Bilateral trade with Russia makes up between 0.5% and 5% of Iran's GDP.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Bilateral trade with Russia makes up less than 0.5% of Iran's GDP.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Since 2022, bilateral trade is making up a growing percentage of Iran's GDP.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Since 2022, bilateral trade makes up roughly the same amount of Iran's GDP.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Since 2022, bilateral trade makes up a shrinking percentage of Iran's GDP.</p>

Table 9. Metrics for economic relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
	<b>Bilateral trade as % of Russia's GDP</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Bilateral trade with Iran makes up more than 5% of Russia's GDP.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Bilateral trade with Iran makes up between 0.5 and 5% of Russia's GDP.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Bilateral trade with Iran makes up less than 0.5% of Russia's GDP.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Since 2022, bilateral trade is making up a growing percentage of Russia's GDP.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Since 2022, bilateral trade makes up roughly the same amount of Russia's GDP.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Since 2022, bilateral trade makes up a shrinking percentage of Russia's GDP.</p>
	<b>Iran: Trade partner ranking compared to top five nations (by trade value)</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Russia is in Iran's top five trade partners.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russia is not in Iran's top five trade partners but remains a significant partner.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russia is not a substantial trade partner for Iran compared to other bilateral trade partners.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Since 2022, Russia is playing an increasingly important role as one of Iran's trade partners.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Russia's role as one of Iran's trade partners has not changed since 2022.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Since 2022, Russia is playing an increasingly unimportant role as one of Iran's top trade partners.</p>
	<b>Russia: Trade partner ranking compared to top five nations (by trade value)</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Iran is in Russia's top five trade partners.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Iran is not in Russia's top five trade partners but remains a significant partner.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Iran is not a substantial trade partner for Russia compared to other bilateral trade partners.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Since 2022, Iran is playing an increasingly important role as one of Russia's trade partners.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Iran's role as one of Russia's trade partners has not changed since 2022.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Since 2022, Iran is playing an increasingly unimportant role as one of Russia's top trade partners.</p>
<b>Investment</b>	<b>Bilateral foreign direct investment (FDI)</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Russia is one of the top five investors in the Iranian economy.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russia is one of the top 10 investors in the Iranian economy.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russia invests in the Iranian economy but is not one of Iran's top 10 investors.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, there has been an increasing trend in the amount of bilateral FDI.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, bilateral FDI rates remain constant.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, there has been a decreasing trend in the amount of bilateral FDI.</p>
<b>Loans</b>	<b>Russian loans to Iran</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Russia regularly loans Iran money in high dollar amounts.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russia periodically loans Iran money in high or medium dollar amounts.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russia irregularly loans Iran money in high or medium dollar amounts.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, Russia is loaning more money to Iran.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, Russia is loaning a comparable amount of money to Iran.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, Russia is loaning less money to Iran.</p>

Table 9. Metrics for economic relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
Strategic sectors	Communications	<p><b>High:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are highly engaged in the communications sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are moderately engaged in the communications sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are barely or not at all engaged in the communications sector of the other country.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's communications sector is growing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's communications sector has not changed.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's communications sector is decreasing.</p>
	Infrastructure	<p><b>High:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are highly engaged in the infrastructure sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are moderately engaged in the infrastructure sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are barely or not at all engaged in the infrastructure sector of the other country.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's infrastructure sector is growing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's infrastructure sector has not changed.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's infrastructure sector is decreasing.</p>
	Oil and gas	<p><b>High:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are highly engaged in the oil and gas sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are moderately engaged in the oil and gas sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are barely or not at all engaged in the oil and gas sector of the other country.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's oil and gas sector is growing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's oil and gas sector has not changed.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's oil and gas sector is decreasing.</p>

Table 9. Metrics for economic relationship dimension indicators (continued)

Category	Indicators	Metrics	Trends
	<b>Aerospace</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are highly engaged in the aerospace sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are moderately engaged in the aerospace sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are barely or not at all engaged in the aerospace sector of the other country.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's aerospace sector is growing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's aerospace sector has not changed.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's aerospace sector is decreasing.</p>
	<b>Nuclear energy</b>	<p><b>High:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are highly engaged in the nuclear energy sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Medium:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are moderately engaged in the nuclear energy sector of the other country.</p> <p><b>Low:</b> Russian or Iranian firms are barely or not at all engaged in the nuclear energy sector of the other country.</p>	<p><b>Upward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's nuclear energy sector is growing.</p> <p><b>No change:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's nuclear energy sector has not changed.</p> <p><b>Downward:</b> Compared to pre-2022, the level of Russian or Iranian engagement in the other country's nuclear energy sector is decreasing.</p>

Source: CNA.

<sup>a</sup> The numbers chosen here are unique to the Russia-Iran relationship and are reflective of historic trade values.

<sup>b</sup> The numbers chosen here are unique to this relationship and historic figures appropriate for this relationship.

# APPENDIX B: MEETINGS AND MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING

This section collects public meetings and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between 2020 and spring 2024. The dataset likely undercounts both but provides an initial baseline count and notes the topic of each discussion. Data sources used are from a survey of Western media as well as state media

reporting in Russia and Iran. Table 10 shows known meetings between Russia and Iran from January 2021 through March 2024. Table 11 shows signed memoranda of understanding between Russia and Iran from 2021 through spring 2024.

Table 10. Russia-Iran meetings, January 2021–March 2024

Topic	Officials	Date
Development of oil and gas fields	Minister of Petroleum Owji and Minister of Energy Shulginov, along with Venezuelan representatives	3/2/2024
New BRICS expansion of additional emerging economies	Multilateral	1/30/2024
Promised Russian investments in Iran oil and gas sector	Secretary of National Security Council Ahmadian and Patrushev	1/24/2024
Gaza Strip, Syria, Red Sea	Multilateral—Iran, Russia, Türkiye, Lebanon	1/22/2024
Condemning US airstrikes on Yemen	Foreign Ministers (FMs) Lavrov and Amir-Abdollahian	1/15/2024
Iranian “territorial integrity” and the three Gulf islands	FMs Lavrov and Amir-Abdollahian	12/17/2023
Deepening economic and social ties, Israel-Palestine	Presidents Putin and Raisi	12/07/2023
Calling for a ceasefire in Gaza	FMs Lavrov and Amir-Abdollahian	11/19/2023
Gaza-Israel war, need for ceasefire and aid	Deputy FMs Kani and Bogdanov with Hamas official Abu Marzouk	10/27/2023
Energy and logistics projects	FMs Lavrov and Amir-Abdollahian	10/22/2023
Israel-Palestine	FMs Lavrov and Amir-Abdollahian	10/11/2023
Economic partnership	Russian Export Centre and Tehran Chamber of Commerce	9/20/2023
Joint military exercises to be held in 2024, US “unilateralism,” expansion of BRICS	Defense Minister Shoigu and senior Iranian military and security officials	9/20/2023



Topic	Officials	Date
Iran voiced support for Russia amid Wagner Rebellion	FM Amir-Abdollahian and Lavrov	6/24/2023
De-dollarization of economies	Multilateral	5/26/2024
North-South transport corridor, MOUs in oil and gas	Presidential aide Levitin, FM Amir-Abdollahian, and Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ahmadian	7/04/2023
Moscow Conference on International Security	Multilateral	4/16/2023
Reducing the influence of the dollar in regional exchanges	Presidential aide Levitin and SNSC Secretary Shamkani	4/09/2023
Deepening political, trade, and economic cooperation	Presidents Putin and Raisi	11/12/2022
Working groups on Iran-Russia joint economic commission	Various groups	10/30/2022
Food security, economy, Russia-Ukraine	Presidents Putin, Raisi, and Erdogan	7/19/2022
General meeting, emphasize Russia-Iran relationship	Presidents Putin and Raisi	1/19/2022
Afghanistan—shaping peace and security in the region	Multilateral—FMs of Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Russia	10/18/2021
Discuss ties, Middle East, nuclear deal, COVID-19 vaccinations	FM Lavrov and President Rouhani	4/13/2021
Discussion of killing of Iran’s military chief Soleimani	FMs Lavrov and Zarif	1/4/2020

Source: CNA.

Table 11. Russia-Iran memoranda of understanding, 2021–spring 2024

Document	Who	Date
MOU to increase cooperation and relations	SNSC Secretary Ahmadian and Secretary of Security Council Patrushev	4/24/2024
MOU to cooperate on ethics of artificial intelligence (AI)	Secretary of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics Development Minaei and Chairman of the Russian Commission on Ethics in AI Neznamov	3/12/2024
19 Economic Committee MOUs	Iranian oil minister Oji and Deputy Prime Minister Novak	2/28/2024
Free trade agreement	Eurasian Economic Union and Iran	12/25/2023
Agreement to counter Western sanctions	FMs Amir-Abdollahian and Lavrov	12/05/2023
MOU to transit grain via Sarakhs Special Economic Zone	Delegation from Iranian Khorasan Razavi province and Russian businessmen	11/28/2023
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	Multilateral	6/30/2023
MOU to bolster security, law enforcement cooperation	Iranian police and Russian National Guard	6/29/2023
Two agreements and eight MOUs: economics, trade, and creation of a joint market	Iranian Oil Ministry, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, and International Institute of Energy Policy and Diplomacy (Russian)	5/19/2023
Deal to finance and build Iranian railway line for North-South transport corridor	Presidents Putin and Raisi	5/17/2023
MOU to enhance media ties	Deputy Minister of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media Cherkesova and Deputy Culture Minister for Press Affairs Mahdipur	2/8/2023
MOU on cooperation in circulation of medical products	Health ministers	11/2/2022
MOU to join Shanghai Cooperation Organization	Multilateral	9/15/2022
MOU on oil industry investment deal	Chief executive officer of Gazprom and National Iranian Oil Company	7/19/2022
Cooperation agreement on cybersecurity and information and communications technology	FMs Lavrov and Zarif	3/15/2021

Source: CNA.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

AIS	Automatic Identification System
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DIME	diplomatic, informational, military, economic
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FDI	foreign direct investment
FM	foreign minister
GDP	gross domestic product
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MOU	memorandum of understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OEC	Observatory of Economic Complexity
PME	professional military education
PRC	People's Republic of China
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations

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