

Iran finds steadfast partner in post-snapback era



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OPINION

Moscow is stepping up as Tehran's strategic partner in the post-snapback era. Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is not only pushing back against the reimposition of Security Council resolutions but has also officially declared its strategic partnership with Iran as binding.

Russia has unequivocally and firmly stated that it considers the activation of the snapback mechanism and the reimposition of UN sanctions to be legally void and refuses to recognize them. This stance, shared with China, has thrown a wrench into the West's efforts to brand Iran a "rogue" state within the Security Council. Russia's behavior can be analyzed on two levels: its Eastern alliance and the Russian mindset are key factors shaping the Kremlin's approach.

East-West rift

China and Russia's reaction to Israel's imposed 12-day war on Iran raises serious questions. Critics argue that neither Beijing nor Moscow has supported Tehran to the extent expected. As traditional Eastern allies, China and Russia are weighing up the anarchic international relations environment. Although the Cold War-era approaches of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc differ in their analysis and are based on interests, confrontation with the West remains a driving force. An immediate tripartite military alliance against the West has not yet taken shape, but a common enemy can forge camaraderie or even partnership.

Former US secretary of state Antony Blinken, in an article published in Foreign Affairs, voiced concerns over the ties among Iran, Russia, China, and ultimately North Korea. Washington's chronic worry is that multilateralism and organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS could be a stepping stone to military alliances. Meanwhile, China responded

sharply to US attacks on Iranian nuclear sites but continues to play up a neutral role. Beijing's foreign policy style is marked by a calm, measured approach to the surrounding turmoil.

From Washington's perspective, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's security and military meeting with Iranian representatives sent a clear signal. China will bypass Western sanctions to keep on buying Iranian oil. Of course, Beijing has also played a unique role over the past decade in Tehran's dealings with certain regional states in the Persian Gulf. The atmosphere outlined and Eastern partners' behavior against Western allies in the UN Security Council show a coordinated stance by China and Russia. However, despite their partnership, Moscow and Beijing pursue different interests regarding Iran. Although Russia-Iran and China-Iran relations have improved to their highest level over the past decade, they have never been complete alliances; they still fall short of the partners' desired benchmarks. Their strategic cooperation is limited and driven by mutual interests and alignment. Notably, Tehran has failed to lay down adequate groundwork for creating shared opportunities and interests and defining strategic partnership details with Eastern partners.

Dynamics of Tehran-Moscow relations

Iran's historical memory of Tsarist and Soviet Russia has always weighed heavily on its view of Moscow. Traditionally, relations with the Kremlin have been a battleground between "Russophiles" and "Anglophiles". Going to both extremes in dealing with Russia has hindered a realistic understanding of Moscow's perception of Tehran. Some groups still calculate interactions through a Cold War lens, overlooking that countries act based on national interests. The Russia-Iran relationship has changed significantly over the past decade, and a certain dynamism has been notable, especially since the Russia-Ukraine war began in 2022. Iran and Russia have actively

ramped up cooperation politically, economically, and militarily. High-level transactions between Tehran and Moscow span diverse areas, including diplomacy, foreign policy, joint military exercises, and institutional-economic ties, that add color to their collaboration.

Key findings in Tehran-Moscow relations

Traditionally, Russia-Iran ties have been described as a mix of cooperation, competition, and suspicion. However, since the early 1990s, this relationship has significantly improved. By the mid-2010s, a broader base emerged, marked by increasing military cooperation and moderate economic alignment. Since the Russia-Ukraine war began, bilateral ties have deepened remarkably, shifting from cautious interaction to fuller cooperation across diverse dimensions.

This progression traces back to the pre-war period when Russia and Iran cooperated on the Syrian war and in the wake of the 2018 initial collapse of the JCPOA. Current conflicts in Ukraine and prior ones in Syria, together with Western sanctions on Russia and Iran, have been key drivers of the enhanced relationship. Russia itself faces sweeping Western sanctions. This structural empathy is a strong incentive for both nations to push back against Western sanctions with an anti-coercion approach.

Previous limitations in Moscow-Tehran engagement — particularly over nuclear issues and secondary sanctions — have been eased, although Moscow remains cautious. Israel's war on Gaza will likely speed up the improvement of bilateral relations in the short to medium term. Politically, Russia and Iran increasingly share a geopolitical alliance, expressed through civilizational and anti-Western rhetoric, with growing high-level government contacts and freshly signed memoranda across a broad range of topics.

Importantly, senior political elites — not just diplomats — now regularly show up for public meetings. Militarily, we observe significant official inter-

action among senior officers and government officials, indicating broad cooperation. Economically — traditionally a weak link — Russia and Iran have started heavily investing in deepening their economic ties. It must be acknowledged that international relations rest on defining and securing shared interests.

Though Russia has historically supplied many industrial goods Iran needs, this relationship is either changing or at least beginning to balance out. Iran now provides key industrial goods to Russia, helping it cope with wartime restrictions. This support extends Russia's capacity to fight in Ukraine. Moreover, closer economic ties have led to training Russian officials on sanctions evasion techniques. This collaboration could affect the long-term endurance of sanctions imposed by the US and other Western countries.

Role of Primakov Doctrine

Russia's backing of Iran in the post-snapback era is not mere friendship but a function of national interests and long-term Kremlin doctrines. Russia's foreign policy doctrine, especially the "Primakov Doctrine," emphasizes a multipolar world. Moscow views Iran as a key strategic partner in the Middle East and West Asia, capable of balancing US and NATO influence. Weakening Iran



The illustration shows Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (2nd-L) and his Russian and Chinese counterparts, Vladimir Putin (L) and Xi Jinping (R), respectively, as well as Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

● PAUL SPELLA/THE ATLANTIC



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Iranian Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh (4th-L) and his counterparts pose for a group photo before the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Defense Ministers' Meeting in Qingdao, China, on June 26, 2025.

● REUTERS

would mean bolstering US unilateralism, which Russia strongly opposes. Although proposed in the late 1990s, the Primakov Doctrine became part of geopolitical discourse after 2014.

The doctrine revolves around five key ideas: First, Russia is a powerful actor with an independent foreign policy. Second, Russia should seek a multipolar world managed by a concert of great powers. Third, Russia should pursue both dominance in its former Soviet sphere and Eurasian integration. Fourth, Russia must oppose NATO expansion. And fifth, Russia must cooperate with China. The doctrine dictates that to break Western encirclement and weaken US influence, Russia must ally with regional powers unwilling to submit to the West. At the same time, Russia fears the collapse of Eurasian geopolitical cohesion.

Future cooperation outlook, interests

Though Tehran-Moscow cooperation is based on realism (securing interests in an anarchic environment) and nourished by the Primakov Doctrine, it remains a limited partnership rooted in mutual alignment. It is predictable that Russia-Iran relations will deepen over time, especially as long as both countries maintain a hostile, oppositional stance toward Western countries and Western-dominated international bodies. However, there are caveats. The principle of "negative balancing" (refusing to give concessions to major powers) is key to maintaining equilibrium between West and East. Excessive skepticism, however, could cause Iran to miss strategic coalition opportunities at critical moments (such as countering the snapback sanctions) and become fully isolated.

Despite lingering distrust in some areas, a severe rift between Russia and Iran is unlikely in the short to medium term. Their relationship is a bilateral dynamic embedded in Russia's broader anti-Western shift and intertwined with China's role. Geopolitical cohesion is a vital necessity for Russia and a special process for China that must be preserved. Western penetration into the heart of Eurasia via Iran's gate would tighten the pressure ring on both China and Russia significantly.

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