

Turkey, Iran unite against Israel as regional power dynamics shift

By Dorian Jones
Journalist

PERSPECTIVE

For years, regional rivalries have limited cooperation between Turkey and Iran. Now, shared security concerns over Israel are providing common ground. During a recent Tehran visit, the Turkish foreign minister called Israel the region's "biggest threat". Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, hosted in Tehran by his Iranian counterpart, Abbas Araghchi, declared that both countries see "Israel as the biggest threat to stability in the Middle East" because of its "expansionist policies". Ankara is increasingly angry over Israel's military operations in Syria, which it considers a threat to security. Syria's new regime is a close Turkish ally. With the Iranian-backed Syrian regime overthrown and Iran's diminishing influence in the Caucasus, another region of competition with Turkey, Tehran is viewed by Ankara as less of a threat. "Ankara sees that Tehran's wings are clipped, and I'm sure that it is also very happy that Tehran's wings are clipped," international relations expert Soli Ozel told RFI. Ozel predicts that perceived diminished Iranian power is opening the door for more cooperation with Turkey.

Cooperation
"Competition and cooperation really define the relations. Now, ... the rela-

tionship is more balanced. But there are limits, driven by America's approach to Iran," said Ozel. Murat Aslan of the SETA Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research, a Turkish pro-government think tank, points out that changing dynamics inside Iran also give an impetus to Turkish diplomatic efforts towards Tehran. "Iran is trying to build a new landscape in which they can communicate with the West, but under the conditions they have identified," observes Aslan. "In this sense, Turkey may contribute. So that's why Turkey is negotiating or communicating with Iran just to find the terms of a probable common consensus." However, warming relations between Turkey and Iran are not viewed in a favourable light by Israel, whose ministers have, in turn, accused Turkey of being Israel's biggest threat. Tensions are rising over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's strong support of Hamas, which Ankara's Western allies have designated as a terrorist organisation. "Obviously, Israel does not want to see Iranian and Turkish relations warm as Israel sees Iran as an existential threat and hence anything that helps Iran is problematic from Israel's perspective," warns Turkey analyst Gallia Lindenstrauss at the Institute for National Security Studies in Al-Quds (Tel Aviv). This month, Israeli security forces accused Hamas of operating a major



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (front-right) talks to his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan, during the 51st session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul, Turkey, on June 21, 2025, toward the end of the Israeli-imposed 12-day war on Iran. ● YASIN AKGUL/AFP

financial operation in Turkey under Iranian supervision. Many of Hamas' senior members are believed to reside in Istanbul.

American ally
Israeli concerns over Turkey's improving Iranian ties will likely be exacerbated with Turkish officials confirming that a visit by President Erdogan to Iran has been "agreed in principle". Ankara also has a delicate balancing act to make sure its Iranian dealings don't risk antagonising its American ally, given ongoing tensions between Tehran

and Washington. Good relations with Washington are vital to Ankara as it looks to US President Donald Trump to help ease tensions with Israel. "For Israel, the United States shapes the environment right now," observes Aslan. "The Turkish preference is to have an intelligence diplomacy with Israelis, not to have an emerging conflict, but rely on the American mediation and facilitation to calm down the situation," added Aslan.

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Iran's first-ever SCO military exercise solidifies ties with China, Russia

By Eva Seiwert
Expert on Chinese affairs

OPINION

Iran recently hosted militaries from China, India, Russia, and six other countries for the first-ever Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) military exercise on Iranian soil. The five-day "Sahand-2025" exercise in the northwest of the country was more than a counter-terrorism drill. It sent a clear geopolitical signal of Tehran's full integration into the multilateral partnership led by China and Russia, illustrating how Beijing and Moscow now see Iran as a valuable participant in their broader regional projects that sit alongside Western formats.

China no longer worried about being seen as Iran's ally
China, for its part, remains wary of unconditionally backing Tehran for fear of unwanted conflicts or disrupted oil flows as a result of Iran's predilections — expanding its role across the Middle East, engaging in hostile actions against Israel, and, perhaps most crucially, maintaining a nuclear program that could encourage Tehran to ignore its nuclear non-proliferation obligations. But the recent military field operations, tactical maneuvers, and joint command exercises from December 1 to 5 were an achievement for a country long isolated by UN sanctions and reflect China's decisive shift in posture: Beijing is no longer worried about being seen as too closely aligned with Iran and now sees value in upgrading ties on several fronts. Until the mid-2010s, Beijing was re-



Iranian and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) officials meet before another day of the Sahand-2025 joint counter-terrorism drill starts in East Azerbaijan Province, Iran. The exercise ran for five days from December 1, 2025. ● SAEID SADEGHI/ISNA

luctant to engage more deeply with the Islamic Republic of Iran politically and militarily. At a time when it was still much keener on good relations with both the US and Europe, China's caution stemmed from concerns over Tehran's global reputation as a pariah state, ongoing international sanctions, and its strong anti-American posture. Iran's long-standing rivalry with Saudi Arabia further complicated matters as Beijing worried that any conflict could endanger oil shipments from two of its largest suppliers.

Tehran's largest trading partner, intent on expanding ties
But Iran's willingness to limit its nuclear program under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which China helped negotiate, the intensifying US-China rivalry, and Beijing's need to diversify its energy have increased the benefits of strengthening ties with Tehran. China's success

in easing Iran-Saudi tensions in 2023 further lowered perceived risks. According to Chinese commentators, US President Donald Trump's withdrawal

from the JCPOA in 2018 and his more adversarial stance towards China, Russia, and Iran were decisive factors leading to the deepening ties among the three states. This culminated in Iran joining the SCO in 2023 and the BRICS grouping a year later. China is today not only Tehran's largest trading partner — accounting for some 90 percent of Iran's oil exports — but also intent on expanding ties. At the same time, Russia — China's close partner and the other driving force of both the SCO and BRICS — appears to have become an even more important security partner for Iran. Moscow has reportedly sold attack helicopters, air defense systems, and fighter jets to Tehran. The three countries together regularly engage in trilateral naval drills as well as broader security coordination, including nuclear consultations. Sahand-2025 has solidified Iran's relations with China and Russia

by showing Iran can play a useful role within the SCO security structures, opening the way for deepening security cooperation.

SCO, BRICS strengthened Iran's geopolitical standing
Iran's entry into the SCO and BRICS added a new institutional dimension to its partnerships with Beijing and Moscow. It allows Tehran to act as a full-fledged member of the world's largest regional organization and benefit from political legitimacy, expanded diplomatic networks, intelligence sharing — including access to the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure's (RATS) anti-terror database, as well as exchanges on cyber threats, border security, and counter-terrorism practices — and to participate in high-level economic and security discussions. This strengthens Iran's geopolitical standing, signaling to both regional rivals and global powers that Tehran is integrated into alternative international frameworks beyond Western-dominated institutions. For Europe, the nuclear implications are particularly important: Iran's closer integration with China and Russia gives it diplomatic backing and economic buffers that reduce the effectiveness of Western pressure. While Beijing is keen for Iran not to escalate its nuclear activities towards weaponization, China's strategic priorities mean it is unlikely to exert the kind of sustained pressure Europe prefers. The result is a geopolitical environment in which Iran feels less isolated — and may therefore be less inclined to rein in its nuclear program.



A Russian military general observes his surroundings during the Sahand-2025 counter-terrorism drill, hosted by Iran's Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC) with the participation of members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province in December 2025. ● SAEID SADEGHI/ISNA

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