



ADVERSARY ENTENTE

The Israel-Iran War Rebalances the Adversary Entente

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The Adversary Entente failed to decisively respond to the Israel-Iran war on Iran's behalf. Neither Russia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), nor North Korea came to Iran's aid during the Israeli and US strikes on the Iranian nuclear program, despite each country's pre-existing relationship with the Islamic Republic. The lack of immediate and tangible response from Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang was to be expected; however, it underlines the strategic nuances that underpin the existence of the entente. Russia, the PRC, Iran, and North Korea are neither working as an axis nor collaborating as a hardened alliance but are rather deeply opportunistic and transactional partners with some important common objectives engaged in imbalanced and constantly shifting strategic interfacing. Their responses to the Israel-Iran war show clearly that they are functioning as an entente – that is, a non-binding understanding between states around a set of often contentious issues without formal pledges of armed support in the event of hostilities, but not excluding the possibility of military support entirely either. The uniting core of the Adversary Entente is the objective of challenging the US-led world order. Each member of the entente is pursuing that aim in its regional spheres of interest, aided to some degree by the others, but with the intention of achieving a global effect through combined efforts. The dangers this entente poses to US national security interests remain real and grave, despite the limitations of its members' willingness to help one another, as the uniting objective of their opportunistic cooperation is to fundamentally redesign the US-led world order in a way that dramatically reduces America's role, power, and influence.

No member of the adversary entente was ever likely to intervene militarily on Iran's behalf in the immediate term while the Israel-Iran war was ongoing. Both Moscow and Beijing initially responded to the outbreak of Israeli strikes on Iran by issuing boilerplate rhetorical statements of support for Iran and condemnation of Israel.[1] North Korea responded a few days after the war began, issuing a similarly predictable statement.[2] All three then condemned the United States for its June 23 strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities.[3] These milquetoast condemnations turned out to be the extent of the entente's immediate support for Iran. Neither Russia, the PRC, nor North Korea has binding obligations to come to Iran's defense. The January 2025 Russo-Iranian strategic partnership agreement notably lacks a mutual defense clause analogous to the one Russia made with North Korea, likely because Moscow feared committing to becoming embroiled in a Middle Eastern

conflict exactly like the one that took place in June. The PRC-Iran relationship has always been more of an economic and quasi-ideological partnership than a military one.

Russia and the PRC's immediate response options for Iran were heavily constrained by political-diplomatic realities exogenous to the Israel-Iran war. Russia limited its responses to rhetorical overtures in diplomatic fora in part because of the delicacy of its diplomatic relationship with the Trump administration as it sought to persuade US President Donald Trump to end support for Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been trying to use US-Israeli tensions within Iran for his purposes, first during nuclear negotiations and then during the Israel-Iran war itself, by presenting himself as a suitable negotiation partner to Trump.[4] Putin tried to use the conflict in the Middle East as an opportunity to improve his relationship with the United States in order to secure concessions regarding Ukraine. Russia's willingness to support Iran materially was also likely limited by its relationships with Israel and the Arab Gulf States. Approximately 1.3 million Russian-speakers live in Israel, a fact Putin acknowledged when claiming that Russia would "stay neutral" in the Israel-Iran war on June 23.[5] The PRC also maintains close economic ties with Israel and Iran's regional adversaries in the Gulf States, which has historically caused Beijing to limit its support for Iran. Russia and the PRC also likely do not wish to see or enable Iran's nuclear weaponization, so in many ways, the damage done to the Iranian nuclear program directly benefits this interest for both countries.[6]

Adversary Entente action and intervention are bounded by each member's national interests. Immediate and tangible military intervention on Iran's behalf was clearly not in Russia's, the PRC's, or North Korea's self-interest. Intervention in the longer term, however, may be more aligned with the interests of each member of the entente. Regime destabilization or regime change in Iran would be very unattractive outcomes, particularly for Russia and the PRC.[7] Moscow and Beijing have no interest in dealing with the loss of an important partner and the regional ramifications of a conflict in the Middle East and are likely to take steps to prevent that from happening. Russia may send Iran regime security and surveillance assets, as it did in 2022 during the Mahsa Amini protests.[8] Moscow could also send agents of its Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) to aid Tehran in counterintelligence and human intelligence operations as Iran reckons with apparent Mossad penetration of its nuclear program and security forces.[9] Russia will only provide Iran with this type of assistance if it deems the risk of doing so to be acceptable, however. The PRC reportedly sold Iran an unknown number of surface-to-air missiles to replenish its stock after the ceasefire, paid for in oil, showing a willingness to bolster Iran's security against future attack but not risk direct entanglement in the conflict.[10]

North Korea is the most isolated of the Adversary Entente, and for that reason may be the most willing to come to Iran's aid as Iran tries to rebuild its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, if Iran or another member of the entente can make it worth Pyongyang's while. North Korea already has an established history of collaborating with Iran—North Korea is believed to have helped with the construction of tunnels under Iranian nuclear facilities and has supported Iran's ballistic missile development for decades.[11] North Korea has almost no need to balance between Iran and Israel and the Arab Gulf States, moreover, and is already under the most restrictive sanctions regime in the world, so constraints on Pyongyang's support for Tehran will likely originate more from domestic bandwidth concerns (or concerns by the PRC and/or Russia) than from external pressure. North Korea is heavily supporting

Russia with personnel and technology, and it remains unclear what amount of help it could immediately give to Iran, given those realities.

The Israel-Iran war has highlighted and increased fundamental inequalities within the Adversary Entente, setting conditions for potential strategic rebalancing. Russia's non-response to the outbreak of the war emphasizes that fact that Russia does not need Iran in the same way for its war in Ukraine that it did between 2022 and 2024.[12] Iran's military support for Russia's war in Ukraine was crucial for Russia's sustainment of combat operations following the full-scale invasion, but Russia has indigenized the production of much of what it previously imported from Iran and has subsequently become much more reliant on North Korea. Russo-Iranian cooperation at the Alabuga Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) in Russia's Tatarstan Republic has allowed Russia to start mass-producing Iranian-origin Shahed drones domestically in sufficient quantities that Russian forces were able to launch 5,337 Shahed-type drones at Ukraine in June 2025 alone.[13] Russia is also carefully stockpiling its ballistic missiles and ramping up munitions production, so it no longer requires Iranian ballistic missile shipments.[14] The 12-day Israel-Iran war will have a negligible impact on the war in Ukraine, once again underscoring Moscow's lessened reliance on Tehran as of 2025.

North Korea has, in many ways, supplanted Iran as Russia's chief defensive partner—a fact that is particularly evident in the aftermath of the Israel-Iran war. A report by the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) found that North Korea had sent Russia 9 million artillery rounds, nearly 15,000 troops, and at least 100 ballistic missiles as of late May 2025.[15] CNN viewed a Ukrainian intelligence assessment on July 2 that North Korea is planning to send an additional 25,000 to 30,000 soldiers to Russia in the coming months.[16] Russia is notably providing North Korean troops with training on how to produce and operate Iranian-origin Shahed drones in return for Pyongyang's support against Ukraine.[17]

Iran now appears to be looking to the PRC as a replacement for the support it previously received from Russia. Some Iranian officials have voiced discontent with Russia's non-response to Israeli and US attacks on Iran, particularly given Iran's persistent support for Russia since 2022. Unspecified Iranian sources told Reuters on June 23, against the backdrop of Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's visit to Moscow, that the Iranian leadership has been "unimpressed" by Russia's lack of support to Iran following Israeli and US strikes.[18] Former Iranian Deputy Parliament Speaker Ali Motahari posted on X on June 30, complaining that Russia provided both Turkey and Saudi Arabia with S-400 air defense systems but failed to give Iran the same systems despite Iran's provision of drones to Russia for the war in Ukraine.[19] Motahari sardonically noted, "This is the kind of strategic cooperation with Iran that Mr. Putin talks about." Iran has long begged Russia for higher-end and more modern platforms such as S-400 air defense systems and Su-35 fighter aircraft, but Russia has never provided these capabilities.[20] The weapons systems that Russia had provided to Iran prior to the Israel-Iran war did very little to augment Iran's defensive capabilities—Israel destroyed most of Iran's Russian-provided S-300 air defense systems in October 2024.[21]

Given the shortcomings of Russia's response, Iran appears to be pivoting to the PRC as a preferable defense partner. *Middle East Eye*, citing anonymous sources, reported on July 8 that Iran has received PRC surface-to-air missile batteries in exchange for oil shipments following the June 24 Israel-Iran ceasefire.[22] This would be a significant inflection in the PRC-Iran relationship, as the PRC has not

provided Iran with weapons since 2005.[23] The PRC's support for Iran post-ceasefire may extend beyond missile batteries, however. Iranian Armed Forces General Staff-affiliated outlet *Defa Press* published an article on June 29 calling for Iran to purchase PRC-made Chengdu J-10 multirole combat aircraft to “more effectively” defend Iranian air defense and confront Iran's adversaries.[24] Iranian Defense Minister Aziz Nasir Zadeh reportedly raised the issue of procuring J-10s from the PRC during a recent visit to the PRC for a meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) defense ministers on June 26.[25] Russia did not deliver Iran Su-35 fighter aircraft as noted above, and the Su-35s have underperformed in Ukraine against a far less capable air force than Israel fields. Iran may be looking to the more advanced J-10s instead of continuing to pursue the acquisition of Su-35s, especially as Russia has clearly shown itself to be an unreliable partner. The PRC, on the other hand, is a technologically advanced country and is not fighting its war (as Russia is in Ukraine), which might make it a more attractive and available defense partner to Tehran. Iran's receipt of PRC surface-to-air missile batteries may indicate that the PRC might consider sending Iran J-10s in the future, which would mark a significant shift and rebalancing in the trilateral Russia-Iran-PRC relationship. The PRC has given no indication of willingness to provide Iran with J-10s as of the time of this writing, however.

The Adversary Entente's failure to respond to the Israel-Iran war either coherently or effectively does not mean that this grouping of countries and set of relationships is inconsequential to US national interests. The entente's propensity for strategic flexibility and rebalancing is what makes it a force to be reckoned with on the international stage. Adversary Entente cooperation in Ukraine currently remains the strongest example of what the Entente can achieve. Russia is training North Korean troops to produce and operate Iranian-origin drones made with PRC-origin parts, while using these Iranian drones to wage a campaign of terror on the European continent. The PRC, Iran, and North Korea are all directly complicit in Russia's war. The effects of the entente extend far beyond the Ukrainian battlefield, however, and touch each of these adversaries' regional spheres of influence. The Israel-Iran war may strengthen Iran's cooperation with North Korea—an outcome that could have significant security implications for both the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. Many North Korea observers have recently remarked that the Israel-Iran war has significantly strengthened Pyongyang's nuclear resolve and reaffirmed to North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un that maintaining North Korea's nuclear program is the only way to secure North Korea's future.[26] Given the depth of North Korea's involvement in the construction of Iran's nuclear program, it is possible that Iran may reciprocate by helping North Korea's domestic nuclearization in return for North Korea's help rebuilding after Israeli and US strikes. Deeper PRC involvement in rebuilding Iran's military capabilities would also mark a dramatic step change in entente relationships, although it is too soon to forecast such major changes in the PRC-Iran relationship. Iran's relationship with Russia has made Europe less secure, and Iran's turn to the PRC and potentially North Korea for partnership could well have similar regional knock-on effects both in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region.

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