



ADVERSARY ENTENTE

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Data cutoff: 10 am ET, June 30

Key takeaways:

- **Iran may be seeking closer military cooperation with the PRC following Russia's failure to support Iran meaningfully during and in the aftermath of the Israel-Iran war. The PRC is unlikely to provide Iran with the military systems it is seeking, however.**
- **Members of the adversary entente are learning airpower lessons from the Israel-Iran war and are likely to implement these lessons in their operational planning for future conflicts. The PRC also continues efforts to learn how to combat Western weapons systems based on the experience of Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.**
- **The Israel-Iran war may have generated a shift in the PRC-Russia energy relationship. Russia may benefit from the PRC's renewed desire to import Russian oil via the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline to offset the risks of disruption of oil flows from the Persian Gulf.**
- **The PRC's failure to support Iran during and after the Israel-Iran war may damage the PRC's reputation in the wider Middle East.**
- **Russia is using the Israel-Iran war to disparage the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to advance informational objectives in Ukraine.**

Defense and Military-Technical Cooperation

Iran may be seeking closer military cooperation with the PRC as an alternative to Russia. Iranian Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh met with PRC Defense Minister Dong Jun on June 26 while attending a defense ministers' meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Qingdao, PRC, his first foreign trip to the PRC since the Israeli and US strikes on Iran.[1] The defense ministers of seven other SCO members also attended the summit, including Russia, Belarus, India, and Pakistan. Nasirzadeh thanked the PRC for "supporting Iran's legitimate position after recent attacks" by Israel and the United States, according to PRC readouts, and expressed hope that the PRC would "continue to uphold justice and play a greater role in maintaining the current ceasefire and easing regional tensions."

Iranian and Arab media speculated that one of Nasirzadeh's aims during the meeting was to secure a purchase of the PRC's Chengdu J-10C multirole combat aircraft.[2] The Iranian Defense Minister is not in the official Iranian military chain of command and has two main functions—managing Iran's defense industrial base (DIB) and engaging in arms acquisitions and sales.[3] Nasirzadeh, in his capacity as defense minister, was very likely engaging his SCO defense ministers in order to secure any sort of military support that they would be willing to provide Iran. Nasirzadeh's meeting with Dong is particularly noteworthy in light of what Iran may be seeking from the PRC. Some Arab news outlets reported that Nasirzadeh and other officials initiated high-level talks to procure J-10s and advanced AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) equipment.[4] Iranian news outlet *Defa Press*, which is affiliated with the Iranian Armed Forces General Staff, published an article on June 29 supporting the purchase of the PRC fighter jets and claiming that Iran was "likely" to buy them. *Defa Press* noted that the 4.5-generation light fighter is more affordable than some Russian, US, and European fighters.[5] Pakistan reportedly used J-10Cs to shoot down Indian French-made Rafale aircraft during the brief Indo-Pakistan conflict earlier in 2025.[6] Iran previously finalized a deal to purchase Russian Sukhoi-35 fighter jets in 2023, but there is no confirmation that Russia has delivered the fighters to Iran as of July 2025.[7]

Iran may be turning to Beijing as an alternative to Russia because the PRC is one of the few technologically advanced countries that may be willing to sell military equipment to Iran, but is not using its equipment for its own war, as Russia is. *Reuters* reported on June 23 that Iranian officials are dissatisfied with Russia's support during Iran's conflict with Israel, further suggesting that Tehran might be looking to alternate partners following Russia's non-response to Israeli and US strikes on Iran.[8] The PRC has been a key economic lifeline for Iran by buying 90 percent of Iran's oil.[9] Beijing has not directly sold weapons to Iran since 2005; however, it is instead limiting itself to selling dual-use equipment and materials such as drone parts and components of missile fuel.[10] It also has not directly intervened to help Iran in its conflict with Israel any more than Russia has, preferring to avoid risky foreign entanglements and maintaining cooperative relations with Israel. It is unlikely that Nasirzadeh succeeded in securing a promise of J-10s from the PRC because of the PRC's reservations about directly intervening in the Israel-Iran conflict, but his meeting with Dong suggests that Iran may be trying to re-balance its relationship vis a vis the PRC, recognizing that Russia will not provide it with concrete military assistance.

Military analysts from Russia and the PRC are beginning to articulate lessons learned from the Israel-Iran war, highlighting the fact that each member of the adversary entente is closely watching contemporary conflicts to prepare for future wars. Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Izvestia* published a report on June 25 compiling commentary from several Russian experts on lessons from the Israel-Iran war.[11] PRC state news agency *Xinhua* notably published a summary of the June 25 *Izvestia* article on June 27, which suggests that the PRC is also looking to how Russia is responding to, and learning from, contemporary conflicts for its own purposes, likely because Russia is fighting an active war in Ukraine and can feasibly "test" some of these lessons in real time.[12]

Many of the Russian experts focused on the role of Israel's modern and advanced air force

in destroying Iranian targets, with one analyst noting that Israel's air power capabilities inflicted massive damage on Iran despite Iran's "modern" air defense systems because Iran lacks "relevant competencies." Another Russian analyst noted that Iran's air defense capabilities are similar to those of Russia and the PRC, but that this was still not enough to defend against Israeli strikes—suggesting that Iranian decision making was more at fault than Iran's available military technologies. The analyst also noted that Israel primed its strike packages by using first person view (FPV) drones to target Iran's air defense system before launching fourth and fifth generation fighter aircraft to destroy remaining air defense systems and additional targets. Russian State Duma Deputy Andrei Kolesnik and other Russian military experts stated that Israel's advanced air defense system was critical to its ability to defend against Iran's retaliatory strikes and called for Russia to increase the effectiveness of its own air defense umbrella accordingly.[13] Russian military commentator Vlad Shlepchenko told Russian outlet *Tsargrad* on June 25 that the Israel-Iran war shows that "only lethal force and the readiness to use it ruthlessly and prudently works," and then advocated for Russia to stockpile over 100 nuclear-equipped Oreshnik ballistic missiles for a future strike on Europe.[14] Russian commentators writ large noted the strength of Iran's ballistic missile program, despite the fact that Israeli strikes have severely damaged ballistic missile stockpiles and launchers.[15]

The most notable Russian responses to the Israel-Iran war pertain to lessons learned about the exercise of airpower. Several Russian commentators offered somewhat ironic critiques of Iran's air strike and air defense capabilities, considering that Moscow has provided Tehran with a large portion of its air defense batteries and aircraft.[16] Their commentary suggests, however, that Russia may be looking to learn valuable lessons about airpower and air operations from the Israel-Iran war—lessons that Russia would likely hope to implement as it prepares for a longer-term, protracted war against NATO. The battlespace in Ukraine has fundamentally challenged traditional airpower concepts, as neither Russia nor Ukraine has been able to establish conventional air superiority.[17] Both sides have instead innovated lower-altitude iterations of traditional airpower concepts using drones, and in many ways have offset, or at least recreated, the traditional imperative for fixed-wing air superiority by pursuing long-range strike campaigns.[18] Russian responses to the Israel-Iran war suggest that Russia still sees a need for traditional guarantors of airpower for a future conflict, even if it has innovated mitigations for its current war in Ukraine. ISW recently reported that Russia is trying to increase production of strategic bombers, helicopters, and fighter aircraft in the medium-to-long term.[19] Russia's increased production of rotary and fixed wing aircraft likely suggests that Russia intends to stockpile these aircraft for a future conflict due to their limited immediate use in Ukraine, and is likely parsing out lessons from the Israel-Iran air war to integrate into its future concept of operations.

PRC military analysts echoed Russian airpower observations from the Israel-Iran war and offered their own interpretations of what the PRC can glean from the conflict. PRC military analyst and former People's Liberation Army (PLA) instructor Song Zhongping stated that the US B-2 stealth bomber strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities demonstrated that "a dedicated strategic bomber is irreplaceable, even in an era when other long-range strike options exist." [20] PRC experts also evaluated the performance of the US GBU-57 "bunker busting" bombs, likely in order

to gauge the potential performance of the PRC's DF-15C short-range ballistic missile, which is similarly designed for precision strikes on hardened underground targets.[21] Song notably questioned the absolute utility of such munitions, asserting that the GBU-57's performance suggests that "airdropped munitions from manned bombers may not be the most effective solution in future warfare." [22] The PRC is actively developing its own Xian H-20 strategic bomber, which it plans to debut in 2030.[23] The PLA likely hopes to learn and implement lessons from the US strike on Iran into its own operational planning for a potential cross-strait invasion of Taiwan, where it is likely to use strategic bombing assets against a variety of Taiwanese targets.

The PRC also continues to look to the battlefield in Ukraine for combat experience. An anonymous Ukrainian military intelligence source told the *Kyiv Post* on June 24 that Russia plans to host around 600 PRC military personnel in 2025 for training on how to counter Western weaponry and adopt Russian combat experience from the war in Ukraine.[24] PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun responded to a question about the *Kyiv Post* story on June 26, saying "I don't have any information on this," but failed to deny the reporting outright.[25] *Reuters* previously reported in April that Beijing authorized an unspecified number of PLA officers to deploy to Ukraine to learn tactical lessons from the war.[26] ISW recently assessed that the PRC is invested in learning lessons from the war in Ukraine for its own military planning, which will become particularly salient in the case of PRC aggression against Taiwan.[27] Taiwan is likely to be equipped with Western-provided weapons systems analogous to those that Ukrainian forces are fielding against Russia, and lessons on how to counter such systems will be valuable for any PRC preparations for an attack on Taiwan.[28] The PRC also likely hopes to learn drone and anti-drone lessons from the war in Ukraine, as it recognizes that technologically driven battlefield innovations will characterize all future wars.[29]

Defense Industrial Base Cooperation

Nothing significant to report.

Economic and Financial Cooperation

The Israel-Iran war reportedly renewed the PRC's interest in increasing its energy imports from Russia, an outcome that Russia likely desires and that would support Russia's war effort. The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported on June 25, citing people close to PRC's decision making that the Israel-Iran war revived the PRC's interest in the Power of Siberia 2 (PS-2) liquified natural gas (LNG) pipeline with Russia.[30] The WSJ's sources stated that the PRC is concerned about the reliability of its LNG and oil imports from the Middle East, given recent reports that Iran may have sought to close the Strait of Hormuz and that Russian President Vladimir Putin intends to discuss the pipeline during an expected visit to the PRC in September 2024. The WSJ noted that the PRC is also interested in increasing its oil imports from Russia and that Russia currently supplies about one fifth of the PRC's oil. Russia has relied on energy exports to the PRC to partially compensate for decreased European energy imports following the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and seeks to further increase its energy exports to its partners, including the PRC.[31] Russian State Secretary and Deputy Energy Minister Dmitry Islamov stated on June 30 that Russia hopes to increase the amount of Russian coal that the PRC uses from 25 percent to 35 percent of the total market "in the near

future," emphasizing Russia's continued interest in carving out more space in the PRC's energy market[32]

The PRC's renewed interest in the PS-2 pipeline may represent a shift in the dynamics of the Russia-PRC energy relationship. Russia has historically been more dependent on the PRC as an energy buyer than the PRC is dependent upon Russia as a seller, likely to maintain a diverse set of suppliers in critical sectors and to maintain leverage in price negotiations.[33] Russia-PRC negotiations regarding the PS-2 pipeline likely stalled in 2024, and the *Financial Times* (FT) reported on June 2 that the negotiations remained stalled as the PRC sought to pay prices close to Russia's subsidized domestic gas prices.[34] The PRC only imported 19 percent of its crude oil from Russia in 2023, even though the PRC effectively replaced Europe as the top customer of Russian energy exports following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[35] People close to the PRC's decision making told the *WSJ* on June 25 that the PRC previously justified to Russia its lack of urgency to conclude a PS-2 deal by stating that the PRC limits its import of oil and gas from a single country to only 20 percent.[36] The PRC's reported interest in changing its energy dynamic with Russia due to concerns about its ability to obtain LNG and oil from the Middle East is a possible near-term impact of the Israel-Iran war on bilateral Russia-PRC relations, and one that is likely to generate disproportionate benefits for Russia's war in Ukraine

Political and Diplomatic Cooperation

The PRC's unwillingness to act meaningfully to help Iran and its other strategic partners in moments of crisis may hinder its ambitions to supplant US influence in the Middle East and elsewhere. The PRC repeatedly criticized Israel and the United States for their strikes on Iran in June and offered rhetorical support for Iran's sovereignty.[37] It did not take any action to support Iran's defense or to punish Israel or the United States for their strikes; instead, the PRC remained on the sidelines as Israel destroyed Iran's military capabilities and destabilized the Iranian regime.[38] PRC Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Bin met with Israel's newly-appointed ambassador to Beijing Eli Belotsercovsky on June 26 and said that "China is willing to strengthen exchanges and cooperation with Israel in various fields." [39] Beijing's lack of direct action with Iran and continued interfacing with Israel is consistent with the PRC's aversion to interference in foreign conflicts but runs counter to its desire to portray itself as a reliable alternative to the United States as a strategic partner for Middle Eastern countries. US policies like the Pivot to Asia, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and continued support for Israel have all shaken Arab states' faith that the United States will be a reliable partner for their security interests, a perception that the PRC has tried to exploit.[40] The PRC has sought for years to portray itself as a peace broker, "responsible great power," and champion of the Global South. It has dramatically increased its trade and investment in the Middle East and worked to bring Middle Eastern partners into alternative multilateral frameworks that exclude Western states, such as the SCO and BRICS, which Iran joined in 2023 and 2024.[41]

The Israel-Iran conflict has exposed the stark limits of Beijing's commitment to its partners. Beijing has deliberately avoided formal alliances, except with North Korea, to maintain independence in its foreign policy. This is a significant limitation in its ability to compete with the United States for influence, as the United States has repeatedly

militarily intervened in defense of its allies and partners and maintains a military presence in many partner countries that deters attacks against them. The PRC can compete with the United States in arms sales in the Middle East, but is not a true security guarantor.

Russia is taking advantage of the Israel-Iran war to discredit the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in support of the Kremlin's informational objectives. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on June 25 that the Israeli strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities "seriously damaged" the IAEA's reputation and that Iran's decision to suspend cooperation with the IAEA is a consequence of the "unprovoked attack" on Iran's nuclear facilities.[42] Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova similarly disparaged the IAEA and claimed that the United States and Israel are responsible for the damage to the IAEA's reputation.[43] Russia has been attempting to use the IAEA to legitimize its occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine, but has largely failed in this effort in the past three years of occupation.[44] Recent reports and satellite imagery indicate that Russia is likely preparing to connect the ZNPP directly to the Russian power grid, likely in an effort to set conditions to permanently occupy ZNPP after US and Ukrainian peace plans both proposed that Ukraine regain control over the ZNPP under US operation.[45] Russia's discrediting of the IAEA likely supports its dual objectives of continuing to rhetorically support Iran in the aftermath of the Israel-Iran war and setting informational conditions to attempt to legitimize Russia's claim over the ZNPP without the IAEA's assistance. The PRC has historically supported the role of international organizations in international disputes, including the IAEA's role in monitoring the Iranian nuclear program and Russia's occupation of the ZNPP.[46] The PRC is unlikely to break from this pattern to support Russia's own rhetorical efforts.

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