



ADVERSARY ENTENTE

Kelly Campa, Daniel Shats, Karolina Hird, and Grace Mappes, with Nicholas Carl

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Key takeaways:

- **The People's Republic of China (PRC) may be helping Iran rebuild its ballistic missile arsenal following the Israel-Iran war. The PRC has a history of providing Iran with material support, including dual-use technologies and chemical components, to support missile production.**
- **North Korean state media released combat footage of North Korean troops fighting in Kursk Oblast, Russia, highlighting the tactical and technical lessons that North Korea could learn from supporting the Russian war against Ukraine.**
- **Iran and Belarus have continued to deepen their ties, especially regarding military and military industrial cooperation. This growing cooperation will ultimately benefit Russia and help sustain its war against Ukraine.**
- **A Ukrainian investigative report confirmed the depths of the PRC-Russian cooperation on drone production. Both Beijing and Moscow could benefit considerably from their collaboration in the field.**
- **US and Western pressure on the PRC has thus far failed to stop it from economically supporting Russia and Iran. The PRC will likely continue to do so as long as it calculates that the associated risks are negligible.**
- **Russia proposed a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that would reportedly delay the potential reimposition of UN sanctions against Iran, demonstrating how Russia uses its UNSC role to provide critical diplomatic cover for Iran.**

Defense and Military-Technical Cooperation

The People's Republic of China (PRC) may be helping Iran rebuild its ballistic missile arsenal following the June 2025 Israel-Iran war, according to Israeli sources. Israeli Ambassador to the United States Yechiel Leiter said on July 24 that Israel has observed “disturbing signs” that the PRC may be aiding Iran with its ballistic missile program, including by providing certain “chemicals” and “rebuilding and reorganizing the ballistic missile program.”[1] Israeli outlet Yedioth Ahronoth (Ynet)

published a report on August 15 saying that Tehran may be looking to Beijing to rebuild its missile arsenal, citing unspecified Western intelligence agencies.[2]

Iran has previously looked to the PRC for support with its ballistic missile program, and the PRC has historically obliged. PRC-based entities have transferred dual-use technologies to Iran for decades, which Iran has mostly used to support its ballistic missile development.[3] The United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission published a report in June 2021, saying that it found that Iran used PRC-origin technology in the missiles with which it attacked US troops in Iraq in January 2020.[4] The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reported in June 2025 that Iran ordered “thousands of tons” of ammonium perchlorate that could fuel “hundreds” of ballistic missiles, which Iran and its Axis of Resistance could use.[5] WSJ noted that its sources expected the shipment to reach Iran within a few months. The Israel-Iran war erupted a week later, however, and ensuing Israeli strikes significantly degraded Iran’s missile forces.[6]

The Financial Times reported in January 2025 that two Iranian-flagged cargo ships delivered over 1,000 tons of sodium perchlorate—a key ingredient in the production of ammonium perchlorate—from ports in the PRC to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in Bandar Abbas, Iran, highlighting previous such cooperation between the PRC and Iran.[7] These reports came as ISW separately assessed that Iran may be looking increasingly to the PRC for military support since Russia declined to provide anything meaningful during the Israel-Iran war.[8] The PRC is unlikely to acknowledge growing military cooperation with Iran outright. It has, however, recently emphasized its continued right to sell military material to friendly countries.[9]

North Korean state media aired footage for the first time on August 22 showing North Korean forces operating alongside Russian troops in Kursk Oblast, Russia, highlighting the longstanding ISW warning that North Korea could gain valuable tactical and technical lessons from its involvement in fighting Ukraine.[10] North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met with North Korean commanding officers, who participated in the “overseas” operations to “liberate the Kursk Region of the Russian Federation,” in Pyongyang on August 21.[11] North Korean state media posted pictures on August 22 of Kim pinning medals on the photos of North Korean soldiers who died in combat in Kursk Oblast.[12] Images of the ceremony show at least 100 North Korean soldiers killed in action—the first North Korean confirmation of casualties suffered in Kursk Oblast.[13] Ukrainian intelligence has estimated that North Korea sustained around 5,000 soldier casualties in Kursk Oblast as of August 2025.[14]

North Korean state outlet Korean Central Television (KCTV) released footage on August 22 as part of a ceremonial concert for North Korean troops who fought in Kursk Oblast, showing North Korean soldiers in combat—sometimes in North Korean-only units and sometimes alongside Russian forces and prominent Russian commanders.[15] The footage includes several tactical and technical artifacts that underline the modern combat conditions that North Korean troops experienced while fighting in Kursk Oblast, including clips of North Korean soldiers operating first-person view (FPV) drones and installing counter-drone measures to protect against Ukrainian drone strikes.[16] One clip shows Russian soldiers showing North Korean troops how to operate a captured US Mk-19 grenade launcher, and other clips showcase North Korean troops using a range of

Russian- and North Korean-origin weapons in combat. The KCTV footage also shows North Korean troops executing fire team-level clearing exercises around buildings.

Kim likely agreed to send upwards of 12,000 North Korean soldiers to fight alongside Russian forces for them to acquire the sort of tactical and technical experience depicted in the KCTV footage.[17] South Korea's National Intelligence Service warned in October 2024 that North Korean forces were interested in receiving training from Russian forces on drone operations and on how to integrate drones into wider offensive operations.[18] The KCTV footage depicts several instances of North Korean forces operating FPV drones, which have become a critical component in shaping the battlespace in Ukraine. FPV drones are generally inexpensive, easy to operate, and have an average range of 20 kilometers (sometimes more or less, depending on the model), therefore representing an attractive and low-cost addition to the North Korean arsenal. North Korea's integration of FPV tactics is likely to pose substantial security risks on the wider Korean Peninsula as North Korea likely seeks to institutionalize lessons learned into its wider doctrine. North Korean forces also received exposure to various anti-drone techniques and technologies from Russian forces.[19] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov recently remarked that North Korea's involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine has "transformed" the North Korean military, echoing ISW's warnings.[20]

Iran and Belarus have continued to deepen ties, especially regarding military and military industrial matters.[21] Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk, Belarus, on August 20 to discuss expanding bilateral cooperation and sanctions mitigation efforts.[22] Iranian and Belarusian officials signed 12 memorandums of understanding intended to strengthen bilateral trade, military technical cooperation, and mutual investment during Pezeshkian's visit.[23] Belarusian state media reported that Pezeshkian and Lukashenko agreed to work toward codifying a strategic partnership treaty.[24]

Lukashenko said during the meeting that Belarus is ready to expand "military technical collaboration" with Iran, though Lukashenko did not specify what this cooperation could entail.[25] Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service (SZRU) warned on August 22 that Iran seeks Belarusian help to restore Iranian air defense systems and electronic warfare (EW) equipment that Israel damaged during the June 2025 war.[26] The SZRU did not specify how Belarus could help Iran restore damaged assets, and Belarus likely lacks the domestic capabilities to do so. Russia effectively controls Belarus' air defense assets within an integrated air defense system, and Russia's delays in providing S-400 systems to Iran have been a source of friction between Russia and Iran.[27] Iran may seek to increase defense industrial cooperation with Belarus, given that Israeli strikes also targeted Iranian domestic production capabilities for air defense components.[28] Belarus reportedly produces missile components for Russian air defense systems, including S-300 and S-400 systems, and Iran may hope to secure similar components from Belarus.[29] Such an arrangement would mirror the way that Russia currently uses Belarus' industrial base to source munitions and other dual-use components to augment Russian military output and sustain its war effort in Ukraine.[30] Iran and Belarus may additionally further collaborate on drone production; Lukashenko announced in March 2025 that Russia would open a drone production facility in Belarus.[31] Iranian engineers

previously traveled to Belarus in May 2023 to reportedly examine modifying local factories to produce Iranian drones, like Shahed-type models, for Russia.[32]

Iran's deepening cooperation with Belarus ultimately benefits Russia and helps sustain the Russian war effort against Ukraine, given Minsk's role as Moscow's key sanctions evasion partner. The SZRU noted that looser restrictions on Belarus' military sector may make Belarus a more compelling partner for Iran compared to Russia.[33] Iranian officials have more publicly voiced discontent with Russian military support for Iran since Russia's non-response to the Israel-Iran war.[34] Iran's expansion of ties with Belarus will not sideline Russia as Iran's primary military partner, however, and will simply allow Iran to diversify the manner in which it interacts with Moscow. ISW has long assessed that Russia has de facto annexed Belarus, and Iran may seek to benefit from this de facto annexation without having to circumvent the same suite of sanctions that are currently levied against Russia.[35]

The United States and its European partners should view Belarus' cooperation with Iran as an extension of Russo-Iranian engagement, with similar impacts and potential consequences. Russian efforts to de-facto annex Belarus ensure that Russia reaps any benefits brought to Belarus from cooperation with Iran.[36] Expanding military technical or defense industrial cooperation between Iran and Belarus will likely directly support Russia's war effort against Ukraine, given how the Kremlin has subsumed elements of Belarus' defense industrial base.[37] Iranian economic cooperation that reinforces the Belarusian economy bolsters Russia's ability to leverage Belarus as a key sanctions evasion partner.[38] Iranian-Belarusian economic cooperation furthermore takes place within and reinforces Russian-led initiatives, including the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and efforts to develop the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).[39] Russia similarly uses Belarus's relations with other Russian partners, such as the PRC, as a way to circumvent international sanctions and use engagement with these partners to support its war effort.[40] The United States and European partners should endeavor to levy the same suite of sanctions on Belarus as they do against Russia in order for sanctions on Russia to bear weight.

Defense Industrial Base (DIB) Cooperation

A recent report confirms the extent to which Russia is reliant on PRC-based entities for its production of long-range strike drones and its broader war effort. Ukraine-based, open source intelligence organization Frontelligence Insight published an investigation on August 21 indicating that Russia's Alabuga Special Economic Zone (ASEZ), which produces much of Russia's long-range strike drones, is dependent upon PRC-based entities for at least 41 components for its long-range strike drones.[41] These long-range strike drones include Russian Geran-2 and Geran-3 strike drones (Russian-produced variants of the Iranian Shahed drones) and Garpiya drones (Shahed variants with PRC components). Frontelligence Insight identified several companies as key suppliers of drone components to Russia, including:

- Beijing Micropilot UAV Control System, which resells engines to Russia from the Xiamen Limbach Aviation Engine Co.

- Redlepus TSK Vector Industrial Shenzhen Co Ltd, which exports electronic and mechanical drone components primarily to the Izhevsk Electromechanical Plant Kupol that manufactures Garpiya drones.
- Juhang Aviation Technology Co., Ltd, which sells aviation spare parts, materials, and components to Russia through the Russian TSK Vector intermediary company.
- Jinhua Hairun Power Technology Company Ltd, which primarily exports drone engines to Russia but also exports engine components, control systems, electric motors, telecommunications gear, and video systems.
- Shandong Xinyilu International Trade Co., Ltd, which exports goods including carbon fiber, engine parts, batteries, antennas, and electronic components to intermediary companies that import goods for the ASEZ.
- Fujian Jingke Technology Co., Ltd, which ships carburetors for drone engines to the ASEZ.
- Mile Hao Xiang Technology Co., Ltd, which produces aircraft engines found in Gerbera-type drones (a decoy drone resembling Shahed drones).
- Suzhou Ecod Precision Manufacturing Co. Ltd, which ships custom aluminum parts to a Russian firm supplying drone components to the ASEZ.
- Shenzhen Jinduobang Technology Co., Ltd, which produces high-tech electronic components and batteries and has shipped goods to Russia explicitly labelled to support Russia's war in Ukraine.

Frontelligence Insight assessed that Russia's claims that it has localized the production of drones used in the war in Ukraine are Russia's in-country assembly of drones using PRC imported components. ISW continues to assess that Russia's war effort in Ukraine remains dependent upon support from its allies, particularly in weapons components and sanctions evasion schemes.[42] The PRC remains a direct enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine, particularly of Russia's long-range strike campaigns that disproportionately affect Ukrainian civilians. Russian forces use Shahed-type strike drones—including the Shahed-131/136, Geran-2/3, and Garpiya drones—during nightly strikes that target Ukrainian defense and civilian infrastructure, and often utilize these drones for strike tactics that overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses.[43] Russia uses decoy drones, such as Gerberas, to augment the size of these strike packages, force Ukrainian troops to take the time to distinguish between the decoy drones and strike drones, and increase the likelihood of the strike drones and missiles hitting their targets.[44] Russia has also equipped its strike drones with warheads designed to inflict maximum damage and equipped the decoy drones with warheads that can detonate when falling or when civilians and emergency responders handle drone wreckage.[45] The PRC is directly enabling the use of all these drones and strike tactics.

Russia is also investing in a dedicated PRC-Russia trade hub at the ASEZ that will likely further facilitate the import of PRC drone components for Russian strike drones. The ASEZ announced in March 2023 a new project to construct the Deng Xiaoping logistics complex at the ASEZ's Ethylene 600 industrial park, which aimed to facilitate trade between the PRC and the Republic of Tatarstan (where the ASEZ is

located) as well as neighboring Russian federal subjects.[46] The ASEZ planned to complete the first stage of construction in the second quarter of 2024 and complete the second stage of construction and fully launch the logistics hub in 2025. The first train importing goods from the PRC to the Deng Xiaoping logistics center arrived in September 2024, and the first train exporting Russian goods to the PRC from this logistics hub departed in October 2024.[47] The Deng Xiaoping logistics center fully launched its first stage of operations by November 2024, with six railway tracks and a processing capacity of up to eight container trains per day and 2.4 million tons of cargo per year.[48] Local Tatarstan official Kamil Nazmiev said in July 2025 that Russia will complete construction of the Deng Xiaoping logistics center in 2026 and that the total investment in the center is 51.5 billion rubles (around 639 million US dollars).[49] The Deng Xiaoping trade hub illustrates the links that Tatarstan already shares with the PRC. Russia is likely to use these logistics links to further import needed dual-use components for its DIB.

Russia and the PRC are also increasing cooperation in drone technology and tactics. Russian Emergency Situations Minister Alexander Kurenkov and PRC Deputy Emergency Situations Minister Xu Jiaai signed an agreement on August 20 on cooperation in unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and unmanned ground vehicle (UGV) development as part of a broader agreement to cooperate in emergency prevention and response.[50] Kurenkov emphasized that Russia is ready to contribute to developing drone technology with the PRC and that Russia is sending specialists to PRC drone factories. Russia and the PRC will likely expand cooperation in drone technology and tactics beyond preventing or responding to emergencies. ISW recently assessed that Russia and the PRC may be setting conditions for the PRC to become involved in drone production in Russia, particularly at the ASEZ, and the August 20 Russia-PRC agreement indicates that Russia and the PRC may also be setting conditions for Russian involvement in PRC drone production.[51] Russia and the PRC are already reportedly collaborating on drone production within the PRC, which is providing Beijing with an opportunity to learn direct lessons on the development and production of combat drones from a partner that is actively using such systems in combat.[52] ISW has repeatedly assessed that Russia's partners, particularly members of the Adversary Entente, are directly benefiting from Russia's military and technological knowledge obtained through Russia's war in Ukraine.[53]

Economic and Financial Cooperation

US and Western pressure on the PRC thus far has failed to stop PRC economic support for Russia and Iran, including via purchases of sanctioned oil. US President Donald Trump announced on August 6 that the United States would double tariffs on Indian goods from 25 percent to 50 percent due to India's purchase of Russian oil and weapons. The new tariffs will take effect on August 27.[54] The threat of the tariffs prompted Indian refiners to briefly pause their purchase of Russian Urals Crude oil near the end of July, though they reportedly resumed purchases by August 18.[55] PRC refiners quickly purchased some of the relinquished oil shipments during this pause, nearly doubling the PRC's average daily imports of Russian Urals crude oil from 40,000 to 75,000 barrels per day thus far in August. Energy analysts told Bloomberg that PRC refiners likely booked 10-15 cargoes of Urals crude for October and November.[56] This increased purchase is a very small portion of the PRC's total purchases of Russian oil, however, which averaged well over 2 million barrels per day in 2024.[57] The PRC

receives most deliveries of Russian oil through the Russian Far East, while Urals crude is shipped through the Baltic and Black Seas.[58] The PRC's new purchases also did not make up for the short-term shortfall in Indian oil imports. Beijing is very likely to remain Russia's top oil importer but is unlikely to substantially increase purchases purely to support Russia if Indian imports of Russian oil fall in the long run, unless Russia offers sizable additional discounts. India and Russia have signaled that India will continue to buy Russian oil in the long run, though Bloomberg reported on August 26 that some Indian refiners are planning to slightly reduce their purchases.[59]

The US Department of State and the US Department of the Treasury announced new sanctions on August 21 targeting Iran's oil exports, which included sanctions against PRC companies. The State Department sanctioned Qingdao Port Haiye Dongjiakou Oil Products Co., which operates Dongjiakou Port in Shandong Province, and Yangshan Shengang International Petroleum Storage and Transportation Co., which operates Yangshan Port in Zhejiang Province. The State Department stated that both ports had received Iranian crude oil on US-sanctioned ships and described Dongjiakou Port as the largest entry point into the PRC for Iranian crude oil by volume.[60] The Treasury sanctions targeted owners of ships that transported Iranian oil to the PRC, including two Hong Kong-based companies.[61] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Mao Ning condemned the "illegal unilateral sanctions" on August 22 and defended "normal cooperation between countries and Iran" under international law.[62] Past US sanctions targeting Iran's "shadow fleet" of foreign-flagged tankers and PRC independent refineries have made temporary dents in PRC purchases of Iranian oil.[63] PRC state-owned Shandong Port Group banned shipments of sanctioned oil at its ports in January 2025, forcing shipments to reroute and delay their journeys.[64] The company's home province of Shandong is the destination of most sanctioned oil to the PRC and is home to many independent "teapot" refineries that rely on access to Iran's significantly discounted oil to stay profitable. PRC imports of Iranian oil appear to have recovered quickly, however, via alternate terminals owned by other companies.[65] The PRC continues to be the largest purchaser of Iranian oil by far.[66] The PRC purchases around 90 percent of Iran's oil, which only amounts to an estimated 11 percent of PRC oil imports. The PRC, by contrast, purchases around 47 percent of Russia's crude oil exports, which is about 20 percent of its imports.[67]

The PRC has devised effective sanctions evasion methods to continue trade with Russia and Iran without incurring serious harm from US and international sanctions. Seaborne shipments of sanctioned oil, which constitute the vast majority of the PRC's oil imports, are often shipped on foreign-flagged "shadow fleet" ships and transferred to other ships mid-journey, especially in the case of Iranian oil.[68] PRC customs data has not reported any oil imports from Iran since 2022 and instead falsely reports such imports as originating in Malaysia or other countries. Ships carrying the oil often "spoof" their transponder signals to disguise their true sailing path. The PRC pays for the shipments through small, US-sanctioned banks, using renminbi rather than US dollars, which minimizes exposure to the US financial system and protects larger banks from sanctions. The PRC and Russia have also collaborated on ways to evade sanctions in other kinds of trade, with the European Union estimating in May 2025 that the PRC is responsible for 80 percent of circumventions of sanctions on Russia.[69] Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin began a visit to the PRC on August 25,

ahead of a state visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin, and said that his meeting agenda included discussing how to counteract sanctions pressure and expand trade relations, suggesting that the Russia-PRC relationship remains a strategic economic priority for the Kremlin.[70]

The PRC has been able to ignore external pressure to stop trading with Iran and Russia because it is a critical trading partner for most of the countries behind the sanctions regimes. US President Trump has not levied the same punitive tariffs on the PRC as he did on India for purchasing Russian oil. European countries are likewise unwilling to seriously jeopardize their trade relationship with Beijing, even though Russia relies on the PRC to sustain its war in Ukraine.[71] Sanctions on major PRC banks and other institutions that do business with both Russia and Western countries could seriously disrupt international supply chains.[72]

The PRC is unlikely to meaningfully reduce its purchase of discounted Russian and Iranian oil until its other trading partners credibly threaten punitive measures that exceed the economic benefits of purchasing the discounted oil. The PRC's outsized role in supporting Russia's and Iran's economies gives it significant leverage over both countries, but it has not appeared to significantly exercise this leverage for geopolitical ends. It has instead enjoyed highly discounted prices while maintaining a diverse range of other suppliers, suggesting that economic calculus primarily drives its energy purchases. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Guo Jiakun said on July 30 that the PRC will ensure its energy supply according to its national interests and that coercion and threats of tariffs will not achieve anything.[73] The PRC's overall trade volume with both the United States and the European Union is much higher than its trade volume with Russia or Iran; however, this consideration may have already restrained Beijing from more openly supporting Russia's war.[74] The PRC may reduce its support for Iran or Russia if it faces the risk of seriously jeopardizing its other trade relations, particularly with Europe.

Political and Diplomatic Cooperation

Russia proposed a draft resolution that would reportedly further delay the potential imposition of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions on Iran.[75] Unspecified sources told UK-based Amwaj Media that Russia submitted a draft resolution to the UNSC that would extend UNSC Resolution 2231, which endorses the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and includes an extension of the snapback mechanism on the condition that it cannot be triggered for six months.[76] Triggering the snapback mechanism would reimpose UNSC sanctions on Iran—an outcome that Iran and its partners are working hard to avoid. The Russian proposal to extend the snapback mechanism is similar to a proposal that the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) offered to Iran in July 2025.[77] The E3 offered to extend its August 31 deadline to trigger the snapback mechanism as long as Iran fulfilled certain conditions, including cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), resuming nuclear talks with the United States, and “accounting” for its 60-percent enriched uranium stockpile.[78]

Russia's proposal reportedly lacks any preconditions for Iran and prevents the E3 from triggering the snapback mechanism for six months, which Iran likely views as a more favorable outcome than the E3's promise to trigger the mechanism by August 31.[79] Iran

has repeatedly opposed the E3 proposal.[80] Iran is additionally very unlikely to meet the E3's conditions before the E3's end-of-August deadline, and the Russian draft resolution is therefore likely a much more attractive option for Tehran.[81] Iran has not yet expressed public support for the Russian draft resolution. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Esmail Baghaei said on August 26 that Iran is reviewing the text of the proposal.[82] An Iranian delegation met with E3 officials on August 26 to discuss potential snapback sanctions and a snapback mechanism deadline extension.[83] An unspecified source told Axios that Iran offered "very little to work with" towards meeting the E3's conditions.[84]

The Russian proposal likely reflects coordinated diplomatic efforts between Russia, Iran, and possibly the PRC to counter the imposition of snapback sanctions. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi discussed potential snapback sanctions on August 25 in separate phone calls with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov, respectively.[85] Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi also called PRC Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu on August 24 to discuss a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue.[86] Unspecified informed sources told Amwaj that the PRC would co-sponsor the Russian draft resolution.[87]

Russia's proposal to extend the snapback mechanism highlights Russia's routine use of its position on the UNSC to provide Iran with diplomatic cover on the international stage.[88] Russia will likely continue its diplomatic support for Iran if the E3 triggers the snapback mechanism. Araghchi told Iranian state media on August 14 that Iran, Russia, and the PRC have "tools to respond" if trilateral efforts to stop the imposition of snapback sanctions fail.[89] It remains unclear how Russia or the PRC will adapt their economic and military support for Iran to mitigate the effects of UNSC sanctions, however. Russia and the PRC's responses to the imposition of snapback sanctions will serve as powerful indicators of how the Adversary Entente may rebalance in response to rising pressure from the United States, European Union, and other UN member states.



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