



ADVERSARY ENTENTE

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Key takeaways:

- Iran may be preparing to expand its GNSS cooperation with the PRC. This would reflect a broader trend of the Adversary Entente using alternative satellite navigation systems to enhance interoperability and challenge the global dominance of US satellite technology.
- The PRC and Russia conducted their annual combined naval exercise near the Russian port of Vladivostok. It marked the first time that a PLA submarine participated in this particular exercise series.
- The United States threatened to increase tariffs on the PRC if it continues to import sanctioned Russian oil. The reduction of PRC imports of Russian oil would have a much greater effect on the Russian economy than on the PRC's.
- The PRC, Russia, and Iran have continued to pursue greater media cooperation, likely to ensure alignment on certain narratives and rhetorical issues. These countries may share lessons with one another on how to influence the information space.

Defense and Military-Technical Cooperation

Iran may be preparing to expand its Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) cooperation with the People's Republic of China (PRC). This would reflect a broader trend of the Adversary Entente using alternative satellite navigation systems to enhance their interoperability and challenge the global dominance of US satellite technology. Iranian officials and state media have discussed in recent days the possibility of switching from the US Global Positioning System (GPS) to the PRC version known as the BeiDou system. They framed the plans as meant to advance Iranian “technological independence” and challenge “Western digital hegemony.” This discussion follows Iran reportedly experiencing significant GPS disruptions during the 12-day war against Israel.[1] Iranian state media reported disruptions to internet connectivity and navigation systems across the country. Iranian Deputy Communications and Information Technology Minister Ehsan Chitsaz told Iranian media on July 13 that “the enemy” (in reference to the United States) uses GPS, which has encouraged Iran to seek “alternative options such as BeiDou.”[2] Chitsaz also confirmed that Iran deliberately jammed GPS from within Iran “for military and security purposes” during the war.[3] The Iranian regime may have caused these disruptions to interfere with US and Israeli military operations. ISW has previously reported on how

Iran has likely learned GPS jamming and spoofing techniques from Russia in recent years.[4] It is noteworthy that Iran appears interested in adopting the BeiDou system rather than the Russian version known as GLONASS. Iranian leaders seem to have looked increasingly to the PRC for support in recent weeks since Russia declined to provide anything meaningful to Iran during the 12-day war.[5] Russia recently launched a communications satellite into orbit on behalf of Iran, however, demonstrating that Tehran and Moscow continue to cooperate regarding space technologies.[6]

US adversaries have long viewed GNSS technologies as an arena of competition with the United States. The Soviet Union developed GLONASS in the late 1970s in response to the US development of the GPS system.[7] The PRC has likewise invested in its BeiDou system to gain "a competitive edge" against the United States, especially since the launch of the BeiDou-3 system in June 2020.[8] The PRC and Russia separately signed an agreement in February 2022 on "ensuring complementarity" and synchronization between the BeiDou and GLONASS systems. They more recently signed contracts providing for the establishment of BeiDou stations in three Russian cities and GLONASS stations in three PRC cities.[9] Iran adopting the BeiDou system would further align it with the PRC and Russia regarding space technologies. Such trilateral GNSS integration could have civilian and military implications, since GNSS can be used for military navigation and weapons targeting.[10]

The PRC and Russia conducted their annual combined naval exercise — known as Maritime Interaction/ Joint Sea — near the Russian port of Vladivostok on August 1-5.[11] The exercise included a two-day, shore-based planning phase and a three-day live-fire implementation phase, featuring drills in surface-to-surface, anti-submarine warfare, air defense, and submarine rescue. The participating PLA forces included the guided missile destroyers Shaoxing and Urumqi, supply ship Qiandaohu, rescue ship Xihu, and submarine Great Wall 210, as well as fixed-wing aircraft, ship-borne helicopters, and marines. Participating Russian forces included the destroyer Admiral Tributs, light frigate Gromkiy, submarine rescue ship Belousov, submarine Volkhov as well as fixed-wing aircraft, ship-borne helicopters, and marines. The PRC and Russia have conducted this naval exercise series since 2012. This most recent iteration was the eleventh and marked the first time that a PLA submarine has participated.

PRC-based military experts boasted that the exercise highlighted the strength of the current Sino-Russian relationship. PRC state-owned tabloid Global Times cited military affairs expert Wang Yunfei, who said that the involvement of submarines, which are highly classified systems, shows the deepening of the PRC-Russia relationship.[12] PLA expert Zhang Junshe said that this is the first time that the exercise has listed the theme of "jointly countering security threats in the Western Pacific" in addition to "jointly safeguarding strategic maritime routes." The new language suggests that the two countries may be using the scheduled exercise to posture against the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific and are trying to increase interoperability for future combat operations. The exercise took place against the backdrop of an exchange of threats between the United States and Russia, with US President Donald Trump saying on July 31 that he has redeployed two nuclear submarines to "appropriate regions" in response to

nuclear threats by Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev.[13] Japan's 2025 Defense White Paper expressed concern that the repeated combined exercises were demonstrations of force against Japan.[14] Russia is unlikely to directly fight in a war in the Taiwan Strait or Korean Peninsula alongside the PRC, but it may help Asian allies (namely the PRC and North Korea) by harassing and threatening Japan to prevent Japanese intervention. Press statements from both the PRC and Russia stated that the exercise was routine, defensive, and not targeted at any third countries, however.[15] Both PRC and Russian source routinely use this language to describe the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship.[16]

The PRC and Russia have significantly increased their military cooperation across all domains, especially maritime, since 2012. They held a record high of 11 combined exercises, patrols, or military competitions in 2024, mostly in the Indo-Pacific.[17] The most recent naval exercise described here is only the second PRC-Russia exercise this year after a trilateral exercise with Iran in March 2025. These countries will likely conduct more in the following months though.[18] PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Zhang Xiaogang said that the two sides would conduct their sixth annual maritime patrol in the Indo-Pacific immediately following the exercise.[19]

Defense Industrial Base (DIB) Cooperation

Nothing significant to report.

Economic and Financial Cooperation

The Adversary Entente has continued to collaborate illicitly to support their economies and circumvent international sanctions. North Korea-focused research organization NK Pro reported on July 31 that at least five UN-sanctioned North Korean oil tankers operated in PRC territorial waters between May and July 2025, citing commercially available marine tracking software.[20] NK Pro reported that three of the North Korean tankers had previously visited Vostochny Port — a port in Primorsky Krai from which North Korea frequently imports Russian fuel.[21] North Korea is subject to a UN-imposed cap on refined oil imports. UN member states must disclose all North Korea-bound oil shipments to the United Nations.[22] Russia has defied UN sanctions to directly supply oil to North Korea since at least March 2024.[23] Neither the PRC nor Russia have reported any fuel deliveries to North Korea in recent months.

Russia, meanwhile, remains heavily reliant on the PRC for economic support amid heavy international sanctions. Russian Export Center Director General Viktoria Nikishina told Kremlin newswire TASS on August 4 that PRC demand for Russian products has risen and that Russia will continue to prioritize trade with the PRC.[24] Russia-PRC trade increased by about 3.9 billion US dollars between 2023 and 2024, according to the PRC General Administration of Customs.[25] Russia's economic reliance on the PRC, which increased after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, remains deeply asymmetric; Russian goods only comprised about five percent of the PRC's total imports in 2023.[26]

The entente has continued to exploit regional economic integration initiatives to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions. Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali met with Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Secretary Bakytzhan Sagintayev in Moscow on July 31. The EAEU, which is a Russia-led regional economic integration initiative, signed a free

trade agreement with Iran that went into effect in May 2025.[27] IRGC-affiliated media reported that the trade volume between Iran and EAEU member states is currently 6 billion US dollars and is reportedly expected to increase to 12 billion US dollars in a "short-term" period.[28] Iranian cooperation with the EAEU is part of a broader effort to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions.[29] Given Russia's outsized role in the EAEU, Iranian cooperation with this economic bloc benefits Russia both economically and reputationally.

The PRC may limit its economic ties with Russia to avoid further US tariffs. Western media reported on July 29 that US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent warned the PRC during recent talks in Stockholm that the United States may levy high tariffs on the PRC if it continues to import sanctioned Russian oil.[30] Major PRC oil companies have halted or reduced imports of Russian oil since January 2025 over concerns about US secondary sanctions on Russia's "shadow fleet" of foreign-flagged tankers, suggesting that the PRC may at least partly respond to further US demands.[31]

The possible reduction of PRC imports of Russian oil would far more significantly impact the Russian economy than the PRC's. The PRC has effectively supplanted Europe as Russia's largest oil and fuel consumer since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. PRC imports of Russian oil have increased each year since 2022 and averaged 2.2 million barrels of oil per day in 2025.[32] But the PRC maintains a diversified supply of energy to avoid disruption. Russia, on the other hand, relies heavily on the PRC as its main customer of oil.

The nature of the Sino-Iranian economic relationship suggests that the threat of punitive economic measures may not deter the PRC from importing Russian energy entirely, however. The PRC has continued to purchase Iranian oil despite heavy international sanctions on Iranian oil exports since 2019. The Sino-Iranian economic relationship is similarly unbalanced like that of the PRC and Russia. The PRC offers a critical economic lifeline for the heavily sanctioned Iranian economy by buying 90 percent of its oil, which Iran sells at a significant discount favorable to the PRC. Iranian oil only comprises about 13.6 percent of the PRC's total oil imports, however.[33] The PRC purchases even more oil from Iran's Gulf State rivals than it does from Iran.[34]

Political and Diplomatic Cooperation

The Adversary Entente has pursued greater media cooperation likely to ensure alignment on certain narratives and rhetorical issues. Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali met with Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova in Moscow on July 30 to discuss expanding Russo-Iranian media cooperation.[35] Iranian media reported that Jalali and Zakharova exchanged views on "ways to combat fake news and the flow of destructive news" aimed at "destroying bilateral relations between Iran and Russia." Jalali met with Zakharova over the backdrop of recent Iranian efforts to gain greater control over the domestic information space following the Israel-Iran war.[36] Russia excels at information space control and manipulation, and Iran may seek to learn and implement such lessons in a domestic context. The Jalali-Zakharova meeting follows a July 11 meeting between Russian Ambassador to the PRC Igor Morgulov and director of Russian government newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* Pavel Negoitsa, during which Morgulov and Negoitsa discussed cooperation between Russian and PRC state media outlets.[37] The Russia-

PRC media meeting, similar to the Iran-Russia meeting, stressed the importance of using the media space to promote “an objective information agenda” that benefits the interest of Beijing and Moscow.[38] Both the PRC and Iran look to Russia as a model of how to implement cognitive warfare agendas, and media cooperation between the PRC, Iran, and Russia highlights a shared desire between members of the entente to coordinate narratives and rhetoric in the wider information space.[39]



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