

Russia–Iran Strategic Partnership and Global Power Shifts (2015–2025)

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Abstract

Confronting U.S. dominance, specifically since 2015, the international order has drawn Russia and Iran into closer strategic alignment, making their partnership a revealing case study in multipolar realignment. With an emphasis on the military, economic, and diplomatic aspects of bilateral relations, this article analyses their development since 2015 and places them within the theoretical frameworks of Complex Interdependence and New World Order. The analysis emphasises growing collaboration in energy investments, multilateral coordination through SCO and BRICS, and sanctions evasion, drawing on events from the Syrian conflict to the 2025 Strategic Partnership Agreement. However, the partnership remains pragmatic and limited: the absence of a mutual-defense clause, Russia's restrained stance during the June 2025 Iran–Israel war, and competition in overlapping energy markets underscore persistent mistrust. Findings suggest that while both states use their alignment to counter U.S. influence and advance regional autonomy, strategic caution and divergent loyalties prevent a full alliance. The article provides insight into the strategic balancing acts of regional powers in a changing global order by showing how the Russia-Iran relationship embodies the opportunities and limitations of multipolar collaboration.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Global Power, Russia, Iran.

Introduction

The contemporary international order is at a pivotal moment as the decline of U.S. unipolarity gives way to the rise of new global power centers. Among the most significant shifts is the evolving strategic partnership between Russia and Iran, particularly since 2015, and this partnership goes beyond tactical alignment, reflecting a larger transformation in global geopolitics toward multipolarity and the diminishing influence of Western powers.

This partnership has evolved across multiple dimensions, encompassing military cooperation, economic collaboration, and diplomatic coordination, and bilateral trade has reached record levels, with both countries developing alternative financial systems to circumvent Western sanctions. The January 2025 strategic partnership agreement between Russia and Iran further institutionalized these ties, underscoring the growing alignment in their military and economic relations.

Historically, the relationship between Russia and Iran has been shaped by suspicion, competitiveness, and cautious cooperation. This evolving partnership and the emergence of a challenging superpower like China to the United States' hegemony as a leader indicate the increasing autonomy of regional powers like Russia and Iran, who are challenging existing hierarchies to reshape the global order. To understand this partnership, one must consider not only bilateral cooperation but also the broader structural changes in international politics from U.S. dominance to a multipolar system where regional powers assert themselves. Drawing on the New World Order theory, this article reveals how the partnership transcends bilateral interests, aligning with a larger vision for global restructuring. Furthermore, Nye's complex interdependence theory offers crucial metrics for evaluating the true extent of their collaboration.

1. The Evolution of the Iran-Russia Partnership (Post-2015)

Russia-Iran partnership after 2015, as significantly shaped by their coordinated involvement in the Syrian conflict. The civil war became a strategic testing ground for joint military operations, where Russia's aerial campaigns complemented Iran's deployment of proxy forces such as Hezbollah to support the Assad regime and secure key territories (Souleimanov et al., 2017). This cooperation not only enhanced their interoperability in asymmetric warfare but also marked a broader shift in regional power dynamics following the U.S. withdrawal. Russia's intervention aligned with its long-standing goal of reasserting great-power status, using Syria to safeguard access to the Mediterranean and challenge Western influence, a strategy rooted in historical ambitions for "warm-water ports" and energy diplomacy (Vassiliev, 2018). The success of their partnership in Syria has had lasting strategic implications. For Iran, Russian air support helped preserve critical land corridors connecting Tehran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, bolstering the "axis of resistance." For Russia, Iran's ground forces provided an effective means of advancing objectives without substantial troop deployments, minimizing political risks (Parker, 2017).

The U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 marked a critical turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics, accelerating the strategic convergence between Iran and Russia. The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, which reimposed severe sanctions on Iran's oil and financial sectors, destabilized the diplomatic gains of the 2015 agreement and compelled Tehran to seek alternative partners for economic survival, with Russia emerging as a key ally (Maleki, 2018). For Moscow, the U.S. retreat created a power vacuum that it was eager to fill, allowing it to enhance its regional influence and position itself as a vital diplomatic actor (Rumer and Sokolsky, 2019). The pressure from secondary sanctions and financial isolation pushed Iran toward deepening bilateral cooperation with Russia, particularly in the energy and defense sectors.

In 2022, a significant shift occurred in the Iran-Russian military alliance. As the war in Ukraine began, Russia also began to face European sanctions and international isolation. Therefore, it turned this relationship from a cautious one to a fuller collaboration (Waller et al., 2025).

Iran officially joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as its ninth full member on July 4, 2023.¹ After 44 years, this was Iran's first entry into a major regional organization. This marked another important event for the Iran-Russia partnership. Iran's trade with SCO member states increased by 5.5% to \$37.1 billion from March 2023 to January 2024 (specific figures for 2024 and 2025 are not yet available).²

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, dealt a major blow to both Iran and Russia, who had invested heavily in Syria as a strategic ally. Despite spending \$30–50 billion³ and \$27.5 billion⁴. The question that thus emerges after considering the financial, temporal, and human costs, as well as the geopolitical significance of Syria, particularly for Iran, is why these two regional powers permitted Assad's regime to fall in just 11 days without any opposition?

Iran's military and economic support had aimed to secure a regional corridor to Hezbollah, while Russia sought to preserve its Mediterranean foothold (David Adesnik et al., 2019). However, years of corruption, military decay, and overreliance on foreign militias left Assad's regime brittle. Iran's withdrawal could be in response to economic pressure, a crumbling Hezbollah, and renewed attention to its nuclear program (Grajewski, 2024). Meanwhile, Russia, distracted by the war in Ukraine, prioritized the safety of its military assets and redirected resources westward.⁵ As a result, Iran's regional strategy is damaged, cutting off its land bridge to Lebanon, isolating its proxies, and bringing Israeli forces closer to its borders (Sanam Vakil, 2024). So now Syria is acting as a bridge once again, but for a different side, while undermining Russia's image as a reliable power broker (Giorgio Cafiero, 2025). This incident strengthened an existing wave of mistrust of Russia among Iranian officials, despite the lack of clear evidence of an explicit agreement between Russia and the United States, Syria, for Ukraine concessions.

Following President Masoud Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow on January 17, 2025, Iran and Russia signed a 20-year comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement. With 47 articles covering a wide range, such as cooperation in technology, information, and cybersecurity, peaceful nuclear energy collaboration, counterterrorism efforts, regional cooperation, environmental issues, the Caspian Sea, and fighting money

¹ Nigar Bayramli, "Iran Becomes Full Member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Caspian News*, July 6, 2023, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-becomes-full-member-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization-2023-7-5-51/>.

² Adam Lucente, "Iran's Araqchi to Meet China, Russia FMs at Shanghai Cooperation Meeting," *Al-Monitor*, July 14, 2025, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/07/irans-araghchi-meet-china-russia-fms-shanghai-cooperation-meeting>.

³ Iran's Debt Trap Strategy in Syria," *Al Estiklal*, <https://www.alestiklal.net/en/article/reaching-50-billion-how-iran-ensnared-the-syrian-regime-in-debts-for-the-next-five-decades>;

⁴ Russia Takes a Hit as Syria's Assad Falls," *The Moscow Times*, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/09/russia-takes-a-political-military-and-economic-hit-as-syrias-assad-falls-from-power-a87266>

⁵ Will Weissert, "Assad's Downfall Is a Humbling Blow to Russia. How Will It Affect Putin's Prestige?" Associated Press, December 9, 2024.

laundering and organised crime, the treaty is an indication of the two nations' growing relationship.¹ Both the Russian and Iranian parliaments ratified the treaty not long after it was signed. Iran's Guardian Council signed the agreement on June 11, and Vladimir Putin signed it into law on April 21.²

The 12-day Iran-Israel war from June 13-24, 2025, exposed the limitations of the Iran-Russia strategic partnership. During the conflict, Russia gave Iran only rhetorical support despite its recent strategic agreement, putting its regional balancing strategy ahead of its commitment to its Iranian partner (Jalilvand et al, 2025). Iranian military installations and nuclear facilities were targeted by Israeli forces at the start of the war, and Iran responded with ballistic missiles and drones. The United States joined the conflict on June 22, striking Iranian nuclear facilities.³ Many Iranians expected Russia to support Iran beyond words, but it didn't just turn its back; in short, the twenty-year "comprehensive partnership" is explicitly not a mutual-defense treaty⁴; it pledges cooperation but stops short of automatic military aid. Russian officials emphasized this distinction as soon as airstrikes began, signaling limited obligations. The Russia-Ukraine war has absorbed manpower, precision munitions, and diplomatic capital, leaving scant capacity for a second high-intensity front⁵. Each spike in Brent crude buffered Russia's sanctions-hit budget. A protracted Middle-East crisis, therefore, served Moscow's interests better than costly intervention.⁶ Additionally, it appears that Russia is defining its foreign policy as a mediator in the South Caucasus and the Middle East.

2. New World Order Theory and the Iranian-Russian Partnership

The Iran-Russia partnership illustrates Anne-Marie Slaughter's concept of a networked world order, where disaggregated institutions collaborate across borders to achieve mutual goals. Since 2015, both countries have deepened ties through multilateral platforms like the SCO and BRICS, pursued major joint energy projects such as Gazprom's \$40 billion investment in Iran⁷, and coordinated military actions in Syria—all reflecting trans-governmental cooperation beyond traditional alliances. Their creation of alternative financial systems to bypass Western sanctions also exemplifies how states pool functional authority while retaining sovereignty (Slaughter, 2004). Russia's embrace of multipolarity and Iran's strategic role in the "Greater Eurasia"⁸ project reinforce Slaughter's vision of decentralized, pragmatic alliances shaped by shared systemic pressures rather than ideology. This approach explains how historical rivals find common cause in counterbalancing U.S. hegemony.

The new world order reflects a shift from the traditional Westphalian system of sovereign states to a more complex global architecture involving multiple actors and forms of governance. As emerging powers like China, India, and Russia assert more strategic autonomy and support alternative institutions, power is shifting away from traditional Western centers like the United States and its affiliated institutions. Meanwhile, regional powers like Iran are using geopolitical realignments and economic integration to increase their influence within their respective domains, making the world more divided and multipolar (Haass, 2020).

3. Analyzing the Iran-Russia Partnership Through Complex Interdependence Theory.

Complex Interdependence Theory challenges traditional realist views by emphasizing the multidimensional nature of global relations. It highlights three key principles: diverse channels of interaction beyond diplomacy, the absence of a fixed hierarchy of issues, and the declining role of military force (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Their concepts of vulnerability and sensitivity interdependence offer useful tools for analyzing the depth and resilience of partnerships like that between Iran and Russia.

Multiple Channels of Interaction

The Iran-Russia partnership exemplifies Keohane and Nye's notion of complex interdependence through three tightly integrated channels. First, military cooperation has increased significantly since 2022, with Iran

¹ *Inside the Strategic Partnership Treaty Between Iran and Russia*, "Middle East Eye", published January 14, 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-russia-inside-strategic-partnership-treaty>.

² *Iranian-Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, Wikipedia, (July 16, 2025), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian-Russian_Treaty_on_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership.

³ *Visualising 12 Days of the Israel-Iran Conflict*, "Al Jazeera", June 26, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/26/visualising-12-days-of-the-israel-iran-conflict>.

⁴ Alexander Palmer and Sofiya Syzonenko, "The Limits of Russia's Friendship: How Moscow Sees the Iran Crisis," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 8, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/limits-russias-friendship-how-moscow-sees-iran-crisis>.

⁵ Elena Davlikanova, *Atlantic Council*, July 2, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/iran-becomes-the-latest-russian-ally-to-discover-the-limits-of-kremlin-support/>.

⁶ Nikita Smagin, "Could Russia Use the Israel-Iran Conflict to Its Advantage?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 19, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/06/russia-iran-partnership-future?lang=en>.

⁷ *Iran, Russia Sign \$40 Billion Energy Cooperation Deal*, "Caspian News", July 19, 2022, <https://www.caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-russia-sign-40-billion-energy-cooperation-deal-2022-7-19-0/>.

⁸ Agha Hussain, "How the Ukraine Crisis Benefits Iran's Eurasia Strategy," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 7, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2022/07/how-the-ukraine-crisis-benefits-irans-eurasia-strategy?lang=en>.

providing Russia with reportedly 400 ballistic missiles and about 6,000 Shahed drones, as well as joint exercises and support for the Assad regime. Joint military exercises and intelligence sharing agreements formalize these security channels.¹² Second, economic and energy ties have deepened: bilateral trade surged to \$4.8 billion in 2024, an EEU free-trade deal in May 2025 promises steep tariff cuts, and Russia's \$40 billion gas-field investment marks its largest energy bet in Iran since 1979.³ According to Reuters, Iran signs a \$4 billion deal for Russian companies to develop seven Iranian oilfields, and Russia agreed to supply Iran with up to 55 billion cubic meters of gas per year. Lastly, diplomatic coordination via BRICS, the SCO, and parallel financial systems (local-currency swaps and crypto)⁴ and the agreement to integrate their national payment systems (Shetab and Mir)⁵ allow both states to circumvent Western-led institutions and sanctions, all of which bind them in mutually constraining, multi-issue cooperation.

Absence of Issue Hierarchy

A balanced issue hierarchy that gives equal weight to political, military, and economic concerns defines the relationship. Both states collaborate intensively on sanctions evasion, linking their national payment systems (SPFS and SEPAM)⁶ and developing alternative financial channels, while treating energy cooperation on par with security agreements. In terms of politics, they support a multipolar world order as fervently as they do military integration, countering Western influence together, and aligning diplomatically in international forums.⁷ Each power pursues a complex strategy that concurrently capitalizes on economic interests, security cooperation, and political influence throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, ensuring that military imperatives do not overshadow larger aspirations.⁸

Declining Utility of Military Force

The Iran–Russia partnership highlights a paradox in which military force has both waned in utility yet remains relevant. Despite deep defense cooperation, their 2025 strategic pact eschews any formal mutual-defense clause, and Russia's backing during the June 2025 Iran–Israel clash was limited to rhetoric rather than action.⁹ Instead, as was discussed, both states rely heavily on economic instruments, sanctions-busting mechanisms, energy diplomacy, and alternative financial networks to advance their objectives. However, real-world limitations—Iran's recent military setbacks and Russia's focus on the war in Ukraine—have limited their ability to use force, underscoring the tensions that exist within their intricate interdependence.

Mutual Sensitivities and Vulnerabilities

Sensitive interdependence is evident between Russia and Iran, as short-term changes in one partner's policies have a swift impact on the other. Economically, Tehran's access to international markets fluctuates with Moscow's decisions on energy cooperation and sanctions-busting mechanisms.¹⁰ In terms of military capabilities, the bilateral transfer of Russian advanced systems and Iranian drones establishes an instantaneous, reciprocal reliance: any interruption in the flow of components or technology weakens the operational capacities

¹ HESA Shahed 136," Wikipedia, last modified July 17, 2025 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HESA_Shahed_136#cite_note-75.

² Giorgio Cafiero, "Iran and Russia Enter a New Level of Military Cooperation," Stimson Center, August X, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/>.

³ Russian-Backed Union Free Trade Deal With Iran Goes Into Effect. Reuters, May 15, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russian-backed-union-free-trade-deal-with-iran-goes-into-effect-2025-05-15/>.

⁴ Sanctions: Iranians Flock to Crypto; Int'l Actions Target Russia," Chainalysis, published approximately February 2025, <https://www.chainalysis.com/blog/crypto-crime-sanctions-2025/>.

⁵ Iran-Russia Monetary Agreement Implemented, Bank Networks Connected," Tehran Times, January 18, 2025, cited in IRIB, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/508763/Iran-Russia-monetary-agreement-implemented-bank-networks-connected>.

⁶ Maziar Motamedi, "What's behind Iran and Russia's efforts to link banking systems?" Al Jazeera, February 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/8/whats-behind-iran-and-russias-efforts-to-link-banking-systems>.

⁷ Russia, China & Iran to Cooperate More in BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Amidst Nuclear Talks," Russia's Pivot to Asia, ca. April 2025. <https://russiaspivottoasia.com/russia-china-iran-to-cooperate-more-in-brics-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-amidst-nuclear-talks/>.

⁸ Russia-Iran Strategic Partnership Treaty Highlights Bilateral Priorities," Caspian Policy Center, published April or May 2025, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security/russia-iran-strategic-partnership-treaty-highlights-bilateral-priorities>.

⁹ Palmer, Alexander, and Sofiya Syzonenko. "The Limits of Russia's Friendship: How Moscow Sees the Iran Crisis." Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 8, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/limits-russias-friendship-how-moscow-sees-iran-crisis>.

¹⁰ Arman Mahmoudian, "Economic Incompatibility Limits Russia–Iran Ties," Stimson Center, July 13, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/economic-incompatibility-limits-russia-iran-ties/>.

of both nations.¹ When either government's position on important international issues changes, they quickly reevaluate their joint diplomatic strategies in organizations like the SCO and BRICS.²

Their vulnerability interdependence is substantial, but it is also inevitably constrained by strategic and structural limitations. Notwithstanding close cooperation, competition in overlapping energy export markets restricts full economic integration³, and Russia's indifferent response to Iran's 2025 conflict with Israel exposed the flaws in Iran's security guarantees (Jalilvand, 2025). Iran should naturally be more cautious in its dealings with Russia because of Israel's close ties with that country.⁴ Both countries' other alliances with China, India, and other nations reduce the costs of disengagement and limit their reciprocal influence. They also undermine trust by constantly spying on each other, revealing the calculated caution that underlies their seeming unity.⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Russia–Iran strategic partnership, while strengthened in recent years, is not a deeply rooted alliance. The Iran-Israel war in June 2025 made the partnership's limitations very evident. Russia only offered rhetorical support as its 20-year cooperation agreement with Iran excludes any duty to defend one another and centers on its role as a mediator in Middle Eastern foreign policy. President Putin himself noted that their agreements “do not include a joint defense deal,” acknowledging that Moscow had offered joint air-defense projects, which Tehran declined. This Iranian hesitancy highlights a persistent strategic mistrust and a reluctance to combine its security with Russia's too closely. Putin emphasized that “almost two million Russian-speaking people live in Israel,” effectively calling Israel “a Russian-speaking country” to justify Moscow's caution during the war. Such comments highlight why Iranian leaders doubt Russia's commitment to a conflict against Israel. Tehran fears that integrating its defense systems with Russia could expose it to espionage or leaks, given Moscow's friendliness with Tel Aviv. In fact, both nations have spied on one another while still being partners, demonstrating the careful planning that goes into their collaboration. Despite increased collaboration, the partnership falls short of the complete trust and shared risks that define a strong alliance because of all these problems.

Recent events have only reinforced Iran's sense of distance. Key military support that Iran anticipated from Russia never materialized when it mattered most. For instance, despite a highly publicised 2023 agreement for cutting-edge Sukhoi-35 fighter jets, Iran's ageing air force was severely outmatched because these aircraft were not present during Israel's air assault. Similarly, Russia's S-400 air defence batteries were not delivered as promised, which made Iran's skies more vulnerable. Absences underscored that Iran cannot rely on Moscow for immediate, robust defense aid. In the war's aftermath, Tehran has pivoted to diversify its strategic partnerships, especially by looking East. Iranian analysts and officials publicly contend that Iran “must expand cooperation with other partners and rethink parts of the relationship with Russia” in delicate military areas. In practice, this has meant deepening ties with China. Within weeks of the conflict, Iran's defence minister met with his Chinese counterpart to discuss possible arms purchases, including cutting-edge radars and contemporary Chinese J-10 fighter jets, to acquire capabilities that Russia had either refused to supply or had been hesitant to provide. There were even reports (officially denied) that China sent surface-to-air missile systems to help replenish Iran's air defenses after the Israeli strikes. This flurry of outreach to Beijing reflects Tehran's determination to hedge its bets. Russia's cautious approach and slow arms deliveries have angered Iran, which is taking steps to make sure it is not dependent on any one customer. Iran seeks to find alternate sources of military and economic assistance outside of Russia's sphere of influence by courting China (and preserving ties with other nations like India).

Ultimately, the Iran–Russia partnership emerges as pragmatic and limited rather than a full-fledged alliance. It is motivated by shared interests to manage regional conflicts, avoid sanctions, and offset Western pressure. But it remains constrained by each side's divergent loyalties and strategic caution. Iran will probably continue to work with Moscow in convenient areas (trade, energy, and limited military coordination) in the future, but it will also strengthen its relations with China and other countries to protect its interests. Maintaining tight ties with both China and Russia is essential to Iran's ambition of becoming a regional hub for transit and energy. Iran and Russia will continue to collaborate against shared adversaries and American dominance in a

¹ Emil Avdaliani, “Iran and Russia Enter a New Level of Military Cooperation,” *Stimson Center*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/>.

² Silvia Boltuc, “Iran's Diplomatic Efforts Towards China, Russia, and India at the SCO Summit,” *Special Eurasia*, July 16, 2025, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/07/16/iran-sco-india-russia-china/>.

³ Arman Mahmoudian, “Economic Incompatibility Limits Russia–Iran Ties,” *Stimson Center*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/economic-incompatibility-limits-russia-iran-ties/>.

⁴ *Bilateral Relations*, “Embassy of Israel in Moscow,” accessed July 20, 2025, <https://new.embassies.gov.il/russia/en/the-embassy/bilateral-relations>.

⁵ *Espionage and Distrust Between Russia and Iran — A Comparative Analysis with Chinese Intelligence Activities in Russia*, *Lansing Institute*, July 18, 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/07/18/espionage-and-distrust-between-russia-and-iran-a-comparative-analysis-with-chinese-intelligence-activities-in-russia/>.

shifting multipolar world, but their partnership will remain a strategic balancing act, in which both parties maintain flexibility. Such a conclusion reinforces that the “strategic partnership” is real but not absolute, marked by solidarity in rhetoric and certain arenas, yet tempered by mistrust and a lack of deeper defense integration.

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