

The Axis Behind Iran: How China, Russia, and North Korea Sustain Tehran's Military Threat

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In justifying Operation Epic Fury, President Trump [warned](#) that Iran's "menacing activities" threaten "the United States, our troops, our bases overseas, and our allies throughout the world," pointing in particular to Tehran's nuclear and missile programs. But Iran did not build its most dangerous military capabilities alone. For decades, China, Russia, and North Korea—which together with Iran form the so-called "Axis of Upheaval"—have helped develop, sustain, and rebuild the very programs now targeted by U.S. and Israeli military operations. Critically, after suffering major battlefield losses during the October 2024 Israeli campaign and the June 2025 12-Day War, Iran was able to rapidly reconstitute key elements of its missile and military infrastructure with external support—accelerating its recovery and restoring its ability to threaten the United States and its regional allies and partners in a matter of months. In the lead-up to February 28, 2026, this support included dual-use items for ballistic missile production; intelligence and surveillance capabilities; and air defense systems that strengthened Iran's ability to threaten the United States and its partners and counter attacks.

Since the war began, China and Russia have shielded Iran diplomatically and provided indirect assistance to its war effort, including intelligence support, and, in Russia's case, technical assistance for Iran's drone operations—while stopping short of direct military intervention on behalf of their embattled partner. If Washington's goal is not only to degrade Iran's capabilities but to prevent their rapid regeneration, military action alone will not suffice. The United States must also ensure that China, Russia, and North Korea cannot once again help Tehran rebuild the military programs that threaten U.S. forces; allies and partners; and regional stability.

Lead-Up to February 28

Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran was effectively cut off from Western defense markets, forcing it to [look elsewhere](#) to build the military capabilities it desired to gain an advantage over Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War and threaten its neighbors. As Iran was establishing its nascent missile program from the 1980s to 2000, China, Russia, and North Korea all provided crucial [assistance](#), selling missiles and components and transferring technology, with support continuing in recent decades.

More recently, after setbacks to Iran's missile and drone programs in the October 2024 Israeli campaign and the 12-Day War, China helped Iran to rapidly rebuild. In October 2024, following Iran's campaign to target Israel with 200 ballistic missiles, [Israeli strikes](#) took out critical components of Iran's missile infrastructure, drone capabilities, and air defenses. Israel [struck](#) planetary mixers, key for producing solid-fueled ballistic missiles, and [cut](#) Iran's missile production rate by 93 percent. Eight months later, in the 12-Day War, Israeli strikes hit missile production facilities, stockpiles, and launchers across Iran, [reducing](#) Iran's missile stockpile from 2,500 missiles to 1,500-1,000 missiles and decreasing its quantity of launch-

ers from 350 to about 100. Israeli strikes in the 12-Day War also [targeted](#) Iranian drone depots and production facilities.

However, after each operation, China worked to erode these advances, providing Iran with materials to replenish its missile and drone stockpiles. China sent Iran thousands of tons of the chemical precursor needed to produce missile propellant, sufficient to fuel [hundreds of ballistic missiles](#). China also continued to provide Iran with [dual-use components](#) for its UAV program. Furthermore, at the end of February, China [transferred](#) offensive drones to Iran and was [close to finalizing](#) the sale of its CM-302 supersonic missiles, which would [dramatically improve](#) Iran's strike capabilities. These transfers helped ensure that Iran could reconstitute its missile and drone arsenals even after battlefield losses, which have allowed Tehran to sustain attacks against U.S. partners across the region.

Moreover, in the lead up to the ongoing operations, Russia was building civil nuclear reactors in Iran, with construction ongoing at the [Bushehr power plant](#)—Iran's sole operational nuclear power plant—and an [agreement](#) in place for Russia to build four additional reactors in Iran. While Russia's assistance was ostensibly aimed at expanding Iran's civilian nuclear energy program, it could contribute to a future nuclear weapons program. Russia has also provided Iran with nuclear technology, as former U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [acknowledged](#) in 2024.

Beyond Iran's missile and nuclear programs, China and Russia have boosted Iran's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, providing Iran with crucial information to direct its attacks on U.S. and partner assets and to guide its air defenses. China has shared information from its satellites and given Iran access to its [BeiDou](#) navigation system, and both China and Russia have provided Iran with surveillance capabilities, including the Russian [Khayyam](#) (*Kanopus-V*) satellite and [Rezonans-NE radar system](#) and the Chinese [YLC-8B radar](#), designed to track stealth aircraft.

Furthermore, during the U.S. force buildup in the Middle East in early 2026, China [deployed](#) vessels to the region capable of tracking the U.S. fleet and providing targeting data for Iranian operations. Chinese companies have published satellite images of U.S. assets in the region, including a [Terminal High Altitude Area Defense \(THAAD\) battery](#) and [F-22 aircraft](#) deployed in Jordan and Israel respectively, to show that China is closely monitoring the movement of American capabilities and more than willing to share its information.

These deployments [coincided](#) with joint naval activity between Iran, China, and Russia in the Strait of Hormuz, part of a broader pattern of trilateral "Maritime Security Belt" exercises. Even when limited in scale, such exercises signal growing operational coordination and, critically, create opportunities for shared situational awareness. Russian and Chinese naval assets with advanced sensor technology operating alongside Iran could provide early warning of U.S. movements or contribute to targeting data, directly complicating U.S. planning ahead of a military confrontation.

To safeguard the military systems that China and Russia helped Iran to build up, both have both significantly bolstered Iran's air defenses, raising the cost of operations to take out its destabilizing capabilities. In 2016, Iran [acquired](#) four Russian advanced S-300 air defense missile systems, forming the backbone of Iran's air defenses; these systems have reportedly been [deployed](#) in February 2026. Additional technology transfers further strengthened Iran's defenses. In July 2025—just after the 12-Day War—Iran [received](#) Chinese HQ-9B surface-to-air missile batteries, a long-range, advanced air defense system. In addition, in December 2025, Iran [reached](#) a deal to purchase the Russian Verba shoulder-fired missile air defense system, including 500 launch units and 2,500 9M336 missiles. While the success of U.S. and Israeli operations calls into question the effectiveness of many of these systems, it is notable that China and Russia largely built Iran's shield against attacks.

Beyond direct military support, China has thrown Iran an economic lifeline as the [buyer](#) of over 80% of its oil, which China receives at a heavily discounted rate—allowing Iran to evade sanctions and maintain a critical source of income, used to fund its military programs. In 2021, the two countries [signed](#) a 25-year cooperation agreement, in which China pledged to invest up to [\\$400 billion](#) in Iran and Iran joined the Belt and Road Initiative.

Support from the Sidelines

Although neither Russia nor China have intervened directly on Iran’s behalf during the war, both countries play roles that help shield Tehran diplomatically and sustain elements of its war effort. Russia’s war-time conduct reinforced its role as one of Iran’s most consequential external backers. While publicly positioning itself as a neutral mediator—offering to broker a ceasefire through calls with Gulf leaders, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, and President Donald Trump—Moscow has simultaneously worked to sustain Iran’s war effort. Russia’s Foreign Ministry condemned the U.S.-Israeli strikes as an “[unprovoked act of armed aggression](#)” and President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed Russia’s “[unwavering support](#)” for Tehran, while Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted that Russia’s mediation proposals “[remain on the table](#).” This dual-track posture serves Russian interests regardless of outcome: if mediation succeeds, Moscow positions itself as a regional power broker; if the conflict continues, elevated oil prices and sustained regional instability divert U.S. and allied attention and resources away from Ukraine.

At the United Nations Security Council, Russia [introduced](#) a draft resolution calling for a ceasefire and a return to negotiations without assigning blame or naming the parties involved. The proposal received only four votes—from Russia, China, Pakistan, and Somalia—and failed to pass. The Council instead [adopted](#) a Bahraini-led resolution, co-sponsored by 135 countries, condemning Iran’s regional attacks on Gulf states and Jordan. Russia and China abstained from the vote. Beijing’s ambassador to the United Nations publicly expressed “[disappointment](#)” that the Russian resolution had failed, reinforcing the broader diplomatic pattern in which both countries declined to condemn Iran’s actions.

Beyond diplomacy, Russia has provided Iran with intelligence support to aid strikes against U.S. forces in the region. According to reporting by the [Washington Post](#) and [Wall Street Journal](#), Moscow shared the locations of U.S. warships, aircraft, and other regional military assets with Tehran during the opening days of the conflict. Russia has also reportedly supplied satellite imagery from intelligence satellites operated by the Russian Aerospace Forces, enabling more precise Iranian targeting and post-strike damage assessments.

The improved sophistication of Iran’s retaliatory strikes suggests the impact of this assistance. Iranian attacks have focused heavily on early-warning radars, air defense infrastructure, and command-and-control nodes—including systems associated with the [THAAD network](#). Iran’s strike packages increasingly resemble Russian operational patterns observed in Ukraine, including drone swarms used to saturate air defenses, followed by precision missile strikes against critical military nodes. In addition to intelligence support, Russia has reportedly [supplied](#) Iran with components for modified Shahed drone systems, incorporating improved navigation, communications, and resistance to electronic warfare, along with tactical guidance on drone employment derived from Russia’s battlefield experience.

China’s wartime conduct has been more restrained than Russia’s, but remains far from neutral. Beyond joining Moscow in abstaining from the Security Council vote condemning Iran’s attacks, Beijing called for an [immediate ceasefire](#) and engaged regional partners diplomatically while avoiding criticism of Tehran. Ongoing reporting during the conflict has provided [little indication](#) that China supplied direct military assistance to Iran’s current war effort—particularly when compared with Russia’s reported intelligence sharing and technical support. However, one week into the war, China permitted the [departure](#) of two

Iranian ships from a Chinese port that stores sodium perchlorate, the precursor for missile fuel, among other chemicals—suggesting that assistance for Iran to rebuild its missile program post-Operation Epic Fury is on its way. Coupled with China’s earlier assistance to Iran’s military programs and the [presence](#) of Chinese military vessels in the region capable of monitoring U.S. naval activity, Beijing’s support to Iran underscores its potential to play a more direct role in future conflicts.

Starving the Octopus

The United States must hold China, Russia, and North Korea accountable for their assistance to Iran’s missile and nuclear programs; ISR and air defense capabilities; and sanctions busting that has allowed Iran to finance its military buildup—and make it clear that it will not tolerate the reconstitution of Iran’s military capabilities both during ongoing operations and once they end.

First, the Trump Administration must maintain existing sanctions on Iran and on Russia, China, and North Korea. The recent [sanctions waiver](#) on Russia, for example, increases the finances available to provide Iran with military support, in addition to sustaining its war effort in Ukraine. The Trump administration has also [lifted](#) sanctions on Iranian oil in stranded tankers to allow it enter the global oil market, lowering prices—but this will increase Iran’s finances to rebuild its military after the war, making renewed operations more likely.

The United States must also impose a new round of targeted sanctions on financial entities, shipping companies, and firms linked to efforts that provide military support to Iran. The U.S. Navy should ramp up [efforts](#) to interdict shipments of dual-use materials heading to Iran, including chemical precursors for its missile program.

Second, the United States should build on collective Gulf outrage at Iran’s attacks to encourage a unified approach to China and Russia’s support for Iranian military capabilities. Chinese and Russian ties with the Gulf have deepened in recent years, including Chinese [arms transfers](#) and [defense cooperation](#) with Saudi Arabia; Chinese investment in AI and digital infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.; and Russian capital flowing to Dubai following Ukraine-related sanctions. Beijing and Moscow have attempted to cast themselves as stabilizers in the Middle East, with China orchestrating the Saudi-Iran détente in 2023, while serving as the Iranian regime’s benefactor. China and Russia can either continue to deepen their relations with influential Gulf states or help Iran build up the capabilities that threaten these very states: pursuing both tracks should no longer be an option.

Iran’s targeting of civilian infrastructure across the Middle East, hitting foes and former friends alike, creates a unique opportunity for the Trump administration to bring together Israel and Gulf states in a joint effort to undermine Iran—and deter the Chinese, Russian, and North Korean assistance that enabled Iran’s military buildup. This should include multilateral sanctions on firms and financial entities that have provided Iran with missile components and technical expertise. The United States should also strengthen regional defense cooperation, including expanded integrated air and missile defense, to ensure that any foreign assistance to Iran’s missile program does not lead to successful Iranian attacks.

Timeline 1: Major Chinese, Russian, and North Korean Assistance to Iran (Pre-October 7, 2023)

Date	Event
December 2006	Iran receives Russian Tor-M1 air defense systems.
February 24, 2010	U.S. cable reveals that North Korea supplied Iran with 19 missiles, including the BM-25.
April 2010	China enables Iranian production of Nasr-1 anti-ship missiles.
September 2011	Iran's first Russian-built nuclear reactor becomes operational.
November 2014	Rosatom agrees to construct two additional nuclear reactors in Iran.
May 2016	Russia delivers S-300 air defense systems to Iran.
December 2019	China, Iran, and Russia conduct first trilateral naval drills in Indian Ocean.
January 2020	Iran uses a Russian Rezonans-NE radar system to track U.S. aircraft.
January 2021	China grants Iran access to the BeiDou satellite navigation system, improving missile precision.
February 2021	Iran and Russia conduct joint naval drills in the Indian Ocean
March 2021	China and Iran sign a 25-year agreement including joint weapons development and defense-industrial cooperation.
January 2022	China, Iran, and Russia conduct trilateral naval drills in the Indian Ocean.
August 2022	Russia launches Iran's <i>Khayyam</i> observation satellite into orbit.
November 2022	Iran and Russia agree to co-produce drones.
March 2023	China, Iran, and Russia conduct trilateral naval drills in the Gulf of Oman.
May 2023	Iran supports construction of Russian drone manufacturing facility.
September 2023	Russia delivers Yak-130 aircraft for training on advanced fighter jets.

Timeline 2: Chinese and Russian Assistance Helps Iran Rebuild

Date	Event
November 28, 2023	Iran signs deal for Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets and Mi-28 helicopters.
March 12, 2024	China, Russia, and Iran begin trilateral naval drills in the Gulf of Oman.
September 10, 2024	Secretary Blinken warns Russia is providing Iran with nuclear technology.
October 4, 2024	Iran showcases a Chinese laser air defense system.
October 26, 2024	<i>Israel Days of Repentance Operation</i>
February-March 2025	Chinese shipments of 1,000 tons of sodium perchlorate arrive in Iran.
March 12, 2025	China, Russia, and Iran begin trilateral naval drills in the Gulf of Oman.
June 13-24, 2025	<i>12-Day War</i>
June 23, 2025	Iran finishes transitioning to the Chinese BeiDou navigation system.
June/July 2025	Iran receives Chinese HQ-9B surface-to-air missile batteries.
July 21, 2025	Iran and Russia begin joint naval drills in the Caspian Sea.
September 26, 2025	Rosatom agrees to build four nuclear power plants in Iran.
September 29, 2025	Shipments of 2,000 tons of sodium perchlorate begin to arrive in Iran.
December 2025	Iran reaches deal for Russia's Verba air defense system.
December 2025	Iran hosts China and Russia for a multi-national military exercise.
January-February 2026	<i>U.S. force buildup in the Middle East</i>
February 2026	Iran reportedly receives the Chinese YLC-8B radar system.
February 10, 2026	China deploys surveillance ships to the Middle East.
February 13, 2026	China's MizarVision releases images of U.S. THAAD battery in Jordan.
February 17, 2026	China, Russia, and Iran begin trilateral naval drills in the Strait of Hormuz.
February 24, 2026	Iran nears deal for China's CM-302 supersonic missiles.
February 26, 2026	MizarVision releases images of U.S. F-22 aircraft in Israel.
February 28, 2026	<i>Launch of Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion</i>