

Epic Fury Reveals Vulnerabilities in the Axis Behind Iran

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Operation Epic Fury has done more than degrade a regional adversary. It has revealed the weaknesses of the broader coalition aligned against the United States, while strengthening U.S. deterrence in global great power competition. The “Axis of Upheaval,” a coalition of authoritarian states—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—aligned in their objective of undermining American influence, has actively [supported](#) Iran’s military capabilities, including missile development, air defense systems, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Through Operation Epic Fury, the United States weakened a key member of the “Axis of Upheaval” and exposed shortcomings in the Axis’ arsenal. The United States has shown the ability to project power effectively, precisely, and at scale against systems provided to Iran by Moscow and Beijing.

America should take full advantage of these achievements to press Gulf states to sever relations with Moscow and Beijing; strengthen and expand Arab-Israeli defense cooperation; and improve the collective defense industrial base capacity of itself and its partners, particularly those in the Middle East. Operation Epic Fury should be seen as part of a greater strategy to set back the Axis of Upheaval, and Washington should prioritize limiting Moscow and Beijing’s role in the region and preventing further support for Tehran.

Epic Fury Highlights Weaknesses in the Axis of Upheaval

The operational successes of the U.S. campaign in Iran, coupled with the minimized impact of Iranian strikes on U.S. bases and partners in the region, demonstrates the inadequacy of the Axis of Upheaval’s arsenal while furthering U.S. deterrence. Iran’s defensive capabilities—built in part on Russian and Chinese systems—as well as, to a lesser extent, its offensive systems, were a poor match for U.S. and partner capabilities.

The U.S. military has been highly effective operationally against Iran—setting back the prewar arsenals of the Middle Eastern contingent of the Axis of Upheaval and undermining its ability to rebuild. U.S. forces have hit [over 13,000 targets](#) in Iran as of April 6, [including](#) Iranian missile facilities; air defenses; and military infrastructure such as weapons depots and command and control centers. The U.S. military has damaged or eliminated more than two-thirds of [Iran’s production facilities](#) for its drone, missile, and naval capabilities. All the while, Iran’s missile attacks have [decreased](#).

The significant but limited impact of Iran’s attacks has shown the effectiveness of the regional air defense architecture against Iranian missile capabilities. The integrated defensive architecture [enabled](#) by U.S. leadership and supported by American-made air defense systems and batteries, including the Patriot air defense system and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries, has been largely effective against Iran’s large missile barrages, with one key [exception](#) being Iranian drones. The Patriot system and THAAD batteries [facilitated](#) the United Arab Emirates’ (U.A.E.) interception rate [above 90 percent](#). The performance of regional air defenses strengthens American deterrence, as U.S. and partner air defenses

can demonstrably contain the effects of missile attacks on U.S. forces, bases, and partners in the region.

The threat the United States is fighting has been [enabled](#) in no small way by Moscow and Beijing. Chinese and Russian assistance have long strengthened Iran's military capabilities, including helping Iran build up its ballistic and anti-ship cruise [missile programs](#) and [reconstitute](#) the former after the October 2024 Israeli campaign and the 12-Day War; providing [ISR](#) capabilities and support; and supplying Iran with [air defense systems](#).

The advanced Russian and Chinese air defenses employed by Iran, including the S-300 and [HQ-9B](#), faced demonstrable challenges against 4.5-generation and 5th-generation U.S. combat and electronic warfare aircraft. Iran's air defense network proved unable to prevent U.S. and Israeli air forces from attaining [air superiority](#) over Iran. The shortcomings of Iranian air defenses were likely exacerbated by previous U.S. and Israeli attrition of advanced systems and disruptions to Iran's integrated air defense system (IADS), including the decapitation of many senior Iranian military officials.

Moreover, Operation Epic Fury has sent a clear message about U.S. military credibility: the United States is capable of decisive military action, including the deployment of significant assets, when its interests are threatened. The United States successfully projected an operationally effective force, including over [50,000 troops](#), thousands of miles from home and without significant forward-deployed basing assets to carry out a massive, precise campaign against a regional great power. Russia would be unable to carry out such a campaign in a hostile environment, and it is unclear that China would be capable of this, either.

Maximizing Gains and Offsetting Risks from Operation Epic Fury

These developments have not only reshaped the battlefield but also altered the broader strategic environment. Iran's prewar arsenal has been significantly degraded, U.S. and allied systems have demonstrated clear advantages, and American deterrence has been bolstered. Together, these outcomes expose weaknesses in the Axis of Upheaval and create a rare opportunity for the United States to translate military success into lasting strategic gains, including reshaping the regional balance of power and weakening the broader alignment among China, Russia, and Iran.

Iran's attacks have created a rare convergence of threat perception across the Gulf, [overturning](#) lingering assumptions in Arab capitals about Tehran's willingness to restrain itself. States that previously pursued hedging strategies—balancing ties between Washington, Beijing, and Moscow—now face direct evidence that Iran's capabilities, and the external support enabling them, threaten their own security and economic stability. Iran's weakened position shifts the regional balance towards the United States and Israel. Gulf countries have a clearer choice between strengthening ties with the Abraham Accords coalition or the Axis of Upheaval. The evident risk of resurgent Iranian drone and missile capabilities should further encourage Arab states to join efforts to prevent Iran from rebuilding its military capabilities, including through foreign assistance.

At the same time, the regional environment is unusually favorable: the Russian- and Iranian-backed Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria has fallen, Hezbollah is weakened, and Iran's remaining proxies are under pressure. The United States should capitalize on this moment to consolidate its gains and build a more integrated regional architecture capable not only of deterring Iran, but also of countering the Chinese and Russian assistance that sustain its capabilities.

Press Gulf States to Suspend Relations with Iran's Backers

In recent years, China and Russia have paradoxically pursued deepened ties with both Iran and Gulf states. China has expanded [arms transfers](#) and furthered [defense cooperation](#) with Saudi Arabia and

invested in Emirati and Saudi digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence projects, and Russian capital flowed to Dubai following Ukraine-related sanctions. Concurrently, Moscow and Beijing have helped Iran build its [civil nuclear industry](#), circumvent sanctions on its oil, and expand its missile, [drone](#), and air defense capabilities. During Iranian attacks on Gulf states over the last several weeks, Moscow and Beijing reportedly sent Iran support, including [intelligence](#), [technology](#) to improve its drone capabilities, and chemical shipments that could contain a key [precursor](#) for missile fuel. [CNN](#) reports that China also plans to send air defenses to Iran.

While China has portrayed itself as a stabilizer for the region, and Russia has tried to position itself as a mediator, both continue to assist a regional power that attacks states across the Middle East. Washington should press Gulf states to penalize Russia and China for enabling the very capabilities that threaten them. The decision should be clear: expand relations with the United States and the Abraham Accords coalition—which strengthen the security of Gulf states—and cut off economic and security ties with countries that purposefully undercut regional stability.

Expand and Operationalize Arab-Israeli Security Cooperation

The Abraham Accords created the political foundation for unprecedented cooperation between Israel and several Arab states. The next phase of Arab-Israeli cooperation should focus on translating that progress into an operational security architecture. This includes expanding intelligence sharing and applying the experiences of the war to more concerted and regular multilateral exercises and to developing more genuinely [integrated air and missile defenses](#) capable of countering Iran’s missile and drone threats.

Recent Iranian operations in the Middle East—from the April and October 2024 air strikes on Israel to its ongoing attacks—have demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated defenses across U.S., Israeli, and partner networks. Institutionalizing cooperation between U.S. partners and allies in the region would reduce the effectiveness of Iranian aggression supported by Chinese and Russian assistance. Strengthened U.S.-led regional defense cooperation could also bolster American credibility, as the United States would act as the convenor for efforts to ensure the security of its partners. Over time, a more integrated regional defense system could allow U.S. partners to shoulder a greater share of the responsibility for regional security. While Iranian capabilities have been set back, the residual danger of its drone and missile programs, as well as the threat of rebuilt military capabilities, should motivate partners in the Middle East to actively pursue a strengthened regional defense architecture.

Build Regional Defense Industrial Capacity

Bolstering America’s position in a future conflict involving Moscow and/or Beijing, sustaining U.S. military advantages, and reducing long-term burdens on American forces will require strengthening the [collective defense industrial base](#) (DIB) of the United States and its partners and ensuring greater interoperability. Operation Epic Fury has exposed significant shortfalls in American munitions production, including for air defense interceptors, and supply chain resilience. U.S. and partner efforts to counter Iranian attacks have burned through interceptors at a high rate, with [Israel](#) reaching critically low levels of interceptors. However, rebuilding America’s munitions stockpile will be slow and costly, and key parts of the supply chain remain [dependent](#) on China, which maintains a near-monopoly on critical minerals. These challenges with the U.S. defense industrial capacity raise concerns about the United States’ ability to sustain high-intensity conflict. In addition, *The Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that Gulf states are considering suppliers outside the United States to replenish depleted munitions stocks, raising the intersecting, urgent issues of ensuring these states remain in the U.S. weapons ecosystem and addressing production shortfalls so as to provide partners with sufficient munitions.

The Middle East presents a unique opportunity to address these gaps. Regional partners—including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E.—possess the capital, industrial ambition, and technological capacity to expand defense production. The United States should prioritize co-production, joint ventures, and supply

chain diversification with these partners, with a particular focus on high-demand munitions, air defense interceptors, and unmanned systems. This approach should emphasize cooperation, not dependency. By building regional production capacity and integrating it into a broader U.S.-led network, Washington can enhance collective resilience, reduce strain on U.S. stockpiles, and limit China's leverage over critical supply chains.

Keep Sight of the Bigger Picture

More broadly, the United States should treat Operation Epic Fury not as an isolated regional campaign, but as part of a wider effort to counter coordination among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Policies that rely on cooperation with Beijing or Moscow to manage the conflict risk undercutting this objective. For example, calls for [China](#) to help secure the Strait of Hormuz or efforts to ease sanctions on [Russia](#) run counter to the reality that both states have enabled Iran's military capabilities. A coherent strategy should instead prioritize limiting their role in the region and preventing further support for Tehran.