

ORION FORUM

Iran-Russia Military Technology Collaboration

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Executive Summary

At the beginning of the Cold War in the 1950's the United States and the Soviet Union competed with arms and technology exports in their respective regions of influence. After the Soviet Union collapsed, [Russia sold much of its Cold War-era military](#) and [technology arsenal](#) to Soviet satellites, and Middle Eastern partners. As Russia's economy stabilized, it could produce more advanced military equipment and sell it to any willing consumer. [In late 2001](#), Russia signed an arms deal for ten years with Iran that supplied conventional military equipment. The United States did not pressure Russia to stop selling weaponry to Iran because it was defensive weaponry and followed international law, and both Russia and Iran supported the United States' global war on terrorism in the aftermath of September 11. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, plus the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), opened the opportunity for increased cooperation between the two countries. In 2023, Iran signed a new bilateral trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union with the intent of entering into a new arms deal with Russia for more military and technological cooperation.

International Military Technology Trade Axis

Iran and Russia's trade and diplomatic relations result from a larger geopolitical and economic objective. Iran and Russia aim to remove or diminish the U.S.-led [world order](#) and create a multipolar world. In 2022, [Mahmoud Abbaszadeh-Meshkini](#), spokesman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Iranian parliament, said, "In the new world order, a triangle consisting of three powers - Iran, Russia, and China - has formed in Asia. This new arrangement heralds the end of the inequitable hegemony of the United States and the West."

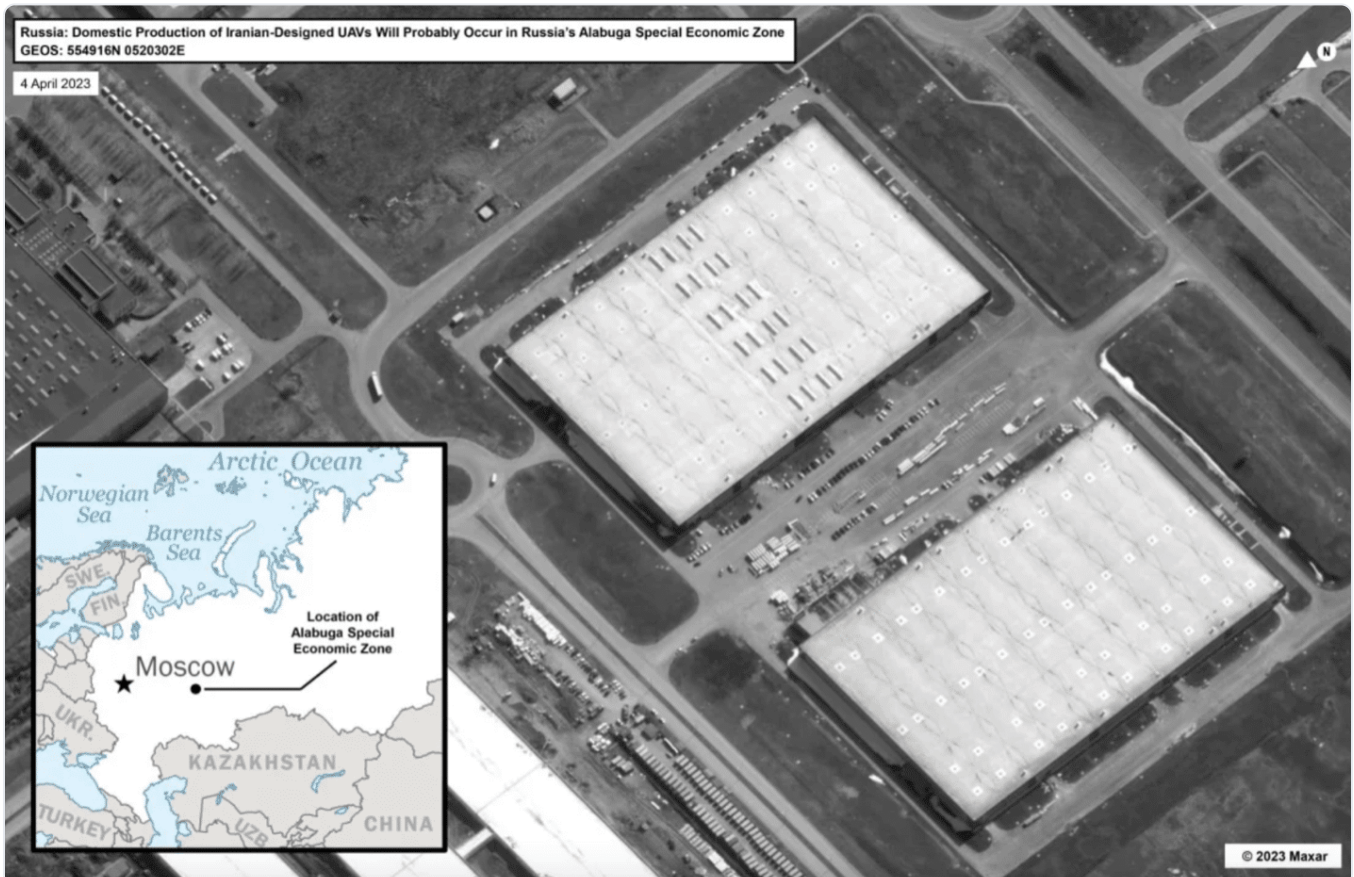
Iran and Russia suffer sanctions from the West and varying levels of [diplomatic isolation](#). Iran and Russia's partnership allows the opportunity to challenge the United States and the West. [North Korea](#), [Venezuela](#), and Cuba share similar objectives to decrease American hegemony and to create a multipolar world; [China](#) and India also seek a [multipolar](#) world but do not suffer from the same political and economic isolation levied against the Russians and Iranians. [There are multiple multilateral initiatives countries create or join to counterbalance the West](#), such as BRICS+, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the International North-South Transport Corridor. These multilateral organizations each have their separate functions, whether financial, trade, or security. Iran's and Russia's [foreign military sales](#) help achieve this strategic objective by creating military and technological ties to dozens of countries or organizations around the world. For example, selling Turkey [S-400](#) surface-to-air missile systems (SAMs) connected the two countries for decades because Turkey needs to buy parts from Russia for repairs.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked a new period of Iran-Russia relations. Russian [sanctions](#) damaged its supply chains and caused strain on its military-industrial complex. The toll of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Russian troops is high, and the Russian Ministry of Defense needs more expendable unmanned systems to supplement the limited amount of [available personnel](#). So, Russia reached out to its allies, [North Korea](#) and [Iran](#), to fill its needs. Iran also needs assistance to supplement its lack of technological progress within its military-industrial complex, and supported the idea of bilateral trade and military collaboration between the two countries. Iran is a large global competitor in military drone technology, especially kamikaze drones. While Russia has some of the best SAMs in the world, as well as cheap conventional arms in large quantities, drones and missile systems are the center of its military-technology trade axis. Moreover, both trade in other equipment such as [tactical gear, fighter jets, helicopters, and satellites](#). Iran manufactures its drones in Tehran and then ships them through the [Caspian Sea](#) to the Russian port Makhachkala for use in Ukraine.

[Iran-Russia](#) Drone Trade Routes



Since 2022, Russia purchased approximately [1,700 drones](#) capable of conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and suicide bomb missions. There are [reports](#) that Russian officials traveled to Iran with \$145 million in cash with British and U.S. missile systems for the Iranian military in exchange for exposure to Iranian drone technology. A few months after the meeting, Tehran sent dozens of its [Revolutionary Guard](#) to Russian-occupied Ukraine as advisors to train Russian military troops on drones. In November 2022, a major development in Iranian-Russian relations was the agreement to create an [Iranian drone factory in Russian territory](#) so Russia can reduce the risk of its supply chains. The [UAV manufacturing factory in Russia](#) enables Russian military forces to increase its drone stockpile. Iran benefits by using the drones deployed in Ukraine to demonstrate effectiveness for potential customers. In December, top Russian military officials claimed that the Russian military trained Iranian pilots how to fly the Sukhoi-35 fighter jet.



What Vulnerabilities does this pose to the U.S.?

The United States' main vulnerabilities are threefold:

1. Increased cooperation between America's adversaries
2. The proliferation of illicit arms exports around the world
3. The increased military capability of Russia in Ukraine and Iran in the Middle East

Increased cooperation between America's adversaries, such as Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, and others, form alliances to challenge Western dominance and the U.S.-led world order. Like the Cold War, these nations intend to create independent international governance structures, self-regulating trade linkages, and ascendent security relationships. These alliances will not threaten the United States within the short to mid-term, mainly due to financial and economic limitations. None of these nations have enough economic and legal security to fully invest in each other. Reserve currencies, financial regulatory bodies, due process, and political

stability are necessary for international investment. So, countries that abide by the global order, like Brazil, India, and China, try to mitigate between the West and outcast countries to diversify their options.

The proliferation of illicit arms exports around the world is a vulnerability to global stability and the United States. Due to international isolation since the [Islamic Revolution](#) of 1979, Iran is willing to sell weapons to anyone without considering any other factors, such as humanitarian concerns; [Russia, Venezuela, and the Houthis](#) are Iran's top three arms exporting destinations. Iran's product with the highest demand is UAVs, which have drone sales throughout the Middle East and Africa. [In Africa](#), Iran sold weapons to government forces in Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, and Sudan, warring civilian communities in Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda, and rebel, insurgent, and militia groups in Ivory Coast, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Niger. Iran sends aid to Hezbollah and [the Houthis](#) through maritime and air transports but with frequent interceptions from the United States and its allies. Russian forces supplemented this loss with military aid for both groups. Russia deepened its partnerships with [Hezbollah](#) for its illicit financial networks to evade sanctions, to maintain Russia's sphere of influence, and to increase arms transfers to the Houthis as part of its [weapons diplomacy](#) to challenge the West further. Russia's rapprochement with Iran leads to rapprochement with the Houthis and Hezbollah. Since the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime, Russia struggles to project power in the Near-East and to maintain ties with Hezbollah.

The increased military capability of Russia and Iran threatens regional stability in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Russia and Iran reportedly committed to sending each other weaponry. Besides military drones, Iran's main arms exports to Russia [ballistic missiles](#), while Russia's main arms exports to Iran are SAMs, helicopters, fighter jets, and [tactical weaponry](#). This bilateral military-technology trade partnership increases the military capabilities in each country's respective area of influence such as Ukraine in Europe and Israel in the Middle East and interconnects each country's military-industrial complex. An Iranian drone factory in Russia and trade via the Caspian Sea limits the United States' ability to counter the military trade axis.

Policy Options

The United States has to rely on allies and partners in the region to counter Iran and Russia's relationship. Two policy options the United States can focus on to challenge Iran-Russia Military Technology Collaboration are 1) engage with partners in the region that can help support the United States, such as the Caucasus countries, Central Asian Republics, or Israel, and 2) declassify and publicly release relevant U.S. [intelligence](#) to provide warning and awareness.

***image credit:** VOA.

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