



Research Paper

Russia - Iran Military Cooperation: The Dynamic is Changing Dramatically Because of Drones in the Ukraine War

Abstract

Russia's struggles in Ukraine, marked by military setbacks, pushed Moscow to seek a cost-effective arms supplier. Iran readily stepped in. Supplying Russia with UAVs, particularly Kamikaze drones, marked a significant shift in Russo-Persian military ties. Historically, this was an "asymmetric partnership." Russia, one of the few to offer Iran arms and political support, held the upper hand. (m)7.171 6na 0 Td888nirlasd ts.194 (.7.163 (d 34 0 Td[(h pre Td[(r34 0 Td[(34 0 T14[ure Td09[(34

From 1909 until 1989, Russo-Iranian military cooperation was non-existent, as they sided with each other's enemies. Iran expanded ties with the United Kingdom (1909-1925), Germany (1925-1941), and the United States (1941-1979), to which Russia responded by invading Iran in 1914 and 1941 and also increasing cooperation with Iran's major regional rival, Iraq. Later, the political chaos in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 diverted the Kremlin's attention from foreign policy to domestic affairs, depriving Russia from having a consistent policy toward military relations with Iran.

Given Yeltsin's Russia faced financial difficulties and needed immediate liquidity, the Kremlin agreed to sell a range of weapons to Iran. In this period from 1991 to 1999, Russia supplied Iran with military equipment, armored vehicles, anti-tank missiles, aerial defense systems, and submarines. A significant portion of those weapons were either assembled or licensed for production in Iran, positioning Russia as a semi-military mentor to Iran.

Table 1: Russia's Arms Sales to Iran from 1991 to 1999

Weapon Description	Promised Quantity	Delivered Quantity	Year of Delivery	Production License
T-72MI Tanks' Engine	104	104	1994-1995	Negative
BMP-2	1500	413	1993-2001	Negative
Fagot anti-tank missiles	5000	5000	1991	Positive: Boraq IFV
T-72 M1 tanks	1000			

Under the Gore-Chernomyrdin Agreement, Russia committed to not entering new arms contracts with Iran, but was allowed to fulfill its delivery obligations under existing contracts until December 31, 1999. In reciprocation, the U.S. assured it would not impose sanctions on Russia for these ongoing arms sales to Iran. However, like many of Yeltsin's policies, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Agreement lost momentum when Yeltsin left office.

Yeltsin's departure momentarily interrupted the steady resurgence of military cooperation, but this pause merely set the stage for its continuation. Generally, throughout this stage, Iran heavily depended on Russia for diplomatic support and arms supplies. However, Iran lacked any significant leverage over Russia to use as bargaining power, leading to continued asymmetric cooperation between the two countries. This stage persisted until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At that point, Moscow's acute need for arms led to a reliance on Iran's military support. This transition marked the onset of the fifth stage in Russo-Persian military cooperation, where the previously asymmetric relationship evolved into a relatively mutual dependency.

Table 2: The Evolution of Russia-Iran Military Cooperation

Stage	Period	Nature of Cooperation
First	15 th -16 th Centuries	Symmetric and Equal Alliance
Second	19 th -20 th Centuries	Semi-Client (Iran)-Patron (Russia) System
Third	1909-1989	Hostile/Insignificant
Forth	1991-2022	Asymmetric: Russia is the dominant actor
Fifth	2022-Present	Relative Mutual Reliance

The Return of Russian-Iranian Military Leadership Under Putin’s Presidency

When Putin assumed the reins of the Kremlin in December 1999, swift shifts in both foreign and domestic policies became evident. Notably, in 2000, just after the deadline set by the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement, Putin openly repudiated the accord.⁵ His choice to restart arms sales to Iran was driven primarily by two significant considerations:

Russia’s Stature in the Global Arms Market.

The fall of the Soviet Union and Yeltsin's succession dealt a considerable blow to Moscow's standing in the global arms sales arena. This decline was particularly poignant for the Kremlin, which, after decades of rivalry with the United States, had risen in the 1980s to claim the top spot in arms exports. Throughout that decade, Moscow met roughly 35% of the worldwide demand for arms,⁶ annually exporting an average of \$60 billion worth of weaponry.⁷

The Soviet Union's dissolution, compounded by the widespread industrial disbandment and administrative turmoil, saw Russia's rank in the arms market plummet. The 1990s witnessed Russia's annual exports dwindling to \$20 billion – merely half of their 1980s figures⁸, Further complicating the situation, numerous traditional clients of the Soviet defense sector, such as India and Egypt, began gravitating towards Western arms suppliers, depriving Russia of its accustomed market share. Confronted with such circumstances, the Kremlin faced limited avenues to rejuvenate its arms industry and augment its clout in the Middle East. One prominent strategy that emerged was the

Vladimir Putin's background as a former KGB officer imbued him with a deep cognizance of Russia's diminished potential to emerge as a paramount global for

political ideologies

move marked a notable blow to Iran's defense potential and strained the arms relationship between Iran and Russia. In response, Iran, which was threatened by the United States/ Israel and desperately needed to empower its aerial defense, attempted to hold Russia accountable by filing a lawsuit in 2011 in the International Court of Arbitration, seeking compensation for breach of contract.¹⁹ However, the threat of a lawsuit did not change Russia's decision, which led to a decline in Russian arms transfers to Iran, from \$368 million in 2006 to \$4 million in 2015.²⁰

In 2016, a year following the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal, Russia and Iran formalized an agreement for the delivery of an upgraded version of the S-300 missile system. This nuclear accord catalyzed a noticeable uptick in arms transactions, with Iran's imports from Russia surging to \$413 million. However, these imports witnessed a drastic slump, plummeting to roughly \$3 million over the subsequent four years leading up to 2020. This downturn in arms agreements could be attributed to an array of factors, notably the 'United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, coupled with external pressures from Israel and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf exerted on Russia.

Nevertheless, while arms deals have seen a reduction, other facets of bilateral military collaboration have witnessed growth, particularly in mutual military drills and exercises. Throughout this period, naval exercises between Russian and Iranian ships continued, culminating in unique tri-nation exercises with China and various drills in the Indian Ocean. Concurrently, Iran's domestic arms industry became more self-sufficient, developing an advanced arsenal and seeking to export arms as a new revenue source amid U.S. sanctions.

In September 2020, the "Kavkaz 2020" drill was conducted,²¹ followed by the second "Maritime Security Belt" exercise in the Indian Ocean in February 2022. All of these developments illustrate a pattern of growing collaboration and complexity in joint military exercises between Iran and Russian. Given these developments, it's clear that from Putin's accession in 2000 to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russo-Persian military ties exhibited an asymmetric nature. In this partnership, Russia, standing as one of Iran's rare allies among the major powers, held a dominant position. Simply put, before the Ukrainian conflict, Iran functioned as the less influential entity in the Russo-Persian alliance, leaning heavily on Russian support without possessing substantial leverage to ensure Moscow upheld its commitments.

Stage Five: The War in Ukraine, A Turning Point in Russo-Persian Relations

Following the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the swift imposition of sanctions that further isolated Russia, Moscow sought to strengthen ties with nations holding anti-Western sentiments, like Iran. During the war's escalation, their military rapport visibly intensified. Just as Iran's urgent need for a

Fortunately for Russia, a diplomatically isolated Tehran swiftly responded to Moscow's call for assistance, supplying them with a substantial number of kamikaze drones. As Iran became Russia's main weapons provider and with the growth in bilateral trade, the dynamics of Russo-Persian relations underwent a profound

might not be mere "payback," but rather a request from the Kremlin for Iran to replicate these weapons or to help the Russian military counter them more effectively by identifying their vulnerabilities. Given Iran's t

Post Western sanctions, which restricted Russia's access to European oil markets, Moscow began eyeing alternative markets, especially in Asia. This move posed a challenge for Iran, which had traditionally viewed Asian markets, particularly China, as a key revenue source. With Russia offering competitive discounts in these markets, Iran's oil exports saw a decline by a quarter.³³ Furthermore, Russia began to surpass Iran in exporting other commodities to Asia like steel, bitumen, and petrochemical products.³⁴

However, this strategy could backfire on Russia. While accessing the Asian markets offers Moscow a new revenue stream, pushing Iran out, particularly when it faces a significant monetary crisis, might incentivize Tehran to strike a nuclear deal with the West. Such a deal could lift sanctions, paving the way for Iran to return to the global energy market.

The potential return of Iran to the energy market didn't escape Russian attention. By March 2022, as the Ukrainian war showed signs of dragging on, Russian leaders grew wary of Iran's potential resurgence in the energy sector. This apprehenss i(he)7.153 (ns)-n4g9 (ch451.(p)-6.123daR19 Tw

Given this backdrop, deploying the Iron Dome in Ukraine could dramatically counteract Russia's UAV assaults on the country. Yet, Israel has so far declined Ukraine's request for the Iron

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