

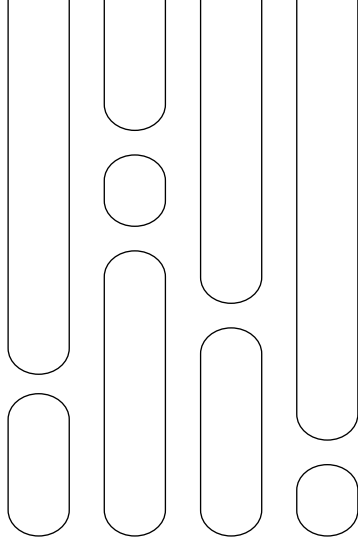
Position Papers

STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF IRANIAN MILITARY SUPPORT FOR RUSSIA IN THE WAR ON UKRAINE

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Contents

Iran's Motivations and Objectives	3
Opportunities and Challenges Facing Iran.....	5
Future of Iran's Involvement in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict .	7
Conclusion	8



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Iran's longstanding desire to acquire Russian weapons has remained unfulfilled due to US sanctions and pressures. However, the course of the battles in Ukraine revealed the influx of Western arms, prompting Russia to request military equipment from Tehran. There is no doubt that this has provided Iran with a historic opportunity to reach armament compromises with Russia. Iran has taken a decisive position in favor of Russia, which is seeking to meet its military needs amid dwindling weapons stockpiles. Among the manifestations of Iranian support is the supply of drones, which have impacted the Ukrainian theater of operations in recent days. According to reports, Russia has used nearly 1,700 Iranian drones that have targeted Ukrainian infrastructure. This is in addition to reports of other types of military assistance such as the supply of ballistic missiles, protection equipment and trainers as well as assistance to circumvent Western sanctions such as turbines to power Russian power plants.

Iran has sided with Russia against the United States and the West from the start of the conflict. However, until recently, Iranian support had been limited to political support, with Tehran offering to act as a mediator to settle the conflict peacefully. Iran denies European and Ukrainian accusations of providing Russia with weapons. However, the emergence of Iranian drones in Ukraine and reports proving the influx of Iranian weapons to Russia indicate Iran's wider role on the side of Russia. The aforesaid have triggered a diplomatic crisis with Ukraine as well as with European countries, which have, for the first time since the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal, reimposed sanctions on Iran. This shift, without a doubt, raises questions about Tehran's motivations and the consequences of siding with Russia in this dispute.

Iran's Motivations and Objectives

Through supporting Russia in its war on Ukraine, Iran has sought to achieve several strategic and geopolitical goals, the most important of which are:

■ **Strengthening ties with Russia and anti-Western powers:** Iran presents itself to Russia as a credible partner through supporting it in its dispute with the United States and NATO. Iran may be attempting to further bridge the historical distrust between the two countries through its support. This schism has been bridged somewhat over the last decade as a result of the two sides' strategic partnership and convergence of views on a variety of international and regional issues, ranging from hostility toward the United States to common interests in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, and joint economic cooperation and efforts to overcome Western sanctions. Furthermore, it is important to note that Iran's ambitions extend beyond Russia, as it positions itself as an important military partner for the anti-

West axis. As a result, current events may bring China, Russia, Iran and North Korea closer together in new alliances. In international disputes, Iran presents itself as a significant and influential power. Hence, it is likely that it will form more bilateral cooperative partnerships as well as participate in collective organizations that include the mentioned countries such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Economic Union, and BRICS. The countries involved in these organizations have multipolar orientations, fitting Iran's ambitions to end US domination over the international system.

■ **Putting pressure on European countries:** The Iranian government exploits every opportunity to achieve more leverage in the face of its adversaries. Iran has repeatedly engaged in indirect confrontations with the United States and the European countries in the Middle East. However, currently, Iran appears to be attempting to use a lever against the Europeans, who, like the United States, are hostile to the Iranian government and support the domestic protests against it. This is in addition to hosting and supporting Iranian opposition factions abroad. As Tehran seeks to support its Middle Eastern project, its involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war may help divert Western attention away from its malign behavior in the region.

■ **Meeting Russia's military needs and promoting Iranian weapons:** Iran's supply of military equipment to Russia reveals Moscow's desire to shore up its battlefield weaknesses and replenish its stockpiles. In comparison to Russian drones, Iranian ones have an advantage in terms of low cost and radar evasion. In addition, they operate within a range of 1,500 kilometers and carry a larger amount of ammunition. These drones provide Russia with an opportunity to address its shortcomings that it appears to have overlooked in the past, despite the fact that drones have become a decisive factor in military confrontations. There is no doubt that the involvement of Iranian drones in the dispute has influenced its outcome. Russia has been able to strike more than 40 percent of Ukraine's electricity infrastructure as well as conduct effective attacks against fixed targets on the front line, which could dampen Ukrainian morale and influence Ukrainian popular support for the continuation of battles. These are some of the benefits Russia has achieved from Iranian drones. Meanwhile, Iran is using these battles to spread propaganda for its drone arsenal, which could awaken the interest of other countries. Perhaps from Iran's perspective, this justifies the participation of Iranian advisers in the operation of the drones, as well as the IRGC publishing videos of drone attacks on its websites; all of this is part of Iran's propaganda to market its weapons.

■ **Putting pressure to find an off-ramp solution in the nuclear talks:** Iran would not have involved itself in Russia's war on Ukraine in the manner it has if the nuclear talks had not broken down. Iran's assistance to Russia is likely

one of its levers against the West and the United States to find a way out of the current nuclear impasse and meet its demand of ending the IAEA probe into the three undeclared Iranian sites where traces of enriched uranium were discovered. This probe is the final impediment to the European plan to return to compliance with the nuclear deal, which has become the Iranian government's only lifeline amid growing popular discontent at home. While several European countries have imposed sanctions on Iran for its involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Iran maintains diplomatic relations and informs the Europeans of its desire to revive the nuclear deal. This implies that a compromise could be reached between the Europeans and Iran, in which the latter would give up its support for Russia in the ongoing war in exchange for resolving the dispute and returning to the nuclear deal.

■ **Iran practically ending the arms sales embargo:** Tehran seeks to promote itself as a supplier of weapons to the world's countries, breaking the cycle of sanctions imposed by the United States on its dealings in this field. Since the UN arms embargo on Iran expired in October 2022, Tehran has supplied weapons to Russia, received weapons, and proceeded with pending deals with Russia and China. In addition, Iran has continued to sell weapons to other countries.

■ **Reaping benefits and revenues and employing them to water down domestic tensions and resolve problems away from the West:** It is certain that Iranian arms sales to Russia provide Iran with important financial revenues, especially in light of the activation of the Mir and Shetap payment systems which allow the two sides to exchange currencies outside of the US-dominated SWIFT system. These revenues could help the Iranian government in quelling popular discontent over deteriorating living conditions. The transfer of weapons to Russia is in exchange for significant financial revenues for Iran, and these incomings are important given the country's volatile domestic situation. Additionally, the move to sell Russia weapons may create an international weapons market for Iran and encourage other countries to buy weapons from it. The aforementioned will lessen Iran's dependence on the West and relieve the pressure on it to make significant concessions in the nuclear talks, thus emboldening the Iranian government's ideological tendencies and perspectives.

Opportunities and Challenges Facing Iran

Iran's arms sales reflect an Iranian willingness to defy the Europeans and Americans. For the first time, Iran moves its dispute with the West to Europe, albeit in an indirect manner. Iran has not merely supplied Russia with drones, its military advisers from the IRGC are deployed on the battlefield in occupied Ukrainian territory. There are also concerns that Iranian ballistic

missiles could enter the theater of operations, complicating European efforts to strengthen Ukraine's anti-drone and anti-missile defense capabilities. As a result of Iran's decision to side with Russia militarily in its conflict with Ukraine, the following challenges await it:

■ **The erosion of Iran's reputation internationally:** No other world power has dared to support Russia in its war on Ukraine in the same way as Iran. The international community sees the war as unjust and an attack on national sovereignty. There has also been widespread international condemnation of the devastation, displacements and killings as well as concern about the negative implications for the global economy, energy and food supplies as well as for the chances of achieving peace through international cooperation. The Iranian position further tarnishes the Iranian government's reputation, which has already been undermined by the government's violation of international norms and disregard for the principles of international law by interfering in the affairs of other countries and disrespecting their sovereignty. Even without its role in destroying Ukrainian infrastructure and siding with Russia in a war raging outside its borders and posing no threat to its interests, the Iranian government's international image has taken a severe hit over the years because of its role in spreading chaos in the Middle East.

■ **A new transatlantic consensus that is more hostile to Iran:** Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war further deepens the schism in relations with the European countries that were once eager to resurrect the nuclear deal. In light of growing European concerns about the presence of Iranian weaponry and even IRGC officers on the battlefield in Ukraine — at a time when the Iranian nuclear talks are stalled and Iran is accumulating technical gains that could allow it to breach the nuclear threshold — the convergence of American and European viewpoints could push for the formation of a transatlantic consensus to shift the mode of relations with Iran toward confrontation, pressures and sanctions.

■ **The collapse of the nuclear talks and diminishing chances of reviving the nuclear deal:** Iran may squander an important opportunity to revive the nuclear deal by its intervention in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its hardline position on reaching a deal with the United States and the West. It may also miss another opportunity to lift the sanctions due to Europe's need for Iranian oil. The resolution of its domestic problems is likely to be dependent on resolving its issues with the West. The policy of turning eastward will not help Iran solve its problems, particularly its economic ones. As a result, the Iranian government may face more dangerous options in the future, particularly if it reaches the nuclear threshold. If this happens,

it could leave the Iranian government standing alone, even without its staunch ally Russia on its side.

■ **The West providing more support for the protests in Iran:** More European and American support for the domestic protests that have not stopped since September 2022 could force the Iranian government to reconsider its hostile actions and involvement in Russia's war on Ukraine. There is no doubt that Western support will fuel the protests' momentum, encouraging Iranians to be more defiant of the ruling establishment. It is clear that Western sanctions and granting protesters internet access via satellite will add further momentum to the protest movement, which has become a great threat to the government when compared to previous ones.

■ **The US reconsidering its strategy toward the Middle East:** While Iran has relocated its battle with the West to the European continent, the United States may reconsider its Middle East strategy, returning to deeper involvement in regional issues and building on its "Defend Forward" strategy rather than its policy of withdrawal that appears to have given Iran an opportunity to implement its regional strategy on the borders of the Atlantic Ocean. The United States must mend its strained relations with its regional allies to coordinate its policy toward Iran. The United States must also reimpose maximum pressure on Iran to force it to change its behavior.

However, the plethora of challenges that Iran may face as a result of its involvement in Ukraine could be extremely costly. Losing European support for reviving the nuclear deal does not bode well for Iran. The nuclear deal is necessary for Iran to get out of the domestic quagmire it is in, especially given the growing popular opposition to any extraterritorial military role, beginning with its role in the Middle East, let alone a similar role in Europe. Only the Iranian people will face the consequences of this intervention. This is in addition to the transatlantic consensus which has prioritized diplomacy and engagement with Iran since Biden's election, evolving into confrontation and the imposition of crippling sanctions, reverting the Iranian landscape to what it was a decade ago.

Future of Iran's Involvement in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

In light of the nature of its objectives and the opportunities and challenges it faces in providing military support to Russia in its war on Ukraine, Iran will most likely pursue one of the two following scenarios:

■ **Continuing arms sales to Russia:** This means that Iran will continue to provide military assistance to Russia, specifically drones and possibly ballistic missiles. This scenario is supported by the fact that the ongoing global conflict in Ukraine has provided Iran with an opportunity to maneuver to strengthen its interests and have more leverage against the West. Nonetheless, the US administration's laxity in enforcing its sanctions

has encouraged Iran's defiance of the United States, reflected through the provision of military support to Russia in its war on Ukraine. This support allows Iran to achieve several advantages such as further undermining the arms embargo imposed on it and reaping financial revenues to mitigate its domestic crisis. In addition, arms sales allow Iran to strengthen its cooperation and partnership with Russia, distract internal populace from domestic crises, and reduce the possibility of launching a direct military strike against Iran. In exchange for this assistance, Tehran may obtain weapons that Russia has previously refused to supply it with such as the S-400 missile defense system and the sophisticated Sukhoi aircraft. From another perspective, Iran could benefit from operational involvement by improving and developing the capabilities of its drones and amassing enough expertise to repel sophisticated Western air defense systems. This would be beneficial to Iran's regional clout and standing. This military support also has a positive impact on the symbiotic relationship between Russia and Iran on a variety of issues.

■ **Withholding military support in fear of hostile Western reactions:** In this scenario, Iran may back down from selling more drones to Russia. Iran could halt its military support to Russia without changing its political position on the conflict. Iran's constant attempts to persuade the world that the drone deals were signed prior to the outbreak of the war, as well as its denial that it provides any military support to Russia in the war, are evidence of this scenario. This is in addition to Iran fearing European sanctions, which could be the first of their kind since the signing of the nuclear deal, and the possibility that the Europeans will use their contribution to the nuclear deal to reinstate all international sanctions against it, potentially reisolating it. Furthermore, the United States and Europe are planning greater coordination of their positions and policies against Iran, which will obstruct the nuclear talks and the revival of the nuclear deal. This deal is the Iranian government's economic lifeline and a way to mitigate the intense wave of protests that threaten its future.

Conclusion

The Trump administration proposed a draft resolution in October 2020 to extend Iran's arms embargo, but the European parties were the first to oppose this US decision. When the Trump administration was unable to pass the resolution, the United States requested that the European troika use the snapback mechanism to reinstate sanctions. Trump was well aware of the risks posed by allowing arms sales to Iran at a time when the country was unwilling to change its behavior and retract its threats to regional and international security. However, because Trump's relations with Europe were strained, the Europeans did not take the United States' advice on

Iran at the time, nor did they take the advice of the region's countries. After Trump, US President Joe Biden laid out a flawed strategy based on diplomacy while abandoning deterrence, which was coupled with laxity in enforcing sanctions. The Europeans followed in Biden's footsteps, but this has encouraged Iran to pursue a more aggressive policy. It appears that, just as the Middle East has paid a high price for the flawed nuclear deal that Obama and the Europeans helped bring about, Europe is about to pay an even higher price. However, the price will be paid in the very heart of Europe, as the Europeans have passed up the opportunity to exercise greater deterrence against Iran.



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