

Sky Diplomacy: The Geopolitical Impact of the Proliferation of Iranian-Russian Military Drone Trade on Global Alliances and Security

What are the implications of Russo-Iranian UAV Trade on the Balance of Power between the US and its Rivals?

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Abstract:

The geopolitical implications of Russian Iranian advancements in military drone trade, particularly Unmanned Air Vehicles, are closely tied to a shifting Balance of Power that is set to leave the West behind. Focusing on the historical context of Iranian trade with Russia and China, as well as recent developments, the study analyzes how these armed drones are contributing to the shifting world order, wherein Russia and China are increasingly taking on a leading role, and how this is impacting the West from various points of view. The research explores ethical concerns, security risks, and international law violations that are resulting from the deepening military collaboration between Russia and Iran. Broader consequences are highlighted, such as increased instability in Syria and heightened nuclear risks due to a nearing nuclear Iranian state. There are certain measures that the West has to take in order to navigate this evolving landscape and changing power dynamics, in order to fortify their current stance within the international order and overcome this imminent change smoothly.

Keywords: Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAV), Balance of Power, Security, Trade

I. Introduction

Iranian and Russian advancements in aerial diplomacy are shaking and shifting Western dominance within the geopolitical Balance of Power. In an age of advanced technologies and Artificial Intelligence, the increasing production of combat drones such as the ‘hunter-killer

drones’ has fundamentally transformed the notion of warfare. So-called Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAVs) - more specifically Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles (UCAVs), referring to those carrying a weapon - are shaping widespread armed combat and leading to the readjustment of military strategies. Below competing states such as the

United States and Israel, Iran counts as one of the leading countries involved in the armed drones industry, and although Russia has its own very advanced UCAV technology, Iran has exponentially been supplying Russia with armed military drones. Especially in Western countries, these advancements sparked a lot of controversies - particularly concerning the role of these drones in Ukraine and the developing entente between Iran and Russia. Current research in the field includes a lot of reviews and analyses on U.S.-Iranian relations, specifically surrounding the pending Nuclear Deal and declining Western influence in Iran after the Revolution. Furthermore, some study the historic geopolitical collaboration of Iran and Russia and their common opposition to Western supremacy. However, research seems to be limited regarding more current trends in Russo-Iranian military relations and particularly how the proliferation of UAV trade is emblematic of a shifting Balance of Power of states, undermining the United States. Delving into historical, moral, legal, and strategic characteristics, this article will examine the rapid increase of UAV arms and their implications on warfare by analyzing the ramifications of the Russo-Iranian drone trade on the Balance of Power between the United States and its Rivals. After a historic outline of Iranian trade with two big U.S. Rivals, Russia and China, the role of military drones as well as the current trade of such between Russia and Iran will be delineated. Lastly, this paper will more closely analyze the implication of this growing alliance and in particular the UAV trade - What does this all mean for

the current Balance of Power, and more specifically, what does it mean for the West?

2. Historic Context of Iranian Trade with Russia and China

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader at the time, rejected any efforts to form ties with foreign states and regarded both the West and the East as threatening. Iranian foreign policy rather consistently reflected the clerical regime's efforts of liberation and self-preservation, thus driving Israeli and American influence out of the country, as well as strengthening the country's dignity and national identity. At the center of Khomeini's endeavors was the principle of exporting the Iranian revolution across the Muslim world - reflecting his interpretation of Shia Islam. When his successor Ali Khamenei assumed office in 1989, as none of these goals were achieved, Iran was more unstable than ever before and the country began to shift its foreign endeavors. Rather than having a zeal for an Islamic revolution and a unified national identity, Khamenei sought to rebuild Iran's economic and social stability and forge better relations with foreign superpowers. Tehran maintained its hostility towards the United States and rather turned to China and Russia, although due to the post-Cold War Balance of Power and overwhelming U.S. influence, these states were cautious not to provoke Washington by fostering close ties with Iran. In the following years and due to the very cautious character of China and Russia with regard to the U.S.' hegemonic-like essence, the Islamic Republic significantly started developing its atomic program, in part by increasing

nuclear weapons research and engaging in illicit trade with North Korea. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's economy suffered immensely, incentivizing trade with Iran, and Chinese interest primarily based on Iranian oil reserves due to the growing energy demand in the country. In response to the illegal actions taken by Iran, the United Nations as well as the United States imposed various sanctions on the state. However, due to the extensive number of western restrictions, its growing leftist economy and in spite of the growing partnerships with Russia and China, the state struggled to attract the necessary foreign investment.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iranian Nuclear Deal, included the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia) and Germany. This plan emerged due to the growing concerns surrounding Iran's atomic program. By limiting its nuclear ambitions and activities the country was granted relief from the previously imposed sanctions. This confidence-based diplomacy was based on the assumption that, by enhancing Iran's freedom and participation internationally, it would lessen its revolutionary and ideological character - for instance by engaging in more democratic trade and opposing regional militant groups. Tehran began to have better access to foreign markets and hence it increased its oil production and trade. This added to Iran's economic and international influence which had been booming since the Arab Spring of 2011, when Tehran began to gain more regional power. However, it did not subside its threatening, antagonistic

nature towards the West. In the following years, as their respective spheres of influence grew and they felt less threatened by the U.S.'s supremacy, China and Russia began showing more interest in the global South. The potential for these new alliances allowed Moscow and Beijing greater access to the Middle Eastern region, thus substantial energy supply and, perhaps most crucially, leverage against the perceived leviathan that is the United States. Particularly, they oppose Western domination and its unilateralism, especially coming from the U.S., and rather advocate for a multipolar world order. Russia in particular is a major energy exporter and saw the opportunity to explore possible partnerships in this sector, such as joint ventures, investments, and the development of energy transport infrastructure. In terms of foreign geopolitical interests, Russia's endeavors are often aligned with Iranian interests - specifically after the shift from a clerical, revolutionary regime to a more internationally strategic one. An example of that is Russia's constant Iranian endorsement during the JCPOA talks. Additionally, during the Syrian civil war, Russia and Iran supported the Syrian government, in contrast to many Western powers as well as major Sunni states in the Middle East who endorsed the Syrian opposition. Because of this, the two states began collaborating in defense matters, engaging in arms sales and elaborate military hardware and technology transfers. Due to sanctions imposed on Russia by the West after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and in more recent years after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's trade with Tehran increased significantly. By imposing significant counter-sanctions,

Russia opened opportunities for Iran, among other countries, to increase bilateral trade. In turn, as recent sanctions aimed to completely isolate Russia economically, thus freezing all public and private access to Western financial systems, technology, and markets, Russia was forced to advance relationships with alternative trade partners - bilateral trade with Iran increased by 44.9% in 2022¹. This relationship, particularly the strong military collaboration, is evolving further and in the near future could be affecting the wider global order. The military technologies that are exponentially being produced and traded between Iran and Russia, as well as their increasing collaboration to counter Western supremacy, indicate a potential shifting Balance of Power between the United States and its Rivals.

3. A Closer Look at Military Drones

The significance as well as implications of military drones in the modern era cannot be overstated. As technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and Robotics advance, UAV production too is experiencing unprecedented growth and evolution. In 2024, the worldwide drone market is expected to exhibit a growth in volume of approximately 8.3%, and the respective revenue is set to increase by 3.20% each year². For states, they provide incredible advantages in warfare, as they offer safer, cheaper, and more effective ways of achieving military objectives. There are many different types of UAVs that

offer a wide range of capabilities, from remote reconnaissance and surveillance to targeted airstrikes through carried and deployed munitions (UCAVs). Initially, the most prominent drone in the market was the American Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) UAV, which was first developed in 1995 and armed with munition in the early 2000s. The Reaper, of which around 300 units were adopted in The U.S. Armed Forces, quickly replaced this model as drones gradually became more sophisticated in terms of surveillance, sensors, accuracy, and remote control.

The rapid increase in military drone production is also raising concerns about missing ethical frameworks, cybersecurity, and autonomy, as they are the prime example of a military weapon that is able to project power without projecting vulnerability. One can look at the morality of drones and the validity of these worries by applying Hegel's philosophical thought in "The Phenomenology of Mind": "Weapons are nothing else than the essential being of the combatants themselves, a being which only makes its appearance for them both reciprocally". By introducing armed drones, however, a state can reduce sending combatants into the battlefield, and if taken to an extreme the question arises if it can then really be considered a combat in itself. Further, taking the UCAV as a proxy combatant, it is not faced with the violence that it exhibits as it can attack its target and depart without being subject to the same human vulnerability it projects. Lastly, considering the mere fact that warfare implies the struggle between enemies, and contrary to this UCAVs offer a way of shifting this to an absolutely unilateral one, this renders

¹ Faro, Mireia, Geranmayeh, Ellie. "Alone Together: How the War in Ukraine Shapes the Russian-Iranian Relationship." ECFR. Geranmayeh, Ellie. 2023

² "Drones - Worldwide | Statista Market Forecast". 2023

the widespread ethical concerns of military drone proliferation comprehensible. Another concern around this innovative combat weapon is the increase in low-cost civilian drones, which are more easily accessible, can be militarized, and are progressively used by non-state military groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and The Islamic State. The lack of accountability coupled with the risk of asymmetric or even unilateral warfare contribute to increasing international security threats, which have to be taken into account as key ramifications of the boost of general UAV proliferation.

4. UAV Trade between Iran and Russia

The bilateral trade between Russia and Iran has not only been booming in recent years, but it has undergone a significant shift in terms of traded goods. Previously, the trade consisted of 80% of agricultural products, however recently it is estimated that the vast majority of goods being exchanged has shifted towards more industrial goods. It must also be highlighted that both countries are heavily sanctioned by powerful states such as the U.S. - momentarily they are considered the two most sanctioned countries in the world³ - and thus it is reasonable to assume that the reported trade goods and quantities do not correspond to de facto affairs. Additionally, because of the imposed sanctions, they became severely restricted in terms of global financial and banking platforms, which further restricted their trade options. The two countries worked to

de-dollarize bilateral trade and bypass banking services such as Visa or Mastercard, which due to the Western embargoes are not accessible. By means of an inter-banking agreement the two have been able to successfully trade goods while evading Western sanctions, while using the Iranian SEPAM and Russian SPFS national financial messaging services. The investment in transit routes was equally as crucial for this advancing alliance. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is the main trade route between Russia and Iran and their bilateral trade heavily relies on this. Considering the advantages of being part of this network, Iran built approximately 200 km of corridor in the past few years and it has developed plans to construct 400 km of railway infrastructure within the country in the year to come. These developments have become a way for both countries to increase cooperation while at the same time avoiding Western sanctions.

The military relationship between these two states is not a novelty but rather a development of the previously perceived 'donor-client' alliance, in which Russia acted as a patron providing Iran with armed weapons. This was for instance the case during the Syrian civil war. However, more recently this notably shifted as Iran began supplying Russia with considerable amounts of military equipment and especially drones armed with various types of munition⁴. This development is most significant when considering the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the role of UCAVs within it. Western intelligence estimates that the first drones were sent from Iran to Russia around August

³ Zandt, Florian. 2023. "Infographic: The World's Most-Sanctioned Countries." Statista Daily Data. Statista. February 22, 2023.

⁴ "Alone Together: How the War in Ukraine Shapes the Russian-Iranian Relationship." ECFR. European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), September 6, 2023.

2022. It is believed that they are manufactured in Tehran, and shipped from the Amirabad Port through the Caspian Sea to Makhachkala in Russia. From there, they are sent to the respective Russian air bases, in Primorsko-Akhtarsk and Seshcha, where they are actively being employed in air strikes against Ukraine. Exhibited in the map below is an illustration of the trade route employed.



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Russia evidently also has a large domestic drone capacity, producing various different models of UAVs and UCAVs, which it uses against Ukraine, however, Iranian drones are of more advanced technology and much lower production cost. The Ukrainian government recently submitted a 47-page report to the G7 (U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Britain), in which it expands on the drones used by Russia during air raids: Firstly, it highlighted the role of western companies, as corresponding components were found in crashed Iranian UAVs. Many representatives of such companies came forward specifying that they do not authorize the usage of their products in weaponry or the business conducted with

⁵ Salama, Vivian, and Gordon Lubold. "Tehran Ships Drones to Russia over Caspian Sea for Deployment on Ukraine Front, U.S. Says." *WSJ*. The Wall Street Journal, June 9, 2023.

Russia and other sanctioned countries. "It proves difficult to control sales throughout the entire lifetime of a product. Still, we have taken extensive measures at our disposal to ensure compliance with sanctions against Russia aiming to not only comply with the letter but also with the spirit of the sanctions"⁶, highlighted by a spokesperson of Infineon Technologies. Furthermore, the document marked that Moscow has begun to implement the names "Geranium 1" and "Geranium 2" instead of "Shahed 136" and "Shahed 138", most likely in order to conceal Iran's involvement. In 2022, the United States estimated that Tehran shipped more than 1,700 armed UAVs to Moscow, and this number exponentially increased in the year that followed. The so-called Iranian 'kamikaze drones' are the most consequential; they are equipped with advanced sensors that can collect real-time visual imagery, assess and monitor targets, and gather critical intelligence on enemy movements, infrastructure, or potential threats. Their relatively low cost, longevity, and precise air strike capabilities make them ideal weapons for Russia to employ in the persistent war against Ukraine. Due to the faulty anticipation of Russia, that the invasion of Ukraine would be short-lived, its cruise missiles and bomb reserves seem to be rapidly declining. As anticipated by Samuel Bendett, senior advisor for the Center for Naval Analyses, focusing on Russian military technology: "As the war lasted longer than the two weeks initially planned, Russia's cruise missile stockpiles started to dwindle and the cost of the war

⁶ Boffey, Daniel. "Revealed: Europe's Role in the Making of Russia Killer Drones". *The Guardian*, 2023

increased dramatically. [...] That's when we started seeing more loitering drones being used by the Russian military"⁷.

5. Implications on the Balance of Power between the US and its Rivals

There are a great number of consequences that come with the deepening Russo-Iranian relationship, and specifically the proliferation of military drones, which could harm Western interests in the global order. Beyond the implications that are already felt in Ukraine, these developments could be consequential for the rest of the world as well. Three major areas of concern regarding this are soaring instability in Syria, the increased risk of nuclear aggravation, and lastly a complete shift in the global order, undermining Western domination.

5.1 Instability in Syria

The growing alliance between Iran and Russia has severely impacted the ongoing conflict in Syria. Not only does this of course affect the indigenous citizens, but it has ripple effects on the wider global community. In 2015, Russia and Iran supported Bashar al-Assad's regime by providing military weapons to Syrian and Iranian-backed troops, ultimately solidifying his control and power in Syria. Through the Ukraine war, which was evidently more economically straining than the Russian state had anticipated, Russian forces and the military company Wagner evacuated some of their bases in the country, leaving them to Iranian forces - including the paramilitary

group Hezbollah. In general, it is obvious that Iranian and Russian forces are, for individual motivations, working together to counter the dominant U.S. presence and put pressure on the respective armed forces to abandon the area. Additionally, the so-called 'Discord Leaks', a number of leaked U.S. documents, revealed a lot of concerns and developments surrounding American armed forces and intelligence. Among other things, the documents highlighted severe drone attacks on U.S. forces in Syria, which have been steadily increasing and intensifying, and they hypothesize that Russian Intelligence was involved and has been aiding Iran with these strikes. Although they do not provide any evidence for this particular anti-U.S. military cooperation, the papers conclusively point towards increasing general Russian involvement in regional Iranian efforts.

5.2 Nuclear Risks

In terms of nuclear risks, Iran has consistently been advancing in the sector, largely due to declining restrictions and oversight; while the West has been preoccupied with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and other major threats, the attention on Iran's nuclear program has plummeted. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report in September 2023 that confirms that Iran has sufficient fissile material to produce various nuclear weapons; an estimation concluded that the country is in possession of a total of 3795.5kg of enriched uranium. As mentioned earlier, the retirement of the United States from the JCPOA, under the presidency of Donald Trump, led to the corresponding widespread non-compliance of Iran.

⁷ "Iranian kamikaze drones: An Economical Solution for Russia Instead of Cruise Missiles". Samuel Bendett, Research Analyst with the Center for Naval Analyses.

Following this, the IAEA was limited to controlling and monitoring nuclear activities within the state, and thus the information they can provide is merely an estimation. It was consistently believed that Iran lacked crucial information and thus was not a vast threat in terms of nuclear power, however the increasing cooperation with the Russian state has shifted this perception; the tightening relations between the two states make it easier for Iran to access the necessary technologies for the production of these weapons, and further, Russia's increasing dependence on Iran for military arms strengthens its general support of a potential atomic weapon. Two schools of thought are highlighted regarding this; firstly, some believe that the benefits of better relations between Moscow and Tehran outweigh the risks that come with a nuclear Iranian state - this includes the cooperation in Ukraine and both states' efforts to overpower U.S. global influence. On the contrary, the second school emphasizes that nuclear arms in Iran would be detrimental to Russian interests⁸. This belief is based on the realist, power-seeking nature of the Iranian state, which could at any given moment move toward the West if this becomes more beneficial, thus putting Russia at risk. Considering however that the military cooperation between Iran and Russia is growing exponentially, and infrastructure as well as economic measures are being implemented to facilitate this alliance further, the first school of thought seems more and more realistic, simultaneously challenging Western security and geopolitical dominance.

⁸ Faro, Mireia, Geranmayeh, Ellie. "Alone Together: How the War in Ukraine Shapes the Russian-Iranian Relationship." ECFR. September 6, 2023.

5.3 Shifting Balance of Power

Western domination is increasingly endangered and the Balance of Power between the United States and its Rivals has the potential to drastically shift - not only in terms of political power dynamics but also economically. As already explored, Iran and Russia share the same vision of a multipolar world order, specifically without Western domination, and both Vladimir Putin and Ali Khamenei have taken significant steps toward this. Furthermore, considering the COVID-19 pandemic, the surge of Artificial Intelligence, and other conflicts between Washington and Beijing, it is not surprising that Chinese policy endeavors also aim to decrease U.S. domination within the world order. However, given its heavy geopolitical impact, more concrete Chinese cooperation with Iran and Russia is needed to fulfill their systemic anti-Western agenda and finally achieve multipolarity. China has been attempting to further its sphere of influence and gain privileged access to the Middle Eastern region. By strengthening its ties with Iran, a state with great regional influence, China is able to further its economic reach, meet its internal energy demands, and simultaneously step away from the West. In 2021 the country signed a 25-year bilateral trade agreement with Iran, which allows the state access to all given economic sectors, and in turn, China is said to invest in Iranian infrastructure programs, telecommunications, and nuclear energy research. This agreement rendered all Western sanctions previously imposed on Iran, regarding the development of its atomic sector, practically useless. Furthermore, in March 2023 China mediated a political

normalization agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which sought to reestablish political and economic collaboration between the two states - for instance, the respective embassies are to be reopened and collaboration in various economic sectors will be restored. Although peace negotiations and efforts to repair their relations have been in the works for years, China's interference is important as it illustrates its commitment to secure more authority and ensure security in the region - thus significantly reducing U.S. dominance. In general, increased collaboration between China, Russia, and the global South is crucial, such as through the economic group BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SHO), and the previously mentioned INSTC route, all of which illustrate examples of this endeavor to sway non-Western states towards a less centralized world order. Iran and Russia are specifically working together to move Arab countries away from Western economic ties, highlighting that a de-dollarisation of the world economy could increase their respective economic independence and eliminate risks of sanctions or other externally imposed economic limitations. The ongoing war in Ukraine is offering a great opportunity for the respective states to further this ideal, as many global South states opposed the Western response to the invasion and rather sided with Russia. In general, it is clear that a lot of the non-Western countries are interested in gaining more independence in the world economy, and thus detaching themselves from the dollar and Western economic systems such as the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT). It is however not yet clear

what the proposed alternative would be, on a global scale, and how this shift would concretely take place.

6. Policy Recommendations

In general, it is unlikely that the situation in itself will drastically change, as these new superpowers are slowly emerging and there is little the West can do to completely halt that. However, there are a variety of ways through which Western powers can soften this shifting Balance of power, in a way to achieve a slower and less radical transition. Diplomacy is likely not a viable option for this, as the cultural differences and strategic motivations are too drastically different between the West and the East, and thus political negotiations would be fruitless. Economic measures are the most crucial to consider, as by leveraging diverse economic tools, the West can incentivize positive behavior within the international landscape. As a prerequisite for this, however, Western nations should increase collaboration and encourage a unified response to the changing Balance of Power. Particularly European nations have not yet taken enough measures to mitigate this growing threat, as a lot of corporations are still pursuing significant economic partnerships with Russia, China, or Iran. Considering the ongoing drone trade and its implications, various Western, especially European, companies are directly engaged, for instance by providing Iran with components of Unmanned Air Vehicles. Contrarily, these states should seek to diversify and engage in strategic partnerships outside the entente. This also applies for instance to the energy sector, wherein Europe is

striving to support the development of alternative partnerships which align with the European energy security goal of reducing reliance on Russian energy. It is of course important to carefully undertake these shifts so as to not destabilize European economies. Pursuing trade agreements and strengthening ties with countries who share the same values as the West, thus democratic and market-oriented, is both geopolitically and economically strategic; countries will benefit from increased cross-border cooperation and transparency. Together with coordinated sanctions imposed on these countries for violating international law, these methods could help mitigate the pending power imbalances. In addition to economic diversification and realignment, Western countries should strengthen their ties with countries in regions where Russia, China, and Iran are seeking to expand their influence - most notably the Middle East. Through diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships with states in these targeted areas, the West can counterbalance and hence halt the Entente's influence in the given region. Pursuing this strategy is however more prone to conflict and would emphasize a deeper geopolitical divide. Lastly, international institutions such as the United Nations and International Law bodies such as the European Council should be strengthened in the face of the new Balance of Power, ensuring that they remain effective and encourage participation within the international community. These institutions are crucial, as they are central to ensuring state accountability and responsibility, as well as monitoring that human rights are not violated, and with respect to this

growing entente it is crucial that these processes are entirely functional.

7. Conclusion

It is vital to highlight that Russo-Iranian drone trade represents a much bigger endeavor and is part of a very multifaceted collaboration between the two states - their vision of a multipolar world order and the mitigation of U.S. international power is at the heart of it. China can be considered a third constituent of this entente, as it shares the same vision of a decentralized world order and it has taken several steps to widen and consolidate its international reach, while at the same time undermining U.S. power. Explicit collaboration is however much more evident between Russia and Iran, as they have taken concrete measures to de-dollarize their economies and overpass Western sanctions - particularly mirrored in their ongoing and covert UAV trade. Although the main direct worry of the exponentially growing UAV trade is the impact these drones are having on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, more generally it also highlights the decreasing Western authority in Ukraine as well as on an international scale. Moscow and Tehran are finding ways to surpass economic sanctions and have little regard for international law measures. It follows that, as there is no control and no impactful consequences that can be imposed by the West, they are running out of ways to maintain the upper hand within the Balance of Power, making it possible for a more decentralized world order to emerge. Furthermore, the mere fact that Russia is actively attempting to hide Iranian

participation in the illegal trade emphasizes their efforts to further develop their current cooperation and advance their agenda internationally. Russia and Iran are willing to go against international law and they are determined to increase their international authority, for instance, highlighted by their joint efforts to increase Iran's nuclear sector. The West should not underestimate these advancements and take the possibility of a triple entente between Russia, Iran, and China into consideration, as the solidification of this could lead to a complete shift in the Balance of Powers of states, essentially leaving the West in the background.

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