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Strategic Boundaries and Limitations of Iran-Russia Partnership

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The partnership between Iran and Russia entered a new phase following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A formal agreement in 2025 established both countries' adherence to a policy of resistance to the West. Yet, Russia's support for Iran is largely symbolic. Accordingly, an escalation in nuclear proliferation, especially if Israeli and US attacks on Iran were to resume, would lead Tehran to seek more reliable security partners than Russia or cross the nuclear threshold. It is unclear whether the expansion ties between Iran and Russia could withstand such a shift in Iranian policy. Russia's compliance with nuclear non-proliferation norms could limit cooperation, which could ultimately reshape the future of the partnership and, in turn, the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

The strategic partnership between Iran and Russia occupies a distinctive place in contemporary international relations. Rooted in shared opposition to Western hegemony and a mutual desire to reconfigure the global order, the Iranian-Russian partnership has evolved through cycles of convergence and divergence since the end of the Cold War. The geopolitical transformations following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have reinvigorated their cooperation, culminating in the signing of the 2025 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty. This formalisation appeared to signal the consolidation of a new axis of resistance, positioning both Moscow and Tehran as central actors in challenging the West. However, closer analysis reveals that the Iran-Russia partnership suffers from significant structural and strategic limitations, including in the military and nuclear domains.

At the core of this partnership lies an asymmetry of power and interest. Russia's global ambitions and Iran's regional aspirations often overlap but rarely align perfectly. For Tehran, cooperation with Moscow is a means to secure political recognition, access to technology and partial relief from Western sanctions. For Moscow, Iran represents a valuable instrument of leverage in its broader confrontation with the West. This divergence is most evident in the

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The Iran-Russia partnership's limitations have been exposed by the shifting regional and international dynamics surrounding Iran's nuclear programme

sphere of defence and security, where despite the rhetoric of "strategic partnership", Russia has consistently refrained from offering Iran explicit security guarantees or military protection. The absence of a mutual defence clause in the 2025 treaty underscores the political rather than operational character of their alliance.

The partnership's limitations have been further exposed by the shifting regional and international dynamics surrounding Iran's nuclear programme. Israeli and US attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, coupled with the reactivation of UN sanctions upon the initiative of the E3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), have heightened Tehran's sense of vulnerability and reinforced its pursuit of credible security guarantees. These developments underscore the paradox of Iran's position: while it seeks to diversify its strategic partnerships, including with Russia, it remains uncertain whether these alliances can effectively safeguard its sovereignty or deter external aggression.

By examining the evolution of the Russia-Iran partnership through key milestones – including their defence cooperation, the Twelve-Day War and the reimposition of UN sanctions – this paper highlights the depth but also the fragility of their bilateral relationship. It evaluates how Russia's shifting behaviour within the non-proliferation regime and its simultaneous engagement with other controversial partners, such as North Korea, complicate its credibility as a guarantor of stability. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Iran-Russia partnership, while significant in its geopolitical symbolism, remains structurally constrained by conflicting interests, normative contradictions and the absence of genuine mutual security commitments.

1 The Impact of the Twelve-Day War

Since 2022, tensions between Iran, Israel and the United States have risen significantly, resulting in direct attacks on critical Iranian nuclear facilities, among other targets. These operations, carried out mainly by Israel with occasional support from the United States, have been designed to limit Tehran's ability to advance its nuclear programme.[1] The attacks have reinforced the perception of the regime's vulnerability and underscored the need for credible and sustainable security guarantees.[2]

The attack on the Parchin missiles plant on 26 October 2024, allegedly considered a nuclear weapons research site by anonymous

[1] Zimmt, Raz and Tamir Hayman, "Between a Nuclear Agreement and Active Containment: Israel and Iran's Nuclear Program after the War", in *INSS Policy Papers*, 22 July 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/?p=122172.

[2] "'Compensation for War and Security Guarantees': Iran Sets Conditions for US Nuclear Talks", in *The Cradle*, 31 July 2025, https://thecradle.co/articles-id/32274.

US and Israeli sources,[3] already raised international concerns about regional security and the potential proliferation of nuclear material. However, it was not until the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow and Esfahan during the Twelve-Day War that such concerns resonated more deeply with the international community. These operations have caused interruptions in enriched uranium production and damage to critical components of centrifuges used for nuclear research and development.[4]

Faced with these threats, Iran has doubled down on cooperation with regional allies, seeking to renew deterrence against possible future attacks.[5] Internally, official discourse reinforces the narrative of the regime's resilience and legitimacy, presenting the attacks as a means to consolidate national unity and strategic autonomy.[6]

The attacks, jointly with the re-adoption of UN sanctions, have quelled Iran's willingness to participate in nuclear negotiations, in the absence of explicit security guarantees and compensation for previous damage.[7] These guarantees should include promises to refrain from future aggression, the lifting of economic sanctions and the recognition of Iran's nuclear rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),[8] specifically its right to enrich uranium under Article IV of the treaty. Iran has also demanded reforms in the governance of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure the protection of its nuclear facilities and full consideration of its sovereignty.[9] The insistence on these guarantees reflects a strategic shift: it is no longer just a matter of preserving the nuclear programme, but of ensuring a security environment that reduces the regime's vulnerability to external intervention.

The United States and its allies seek to limit Iran's nuclear development, while Iran persists in its quest for security in the face of repeated attacks

Iran's emphasis on security guarantees poses a complex challenge for international diplomacy. The United States and its allies seek to limit Iran's nuclear development, while Iran persists in its quest for security in the face of repeated attacks.[10] Paradoxically, the attacks have strengthened Iran's determination to maintain and diversify its nuclear infrastructure, while seeking additional security

[3] Ravid, Barak, "Scoop: Israel Destroyed Active Nuclear Weapons Research Facility in Iran, Officials Say", in *Axios*, 15 November 2024, https://www.axios.com/2024/11/15/iran-israel-destroyed-active-nuclear-weapons-research-facility.
[4] Zimmt, Raz, "The Iran–Israel War and the Stability of the Islamic Regime", in *INSS Policy Papers*, 29 July 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/?p=122240.
[5] Ibid.
[6] "Iran Passes Bill to Halt IAEA Cooperation as Fragile Israel Ceasefire Holds", in *Al Jazeera*, 25 June 2025, https://aje.io/126o13.
[7] "'Compensation for War and Security Guarantees'", cit.
[8] Han, Hao, "Iran-Israel War: What China Won't Do for Iran", in *ThinkChina*, 30 June 2025, https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/iran-israel-war-what-china-wont-do-iran.
[9] "Iran Passes Bill to Halt IAEA Cooperation as Fragile Israel Ceasefire Holds", cit.
[10] Erästö, Tytti, "Israel's War on Iran Broke the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty", in *Responsible Statecraft Analyses*, 14 July 2025, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-nuke-npt.

The combination of Israeli and American attacks with Iran's insistence on obtaining security guarantees creates a context of sustained tension

mechanisms.[11] This pattern of action-reaction shows that military pressure alone does not guarantee sustainable strategic results and underscores the need for comprehensive approaches that combine deterrence, diplomacy and explicit security guarantees.

Iran's hardening stance also has direct impacts on stability in the Middle East. The combination of Israeli and American attacks with Iran's insistence on obtaining security guarantees creates a context of sustained tension, where every move can trigger military escalations.[12] A temporary cessation of hostilities does not address the underlying causes of the conflict, keeping the region in a state of latent vulnerability.[13] External pressure has also encouraged Iran to explore strategic alternatives, such as multilateral diplomacy, the reconsolidation of the axis of resistance and preparation for scenarios of direct confrontation.[14] This sets the stage for assessing the extent to which partnership with Russia can offer additional security guarantees.

2 Foundations and Limits of the Russia-Iran Partnership

2.1 Fragile partnership

Following Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death in 1989, a new phase in Russia-Iran relations began, during which Moscow assumed a central role in providing Iran with nuclear technological assistance and expertise.[15] Cooperation in 'peaceful use of nuclear energy' was a key component of Iran-Russia relations in the 1990s, reflected in an agreement to complete the construction of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, which had been frozen after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Occasional pauses were marked by mutual accusations, with shifts mostly influenced by the Kremlin's broader relationship with the United States.[16] Nevertheless, in 1995 both countries deepened their cooperation with a comprehensive nuclear cooperation package that included the transfer of 2,000 tons of natural uranium, assistance in developing a uranium mine, a gas centrifuge enrichment facility and annual training for ten-twenty students at the graduate and doctoral

[11] Vaez, Ali, "Iran Is Down, But It Is Not Out", in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 18 August 2025, https://ip-quarterly.com/en/node/42555.
[12] Zimmt, Raz, "The Iran–Israel War and the Stability of the Islamic Regime", cit.
[13] Foucer, Laure and Ilaï Berissi, "Israel-Iran Ceasefire: The Shortcomings of the 'Peace through Strength' Approach", in *Notes de la FRS*, No. 12/2025 (27 June 2025), https://www.frstrategie.org/en/node/10106.
[14] "Iran Passes Bill to Halt IAEA Cooperation as Fragile Israel Ceasefire Holds", cit.
[15] Eisenstadt, Michael, "Russian Arms and Technology Transfers to Iran: Policy Challenges for the United States", in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (March 2001), p. 15-22, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/807.
[16] Moore, Eric D., *The Crisis of Cooperation: A Critical Analysis of Russian-Iranian Relations in the Post-Soviet Era*, Thesis, Portland State University, Fall 2012, p. 29, https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.902.

level at Russian academic institutions. However, under US pressure, Russia agreed to drop the package in December that same year.[17]

Even when Iran emerged as a high-priority international concern in 2002, Russia continued to support Tehran diplomatically. However, in 2006, after Iran started large scale uranium enrichment, Russia accepted the idea of discussing this in the UN Security Council, and between 2006 and 2008 voted for all three resolutions containing sanctions against Tehran.[18]

Moscow's role in the negotiations that would lead to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was as a bridge between Iran and the West

Moscow's role in the negotiations that would lead to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal, was as a bridge between Iran and the West. Following Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia shifted toward strengthening its relations with Iran. After the Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Moscow wanted to guarantee that Russia-Iran trade would not be affected by Western sanctions.[19] In order to mitigate risks, the Russian Minister of Economic Development, Alexei Ulyukayev, visited Iran and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Iranian Minister of Industry, Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh. This memorandum aimed to promote trade and investment between the two countries, thereby mitigating the negative impact of international sanctions on Russian-Iranian economic cooperation.[20]

2.2 Defence cooperation facilitators

After Russia's important role in the JCPOA negotiations, countries resumed defence cooperation and signed a military and defence agreement on 20 January 2015.[21] In 2016 President Putin lifted the ban on S-300 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) sales to Tehran. Completion of the long-awaited S-300 deal doubled with negotiations in naval, ground and air defence, bolstered Iran's air defence ability and motivation.[22] Additionally, there was a significant demonstration of interest in cooperating with Iran in the development of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs).

[17] Albright, David, "Viewpoint: The Russian-Iranian Reactor Deal", in *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring-Summer 1995), p. 49-51, https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/albrig23.pdf.
[18] Pikayev, Alexander A., "Why Russia Supported Sanctions Against Iran", in *CNS Analyses*, 23 June 2010, https://nonproliferation.org/?p=3963.
[19] Hickey, Samuel, "Iran, Russia and the JCPOA: Is a Year of Negotiations at Risk?" in *MED This Week*, 17 March 2022, https://www.ispionline.it/en?p=62892.
[20] Kozhanov, Nikolay, "Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations", in *Carnegie Briefs*, May 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/06/understanding-the-revitalization-of-russian-iranian-relations.
[21] Borshchevskaya, Anna, "Russia's Cooperation on the Iran Deal Is No Favor to Washington", in *PolicyWatch*, No. 2646 (7 July 2016), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/3433.
[22] "Iran Gets Missiles of Russia's S-300 Air Defense System — Media", in *TASS*, 18 July 2016, https://www.tass.com/defense/888959.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia and Iran began to cooperate more closely, as Russia was interested in acquiring Iranian drones for use on the battlefield. Iran began to supply Russia with UAVs, assist in the construction of a drone factory in Tatarstan and to train personnel. The culmination of the drone cooperation was the construction of the Alabuga drone factory.[23]

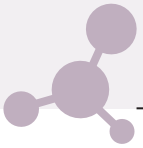
Because it was the first time Russia relied on Iran in the military domain, their cooperation was repeatedly named a full-fledged military partnership. However, after the countries signed a twenty-year Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in January 2025,[24] it became clear that it closely resembled the Treaty on the basis for mutual relations and the principles of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation on 12 March 2001.[25] In the 2001 treaty they indicated themselves as friendly states (Article 1), in 2025 they indicated themselves as strategic partners and this is the most significant difference between the two treaties. Article 2 of the 2001 Treaty states that each party shall not use or threaten the use of force, nor shall it use its territory for acts of aggression or separatist activities against another state. Article 3 states that none of the parties shall offer military or other assistance in the event of an attack on one of the parties. They shall also contribute to the settlement of any disputes arising from the UN Charter.[26] The 2025 Treaty combined these points into Articles 3.3 and 3.4, which use the same wording. The so-called defence-clause is missing in the treaty which emphasised the symbolic use of the word 'strategic' between Iran and Russia.[27]

2.3 Testing the bolstered Russia-Iran partnership

The Twelve-Day War was the first testing mechanism for the newly officially formed strategic partnership

The Twelve-Day War, alongside the pressure from the E3 regarding the activation of the snapback mechanism, was the first testing mechanism for the newly officially formed strategic partnership. In fact, Russia's support to Iran during the war was largely symbolic, focusing on co-drafting a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution with China and Pakistan that called for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.[28] At the 9939th UNSC meeting on 29 June 2025, Russia

[23] Cotovio, Vasco et al., "Russia Built a Massive Drone Factory to Pump Out Iranian-Designed Drones. Now It's Leaving Tehran Out in the Cold", in *CNN*, 8 August 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/08/08/europe/russia-drone-factory-iran-intl.
[24] Russia and Iran, *Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran* (in Russian), Moscow, 17 January 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20250119041905/http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/6258.
[25] Russia and Iran, *Treaty on the Basis for Mutual Relations and the Principles of Cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation*, Moscow, 12 March 2001, https://doi.org/10.18356/280cd9af-en-fr.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Russia and Iran, *Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, cit.
[28] "Russia, China, Pakistan's Draft Resolution Reflects Stance of UNSC Majority —



opposed the ongoing attacks and cautioned against "catastrophic" consequences, nonetheless adopting a more mediatory position that emphasised the restoration of peace acceptable to all parties.[29] Separately, Russia and China expressed joint intentions to provide future assistance to Iran, although without specifying concrete measures. In response to criticism, a range of discussions in media and academia of Russia's limited involvement during the Twelve-Day War took place, but officials from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) emphasised that Tehran had not expected military support from Russia, as their agreement lacked a defence clause. Nonetheless, diplomatic and military collaboration, including arms sales, remains an area of ongoing expectation.[30]

Another test for the Iran-Russia partnership was the snapback mechanism

Another test for the Iran-Russia partnership was the snapback mechanism. In July 2025, the E3 issued a snapback threat due to the upcoming expiration of UNSC Resolution 2231 on 18 October 2025. The E3 expected Iran to resume direct talks with the United States and take steps toward signing the deal till the end of August. This timeline was unrealistic for Iran, still recovering from Israeli-US attacks and unwilling to negotiate directly with the United States or to make concessions.[31]

On 28 August 2025, the E3 officially informed the UN Security Council about the 30-day "snapback" process to reimpose UN sanctions due to Iran's non-compliance.[32] In the face of this new challenge, Russia together with China demonstrated diplomatic support for Iran. On 28 August 2025, they introduced to the UN Security Council a draft of the resolution to extend the deadline of UNSC Resolution 2231. They proposed moving the deadline to 18 April 2026. Russia emphasised that this would give all parties more time to return to negotiations and rebuild trust step by step. Not only was Russian Deputy Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy stressing the importance of returning to diplomacy, but he was also accusing the E3 of not complying with the JCPOA themselves. He cited the failure to lift sanctions on "Transition Day" in 2023, as planned under the JCPOA.[33] Additionally, On 2 September, the UN received a letter from

Envoy", in *TASS*, 23 June 2025, https://tass.com/world/1978875.

[29] UN Security Council, *9939th Meeting*, 20 June 2025, p. 9, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4084933.

[30] "Iran Did Not Seek Military Help from China or Russia, IRGC Official Says", in *Iran International*, 3 August 2025, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202508031352.

[31] McFall, Caitlin, "Iran Seeks China, Russia Help to Stall UN Sanctions ahead of Nuclear Talks with Europeans", in *Fox News*, 21 July 2025, https://www.foxnews.com/world/iran-seeks-china-russia-help-stall-un-sanctions-ahead-nuclear-talks-europeans.

[32] Council of the EU, *Iran Sanctions Snapback: Council Reimposes Restrictive Measures*, 29 September 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/09/29/iran-sanctions-snapback-council-reimposes-restrictive-measures.

[33] Council of the EU, *Iran: Council Maintains Restrictive Measures under the Non-proliferation Sanctions Regime after the JCPoA Transition Day*, 17 October 2023, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/17/iran-council-

In a UN Security Council vote on 19 September 2025, the draft resolution about the extension of the snapback was rejected, receiving only four votes in favour (from China, Russia, Pakistan and Algeria)

Russia, China and Iran. In the letter, the three countries stated that they did not agree with the E3's decision, questioning its legal basis.[34]

During the thirty-day period, Iran still had the opportunity to reach a diplomatic solution before the sanctions were reinstated.[35] Iran demonstrated readiness to take some steps to negotiate with E3, China and Russia. One of the achievements was the agreement reached on 9 September in Cairo between IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi to resume IAEA inspections of Iran's nuclear sites.[36] It was only the first step, with no clarification of the timeline or procedure for resuming inspections.[37] Nevertheless, in a UN Security Council vote on 19 September, the draft resolution about the extension of the snapback was rejected, receiving only four votes in favour (from China, Russia, Pakistan and Algeria), nine against and two abstentions.[38] On 28 September 2025, UN sanctions were thus reimposed. The E3 emphasised that Iran had not taken the issue seriously and had not fulfilled any of its obligations.[39] In response, Iran suspended the Cairo agreement and on 18 October announced that all restrictions under the JCPOA were terminated.[40]

In this specific case, Russia made diplomatic efforts to prevent the snapback mechanism from being activated, as this could directly affect its interests. Renewal of the pre-JCPOA sanctions cover trade, financial services and transport. The arms export ban includes any technology that could contribute to the nuclear energy sector or ballistic missile programme, as well as the import, purchase and transport of crude oil and natural gas.[41] This directly affects Russia-Iran cooperation. Russia has firmly refused to recognise or comply with the reimposed sanctions, citing their illegality arguing

maintains-restrictive-measures-under-the-non-proliferation-sanctions-regime-after-the-jcpoa-transition-day.

[34] China, Iran and Russia, *Letter Dated 2 September 2025 from the Representatives of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council*, 2 September 2025, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4087953.

[35] Security Council Report, "Iran: Vote on a Draft Resolution to Delay the 'Snapback' of UN Sanctions", in *What's In Blue*, 26 September 2025, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/09/iran-vote-on-a-draft-resolution-to-delay-the-snapback-of-un-sanctions.php.

[36] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Statement by IAEA Director General on Iran*, 10 September 2025, http://www.iaea.org/node/233035.

[37] "Iran, IAEA Announce Agreement on Resuming Nuclear Inspections", in *Reuters*, 9 September 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-iaea-announce-agreement-resuming-nuclear-inspections-2025-09-09.

[38] "UN Security Council Rejects Russia-China Draft Resolution on Iran Sanctions", in *WANA News Agency*, 26 September 2025, https://wanaen.com/?p=40762.

[39] Davenport, Kelsey, "Iran to Suspend IAEA Deal after UN Sanctions Return", in *Arms Control Today*, 1 October 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/14911.

[40] "Iran Announces the Official End of Landmark Nuclear Program", in *Le Monde*, 18 October 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/energies/article/2025/10/18/iran-announces-the-official-end-of-landmark-nuclear-program_6746554_98.html.

[41] Council of the EU, *Iran Sanctions Snapback*, cit.

the requirement of specific procedural steps to be taken before sanctions can be reimposed. Firstly, referral to the Joint Commission for a minimum fifteen-day review, then discussions at the foreign ministers' level and, finally, an advisory opinion from a three-member panel.[42] As the E3 didn't adhere to this process, Russia said it intends to continue trading with Iran, selling arms to the country and cooperating with it on nuclear matters.

3 Cracks in Russia's non-proliferation redlines

Historically, Russia could be named as a leading and sustainable actor committed to the principles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) non-proliferation. It is a signatory to key non-proliferation agreements, including the NPT, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).[43] Not only did Russia sign the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), it also ratified it, unlike the United States and China.[44] Another important stabilising element was Russia's involvement in arms control negotiations and agreements with the United States stemming from the Cold War era. These agreements were an important instrument that limited and reduced strategic, sub-strategic and defensive nuclear arms and formed part of the nuclear non-proliferation regime.[45]

Russia consistently demonstrated opposition to a nuclear-armed Iran, prioritising this over its cooperation with Tehran

Russia consistently demonstrated opposition to a nuclear-armed Iran, prioritising this over its cooperation with Tehran. However, Russia's long-standing red lines can be put into question in light of numerous shifts in its current policy. First of all, Russia's deepening cooperation with North Korea, a country that withdrew from the NPT in 2003 and subsequently developed its nuclear arsenal. This cooperation includes strategic partnership similar to Tehran's. However, unlike with Iran, it includes a defence clause.

Secondly, on 2 November 2023, Russia withdrew its ratification of the CTBT. Although the CTBT has not yet come into force, a de facto global moratorium on nuclear testing has been maintained (except by North Korea). Russia's recent action might undermine or question

[42] Hickey, Samuel, "A Quick Guide to the JCPOA Dispute Resolution Mechanism", in *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Articles*, 22 January 2020, https://armscontrolcenter.org/?p=12066.
[43] Russell, Martin, "Russia, Arms Control and Non-proliferation", in *EPRS Briefings*, September 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2020)652100.
[44] Podvig, Pavel, "Preserving the Nuclear Test Ban after Russia Revoked Its CTBT Ratification", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (2024), p. 75-80, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2314431.
[45] Kühn, Ulrich and Heather Williams, "Behavioral Arms Control and East Asia", in *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2024), p. 143-156, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2024.2337965.

the existing moratorium.[46]

Thirdly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a nuclear-armed state attacking a country that had given up the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in exchange for security assurances of its territorial integrity, has severely undermined the disarmament pillar.

Fourthly, US-Russia arms control treaties have broken down for various reasons. For example, the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019,[47] accusing Russia of violations in development and deployment of prohibited missiles. Other key agreements, such as the Open Skies Treaty[48] and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)[49] have either collapsed or been suspended. The New START Treaty,[50] the last remaining arms control agreement between the United States and Russia which Moscow partially suspended in 2023, is set to expire on 5 February 2026.[51]

Finally, a *Financial Times* article about a series of secret trips by Iranian scientists with links to the military industry to collaborate on technology with Russia has exposed additional concerns. According to the article, Iran is seeking laser technologies and associated expertise that pose dual-use risks, including potential applications in the design and validation of nuclear weapons. Iranian experts met with representatives from the Russian company Laser Systems, which is subject to US sanctions due to its work in both civilian and military areas.[52] Taken together all Russia's actions and shifting diplomatic behaviour illustrate the gradual erosion of Moscow's position within the non-proliferation regime. This raises the question of whether Russia still considers a nuclear-armed Iran to be a genuine red line, or those lines started to blur, and potentially could lead to silent acceptance of a new nuclear state.

All Russia's actions and shifting diplomatic behaviour illustrate the gradual erosion of Moscow's position within the non-proliferation regime

[46] Podvig, Pavel, "Preserving the Nuclear Test Ban after Russia Revoked Its CTBT Ratification", cit.
[47] Arms Control Association, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance", in *ACA Fact Sheets & Briefs*, last reviewed August 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/2559.
[48] *Treaty on Open Skies*, Helsinki, 24 March 1992, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/5/14127.pdf.
[49] *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, Paris, 19 November 1990, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/9/14087.pdf.
[50] Arms Control Association, "New START at a Glance", in *ACA Fact Sheets & Briefs*, last reviewed December 2024, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/4287.
[51] USA and Russia, *Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START)*, Prague, 8 April 2010, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf.
[52] Johnson, Miles and Max Seddon, "Iranian Nuclear Experts Held Second Covert Meeting with Russian Weapons Institute", in *Financial Times*, https://www.ft.com/content/1312a12a-5404-4cb2-adc0-b11db118b079.

4 Iran's nuclear threshold vulnerability

Iran used a 'fatwa' issued by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, as strong evidence against its intentions to develop nuclear weapons

The next question is how likely Iran's nuclear breakthrough is. Following a series of strategic failures, the Twelve-Day War and the approval of the snapback mechanism, the climate in Iran is somewhere between escalation and leaving space for diplomacy to prevent further military attacks. Discussions about Iran's nuclear programme have been on the table for decades, but Iran insists on its peacefulness. It also used a 'fatwa' issued by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, in October 2003 as strong evidence against its intentions to develop nuclear weapons.[53] A 'fatwa' is Islamic law given by a recognised authority. Although it is not usually legally binding, it carries significant religious and moral weight within Islamic communities.[54]

However, Khamenei's speeches show that he never mentions a 'fatwa' against building nuclear weapons, only using them.[55] He clearly avoids connecting the production and storage of nuclear weapons with religious dogma,[56] thereby calling into question the reliability of this argument and demonstrating the flexibility of this religious concept. The proof of such flexibility can be found in a September 2025 letter to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) by seventy lawmakers, who called for a reconsideration of Iran's nuclear and military doctrine.[57] Another effort was made in October 2024 when 39 lawmakers sent a similar letter to the SNSC.[58] The main message was to reconsider the use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent, mentioning that it is *haram* to use nuclear weapons, but not to produce or store them.[59] The government has not commented on the letters but it is a clear reaction to the renewed Western pressure.[60]

Tehran is responding to pressure not only by assessing the possibility of developing a nuclear deterrent option but also by conducting missile tests. For instance, on 20 September 2025, Iranian parliamentarian Mohsen Zanganeh announced that Iran had successfully tested "one of the country's most advanced missiles", without specifying whether it was an intercontinental ballistic missile

[53] Institute for the Study of War, *Iran Update, September 22, 2025*, https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/iran-update-september-22-2025.
[54] "Fatwa", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/fatwa.
[55] Isfahani, Khosro Sayeh, "The Nuclear Fatwa that Wasn't—How Iran Sold the World a False Narrative", in *IranSource*, 9 May 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=763750.
[56] Ibid.
[57] "Lawmakers' Letter Asking for Reconsideration of Iran's Nuclear Doctrine Resurfaces", in *Tehran Times*, 22 September 2025, https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/518193https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/518193.
[58] "Report: Dozens of Iranian MPs Call for Revision of Nuclear Weapons Doctrine", in *IFP News*, 9 October 2024, https://ifpnews.com/?p=326184.
[59] Institute for the Study of War, *Iran Update, September 22, 2025*, cit.
[60] "Iranian Lawmakers Urge Review of Defense Doctrine, Call for Nuclear Weapons", in *Iran International*, 22 September 2025, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202509229643.

(ICBM) or a preparation for one.[61] While Iranian media described the launch as a successful ICBM test,[62] other outlets reported it as an undeclared solid-fuel missile test and questioned its connection to ICBM development.[63]

Conclusions

The analysis of the Iran-Russia partnership demonstrates the persistent gap between strategic rhetoric and practical cooperation. Despite the formal elevation of their relationship through the 2025 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, the absence of a mutual defence clause and the largely symbolic nature of Russia's support during the Twelve-Day War expose the limits of Moscow's commitment to Tehran. Russia's actions during critical junctures – such as its restrained diplomatic stance in the UN Security Council and its failure to offer material assistance during military crises – highlight the pragmatic and self-interested character of its engagement. The relationship thus operates primarily within a framework of political signalling rather than strategic interdependence.

The absence of a mutual defence clause and the largely symbolic nature of Russia's support during the Twelve-Day War expose the limits of Moscow's commitment to Tehran

This dynamic reflects broader structural constraints that shape both countries' foreign policies. While Russia views Iran as an instrument for challenging US dominance and circumventing Western sanctions, it remains cautious about deepening military entanglements that could jeopardise its own strategic flexibility. Iran, for its part, continues to rely on Russia as a diplomatic shield and technological partner but recognises the limitations of the partnership. The repeated failure of Moscow to provide tangible security guarantees reinforces Tehran's perception of strategic isolation and feeds domestic debates about the necessity of achieving greater self-reliance, including the potential reconsideration of its nuclear threshold policy.

At the same time, Russia's evolving stance within the global non-proliferation regime raises further concerns. The erosion of Moscow's historical red lines – evident in its withdrawal from the CTBT, its partnership with North Korea and the breakdown of key arms control agreements with the United States – suggests a redefinition of its approach to nuclear governance. These shifts weaken Russia's position as a stabilising actor and create ambiguities regarding its response to a potential Iranian nuclear breakout. For the

[61] Institute for the Study of War, *Iran Update, September 22, 2025*, cit.
[62] "Iran Successfully Tested Intercontinental Missile, Lawmaker Says", in *Iran International*, 20 September 2025, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202509202533.
[63] Gambrell, Jon, "Iran Has Likely Carried Out an Undeclared Missile Test, Satellite Photos Analyzed by the AP Show," in *AP News*, 26 September 2025, https://apnews.com/article/20e455ff76632d7b67fe2633cf19e37b.

international community, this erosion of norms not only undermines the credibility of the non-proliferation regime but also increases the risk of a regional arms race in the Middle East.

Ultimately, the trajectory of the Iran-Russia partnership reveals that while tactical convergence may persist, strategic cohesion remains elusive. Both countries benefit from the symbolic and diplomatic advantages of their alignment, yet the absence of enforceable commitments and enduring mistrust prevent the formation of a genuine alliance. In this context, the partnership serves more as a vehicle for political messaging than as a mechanism of mutual security. Whether this relationship evolves into a more robust strategic alliance or remains confined to rhetorical cooperation will depend on the extent to which Moscow and Tehran can reconcile their diverging interests, manage external pressures and redefine their roles within the broader architecture of global security and nuclear non-proliferation.

Abbreviations

BWC	Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention
CFE	Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICBM	Intercontinental ballistic missile
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
UAV	Uncrewed aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNSC	UN Security Council
US	United States
WMD	Weapon of mass destruction

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