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NEW ERA TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS: THE IRAN WAR AND BEYOND

Richard Weitz

The 2026 Iran war has represented an unprecedented challenge for transatlantic relations. For the first time in almost a century, the United States proved unable to mobilize a broad “coalition of the willing,” comprising European and other allies, to support a major military operation. These divisions have occurred against the backdrop of a strengthening Russia-China alignment and novel military-technological challenges aptly illustrated by the Ukraine and Iran wars. Fortunately, the July 7th-8th NATO summit in Ankara provides transatlantic leaders with a timely opportunity to address these challenges.

The Iran War

European leaders likely anticipated the U.S. attack on Iran given Washington’s prewar statements and massive military buildup in the Middle East. However, many European governments were surprised by both the Administration’s failure to consult with them in advance and the subsequent U.S. expectation that European militaries would make a major contribution to the Israeli-U.S. war effort. European leaders have since demonstrated an atypical resistance to Trump’s demands. Several governments have restricted the Pentagon’s access to important military installations. Though tensions over trade, Greenland, Ukraine, and other issues undoubtedly contributed to this standoffishness, widespread popular opposition and elite unease over the goals, tactics, and legality of the U.S.-Israeli attack reinforced this stance. Still, however confrontational and unpredictable the White House becomes, European leaders recognize that they will require U.S. military protection for several more years.

The Iran war has yielded Russia and China some short-term benefits, but they face longer-term risks in aligning with the Islamic Republic. Until now, Iran’s resistance has given Moscow a strategic windfall. The war has depleted global stocks of U.S. missile interceptors, destroyed critical U.S. refueling and battle management aircraft, and degraded other high-demand, low-density platforms while shortening their service lives. Higher global hydrocarbon prices and U.S. sanctions waivers on Russian oil exports have generated enormous wartime profits at a time when the Russian government is struggling to fund its Ukraine invasion. Nonetheless, the Iran war has showcased U.S. military capabilities unavailable to Russia’s armed forces. Additionally, Ukraine has leveraged its drone expertise to secure defense partnerships with several Arab governments. Whereas a decade

ago Moscow enjoyed the reputation of standing by its friends while Washington cast aside its partners during the Arab Spring, Russia has more recently proven impotent at defending foreign clients from U.S. military action.

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Chinese analysts now have another example to evaluate U.S. military effectiveness and how to degrade it. The war will likely accelerate Beijing's reconciliation with European governments hedging against Russian hostility and U.S. unpredictability. Furthermore, China's renewable energy technology may become more attractive to countries seeking to reduce dependence on fossil fuels from the Middle East and elsewhere. Yet, PRC policymakers do not seem entirely pleased by the new situation. They face the same problem as during the first Trump Administration: confusion about how to deal with an unpredictable White House. Drawing lessons from that first term, China developed an effective counterstrategy to U.S. economic coercion. But the PRC has struggled to respond to Trump's second-term penchant for liberally applying military force to dislodge Beijing-friendly governments. U.S. policies also complicate Beijing's calculations regarding Taiwan and threaten key pillars of the PRC's economic security strategy, including its access to global markets, cheap hydrocarbons, and free-riding on U.S.-sustained global public goods.

Moscow and Beijing will strive to maintain a strong, anti-Western Iran to promote a multipolar world and divert U.S. resources from Europe and Asia. Since 2019, Russia, China, and Iran have conducted several joint military exercises. Access to Iranian ports is important for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and Moscow's International North-South Transport Corridor. The three countries have developed a mutually profitable economic and security partnership in which the PRC buys

discounted Iranian oil while Iran uses the revenue to purchase Chinese domestic control tools and Russian military assistance. Thus far, Russia and China have benefited from the Iranian government's military perseverance without overt Sino-Russian military assistance, limiting their involvement to the likely provision of satellite imagery, intelligence, and dual-use components. If the regime survives, which looks increasingly likely, Moscow and Beijing could, in parallel or together, fortify Iran's postwar government. While constraining their assistance to minimize alienation of their Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners and Trump, Russia could rebuild the country's missile, drone, and air defense arsenals, while China could support Iran's economic reconstruction and bolster the regime's repressive apparatus, potentially with the export of surveillance technologies.

European and U.S. leaders will find it difficult not to cooperate to address these issues. On the one hand, Europe has suffered more directly and extensively from the war's negative impact due to the continent's post-2022 dependence on Gulf energy. On the other hand, European disengagement risks weakening transatlantic ties. Divisions among European governments will likely prevent them from acting through NATO or the EU, which reach decisions by consensus. Yet, the major European militaries could expand their hitherto limited roles to directly protect commercial shippers and GCC ports. In previous years, European navies participated in similar maritime security missions against pirates and the Houthis. Not only would a future campaign reduce some of the shipping bottlenecks plaguing the global economy, but it could also dispel perceptions of European marginalization in Gulf security and mollify the Trump Administration, which would likely provide intelligence and logistical support for such an operation.

Russia-China: Stronger Than Ever

The wars in Ukraine and Iran, along with other developments over the past five years, have accelerated preexisting trends in Sino-Russian relations rather than changed their direction. Even before then, China was becoming Russia's most



Rescuers and residents searching through the rubble of the Minab girls' elementary school, destroyed by the United States.

Photo: Mehr News Agency CC BY 4.0

important foreign partner, while the balance between Russia and China was already shifting in Beijing's favor. Additionally, the same pattern of Sino-Russian geographic and functional cooperation has also persisted. Those issues and regions where Sino-Russian cooperation was strong before 2022—such as in the defense domain or in Central Asia—have remained solid, while areas where Beijing and Moscow did not collaborate substantially still have underdeveloped ties. But there has been one marked development: China and Russia have enhanced their cooperative alignment with additional partners, especially North Korea and Iran.

In terms of functional areas, Sino-Russian cooperation remains strongest in diplomacy, information, and security. Their diplomatic collaboration is most evident in their joint government statements and joint vetoes on the UN Security Council. Russian and Chinese officials continue to coordinate their arms control policies. In particular, Moscow has parried U.S. demands to press the PRC to join the strategic

arms control process. In the information domains, the leaders of China and Russia offer the same narratives about world events. Their messaging is highly critical of the West in general and the transatlantic alliance in particular. Furthermore, Russia's domestic information sphere increasingly resembles that of China, with tighter controls over print, broadcast, and (increasingly) social media.

The Chinese and Russian armed forces remain each other's most important foreign partners. Sino-Russian security cooperation falls into three baskets. First, their joint exercises take place in more locations than ever. They encompass both countries' ground, sea, air, and aerospace forces. The second dimension, high-level Sino-Russian civil-military exchanges, also



General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping and his wife with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Photo: Kremlin.ru

continues. They address both global and regional international security issues, such as arms control and regional nonproliferation issues. The final Sino-Russian security basket, Russian arms sales to China, has continued to decline in importance as China's military-industrial complex grows stronger. PRC defense industries can now produce many military systems that are as good as, and sometimes better, than those available from Russia. Due to Beijing's caution in confronting Western sanctions on Russia related to the Ukraine War, the Russian government cannot purchase substantial Chinese weaponry. Though both governments have pledged to jointly research, develop, and produce new military technologies, these plans have yet to come to fruition.

In contrast, Sino-Russian cooperation lags in the economic and humanitarian domains. The Ukraine war has solidified China as Russia's dominant economic partner. The two countries have expanded their trade and mutual investment

as PRC firms have filled the gap in the Russian market left by departing Western firms. Russian consumers now buy Chinese phones and cars rather than Western products. Sino-Russian cooperation to circumvent Western sanctions substantially boosts their economic ties. PRC intermediaries have helped Russian entities overcome sanctions by transferring Western high-tech products and other goods to Russian entities, often via Central Asia.

Nonetheless, Russia remains a modest trade and marginal investment partner for China. Indeed, Russia's trade profile with China looks like that of a colony, whereas Russian exports to the PRC still consist overwhelmingly of raw materials, such as oil, coal, and timber, rather than high-value products like high-tech goods. Hydrocarbons account for some

two-thirds of China's imports from Russia. Reciprocal Russian and Chinese investments remain modest: Western capital still dominates China's inward-bound foreign investment, and PRC investors and lenders continue to prefer more secure locations than Russia.

Except at the elite level, contacts between the Chinese and Russian people remain minimal. Only a small percentage of Russians study Chinese and vice versa. Since the Sino-Russian partnership remains driven from the top-down, it will be highly vulnerable to future changes in the political leadership of both countries. However, popular exchanges may grow over time if Chinese and Russian youth continue to encounter obstacles studying in, or traveling to, Western countries. If Sino-Russian economic ties substantially expand, the commercial value of understanding the partner country's culture will grow.

Regarding the geographic centers of Sino-Russian cooperation, Central Asia continues to stand out as the primary region for collaboration. Beijing has not challenged Russia's traditional political-military primacy in the region, while Moscow has downplayed earlier concerns about China's growing economic presence in Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has provided a convenient mechanism to channel Sino-Russian cooperation in the region. In East Asia, China and Russia have increasingly aligned their positions behind each other's territorial claims. The PRC government has not overtly challenged Russia's military ties with North Korea even as the DPRK has taken the unprecedented step of sending its soldiers to fight in the European theater. Kim Jong-un's attendance at the September 2025 PLA Victory Parade restored senior Sino-DPRK diplomatic exchanges. The Chinese-Russian-DPRK leadership engagements at the event implied Beijing's acceptance of the Moscow-Pyongyang defense alliance and increasing support for a trilateral alignment. In the Arctic, over the past decade, Moscow has set aside concerns over Beijing's long-term ambitions. Russia now perceives China as its most likely future partner for developing Arctic infrastructure and resource projects. The two states are especially interested in expanding transpolar transit through Russia's Northern Sea Route, connecting China and Europe through the Arctic. Meanwhile, though China and Russia might have similar goals in Africa, South America, and Europe, their policies are disconnected and non-conflictual rather than complementary and coordinated, though their collaboration in the Global South might grow if the BRICS continues to expand its global influence.

China's support for Russia's war against Ukraine has been extensive but carefully managed and narrated. Beijing has provided critical economic, diplomatic, and quasi-military assistance to Moscow. The PRC has bought enormous volumes of Russian

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oil, provided Russia's military-industrial complex with critical dual-use goods that help sustain Russian military technology, and fortified Russia against Western diplomacy, sanctions, and other pressure. Despite this support, China has not paid high costs for assisting Russia by meticulously eschewing the "red line" of supplying overtly lethal weapons to the Russian armed forces. Beijing's support substantially explains why the Russian government obstinately clings to the same war aims that Moscow declared even before launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022.

Beijing has several competing interests at play in the Ukraine War. The war has absorbed Western attention and resources that might otherwise flow to the Asia-Pacific region to counterbalance China. Some PRC entities have earned substantial income from sales and investments in Russia. Meanwhile, Beijing's public stance of benign neutrality has helped China project a positive international image, especially in the Global South. And a Russian victory in Ukraine might weaken the credibility of U.S.-led defense alliances globally, including in the Indo-Pacific and other regions.

On the other hand, China's close ties with Russia have harmed Beijing's image in the West, especially in Europe, due to perceived PRC tolerance for Russian aggression. The conflict has also paralyzed the Arctic Council, which has been the main instrument through which China has pursued multilateral diplomacy in the Arctic to complement (and balance) its deepening economic ties with Russia in the region. Furthermore, the events in Ukraine have led Western governments in Europe as well as Asia,

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to worry more intensely that Beijing might launch a similar full-scale attack against Taiwan. On balance, though, Beijing will likely strive to avert a Russian defeat since that outcome would weaken China's most important foreign military partner, challenge the Sino-Russian narrative of Western decline, risk Putin's removal and replacement by a less pro-Beijing regime, and permit the Western democracies to concentrate more resources against China.

A Forward-Looking NATO Summit Agenda

At the Ankara summit, the wars in Ukraine and Iran will inevitably be major topics of discussion. NATO officials recognize that the unprecedented effectiveness of missiles and drones in these conflicts requires the alliance to increase its offensive and defensive capabilities in this domain. Drones and missiles have become the weapons of choice for potential NATO adversaries. They are

inexpensive and available in high volume. Indeed, NATO has had to protect the host nation of Turkey from both Russian and Iranian missiles. Iran's attempted missile attack on Diego Garcia, situated almost 4,000 kilometers from Iranian territory, suggests that Tehran seeks long-range strike systems that can reach most of Europe.

Given the cost advantage favoring attackers, NATO defenders need more efficient systems. The allies' interceptor inventories are modest and NATO countries still lack the industrial base to surge production. The Russian and Iranian success in attacking static platforms such as advanced radars and fixed military bases illustrates how modern warfare demands modular, adaptive, and mobile systems that are harder for enemies to target. To increase defenders' efficiency, more allies should follow Poland's example in acquiring the Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS). This mobile multi-domain command-and-control system employs composite tracking to fuse data from disparate sensors into a single, common operating picture. Its Integrated Fire Control Network then selects the best available systems, regardless of nationality or military service, to neutralize ballistic and cruise missile threats, as well as crewed and uncrewed aircraft. The IBCS increases the probability that an interceptor will hit its target while decreasing the risk that multiple defenders will engage the same target or, worse, shoot down a friendly target.

Still, defending all of NATO members' vast and varied territory from Russian and Iranian drone and missile strikes is physically and technically impossible. Prioritization is necessary. NATO defenders should focus on preventing or negating strikes against the most critical high-value targets, such as command posts, airbases, and seaports designated for the reception of allied reinforcements. For deterring other threats, the alliance should employ widely available passive defenses (including civilian warning networks), preemption (including non-kinetic capabilities such as cyber and special forces operations), and deterrence through conventional counter-strike capabilities. Negating aerial threats requires shooting not only the arrows aimed at NATO but also the archers launching them.

In this regard, proposals to terminate plans to deploy the 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force (2MDTF) to Germany are mistaken. This specially equipped Army battalion would deploy several types of ground-launched missiles with ranges exceeding those of the Army Tactical Missile System short-range ballistic missile currently in Europe. These novel capabilities would include the short-range Precision Strike Missile, the multi-domain SM-6 ballistic missile, the long-range Tomahawk cruise missile, and ground-



President Donald Trump attends a pull-side meeting with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Wednesday, June 25, 2025, at the 2025 NATO Summit at the World Forum in The Hague, Netherlands.

Photo: Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok

launched hypersonic missiles under development (such as the Dark Eagle). These would balance the new offensive missiles Russia has been deploying in Europe and, all too often, employing in Ukraine.

The stationing of the 2MDTF, if even for a few years in Europe, is needed as an interim measure until Europeans can field more of their own long-range strike systems. Several governments are collaborating under the European Long-Range Strike Approach program to develop new deep-precision attack systems capable of preempting missiles and drones before launch, but these systems will not be widely available for several years.

Transatlantic divisions over the Iran war, the strengthening Sino-Russian alignment, and transformative military challenges present the European and U.S. leaders with unprecedented challenges. The upcoming NATO summit in Ankara provides a timely opportunity to address them.