

# FMSO's Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project

*Tracking Russian and Chinese military influence in states around the world*

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## Instruments of Russian Military Influence in Iran

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## OVERVIEW OF FMSO'S M-DIME RESEARCH PROJECT

The Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project is a dynamic effort from researchers at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO). Its goal is to provide Army leaders with a clear, comparative understanding of how China and Russia employ instruments of national power to obtain military influence around the world. The M-DIME framework is derived from the "DIME" concept, which classes instruments of national power into four types: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic. Based on this concept, the M-DIME framework gives more narrow attention to the instruments that China and Russia employ to gain military influence in third-party countries.

The M-DIME framework's purpose is to track and analyze the military influence of "Benefactor" countries (i.e. China and Russia) in select "Recipient" countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South and South-east Asia. Benefactor countries are assumed to engage in activities that result in them having increased military influence in Recipient countries to gain leverage over global rivals, competitors, and adversaries; for China and Russia, this means the United States. Within this framework, "military influence" is defined as the ability of a Benefactor country to shape or alter the attitudes, behaviors, and capabilities of actors within—and entities associated with—the armed forces of Recipient countries.

**The M-DIME framework identifies 12 distinct instruments of national power employed by Benefactor countries to gain military influence in Recipient countries, three for each of the DIME categories. They are as follows:**

### DIPLOMATIC INSTRUMENTS

- D1 Defense-Related Diplomacy
- D2 International Military Education and Training
- D3 Soft Power Activities

### INFORMATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

- I1 Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment
- I2 Information/Communications Technology Support
- I3 Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications

### MILITARY INSTRUMENTS

- M1 Formal Bilateral Military Engagements
- M2 Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements
- M3 Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements

### ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS

- E1 Arms Transfers
- E2 Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements
- E3 Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors

M-DIME analysis is based on qualitative assessments of Benefactor influence in Recipient countries along each of the 12 M-DIME instruments of influence. These assessments are made for the Benefactor's **Current Influence** (assessed as **Very High, High, Medium, Low, Very Low, or Unobserved**) and **Projected Influence** (assessed as **Increasing, Steady, Decreasing, or Unknown**). Current assessments are made based on activities from 2012 to the present, while future assessments are three-year forecasts.

The bulk of activities considered in the M-DIME Research Project involve members of the armed forces or defense sector personnel in both Benefactor and Recipient countries. Such activities include formal and informal military-to-military diplomacy, security cooperation engagements, and arms transfers. However, the M-DIME Research Project also tracks and analyzes Chinese and Russian activities that employ non-military instruments of influence but ultimately bear on the decision-making and capabilities of the Recipient country's armed forces. Such activities include Chinese and Russian collaboration with Benefactor states in media, communications technology, and strategic sectors.

The M-DIME Research Project's findings are derived from open-source research. Each M-DIME product is produced with the collaboration of analysts from across FMSO, frequently with the assistance of non-Department of Defense subject matter experts coming from academia, think tanks, and the private sector. Given its basis in open-source research, the M-DIME Research Project has an inherent limitation. It cannot track Chinese and Russian military influence activities that are deliberately kept secret. Consequently, assessments of Chinese and Russian influence based on instruments for which secrecy is important or where information would typically be classified by the Benefactor or Recipient countries—for instance, military-technology sharing or intelligence collaboration—are acknowledged to be made with low confidence. In certain cases, assessments are not made where open-source data is considered inconclusive.

In sum, the M-DIME Research Project is a tool for U.S. Army and U.S. Government personnel to better understand the instruments of national power employed by China and Russia to gain global military influence and the impact these activities have on U.S. national security interests. Over time, FMSO will expand the body of research and assessments based on this framework, increasing its comparative value across Benefactor and Recipient countries.

















## KEY ASSESSMENTS

**Russia's current M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as High.** Some of the most important instruments for Russian influence in Iran include:

- 
**Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications (I3).** Russia and Iran's formal collaboration in cyber security as well as the assistance given by Moscow to Tehran's satellite program, indicate increasing bilateral cooperation on military intelligence and communications. Iran's access to remote-sensing satellite data and collaboration with Russia in the cyber domain may augment both states' offensive and defensive cyber capabilities.
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**Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements (M2).** Iran and Russia tend to conduct multilateral exercises with other militaries, such as China's, rather than bilateral exercises. This increases the prospect of a well-integrated military bloc that is hostile to U.S. and allied interests.
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**Arms Transfers (E1).** Russia increased its arms exports to Iran after Tehran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 precipitated a further increase in bilateral arms sales. This increased arms trade has the ability to sustain conflicts in which the United States has an interest, such as the Russia-Ukraine war.

**Russia's projected M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as Increasing.** Some of the most important instruments for Russia's future influence over Iran include:

- 
**Defense-Related Diplomacy (D1).** Since 2021, high-level bilateral meetings have become more regular and security-oriented. Increasing influence via this instrument may result in increasing security and military alignment between the two states.
- 
**Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements (M3).** As of March 2023, the two sides were in the final stages of a long-term strategic cooperation agreement. The prospect of formalized relations would likely entail closer coordination and cooperation across all key military spheres.
- 
**Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors (E3).** The imposition of sanctions on the two countries has incentivized them to create new trading agreements and collaborate in strategic sectors, such as oil and financial services. Increasing engagement in this area is aimed at insulating both states from current and future economic sanctions.

DIPLOMATIC / INFORMATION			MILITARY / ECONOMIC		
	<b>D1</b>	Defense-Related Diplomacy		<b>M1</b>	Formal Bilateral Military Engagements
	<b>D2</b>	International Military Education and Training		<b>M2</b>	Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements
	<b>D3</b>	Soft Power Activities		<b>M3</b>	Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements
	<b>I1</b>	Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment		<b>E1</b>	Arms Transfers
	<b>I2</b>	Information/Communications Technology Support		<b>E2</b>	Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements
	<b>I3</b>	Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications		<b>E3</b>	Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors
<b>CURRENT DEGREE OF INFLUENCE</b> Very High   High   Medium   Low   Very Low   None/Unobserved			<b>PROJECTED FUTURE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE</b> Increasing    Steady    Decreasing 		

## INTRODUCTION TO RUSSIA-IRAN MILITARY RELATIONS

In recent years, pragmatism and a shared perception of threats emanating from the United States and its allies have come to prevail over historical animosity between Russia and Iran. Some Iranians still regard Russia as an unwelcome colonial power following territorial losses during the Russo-Persian wars from 1651 to 1828. The relationship was further strained when the Soviet Union backed and armed Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Nevertheless, after 1988, Moscow began supplying arms to Tehran, resulting in a substantial increase in arms transfers between the two nations from less than \$1 million in 1979 to \$772 million in 1991. However, a secret deal cut with the United States in 1995 limited Russia's weapons trade with Iran. Tehran, frustrated with Moscow's erratic arms sales and the quality of its weapons, thereafter prioritized self-reliance. Iranian antipathy toward Russia was fueled by perceptions that Moscow shared responsibility for Tehran's economic difficulties: Russia voted in favor of six UN Security Council resolutions against Iran's nuclear program.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, the two states have drawn closer together as each has been ostracized in the international sphere. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February

2022 was a turning point, precipitating increasingly formal collaboration across a wide range of activities. According to U.S. officials, Iran has supplied Russia with over 400 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) since August 2022.<sup>2</sup> In February 2023, Moscow and Tehran announced the connection of Russia's Financial Messaging System of the Bank of Russia to Iran's national financial messaging service amid increasing economic pressure from punitive sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, both countries have intensified their efforts to complete the International North-South Transport Corridor, a 7,200 km-long project aimed at linking India and Iran.<sup>4</sup>

In its 2022 National Security Strategy, the United States described Russia as an "immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability" and condemned Iran's "destabilizing activities."<sup>5</sup> The deepening ties between Iran and Russia have the potential to enhance the military capabilities and power projection of both U.S. adversaries.<sup>6</sup> This development risks destabilizing the Middle East and Europe, where the United States maintains critical alliances and strategic interests.

### IRAN AT A GLANCE

<b>Capital</b>	Tehran
<b>Population</b>	87,590,873 (2023 estimate) <sup>7</sup>
<b>GDP per Capita</b>	\$15,000 (2021 estimate) <sup>8</sup>
<b>Head of Government</b>	President Ebrahim Raisi <sup>9</sup>
<b>Head of State</b>	Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini Khamenei <sup>10</sup>
<b>Minister of Defense</b>	Brigadier General Mohammad-Reza Gharaei Ashtiani <sup>11</sup>
<b>Chief of General Staff</b>	Major General Mohammad Bagheri <sup>12</sup>
<b>Military Expenditure (total)</b>	\$6.842 billion (2022 estimate) <sup>13</sup>
<b>Military Expenditure (% of GDP)</b>	2.5% (2022 estimate) <sup>14</sup>
<b>Armed Service Branches</b>	Islamic Republic of Iran Army (Artesh): Ground Forces, Navy (includes marines), Air Force, Air Defense Forces Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC or Sepah): Ground Forces, Navy (includes marines), Aerospace Force (controls strategic missile force), Qods Force (a.k.a. Quds Force; special operations), Cyber Electronic Command, Basij Paramilitary Forces <sup>15</sup>
<b>Active Armed Forces Personnel</b>	550,000-600,000 <sup>16</sup>



## D - Diplomatic Influence

Russia's use of diplomatic instruments to gain military influence in Iran is evident in defense-related diplomacy and, to a lesser extent, in soft-power activities. Before 2021, meetings between Russian and Iranian officials were somewhat infrequent, yet both sides consistently emphasized the significance of fostering strong bilateral relations. Since 2021, there has been a noticeable shift toward more focused and security-oriented engagement between the two countries.



### D1: Defense-Related Diplomacy

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Before 2021, Russian and Iranian officials met somewhat sporadically, with the most notable meetings in 2015.**
  - » Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Tehran in January 2015 marked the first time a high-ranking Russian military official had visited the Iranian capital since 2002. Significantly, Shoigu and his Iranian counterpart, then Defense Minister Hossein Dehqan, signed a military cooperation agreement during this visit.<sup>17</sup>
  - » During a trilateral summit between Turkey, Russia, and Iran in Tehran in November 2015, Putin met with then Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Khamenei. Putin proclaimed Iran to be "a strategic partner and a great neighbor" and that Russia "will take advantage of every opportunity to expand and consolidate relationships in all dimensions."<sup>18</sup>
- **High-level bilateral meetings have become more regular and security-oriented since 2021.**
  - » In October 2021, the Chief of the General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri, visited Moscow and met with Shoigu and the Chief of the General Staff of Russia's Armed Forces, Valery Gerasimov.<sup>19</sup> There, according to Shoigu, they discussed "the most essential issues of Russian-Iranian military cooperation."<sup>20</sup>
  - » In January 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Moscow, the first time an Iranian leader had visited Russia in more than five years. Raisi stated that he hoped his visit would be a "turning point" in Russia-Iran relations. During his visit, Raisi handed over Iran's draft of a proposed 20-year cooperation plan between Russia and Iran.<sup>21</sup>
  - » Putin, Raisi, and Khamenei met in Tehran in July 2022, following a trilateral summit with Turkey. The three leaders announced that bilateral cooperation was increasing in the political, economic, and security spheres.<sup>22</sup>
- **Defense-related diplomacy will probably increase and be more regular in the future.**
  - » During Putin's July 2022 visit to Tehran, Khamenei stated that, "world events show Iran and Russia's need for increasing mutual cooperation," likely a reference to Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup>



### D2: International Military Education and Training

**Current Influence: Unobserved**

**Projected Influence: Unknown**

- **There is no publicly available information about ongoing International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs and efforts between Russia and Iran.**
- **However, there is a strong likelihood that IMET programs do occur based on previous incidental information about related activities.**
  - » U.S. intelligence officials have publicly disclosed that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps sent trainers to Crimea to help Russian military personnel overcome difficulties they encountered with using UAVs, which were likely of Iranian origin.<sup>24</sup>



**D3: Soft Power Activities**

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Steady**

- ***Iran has participated in the Russia-instituted International Army Games every year between 2016-2022.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the routine and multilateral nature of these engagements limits Russia’s ability to consolidate influence, limiting their significance.***
  - » Iran hosted the UAV competition as part of the International Army Games in 2022.<sup>26</sup>
- ***Russia and Iran have close security cooperation in the context of multilateral summits.***
  - » Several trilateral summits have been held between Iran, Russia, and Turkey on issues affecting the Middle East region, such as the Syrian civil war and, more recently, grain exports in light of the Russo-Ukraine war.<sup>27</sup>
  - » Russia is involved in the Caspian Sea Summit series, which began in 2002, and includes discussions on security matters. After the 2022 summit, Putin declared, “Russia unfailingly supports expanding partnerships within the Caspian ‘five’—in politics, security, the economy and nature conservation, as well as many other items on the humanitarian agenda.”<sup>28</sup> The “Caspian ‘five’” includes Russia and Iran, as well as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.
- ***The depth and frequency of these events has been consistent in recent years and there is no indication that Russia’s use of this instrument to gain influence in Iran will change over the next three years.***



# I - Informational Influence

Russia's use of informational instruments to gain military influence in Iran is most profound in the area of cooperation in military intelligence and communications; it is also increasingly extensive in cultural and media outreach as well as information and communications technology. Russia's information engagement in Iran involves media cooperation, close collaboration on financial services, and software transfers. Increasingly, Russo-Iranian information exchanges have involved space collaboration and cyber military cooperation.



## I1: Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Iran and Russia collaborate closely on media outputs for their respective domestic audiences, as well as for international audiences.**
  - » In 2018, Russia and Iran established a bilateral committee on media cooperation.<sup>29</sup> The committee fosters “exchanges of journalists, mutual provision of favorable media coverage, coproduction of content, countering Western media narratives, and media cooperation targeting foreign audiences.”<sup>30</sup>
  - » In August 2020, Russia and Iran formally agreed to counter what Russia's Foreign Ministry called “increasing information pressure from the West” designed “to discredit Russia and Iran,” as well as alleged Western “discrimination” against Russian and Iranian media abroad.<sup>31</sup>
- **There are academic exchanges between Russia and Iran.**
  - » Russia offers scholarships to Iranian students.<sup>32</sup>
  - » In 2016, Tehran gave special priority to Russia for scientific and technological relations with Iran.<sup>33</sup> There is a national Iranian working group on scientific cooperation with Russia,<sup>34</sup> and regular meetings between representatives from the top universities in Russia and Iran take place.<sup>35</sup>
- **Despite substantial efforts to promote close relations using this instrument, it remains uncertain whether the Iranian public is receptive to such outreach. Although bilateral engagement in this area has become more formal and is expected to increase, achieving the desired outcomes may be challenging due to the significant distrust of Russia by many in Iran.**
  - » The 2022 Democracy Perception Index found that 50 percent of Iranians held an unfavorable view of Russia, while 15 percent expressed very or somewhat positive views of Russia. Notably, attitudes toward Russia were found to be more negative among Iranians than among Egyptians or Saudi Arabians.<sup>36</sup>



## I2: Information/Communications Technology (ICT) Support

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Russia and Iran have agreed to cooperate on software transfers.**
  - » In 2016, Iran and Russia agreed to cooperate on “demonopolizing software” to end “unilateral Western domination” in the field.<sup>37</sup>
  - » In 2017, Moscow offered to provide Tehran with Russian servers with Russia-produced Elbrus processors to reduce Iran's reliance on foreign servers.<sup>38</sup>
- **Russia and Iran are collaborating in the financial services sector amid punitive sanctions and bans on both countries from participating in the prevailing global payments system, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT).**
  - » In February 2023, Moscow and Tehran announced that they had connected Russia's Financial Messaging System of the Bank of Russia (Russia's alternative to SWIFT) to Iran's national financial messaging service.<sup>39</sup>
- **Russia has provided Iran with communication surveillance and censorship technology.**
  - » Russia's PROTEI Ltd, which has contracts with the Russian Defense Ministry, began providing internet-censorship software to Iranian mobile-services provider Arianetel, according to documents published by the Citizen Lab.<sup>40</sup>
- **Engagement via this instrument is expected to increase as both countries remain ostracized from Western-dominated financial services for the foreseeable future.**

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved





### I3: Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Iran and Russia formally cooperate on cyber military matters.**
  - » In 2017, the Head of Iran’s Civil Defense Organization, Brigadier General Gholam Reza Jalali, said that Russia and Iran are among countries “whose interests in cyberspace are under threat posed by common enemies.”<sup>41</sup>
  - » In January 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and then Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif signed an agreement on cyber security cooperation, which includes broad cybersecurity cooperation, such as coordination of actions, exchange of technologies, and training of specialists.<sup>42</sup>
- **Russia has helped Iran develop and launch remote-sensing satellites, which have both civilian and military uses.**
  - » In 2021, Iran’s IRGC and Russia had negotiated an agreement to build and launch a remote-sensing satellite that would give Iran broad capabilities to conduct surveillance for military and civilian purposes.<sup>43</sup>
  - » In August 2022, Russia launched the Iranian Khayyam satellite, a remote-sensing satellite. It was delivered into orbit onboard a Soyuz rocket launched from Russia’s Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.<sup>44</sup> However, Iran reportedly may not be able to take control of the satellite immediately.<sup>45</sup>
  - » U.S. officials voiced concerns that the satellite would provide Iran with better capacities for surveilling and identifying potential military targets in the Middle East.<sup>46</sup>
- **Formal engagement using this instrument has steadily increased in recent years and is expected to continue to grow.**

# M - Military Influence

Russia's use of military instruments to gain influence in Iran is extensive and increasing in both bilateral and multilateral military engagements. There are also indications that the two states may further formalize their military relationship by negotiating further security pacts. Between 2010 and 2023 the Russian and Iranian militaries participated in nine joint military exercises, as well as several multilateral military exercises. While they have not yet established formal military relations, their security partnership appears to be growing increasingly close.



## M1: Formal Bilateral Military Engagements

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Decreasing**

- **Russia and Iran have conducted joint military exercises in the past decade, which underscores the importance of their bilateral military engagement.**
  - » In August 2015, 200 Iranian naval forces manning a destroyer and two missile launchers, as well as 150 Russian naval forces manning two warships, participated in a three-day joint exercise in the Caspian Sea. Iranian officials reported that the exercise focused on expanding cooperation and raising combat readiness.<sup>47</sup>
  - » In July 2017, Iranian and Russian ships conducted a joint exercise as part of a three-day Russian visit to the Iranian port city of Bander Anzali,<sup>48</sup> followed by a three-day exercise in the Caspian Sea in October 2017.<sup>49</sup>
- **Russian and Iranian forces have coordinated combat operations in Syria.**
  - » In August 2016, Russian long-range Tupolev-22M3 bombers and Sukhoi Su-34 fighter bombers used the Hamedan air base in northwestern Iran to conduct airstrikes in Syria.<sup>50</sup>
  - » In 2017, then Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif justified Russia's use of Iranian soil by stating, "Russia doesn't have a military base [in Iran], we have good cooperation, and on a case-by-case basis, when it is necessary for Russians fighting terrorism to use Iranian facilities, we will make a decision." However, the base was not used again by Russian forces after a strong domestic backlash over a foreign country's use of local military facilities.<sup>51</sup>
  - » IRGC combat detachments are stationed at the main Russian command post in Syria (Khmeimim), and Russia and Iran's strategic alliance in support of the Assad regime have caused Russia and Iran to establish bureaucratic channels and command structures to grapple with the challenges of joint military cooperation on the battlefield.<sup>52</sup>
- **Russia and Iran tend to conduct multilateral exercises with other militaries, such as China's, rather than bilateral exercises. As a result, Russia's use of bilateral military engagements to gain military influence in Iran is likely to decrease in the next three years.**
  - » The most recent bilateral exercise was the second Maritime Security Belt in 2021, which was intended to be a multilateral exercise also involving China and India, both of which withdrew because of their 2020 border skirmish.<sup>53</sup>



## M2: Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **As of late 2023, Iran and Russia have conducted three exercises with China as part of the Maritime Security Belt, suggesting burgeoning trilateral military relations.**
  - » Combined naval exercises between Iran, China, and Russia have taken place in December 2019,<sup>54</sup> January 2021,<sup>55</sup> and March 2023.<sup>56</sup>
- **Iran has participated in Russia-organized multilateral military drills.**
  - » For example, "Kavkaz 2020," took place in September 2020 and comprised Russian forces and 1,000 servicemen from Armenia, Belarus, China, Myanmar, and Pakistan, as well as Iranian naval vessels.<sup>57</sup>
- **Iran has also collaborated with Russia via other intergovernmental security initiatives.**
  - » In 2015, Iran, Russia, Syria, and Iraq established a joint intelligence center in Baghdad to coordinate their separate operations against ISIS.<sup>58</sup>
  - » Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member in July 2023.<sup>59</sup> Iran's Defense Minister of Defense, Brigadier General Mohammed Reza Ashtiani, has advocated for closer military relations between SCO members.<sup>60</sup>
- **Multilateral military engagements comprising Iran and Russia will likely increase through the annual Maritime Security Belt, Kavkaz exercises, and the SCO.**

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved



### M3: Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Iran and Russia have formal security ties, though the precise details of these arrangements remain unclear.**
  - » In January 2015, Shoigu and Dehqan signed a military cooperation agreement in Tehran, about which no further details are available.<sup>61</sup>
- **Iran and Russia are probably poised to deepen their formal security cooperation in the next three years.**
  - » In 2022, Iran and Russia committed to negotiate a new 20-year strategic cooperation agreement.<sup>62</sup>
  - » As of March 2023, the two sides were in the final stages of negotiating a long-term strategic cooperation agreement, according to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. However, no concrete information has been released yet.<sup>63</sup>

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved

## E - Economic Influence

Russia's use of economic influence instruments to gain military influence in Iran is especially significant in arms transfers; it is less profound, but increasing, in technology sharing, joint production agreements, and trade in strategic sectors. Russia increased its arms exports to Iran in 2016 after the JCPOA deal was struck the year before. The arms and technological transfer dynamics between the two countries have evolved into a more reciprocal relationship following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.



### E1: Arms Transfers

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Russian arms sales to Iran dropped in 2010 after UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which included a ban on the transfer of most conventional weapons. Though Russia eventually fulfilled its long-delayed orders in 2016 after the JCPOA was passed, Russian arms sales to Iran remained below 2010 levels.**
  - » Official Russian arms transfers to Iran declined from \$35 million in 2010 to \$4 million in 2015.<sup>64</sup>
  - » In an indication of Russia's compliance with the UN Security Council resolution, Tehran in 2011 sued Moscow in the International Court of Justice in Geneva for breach of contract after Russia failed to deliver the S-300 air defense system, for which Iran had already paid \$166 million.<sup>65</sup> After the JCPOA eased sanctions on Iran, Russia fulfilled its long-delayed orders for the S-300.<sup>66</sup>
  - » Iranian Air Force Commander Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi and Iranian Member of Parliament Shahriyar Heidar stated that Iran has purchased 24 new Su-35 jets from Russia, with deliveries expected to start in the middle of 2023, as well as helicopters, defense systems and various missiles.<sup>67</sup> However, it appears that the deal has fallen through.<sup>68</sup>
  - » However, there was not a significant uptick in arms sales, even after the 2020 arms embargo on Iran was lifted, in part, because Iran's arms industry had become more self-sufficient by that time.<sup>69</sup>
- **Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has precipitated an increase in arms transfers, though these have primarily flowed from Iran to Russia, representing a reversal of historical trends. As a result, in this category, Russia is more reliant on Iran than Iran is on Russia.**
  - » The United States alleges that Iran has sold Russia more than 400 one-way attack drones since August 2022<sup>70</sup> and 300,000 artillery shells and a million rounds of ammunition.<sup>71</sup> Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian insisted in November 2022, however, that the weapons were provided "in the months before the start of the war in Ukraine."<sup>72</sup>
  - » Lloyd's List, which specializes in the analysis of global maritime trade, has noted an uptick in possible "dark port calls" made by ships traveling from Iran to Russia since 2022, which may corroborate U.S. officials' allegations that Iran has supplied Russia with arms for its war in Ukraine.<sup>73</sup>
  - » The National Resistance Center of Ukraine has reported that three Iranian state-owned airlines, along with Mahan Air, a private airline that was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in 2011, have been delivering UAVs to Russia. An analysis of tracking data from Flightradar24 revealed that Iranian aircraft have made more than 85 trips to Russian airports between May 2022 and March 2023.<sup>74</sup>
- **The trend in reciprocal arms flows is likely to continue for the next three years given that Iran remains reliant on foreign arms makers for many key systems, such as fighter jets, while Russia will continue to rely on Iranian arms transfers for the duration of its war in Ukraine and perhaps beyond as it rebuilds its stocks in the aftermath.**



### E2: Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Iran is supporting Russia's ability to operationalize and manufacture UAVs domestically.**
  - » Declassified intelligence from U.S. intelligence agencies suggests that Iran has provided Russia with materials to establish a drone manufacturing facility inside Russia, which could be fully operational by early 2024.<sup>75</sup>
- **If this facility becomes operational, this would suggest that technology sharing and joint production between Iran and Russia will increase over the next three years because the two countries will have established a successful model for co-production that they can then easily replicate.**

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved



### E3: Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Although historically trade between Russia and Iran has not been substantial, sanctions have drawn the two countries closer in the economic sphere.**
  - » Trade between Russia and Iran witnessed a significant boost after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, with an increase of nearly \$1 billion, reaching an approximate total of \$5 billion. By the end of that year, Russia emerged as Iran's fifth-largest trade partner and the largest foreign investor in Iran. Russia's investments in Iran during the Iranian fiscal year (from mid-March 2022 to mid-March 2023) amounted to \$2.76 billion. In contrast, China's investments in Iran during the same period amounted to only \$131 million.<sup>76</sup>
  - » In 2023, Russia's TASS news agency reported that a free trade zone agreement between Iran and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union would be possible by the end of the year.<sup>77</sup>
- **The imposition of sanctions on the two countries have provided them with fresh impetus to create new trade routes.**
  - » After Putin visited Tehran in June 2022, the Director of the Iranian Construction and Development of Transportation Infrastructure Company, Abbas Khatibi, said Iran is willing to complete the International North-South Transport Corridor, a 7,200 km long project to connect India and Iran, which was first conceived in 2000.<sup>78</sup> In 2022, Iran committed to building at least 11 infrastructure projects and Russia committed more than \$13 billion to 52 infrastructure projects to enhance the International North-South Transport Corridor.<sup>79</sup>
  - » In August 2022, the heads of the customs authorities of Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia signed a memorandum on the facilitation of transit traffic.<sup>80</sup>
  - » A couple of pilot projects have taken place. In June 2022, two containers departed from St. Petersburg to Astrakhan in southern Russia, then to the Iranian port of Anzali on the Caspian Sea, and ultimately to Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf.<sup>81</sup> In October 2022, seven Russian freight trains had reached India through Central Asia via Iranian territory.<sup>82</sup>
- **Russia and Iran have closely collaborated on oil exports, particularly since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.**
  - » Although Russia was initially hesitant about engaging closely with Iran on energy issues, given the risk of incurring secondary sanctions, this changed in 2022 after the Russo-Ukrainian war began. When Putin visited Tehran in 2022, the National Iranian Oil Company and Russia's Gazprom signed a \$40 billion agreement to upgrade Iran's oil and gas sectors.<sup>83</sup> The agreement encompasses Gazprom's investment in Iran's North Pars gas field, which had previously been awarded to a Chinese firm.<sup>84</sup>
  - » In late 2022, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak acknowledged that Russia and Iran had agreed to an arrangement known as an oil-gas "swap" as a hedge against price fluctuations in the market.<sup>85</sup>
- **Russian influence via this instrument is likely to increase over the next three years as the countries pursue further economic cooperation to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions.**

## CONCLUSIONS

**Russia's current M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as High. Russia primarily employs Informational, Military, and Economic instruments for military influence in Iran.** Moreover, all four types of instruments are significant given that influence via each instrument is assessed as at least medium. In August 2020, Russia and Iran agreed to counter what Russia's Foreign Ministry called "increasing information pressure from the West" designed "to discredit Russia and Iran."<sup>86</sup> In January 2021, Russia and Iran signed a wide-ranging agreement on cyber security cooperation.<sup>87</sup> In August 2022, Russia launched the Iranian "Khayyam," a high-resolution imaging satellite, which signaled growing collaboration in the space domain. U.S. officials voiced concerns that the satellite would provide Iran with better capacities to survey and identify potential military targets in the Middle East.<sup>88</sup> Militarily, Russia and Iran have shifted their focus from bilateral military engagement to a more pronounced emphasis on close multilateral cooperation, as demonstrated by their participation in joint naval exercises like the annual Maritime Security Belt drills with China. Russia and Iran are also keen to engage with each other on security matters in multilateral fora, such as the SCO.<sup>89</sup> Further, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has precipitated an uptick in bilateral arms transfers, though, notably, more reliably from Iran to Russia than the other way around.<sup>90</sup>

**Russia's projected M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as Increasing over the next three years. This increase is likely to take place across all four types of instruments—Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic.** Bilateral engagement across all four M-DIME instrument types has intensified and become more formal and strategic since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Diplomatic exchanges have become more regular and security-oriented in recent years, and there are indications that Iran and Russia are poised to deepen their formal defense partnership in the near future. For example, as of March 2023, the two sides were in the final stages of negotiating a long-term strategic cooperation agreement, according to Amir-Abdollahian.<sup>91</sup> Russia-Iran bilateral engagement in strategic areas is likely to continue to deepen while the two states remain under sanctions regimes and ostracized from Western-led international institutions. Sanctions have provided the two countries with fresh impetus to engage in strategic economic activity, such as working to create new trade routes like the International North-South Transport Corridor and collaborating on the oil trade.<sup>92</sup> Although overall activity is increasing, there are reasons to be conservative about projections over the next three years. The Iranian public remains profoundly skeptical of Russia, which hampers official efforts to intensify bilateral engagement, especially in the cultural and media spheres.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, in a sign of dysfunction in the relationship, a deal Russia struck in 2022 to sell Su-35 jets to Iran fell through in July 2023. Defense Minister Ashtiani hinted that Tehran was confounded by the breakdown of the deal, noting that "we have the ability to produce [fighter jets] in the country," without giving any further context.<sup>94</sup> Even as both countries mull further cooperation, it appears that Tehran's longstanding concerns about Moscow's unpredictability as a long-term strategic partner will persist.

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