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Assessing Emerging Cooperation and Conflict Among China, Iran, and Russia

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Key Points:

- The increasing economic, defence and security cooperation between China, Iran and Russia is being perceived by the West and its allies as a concerning development.
- Amidst converging interests, the three states share several mutual security concerns, such as counterterrorism, maritime security, and Iran's nuclear program.
- Despite key similarities, including an authoritarian approach at home, fissures exist within these partnerships at the bilateral levels.
- There is potential for cooperation and conflict between China, Iran, and Russia regarding security, energy, political, and diplomatic alignment.

Introduction

In an era marked by shifting geopolitical dynamics, the increasing economic, defence and security cooperation between Beijing, Tehran and Moscow is being perceived by the West and its allies as a dangerous development for several reasons. Chief amongst these is the alleged transfer of sanctioned nuclear technology and cooperation between the three.¹ Notwithstanding the reality of such fears, hostile narratives can be extremely dangerous given the destabilising global situation. Confrontational politics is also unhelpful against the background of a

strained global economy.² With an eye on such rhetoric, the study examines the potential for cooperation and conflict between China, Iran, and Russia in light of security, energy, political and diplomatic alignment. It is observed that while growing cooperation is one feature of this arrangement, a potential for conflict also exists where the national interests of each state can conflict with the strategic goals of the others.

Security and Energy

The three states share several mutual security concerns, including those pertaining to counterterrorism, maritime security, and the future of Iran's nuclear program. Cross-border terrorism remains a concern

¹ Matthew Karnitschnig, "Iran in secret talks with China, Russia to acquire sanctioned missile fuel," *Politico*, APRIL 12, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-ukraine-war-xi-jinping-china-russia-in-secret-talks-to-supply-iran-missile-propellant/>.

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² Abraham Darwyne, "Central banks will tip economy into global recession – Ninety One," *Fund Selector Asia*, September 27, 2023, <https://fundselectorasia.com/central-banks-will-tip-economy-into-global-recession-ninety-one/>; Ferenc Gaal, "China's surveillance tech: Western bans, global growth," *DW*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/western-countries-are-banning-chinese-tech-why-is-it-still-spr/>; Hiroyuki Suzuki, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition and Japan's Role in 2023," *CSIS*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-china-strategic-competition-and-japans-role-2023>; Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, "Global Economy on Track but Not Yet Out of the Woods," *IMF Blog*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/07/25/global-economy-on-track-but-not-yet-out-of-the-woods>.

for all three states, especially against the backdrop of the Afghan Taliban's takeover. Groups, including the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State, all pose threats with their links to sectarian groups in Iran and the Muslim pockets in both Russia and China.³ The three are also brought together by geography, sharing common maritime concerns. They view the Western influence and the presence of the NATO-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in the Persian Gulf as unjustified. Here, several critical waterways and choke points, including the straits of Bab al-Mandab, Malacca and Hormuz, influence security, trade and energy for all three states. With a view to this, the three states have been actively engaging in spells of joint naval training since 2019, with the Security Belt 2023 being the latest joint maritime exercise.⁴ In the bilateral context, Iran has found Russia a valuable partner to mitigate some of the isolation it has faced since the US pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁵ In turn, Iran has also supported Russia's stance on its conflict with Ukraine and holds similar ideas about foreign intervention in domestic matters as the latter. The bilateral relationship is being solidified through increased cooperation in defence and energy, which have become especially crucial since Russia's action in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Russia is also weary of the fallout of the JCPOA. While it blames the West for taking an unfair approach to pressurise Iran, it still pushes for the JCPOA, viewing it as the best option to deal with the nuclear issue peacefully.⁶ Historically, it has remained a key player in the nuclear negotiations. Its nuclear policy has also extended to cover the civilian side of Iran's nuclear power. Iran's attempts to secure such

help from Russia in the early 1990s culminated in the initiation of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP) in 1995.⁷ Ventures like these can support the Iranian economy by meeting its domestic energy requirements through the exploration of peaceful uses of nuclear energy. In this regard, the Russian and Iranian presidents signed nuclear and military cooperation deals in 2001, followed in 2014 by the signing of a deal to build up to eight more reactors in Iran. Yet Russia's concern for Iran's nuclear policy does come attached with its own caveats, especially against the backdrop of its conflict with Ukraine and the accompanying international isolation.⁸ Where it had been decisive and stern in its approach towards Iran regarding the negotiations earlier, it has now taken a much more patient approach. This works out in favour of Iran. Additionally, on the Iranian side, there exist doubts with regard to Russia's sincerity, given its ties with Israel.⁹ Yet despite their historical differences, and notwithstanding the nuclear issue, contemporary conditions are more likely to drive the two closer together. Where Russia may have to compromise on its role as a mediator, Iran turns towards China.¹⁰

In the past, China has been vital to the Iranian economy in the face of foreign sanctions. One of Iran's major oil importers, China's defence exports to the latter have recently been used in quelling the growing domestic discontent. Chinese surveillance technology has been used extensively in reining in the protestors in the "Mahsa Revolution", fuelled by the death of a young Kurdish woman in Iranian custody.¹¹ Similarly, China is also helping Iran navigate crippling sanctions and modernise its defence industry.¹² Military cooperation, in addition to other areas of cooperation, between the two is ensured by the 25-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021. It facilitates weapons development, joint

³ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's objectives, priorities, and policy drivers," White Paper from the Task Force on US Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, *Carnegie Moscow Center* (2016); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Joint Statement of the Second Informal Meeting on Afghanistan Between Foreign Ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran," April 13, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202304/t20230414_11059063.html; Nigar Bayramli, "China, Iran Call for Counter-Terror, Defense Cooperation," *Caspian News*, February 18, 2023, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/china-iran-call-for-counter-terror-defense-cooperation-2023-2-16-32/>

⁴ Hussein Askary, "Russia, Iran, China aim to reboot Persian Gulf security," *The Cradle*, May 1, 2023, <https://new.thecradle.co/articles-id/580>; Riyaz ul Khaliq, "China, Iran, Russia to hold joint naval drills," *Anadolu Agency*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/china-iran-russia-to-hold-joint-naval-drills/2846478>

⁵ Syed Rifaat Hussain, "Budding friendship," *BOL News*, July 31, 2022, <https://www.bolnews.com/oped/budding-friendship/>.

⁶ Abraham Darwyne, "Central banks will tip economy into global recession – Ninety One," *Fund Selector Asia*, September 27, 2023, <https://fundselectorasia.com/central-banks-will-tip-economy-into-global-recession-ninety-one/>; Adlan Margojev, "A Russian perspective on Iran's final offer for a nuclear deal," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 18, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/08/a-russian-perspective-on-irans-final-offer-for-a-nuclear-deal/>; Reuters, "Russia criticises 'unacceptable' Western pressure on Iran over nuclear deal," August 8, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-criticises-unacceptable-western-pressure-iran-over-nuclear-deal-2023-08-08/>.

⁷ Sina Azodi, "Iran's Nuclear Program Has a Long History of Advances, Setbacks and Diplomatic Pauses," *Stimson*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/irans-nuclear-program-has-a-long-history-of-advances-setbacks-and-diplomatic-pauses/>.

⁸ Hanna Nottle, "Don't Expect Any More Russian Help On The Iran Nuclear Deal," *War on the Rocks*, November 3, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/11/dont-expect-any-more-russian-help-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

⁹ Muhammad Hashemi, "Russia's Double Game in the JCPOA Negotiations," *Gulf International Forum*, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://gulffif.org/russias-double-game-in-the-jcpoa-negotiations/>.

¹⁰ Unites States Institute of Peace (USIP), "Iran & China: A Trade Lifeline," July 5, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-trade-lifeline>.

¹¹ Nader Habibi, "Challenges to Iran-China relations in the shadow of the 'Mahsa revolution'," *Stimson*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/challenges-to-iran-china-relations-in-the-shadow-of-the-mahsa-revolution/>.

¹² Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, "China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations," *Rand*, 2012, https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html.

research, and training and exercises.¹³ Reciprocally, Iran also offers the opportunity for China to diversify its energy imports. The two have also voiced parallel concerns regarding the global security architecture, criticising US unilateralism. They have viewed their bilateral relations as a strategic partnership to confront unilateralism and promote stability through cooperation between “like-minded powers”.¹⁴

While Iran has fostered independent security relations with China and Russia, the three countries have also moved towards a coordinated, trilateral security mechanism known as the “Security Bond-2023” in the Gulf of Oman. The joint naval manoeuvre was inaugurated by the three states in 2019 with the aim of enhancing maritime security cooperation, especially in the Gulf of Oman.¹⁵ The third round of the trilateral security bond took place in March 2023.¹⁶ It was preceded by rounds of joint naval exercises in 2019 and 2022, respectively.¹⁷ While promoting these joint exercises, the partners have stressed that these are aimed at enhancing not only collaborative maritime threat responses but also building a shared future for regional security. They have also highlighted the concept of “common security” instead of a “common enemy” as the driving force behind the joint exercises.¹⁸

With its traditional monopoly in the area, the West has viewed these developments as an encroachment. The area remains strategically important since, connected to the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman is home to several significant oil-rich countries. As an energy corridor, the region houses oil reserves equivalent to nearly two-thirds of the world’s supply. The traditional Western monopoly is also challenged by the attempts of regional states like Qatar to diversify their energy trade by pursuing multilateral

¹³ USIP, “Iran & China: Military Ties,” June 28, 2023, [https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-military-ties#:~:text=March%202021%3A%20The%20Iranian%20and,joint%20research%2C%20and%20weapons%20development;Yasir Rashid. “The Latest Status of the 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement Between Iran and China.” *Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara*, 2022. <https://iramcenter.org/en/the-latest-status-of-the-25-year-comprehensive-cooperation-agreement-between-iran-and-china-737>.](https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-military-ties#:~:text=March%202021%3A%20The%20Iranian%20and,joint%20research%2C%20and%20weapons%20development;Yasir Rashid.)

¹⁴ AP News, “Iran seeks to expand its military cooperation with China,” April 27, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-china-iran-tehran-ebrahim-raisi-ea72d03c548cce8ab1863edb02485e68>.

¹⁵ Novo News, “The naval exercises of China, Russia and Iran in the Gulf of Oman are underway,” *Agenzia Nova*, March 15 2023, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/china%2C-russia-and-iran-exercises-begin-in-the-gulf-of-oman/>.

¹⁶ Riyaz ul Khaliq, “China, Iran, Russia to hold joint naval drills 5-day maritime exercise to be held in Gulf of Oman beginning Wednesday,” *Anadolu Agency*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/china-iran-russia-to-hold-joint-naval-drills/2846478>.

¹⁷ Lee Willet, “Iran, China, and Russia conduct combined naval drills in Gulf of Oman,” *Armada International*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.armadainternational.com/2023/03/iran-china-and-russia-conduct-combined-naval-drills-in-gulf-of-oman/>.

¹⁸ China Daily, “Joint exercises help safeguard peace, stability,” March 16, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/OPINIONS_209196/Opinions_209197/16209596.html.

opportunities unconfined to the West.¹⁹ This comes at a time when the war in Ukraine is also reshaping the energy markets in considerable ways and taking a toll on the Western allies.²⁰ Here, a convergence between new actors indeed indicates a weakening Western hegemony. Other powers like China find themselves with a growing role in the region, especially with regard to settling regional rivalries. China’s recent success in facilitating the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a solid start.²¹ Its increasingly diverse regional involvement is also evidenced by its recent involvement in the North Field East expansion project, a venture that is also of interest to Iran.²² Undoubtedly, Iran holds great geostrategic significance for China, where it is not only one of China’s largest oil providers but also a potential transport hub for energy between the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe.²³ Amidst Iran’s backing for several resistance groups throughout the Middle East, keeping it engaged is also important for China and Russia as far as they hold their own strategic concerns in the area.²⁴ Thus, these multilateralist approaches are a logical result of seeking alternatives in the presence of debilitating Western sanctions and hostility.²⁵

Politics and Diplomacy

China, Iran and Russia have also strengthened their ties on political and diplomatic fronts. All three governments share common features, which have helped increase their proximity. For one, they share an authoritarian approach at home, which is strictly opposed to any foreign influence or intervention.

¹⁹ Shibley Telhami, “The Persian Gulf: Understanding the American Oil Strategy,” *Brookings*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-persian-gulf-understanding-the-american-oil-strategy/>.

²⁰ Nick Butler, “The Impact Of The Ukraine War On Global Energy Markets,” *Centre for European Reform*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/impact-ukraine-war-global-energy-markets>.

²¹ Tamara Qiblawi, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Signal the Start of a New Era, with China Front and Center,” *CNN*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/11/middleeast/iran-saudi-arabia-normalization-china-analysis-intl/index.html>.

²² Eric Yep and Staff, “China’s Sinopec acquires 1.25% share in Qatar’s North Field East LNG expansion,” *S&P Global*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/lng/041223-chinas-sinopec-acquires-125-share-in-qatars-north-field-east-lng-expansion>.

²³ Peter Mackenzie, “A Closer Look at China-Iran Relations Roundtable Report,” *CNA*, September 2010, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2010/D0023622.A3.pdf>.

²⁴ Al Jazeera, “Iran advances nuclear enrichment while still barring inspectors: IAEA,” November 15, 2023, [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/15/iran-advances-nuclear-enrichment-while-still-barring-inspectors-iaea](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/15/iran-advances-nuclear-enrichment-while-still-barring-inspectors-iaea;); Dmitri Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East: Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers: Task Force White Paper,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, April 05, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/04/05/russia-in-middle-east-moscow-s-objectives-priorities-and-policy-drivers-pub-63244>; Escobar, “The geopolitics of Al-Qsa Flood.”

²⁵ Ahmadi Ali, “China, Russia Face Sanctions from US States Now. That’s Dangerous,” Al Jazeera, March 24, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/24/the-next-us-sanctions-could-come-from-states-thats-dangerous>.

This, in combination with other factors, has strongly facilitated their growing proximity. This shared approach has also held in the case of the Russian action in Ukraine. Both Iran and China have shown varying degrees of support for Russia. Iranian authorities have criticised the US policies for enabling the crisis in Ukraine. Meanwhile, several international sources have provided evidence of Iranian weapons being used in Ukraine in violation of international humanitarian law.²⁶ China and Iran also voted against the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) last year.²⁷ While China has committed to holding an impartial position and pushed for a peace plan to settle the Ukraine conflict, it has also deepened its ties with Russia through the “no limits” partnership. Furthermore, it has blamed the US for driving Russia into a corner through the overexpansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).²⁸ In addition to showing an understanding of Russia’s stance on Ukraine and blaming Western provocation for the outcome, China has also historically preferred diplomatic solutions to its disputes with Russia.²⁹

China has similarly supported Iran by mediating between the latter and Saudi Arabia to resolve long-standing regional differences.³⁰ It has also reaffirmed its support for Iran on “issues concerning core interests”.³¹ On its part, Iran is also pursuing closer alignment and has made moves to integrate itself within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.³² The Iranian regime realises the need for Chinese backing, especially given the growing dissent at home. To foster development and restart the economy, the Iranian authorities are also attempting to reinvigorate the 25-year strategic agreement signed

between the two countries in 2021.³³ For Iran, the strong support from two of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China and Russia, can strengthen its global position. Increasing domestic political pressure has also moved Iran closer to both powers, which can lend support to its political ambitions at home and perhaps also to its nuclear ambitions in general, depending on how their balance with the Western powers evolves. Vice versa, a friendly Iran also offers a stable partner in the turbulent Middle East, where both powers possess several stakes.³⁴ Indeed, China has emphasised putting the JCPOA back on track, where it views non-proliferation as an essential issue to be solved to move the Middle East along the path of peace.³⁵ This is vital since completely isolating Iran is not desirable, as this can push it towards perceiving insecurity, especially with the mounting tensions and sanctions.³⁶ Iran’s disenchantment with the Western powers has also manifested in how it has recently prohibited International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) inspectors of Western origins from accessing its nuclear facilities.³⁷ Most visibly, the vacuum left by the US withdrawal from the nuclear treaty and the ensuing hostility has significantly pushed the three even closer. However, challenges remain, and as the main challenger to what it views as a unipolar world order, China will also have to uphold international commitments to peace if it is to present itself as a responsible superpower, where Russia has been largely discredited.

In this situation, inevitably, closer cooperation between the three already poses a threat to the existing global arrangement, which has long been preoccupied with containing the Soviet and the Chinese threats. On the other hand, China has repeatedly pointed out the Western war-mongering tendencies and advocated for an alternative world order based on its proposals like the Global Security Initiative.³⁸ Its recent announcement of a no-limits partnership with Russia has piqued tensions between what is perceived as the

²⁶ Garrett Nada, “Iran Blames US, West for Ukraine War,” *The Iran Primer*, July 19, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/mar/03/iran-blames-us-west-ukraine-war>; ICRC, “What is International Humanitarian Law?” accessed September 23, 2023, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/what_is_ihl.pdf.

²⁷ Reuters, “China tells Russia it will uphold ‘impartial’ position on Ukraine,” August 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-tells-russia-it-will-uphold-impartial-position-ukraine-2023-08-07/>; UN, “UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council,” April 7, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>.

²⁸ Al Jazeera, “China says the US is the ‘main instigator’ of the war in Ukraine,” August 10, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/10/china-accuses-us-as-main-instigator-of-the-war-in-ukraine>.

²⁹ China Power, “How Has the China-Russia Relationship Evolved?” accessed September 22, 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/history-china-russia-relations/>; China Power, “What Are the Key Strengths of the China-Russia Relationship?” accessed September 21, 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-relationship-strengths-benefit/>.

³⁰ Qiblawi, “Iran and Saudi Arabia Signal the Start of a New Era.”

³¹ Al Jazeera, “China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal driving ‘wave of reconciliation’, says Wang,” August 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/21/china-brokered-saudi-iran-deal-driving-wave-of-reconciliation-says-wang>.

³² Emil Avdaliani, “An Emerging Eurasian Axis?” *CEPA*, February 27, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/an-emerging-eurasian-axis/>.

³³ Al Jazeera, “What’s changed in Iran?” YouTube video, 12:35, Dec 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpEDNdAqY8g>; Bayramli, “China, Iran Call for Counter-Terror, Defense Cooperation.”

³⁴ Samuel Ramani, “The potential and limitations of Russia-China cooperation in the Middle East,” *Middle East Institute*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/potential-and-limitations-russia-china-cooperation-middle-east>.

³⁵ Jacopo Scita, “Can China Be the JCPOA’s Last Hope?” *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/can-china-be-the-jcpoas-last-hope/>.

³⁶ Al Jazeera, “US targets Iranian drone industry in latest round of sanctions” March, 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/21/us-targets-iranian-drones-in-latest-round-of-sanctions>.

³⁷ Al Jazeera, “Iran advances nuclear enrichment while still barring inspectors: IAEA.”

³⁸ Mordechai Chaziza, “The Global Security Initiative: China’s New Security Architecture for the Gulf,” *The Diplomat*, May 5, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/the-global-security-initiative-chinas-new-security-architecture-for-the-gulf/>.

West and the anti-Western bloc, where Iran is the latest to join.³⁹ The convergence between these three poses significant challenges to the existing global financial, economic, and military arrangements. However, it still may be too early to confirm an alternative world order. For one, several fissures exist within these partnerships at the bilateral levels. In the case of Russia and China, a certain level of mistrust exists due to the former's erstwhile endorsement of several agreements, which were linked to the latter's era of humiliation.⁴⁰ Similarly, while China has supported Russia in the war on Ukraine both diplomatically and economically, it cannot outrightly side with Russia in terms of military cooperation.⁴¹

Problems also exist in the case of Iran, specifically with regard to its nuclear program. At present, Iran has denied allegations of militarising its nuclear capabilities. However, this possibility remains open infinitely. IAEA reports already warn of Iran reaching 60 per cent purity in uranium enrichment.⁴² A nuclear Iran will have vast destabilising effects on the region, which goes against both Chinese and Russian interests. Where Iran and Russia enjoy stronger cooperation in certain areas, China's tendency to avoid formal alliances allows it a way out of unfavourable relationships that may evolve inauspiciously due to changing circumstances.⁴³ Additionally, China would also want to avoid the sort of security-based engagement that the US had in the region. Such conflicting perceptions and interests will prevent a deeper formal alliance where, individually, these states also have to deal with the challenges of winning taxing wars (Russia), battling the aftermath of strict COVID policies (China), and controlling burgeoning dissent at home (Iran). Under such circumstances, trilateral cooperation can suffer due to the underlying fissures that inhibit closer cooperation. It is only by mitigating these issues that stable cooperation can emerge, which may realistically pose a challenge to the existing order.

Recommendations

1. China can improve its soft power if it is able to manoeuvre a diplomatic solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It can use its economic leverage in Russia to help the two sides reach a political solution.
2. China can leverage the momentum it has picked up through the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. The two permanent members of the Security Council can help rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions, especially with Iran's disillusionment with the remaining members of the JCPOA.
3. Restoring regular communication between IAEA and Iran through inspectors of Chinese and Russian origins can help mitigate the trust deficit.
4. With a view to Russia's earlier successes in mediation, compartmentalising issues can help move along areas of mutual concern for the Western powers and Russia. They can still cooperate on Iran's nuclear policy while navigating their non-negotiables, especially in the case of the Ukraine conflict.
5. Integrating Iran into the economic and energy sectors will help decrease any perceived insecurity on Iran's part, which may otherwise precipitate the militarisation of its nuclear program. In this regard, encouraging, for instance, the International North-South Transport Corridor can enable multiple points of connectivity and transit.
6. China can also engage Iran in various other capacities against the backdrop of its commitments in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, including in trade, industry and infrastructure. Such engagement and development can open Iran up to diplomatic efforts geared at its nuclear program.
7. It is also vital to counter vitriolic narratives that exacerbate the perception of insecurity and hamper global cooperation.

³⁹ Al Jazeera, "'No limits partnership': Xi and Putin's economic priorities," March 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/3/21/no-limits-partnership-xi-and-putins-economic-priorities>.

⁴⁰ China Power, "What Are the Weaknesses of the China-Russia Relationship?" accessed September 19, 2023, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-relationship-weaknesses-mistrust/>.

⁴¹ Associated Press, "China promises not to sell arms to any party in Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *PBS News Hour*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/china-promises-not-to-sell-arms-to-any-party-in-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>.

⁴² Al Jazeera, "Iran advances nuclear enrichment while still barring inspectors: IAEA."

⁴³ Avdaliani, "An Emerging Eurasian Axis?"