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Trilateral Relations among Iran, Russia, and China: From Soft Balancing to Hard War

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Relations among Iran, Russia, and China have emerged as an important subject in international relations in recent decades, with their nature, objectives, and implications attracting sustained scholarly attention. The Twelve-Day War between Iran and Israel in June 2025 and the Forty-Day War between Iran and the U.S.–Israeli coalition in February 2026 provided critical tests for assessing the nature and capacity of these relations under wartime conditions. The principal research question is: Under what factors and mechanisms can trilateral relations among Iran, Russia, and China be sustained amid the difficult conditions created by war? The study aims to explain the nature of these relations and to examine their capacities and limitations in confronting security crises and armed conflict. The research adopts a qualitative approach and employs a case study strategy. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis based on categories derived from the theoretical framework of defensive realism. The findings indicate that the rapprochement among Iran, Russia, and China can primarily be explained in terms of soft balancing against the hegemony of the United States and the West and has not resulted in the formation of a formal alliance or defensive coalition. Moreover, the experience of the wars examined demonstrates that the continuity of these relations depends less on coherent security integration than on the strategic considerations, national interests, and pragmatic calculations of each of the three actors. Accordingly, these trilateral relations may be characterized as a form of calculated and flexible convergence that facilitates limited and issue-specific cooperation.

Keywords: *Iran; Russia; China; trilateral relations; defensive realism; Twelve-Day War; Forty-Day War*

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the expanding relations among Iran, Russia, and China have become one of the most significant subjects in international relations. These relations have moved beyond the level of conventional diplomatic interactions and have come to encompass a broader range of dimensions. Joint naval exercises, shared approaches within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS, convergent positions on international crises, efforts toward de-dollarization and resistance to U.S. unilateralism, and long-term economic cooperation are all manifestations of this convergence. At the level of grand strategy, similar orientations—including Iran's "Look to the East" policy, Russia's "Pivot to the East," and China's Belt and Road Initiative—constitute strategic trajectories capable of accelerating linkages among the three countries. This trend has also been reflected in Western political, academic, and media circles. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the nature of the trilateral relations among Iran, Russia, and China. Some scholars

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characterize them as a long-term strategic partnership or alliance, whereas others, pointing to the absence of the essential components of an alliance, regard them as a temporary and short-term partnership. This divergence of views stems from differing interpretations of the nature and character of these relations.

The principal research question is: Through which factors and mechanisms can trilateral relations among Iran, Russia, and China maintain continuity and stability under the difficult conditions generated by war? It is hypothesized that trilateral relations among Iran, Russia, and China have primarily possessed a soft, balancing-oriented character directed against the hegemony of the United States and the West. Consequently, under conditions of hard war, these relations are less likely to culminate in a coherent and comprehensive alliance than to facilitate limited and issue-specific forms of cooperation, which themselves remain contingent upon the strategic considerations and national interests of each actor within the complexities of the contemporary international order. The aim of the study is to explain the nature of these relations and examine their capacities and limitations in confronting security crises and war. In terms of purpose, the present study is classified as applied-developmental research. It employs qualitative content analysis. The research data were collected through documentary and library-based methods and subsequently analyzed and interpreted on the basis of theoretically predetermined categories in order to determine the extent to which the behavior of Moscow and Beijing corresponds to the components of an alliance or merely represents a form of "tactical alignment." The findings indicate that relations among Iran, Russia, and China can primarily be explained within the framework of soft balancing against U.S. and Western hegemony and have not resulted in the formation of a formal alliance or defensive coalition. The continuity of these relations is also determined less by security integration than by the national interests and strategic and pragmatic calculations of each actor. Accordingly, these relations may be understood as a form of calculated and flexible convergence with the capacity for limited and issue-specific cooperation.

2. Research Background

The first source is Seth G. Jones's book *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare*, which focuses on the irregular instruments—cyber, informational, and proxy-based—employed by the three countries in their competition with the United States. The principal strength of the book lies in its operational analysis of unconventional tactics (Jones, 2021). However, the trilateral relations and collective cooperation among these countries remain largely neglected, as each country is examined separately and primarily in the context of its confrontation with Washington. The strength of the present study in comparison with Jones's work lies in its examination of the dynamics of trilateral cooperation across institutional, economic, and military domains, as well as its analysis of developments after 2021, including the recent wars, which are not addressed in Jones's book. Accordingly, the present study seeks to fill an existing gap in the literature by providing a more comprehensive assessment of relations among these three powers.

The second source is Nicole Grajewski's article, "An Illusory Entente: The Myth of a Russia-China-Iran 'Axis,'" which argues that relations among the three countries lack an institutional structure and constitute merely an emerging form of coordination in areas of shared interest (Grajewski, 2022). A major strength of this article relative to the present study is its cautious approach to assessing the depth of the purported alliance and its avoidance of exaggeration. However, the strength of the present research lies in examining the possibility of alliance formation in light of rapidly evolving recent developments, such as the Twelve-Day and Forty-Day Wars, while also addressing a broader set of subsidiary questions not examined with comparable scope in previous studies. The present research therefore seeks to fill the gap concerning emerging dynamics that were not addressed by Grajewski.

The third source is the article "A 'Soft' Balancing Ménage à Trois? China, Iran and Russia Strategic Triangle vis-à-vis US Hegemony" by Papageorgiou, Eslami, and Duarte, which employs soft-balancing theory to analyze the diplomatic, economic, and regional mechanisms used by the three countries in confronting U.S. unilateralism (Papageorgiou et al., 2023). A major strength of this study relative to the present research is its use of a coherent theoretical framework. The present study, however, extends the analysis to broader implications beyond U.S. hegemony, including effects on the regional order, institutional cooperation, and collective security,

while also providing a more detailed analysis of post-2022 developments, such as the war in Ukraine and the Gaza crisis, which were not covered in that article. By drawing on a broader range of sources and providing greater analytical detail, the present research therefore offers a more comprehensive account of trilateral relations.

The fourth source is Samir Puri's article, "The Strategic Hedging of Iran, Russia, and China: Juxtaposing Participation in the Global System with Regional Revisionism," which demonstrates how the three countries pursue security through regional revisionism without jeopardizing their participation in the international system or provoking war with the United States (Puri, 2017). The principal strength of this article in comparison with the present study is its development of the concept of strategic hedging and its balanced analysis of three major crises involving Iran's nuclear program, Ukraine, and Chinese maritime activities. The present study, however, moves beyond the commonality of revisionism alone by identifying broader areas of convergence in foreign policy, including institutional, economic, and military cooperation, while also incorporating developments since 2017, such as recent wars, sanctions, and emerging crises that could not have been addressed in Puri's earlier study. Accordingly, by examining a wider range of shared interests, the present research offers a more comprehensive picture of convergence among the three countries.

3. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Conceptual Framework

There is no universal scholarly consensus regarding theories of international relations. Nevertheless, most scholars of political science and international relations recognize that the borrowing of Western theories in political science became increasingly widespread during the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, tendencies have emerged toward developing indigenous theories of international relations that correspond to the academic environment and political experiences of particular countries. At present, however, realism remains one of the dominant schools of thought in international relations (Drobot, 2014). The present study likewise analyzes its data through realist theoretical perspectives. There are several reasons for employing a realist approach in this research.

The term realism derives from the Latin root *real*, referring to reality, and in its literal sense denotes an orientation toward what is real. Within this perspective, reality refers to the perceptible dimension of the world and the actual conditions of existence (Zarshenas, 2018). Realism is widely regarded as one of the most significant and enduring theories of international relations. Its appeal is commonly attributed to its proximity to the actual conduct of political leaders and to conventional understandings of international politics. Realist thinking has deep roots in human history, although its formal emergence as an international-relations approach is generally associated with the period following the Second World War. Before the Second World War, realist thinking was advanced by E. H. Carr and later systematized as a scientific model by Hans Morgenthau. While recognizing the complexity of human nature, realism seeks to establish politics as an autonomous sphere of analysis. From a realist perspective, power constitutes the foundation of politics and a principal determinant of international relations (Mansouri, 2021). Numerous considerations demonstrate the importance and standing of realism within international relations. For example, the realist perspective is useful for understanding contemporary geopolitical tensions, including Iran's confrontation with Israel, Russia's conflict with Ukraine, China's tensions with Taiwan, and the role of Western countries in these conflicts. Realism also provides a framework for analyzing state behavior on the basis of the primacy of national interests over cooperative endeavors. It can offer a realistic explanation of how interstate relations are formed and which factors contribute to either competition or alliance formation. Furthermore, many states employ realist principles when formulating foreign policy. Political leaders generally take into account the balance of power and the possibility of conflict when making decisions. By providing analytical tools for understanding the motivations underlying state actions, realism can also contribute to the analysis and management of international crises.

Realism, in its broader intellectual sense, began to take shape during the second half of the nineteenth century. Initially, its application was largely confined to literature, theater, and painting. Once the conceptual and analytical

capacities of realism attracted the attention of political thinkers and decision-makers, the approach was subsequently incorporated into the study of international relations. As in the arts, realism in international relations emerged partly as a reaction against idealist and utopian tendencies that had developed from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Unlike idealist approaches, realism directs primary attention toward immediate issues and ongoing political realities rather than long-term normative projects. Another distinction from idealism is its comparatively limited emphasis on moral and legal norms. More precisely, a realist political leader seeks the shortest and most advantageous means of achieving desired objectives. Alongside power, security, and development, success constitutes a fundamental value within the realist approach. Success is regarded as the principal practical criterion for evaluating the actions of a realist statesperson. Other values recognized by realists include interests and power. Power, as one of the central realist concepts, is closely associated with the historical emergence of realism in the nineteenth century, a period in which force and the balance of power were of considerable significance (Shabaga, 2015).

3.2. Theoretical Foundations

To provide a deeper analysis of the foundations of cooperation among Iran, Russia, and China, this study employs defensive realism. In contrast to offensive interpretations of realism, defensive realism argues that states operating within an anarchic international system primarily seek "security" and "survival," rather than necessarily attempting to maximize power. According to this perspective, external threats constitute a major driver of alliance formation: when countries confront a shared threat, they form coalitions in order to balance against its source. In the context of the present study, the behavior of Iran, Russia, and China in confronting Western hegemony and the structural pressures of the international system is analyzed through the logic of the "balance of threat." Their rapprochement is therefore understood not simply as a manifestation of aggressive revisionism but as a defensive response to common security, economic, and normative threats perceived as originating from the United States and its allies.

Realism emphasizes state-centrism, survival, and the anarchic character of the international system (Jamshidi et al., 2022). During the development of contemporary realist thought, a distinction emerged between defensive and offensive realism (Jalali Baranji et al., 2023). Kenneth Waltz developed the structural foundations associated with defensive realism and emphasized that anarchy does not necessarily make security unattainable. From this perspective, territorial expansion does not necessarily generate greater security, while excessive accumulation of power is likely to provoke balancing behavior by other states (Jamshidi et al., 2022). Defensive realism gained particular prominence after the Cold War through its emphasis on security. Stephen Walt argued that states form alliances in response to threats rather than power alone and developed the concept of the balance of threat (Manouri & Mohammadsharifi, 2017).

According to defensive realism, states prioritize their continued existence and react on the basis of perceived threats (Torabi & Mohammadian, 2015). The balance of power is therefore central to maintaining security and preserving the status quo (Kamneva, 2015). Threat perception constitutes a fundamental basis of interstate relations, meaning that states tend to cooperate or align when confronted by a common threat (Zinovyeva & Yanikeeva, 2022). Accordingly, one of the principal mechanisms associated with defensive realism is the mobilization or attraction of external actors in order to counter a rival (Grafov, 2020).

Defensive and offensive realists share many fundamental assumptions but derive different conclusions from them. Both approaches emphasize the centrality of the state and the primacy of interests (Douglas, 2012). Both also identify the absence of a supreme authority in the international system as one of the principal structural conditions shaping power-seeking behavior (Jalali Baranji et al., 2023).

As noted above, defensive realism holds that states interact with one another through arrangements such as cooperation, partnership, coalition, or alliance in order to counter threats, although each of these forms of interaction possesses distinct characteristics. Cooperation occurs when actors adjust their behavior to the actual or anticipated preferences of others through a process of policy coordination. More formally, interstate cooperation occurs when the policies actually pursued by one government are regarded by its partners as facilitating the achievement of their own objectives as a

consequence of policy coordination. Within defensive realism, cooperation therefore refers to coordination among states in specified areas in order to reduce costs and enhance security (Keohane, 1984). Partnership represents a more institutionalized and durable level of interaction than ordinary cooperation, involving long-term relations and regular mechanisms without necessarily creating binding formal defense commitments (Mirfakhraei & Rahimi, 2017). An alliance is a formal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states (Walt, 1990). Alliances may therefore be defined as formal, treaty-based, multilateral security arrangements among two or more states designed to confront a shared threat. Coalitions, by contrast, refer to more temporary and issue-specific cooperation and coordination among states for addressing a shared threat or particular security problem (Saka & Abdullahi, 2022).

Accordingly, the concepts of cooperation, partnership, coalition, and alliance are treated in this study as different levels of interstate convergence. These levels are distinguished according to the degree of institutionalization, the extent of security commitment, temporal durability, and the intensity of the perception of a common threat. Within a defensive-realist framework, the greater the perceived common threat confronting Iran, Russia, and China, the greater the probability of movement from limited cooperation toward strategic partnership and subsequently toward issue-specific coalition formation.

4. Historical Background

The historical record of relations between Iran and China constitutes one of the factors contributing to contemporary rapprochement between the two countries. The deepening of bilateral relations accelerated following the Iranian Revolution, while economic considerations played a significant role in consolidating bilateral ties. In recent years, relations between the two countries have advanced considerably in political and economic affairs, as demonstrated by the agreements concluded between them. Relations among the three countries have also moved beyond economic issues, and the conduct of joint naval exercises has elevated their interactions to the level of trilateral security cooperation. To better understand the current state of these relations, it is therefore necessary to provide a brief overview of the historical development of relations among the three countries.

Relations between China and Iran extend back several centuries, and there is no significant historical record of comprehensive conflict between them. Beijing and Tehran formally established diplomatic relations in 1971, and their relationship has subsequently deepened. Economic and energy relations have constituted the cornerstone of bilateral cooperation over the years (Papageorgiou et al., 2023). In recent years, Iran-China relations have become an important subject of scholarly inquiry, as reflected in the considerable number of academic studies published on the topic, which itself demonstrates the growing significance of these relations. Unlike China, Iran's relations with Russia have historically been characterized by considerable fluctuation, encompassing periods of both confrontation and alignment. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran-Russia relations gradually underwent substantial positive transformation, and extensive cooperation emerged across political, security, economic, and cultural domains. Relations between Russia and Iran date back to the Tsarist period and have alternated between phases of rapprochement and periods characterized by tension and coldness. In general, Iran-Russia relations have historically been highly variable, although the two countries have developed close cooperation in a range of fields during recent years (Papageorgiou et al., 2023).

5. Research Findings

Geopolitical triangles influence the global balance of power and are shaped by state strategies and geopolitical positions (Khudaykulova, 2020). Relations among China, Iran, and Russia constitute an emerging geopolitical triangle (Papageorgiou et al., 2023). Attention to this geopolitical configuration increased after Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's Permanent Representative to the international organizations in Vienna, described cooperation among Russia, Iran, and China as a "new triangle of international diplomacy" (Garbuzarova, 2024).

At present, each of the three countries has multiple points of contention with the United States and the West, a condition that has contributed significantly to their rapprochement. Issues such as Sino-American economic competition, the Russia-Ukraine war, and Iran's regional

activities in West Asia have all generated friction with Western powers. The United States has, in turn, responded to these developments. China, Russia, and Iran are engaged in multidimensional competition with the United States: China primarily in the economic domain, Russia through the war in Ukraine, and Iran through its relationships with forces commonly referred to as the resistance groups in West Asia (Jones, 2021).

The most important factor driving Iran, Russia, and China toward trilateral cooperation has been their opposition to U.S. policies. Although Iran, Russia, and China are not formal allies, they have demonstrated alignment in their opposition to the United States (Brands, 2022). Their perception of a common threat has encouraged them to coordinate in opposition to U.S. hegemony and to advance their preferred visions of regional order (Dorj & Falahat Pishe, 2019). Trilateral cooperation among the three countries has progressed to a considerable degree. When states cooperate in military and security affairs, the likelihood of extending their relations into other domains also increases. In practice, such cooperation may indicate movement toward higher levels of coordination, potentially including strategic alliances.

Nevertheless, these relations do not contain explicit mutual-defense guarantees, although they exhibit certain alliance-like characteristics, including military cooperation (Brands, 2022). This relationship reflects both the increasing convergence among the three countries and their growing tensions with the United States. Regional activities also form part of their broader policies for countering U.S. influence. Western political leaders currently regard the increasing proximity among Iran, Russia, and China as a significant geopolitical development. Accordingly, Western states have adopted various measures intended to constrain this trilateral configuration.

The rapprochement among Russia, China, and Iran has increased markedly as a consequence of global transformation and intensifying geopolitical competition, while confrontational Western policies have contributed to greater alignment among the three countries. Perceived U.S. threats have made opposition to American unilateralism a common denominator in the strategic approaches of Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran (Dorj & Falahat Pishe, 2019). The geopolitical cooperation of Iran, Russia, and China is therefore primarily rooted in their opposition to U.S. unilateralism (Marketos, 2009).

The three countries perceive a pressing need to counter Western influence, and Russian, Iranian, and Chinese scholars have repeatedly emphasized the importance of limiting U.S. geopolitical influence. Russian scholarship, for example, has argued that Russia, China, and Iran should minimize Western geopolitical influence and constrain the channels through which the United States exercises influence to the greatest extent possible (Khatuntsev, 2015). Scholars have consequently characterized the rapprochement among China, Iran, and Russia as a major strategic development (Rajagopalan, 2019).

The growing cooperation among the three countries, combined with their shared perspectives and dissatisfaction with unilateral U.S. actions, has reinforced considerations of revisionism and balance-of-power politics (Papageorgiou et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it should again be emphasized that Russia and China do not seek to escalate their relations with the United States to the level of direct confrontation and have generally attempted to avoid severe deterioration in relations with the West. They prefer to challenge the United States through controlled measures that remain below the threshold likely to provoke an intolerable Western response.

Moscow and Beijing avoid conventional war with the United States because of U.S. military superiority and the potentially devastating consequences of direct confrontation (Jones, 2021). Instead, they employ calibrated measures designed to exert pressure on the United States without crossing the threshold of war (Connable et al., 2016), and they are likely to continue this pattern of indirect confrontation (Papageorgiou et al., 2023). Despite their revisionist behavior, they do not seek direct military conflict with the United States or disengagement from the global system and therefore regulate the level of tension in their relations with Washington (Puri, 2017).

5.1. Testing the Nature of Iran-Russia-China Relations through Military Experience

The Twelve-Day War of June 2025 between the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the one side, and Israel and the United States, on the other, constituted an important test of the effectiveness and depth of Iran's relations with

China and Russia. In this section, in order to explain their behavior and better understand the limitations and capacities of these countries' partnerships with Iran during a crisis, their official positions, diplomatic activities, and levels of cooperation are examined, while the dimensions of alignment and coordinated action by Moscow and Beijing in providing political support to Iran are assessed.

5.1.1. The Twelve-Day War and Iran-Russia-China Relations

In examining the Twelve-Day War, Moscow characterized attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities as unjustified and rejected criticism concerning its alleged passivity; nevertheless, Tehran expressed dissatisfaction with the level of practical support provided by the Kremlin. Russia rejected comparisons between its approaches toward Iran and Syria and welcomed the establishment of a comprehensive ceasefire (News, 2025). The Kremlin regarded its explicit political positions as a form of practical support and emphasized the continuation of strategic relations with Iran (Interfax, 2025). The absence of a mutual-defense clause and Russia's refusal to provide direct military assistance contributed to dissatisfaction in Tehran. Moscow's cautious approach reflected its continuing focus on the war in Ukraine, expectations regarding possible engagement with the new U.S. administration, and opposition to further Iranian nuclear development. Assessments indicated that the conflict in Ukraine had effectively restricted Moscow's support to the diplomatic sphere (Faulconbridge & Antonov, 2025).

At the diplomatic level, Beijing opposed violations of Iran's territorial integrity, warned against further escalation of the conflict, and expressed readiness to contribute to de-escalation. The Chinese government reiterated the importance of regional stability and diplomatic mediation (Said, 2025). At the United Nations Security Council, a degree of trilateral alignment emerged in response to Washington's narrative; Beijing emphasized diplomacy, while Moscow compared U.S. justifications with the allegedly fabricated intelligence invoked during the Iraq War (Nichols, 2026).

Although reports indicated that Russia had transferred information concerning the deployment of U.S. forces, no evidence of direct Chinese military assistance was identified; nevertheless, political convergence between Moscow and Beijing in support of Tehran continued (Inquirer.net, 2026). Ultimately, Beijing's and Moscow's opposition to escalation and their refusal to provide direct military assistance reflected concerns regarding energy instability, additional sanctions, and confrontation with Washington. Their broader strategic approach remained focused on balancing and diplomatic mediation (Said, 2025).

5.1.2. Analysis of Findings from the Twelve-Day Military Conflict

An examination of Moscow's and Beijing's behavior toward Iran during the June 2025 security crisis indicates that both countries avoided direct military support. At the analytical level, the responses of Russia and China were largely confined to diplomatic support. At the theoretical level, this approach reflected calculated convergence and cooperation-oriented soft balancing; in other words, political alignment primarily functioned as an instrument for indirectly balancing against the United States, while the unwillingness of either country to incur substantial security costs prevented trilateral relations from developing into a traditional defensive alliance. The absence of mutual-defense clauses in the agreements concluded among the three countries restricted support largely to diplomatic and intelligence-related measures. At the applied level, this practical restraint demonstrates that excessive Iranian reliance on Russia and China for security assistance would be unrealistic and suggests the need for Iran to reassess its foreign policy assumptions, diversify its partnerships, and strengthen fully indigenous deterrence capabilities in order to preserve strategic autonomy.

Table 1

Analysis of Findings from the Experience of the Twelve-Day Military Conflict

Level of Analysis	Approach	Manifestation	Findings
Analytical	Prioritization of national interests over regional alliances	Limiting action to proposing resolutions at the UN Security Council	Dissatisfaction with the level of practical support; demonstrating that excessive reliance on the two powers does not necessarily produce tangible security outcomes.
Theoretical	Calculated convergence	Political support stopping at the threshold of significant security costs	Trilateral relations remain primarily instrumental and, because of the absence of a "mutual-defense clause," do not develop into a binding defensive coalition.
Applied	Structural limitations of long-term partnerships	Avoidance of direct military confrontation	The need for Iran to maintain strategic autonomy, reassess assumptions, diversify partners, reduce security dependence, and strengthen indigenous deterrence capabilities.

5.2. The February 2026 War and Iran-Russia-China Relations

The outbreak of military conflict between Iran and the U.S.-Israeli coalition in February 2026 constituted another major test of the nature of Iran's relations with Russia and China and revealed their essentially pragmatic character. The behavior of Moscow and Beijing combined support with caution: neither intervened militarily, while assistance remained largely confined to intelligence and diplomatic dimensions.

At the discursive level, Moscow supported Tehran by condemning Washington's unilateralism and confirmed the transfer of equipment within the framework of "military-technical cooperation" (Xinhua, 2026). The Kremlin's diplomatic activities included condemnation of the assassination of Iranian officials and regional consultations, while its pragmatic approach continued to prioritize preservation of channels for negotiations concerning the war in Ukraine (Kragh, 2026). Nevertheless, intelligence reports indicated extensive covert cyber cooperation and the provision by Russia of detailed satellite data intended to facilitate the identification of U.S. targets (Balmforth & Irish, 2026). The Russian Federation's response therefore combined rhetorical solidarity with the avoidance of direct military intervention, reflecting both the absence of mutual-defense obligations and the prioritization of Russia's broader strategic objectives in Ukraine (Kragh, 2026).

China's diplomatic apparatus expressed deep concern over the escalation of hostilities and emphasized respect for Iranian sovereignty, the cessation of military operations, and a return to diplomacy (Zhang, 2026). At the practical level, the departure of ships carrying chemical precursors used in solid missile fuel from Chinese ports to Iran during the conflict was considered a noteworthy development (Karataş & Mustafaoğlu, 2026). In addition, Iran's strategic access to China's BeiDou satellite navigation system reportedly enhanced the accuracy of Iranian missiles and challenged U.S. informational superiority (Montagu-Smith, 2026). Nevertheless, Beijing adopted a highly cautious approach and, because of the overriding importance it attached to the security of energy flows from the Persian Gulf, refrained from direct intervention (Zhang, 2026). China effectively behaved as a "concerned observer": while opposing regime change, it declined to provide formal security guarantees and acted as an opportunity-oriented actor seeking to prevent uncontrollable escalation of the conflict.

Within international institutions, Moscow and Beijing demonstrated coordinated diplomatic action by calling for a special meeting of the UN Security Council and jointly challenging Western security narratives (Nebenzia, 2026). U.S. intelligence assessments suggested that China might have supplied man-portable systems and dual-use components through third parties, while Russia allegedly provided reconnaissance imagery to assist Tehran with targeting (Karataş & Mustafaoğlu, 2026). The CIA confirmed that Tehran had explicitly requested positional intelligence on U.S. assets from Moscow and Beijing, while President Vladimir Putin denied such claims and Russia benefited financially from the increase in oil prices (Fenbert, 2026). Iran stated that it had maintained "favorable" military and intelligence cooperation with the two powers during U.S. operations, a claim that conflicted with official Kremlin denials (Cna, 2026). The absence of mutual-defense guarantees in bilateral treaties, limitations in Russian military capacity, and China's unwillingness to confront the United States demonstrated the constraints of this alignment (Chtatou, 2026). Nevertheless, Chinese industrial, space-based, and artificial-intelligence support, together with Russian surveillance data, reportedly provided an important source of resilience for Iran's military capabilities (Baev, 2026). The geopolitical consequences of the war for

Moscow and Beijing combined short-term economic opportunities with longer-term security vulnerabilities (Center for & International, 2026). Without assuming any obligation to intervene militarily, Moscow remained focused on mediation, while Beijing prioritized its geoeconomic interests (Adler, 2026).

5.2.1. Analysis of Findings from the 2026 Military Conflict

An examination of the responses of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China to the 2026 military conflict between Iran and the U.S.-Israeli coalition demonstrates the emergence of a form of "pragmatic strategic alignment" and rejects the hypothesis that these relations constitute a classical military alliance involving binding defense commitments. Moscow and Beijing adopted a pattern of "low-cost support," limiting their support for Tehran to diplomatic convergence in institutions such as the UN Security Council and indirect operational assistance. This approach enabled them to challenge the position of the United States while avoiding direct and costly military confrontation with Washington.

Russia refrained from intervention because of its own strategic considerations regarding the war in Ukraine, while simultaneously benefiting from some economic consequences of the conflict, including higher energy prices and the diversion of U.S. strategic attention away from Ukraine. China, by contrast, concentrated primarily on maintaining the stability of energy supplies because of its dependence on oil imports passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Rather than engaging in direct military confrontation, Moscow and Beijing employed asymmetric, cyber, and diplomatic instruments to challenge the U.S.-led international order.

Table 2

Analysis of Findings from the Experience of the 2026 Military Conflict

Analytical Dimension	Performance	Finding
Nature of relations	Absence of binding security commitments and predominance of pragmatic cooperation	Rejection of the hypothesis of a classical military alliance and confirmation of a pragmatic alignment lacking a legally binding mutual-defense obligation.
Actions	Refusal to undertake direct military intervention	Confirmation of a low-cost support model.
Calculations	Exploitation of the crisis without incurring direct costs	Asymmetry of interests among Iran, Russia, and China.
Positions	Condemnation of attacks and convergence within the UN Security Council	Replacement of direct confrontation with indirect and diplomatic instruments for challenging U.S. hegemony through soft balancing.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of relations among Iran, Russia, and China demonstrates that this convergence reflects broader structural transformation within the international system. Each of the three actors, despite possessing different motivations and capabilities, has moved toward revision of the Western-led liberal order and toward a more multipolar international system in response to U.S. unilateralism.

While pursuing their respective national interests and seeking to increase their relative power, Russia and China employ strategies of indirect and controlled confrontation in order to avoid direct conflict with the global hegemon. Iran, as a geographic link between eastern and western Eurasia; Russia, as a major power in the post-Soviet space; and China, as one of the principal engines of the global economy, collectively seek to challenge existing configurations of global power. The analytical conclusions concerning the nature, objectives, and consequences of trilateral relations among Iran, Russia, and China can be formulated on the basis of the practical tests examined above.

A. Testing the Nature of Relations: Pragmatic Convergence

By examining Russian and Chinese behavior during the wars of June 2025 and February 2026, the study tested and rejected the hypothesis that these relations constitute either a formal alliance or a comprehensive strategic coalition. Their nature is better understood as cooperation-oriented soft balancing characterized by strong pragmatism. Because no mutual-defense treaties exist, Moscow and Beijing refrained from military intervention on Tehran's behalf during acute security crises and restricted their support primarily to

intelligence and diplomatic assistance in order to avoid costly confrontation with the United States.

B. Testing the Objectives: Convergence in Countering Threats and Divergence in Vital Interests

From the perspective of defensive realism, the principal common objective binding this geopolitical triangle is the management and counterbalancing of threats associated with U.S. unilateralism. Nevertheless, the crisis cases examined in this study demonstrate significant differences in the objectives and priorities of the three actors. China's primary objective is the preservation of economic stability, which encourages it to avoid escalation. Russia adopts a more tactical approach, seeking to use crises to divert U.S. attention from the war in Ukraine and to increase its energy revenues. Iran, in contrast, seeks hard balancing against what it perceives as existential threats. This divergence in objectives demonstrates that their alignment remains sustainable only so long as it does not conflict with the national and economic interests of Moscow and Beijing.

C. Testing the Consequences: Security Ineffectiveness

At the macro level, an important consequence of trilateral cooperation is the acceleration of movement toward multipolarity and the gradual erosion of U.S. hegemony through de-dollarization and the creation or strengthening of alternative institutions. However, from the perspective of Iran's immediate security requirements, the evidence demonstrates that these arrangements do not provide members with effective hard-defense or deterrence guarantees.

Relations among Iran, Russia, and China represent an element of the broader transition away from a unipolar international order, but their underlying character remains that of a "calculated and limited" partnership. The analytical implication is that absolute Iranian reliance on Russia and China is unrealistic because Moscow and Beijing prefer controlled confrontation with the West to direct conflict. Consequently, maintaining strategic autonomy and relying on indigenous deterrence capabilities remain essential for Iran.

Table 3

Analysis of Findings and Strategic Implications of Trilateral Relations among Iran, Russia, and China

Dimension Examined	Description	Key Finding
Nature of relations	Absence of direct Chinese and Russian military intervention and reliance primarily on diplomatic support	Pragmatic convergence and soft balancing; rejection of the hypothesis of a classical alliance or coalition.
Objectives of relations	Countering U.S. unilateralism	Convergence in responding to the threat of U.S. unilateralism combined with divergence in national interests and priorities.
Consequences of relations	Eastern institutions lack collective defensive-deterrence mechanisms and function primarily as diplomatic platforms	Efforts to facilitate transition toward a multipolar order coexist with the limited security effectiveness of Eastern institutions.
Overall result	Russian and Chinese preference for controlled confrontation and the resulting necessity for Iran to rely on indigenous deterrence	The trilateral partnership is "calculated and limited" and does not constitute a guaranteed security umbrella.

Overall, it can therefore be concluded that trilateral relations among Iran, Russia, and China, contrary to the hypothesis of a classical alliance or coalition, are characterized by pragmatic convergence and soft balancing, with their principal objectives being opposition to U.S. unilateralism and acceleration of the transition toward a multipolar order. Although Iran's political disputes with the West operate as a driver strengthening trilateral convergence, escalation of these disputes to the level of acute tension and armed conflict weakens the relationship because Beijing and Moscow prefer controlled confrontation and remain constrained by divergent national interests. Accordingly, this trilateral partnership and the institutions associated with it lack both collective defensive deterrence and a guaranteed security umbrella. The principal implication of this calculated and limited partnership is therefore the necessity for Iran to rely on indigenous deterrence within the anarchic international environment.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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