OPEN PEER REVIEW

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

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

The second paragraph of the Introduction states that "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?" The research question is important but currently too broad and insufficiently aligned with the empirical design presented later in the article. The manuscript examines two specific episodes—the June 2025 conflict and the February 2026 conflict—yet the question is framed as a general inquiry into the long-term continuity and stability of trilateral relations. The authors should either narrow the question to ask how these two military crises reveal the mechanisms, limits, and resilience of trilateral alignment, or provide a broader longitudinal analysis sufficient to answer the present formulation. It would also strengthen the design to specify the dependent variable more clearly: is the study explaining continuity of cooperation, variation in the level of support, failure of alliance formation, or resilience of soft balancing under wartime pressure?

In the same introductory paragraph, the manuscript argues that the relationship is "less likely to culminate in a coherent and comprehensive alliance than to facilitate limited and issue-specific forms of cooperation." This hypothesis is plausible, but it presently incorporates much of the eventual conclusion and therefore risks making the empirical analysis appear confirmatory rather than genuinely evaluative. The authors should translate the hypothesis into observable indicators that could potentially falsify it. For example, evidence of automatic military assistance, activation of treaty-based defense commitments, deployment of combat forces, coordinated operational planning, or institutionalized joint command structures could count against the hypothesis, whereas diplomatic support, intelligence sharing, dual-use assistance, or ad hoc logistical support would support it.

Establishing these indicators before presenting the case evidence would considerably improve methodological transparency and reduce confirmation bias.

The theoretical discussion states that "Kenneth Waltz developed the structural foundations associated with defensive realism" and subsequently relies on Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat logic. The relationship between structural realism, defensive realism, and balance-of-threat theory should be clarified more carefully. Waltz's structural realism emphasizes the systemic consequences of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities, whereas Walt's balance-of-threat theory introduces additional variables such as aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. These approaches are related but not identical. The manuscript should specify whether the principal explanatory framework is Waltzian defensive realism, Waltian balance-of-threat theory, or a combined analytical framework. If the latter is intended, the authors should explicitly show how each theoretical component generates distinct expectations regarding Iran, Russia, and China.

In Section 4, the manuscript states that "when states cooperate in military and security affairs, the likelihood of extending their relations into other domains also increases" and that such cooperation "may indicate movement toward higher levels of coordination, potentially including strategic alliances." This is a causal proposition that currently lacks sufficient theoretical support and empirical qualification. Military cooperation can indeed contribute to institutionalization, but it can also remain compartmentalized, transactional, or symbolic without leading to alliance formation. The authors should either provide theoretical literature supporting this proposed progression or reformulate the claim as an empirical possibility rather than a general tendency. The article's own findings actually demonstrate that recurring military cooperation did not produce binding defense commitments, making this an important opportunity to distinguish military interaction from alliance institutionalization.

The paragraph asserting that "the rapprochement among Russia, China, and Iran has increased markedly as a consequence of global transformation and intensifying geopolitical competition" would benefit from a more explicit causal sequence. At present, U.S. unilateralism, sanctions, geopolitical competition, perceived threats, revisionism, and multipolarity appear simultaneously as causes and consequences of trilateral alignment. The authors should identify the causal mechanism more precisely. One plausible formulation would be: increasing U.S. pressure heightens shared threat perceptions; shared threat perceptions create incentives for diplomatic and economic coordination; asymmetric national interests constrain the institutionalization of this coordination; and the resulting pattern produces soft balancing rather than formal alliance. Presenting the argument as a causal chain would significantly improve theoretical coherence and make the later case analysis easier to evaluate.

In Section 4.1.1, the sentence "the absence of a mutual-defense clause and Russia's refusal to provide direct military assistance contributed to dissatisfaction in Tehran" is analytically important, but the manuscript should distinguish more rigorously between evidence of Iranian dissatisfaction and the authors' inference regarding the causes of Russian restraint. The subsequent explanation attributes Moscow's caution to "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." These are distinct causal explanations and should not be presented as established simultaneously unless supported by direct evidence. The authors should specify which claims are documented by official statements, which derive from expert interpretation, and which represent their own inference. A source-evidence table or explicit evidentiary hierarchy would strengthen the credibility of this section.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The methodological statement in the Introduction—"the research data were collected through documentary and library-based methods and subsequently analyzed and interpreted on the basis of theoretically predetermined categories"—requires substantial elaboration. The manuscript does not specify the corpus of documents, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the

period covered, the types of sources used, the number of documents examined, or the procedure followed in qualitative content analysis. Because much of the empirical discussion relies on governmental statements, news reports, policy analyses, and secondary academic sources, the authors should explain how source credibility, duplication, political bias, and conflicting accounts were handled. The methodological section should identify the coding categories derived from defensive realism, such as threat perception, balancing behavior, alliance commitment, security costs, strategic restraint, national-interest divergence, and indirect support, and clarify whether coding was deductive, iterative, or supplemented by inductively generated categories.

In the first paragraph of the Research Background section, the authors write that Jones's work examines Iran, Russia, and China "separately and primarily in the context of [their] confrontation with Washington," whereas the present study examines their "trilateral cooperation across institutional, economic, and military domains." This comparison would be stronger if the literature review moved beyond sequential summaries of four publications and synthesized the broader scholarly debate. At present, each study is discussed individually in terms of "strengths" and the alleged superiority of the present article. A more rigorous review should classify the literature into competing perspectives—for example, the "axis/alliance" interpretation, the strategic-partnership interpretation, the soft-balancing interpretation, and the pragmatic or issue-specific alignment interpretation—and then identify the precise unresolved theoretical or empirical question to which this article contributes. This would transform the literature review from an annotated bibliography into a genuine scholarly positioning of the research.

The paragraph discussing Grajewski states that the present study is stronger because it examines "rapidly evolving recent developments, such as the Twelve-Day and Forty-Day Wars." This claim of novelty should be reformulated more cautiously. Recency alone does not constitute a sufficient scholarly contribution unless the newer cases permit testing, refinement, or modification of an existing theoretical proposition. The authors should explain precisely how the 2025 and 2026 conflicts function as "critical cases," "most-likely cases," or "stress tests" for claims about trilateral alignment. If a severe military crisis involving Iran should be the situation in which security commitments from Russia and China are most visible, then the absence of direct intervention becomes theoretically informative. Explicitly presenting the cases in this way would make the novelty of the article analytical rather than merely chronological.

In Section 2.1, the manuscript states that "at present, however, realism remains one of the dominant schools of thought in international relations." The subsequent discussion devotes substantial space to the intellectual and even artistic origins of realism, including literature, theater, painting, idealism, and nineteenth-century intellectual history. Much of this material is only indirectly related to the research question and should be substantially condensed. A journal article focused on contemporary trilateral relations would benefit more from a theoretically precise discussion of structural realism, defensive realism, balance-of-threat theory, soft balancing, strategic alignment, and alliance theory. The current historical exposition risks diluting the conceptual focus and consuming space that could instead be used to clarify the theoretical mechanisms connecting external threat, alliance restraint, security-seeking behavior, and limited cooperation.

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2. Revised

Editor's decision: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.