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“E3’s Snapback” and Strategic Realignment:
Iran’s Accelerated Pivot Towards China

By
Gulf State Analytics



4 September 2025

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Executive Summary

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- ✧ The E3 triggered the JCPOA “snapback” mechanism on 28 August in response to Iran's continued non-compliance, initiating a 30-day countdown to the likely reimposition of pre-2015 UN sanctions.
- ✧ China sharply criticized the E3’s decision, calling it destabilizing and counterproductive to diplomacy, while Russia echoed these concerns and joined Beijing in drafting a resolution to preserve aspects of the JCPOA.
- ✧ The unique legal structure of the snapback mechanism prevents any permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) member from vetoing sanctions reinstatement, effectively sidelining China and Russia despite their objections.
- ✧ If China and Russia openly defy the renewed sanctions, it could create a crisis of legitimacy for the UNSC, weakening its authority and signaling a deeper erosion of multilateral norms in global governance.
- ✧ This institutional breakdown reflects a growing East-West divide in the international order, with China and Russia increasingly willing to challenge U.S.-led frameworks when consensus breaks down.
- ✧ Iran’s strategic pivot toward China has accelerated following the June 2025 12-day conflict with Israel and the U.S., as Tehran seeks new military, economic, and diplomatic lifelines.
- ✧ China is becoming Iran’s key defense partner, supplying dual-use materials vital to missile development and reportedly engaging in oil-for-arms arrangements, despite denying full weapons transfers.
- ✧ Iran is embedding itself in China’s Eurasian economic architecture, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with new freight links and participation in regional connectivity projects that bypass Western-controlled maritime routes.
- ✧ Iran’s integration into transcontinental overland corridors (e.g., the International North-South Transport Corridor) strengthens its economic resilience while advancing Beijing’s strategy to diversify energy and trade routes.
- ✧ The Iran-China partnership is increasingly strategic, not just tactical, rooted in shared goals of resisting U.S. hegemony, fostering multipolarity, and building non-Western institutions — a development likely to reshape power dynamics across Eurasia and complicate Western containment efforts.

Key Picture: China-Iran Freight Train Route (May 2025)



Source: [China Daily](#)

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1. The ‘Snapback’ Mechanism

On 28 August, the E3—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—announced their decision to invoke the “snapback” mechanism in response to Iran’s continued non-compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).¹ This move initiates a 30-day process likely to culminate in the reinstatement of pre-2015 United Nations sanctions on Iran—penalties originally lifted under the terms of the 2015 nuclear accord. China and Russia swiftly condemned the move, challenging its legality and framing it as a diplomatically counterproductive step that risks deepening tensions and derailing prospects for renewed negotiations.² In doing so, the snapback may inadvertently accelerate the realignment of Iran toward China, further entrenching the geopolitical divide between Western powers and China on the Iranian nuclear issue.

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Although neither China nor Russia holds the power to veto the reimposition of “snapback” sanctions on Iran—given the unique legal design of the mechanism embedded in the JCPOA—their potential defiance of such sanctions introduces a complex layer of geopolitical and institutional uncertainty. The snapback process, deliberately constructed to prevent obstruction by any single UNSC member, was intended as a safeguard to enforce compliance. However, if Beijing and Moscow were to openly reject or circumvent the renewed sanctions, it would raise profound questions about the legitimacy and enforceability of UNSC resolutions, particularly in a context where consensus among major powers is absent.

Such a move could further fracture an already polarized Council, undermining the perceived authority of the UNSC as a cornerstone of the international rules-based order. It would also signal a broader erosion of multilateral mechanisms at a time when global cooperation is urgently needed to address non-proliferation and regional security challenges. The implications would extend beyond Iran, potentially setting a precedent for selective compliance with international mandates, and accelerating a shift toward a more fragmented, multipolar diplomatic landscape defined by increased East-West bifurcation.

2. Iran’s Strategic Turn Toward China

Regardless of how the E3-Iran tensions unfold, security dilemmas and geopolitical pressures are likely to drive Iran deeper into China’s sphere of influence following the June 2025 12-day conflict and the probable reinstatement of UN sanctions. Confronted with ongoing military threats from the American-Israeli alliance and mounting Western economic pressure, Iran is rapidly deepening its strategic partnership with the Asian giant.

This shift, hastened by recent hostilities, signifies not simply a reactive adjustment but a calculated, long-term recalibration of Tehran’s foreign policy trajectory. Disappointed by Moscow’s perceived lack of support during the 12-day war, Iran increasingly relies on China as its most dependable partner for rebuilding missile and air defense systems, including reported acquisitions of Chinese surface-to-air missile systems through oil-for-arms deals and expanding Chinese involvement in restoring Iran’s damaged military infrastructure following Israel’s Operation Days of Repentance in October 2024.

While Beijing denies transferring complete weapons systems, Chinese companies have been implicated in supplying dual-use materials vital to Iran’s missile program—such as sodium perchlorate, a key ingredient in solid rocket fuel. U.S. sanctions on several Chinese firms highlight Washington’s concerns, and Israeli officials have issued sharp warnings about China’s role in facilitating Iran’s military resurgence.^{3, 4}

3. Iran’s Role in China’s Eurasian Strategy

Beyond defense, Tehran is embedding itself within China’s Eurasian economic vision to achieve greater strategic autonomy. Central to this effort is Iran’s push to expand overland trade corridors that bypass the vulnerable Strait of Hormuz and Western-controlled maritime routes. These efforts predate the June conflict but have gained urgency in its aftermath.

In July, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—followed by President Masoud Pezeshkian’s visit to Tianjin in late August for the SCO summit—underscoring Tehran’s pivot toward China.^{5, 6} A significant milestone

occurred in May when a direct freight rail link between China and Iran was launched, cutting shipping times in half and symbolizing Iran's deeper integration into China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.⁷ This new rail route, which runs through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, highlights Iran's role as a vital link in emerging East-West connectivity networks.⁸

Tehran is also aligning itself with China's broader regional infrastructure push, seeking to capitalise on projects like the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and the Ayagoz-Tacheng rail link. Iran is positioning itself as a critical node in China's transcontinental trade ambitions and an indispensable component of the International North-South Transport Corridor, which connects Russia to India via Iran. These overland alternatives offer Iran both economic diversification and insulation from potential Western sanctions or blockades, while enabling Beijing to circumvent the increasingly risky energy routes through the Strait of Malacca and the sanctioned Russian land corridor.

Strategically, China and Iran are converging around shared goals: resisting U.S. hegemony, promoting a multipolar global order, and building resilient, non-Western networks of military and economic cooperation. While China is unlikely to involve itself militarily in Iran-Israel hostilities, it is quietly bolstering Iran's strategic depth—most visibly in its support for missile rebuilding—without endorsing Iran's nuclear ambitions. For Beijing, Iran represents both a counterweight to U.S. influence in the Middle East and a crucial partner in securing stable overland energy and trade corridors.

Ultimately, the June conflict has catalysed a decisive Iranian pivot toward China, one driven by both immediate security needs and long-term geopolitical calculus. As Iran embeds itself more deeply into China-centric frameworks of defense and commerce, the West—particularly the United States—and Israel will face mounting challenges.

The evolving Sino-Iranian partnership is not just tactical but strategic, and its trajectory suggests a reordering of power dynamics across Eurasia that could complicate efforts to contain Iran's regional and global ambitions.

4. Limits of Alignment: Testing the Depth of the China-Iran Strategic Partnership

Despite the growing strategic convergence between China and Iran, their partnership remains bounded by real limitations. Chief among these are Beijing's long-standing and strategically vital relationships with Israel and key Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—many of which have consistently viewed the Islamic Republic as a destabilising regional actor and existential threat. In parallel, China has often demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to comply with U.S. secondary sanctions on Iran, particularly when its core economic interests are at stake. These competing imperatives reflect the delicate diplomatic calculus that Beijing must maintain, raising important questions about the nature and limits of its emerging leadership role within the Global South.

As Tehran deepens its engagement with multilateral frameworks such as BRICS and the SCO, a central question emerges: to what extent is China willing to underwrite Iran's bid to confront the American-Israeli alliance and reposition itself as a central player in a more multipolar international system? While both countries share a desire to erode the foundations of U.S. global primacy, their respective strategic priorities are not always fully aligned. For Beijing, stability and predictability across the Middle East remain paramount, particularly as it seeks to safeguard its vast Belt and Road investments and maintain energy security. Thus, any move by Iran that introduces acute regional volatility could test the elasticity of Chinese support.

This tension would become especially salient in the event of renewed Israeli military action against Iran—particularly if such strikes were to prompt Tehran's leadership to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and pursue a nuclear weapons program in earnest. How China responds in such a scenario would serve as a revealing indicator of the true depth and durability of the Sino-Iranian partnership. Would Beijing stand firmly behind Iran despite global condemnation and the risk of further destabilisation, or would it revert to a more cautious, risk-averse posture to protect its broader strategic equities? The answers to these questions will help clarify not only the contours of the China-Iran relationship, but also the credibility and coherence of China's broader claim to global leadership in an increasingly fractured international order.

NOTES

¹<https://apnews.com/article/iran-sanctions-snapback-nuclear-e3-explainer-49a5ccebbaeecc3578f3d19db318a42c>

²<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-opposes-snapback-sanctions-on-iranian-nuclear-program/3672428>

³ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0116>

⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-report-iran-china-missile-boost-2114156>

⁵<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russian-iranian-foreign-ministers-discuss-tehrans-nuclear-program-on-sidelines-of-sco-meeting-in-china/3631228>

⁶ <https://en.irna.ir/news/85927806/Pezeshkian-arrives-in-China-for-Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>

⁷ <https://silkroute.news/article/1202550/>

⁸ <https://www.stimson.org/2025/iran-seeks-new-trade-routes-with-china/>