

Allies of Convenience: How Russia and China Are Dodging the Iran Conflict

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Cover Image Attribute: Tehran's skyline after Israeli air strike / Source: YouTube Screengrab

The recent U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities have thrust the Middle East into a precarious new phase of conflict, drawing sharp reactions from global powers Russia and China. These attacks, coupled with Iran's retaliatory missile strikes on a U.S. base in Qatar, have heightened fears of a broader regional war. Russian President Vladimir Putin labeled the U.S. actions "unjustified" and "unprovoked," warning they bring the world to a "very dangerous line." Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi condemned both the Israeli and U.S. strikes, arguing they set a "bad precedent" by targeting Iran over "possible future threats." Both nations have called for de-escalation and diplomacy, yet their responses reveal a complex interplay of strategic caution, economic interests, and geopolitical ambitions. This escalation tests the limits of Russia and China's partnerships with Iran, exposes the fragility of their anti-Western axis, and highlights the challenges of navigating a multipolar world where rhetoric often outpaces action.

Russia's condemnation of the U.S. strikes was swift and pointed. Speaking after meeting Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in Moscow, Putin described the attacks as "absolutely unprovoked aggression" with "no basis and no justification." At the United Nations Security Council, Russia's envoy Vassily Nebenzia drew parallels to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, accusing Washington of peddling "fairytales" about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Russia's rhetoric aligns with its 20-year strategic partnership with Iran, signed earlier this year, which has deepened ties through intelligence sharing and cooperation in Syria. Yet, despite Tehran's expectations for tangible support, Moscow has offered little beyond words. Iranian officials, speaking anonymously, expressed frustration with Russia's inaction, noting that Tehran felt let down despite its past aid to Moscow, including drones and ammunition for the Ukraine war. Putin's public remarks to Araghchi emphasized a desire to "think together about how it would be possible to get out of this situation," signaling a preference for diplomacy over military entanglement.

Moscow's caution stems from multiple considerations. The strategic partnership with Iran lacks a mutual defense clause, leaving Russia with no obligation to intervene militarily. Putin's reluctance to escalate is also shaped by domestic priorities, including the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has strained Russia's military and economic resources. Analysts like Nikolay Kozhanov argue that Moscow "will never accept" Iran's requests for retaliation against the U.S., citing the transactional nature of their relationship. Russia's past failure to deliver promised military hardware, such as Sukhoi Su-35 jets and S-400 air-defense systems, reflects this pragmatism. Production issues and diplomatic pressure from Gulf states have limited Moscow's willingness to arm Tehran, even as Israel destroyed Iran's Russian-supplied air defenses last year. Moreover, Putin is mindful of preserving ties with Israel, home to nearly two million Russian-speaking residents, and maintaining a delicate rapport with U.S. President Donald Trump, who has refrained from new sanctions on Russia despite tensions over Ukraine.

Russia's economic calculus further complicates its stance. A prolonged but contained Israel-Iran conflict could benefit Moscow by driving up oil prices, boosting its federal budget at a time when sanctions have slashed energy revenues by 24%. Analyst Alyona Nikolayeva notes that moderate disruptions could push Russia's Urals blend to \$75 per barrel, generating an additional \$2.8 billion monthly. Yet, an all-out war risks global economic turmoil, which could dampen oil demand and strain Russia's already stretched war chest. Putin's offer to mediate, rebuffed by Trump's quip to "mediate your own" in Ukraine first, reflects Moscow's attempt to position itself as a regional stabilizer while avoiding direct involvement. The fall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad in 2024, despite Russia's decade-long support, has already dented Moscow's credibility as an ally. As political scientist Andrey Kortunov observed, Russia's inability to prevent Israel's strikes on Iran, a strategic partner, further undermines its reliability.

China's response to the crisis mirrors Russia's in its rhetorical intensity but cautious action. Beijing condemned the U.S. strikes as a "serious violation" of the UN Charter, with Foreign Ministry spokesperson Liu Jiakun emphasizing the need for peace and stability. China's UN ambassador Fu Conged argued that the attacks damaged U.S. credibility in

international negotiations. Like Russia, China has called for an immediate ceasefire as soon as possible,” but its support for Iran has been “more strategic than substantive. Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed being “deeply concerned” about Israel’s actions, while Foreign Minister Wang Yi engaged counterparts in Iran, Israel, and Oman to explore mediation. Yet, China’s public opinion, as indicated by online discourse, shows little sympathy for Iran, viewing it as unreliable due to its internal weaknesses and perceived pro-Western leanings. Chinese commentators criticize Tehran for not fully “embracing China,” citing its refusal to host a Chinese military base and its strategic autonomy.

Beijing’s restraint is driven by economic imperatives. As Iran’s largest oil buyer, purchasing 80-90% of Tehran’s exports, China relies heavily on the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of global oil flows. Iran’s threat to close this chokepoint, approved by its parliament, sent Brent crude futures soaring to \$81.40 per barrel before Trump’s ceasefire announcement eased prices to \$67.30. A prolonged disruption could cripple China’s economy, which imports of 11.1 million barrels daily and a 90-day oil reserve leave vulnerable. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, with significant investments in Iran’s infrastructure, also faces risks from instability, as rising insurance costs and security risks could derail projects. Beijing’s evacuation of citizens from Iran and its cautious trade stance reflect these concerns, with trade dropping sharply due to sanctions risks.

Despite these immediate risks, China sees long-term strategic opportunities. A U.S. entanglement in the Middle East could divert Washington’s focus from the Indo-Pacific, easing pressure on Beijing over Taiwan and regional militarization. The U.S. decision to reroute an aircraft carrier from Vietnam to the Middle East underscores this shift, prompting Chinese analysts to reassess a potential recalibration of strategy. China’s 2023 mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran bolstered its image as a peacemaker, and Beijing now seeks to capitalize on U.S. actions to portray Washington as a destabilizing force. Yet, as political scientist Ja Ian Chong notes, “Beijing cannot [restrain] Iran,” limiting its influence. China’s conditional support for Tehran hinges on Iran’s ability to sustain a low-intensity conflict, potentially weakening U.S.-Israel while preserving Chinese investments.

Both Russia and China face a dilemma: their strategic partner, Iran, expects support, yet neither is willing to risk direct confrontation with the U.S. Iran’s Foreign Minister Araghchi’s plea for Russian air-defense systems and nuclear restoration aid went unanswered publicly, while China’s public skepticism of Iran’s capabilities reflects a pragmatic approach. The U.S.-China-Russia-Iran-North Korea axis, often touted as a counterweight to Western dominance, reveals its cracks under pressure. Iran’s frustration with its allies echoes past disappointments, such as Russia’s abandonment of Armenia and Syria. As Fabrice Pothier remarked, “Russia is not as good a ally of dictators as it pretends to be.”

The U.S. strikes, hailed by Trump as a “spectacular military success” that “completely obliterated” Iran’s nuclear sites, have reshaped the conflict’s dynamics. Trump’s subsequent ceasefire announcement, contradicted by ongoing Israeli strikes, highlights

the fragility of de-escalation efforts. His Truth Social post allowing China to buy Iranian oil while urging U.S. crude purchases signals a pragmatic approach to sanctions enforcement, drawing criticism from Scott Modell for “minimum pressure.” Iran’s insistence on retaliation before diplomacy, as stated by Araghchi, complicates negotiations, with Tehran feeling betrayed by both allies and adversaries.

Russia and China’s cautious responses reflect a shared priority: preserving their strategic flexibility in a volatile region. Moscow’s economic gains from oil price volatility and Beijing’s diplomatic leverage from U.S. overreach depend on a contained conflict. Yet, their reluctance to fully back Iran risks alienating a key partner, potentially weakening their anti-Western bloc. The Middle East stands at a crossroads, where the interplay of great power interests—Russia’s mediation ambitions, China’s economic pragmatism, and the U.S.’s military assertiveness—will shape the path forward. As Putin warned, the world is at a “very dangerous line,” and the absence of concrete action from Russia and China may tip the balance toward further chaos or uneasy stalemate. The stakes are high, not just for Iran but for the global order, where alliances are tested and opportunism thrives amidst uncertainty.

With reporting by Al Jazeera, AP News, BBC, Reuters, and The Wall Street Journal

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