Chinese Eyes, Iranian Missiles: Intelligence Cooperation in the US/Israelâ??Iran War 2026

Description

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The 2026 war between the United States, Israel, and Iran represents one of the most technologically complex conflicts in modern Middle Eastern history. Iranâ??s ability to conduct precise missile and drone strikes against Israeli cities and American military bases surprised many military observers. The level of accuracy demonstrated in these operations suggests the presence of sophisticated targeting systems, satellite navigation, and real-time intelligence networks. Although Iran has developed an indigenous missile program over the past three decades, analysts increasingly argue that its recent operational success cannot be explained solely through domestic technological capacity. Instead, a growing body of evidence suggests that China has played a crucial role in providing intelligence support, satellite navigation, radar systems, and electronic warfare technologies that enhance Iranâ??s targeting capabilities.

Chinaâ??s partnership with Iran is rooted in broader geopolitical interests. Iran is a key partner in Chinaâ??s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a major energy supplier, and an important strategic counterweight to U.S. influence in the Middle East. Through technological cooperationâ??particularly in space-based intelligence and navigation systemsâ??China may be enabling Iran to conduct precision warfare against U.S. and Israeli assets while avoiding direct military involvement.

This essay examines the emerging intelligence partnership between China and Iran during the ongoing conflict. It explores four key dimensions of this cooperation: satellite intelligence, BeiDou navigation systems, advanced radar networks, and electronic warfare capabilities. The analysis also considers the broader strategic implications for the balance of power in the Middle East and for great-power competition between China and the United States.

Strategic Foundations of Chinaâ??Iran Military Cooperation:

The strategic partnership between China and Iran has evolved significantly over the past two decades, shaped by converging geopolitical interests, economic interdependence, and shared concerns about U.S. influence in the Middle East. Both countries view their relationship not merely as a bilateral cooperation framework but as part of a broader effort to reshape regional and global power dynamics. A major milestone in this partnership was the signing of the 25-year Chinaâ??Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in 2021, which laid the foundation for long-term collaboration in areas such as energy, infrastructure, security, and technological development. The agreement reportedly envisages extensive Chinese investment in Iranâ??s economy while expanding cooperation in strategic sectors, including telecommunications, transportation networks, and defence-related technologies.

Iranâ??s geopolitical location makes it a highly valuable partner for Beijing. Positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East, Iran serves as a critical node in Chinaâ??s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The country provides land and maritime routes linking East Asia with Europe and the Mediterranean while also controlling access to the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the worldâ??s oil supply passes. For Chinaâ??the worldâ??s largest importer of energyâ??maintaining stable relations with Tehran is essential for securing long-term oil supplies and ensuring uninterrupted maritime trade routes. Iran has remained one of Chinaâ??s key energy partners despite Western sanctions, with Chinese refineries continuing to import significant volumes of Iranian crude oil through indirect channels.

Beyond economic cooperation, the relationship has gradually expanded into the military and technological domains. Over the past decade, China and Iran have increased collaboration in missile technology development, satellite and space cooperation, intelligence sharing, cybersecurity, and electronic warfare. Joint military exercises between China, Iran, and Russia in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman since 2019 have further demonstrated a growing level of strategic coordination. These exercises not only signal a shared interest in countering Western naval dominance but also provide opportunities for operational learning and technological exchange.

From Chinaâ??s perspective, cooperation with Iran also offers an opportunity to observe and assess Western military capabilities in real operational environments. Conflicts involving Iran and its regional adversaries allow Chinese strategists to collect valuable insights into the performance of U.S. missile defence systems, stealth aircraft, precision strike capabilities, and electronic warfare operations. Such observations are particularly valuable for the Peopleâ??s Liberation Army (PLA), which is rapidly modernising its own military technologies in preparation for potential future conflicts with technologically advanced adversaries.

For Iran, the partnership offers access to advanced technologies that would otherwise be difficult to obtain due to decades of international sanctions. Chinese assistance in areas such as satellite surveillance, navigation systems, radar technologies, and cyber capabilities has the potential to significantly enhance Iranâ??s military effectiveness. These technologies improve the precision of Iranian missile systems, strengthen its air defence networks, and expand its ability to monitor regional military activities.

In this sense, the Chinaâ??Iran relationship functions as a form of strategic symbiosis. Iran benefits from access to advanced technological capabilities and intelligence networks that enhance its operational effectiveness, while China gains a strategically positioned partner that provides energy security, geopolitical leverage in the Middle East, and opportunities to study Western military systems in real-world conditions. As great-power competition intensifies, this partnership is likely to become increasingly important for both countries, shaping the evolving strategic landscape of the Middle East and the broader international system.

Chinese Satellite Intelligence and the Iranian Targeting Network:

Modern warfare increasingly depends on space-based intelligence systems that enable militaries to observe, track, and strike targets with unprecedented accuracy. Satellites provide several critical capabilities for modern military operations, including high-resolution imagery, electronic signals intelligence (SIGINT), radar mapping, and the real-time tracking of military assets. These technologies form the backbone of contemporary intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) networks, allowing states to monitor adversary movements and coordinate precision strikes across vast distances. In conflicts involving long-range missiles and drones, satellite intelligence often serves as the first link in the operational â??kill chain,â?• identifying targets and guiding weapons toward them.

Iranâ??s indigenous space program has made gradual progress over the past decade, but its capabilities remain relatively limited compared with those of major space powers. The country has launched several military and reconnaissance satellites, including the **Noor series**, operated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These satellites provide basic Earth-observation capabilities that allow Iran to monitor regional developments, but they lack the persistent global coverage and advanced sensing technologies required for continuous battlefield surveillance. As a result, Iranâ??s domestic satellite infrastructure alone is unlikely to provide the level of targeting precision demonstrated in recent missile and drone operations.

China, by contrast, possesses one of the worldâ??s most extensive and technologically advanced satellite networks. Chinese constellations such as the **Yaogan reconnaissance satellites** and the **Jilin-1 commercial imaging network** are capable of providing frequent high-resolution imagery and

synthetic aperture radar (SAR) observations across large parts of the globe. These systems can detect and monitor military infrastructure, track naval movements, and generate detailed geospatial maps of potential targets. Analysts argue that access to such satellite data could significantly enhance Iranâ??s targeting capabilities by enabling more precise identification of airbases, ports, radar stations, and logistical hubs throughout the Middle East.

According to several defence analyses, Chinese satellite systems are capable of providing near-continuous surveillance through a combination of optical, radar, and infrared sensors. This capability allows for real-time updates on troop movements, ship deployments, and aircraft activity, dramatically improving situational awareness during military operations. Within such a framework, a modern operational â??kill chainâ?• emerges in which **Chinese satellites provide the surveillance and targeting intelligence, while Iranian missiles and drones execute** the kinetic strike**.**

The integration of space-based intelligence with missile forces therefore represents a significant transformation in regional warfare. By leveraging advanced satellite data, Iran can compensate for technological limitations in its domestic surveillance infrastructure and conduct more accurate long-range strikes against strategic targets across the region.

Iranâ??s Missile Guidance Systems

Missile System	Type/Range	Guidance System Confirmed by Search Results
Fateh-110	Short-Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM)	Western analysts believe it uses GNSS. Iranian state media mentions inertial & electro-optical terminal guidance for some variants. The Zolfaghar variant is believed to use commercial GNSS.
Fath-360	Short-Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM)	Inertial navigation system (INS) **and satellite navigation (GNSS)**.
Emad	Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM)	Likely integrates **inertial and satellite navigation systems** with a guided re-entry vehicle.
Ghadr-110	Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM)	**Inertial guidance and Global Positioning System** (GPS).

Qasem Basir	Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM)	**Inertial Navigation System** (INS) independent of GPS, with an optical-electronic homing system.

BeiDou Navigation System and Precision Missile Guidance:

One of the most significant technological contributions China may provide to Iran is access to the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS), Chinaâ??s global satellite navigation and positioning network. BeiDou functions in a manner similar to the United Statesâ?? Global Positioning System (GPS) and the European Unionâ??s Galileo system, offering precise positioning, navigation, and timing services for both civilian and military users. The system reached full global operational capability in 2020 and now consists of a constellation of more than thirty satellites providing worldwide coverage. In military applications, encrypted BeiDou signals can deliver extremely accurate positional dataâ??sometimes within meter-level or even centimetre-level precision under optimal conditionsâ??thereby significantly enhancing the targeting capabilities of modern missile and drone systems.

For Iran, access to an alternative satellite navigation infrastructure carries considerable strategic importance. For many years, Iranian missile systems relied on inertial navigation systems supplemented by publicly available GPS signals. However, GPS signals remain controlled by the United States and can potentially be degraded or denied during military conflicts. Consequently, Iranian defence planners have sought alternative navigation systems that would reduce dependence on Western-controlled technologies. Recent analyses suggest that Iran has increasingly integrated BeiDou navigation services into parts of its military architecture, allowing its weapons systems to rely on Chinese satellite signals rather than U.S.-controlled GPS networks.

This transition provides several operational advantages. First, BeiDouâ??s encrypted military signals are considered more resistant to Western electronic warfare and jamming efforts, improving reliability in contested electromagnetic environments. Second, BeiDou offers a unique short-message communication capability, allowing users to transmit encrypted data through satellite links even when conventional communications networks are disrupted during wartime. This feature can facilitate coordination between missile units, command centres, and reconnaissance platforms. Third, satellite-based navigation dramatically improves the accuracy of precision strike systems. Iranian missiles such as the Fateh-110, Fath-360, and longer-range systems including the Emad and Ghadr ballistic missiles are believed to employ guidance systems that combine Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) signals with inertial navigation technologies.

Such hybrid guidance systems enable missiles to maintain stable flight trajectories during the midcourse phase while correcting their path during the terminal phase of flight using satellite navigation updates. As a result, the circular error probable (CEP)â??a measure of missile accuracyâ??can be significantly reduced. The integration of BeiDou into Iranâ??s missile architecture therefore represents a major technological upgrade, enabling Iranian forces to conduct more precise long-range strikes against strategic targets such as military bases, air defence installations, and logistical infrastructure across the region.

Chinese Radar Systems and Air Defence Support:

In addition to satellite intelligence and navigation systems, China may also contribute to Iranâ??s military capabilities through the provision of advanced radar technologies and air defence support. Radar systems form a critical component of modern integrated air defence networks because they enable states to detect, track, and intercept hostile aircraft, missiles, and drones before they reach their targets. For Iran, strengthening radar coverage has long been a strategic priority, particularly in light of repeated Israeli air strikes in Syria and the presence of advanced U.S. airpower in the Persian Gulf region. Cooperation with China in radar technology therefore offers Tehran an opportunity to improve its early warning capabilities and reduce the vulnerability of its military infrastructure.

One system frequently discussed in defence analyses is the YLC-8B anti-stealth radar, a Chinese very-high-frequency (VHF) radar designed to detect low-observable aircraft. Stealth aircraft such as the U.S. F-35 Lightning II and F-22 Raptor rely on radar-absorbing materials and specific airframe designs to reduce their visibility to conventional radar systems operating in higher frequency bands. VHF radars, however, can partially counter these stealth features by detecting larger electromagnetic signatures produced by aircraft at lower frequencies. Although such systems may not provide the same targeting precision as conventional fire-control radars, they can generate early warning alerts that cue other radar systems and air defence batteries. Reports indicate that Iran has explored or deployed Chinese radar technologies capable of detecting stealth aircraft and integrating radar data into its broader air defence architecture.

These radar systems serve several strategic functions within Iranâ??s defence network. First, they enhance early warning capabilities by detecting incoming air strikes at longer distances. Second, they improve the detection of stealth aircraft, reducing the operational advantages enjoyed by advanced Western fighter jets. Third, modern radar systems enable improved tracking of cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, which have become increasingly common in contemporary warfare. Finally, radar networks allow for the integration of missile defence systems, ensuring that detected targets can be rapidly engaged by surface-to-air missile batteries.

China has also developed advanced long-range air defence systems such as the HQ-9B surface-to-air missile system, which offers interception ranges comparable to Russiaâ??s S-300 or S-400 systems. If integrated with modern radar networks and supported by satellite-based surveillance, such systems could significantly strengthen Iranâ??s ability to construct a multi-layered air defence architecture. The combination of radar coverage, missile defence capabilities, and external intelligence inputs would enable Iran to detect, track, and respond more effectively to U.S. and Israeli military operations across the region.

Electronic Warfare and Cyber Targeting Networks:

Electronic warfare has become a central component of modern military operations, particularly in conflicts involving advanced missile systems, drones, and network-centric warfare. Electronic warfare refers to the use of electromagnetic spectrum operations to detect, intercept, disrupt, or manipulate an adversaryâ??s communications, radar systems, and navigation technologies. In contemporary conflicts, dominance in the electromagnetic spectrum can significantly influence battlefield outcomes because it affects command and control, targeting accuracy, and the effectiveness of defensive systems. Both China and Iran have invested heavily in developing electronic warfare capabilities, recognising that technological superiority in this domain can offset conventional military disadvantages.

China is widely regarded as one of the worldâ??s leading powers in electronic warfare and cyber operations. The Peopleâ??s Liberation Army (PLA), particularly through its Strategic Support Force, has developed advanced capabilities in signal intelligence, cyber operations, and electronic countermeasures designed to disrupt adversary command networks and surveillance systems. Iran has similarly developed its own electronic warfare infrastructure, particularly after decades of sanctions forced Tehran to rely on indigenous innovation and asymmetric strategies. Increasingly, analysts suggest that Iran has integrated electronic warfare techniques into its missile targeting and reconnaissance architecture.

These capabilities involve a combination of communications interception, signal intelligence collection, and cyber-enabled targeting networks that gather real-time information about enemy activities. By intercepting communications and monitoring electronic emissions, Iranian forces can identify the location of radar installations, air defence systems, or military bases. In some cases, telecommunications networks and digital infrastructure may also provide geolocation data that can support missile targeting and operational planning. Such networks allow targeting information to be transmitted quickly between reconnaissance units, command centres, and missile launch platforms.

Chinese technological expertise may further strengthen these capabilities. Advanced electronic warfare support could help Iran resist Western GPS jamming efforts, protect missile guidance signals from

interference, and disrupt enemy radar systems during military operations. By operating effectively within a contested electromagnetic environment, Iranian forces are better able to coordinate missile launches and drone operations despite attempts by U.S. and Israeli forces to degrade their communications and navigation systems. As a result, electronic warfare and cyber targeting networks have become critical elements of Iranâ??s evolving military strategy, complicating defensive operations and increasing the effectiveness of its precision strike capabilities.

Strategic Implications for the Middle East and Global Power Politics:

The emerging intelligence and technological cooperation between China and Iran carry significant implications for both regional security in the Middle East and the broader dynamics of global power politics. At the most fundamental level, this partnership illustrates how contemporary warfare increasingly depends on information dominance rather than purely kinetic military power. In modern conflicts, the ability to gather, process, and exploit real-time intelligenceâ??through satellites, navigation systems, cyber networks, and electronic warfareâ??can be as decisive as the number of missiles or aircraft deployed. By integrating external intelligence support into its military operations, Iran can enhance the precision and effectiveness of its missile and drone strikes despite facing technologically superior adversaries.

Second, the growing cooperation highlights how major powers can shape conflicts indirectly through technological assistance rather than direct military intervention. China has carefully avoided direct involvement in Middle Eastern military confrontations, yet the provision of satellite data, navigation infrastructure, and electronic warfare expertise allows China to influence the strategic balance without deploying its own forces. Such indirect support enables China to strengthen a key regional partner while minimizing the risks associated with direct confrontation with the United States. In this sense, technological cooperation functions as a form of strategic leverage that allows China to expand its geopolitical influence in the region.

Chinaâ??s support also enables Iran to challenge U.S. and Israeli military superiority in new ways. Although Iran lacks the conventional military capabilities of these states, access to advanced intelligence networks and navigation technologies can partially offset this imbalance. Precision targeting supported by satellite data, improved missile guidance systems, and enhanced electronic warfare capabilities allow Iranian forces to conduct more effective strikes against high-value military targets.

Third, the ongoing conflict provides China with an important opportunity to observe and analyse U.S. and Israeli military technologies in real combat environments. Data gathered from such conflicts can provide valuable insights into the operational performance of missile defence systems, stealth aircraft,

electronic warfare systems, and network-centric warfare capabilities. These observations may inform future Chinese military planning, particularly in scenarios involving technologically advanced adversaries.

Finally, the deepening technological partnership between China and Iran reflects a broader shift toward a multipolar international system, where regional conflicts increasingly intersect with great-power competition. As global power structures evolve, technological alliances and intelligence-sharing networks are likely to play an increasingly important role in shaping the balance of power across key geopolitical regions.

Table: Strategic Agreements and Frameworks Between China and Iran

Agreement / Framework	Year	Key Features
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (25â??year plan)	2021 (signed); reaffirmed 2025	Longâ??term cooperation in energy, infrastructure, technology, and security; emphasized in April 2025 Beijing consultations
Draft 25â??year Cooperation Framework	2020â??2021	Largeâ??scale investment proposals; longâ??term supply guarantees; classified implementation details
Military & Security Coordination (Cyber/EW/Radar)	2025â??2026	Strengthening Iranian digital sovereignty; Chinese MSS involvement; antiâ??stealth radar deployment
Defense Diplomatic Engagement (Naval & Joint Drills)	2023â??2026	Joint naval exercises; intelligence coordination; strategic signaling in multilateral platforms
Advanced Weapons & Airâ??Defense Interests	2025	Iranian pursuit of HQâ??9, Chinese antiâ??stealth radars, and deepâ??strike missile technology

Conclusion:

The 2026 war involving the United States, Israel, and Iran illustrates an evolving pattern of indirect great-power involvement in regional conflicts. While Iran remains, the primary military actor confronting U.S. and Israeli forces on the battlefield, Chinaâ??s technological and intelligence support appears to play an important enabling role in strengthening Tehranâ??s operational effectiveness. Access to

advanced satellite intelligence, the BeiDou navigation system, modern radar technologies, and electronic warfare expertise can significantly enhance Iranâ??s ability to conduct more precise missile, and drone strikes while improving its capacity to defend against sophisticated air campaigns.

This cooperation reflects a broader transformation in warfare, where success increasingly depends on integrated technological ecosystems rather than individual weapons platforms. Intelligence networks, space-based surveillance, navigation systems, and cyber capabilities now operate together to create a comprehensive operational architecture that supports modern precision warfare. In this context, technological partnerships between states can dramatically alter the strategic balance even when one partner is not directly involved in combat operations.

For the United States and its regional allies, the conflict offers an important strategic lesson. Future wars may not necessarily involve direct military confrontation between great powers; instead, they may unfold through indirect competition, proxy conflicts, and technological support to regional actors. Understanding the evolving intelligence and technological cooperation between China and Iran is therefore essential for analysing the changing balance of power in the Middle East and the wider trajectory of global strategic competition in the twenty-first century.

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