



The war of signals: How Russia and China help Iran see the battlefield

Electronic warfare and intelligence sharing are eroding decades of US-Israeli dominance in the Gulf.



Intelligence is the decisive currency, writes Al-Azzawi [AFP]



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When three senior American officials told The Washington Post that Russia was providing Iran with sensitive intelligence, including the precise locations of US warships and aircraft operating across the Middle East, they revealed more than a tactical alliance. They exposed the architecture of a new kind of war. A war without front lines. A war fought not with

tanks or missiles, but with radar beams, satellite feeds and encrypted coordinates. In the Gulf today, the battlefield is the electromagnetic spectrum, and both sides are fighting, above all else, to blind the other.

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly denied that Moscow was sharing such intelligence with Iran during a call with US President Donald Trump. The denial, however, changes little. Russia has received Iranian drones and munitions for its war in Ukraine. It has watched the US supply Ukraine with targeting intelligence used to strike Russian positions, including, reportedly, locations near Putin's residences. Moscow's calculus is not hard to read. Intelligence is a currency. Putin is simply spending it.

Signals as weapons

As former CIA officer Bruce Riedel once observed, in modern warfare, coordinates are often more valuable than bullets. Whoever knows where the enemy is wins. That axiom is now playing out in real time across the Gulf. Russia's intelligence pipeline has allowed Iran to locate US and Israeli assets with a precision Tehran could not achieve alone. Iran operates only a limited constellation of military reconnaissance satellites — wholly insufficient for tracking fast-moving naval assets across open water. Russia does not share that limitation. Its advanced overhead surveillance network, including the Kanopus-V satellite — re-designated “Khayyam” upon transfer to Iranian operational use — provides Tehran with round-the-clock optical and radar imagery. For Iran, this is not a supplement to its military capability. It is the nervous system of its precision-strike doctrine.

The drone that slammed into a US military facility in Kuwait, killing six American service members, did not find its target by accident. Pentagon officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, noted that several recent Iranian strikes hit facilities directly associated with US operations — targets whose coordinates do not appear on any public map. The sourcing is not hard to trace.

China's silent hand

Beijing's role is quieter. But it is no less consequential. China has spent years reshaping Iran's electronic warfare landscape — exporting advanced radar systems, transitioning Iranian military navigation from US GPS to China's encrypted BeiDou-3 constellation, and drawing on its expanding satellite network to support signals intelligence and terrain mapping for Iranian forces. Retired Israeli air force Brigadier-General Amos Yadlin once

put it plainly: every second counts. If Iran can shave minutes off detection and targeting, it changes the balance in the skies. China has done more than shave minutes. It has reshaped the entire kill chain.

The YLC-8B anti-stealth radar — a Chinese-supplied UHF-band system — uses low-frequency waves designed to reduce the effectiveness of radar-absorbent coatings on US stealth aircraft. The B-21 Raider and the F-35C were engineered to be invisible. Against a YLC-8B, they are considerably less so. And now, Reuters reports that Iran is nearing a deal to acquire 50 CM-302 supersonic antiship missiles — the export variant of China’s YJ-12, capable of travelling at Mach 3 and sea-skimming at altitudes that compress a ship’s reaction window to seconds. Military analysts call them “carrier killers”. The USS Abraham Lincoln and USS Gerald R Ford are currently operating within their engagement envelope.

US-Israeli countermoves

The US and Israel are not passive. They are hunting. US and Israeli intelligence teams have been tracking Iranian leadership movements, mapping Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) command nodes, and — in the opening phase of Operations Roaring Lion and Epic Fury — destroying Iranian radar infrastructure with a speed and precision that exposed how brittle Tehran’s defensive integration actually was. As former Israeli air force commander Major-General Eitan Ben-Eliyahu has noted, destroying a radar is not just about knocking out a machine; it blinds the enemy. In the war’s first hours, they erased many of them.

Yet the IRGC’s spokesman, Ali Mohammad Naeini, claimed that Iran had destroyed nearly 10 advanced US radar systems across the region — a statement that, if even partially accurate, offers a partial explanation for how Iranian missiles reached targets in Israel, the Gulf capitals and beyond. US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, asked directly about Russia’s intelligence assistance on CBS’s 60 Minutes, answered with studied brevity: “We’re tracking everything.” That is either a reassurance or a warning. Possibly both.

A new balance of power

For decades, the Gulf was a theatre of overwhelming US-Israeli technological dominance. That dominance has not vanished. But it has been eroded, quietly and deliberately, by

years of Chinese hardware transfers and Russian intelligence sharing. As a senior US military commander recently acknowledged, signals are the new bullets: whoever controls the spectrum controls the fight. Neither side controls it decisively. That, in itself, is a profound shift.

This struggle also has precedent, though not a comforting one. In 1991, coalition forces jammed Iraqi radar networks and misled Saddam Hussein's defences so thoroughly that US aircraft struck with near-impunity. Electronic countermeasures were decisive. Baghdad fought blindly, and it lost. Iran has studied that war closely for three decades. It has studied every subsequent conflict in which a technologically inferior force was dismantled from the air. Russia's satellite feeds and China's radar architecture are, in part, Iran's answer to those lessons. Tehran is determined not to become the next Baghdad.

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There is a deeper strategic logic at work that goes beyond Iran's immediate survival. China is not arming Tehran out of ideological solidarity. It is treating the conflict as a live-fire laboratory. Every potential CM-302 engagement against a US carrier strike group can generate targeting and intercept data that Beijing's military planners will study exhaustively, refining doctrine for the one scenario China actually cares about: Taiwan. Russia, meanwhile, has watched Western sanctions and Ukrainian targeting intelligence hollow out its own military credibility. Enabling Iran to bleed US forces and drain their interceptor stocks in the Gulf is not merely transactional. It is a form of strategic debt collection.

The implications are not abstract. The Gulf is becoming the first theatre where electronic warfare may prove more decisive than conventional firepower. Alliances are being redrawn not by troop deployments or treaty signings, but by intelligence flows and satellite constellations. Russia and China are not sending divisions to Tehran's aid. They are doing something more durable: they are teaching Iran how to see.

Radar beams are now as lethal as missiles. Intelligence is the decisive currency. In this signals war, Iran is fighting for parity it has never had — and for the first time, it has partners capable of providing it. For the US and Israel, the challenge is no longer simply to outgun Tehran. It is to ensure that when the trigger is pulled, Iran is the one firing blind.

The question is no longer whether the Gulf will erupt. It already has. The question is who will be able to see clearly when the smoke finally lifts.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.



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