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Ad Hoc or Enduring? A Dynamic Taxonomy of Strategic Partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract

This article advances a dynamic taxonomy for analyzing Strategic Partnerships (SPs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), challenging the prevailing tendency to treat them as a generic category. It distinguishes between two intermediary forms of alignment—*hyper-transactionalism* and *semi-alliance*—and classifies SPs along two analytical dimensions: the presence or absence of strategic intent and their primary functional orientation, whether economic or security-related. A central finding of the study is the increasing prominence of air and space cooperation within MENA-based SPs. These domains function as key vectors through which global powers project asymmetric influence while enabling regional states to bypass technological constraints and expedite access to advanced capabilities such as UAVs, satellite systems, and precision-guided technologies. Drawing on case studies of Russian and Chinese SPs in the region, the article demonstrates that air and space collaboration acts as a strategic force multiplier. The proposed taxonomy provides scholars and policymakers with

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a more nuanced analytical framework for assessing the depth, durability, and transformative potential of emerging alignments within MENA's swiftly evolving security architecture.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Alliance, Transactionalism, Middle East, Africa, MENA, Russia, China, Aerospace Power, Strategic Intent

Introduction

Strategic partnerships (SPs) have become a defining instrument of post-Cold War diplomacy, yet their meaning and strategic significance remain poorly understood. More than 200 SPs exist globally, based on formal agreements, official declarations, or scholarly assessments (Pan & Michalski, 2019; Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). These arrangements vary widely in structure, depth, and intent. Nowhere is this ambiguity more pronounced than in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where at least 40 SP frameworks were signed between global powers and regional states between 2000 and 2025—a sharp increase over previous decades with a marked acceleration beginning in the early 2010s (Fulton, 2019; Guzansky, 2022; Conley et al., 2023; Heimann et al., 2024).

Air and space cooperation has emerged as a critical dimension of many of these partnerships. This includes the transfer and co-production of combat and surveillance platforms, joint research and development, technology transfers, basing rights, overflight arrangements, and military exercises. In the space sector, SPs have enabled satellite launches, the development of domestic manufacturing capacity, and advances in communications, remote sensing, and missile guidance systems. For example, these dynamics are particularly visible in the Russia-Iran strategic partnership, especially since the summer of 2022, which has enabled Iran to expand its capabilities in air, space, and electronic warfare thanks to Russian support, including satellite launches and assistance with GPS jamming. However, while this cooperation bolstered Iran's technical capabilities, it ultimately proved insufficient to shield Iran from the coordinated strikes by Israel and the United States in June 2025, highlighting the limitations of such support in delivering effective deterrence or defense. Similarly, China's partnership with Egypt blends economic ties with strategic technology transfers, as demonstrated by the 2023 MisrSat-2 launch and the delivery of Wing Loong Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).

Despite their growing importance, SPs are often treated as a generic category, blurring important differences in design, depth, and purpose. Some are formalized and institutionalized, functioning as structured platforms for sustained cooperation. Others remain largely declarative, signaling intent

without operational mechanisms. In some cases, the "strategic partnership" label is applied rhetorically, with no formal basis. Internal hierarchies—such as "basic," "comprehensive," or "in-depth" partnerships—further complicate the landscape, while interpretation often hinges on how the parties frame the relationship. Functional orientation adds another layer of complexity: some SPs prioritize defense and security cooperation, while others focus on economic and technological exchange. These variations are rarely analyzed systematically, contributing to analytical ambiguity.

This conceptual imprecision reflects a larger theoretical gap. SPs occupy an intermediate space between formal alliances and short-term transactional arrangements. They usually lack binding defense commitments but are more durable and multidimensional than ad hoc deals. Yet this "middle ground" of interstate alignments remains under-theorized. While International Relations (IR) scholarship has extensively explored alliances and transactional alignments, it has yet to offer a coherent framework for understanding the increasing number of partnerships that fall between these two poles.

This article addresses these gaps by introducing a dynamic taxonomy of SPs. It argues that SPs can be more accurately understood along two key dimensions: the *strategic intent* (mainly presence or absence of) underpinning the relationship and the SP's primary functional orientation—whether economic or security-based. *Strategic intent* is defined here as the sustained mutual commitment of both parties to deepen and institutionalize their cooperation over time. Although underdeveloped in existing IR frameworks, strategic intent provides a meaningful criterion for distinguishing between temporary alignments and more enduring, quasi-allied relationships.

This article proposes a taxonomy that distinguishes between two main forms of SPs: *hyper-transactional relationships* and *semi-alliances*. *Hyper-transactional* refers to partnerships rooted in pragmatic quid pro quo exchanges across multiple domains (e.g., defense, technology, energy), often stable over time but lacking formal commitments or normative alignment. These relationships are not narrow or fleeting; rather, they are expansive in scope yet limited in institutional depth and strategic intent. In contrast, *semi-alliances* involve deeper coordination and a shared intent to formalize ties.[2] By differentiating these often-conflated forms of SPs, the proposed framework clarifies levels of strategic commitment and helps assess partnership trajectories. It also accounts for functional orientation—

[2] The term *hyper-transactional* may suggest, at first glance, a weaker or more narrowly defined relationship. However, as used here, it designates a broad and often enduring form of transactionalism, involving multifaceted cooperation that remains fundamentally interest-based and non-institutionalized. Unlike fleeting tactical alignments, hyper-transactional partnerships are stable but deliberately avoid deeper alignment or normative convergence.

security versus economic-technological—each with distinct implications. This approach contributes to IR debates on strategic alignment and responds to recent scholarly calls for more flexible, phase-based models of interstate cooperation (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024).

Empirically, the article focuses on Russia's and China's SPs in the MENA region since the early 2010s, with particular attention to developments in the air and space sectors. Our findings show that these domains have emerged as key vectors of strategic engagement in MENA, enabling rapid technological diffusion and capability enhancement—even in the absence of formal defense obligations.

This article thus pursues two core objectives. First, it introduces a new taxonomy designed to capture the variation in commitment and strategic depth that characterizes contemporary SPs. Second, it analyzes the role of air and space cooperation as a catalytic domain within these evolving relationships. By situating SPs along a continuum from hyper-transactionalism to semi-alliance—determined by the presence or absence of strategic intent—and by emphasizing the growing relevance of the air and space domains, the article suggests an analytical framework for understanding the nature, evolution, and strategic impact of SPs in the MENA region and beyond.

Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

The post–Cold War era has seen the emergence of a growing number of interstate relationships that fall between traditional alliances and ad hoc transactional engagements. This "middle space" of strategic alignment has expanded in tandem with two global trends: the erosion of Cold-War-era alliance structures, often described as a "post-alliance era," and the increasing prevalence of transactionalism in statecraft.

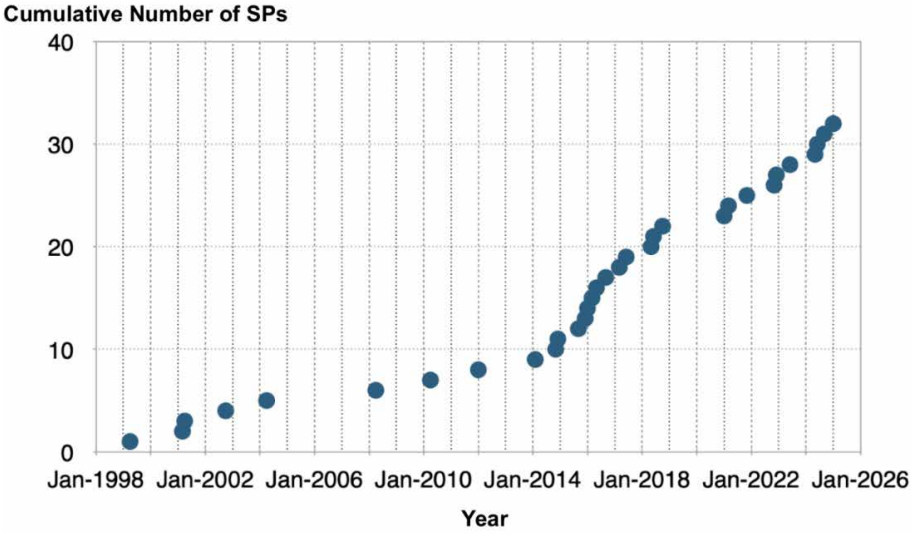
Since the late 1990s, alternative diplomatic frameworks have gained prominence. These arrangements often fall short of formal alliances but entail more structured cooperation than one-off deals or narrowly issue-based exchanges do. They may involve recurring defense coordination, joint political dialogue, institutional frameworks, or expectations of support in times of crisis, whether formal or informal (Saxi, 2019). Contemporary security cooperation thus reflects a more flexible and layered spectrum of relationships, which includes these intermediary forms alongside enduring alliances and temporary alignments (Kinne, 2018).

Efforts to conceptualize this intermediary space began in the 1990s as scholars sought to define "security alignments" that entailed more structured collaboration than ad hoc transactional relationships, though fell short of formal alliances.

This emerging literature challenged the rigid dichotomy between alliances and transactional relations, instead framing them as different "stages" or "tiers" within a broader, multi-phase spectrum of security alignments (Snyder, 1997, p. 123; Adler & Barnett, 1998). Expanding on this multi-tiered framework, Wilkins (2012) defined alignment as a "state of shared agreement or accord on one or more significant issues" (p. 56), with formal alliances positioned at the far end of the spectrum as its most binding and institutionalized form.

Strategic partnerships, as a distinctive category within this spectrum, have proliferated in recent decades in the MENA region (Figure 1). Since the 1993 China-Brazil and the 1994 U.S.-Russia partnerships (often cited as the first formal SPs) this model has expanded globally. However, SPs remain conceptually ambiguous. They vary greatly in scope and form: some are highly institutionalized, others entirely declarative; some involve defense cooperation, while others are limited to economic or technological coordination. What unites them is their positioning between one-off transactions and treaty-bound alliances, and their potential to evolve in either direction (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Lanoszka, 2022).

Figure 1: Growth of Russia's and China's SPs in MENA



The motivations behind SPs are similarly diverse. Middle powers often use them to boost regional or global status, enhance bargaining power, or hedge against uncertainty. Major powers, including both revisionist and status quo actors, leverage SPs to shape the international order, counterbalance rivals, increase strategic flexibility, or pursue tactical objectives (Brzezinski, 1997;

Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019, pp. 10–13; Kireeva, 2022). For example, Russia's SPs often privilege military cooperation and arms transfers, whereas China's typically emphasize economic infrastructure and long-term investment (J. Fulton, personal communication, January 12, 2025). Extensive work on China's partnerships with states across the world underscores how Beijing uses SPs to structure layered economic dependencies without necessarily seeking security alignments (Zhongping & Jing, 2014; Mardell, 2024; Seiwert & Soong, 2024).

Another defining feature of SPs is their malleability. Scholars have described this as "constructive ambiguity," which allows states to cooperate without locking themselves into a shared strategic vision (Hoffmann, 1995; Jegen & Mérand, 2014; Haukkala, 2021). Some SPs, such as the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea, even include mutual defense clauses. However, those commitments might serve more as signaling tools than as binding security guarantees, especially given the ambiguous dynamics of Moscow-Pyongyang relations (Naumenko & Saltanov, 2024, pp. 113-115).

Furthermore, not all SPs carry equal strategic weight. Some remain purely symbolic, functioning as diplomatic tools to boost regional or global status (Pan & Michalski, 2019; Haukkala, 2021) or as a trust-building measure to boost bilateral ties despite lingering tensions. Nevertheless, many provide a platform for sustained interaction, enabling cooperation across different domains, either formally or informally (Snyder, 1997; Wilkins, 2012). In the defense and security domains specifically, SPs facilitate recurring defense coordination, intelligence sharing, arms transfers, joint exercises, and military-to-military engagements.

In addition, from an international law perspective, the legal enforceability of SPs remains ambiguous, as it is not clear to what extent they represent legally binding agreements akin to treaties or simply ad hoc non-binding agreements akin to Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). It places them in a legally ambiguous territory, existing somewhere between strictly legally binding agreements and non legally-binding agreements (Posner & Goldsmith, 2003).

This article contributes to the growing literature on SPs by addressing their inner ambiguity and conceptual fluidity. It introduces a dynamic taxonomy designed to capture the evolving nature of SPs and to distinguish between their forms and trajectories. This taxonomic approach aligns with recent scholarly calls to move beyond binary distinctions and toward more flexible, phase-based typologies of international partnerships (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024).

Hyper-Transactionalism, Semi-Alliance and Strategic Intent

What ultimately characterizes SPs, despite their versatility, is their positioning along a continuum between one-off transactions and treaty-bound alliances, as well as their potential to evolve in either direction (Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019; Lanoszka, 2022; Omidi, 2025).

Transactional relationships are characterized by short-term, issue-based, and compartmentalized cooperation, meaning collaboration in one area does not necessarily translate into broader alignment (Stokes, 2018; Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020). On the opposite end, alliances-in-the-making involve deepening security cooperation and institutionalization, even if they do not yet constitute full alliances.

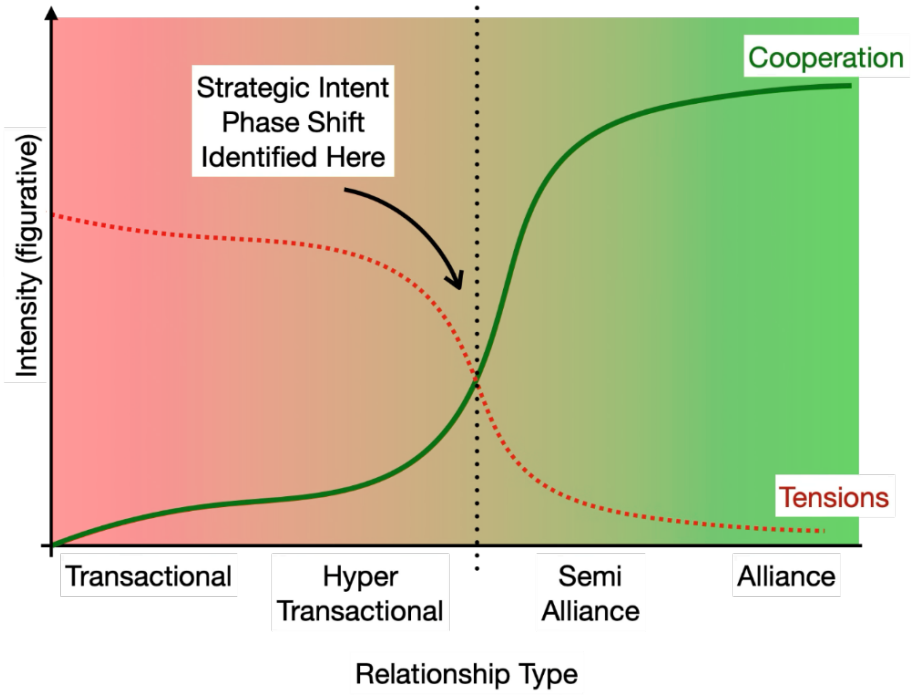
Between these two extremes, we identify two intermediary stages. The first is "hyper-transactionalism," an advanced form of transactionalism in which states engage in broad, multi-domain cooperation while actively minimizing policy divergences to sustain the relationship over time. The second is "semi-alliance," which—though similarly based on extensive cooperation— also introduces a mutually shared intent to institutionalize and formalize the partnership. While the term strategic partnership is often treated as a generic category, it in fact encompasses these two distinct forms of alignment. Hyper-transactionalism reflects the pragmatic, instrumental dimension of SPs: cooperation is wide-ranging but remains non-binding and opportunistic. Semi-alliance, in contrast, represents the aspirational and structured dimension of SPs: although not yet alliances, these partnerships express a shared commitment to deepening, formalizing, and potentially codifying long-term strategic alignment.

Although these two forms of strategic partnership—hyper-transactionalism and semi-alliance—may appear closely related, they are in fact qualitatively distinct in both nature and purpose. We identify *strategic intent* as the critical inflection point that separates them. Defined here as the mutual commitment to deepen, formalize, and institutionalize cooperation over time, strategic intent captures the transition from flexible, pragmatic arrangements to more structured and enduring alignments—potentially codifying a long-term strategic relationship. It thus functions as a conceptual "cliff," marking a discontinuity in the trajectory of the partnership and distinguishing between ad hoc coordination and a semi-alliance that approximates an alliance-in-the-making (Figure 2). Strategic intent is not always explicit or symmetrical. It may be inferred from patterns of behavior such as repeated upgrades, expanded institutional mechanisms, or long-term risk-sharing, and its expression can vary significantly between partners. Identifying intent in real time is particularly challenging. It often becomes fully visible only in retrospect, once a partnership has either solidified

or broken down. To address this difficulty, we propose treating *strategic intent* not as a static declaration, but as a *phase shift*—an observable change in behavior that signals a move toward long-term alignment. These changes may include sustained friction reduction, cost-sharing under domestic and/or international pressure, or the creation of irreversible dependencies. By identifying these inflection points, our framework offers a practical way to assess strategic intent as it emerges, rather than only after the fact.

While difficult to measure directly, the presence—or absence—of strategic intent remains a key indicator of a partnership's trajectory. Hyper-transactional relationships, even when broad in scope, tend to remain flexible and opportunistic, avoiding commitments that bind futures together. Semi-alliances, by contrast, reflect a deliberate effort to align long-term interests and institutionalize shared strategic purpose (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Strategic Intent as a Change of Phase



Economic vs. Security Orientation

A complementary differentiation is the partnership's primary functional domain — whether economic or security-oriented. This dimension serves as an important additional criterion for characterizing, analyzing, and comparing strategic

partnerships. Economically oriented partnerships emphasize trade, investment, infrastructure development, and energy cooperation (Pan & Michalski, 2019; Fulton, 2019). By contrast, security-oriented partnerships focus on defense collaboration, arms transfers, and operational coordination (Notte & Lamson, 2024; Waller et al., 2025). Russia's partnerships with Iran illustrate this security-driven orientation, characterized by joint military operations, arms sales, and growing strategic coordination.

While some partnerships remain predominantly economic or security-focused, this functional orientation is not static. In many cases, it evolves over time—especially as relationships deepen. Partnerships that advance toward semi-alliance or alliance often display increasing integration across both economic and security domains (Table 1). China's evolving relationships with Iran and Egypt exemplify this trajectory, where economic investments initially dominate but gradually lay the groundwork for broader defense cooperation (Table 3, p. 80). In this sense, balanced or dual-track partnerships become more common as strategic intent strengthens, making functional orientation a dynamic indicator rather than a fixed trait.

Table 1: Differentiating Interstate Alignments by Strategic Intent and Functional Orientation

	Transactional Relationship	**Hyper-Transactional Relationship**	**Semi-Alliance**	**Alliance**
Strategic Intent	No	No	Yes Towards formalized commitment	Yes Established, deep commitment
Functional Orientation	Domain specific, ad hoc	Multiple domains, with a dominant driver	*Dual-domain integration (security and economic)*	*Dual-domain integration (security and economic)*

Russia's strategic partnerships in MENA

Russia's strategic partnerships in MENA largely fall within the hyper-transactional and security-oriented quadrant of our framework, reflecting a preference for security cooperation and flexible relationships over alliance commitment. The Kremlin explicitly distinguishes between strategic partnerships (*strategicheskoe partniorstvo*) and alliance-level relations (*soyuznicheskie otnoshenia*), viewing SPs as intermediate forms of alignment (Mikhaylenko, 2023). Notably, Russia has formalized only a limited number of official SPs across MENA: much of its

discourse on SPs remains rhetorical, with few partnerships exhibiting meaningful institutionalization and structured collaboration (Table 2).[3]

Table 2 :Russia's SPs in MENA[4]

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Algeria	Enhanced Strategic Partnership	2001- Strategic Partnership Agreement 2023- upgraded to an Enhanced Strategic Partnership.	2002 – 2014- Procured, S-300PMU-2, Buk-M2, Tor-M2, and Pantsir-S1, as well as upgraded SA-2, SA-3, SA-6, SA-8, and S-125 Pechora. 2020 – Procured 3 Russian MiG-29Ms. 2021 – Procured 2 Russian MiG-29M2s. 2023- Procured 2 Russian Be-200ES amphibious aircraft. 2025 – Satellite footage reveals Su-35 presence at Oum Bouaghi airbase. – Confirms acquisition of Su-57 fighters (deliveries are scheduled to begin in late 2025).
Egypt	Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement	2018 – entered into force in 2021	2014 – Launch of EgyptSat-2 satellite with Russian assistance. 2015 – Signed a contract for 46 Ka-52K helicopters. 2017-2019 – Deliveries of the Ka-52Ks. 2017 – Deliver of MiG-29M2s, Ka-52s, and S-300VMs to Egypt. 2025 – Cancels Su-35 deal with Russia (announced the cancellation in 2022). Acquired in unspecified years: 2 Mi-24s, 24 Mi-17V-5s, and 44 Mi-8Ts, ZSU-23-4s, Tor-M1Es, Buk-M2Es, and S-300VMs air defense systems.

3 Informal cooperation with the UAE and Oman (via a 2018 declaration and the GCC-Russia dialogue, respectively) has not culminated in official SP agreements (World Trade Center Moscow, 2024; Galeev, 2025). Saudi Arabia exemplifies a pragmatic alignment with Russia through the OPEC+ mechanism, without formalizing a strategic partnership.

4 Most data are extracted from Jane's open-source defense intelligence 2001 – 2024 and are listed as references for Table 2, p. 88

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Iran	Strategic Partnership – Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2001- "Treaty on the Basic Elements of Relations and the Principles of Cooperation" 2025- "Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and Iran"	***Russia to Iran:*** Unspecified years: Deliver of IL-76 aircraft (total delivered 15, in service 5 according to Janes, last updated in July 2024). – 2005 – Launch of Sina-1 satellite with Russian assistance. – Since 2022-2023 – Russia has shared with Iran captured Western technologies with Iran, as well as electronic warfare and space capabilities, based on cumulative Syria and Ukraine experience. – 2022 – Launch of Khayyam satellite with Russian assistance. – 2023 – Procurement of 2 Yak-130 jet trainers – 2024 – Launch of Pars-1, Kowsar, and Hodhod satellites from Russian air space. – 2025- Launch of Nahid-2 with Russian assistance. Iranian sources report the purchase of Su-35 fighter jets. ***Iran to Russia:*** Since 2022 – Supply of Mohajer-6, Shahed-129/191, Shahed-131/136 (Geran-1/2), Shahed-238, and Shahed-107 UAVs. Ongoing negotiations for full supply of Iranian ballistic missiles: Ababil CRBMs, Fateh-110 (300-km range) SRBMs, and Zolfaghar (700-km range) SRBMs.

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2002 – Signature of a Strategic Partnership. Upgraded in 2016 to a "Declaration for the Deepening of the Strategic Partnership".	Mostly declarative in nature. Limited air or space cooperation to date; civilian engagement primarily in energy, fisheries, and medical sectors.
UAE	Strategic Partnership	2018	2017 – Attempts to procure Russian Su-35s. 2019 – Signed a contract with Russia to upgrade Pantsir S-1s procured in 2000. According to the 2018 declaration the strategic partnership concentrates mainly on economic and trade cooperation with a focus on bilateral energy interactions

Russia – Iran

Among these partnerships, the Russia-Iran strategic partnership most clearly exemplifies structured "hyper-transactionalism" particularly through intensified cooperation in the air and space domains, through still devoid (at the time of writing) of any conspicuous strategic intent to evolve into a durable alliance.

Originally formalized in 2001 and officially upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2025, the Russia-Iran strategic partnership has enabled expanding defense cooperation, with particularly consequential mutual assistance in the air domain and Russia's support to Iran's space capability development. This encompasses arms transfers, satellite launches, coordinated operations in Syria (until 2024), joint electronic warfare development as well as joint development and production of UAVs (Table 2; Feldman & Rakov, 2021; Waller et al., 2025; Notte & Lamson, 2024). For Russia this represents an unprecedented development, whereby it has for the first time relied on a foreign supplier to compensate for conventional capability shortfalls during wartime.

Yet the deepening of the Russia-Iran relationship has not been driven by the formal SP framework. Rather it is rooted in mutual geopolitical isolation from the West—reflected in their status as the two most heavily sanctioned states—

and from Russia's acute operational needs in Ukraine following the collapse of its initial offensive in summer 2022 and a severe shortage of ammunition. What began in the 1990s as a patron-client relationship has matured into a more pragmatic and integrated partnership, driven by parallel geopolitical marginalization and a shared need to counter Western pressure (Grajewski, 2024). In this context, the 2025 CSP did not mark a substantive "upgrade" of the relationship but rather served to formalize existing cooperation and to signal the seriousness of the Russia-Iran rapprochement (Smagin, 2025). The timing of the upgrade—just days before President Trump's second inauguration in January 2025—further underscores its function as a diplomatic signal of both parties' intent to deepen their alignment (Rakov, 2025).

Despite its expansion in both quantity and quality, the Russia–Iran relationship continues to exhibit the features of a "hyper-transactional" partnership, rather than those of a semi-alliance. While the two countries have broadened their cooperation—including in the energy and infrastructure sectors, such as nuclear power stations and plans for the North–South transport corridor—the relationship remains largely conditional, ad hoc, and constrained by each side's broader strategic calculations and external commitments. The 2025 comprehensive strategic agreement provides a framework for deepening bilateral ties, particularly in the economic sphere, but it does not include mutual defense clauses or any binding security commitments. Article 3, for instance, contains only a pledge not to assist the other party's adversaries in the event of conflict—falling short of an obligation to provide support.[5] Furthermore, Russia's continued reluctance to deliver advanced air defense systems (such as the S-400) or fighter jets (such as the Su-35) to Iran, even after the April and October 2024 Israeli strikes and the June 2025 IAF Operation "Rising Lion", signals a deliberate Russian effort to avoid crossing thresholds that might compromise Moscow's ties with third parties or escalate regional instability.

In fact, the Kremlin's caution in the Iranian case contrasts with its deeper, albeit less militarized, engagements with Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia—where strategic alignment, especially in the economic and energy spheres, may be equally or more consequential in practice. This restraint—alongside moments of tension and mutual recrimination, notably after the failure to preserve the Assad regime in late 2024—underscores the structural limitations

5 "In the event that either Contracting Party is subject to aggression, the other Contracting Party shall not provide any military or other assistance to the aggressor which would contribute to the continued aggression, and shall help to ensure that the differences that have arisen are settled on the basis of the United Nations Charter and other applicable rules of international law." In Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation, January 17, 2025.

of the Russia-Iran partnership. Thus, the current configuration still lacks the strategic intent and binding commitments characteristic of a semi-alliance.[6] .

Russia – Egypt

Russia's 2018 comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) with Egypt offers another prominent example of hyper-transactionalism. This partnership, underpinned by Cairo's goal of external diversification and Moscow's need to maintain its regional Middle Eastern engagement after Crimea's annexation in 2014, reflects a long-standing historical trajectory of military and economic collaboration. Egypt's procurement of S-300V4 air defense systems, MiG-29M fighters, and Ka-52 helicopters tailored for Mistral-class ships reflects the expansion of security cooperation in the air domain (Table 2). Space collaboration has also advanced through satellite projects and launch agreements (Berman & Albo, 2020; Hamzawy & Ji, 2024).

In addition to security objectives, the partnership has also served Russia's interest in projecting power across the Eastern Mediterranean, securing access to critical infrastructure in the Suez Canal zone, and expanding its economic footprint through cooperation on nuclear energy, grain exports, and the development of a joint free trade zone in Port Sudan. Despite the expanding agenda, the relationship has not resulted in joint institutional mechanisms or a formalized strategic vision, thereby reinforcing its categorization as hyper-transactional. The lack of deep commitment in this partnership is illustrated by the following example. In January 2022, Egypt declared its cancellation of its planned purchase of Russian Su-35 fighter jets—originally agreed in 2018 and officially enacted in 2025—due to concerns over the aircraft's radar and electronic warfare systems, and fears of U.S. sanctions under the CAATSA framework (Malyasov, 2022).

Russia – Syria

The case of Russia's relationship with Syria offers a useful comparative lens. On the one hand, Moscow demonstrated strategic commitment to the Assad regime by launching and managing an extensive air campaign beginning in 2015. On the other, the gradual erosion of that commitment in the years preceding the regime's collapse in December 2024 illustrates how Russia's partnerships—even when operationally robust—can remain conditional, reversible, and shaped by shifting geopolitical trade-offs. This precedent is instructive not only for

6 The reality is nuanced and multilayered, though. Although the Russia-Iran CSP does not include a mutual defense clause—primarily due to Iranian reluctance to become entangled in a protracted, Russia-led war—Russia has covertly continued to provide Iran with air defense systems, intelligence sharing, and technical assistance, particularly in response to the Israeli strikes on Iran in October 2024 (Grajewski, 2025).

assessing the limits of the Russia–Iran relationship, but also for understanding a broader structural feature of Russia's regional engagement: even increased military cooperation does not necessarily signal durable commitment.

Russia's SPs in MENA – Summary

Taken together, Russia's SPs in MENA reveal a consistent pattern: structured yet non-committal cooperation, all of which spans across multiple sectors but with a salient defense cooperation component in the air and space domains (Table 2). While the security dimension seems the most salient, these partnerships are also shaped by economic considerations. Arms sales, nuclear energy exports, energy agreements contribute to the transactional calculus and has offered Russia important revenue streams. In parallel, these SPs support Moscow's broader geopolitical strategy of projecting influence and contesting Western dominance by cultivating pressure leverages in the Eastern Mediterranean. Accordingly, Russia's engagement in MENA remains firmly within the hyper-transactional, security-oriented quadrant of our framework and does not demonstrate strategic intent toward alliance-level commitment.

China's strategic partnerships in MENA

China's SPs in MENA reflect a markedly different mode of engagement from that of Russia. Characterized by an emphasis on economic infrastructure and long-term investment (J. Fulton, personal communication, January 12, 2025), China's SPs exhibit a clear economic orientation. Extensive research on China's global partnerships highlights how Beijing leverages SPs to create layered economic dependencies without necessarily pursuing formal security alignments (Zhongping & Jing, 2014; Mardell, 2024; Seiwert & Soong, 2024).

Unlike Russia's more selective SP engagements, China has pursued a region-wide strategic outreach, establishing formal partnerships with nearly every MENA country except Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Table 3).

Table 3: China's SPs with MENA Countries[7]

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Algeria	Strategic Cooperation Agreement	2022	2017- Alcomsat-1 launched with Chinese assistance. 2023 – Procured 2 Chinese Wing Loong UAVs and 5 CH-5 UAVs.
Bahrain	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2024	Global MoU with China National Space Administration (CNSA).
Cyprus	Strategic Partnership	2021	Cooperation mainly through BRI: economy, trade, transport, and exchanges.
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014	2023 – MisrSat-2 launch. 2025 – "Eagles of Civilization" air exercise with China. Procurement of Wing Loong Is (unspecified year).
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016 – Declared 2021- Signed (25-year period)	Procured in an undisclosed year 22 Chinese FT-7Ns. Alleged missile and space tech support. 2015 – Agreement between SaIran and Chinese aerospace firms granted Iran access to BeiDou-2 Navigation Satellite System. 2021: Iran became one of only two foreign states with full BeiDou-2 access (alongside Pakistan); integrated into missiles, UAVs, and military platforms, enhancing precision-strike capabilities.
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015	BRI-related cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and reconstruction.
Israel	Innovative Comprehensive Partnership	2017	Mainly civilian BRI projects. Post-October 7 tension has slowed momentum.
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015	Mainly civilian BRI projects, in particular trade, bilateral visits, cooperations, and infrastructure. Purchased Chinese UAVs (2015), resold (2019) due to quality concerns.
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018	BRI-related cooperation in infrastructure, economy, and law enforcement.

7 Most data are extracted from Jane's open-source defense intelligence from 2001 to 2024 and are listed as references for Table 3, p. 89.

Country	Level	Year Signed	Air and Space Cooperation
Libya	Strategic Partnership	2024	2024 – Wing Loong UAV shipment intercepted in Italy, reportedly bound for the LNA.
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2016	2020- Procured 4 Wing Loong Is. 2023- Procured 3 Wing Loong IIs.
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018	2024- First satellite launched with Chinese assistance.
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014	Focused on BRI trade, energy, tourism, and international cooperation.
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2022	Procured CH-4Bs and Wing Loong Is (undisclosed date). 2017- Procured 15 Wing Loong IIs. Space and BeiDou cooperation underway.
Tunisia	Strategic Partnership	2024	2018 – BeiDou satellite navigation office opened.
Turkey	Strategic Cooperation	2010	2012 – Gokturk-2 satellite launched with Chinese support.
United Arab Emirates	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018	2011 – Procured 18 Wing Loong Is. 2017 – Procured10 Wing Loong IIs. 2023 & 2024 – Joint military exercises in Xinjiang.

As shown in Table 3, China employs a three-tiered classification (general partnership, strategic partnership, and comprehensive strategic partnership) to signal differentiated levels of engagement. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and the UAE hold CSP status, typically reflecting broad, multidimensional cooperation. Other states, including Israel, Jordan, and Morocco, maintain mid-level SPs, while general partnerships remain low-commitment and symbolic.

Another distinguishing feature of China's SP diplomacy is its asymmetrical pace. While the China–Iran CSP was announced in early 2016, its operationalization proceeded slowly—likely due to Beijing's cautious stance following the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump. In contrast, China moved swiftly to sign and implement SPs with Saudi Arabia (2016) and the United Arab Emirates (2018), institutionalizing these ties through bilateral steering committees (Fulton, 2022).

What characterizes Beijing's SP diplomacy in MENA is its highly declarative and deliberately opaque character. In contrast to other regional SPs—most notably the Russian-Iranian CSP, whose full text was made public and contains 47 detailed articles—China and its MENA partners have released only vague statements regarding the establishment of their partnerships. These declarations typically emphasize general rapprochement in the economic domain, particularly in infrastructure and trade.

Beijing's approach thus prioritizes trade, infrastructure, energy, and technological cooperation—advancing economic entanglement while avoiding security entrapment (Seiwert & Soong, 2024; Mardell, 2024). The UAE is illustrative: under a CSP, it has become a central hub in China's Belt and Road Initiative and a key collaborator in space technology, yet it has refrained from entering a defense alignment. Similarly, Egypt's CSP, signed in 2014, has yielded major infrastructure projects and the 2023 launch of MisrSat-2 without evolving into a partnership in the security realm (Fainberg, Fadlon, & Schwarz, 2023). While China has conducted limited arms transfers and engaged in dual-use technology cooperation with Iran, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, these activities remain secondary to its broader economic objectives. Even the 2021 CSP with Iran—though politically consequential—has not translated into a formal security alignment (Fulton, 2019; Fulton, 2022).

Nevertheless, China's expansive and malleable SP diplomacy has served as a vehicle—albeit cautiously—for limited and covert defense cooperation. This cooperation has often occurred through dual-use technological transfers and discreet security assistance that carries strategic implications for regional power balances. China's pattern of dual-use technology transfers enables partner countries to develop military capabilities—particularly in UAVs, space and cyber—that are critical to future battlefields (Table 2). For example, China has capitalized on the niche unmanned systems market, where it has held a comparative advantage over the United States and Russia (Seiwert & Soong, 2024), with Chinese drones and anti-drone systems exported to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan.[8]

[8] Chinese UAV platforms have been especially valued in the Gulf for their compatibility with existing Western systems, avoiding interoperability challenges. For example, Saudi and Emirati air forces have used Chinese drones primarily for surveillance and reconnaissance without disrupting operations alongside U.S. technologies.

Discussion

Russia's vs. China's SP Diplomacy in MENA

Our findings indicate that Russia's and China's respective SP approaches in the MENA region display significant contrasts.

Russia faces significant resource limitations compared to China, as it possesses a narrower array of goods and services to offer MENA countries. Its offerings are largely confined to military equipment transfers, energy and nuclear cooperation, and select infrastructure projects. These constraints have become more acute since the onset of the war in Ukraine, potentially intensifying Moscow's reliance on defense and security cooperation. Such partnerships are seen by regional actors as a means of gaining a technological or strategic edge, while for Russia, they represent a cost-effective way to maximize influence through limited investment. Russia's strategic engagements in MENA remain highly transactional and non-committal. While Moscow participates in broader multilateral frameworks such as OPEC+, which it helped establish in 2016 alongside Saudi Arabia, this cooperation is primarily aimed at managing global energy markets rather than building durable regional alignments. Russia's partnerships in MENA are few in number and largely bilateral, focused on short- to mid-term but geopolitically vital objectives: maintaining oil revenues, securing military footholds, sustaining arms exports, and circumventing Western sanctions. These objectives are pursued without a clear intent to formalize or institutionalize the partnerships, reflecting Moscow's reluctance to overextend and its aim to preserve a flexible and minimally encumbered regional presence.

By contrast, China's SPs in MENA currently follow an economy-driven model designed for sustained and multi-layered engagement over time and across the region (involving almost all the regional actors), prioritizing trade, infrastructure, and technological cooperation while avoiding security commitments. This approach is facilitated by several key factors: the region's interest in economic diversification, China's sustained demand for energy resources, and its willingness to engage in partnerships at favorable terms in exchange for deepening economic interdependence or fostering long-term local dependencies. At the bilateral level, China's SPs remain highly transactional, economic-oriented, and structured for the long term, reinforcing economic entanglement without formal security alignments.

At the multilateral level, China's engagements are forming a broader web of interdependent relationships that may, over time, consolidate into a larger, multi-layered strategic foothold. This emerging configuration is underpinned by a dual strategic intent. From a top-down perspective, it aligns with China's global strategy: expanding international influence, advancing the "national rejuvenation"

agenda, and promoting the Belt and Road Initiative—an expansive economic program that functions as a form of "globalised capital accumulation abroad" (Hairong & Sautman, 2023). Simultaneously, a bottom-up dynamic emerges through China's cumulative and adaptive engagement, whereby incremental economic footholds and diffuse political influence coalesce into a durable long-term regional presence. Although not necessarily aimed at immediate alliance formation, this dual-pronged strategy reflects a flexible yet resilient architecture of SPs capable of evolving into deeper political and security commitments.

Space Domain

The space domain occupies a central role in both Russia's and China's strategic partnership diplomacy in MENA. For both powers, collaboration in space technology serves as a means of cultivating asymmetry in their relationships with regional partners. Given the limited number of global actors possessing advanced and autonomous space capabilities, Russia and China can leverage their scientific expertise and technological assets to maintain a hierarchical dynamic.

For MENA states, engaging in space cooperation with these powers is seen as a strategic opportunity: a gateway to acquiring technological and strategic advantage and, ultimately, regional empowerment. The ability to launch satellites, develop space-based surveillance, or participate in dual-use technology programs is not merely a matter of national prestige but is increasingly perceived as a tangible instrument for enhancing strategic standing in the region.

The growing prominence of space cooperation within SPs reveals multifaceted implications. Space-focused SPs in the MENA region contribute to the strengthening and acceleration of three interrelated trends: democratization, commercialization, and miniaturization of the space domain in the region. The democratization of space is evident in the growing number of small and middle powers in the region launching their first satellites with Russian or Chinese assistance (Tables 1 and 2).

The proliferation of SPs in space is also accelerating the commercialization of space in the MENA region, largely driven by the involvement of private Chinese firms operating under Beijing's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) approach. Although these firms present themselves as commercial entities, they are closely aligned with the Chinese Communist Party's national defense objectives and operate within a grey regulatory zone. Their expertise in launch systems, surveillance satellites, and communication platforms enables them to support both the civilian and military needs of regional partners, raising concerns about the growing militarization of space programs under the guise of civilian cooperation.

It is important to emphasize that while defense-related cooperation in outer space is tightly regulated under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, civilian cooperation remains loosely (if at all) regulated. This regulatory gap allows for the proliferation of dual-use capabilities and the development of ostensibly civilian technologies with direct military applications.

In addition, a particularly consequential development concerns the trend toward miniaturization (Altaf, 2025). This trend facilitates the transfer of advanced technologies from the space sector into adjacent military domains. The miniaturization of components originally developed for satellites has direct applications for missile systems, drones, high-precision weapons and loitering munitions. Advances in propulsion, guidance, autonomy through software and AI, and communication (initially conceived for large space platforms) are increasingly being integrated into air and missile systems. High-efficiency propulsion used in space launch vehicles can enhance the range and maneuverability of ballistic missiles and drones; moreover, compact navigation and targeting systems developed for micro-satellites can improve the precision and lethality of air-delivered munitions. In this context, space cooperation in the framework of SPs or CSPs not only strengthens national space capabilities in MENA but also serves as a driver of innovation, knowledge diffusion, and operational upgrade in the air and missile realms.

Air Domain

The enhancement of air power is increasingly viewed as a strategic imperative—critical for achieving deterrence, shaping adversary calculus, and enabling the integration of multi-domain military capabilities, especially in the wake of the war in Ukraine. In an era when high-intensity warfare has returned to the global stage, and air superiority is once again seen as decisive for operational success, the ability or failure to supply advanced air capabilities serves as a revealing indicator of the strength of a strategic partnership. Where SPs provide significant aerial capabilities, they become not just symbolic gestures but functional enablers of deterrence and power projection.

Russia's cooperation in the air domain builds on previous military-technical collaboration with the Soviet Union. Algeria, Egypt, and Iran have pursued strategic partnerships with Russia in the air domain to diversify and modernize their capabilities in manned aircraft, integrated air defense systems, high-end aerial warfare platforms, and key denial and jamming technologies (Table 2). By contrast, Russia's reluctance to provide Iran with Su-35 or S-400 systems—even after repeated Israeli and U.S. strikes in 2024–2025—exposed the limits of the Russia-Iran SP and signaled a failure, in Iranian eyes, of mutual commitment.

Similarly, MENA actors have pursued cooperation with China in the air domain, focused on UAV technology and the integration of precision-strike technologies. Over the past decade, China has supplied a wide range of drones—including Wing Loong I/II, CH-4B, and CH-5 models—to Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Morocco. Iran's access to the BeiDou-2 satellite navigation system—granted in 2021—has further enhanced its precision-strike capabilities across missiles and UAVs, deepening the integration of space-derived targeting into its air doctrine.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that SPs centered on air and space are becoming a critical vector for the development and proliferation of advanced space and air capabilities in MENA. They contribute to a broader transformation of the regional security landscape by reducing technological barriers, enabling and accelerating indigenous capability development, and fostering the integration of dual-use technologies across domains.

Hyper-Transactionalism Matters

The proposed taxonomy provides a differentiation model that helps avoid two key analytical pitfalls: first, the dismissal of SPs as merely hyper-transactional relationships without significant strategic and operational consequences (the "transactional bias") and, second, its opposite bias, attributing to SPs a level of strategic robustness they do not possess (the "alliance bias"). Both biases can lead to miscalculations in strategic assessments and policy planning.

Overestimating adversarial partnerships is a common analytical pitfall in Western strategic circles, particularly among conservative circles which often frame anti-Western alignments (Russia-Iran, Russia-China, or Russia-North Korea) as components of a unified "anti-Western axis." This Western "mirror-imaging" perspective risks overlooking critical tensions and contradictions within these relationships. Understanding the conditions under which a hyper-transactional relationship may transition into an alliance, or revert to a looser arrangement, enables a more precise evaluation of its durability and strategic impact.

Conversely, underestimating SPs due to their hyper-transactional nature can also be misleading. Even lacking the strategic intent to form enduring bonds, hyper-transactional relationships may have the same strategic and operational effects an alliance would and can consequentially alter regional balances of power at both the strategic and operational levels. They may facilitate military-technical collaboration, supply critical capabilities, or disrupt adversary planning despite their lack of long-term institutionalization or mutual commitment in the defense and security realms.

Conclusion

Strategic partnerships in MENA are no longer peripheral or symbolic diplomatic constructs—they are emerging as pivotal vectors through which great powers exert influence, while regional actors pursue strategic hedging. The proposed dynamic taxonomy moves beyond the generic use of the term "strategic partnership," offering a two-dimensional framework that distinguishes SPs by their strategic intent (distinguishes between hyper-transactionalism to semi-alliance) and their functional orientation (economic vs. security). By applying this taxonomy to Russian and Chinese engagements in the region—particularly in the air and space domains—we demonstrate that SPs have become powerful accelerators of technological and military capability diffusion.

The growing salience of air and space cooperation within SPs reflects both structural and strategic shifts. For great powers, these domains provide asymmetric leverage in contested environments; for MENA states, they offer unprecedented access to advanced capabilities that would otherwise take years to develop indigenously. While hyper-transactional partnerships may lack long-term institutionalization or mutual defense commitments, they can produce operational outcomes that rival those of formal alliances. Conversely, the emergence of semi-alliances—though rarer—signals an intent to translate functional cooperation into enduring security bonds.

Policymakers and analysts must therefore resist both the tendency to dismiss SPs as hollow diplomatic gestures and the impulse to equate them with alliances. Instead, they should evaluate each partnership on its own terms, using strategic intent and domain-specific cooperation as key indicators of depth, durability, and potential disruption. As the geopolitical contest for MENA intensifies and the boundaries between civilian and military technologies continue to blur, air and space cooperation within SPs will likely shape the region's security architecture in increasingly consequential ways.

The article's framework may also serve as a foundation for future research on U.S. strategic partnerships in the MENA region—such as those with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or the UAE—which, despite their longevity and air cooperation depth, often fall outside formal alliance structures. Applying the proposed taxonomy to these cases could yield valuable comparative insights and further clarify the spectrum between transactionalism, partnership, and alliance in the evolving global order.

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