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# Moscow, Tehran Advance Plans for Iranian-Designed Drone Facility in Russia

The two countries are deepening a military partnership that has alarmed the West

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Moscow and Tehran are moving ahead with plans to build a new factory in Russia that could make at least 6,000 Iranian-designed drones for the war in Ukraine, the latest sign of deepening cooperation between the two nations, said officials from a country aligned with the U.S.

As part of their emerging military alliance, the officials said, a high-level Iranian delegation flew to Russia in early January to visit the planned site for the factory and hammer out details to get the project up-and-running. The two countries are aiming to build a faster drone that could pose new challenges for Ukrainian air defenses, the officials said.

Tehran has already provided Moscow with hundreds of drones it has used to hit military and civilian targets in Ukraine, U.S. officials have said. And the Biden administration has warned that Russia and Iran are developing a “full-fledged defense partnership.” The White House says Moscow was training Iranian pilots to fly Russian jet fighters, with the intent of sending Tehran those jets by year’s end.

In December, the White House warned that Moscow and Tehran were considering whether to build a joint drone-production line in Russia.

Now, the U.S.-aligned officials said, the talks have morphed into concrete plans with the Jan. 5 visit to the Russian town of Yelabuga, about 600 miles east of Moscow. They toured the empty site where leaders from the two nations are planning to build a new factory that can produce at least 6,000 drones in the coming years, they said.



Ukrainian rescuers at the site of a residential building destroyed by a Russian drone, which local authorities consider to be Iranian-made, in central Kyiv, Ukraine.

PHOTO: OLEKSII CHUMACHENKO/ZUMA PRESS

The officials said the Iranian delegation was led by Brig. Gen. Abdollah Mehrabi, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization, and Ghassem Damavandian, the chief executive of Iran's Quds Aviation Industry, a key defense manufacturer the U.S. says is central to developing and building the country's drones.

Russian and Iranian officials didn't respond to requests for comment.

So far, Iran has provided Russia mostly with so-called suicide drones, known as the Shahed-136, that contain a modest amount of explosives that detonate when the unmanned vehicles crash into their targets, U.S. and Ukrainian officials say.

Russia has used the drones to target Ukraine's power grid in an attempt to cripple the country's electricity supply during the cold winter and undermine morale. Over time, Ukraine's air defenses have succeeded in largely neutralizing the drone threat. The Shahed-136 is a slow-moving and loud drone with propeller engines, making it relatively easy to spot and shoot down. Ukraine has shot down more than 540 drones since they started appearing over the country's skies last fall, according to the nation's air force.

Now, the officials said, Iran is working with Russia to develop a Shahed-136 model expected to include a new engine making it fly faster and farther. The new factory would produce the advanced drone. That could pose new challenges for

Ukraine and other nations that could be targets for the drones.

Ground hasn't been broken on the factory, so the production line isn't expected to have an immediate impact on the balance of power in Ukraine, where signs point to Russia mounting a new offensive in the coming weeks.



A drone seconds before it fired on buildings in Kyiv, Ukraine, in October.

PHOTO: EFREM LUKATSKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The drone factory is part of a \$1 billion deal between Russia and Moscow, the officials said. Moscow has provided Iran with weapons seized on the battlefield in Ukraine that they are trying to reverse engineer, the officials said.

The U.S. has warned that Iran has agreed to provide Moscow with ballistic missiles. So far, U.S. and allied officials said, there is no indication that Tehran has sent such missiles to Russia.

Russia and Iran continue to develop closer ties on various fronts. The two countries recently connected their interbank payment messaging systems, paving the way for all Iranian banks to transact with Russian lenders. Both countries face strict international sanctions on their banking industries.

In an apparent coincidence, on Jan. 6, the day after Iranian officials flew to Russia to discuss the drone factory, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions on Mr. Damavandian, the Iranian aviation executive accused by America of overseeing Iran's supply of drones to Russia and training of Russian forces to use the weapons. The U.S. imposed economic sanctions on Brig. Gen. Merhabi in 2021, when America accused the Iranian military commander of building and buying

drone engines for the country's fleet of unmanned vehicles.

—*Benoit Faucon, Ann Simmons and Aresu Eqbali contributed to this article.*