



# The Fallout of the US-Iran Confrontation for Russia: Revisiting Factors in Moscow's Calculus

*Abdolrasool Divsallar and Pyotr Kortouov*

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# The Fallout of the US-Iran Confrontation for Russia: Revisiting Factors in Moscow's Calculus

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# 1. Introduction

2020 witnessed the peak of military tensions between the US and Iran since the conclusion of the tanker-war in 1987. The Trump administration's *maximum pressure* campaign and Iran's *resistance/retaliation* policy have worked to generate collision points one after another.<sup>1</sup> Despite both sides' unwillingness to wage a war, the risk of an all-out conflict breaking out has become a consistent feature of US-Iran tensions. A new president in the White House is expected to bring opportunities for diplomatic crisis management, but it might not be able to swiftly erode the risk of war.

Several factors contributing to the risk of a US-Iran war remain persistent throughout 2021. First, both sides' violation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has complicated the resolution of the nuclear crisis with a face-saving option, raising the chance of failure. Second, while Washington assesses its extended sanction regime as invaluable leverage, Tehran sees its nuclear potential and the swift leap of its missile program to intermediate or intercontinental ranges as pressure tools. Both sides' leveraging acts, combined with the trust deficit, have made reaching another deal far more difficult. Third, Iranian internal politics are divided over talks with the US. Hassan Rouhani's government is leaving office and has become structurally weak, leaving centers of powers to compete over who will lead negotiations and what to negotiate. This situation constrains constructive engagement with the US until a new government in Tehran will be elected on 18 July 2021. Fourth, a heightened anti-American sentiment within the deep state and the Islamic Republic's reliance on its deterrence posture to counter US threats, keeps the risk of accidental collisions high. Fifth, and finally, destabilizing provocations such as the assassination of a top Iranian defense official in November risk a collision between regional actors such as Iran and Israel, ultimately forcing the US to intervene.

The above destabilizing dynamics contribute to bringing about fresh moments of escalation. Besides, if Iran decides to go nuclear, the risk of a US-led strike on Iranian atomic facilities will arise. The history of miscalculations in Washington and Tehran, the absence of deconfliction mechanisms, and international actors' difficulties in establishing rapid conflict prevention measures provides US-Iran tensions a potential to easily evolve into a military engagement. What would be the implications of such a scenario for Russia? Will the fallout of a US-Iran war in the Middle East push Russia to rush in with a more active mediation effort? Or will Russia prefer to erode US power projection through military assistance to Iran?

This paper attempts to explore the cost-benefit calculations which would drive Moscow's decisions in a US-Iran war scenario. In the first section, we analyze the possible benefits Moscow might derive from an open conflict emerging between the US and Tehran, while in the second we consider the downsides of such a scenario for Russian interests. The paper analyzes the implications of these benefits and costs on Russian Middle East policy. We argue that Moscow's losses in such a war would be threatening to Russia's core interests in the Middle East, and thus is probably the key factor defining the Russian response strategy.

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1 On 3 January 2020, Trump's decision to assassinate Iran's top General Ghasem Soleimani and Tehran's missile strike on US bases in Iraq in retaliation on January 8 brought the two countries closer than ever to an all-out war. Later, the COVID-19 pandemic worked to deepen resentments and hostilities. It worsened both sides' threat perception as the pandemic witnessed the weaponization of COVID and boosted chances of actors' resort to opportunistic offensive policies to gain military leverage. During April and May, this perception heightened naval tensions in the Persian Gulf as both sides resorted to demonstrating power in order to eliminate any perception of military vulnerabilities. Through July 2020, the fierce diplomatic marathon in the UN Security Council concerning the extension of an arms embargo on Iran after its expiration in October 2020 brought another moment of escalation. Even the results of US elections provoked new speculation about the Trump administration's extra hawkish measures to raise pressure before leaving office, worsening levels of tensions. The assassination of Iran's top defense and nuclear official, Mohsen Fakhrazadeh, is widely believed to be an Israeli provocation on the above line.

## 2. What does Moscow stand to gain from the conflict?

### *Adding to US constraints in the great power competition*

Military confrontation with Iran entangles US long-term involvement in the Middle East with prolonged regional contingencies, setting constraints on the US reorientation toward the great power competition with Russia. A military conflict with Iran will not impact American long-term National Security Strategy objectives toward the great power competition<sup>2</sup> but creates a set of limitations on US conventional capabilities, a dynamic which may contribute to US strategic misalignment.<sup>3</sup> As Elbridge Colby, one of the authors of US National Defense Strategy, and Wess Mitchell argue, a war with Iran is “antithetical to success in a world of great power competition”.<sup>4</sup> There is a combination of geopolitical and resource constraints behind this assessment.

According to Iranian military thought, there is no such scenario as a limited war with the US. Any military action by Washington on Iranian territory will result in a retaliation by Tehran,<sup>5</sup> increasing the likelihood of the situation spinning out of control and into a full-scale war. Tehran’s doctrine of *massive retaliation*<sup>6</sup> is designed to deter the US threat through the strategy of making war too expensive for the US. Iran seeks to achieve this by expanding the war theater against US-related targets across the Middle East. The US response needs an established combat power across an extended geographical territory which then requires an employment of the critical enablers such as strategic airlift and massive logistical operations. This situation impacts conventional US power projection capability in hot zones critical for the great power competition. The allocation of higher personnel numbers to the Middle East would probably force Washington to revisit its deployment of the military assets in Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Asia, thus giving Russia and China more room for conducting independent policies in the regions.

This is happening at a time when, according to Trump’s National Security Advisor, Robert C. O’Brien, to counter China and Russia, U.S. forces must be deployed abroad in a more forward and expeditionary manner than they have been in recent years.<sup>7</sup> The Iranian crisis potentially serves to check US force concentrations through on-and-off urgencies. Washington was forced to allocate more than 2500 soldiers to the Middle East in the first half of 2019, and also had to relocate some of its military assets that had previously been withdrawn from the region. The deployment of another 3000 troops to Saudi Arabia was announced in October 2019.<sup>8</sup> The US positions in Iraq were also further reinforced by the delivery of Patriot missile defense systems in response to Iran’s missile attack on the Ein Alssad

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2 White House. (December 2017), “National Security Strategy of United States of America”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

3 To read more see: Cook, James L. (7 May 2019), “Strategic Misalignment and the Risk of War with Iran”, *the Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/442335-strategic-misalignment-and-the-risk-of-war-with-iran>

4 Edelstein, David M. (15 January 2020), “How the US-Iran conflict could help China and Russia”, *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/15/how-us-iran-conflict-could-help-china-russia/>

5 Khamenei, Seyed Ali. (6 May 2015), “Speech Among teachers and Cultural activists”, *Khamenei*, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=29639>

6 Divsallar, Abdolrasool (28 May 2019), “Will Iran adopt a massive retaliation doctrine?”, *LobeLog*, <https://lobelog.com/will-iran-adopt-a-massive-retaliation-doctrine/>

7 O’Brien, Robert C. (21 June 2020), “Why the U.S. Is Moving Troops Out of Germany”, *Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-u-s-is-moving-troops-out-of-germany-11592757552>

8 Stewart, Phil and Idrees Ali (11 October, 2019), “US says Deploying More Forces to Saudi Arabia to Counter Iran Threat”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-exclusive/u-s-says-deploying-more-forces-to-saudi-arabia-to-counter-iran-threat-idUSKBN1WQ21Z>

base. Later, in May, 2020, the US pulled some of its assets out of Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the crisis with Iran has caused a frequent rotation and movement of US troops in the Middle East while at the same time forcing US troops to maintain combat readiness. If the situation swings out of control, it could broadly impact US global force structure by creating the need for more US troops allocated to the Middle East. Russia will particularly benefit from constrained US capability to respond in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of or during the onset of a US-Iran war.

Moreover, a confrontation with Iran might cause technology and acquisition limitations similar to what was seen during the long-term US engagements in the Middle East conflicts. Fighting against a mid-tier adversary such as Iran will push the US toward putting greater emphasis on the development of weapon systems required for sub-conventional operations and counter-insurgency actions instead of high-end capabilities developed by peer competitors such as Russia. It might significantly impact US nuclear policy, and is similar to a trend seen since mid-2000s, and operational costs would gradually direct the Pentagon towards less expansive defense strategies.<sup>10</sup> This is the likely response to resource constraints and the growing casualties of war.

Jim Mattis in April 2018, then secretary of state, outlined the negative impacts of military readiness resulting from the longest continuous period of combat in US history. Such an entanglement in the region has resulted in an overstretched and under-resourced military.<sup>11</sup> An intense conflict with Iran would activate a combination of budgetary constraints and new operational requirements that distance the US from making proper investments in cutting-edge military technologies. This trend impacts Pentagon's potential to respond to Russian military modernization programs, a pattern that threatens to damage the US ability to compete globally with such military powerhouses as China and Russia.<sup>12</sup>

### *The race to win Russia's support*

Moscow and Tehran have established a limited balancing coalition through providing diplomatic support for the preservation of the JCPOA, rejecting US calls for extending the Arms embargo, and holding joint naval drills. Moscow has also played a role in blocking attempts to pressure Iran over the supply of weapons to the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>13</sup> The Kremlin has promoted easing tensions in the Persian Gulf by proposing the Gulf Security Concept,<sup>14</sup> which in principal echoes Iran's objective of building a security system in the Persian Gulf under the UN umbrella instead of America's security architecture. However, none of these developments has been politically effective enough to have a substantial impact on the dynamics of US-Iran tensions. Instead, they have enhanced Moscow's leverage in bargaining to sell support to Riyadh and Tel-Aviv on more lucrative terms. The ambiguity about the Russian response to the US-Iran conflict adds to the competition between Tel Aviv, Riyadh, and Tehran to attract Moscow's support, highlighting the Kremlin's advantageous position.

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9        [Baldor, Lolita C.](https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/05/08/us-pulls-anti-missile-systems-saudi-arabia-amid-dispute.html) (8 May 2020), "US Pulls Anti-Missile Systems from Saudi Arabia amid Dispute", *Military.com*, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/05/08/us-pulls-anti-missile-systems-saudi-arabia-amid-dispute.html>

10       Brands, Hall and Montgomery, Evan Braden. (Spring 2020), "One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition", *Texas National Security Review*, Volume 3, Issue 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8865>

11       Mattis, Jim. (26 April 2018), Statement at Senate Armed Service Committee, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mattis\\_04-26-18.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mattis_04-26-18.pdf)

12       Brose, Christopher. (May/June 2019), "the new revolution in military affair", *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-04-16/new-revolution-military-affairs>

13       Gladstone, Rick. (26 February 2018), "Russian Votes UN Resolution to Pressure Over Iran Yemen Missiles", *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/world/middleeast/iran-yemen-security-council.html>

14       Russian Foreign Ministry. (23 July 2019), "Russia's security concept for the Gulf area", [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/conflicts/-/asset\\_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&101\\_INSTANCE\\_xIEMTQ3OvzcA\\_languageId=en\\_GB](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA_languageId=en_GB)



Washington too is likely to seek to mitigate any potential Russian diplomatic and military support for its adversary. First, Washington may attempt to minimize Moscow's diplomatic support to Tehran as it plays a role in leaving Iran isolated. Moscow's diplomatic silence or low profile reaction would help Washington to build a global consensus against Tehran and frame it as a global community effort. Second, it is important for the US to discourage Moscow from providing Tehran with any kind of financial or military help, should an open conflict break out. Russia is among the few countries that maintain a working defense relation with Iran and it also possesses the military capacity to assist in a potential conflict. Depending on the amount of risk Moscow is willing to take, any Russian military involvement in assisting Tehran has the potential to constrain US planning. Such estimations push Washington to secure Russia's backing for its Iran war strategy. And third, Washington looks to prevent possible Russian opportunistic behavior, which might prove to be damaging in the US-Russia great power competition.

US officials were willing to announce their desire to gain Moscow's support for a military operation against the Islamic Republic. The latest of such requests was made by the US during the joint meeting of US, Russian and Israeli Security Council Secretaries in Tel Aviv in June 2019.<sup>15</sup> Washington, if it seeks to gain Russian Support for a war with Iran, might be inclined to make some sort of concessions such as easing political or economic pressure on Moscow. This is hard to imagine because of Moscow's established policy since 2012 in the Middle East, which is based on countering US interventions, and the deep mistrust between Washington and Moscow. However, such a dynamic has the potential to become a factor in improving Moscow's position in US-Russia talks.

### *An opportunity for EU-Russia dialogue*

Moscow and Brussels share the view that the JCPOA was a success story for multilateral diplomacy and was capable of curtailing one of the greatest threats to international peace – a nuclear Iran.<sup>16</sup> Besides, both share the view that the Trump administration has mishandled the situation and condemn the negative role that the US has played by unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA. This shared understanding has facilitated diplomatic cooperation between the EU and Moscow to save the Iran nuclear deal. Uncommonly, when viewed from a historical perspective, Russia's interests have converged with those of European powers as regards managing the Iran nuclear file.

The inability of Trump's administration to compromise and the lack of any desire to regard the EU as an equal partner has contributed to the fallout between Washington and Brussels on the Iranian crisis. In one of their latest rifts, the two parties adopted different approaches to extending the arms embargo on Iran. The foreign ministers of France, the UK, and Germany rejected the US position on resorting to a JCPOA *snapback mechanism* to re-impose UN sanctions and completely destroy the JCPOA for the sake of extending the arms embargo. The foreign ministers in a joint statement on 30 May said, "We firmly believe that any unilateral attempt to trigger UN sanctions snapback would have serious adverse consequences for the UNSC. We would not support such a decision which would be incompatible with our current efforts to preserve the JCPOA."<sup>17</sup> In the same statement, European ministers wished to address the issue in close coordination with Russia because of the two sides' shared views. Sergei Lavrov, on the other side, took the opportunity and aligned himself with the EU saying

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15 Stewart, Phil. (5 June 2019), "US seeks Russian support on Iran at key Israeli meeting", *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-russia/u-s-seeks-russian-support-on-iran-at-key-israel-meeting-source-idUSKCN1T5305>

16 Moghrini, Federica. (17 January 2017), "The Iran Nuclear Deal is a Success- and the World is Safer for It", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/17/iran-nuclear-deal>

17 UK Government. (19 June 2020), "E3 foreign ministers' statement on the JCPOA", <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/e3-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-jcpoa-19-june>

that “Russia is also determined to counter any attempts to use the situation to manipulate the UN Security Council and is willing to raise the issue on all multilateral international formats.”<sup>18</sup>

The tensions between the US and Iran have presented Moscow with a much-needed opportunity to improve its own diplomatic position in Europe. The state of EU-Russia relations is caught in a net of strategic issues while both are likely to emerge weaker in the aftermath of the pandemic’s restructuring of international relations.<sup>19</sup> Yet the modest opportunity that EU-Russia collaboration on Iran might provide cannot be easily ignored. The ongoing crisis in the Middle East has sparked numerous calls across Europe urging Brussels to engage in an intensified dialogue with Moscow to both salvage the JCPOA and mitigate the tensions that peaked after the US assassination of General Soleimani.<sup>20</sup>

The worries attached to the prospect of the JCPOA becoming obsolete emerged as a catalyst in EU-Russia relations. Earlier in 2015, when the JCPOA was being negotiated, the Iranian crisis provided Moscow with similar space for diplomatic maneuvers, to the extent that the EU’s former foreign policy Chief, Federica Mogherini, said that Russia is seen by the EU as a reliable participant in talks on Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, talks about the fate of the JCPOA have become a consistent part of the dialogue between Russian and European leaders. Moscow’s sharing of many of the European concerns, combined with a desire for a multilateral solution, have contributed to Russia’s image as a collaborative decision-maker. Moscow is eager to maintain this status as it believes it could pave the way for future strategic communications with the EU. More importantly, the Kremlin views the situation as an opportunity to present itself as a responsible actor that is able to guarantee international norms. As Richard Sakwa argues, the latter defines a long-standing Russia’s foreign policy objective.<sup>22</sup>

On the other side, the difference between American and European views during the Trump administration have been packed with occasions of confrontation between allies. Transatlantic conflicting views on Iran are likely to change toward a new era of diplomatic cooperation during President-elect Biden’s term in office. However, there is the potential for divergence should a full-scale conflict between the US and Tehran erupt without a UN mandate. Russia, in turn, sees such possibilities as opportunities to further rally against Washington, seeing the situation as an alternative way to exert pressure on the cracks appearing in relations between the members of the NATO alliance.

### ***Guaranteeing global energy security***

The Middle East turmoil is helping fortify Russia’s position as the stable source of energy with few foreseeable geopolitical risks in production and transportation of its petroleum resources. The central point of collision between Russian and Iranian interests is their competition on the global energy market. Both Russian and Iranian economies are dependent on the revenue generated from exporting oil and gas; therefore, the decline of the Iranian share of the fuel market since 2018 has been welcome news for Russia and led to Moscow’s decision to accelerate its efforts to displace Tehran from

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18 Tass. (16 June 2020), “Russia opposed to attempts to manipulate UNSC on Iran nuclear deal”, <https://tass.com/politics/1168137>

19 Kortunov, Andrey. (8 July 2020), “How the Pandemic Will Change EU-Russian Relations”, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/07/08/how-pandemic-will-change-eu-russian-relations-pub-81894>

20 See for example: ECFR statement. (8 March 2020), “A call for increased European de-escalation efforts in the Middle East”, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_a\\_call\\_for\\_increased\\_european\\_de\\_escalation\\_efforts\\_in\\_the\\_middl](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_a_call_for_increased_european_de_escalation_efforts_in_the_middl); Andrey Baklitskiy and Adlan Margoev, “Saving the JCPOA: The EU has to work with Russia and China”, ELN, (23 April 2018), <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/saving-the-jcpoa-the-eu-has-to-work-with-russia-and-china/>

21 Tass. (15 July 2015), “Iran talks success open prospects for EU-Russian cooperation”, <https://tass.com/world/808779>

22 Sakwa, Richard. (October 2017), *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

the global energy market. This has been especially visible in Europe, where oil-importing countries started abruptly halting purchases of oil from Iran after the re-imposition of US sanctions in 2018.<sup>23</sup> These extraterritorial sanctions inflicted considerable damage to the Iranian oil industry, severely hurting the country's oil-exporting capabilities. In addition, since Tehran has been deprived of the opportunity to make timely investments in its gas-fields, the prospects for joining the global gas market in the near future is no longer look as bright as they used to be for Iran, yet Russia seems to find the situation quite favorable.

Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of sanctions on the Iranian economy couldn't have come at a better time for Moscow as its combination with crises in Libya and Venezuela practically removed millions of barrels from the oil market. Venezuela alone has been forced to reduce its oil exports to 770,000 barrels per day (bpd),<sup>24</sup> while Iranian exports have fallen into a wide range of between 400,000 bpd and 1.5 million bpd.<sup>25</sup> In the meantime, Russia's agreement with the OPEC helps limit the rates of oil extraction to manage a drop in the oil prices. Though there are uncertainties whether Russia can substitute Iranian oil, it benefits from price fluctuations. The September 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco oil facilities are a noticeable showcase for how Russia has benefited from higher oil prices thanks to tensions in the resource-rich region. As one senior observer in Moscow concludes, every extra dollar in the price of oil translates into an additional \$7.5 million of export revenue each day for Russia with about 75% of that going into the federal budget.<sup>26</sup> Should an open confrontation between Teheran and Washington take place, the market will suffer an even bigger shortage of oil supply, not only on Iran's part, but from all producers in the Middle East, resulting in unprecedented price spikes.

As part of its deterrence posture, the Iranian military will not hesitate to inflict damage on the oil industry's critical infrastructures in the Arabian Peninsula. Both the oil transportation routes and the oil production infrastructures can be targeted if Tehran decides to retaliate against a US strike, creating major challenges for sustained oil supply in a time of crisis. The May 2019 tanker attacks demonstrated just how vulnerable the oil supply chain networks are in the Persian Gulf, while the attack on Aramco revealed the deep-seated level of vulnerability of oil-production facilities. In the wake of full-scale military conflict, the oil exporting capability of local petroleum giants will be crippled.

Such developments have the potential to turn the tide of the global oil markets in Russia's favor, with both production and transit being disrupted, fortifying Russian position as the guarantor of global energy security. Any large-scale conflict in the Middle East poses limited geopolitical risks, if any, to the Russian oil industry. Such an advantage assists Russian attempts to fill the gap and present itself as a sustainable source of energy. Moscow may also find new opportunities to advocate for some of its long-term transit ambitions in the Northern Sea route as well. Putin has stressed the importance of the Arctic sea route to global growth and prosperity, describing it as a "global and competitive route that connects northeastern, eastern and southeastern Asia with Europe."<sup>27</sup> Turmoil in the Persian

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23 Faucon, Benoit. (7 November 2019), "Stealing its oil Customers, Russia Throw Iran a Lifeline", *Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-is-surprise-beneficiary-of-iranian-oil-ban-1541609785>

24 Parraga, Marianna and Mircely Guanipa. (3 September 2019), "Venezuela's Oil falls to Lowest Level in 2019 as US sanctions bit", *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-oil-exports/venezuelan-oil-exports-fall-to-lowest-level-in-2019-as-u-s-sanctions-bite-data-idUSKCN1VO1Y0>

25 Sharafedin, Bozorgmehr and Alex Lawler. (25 September 2020), "Iran's oil exports jump in September defying sanctions", *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-oil-exports-idUSKCN26G1VA>

26 Nicholson, Alex. (16 September 2019), "Russia's Ruble Jumps on Oil Spike as Rosneft Leads Stock Gains", *Bloomberg news*, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/russia-s-ruble-jumps-on-oil-spike-as-rosneft-leads-stock-gains-1.1316557>

27 The Barents Observer. (30 April 2019), "Putin steps up talks with Beijing over Arctic shipping", *Moscow Times*, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/30/putin-steps-up-talks-with-beijing-over-arctic-shipping-a65436>

Gulf might increase the attractiveness of Russia's Northern sea route as a substitute energy and trade corridor.<sup>28</sup> Strategically, tensions open the window of opportunity for Moscow to be introduced as a reliable energy provider, either by providing safe a transit route or sustained production.

### 3. What Russia loses from the confrontation

#### *Loss of a burden-sharing partner*

For Moscow, losing a regional actor such as the Islamic Republic means the loss of a partner that shares the burdens of countering the American-led world order, and with whom the shared threat perceptions could be defused in partnership.<sup>29</sup> It is almost a decade now that both Russia and Iran have pooled their resources and operational information at the regional level in response to their resource deficit. Lack of this collaboration simply translates into more Russian resources for pursuing the same objectives. Both countries' aspiration of a multipolar world reinforces one another and the failure of either could gravely affect this broader revisionist perspective. The Islamic Republic's systematic opposition is the most sustained and influential challenge to Washington's leading role in South Asia and the Middle East. The fall of the government in Tehran will erode the last serious obstacle to establishing US-led security architecture in the Middle East. This substantially constrains Moscow's act as a counterweight to Washington in the Middle East and Mediterranean region.

So far, Iran's relentless opposition to Washington's plans has been surprisingly effective in fueling the perception of declining American credibility in guaranteeing security in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> And of course, Russia is trying to capitalize on it. Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its maximum pressure campaign created occasions that were picked up by Moscow as a "demonstration of the hypocritical nature of the Western rule-based order and a sign of losing a moral legitimacy".<sup>31</sup> At the regional level, cracks in the credibility of the US security umbrella grew after Trump refrained from responding to the Iranian-backed attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities in 2019 and missile attacks on US bases in Iraq. The EU's dissatisfaction with Washington undermined the credibility of European external policy by forcing European businesses to abandon their trade with Iran. The EU's inability to save the JCPOA, among other reasons, has fueled discussions about Washington's leadership credibility and stronger European strategic autonomy.<sup>32</sup>

From a military perspective, Washington regards Tehran as the greatest challenge to its military freedom of maneuver in the Middle East.<sup>33</sup> Though Iran's goal of kicking US out of the Middle East is far from being put into practice, it is nonetheless limiting the ability of the US to project power. As far as it continues, Russia could remain assured that the US being engaged in a confrontation with

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28 Gvosdev, Nikolas. (9 May 2019), "Russia is a real winner in any US-Iran conflict", *the Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/442843-russia-is-the-real-winner-in-any-us-iran-conflict>

29 Divsallar, Abdolrasool. (2019), "The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence", *The International Spectator*, Vol.54, No.3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1586147>

30 Cernelos, Marco. (26 April 2019), "Is a New World Order Emerging to Replace US hegemony?", *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/new-world-order-emerging-replace-us-hegemony>

31 Andrey, Sushentsov. (15 May 2018), "A Russian View on America's Withdrawal from the Iran Deal", *National Interest*, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russian-view-americas-withdrawal-the-iran-deal-25836>

32 Barbara Lippert, Nicolai von Ondarza and Volker Perthes (eds. )(March 2019), "European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests", *SWP Research Paper 4*, P.21, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research\\_papers/2019RP04\\_lpt\\_orz\\_prt\\_web.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2019RP04_lpt_orz_prt_web.pdf)

33 Coats, Daniel. (29 January 2019), "Worldwide threat assessment report of US Intelligence Community", *Director of National Intelligence*, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>



Iran is adequately curbed in shaping an American-led security architecture. At the same time, since Russia is able to deploy only a limited amount of resources, any chance to allocate less to the Middle East will be welcomed. The disappearance of the Islamic Republic or its limited play at the region will leave Moscow with undesirable choices – either to significantly increase its financial and military involvement or to broadly rethink its Middle Eastern policy on the basis of an American-led system.

### **Arms and Nuclear Export loss**

Nuclear and arms exports are two vital sources of revenue for Russia's federal budget and at the same time a significant dimension in Russian-Iranian relations. A US-Iran open conflict will set back Moscow's prospect of nuclear and arms sales to Tehran, but more importantly it would exhaust its chance of using an Iranian card to raise its Middle East market share. The Russian calculation of such costs might be even larger than previously anticipated in a post-pandemic era.

On the question of nuclear cooperation, since the 90's Moscow has been working with Tehran to complete the construction of the Bushehr power plant. The Bushehr-I reactor was the Russian nuclear engineering industry's first foreign contract after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the CEMA. Two decades later in 2011, with an approximately 11 billion dollars of investments<sup>34</sup> and numerous technical and engineering setbacks,<sup>35</sup> Iran and Russia's ROSATOM opened the first functioning nuclear power plant in the region.

Since the opening of Bushehr-I, Iran has remained firm in striking another deal with Moscow, seeking to continue the work of enhancing Iranian nuclear infrastructure. In November 2014, Moscow and Tehran concluded a deal, according to which ROSATOM committed to building two new nuclear reactors in Iran by 2026.<sup>36</sup> Despite the US sanctions hitting Iran's economy hard, both Moscow and Tehran continue to insist that they would adhere to the terms of the contract. ROSATOM's CEO was clear in rejecting the US pressure, emphasizing that "ROSATOM has always abided by its obligations under international law".<sup>37</sup>

The total cost of Tehran's existing nuclear deal with Moscow is estimated to be around 10 billion dollars,<sup>38</sup> which accounts for as much as 7% of ROSATOM's total value of contracts around the world.<sup>39</sup> Despite complications in the financial transactions involved in these deals and ROSATOM'S worries about US unilateral restrictions because of its projects in Iran, the amount is important for Moscow. Should a war break out, Iran's nuclear facilities are potential targets for US military operations. The destruction of existing nuclear infrastructure in Iran is likely to make the concluded deal obsolete and lead to the closure of future ones.

Similarly, on arms exports, Russia seeks to not lose the chance of a new contract with Iran. Russia is

34 Vaez, Ali and Karim Sadjadpour. (2013), "Iran's Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://fas.org/pub-reports/new-report-analyzing-irans-nuclear-program-costs-risks/>

35 On the challenges of this project and how it lay the foundations for future Russia and Iran nuclear cooperation see: Khlopkov, Anton and Lutkova, Anna. (1 August 2010), "The Bushehr NPP: Why it take so long?", *Center for Energy and Security Studies*, <http://ceness-russia.org/data/doc/TheBushehrNPP-WhyDidItTakeSoLong.pdf>

36 Savsin, D. (18 August 2018), "Rosatom has officially started the construction of the nuclear power plant Bucher-2 in Iran" [in Russian], *Neftgaz*, <https://neftgaz.ru/news/nuclear/198445-rosatom-ofitsialno-pristupil-k-stroitelstvu-aes-busher-2-v-irane/>

37 *Ria Novosti*, (9 May 2019), "Lichachev about the the JCPOA: Rosatom is compliant with all its obligations" [in Russian], <https://ria.ru/20190509/1553382966.html> \h

38 DW. (12 August 2016), "The Costs of Two Nuclear Reactors in Iran According to Russian Sources" [in Farsi], <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/ا-19545311>  
ا-19545311/سی-سور-عبان-م-تی-اور-هب-رهشوب-هاگوری-ن-دحاو-ود-تخاس-هنی-زھ

39 Rosatom. "Projects", Retreated on 8 October 2019, <https://rosatom.ru/en/investors/projects/>

the world's second arms exporter, controlling 24% of the global arms export market in 2011-2017, which amounts to as much as 4% of the country's GDP. The COVID-19 pandemic may convince decision-makers in Moscow to further raise the prospect of arms sales as a key alternative source of revenue to compensate for emerging economic hardships in Russia's resource-based economy.

However, Moscow is struggling with two sets of classic and newly emerged challenges to sustain its arms sales figures. In an environment with emerging competitors such as China and South Korea, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Russia to penetrate new markets, as well as to maintain its presence in already established ones. This means that attracting and signing new contracts is a vital necessity for the strategic health of the Russian defense industry.<sup>40</sup> Also, new sets of pandemic-related challenges have emerged. The global economic meltdown after COVID-19 is negatively impacting the purchasing power of Russian arms customers, making it even more crucial for Russia to secure a stream of new sales.

The combination of these factors raises the significance of concluding new arm deals with Tehran. According to the JCPOA, the UN-imposed arms embargo on Tehran dating back to 2006 has been lifted on 18 October 2020. Moscow has strongly rejected earlier US calls in 2019 to review this article in order to re-impose arms embargo on Tehran.<sup>41</sup> Russia remained committed to this policy by opposing US draft resolution to indefinitely extend an arms embargo on Tehran during a UN Security Council meeting held on 30 June. Russia's UN envoy slammed the American plan while Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov has made it clear that "for us, the case of the existing ban on arms deliveries to and from Iran was closed with the adoption of Resolution 2231. The embargo regime expires in October this year".<sup>42</sup>

The fact that Russia emerged as the largest supplier of arms to Iran in post-1979 era matters for securing future contracts. Since the 1989 and 2000 deals, when Moscow delivered major arm systems to Tehran, the latest high-profile deal was the controversial air defense sale in which four S-300 PMU-2 batteries worth \$1 billion were delivered in 2016. The military, technical, and industrial cooperation between Moscow and Tehran has become institutionalized in the post-JCPOA period with the establishment of a joint military commission in 2016. Now, the two countries' defense relations benefit from better planning,<sup>43</sup> an unprecedented amount of regular high-level military and intelligence contacts,<sup>44</sup> and operational links established across Syria.

The frequent meetings of high-level military-industrial officials between the two countries have raised speculation about the possibility of the conclusion of an arms deal. Russian sources have argued that talks about a deal with Iran were held in April 2019.<sup>45</sup> Dmitry Shugayev, the Head of Russia's Federal Service for Military and Technical Cooperation said in early 2019 that Russia might participate in

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40 Bret, Crille. (2017), "Armaments Export", Chapter II in Richard A. Bitzinger and Nicu Popescu, *Defense Industries in Russia and China: players and Strategies*, EU Institute for Security Studies, p25, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report\\_38\\_Defence-industries-in-Russia-and-China.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_38_Defence-industries-in-Russia-and-China.pdf)

41 Nicoles, Michelle. (20 August, 2019), "Pompeo Warns of a New Turmoil if UN arms Embargo on Iran lifted in 2020", *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-un/pompeo-warns-of-new-turmoil-if-u-n-arms-embargo-on-iran-lifted-in-2020-idUSKCN1VA253>

42 Korso, Tim. (30 April 2020), "Moscow: UN Weapons Embargo on Iran Can't Be Prolonged Despite US Efforts", *Sputnik News*, <https://sputniknews.com/world/202004301079144447-moscow-un-weapons-embargo-on-iran-cant-be-prolonged-despite-us-efforts/>

43 Nezami, Ghadir. (21 September, 2019), "Joint Drill with Russia and China: Soon" [in Farsi], *Mosalas Online*, <https://www.mosalasonline.com/6/47445-یادروز-هپ-هی-سور-نی-چ-ناری-اکرت-شم-شی-ام-ز-ری-را-گرب-6/47445-ی-س-ای-س-ش-خ>

44 Sanaei, Mehdi. (18 April 2017), "Iran-Russian Military Cooperation is Unprecedented" [in Farsi], *Mehr News Agency*, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/ت-س-ا-ه-ق-ب-اس-ی-ب-ه-ی-س-ور-و-ن-اری-ای-م-اظن-ی-ا-ه-ی-را-ک-م>

45 Mardasov, Anton. (24 January 2020), "Will Russia provide missiles to 'close the entire sky' over Iran?", *Al-monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/russia-iran-us-military-deals.html> \l "ixzz6SKg1EVbY

strengthening Iran's coastal defenses in the post-2020 period.<sup>46</sup> Later, on July 29 2019, Iran's Navy Commander in Chief announced the signature of an agreement with his Russian counterpart which regulates defense interaction between the two navies.<sup>47</sup> Speculations were confirmed in May 2020 by the Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Kazem Jalali, saying that several countries had offered their arms sales proposals to Tehran.<sup>48</sup>

While the composition of weapon systems for sale to Tehran is subject to change depending on its impacts on the Arabian Peninsula, US-Russia relations, and Israel-Russia relations, Moscow seems to be determined to proceed with arms sales to Tehran in one form or another. In the meantime, arms sale is a potential tool to push Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward buying Russian arms. As Mark Katz argues, Moscow might be willing to hold off the sale of certain weapons to Tehran that Riyadh most fears, obtaining in return for compensation purchases of Russian arms by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>49</sup> In this way, Moscow could benefit from arms sales to Tehran as a means to achieve a larger objective, which is penetrating the lucrative arms market of the Persian Gulf region. Subsequently, the ultimate revenue of arms sales to Iran would be much higher than those official figures that Moscow and Tehran will conclude.

### *The changing geopolitics of Central Asia and Caucasus*

The Islamic Republic, in the last three decades, has proved that it is a reliable Russian partner in Central Asia and the Caucasus region, and that it recognizes Moscow's geopolitical interests. As much as it sees itself as a Middle Eastern power, Tehran is perceiving itself to be a Central Asian power. Yet, in sharp contrast to its Middle East policy, Tehran does not seek any revisionary power-projection strategy, either in Central Asia or in Caucasus. Instead, it follows a conservative position that aims to maintain the status quo in its northern borders. Russian authorities view Iran's efforts in these regions positively, as they both strive to stabilize the region and counteract Western encroachment<sup>50</sup> and most recently Turkey's aggressive spread of its political agenda. The Russian understanding is fundamentally influenced by the Islamic Republic's Russia-centric policy in Central Asia and Caucasus. In the words of former Iranian ambassador to Moscow, "Iran acknowledges Russia's leadership...as a guarantor of the balance of interests".<sup>51</sup>

However, a forceful regime change in Tehran and the emergence of a government that is unfriendly toward Russia significantly impacts future geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia and south Caucasus. It would endanger Russian interests in three main ways.

First, a war in Iran raises the risk of a leap in traditional destabilizing factors in Central Asian region, such as a rise in Radicalism and Narco-trafficking. In a time of conflict, Tehran will no longer be able to prevent the Jihadist elements in Iraq and Syria from linking up with their counterparts in Afghanistan

46 Ria Novosti (6 February 2019), "Head of the FSMTC expects the beginning of a new phase of cooperation between Russia and Iran" [in Russian], <https://ria.ru/20190206/1550442313.html>

47 Mehr News. (29 July 2019), "An agreement of military cooperation between Iran and Russia signed" [in Farsi], <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4679821/> می‌سور و-ناری-ن-ب-ی-ای-رد-ی-غاف-ت-ال-ماعت-هم-ان-ق-فاوت-ی-اضام

48 IRNA News Agency. (13 May 2020), "Iran has received arms sales proposals" [in Farsi], <https://www.irna.ir/news/83786798/> می‌ماظن-و-ی-غاف-ت-از-ی-هجت-ن-مات-ی-ارب-ی-ی-اهدادهن-شی-پ-ناری-ال-ج-مظاک

49 Katz, Mark. (9 June 2020), "Moscow is not buying Pompeo's Iran Snapback Sanctions Logic", *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/moscow-is-not-buying-pompeos-iran-snapback-sanctions-logic/>

50 Kozhanov, Nikolay. (Jun 2012), "Russia's Relations with Iran: Dialogue without commitments", *Policy Focus 120*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus120.pdf>

51 Sanaei, Mehdi. (2002), "Iran's Relations with Central Asian CIS Countries: Sociopolitical and Economic Aspects" [in Farsi], *Moscow Muravei*, p.128 quoted in Nicole Grajewski, 'Russia and Iran in Greater Eurasia', (2020), p.29

and vice versa.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the country's function as a geographical barrier will degrade. This situation will potentially exacerbate the Jihadi threat by providing them new opportunities to regroup while complicating the international anti-terrorism campaign. Besides, the previous experiences of conflicts in the Middle East confirms that Jihadists are the ultimate beneficiaries of war-torn countries suffering from weak statehood. This fact raises a possibility in which Iran itself would turn into a hotspot for groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda or similar extremist groups in the future. Such a development puts Central Asia and the South Caucasus in the proximity of a powerful destabilizing dynamic which deteriorates Russian threats in its *near-abroad*.

Second, the migration of new insecurity factors from Iran to the Central Asian security landscape and the Russian inability to guarantee the region's security will provide China and the US with fresh opportunities to accelerate their security presence in the region. At the moment, the key rationale for Russian presence in Central Asia is minimizing the spread of instability from Afghanistan and securing a buffer zone along its southern peripheries.<sup>53</sup> Yet, considering Russia's constrained resources, it is not clear if Russia will remain capable of blocking emerging instability risks that originate in Iran by its own means. The post-Iran war security environment in Central Asia will convince external powers to intervene and neutralize threats. To avoid such an undesirable outcome, Moscow will need to boost investment into the region's security. This possibility looks unrealistic given Russia's post-pandemic economic pressure.

China is highly interested in expanding its influence into Central Asia should Moscow fail to ensure the region's security. For now, Beijing's involvement in Central Asia is mostly limited to economic domination, but with the development of ambitious Chinese projects such as the Belt and Road initiative, China might decide to revise its security reliance on Russia in the region. The spillover of Iranian instability into Central Asia could provide the much-needed basis for Beijing's more assertive security agenda in Central Asia. Consequently, China's self-imposed limitation on Central Asian security policy<sup>54</sup> might be lifted should more urgent threats unfold, which in the end challenge the Russian-led security order manifested through CSTO in Eurasia.

A final source of threat to Russian interests will emerge from the reality that war in Iran would provide the Western allied forces, US troops and NATO, with new operational reasons and political incentives to boost their presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In spite of the shrinking US profile in Central Asia in recent years, Washington might be in need of a more secure basis for its logistical operations and thus seeks a renewed presence in the region. In addition, with the dissolution of Iran's anti-American policy, a post-war government in Tehran is likely to abandon resistance to American presence in its security environment. Instead, Tehran is likely to witness a radical shift of security policy, both due to the more pro-American regime and its own weakened power, as it acts as a facilitator of American military presence in the Russian near-abroad. The decline of Islamic Republic completes Russia's geopolitical encirclement by NATO and the Western security umbrella.

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52 Divsallar, Abdolrasool and Marc Otte. (July 2019), "Reviving the security function: EU's path to save the JCPOA", *Egmont Security Brief*, No 113, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/reviving-the-security-function-eus-path-to-save-the-jcpoa/>

53 Rumer, Eugen, Richard Sokolosky and Paul Stronski. (25 January 2016), "US Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/25/u.s.-policy-toward-central-asia-3.0-pub-62556#:~:text=During%20the%20first%20period%2C%20which,defend%20their%20newly%20won%20sovereignty%2C>

54 Swannstrom, Nikolas. (2015), "Central Asia and China's Security Policy", Chapter 16 in Lowell Dittmer and Maochun Yu, *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Security*, (Abingdon: Routledge)



## *Undermining Russian Objectives in Syria*

Moscow's and Tehran's existing frictions in Syria<sup>55</sup> have distanced them from their 2015 honeymoon, which they enjoyed after Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war. Nevertheless, a system of mutual dependencies has remained, which makes both sides interested in continuing the cooperation. Moscow's strategy in Syria will be negatively impacted if Iran's collision with the US overflows into the Levant. Russia resorted to active diplomacy immediately after US assassination of General Soleimani to prevent such an escalation. The Russian Defense Minister, General Sergey Shoigu, held telephone talks on 5 January 2020 with Iran's Chief of Staff, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, and Turkey's head of national intelligence, Hakan Fidan. Later, on 7 January, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a surprise visit to Syria and met Assad, while on 8 January, he held talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul. All of these signal that Moscow's calculus is that extension of US-Iran tension in Syria would be risky to Russian interests. At least three reasons contribute to this dynamic.

First, as far as the military operations of Assad's government sustain and the state's fragility bears the risk of new outbreaks of violence, a shrinking Iranian presence with no workable substitution plan would create a power vacuum in Syria. Such a vacuum has more importance in areas where the Iranian presence is concentrated, such as Deir-el-Zor, areas bordering Iraq, and Aleppo. A shrinking Iranian presence could also prevent Russia and Damascus from taking over Idlib. It could potentially hamper Assad's success in the fight against opposition and terrorist elements. Iran-backed militias are still conducting anti-ISIS operations,<sup>56</sup> demonstrating ongoing Russian dependency on Iran's stabilization assistance. At the same time, the Syrian state has remained fragile to both dangers of sudden political contests, as shown in the tensions between Rami Makhlouf and Bashar Al-Assad's clan,<sup>57</sup> and its inability to confront severe socio-economic crisis.

Principally, Moscow follows the strategic objective of rebuilding the Syrian army and expelling Iranian militias from the areas already militarily stabilized. As far as Moscow does not possess its own loyal ground-force or independent Syrian Army while the military phase of the conflict continues, it will remain dependent on Iranian military support to keep the status quo. Russia's experiences in forming the 5th Corps reveals it still lacks the capacity to forge a reliable ground force and cannot effectively fill the Iranian vacuum. If an Iranian power vacuum occurs amid intense struggles between Assad and oppositions, Moscow will either have to fill the vacuum through more direct military allocations or will be forced to accept stronger rival actors such as Turkey and the Arab states. For obvious reasons, neither option is regarded as favorable for Moscow. Supplying more resources looks unrealistic considering Russia's financial constraints, while Russia is competing with Turkey in the area. In this way, a war-torn Iran which is no longer capable of maintaining pro-Assad warfighting capability and contributes to Assad's stabilization is likely to upset Russia's interests in Syria.

Second, in the case of an open conflict between Iran and the US, Syria will likely transform into a battlefield for the unfolding war. Syria is already a battlespace of Iran-Israel engagement, but with much less escalatory impact. Indeed, Tehran's decision to refrain from retaliating against Israeli

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55 Points of contention are mainly linked to the diverging objectives over future of Syrian political settlement, the means and methods of a military reform, and the growing competition over access to the financial opportunities offered by Syrian economy. Both countries are misaligned in the approaches they have adopted to follow their interests. While Russia works more on state level, Iran prefers a grassroots-model of influence making.

56 Syrian Observatory Human Rights. (Jun 10 2020), "Regime forces and Iranian-backed militias sweep Deir Ezzor eastern desert, searching for ISIS cells", <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=169133>

57 Daher, Joseph. (13 May 2020), "The Syrian Presidential Palace Strengthens its Concentration of Power: The Rift Makhlouf-Assad", *Middle East Directions Policy Brief*, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67027/PB\\_2020\\_21\\_MED.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/67027/PB_2020_21_MED.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

attacks in its positions in Syria cannot be simply extended to a major US-Iran conflict scenario. From Tehran's point of view, the principal function of its so-called *axis of resistance*, which includes Syria, is to establish a strategic depth that reinforces deterrence against Washington. Forward deployment in Syria gives Iran offensive retaliatory capabilities against the US and its interests should the latter become involved in the conflict. As the commander in chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force has stressed, in case of an armed conflict, Iran will certainly enact multiple front lines throughout the Middle East, including Syria,<sup>58</sup> to entangle the enemy in a complexity of multiple scattered operational environments. The possibility of a military response beyond its national borders provides Tehran with freedom of maneuver to raise engagement costs for its adversaries.

The prospect of Syria caught up in a military confrontation between Washington and Tehran catastrophically damages Russian objectives. A similar scenario would also emerge from an escalation of regional tensions between Tehran and Riyadh. Vladimir Putin, referring to this aspect, has urged Iranian and Saudi leaders not to use Syrian territory as a site for confrontation.<sup>59</sup> Such developments would result in Israeli and American military interventions, challenging Russian supremacy in Syria, and a further weakening of Assad's government. Uncertainty regarding the dimension and level of Iranian arms proliferation in Syria, makes uncertain any Russian assumptions about the severity and depth of Iranian clash with its adversaries inside Syria. This factor adds to Russian risk assessment.

Today's Iranian positions in Syria are a far cry from the situation in 2017-2018, due to the transitory challenges of the Soleimani assassination, coupled with economic hardship, the impacts of COVID-19, and Israeli air strikes. However, this situation does not necessarily constitute Iran's declining influence or change the country's general strategy. Having Iranian strategic culture and recent military developments in mind, Tehran is conducting a continual process of reassessment with tactical readjustments including: securing its irregular hybrid warfare capability by both increasing counter-intelligence and deception tactics; lowering the exposure of Iranian high-profile commanders and mercenaries; revisiting command structures including giving Hezbollah's broader operational leadership role; more reinforcement of proxy militias in strategic zones;<sup>60</sup> redeployment and distribution of some of Hezbollah's forces to Daraa, Qalamoun, Western Ghouta and Damascus; replacing their banners with Syrian flags, and, fortifications of some positions within the same area.<sup>61</sup>

Moscow is fully aware of these developments. To minimize the risk of Iran-related tensions escalating in Syria, it is seeking a calculated distribution of influence through: checking Iranian power in Syria while averting the emergence of a power vacuum; persuading Tehran to withdraw its forces from the Syrian border with Israel;<sup>62</sup> conducting military reforms in the Syrian Army, pushing back against Iranian presence at the local level; providing Israel the possibility of conducting its Maban operation; and reducing the mobility of the Iran-backed forces due to the pandemic concerns.<sup>63</sup> These are among the steps Moscow has taken. However, the IRGC-Quds forces' bottom-up approach doctrine has

[illegible]

59 Tass. (3 October 2019), “Putin Cautions Iran, Saudi Arabia against Turning Syria into Site for Confrontation”,  
Tass News Agency, <https://tass.com/world/1081392>

60 Syrian Observatory Human Rights. (May 20 2020), “Iranian forces bring in tens of fighters to Al-Bokamal”, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=165605>

61 Ezzi, Mazen. (13 March 2020), "Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria", *RSCAS/Middle East Directions*,  
2020/04, p.10, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66546/MED\\_WPCS\\_2020\\_4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66546/MED_WPCS_2020_4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

62 Sergei Ryabkov, Interview with CNN, (January 25 2019), <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1901/25/cnr.20.html>

63 Mardasov, Anton. (31 March 2020), "Is COVID-19 changing Astana allies' dynamics in Syria?", *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/russia-iran-syria-turkey-coronavirus-subversion.html>

integrated loyal troops as an imperative part of Assad's armed forces, combined with myriad militias outside of the framework of the Syrian Arab Army, facilitating a deep-rooted structural influence which is hard for Russia to dismantle. As some observers conclude, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that Moscow's influence on the Syrian military and security system is strong and that attempts to replace pro-Iranian commanders with pro-Russian ones are actually successful.<sup>64</sup>

Third, a sharp decline in Iranian economic cooperation with Syria does not entirely fit Moscow's stabilization efforts. Iran plays a large role in helping the Assad regime to break US sanctions and provide essential services, including oil, to its population. A critical factor that helps Damascus sustain a minimum functionality. Tehran also plays a potential role in stabilizing Assad through investment and reconstruction projects. It has reached a strategic roadmap of economic cooperation with Damascus that specifically promotes Iranian private sector investments in Syria,<sup>65</sup> as well as alliances with local businessmen.<sup>66</sup> Although these investment plans have been hit hard by grave economic troubles after US sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, Tehran has remained a major Assad partner once it has recovered from current challenges.

Neither Moscow nor Tehran have the financial resources for around \$400 billion worth of investments that Assad's government requires in order to restore the country to its former economic level. That is why Iranian involvement in rebuilding Syria is strategically aligned with Moscow's long-term goal of stabilizing the country. Now that the Moscow has an upper hand in the earlier Russian-Iranian competition over the lucrative Syrian reconstruction projects and is proceeding with weakening the complex net of Iranian economic interests,<sup>67</sup> Moscow might welcome Tehran's participation in longer-term reconstruction efforts. At the same time, a major divergence between the EU-US alliance and Russia regarding Syrian reconstruction has so far blocked any meaningful international reconstruction cooperation.<sup>68</sup> The EU and the US have made it clear that they will not participate in the reconstruction efforts unless a political transition of power is agreed upon.

Tehran wishes to establish an economic block between Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran to boost its regional trade under US sanctions.<sup>69</sup> This places Iran among the few who are willing to take the risk of reconstruction investment in Syria due to its prospective opportunities. This role is viewed positively by Moscow as it serves Russia's objective to return stability to Syria and subsequently empower Assad's government. Moscow considers the best Syrian rebuilding scenario to be the one where the most capable players in the Middle East itself, such as the UAE, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are involved.<sup>70</sup> These factors discourage Russia from taking direct action against Iranian economic activities in Syria, with the exception of fair trade competition.

64 Anton Mardasov. (22 April 2020), "Why Russia's grip on Syrian military is weaker than it seems", *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/russia-syria-militias-iran.html>

65 Donyaye Egtesad. (10 December 2018), "Syrian Economic Menu for Iran" [in Farsi], <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/ناری-ای-داهن-قی-روس-ی-داصت-قا-ی-ون-م-3/3480774-ندع-م-ت-ع-ن-ص-ش-خ-ب/>

66 Azizi, Hamidreza. (22 February 2019), "Iran Seeks Economic Benefits from Syria", *The Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-seeks-economic-benefits-from-syria>

67 Hetahet, Sinan. (March 2019), "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria", *Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>

68 Hilterman, Joost. (2019), "Russian, the EU, and the struggle over Syria reconstruction", in Andrey Kortunov, Joost Hilterman, R.Sh Mamedov, T.A Shmeleva, "Squaring the Circle: Russian and European views on Syrian reconstruction", *Russian international Affair Council (RIAC)*, Report No 49, pp. 9-13, <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-EU-Syria-Report48-En.pdf>

69 Egtesad News, <https://www.eghtesadonline.com/قار-ع-ناری-ای-داهن-قی-کولب-لی-کشت-داهن-شی-پ-14/383088-ت-ع-ن-ص-ش-خ-ب/>

70 Kortunov, Andrey, Joost Hilterman, R.Sh Mamedov, T.A Shmeleva. (2019), "Squaring the Circle: Russian and European views on Syrian reconstruction", *Russian international Affair Council (RIAC)*, Report No 49, p.5 <https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-EU-Syria-Report48-En.pdf>

## 4. Implications for Russian Middle East Policy

The possible US-Iran conflict is different from previous American interventions in the Middle East. A looming conflict will not be one between a superpower and a fragile state such as Iraq, but rather a confrontation with a regional power enjoying a network of well-armed regional proxies, a second-strike offensive capability, and ideological influence in the region. The Islamic Republic's investment in an asymmetrical military power helps it to make use of interconnections among conflicts in the Middle East, based on the logic that ignition of any war with the US will produce regional conflagration. The IRGC Commander in Chief, Major General Hossein Salami, makes this clear by rejecting any possibility of a limited war with Iran, emphasizing that "a limited attack will not remain limited, we will not surrender until we take the war into the territories of the aggressor."<sup>71</sup> Russian leaders seem to be aware of the escalatory risks of this scenario. On June 2019 in a televised address, Vladimir Putin called a war between the US and Iran a catastrophe for both the region as a whole and those who wage it.

As argued in this paper, assessments about the implications of such an escalation for Russian Middle East policy follow two directions: one considers the benefits that arise from the tensions and another notes the risks and threats that might emerge from a deteriorating security environment in the Russian Southern neighborhood. Though Russia's way of balancing these considerations remains unclear, what seems inevitable is that a US-Iran clash will impact almost all aspects of Russian Middle East policy. A weakened or failed Islamic Republic, changes the prospects of Moscow continuing its balancing act in the region and damages Russia's reputation for the capability of protecting its partners. Both lie at the core of Russia's current Middle East policy.

Current Russian Middle East policy is only compatible with a strategic environment which no single state is strong enough to obtain a dominant role. In such a distribution of power, Moscow's balancing act comprises simultaneous partnerships with competing regional players, with itself in the role of the unbiased mediator among actors. What Putin seems to be banking on is that each side anticipates that not cooperating with Moscow will result in Russia aiding its rivals even more – thus giving each an incentive to continue or even enhance their friendly relations with Russia.<sup>72</sup> Fueling this constant competition between rival states helps Moscow to motivate each side to buy Russian support.

The ability to preserve this policy fundamentally depends on keeping the current status quo, characterized by a lack of any regional hegemon and the existence of multiple regional powers capable enough to continue competing. Any profound damage to the Islamic Republic's position in the Middle East will produce new uncertainties in the region's balance of power and its future dynamics. It might even contribute to the emergence of a dominant regional power, given the more ambitious agenda among actors such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Partnering with Iran has been a useful leverage that Moscow effectively played to expand its influence over Tel-Aviv and Riyadh. If taken off the table, it could undermine Moscow's capacity to maintain the balance of power. The dissolution of Iranian hostility to Saudi Arabia and Israel is likely to impact these countries' cooperation choices with Russia.

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71 Salami, Hossein. (21 September 2019), "We Have Increased the Unknown Threats to Our Enemies" [in Farsi], *Mashregh News*, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/> دی لوت-ت ردق-هل ل-م س ب-دوش-گ ن ج-ی لص ا-ن ادی-م-ش ن ی م زرس-ده اوخی م-س کره

72 Katz, Mark N (7 May 2018), "Balancing Act: Russia between Iran and Saudi Arabia", *LSE Middle East Center Memo*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/26/balancing-act-russia-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>



In addition, the Iranian crisis is a potential challenge to the Russian image as a credible partner. Moscow wishes to offer its partnership in the Middle East to those seeking to diversify their foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> Started with Russian and Iranian convergence in the Syrian civil war and in a range of other issues, Tehran and Moscow's deep-seated partnership has become a dominant feature of bilateral relations. Isolating the Islamic Republic and giving no response to the possibility of a US attack will highlight Moscow's unwillingness and inability for strong commitments. This policy will support claims calling Russia's policy in the Middle East a series of short-term interest-based partnerships, and a number of transactional behaviors rather than a long-term strategic policy.<sup>74</sup> Further, it revives the memories of Russia's incapability in preventing Western-led wars against Yugoslavia, Libya, and Iraq, and its failure to protect its friends. This dynamic will damage Russia's desire to distance itself from past weakness.

On the other hand, if Russia is contemplating proving commitment to its partners, it is likely to find itself in a bigger challenge. Any decision to end neutrality and provide stronger commitments to any of the partners will be at the expense of damaging relations with the rest. This will make any side-taking in a crisis significantly costly. Marks Katz describes such a scenario as follows "if Russia supported Iran in a conflict against a US-backed Saudi Arabia, Russia could quickly lose influence with Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies".<sup>75</sup>

In this way, a US-Iran conflict will put Russia's Middle East policy into a dilemma. The choice will be between remaining neutral, and accepting risk of facing new threats, combined with credibility loss, and taking sides and ruining the *honest broker* strategy that Moscow enjoyed from. In either of these choices, Moscow's current Middle East policy is unlikely to remain the same. The policy of working simultaneously with all parties and benefiting from maneuvering on the edge of tensions may work effectively in the pre-conflict era, but the costs of maintaining such a strategy will become much higher should a war break out.

## 5. Conclusion: Imagining the Russian Response

A Russian response to any US-Iran war seems inevitable. This response is likely to be influenced by two factors: Russian perception of threats from the confrontation, and Moscow's political and economic opportunities that would arise from a conflict.

In Russia's response to previous US-led wars in Iraq, Libya, and Kosovo, Moscow's decisions were influenced by risks and threats to its core interests. One RAND Institute study asserts that these wars were not necessarily seen as a direct threat to Russia's core interests<sup>76</sup>, thus combined with Moscow's resource constraints contributed to a modest Russian response. In a sharp departure from the late 90s and early 2000s, contemporary Russia is a powerbroker with a better foreign policy toolbox in the Middle East that is serving its global power aspirations. Moscow is likely to seek to pragmatically minimize the negative implications of any regional conflict for its position in the region.

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73        Trenin, Dmitry. (2016), "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's objectives, priorities, and policy drivers", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, P.4, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf)

74        Sladden, James, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, Sarah Grand-Clement. (2017), "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", *Rand Corporation*, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE236/RAND\\_PE236.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE236/RAND_PE236.pdf)

75        Katz, Mark N. (26 June 2018), "Balancing Act: Russia between Iran and Saudi Arabia", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/06/26/balancing-act-russia-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>

76        Radin, Andrew and Clint Reach. (2017), "Russian Views of the International Order", *Rand Corporation*, p.64, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1826.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html)

US motivation for conducting a military operation in Iran will affect the Russian threat perception. While any US attack on Iran for regime change, disputes over regional issues, and accidental collisions may seem threatening to Moscow, a US preemptive strike to stop the nuclear weapons program as a last resort might be interpreted differently. A game-changing factor in Moscow's calculations is Iran's decision to develop a nuclear bomb. If under a heavy security threat, Tehran calculates in favor of the security benefit of possessing nuclear weapons, then Moscow will face a tough choice. Moscow's resistance to a possible US preventive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities risks a major proliferation crisis and raises the probability of a nuclear state emerging in the Russian southern neighborhood, while giving the green light to a US surgical strike causes unpredictable large-scale instabilities and complicates Russian Middle East policy.

As shown in this paper, Russia has certain gains from these heightened tensions but faces more threats if they escalate militarily. This dynamic maximizes Moscow's interests in a grey area that is between any open conflict between Iran and the US and their reconciliation. A system of controlled tension helps Moscow to augment benefits while minimizing threats of full escalation. This is a situation in which US-Iran relations and the Iran-Arab ties remain strained, but do not boil over into an open conflict. Any departure from this situation is undesirable to Moscow, because it would deprive it of its current advantage of avoiding taking sides.<sup>77</sup> On this basis, Moscow's primary objective would be to save the current status-quo through preventing regional deterrence from collapse and a diplomatic resolution of non-proliferation concerns. Despite a serious leverage deficit in implementing this policy, Moscow will likely rely on a hybrid of diplomatic maneuvers and military assistance as a remedy.

The idea that Russia will take Iran's side in a possible US-Iran military conflict is as inconsistent with Russia's *Realpolitik* as the idea that Russia will fully step aside and watch a major shift in the regional balance of power take place. Moscow's perception of threat from any fundamental changes in the regional power equations through regime change or a failed state in Tehran is likely to push the Kremlin to take steps toward defusing existential threats to the Islamic Republic. Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, in his speech on June 2019 during a trilateral meeting of the security chiefs of Russia, Israel and the United States, demonstrated Russia's recognition of the Islamic Republic's threat perception. He noted: "We understand the [security] concerns that Israel has, and we want these threats to be eliminated so that Israeli security is guaranteed.... At the same time, we should never forget about the national interests that other regional powers [Iran] have."<sup>78</sup>

Moscow has not only recognized the Islamic Republic's perception of existential threats, but has also acknowledged Iran's right to maintain defense capabilities against threats to be legitimate.<sup>79</sup> This approach helps Russia to prevent Tehran from pursuing the benefits of nuclear weapons. Part of the Russian solution of defusing existential threats against the Islamic Republic manifests itself in readiness to offer military assistance to strengthen Iranian conventional deterrence. Based on what has been discussed, Moscow and Tehran have sped up their planning of future military-technical coordination since 2019. It is likely that Moscow will reach a new deal on enhanced military cooperation, including at the operational level, such as previously exercised a joint naval drill in the Indian Ocean. According to the Commander in Chief of the Iranian Navy, Hossein Khanzadi, such a deal is a turning point in

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77 Kortonuv, Andrey. (2019), "The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Actions", Chapter 3 in Karim Mezran and Arturo Vervelli, *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, ISPI and Atlantic Council, Milan: Ledi Publishing, p. 50, [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/ispi\\_report\\_mena\\_region\\_2019.pdf#page=53](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/ispi_report_mena_region_2019.pdf#page=53)

78 Toi Staff. (24 June 2019), "Netanyahu Tells Russian Officials: We Will Do Anything to Prevent Nuclear Iran", *Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-tells-russian-official-we-will-do-anything-to-prevent-nuclear-iran/>

79 Nebenzya, Vasily. (11 April 2019), "Interview: Iran and Turkey Will Leave Syria", *Asharq-al-Awsat*, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1674386/iran-and-turkey-will-leave-syria-russia%E2%80%99s-un-ambassador-tells-asharq-al-awsat>

the history of the two countries' military cooperation.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, cooperation with Tehran does not contradict keeping regional deterrence intact. Putin's proposal that Saudi Arabia purchase S-400 SAM systems, clearly sends this message to Tehran.

However, Moscow's steps would be cautious and as reiterated in the Negrono-Karabakh response model, is likely to follow "Russia first and non-commitment principles."<sup>81</sup> It is unlikely that the policy of not supplying Tehran with offensive weapons will change radically, but that doesn't mean Russia has no way of enhancing Iran's anti-access capabilities. The history of the military-to-military ties between Tehran and Moscow provides a picture of what steps Moscow may take to deter an attack on Iran. Interplay between the two countries has evolved around arms sales, intelligence sharing, and operational cooperation. Now, accompanied by newly established joint commissions, Moscow may use these patterns of cooperation as a platform with which to stream new assistance to the Islamic Republic. That includes: fortification of Iran's air defense systems; deployment of Russia's military assets to Iran in order to limit the scope or complicate US operation; and providing Iran with limited operational intelligence prior to or during the outbreak of an armed conflict with the US.<sup>82</sup>

Zamir Kabulov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's special envoy for Asian countries argued in July 2019 that Russia is unlikely to remain completely neutral if a war breaks out. He said that "Iran will withstand [this type of] fight and Iran is not alone...but if the U.S. attacks, any specific actions are a question for the Russian President."<sup>83</sup> However, it is again unlikely that Moscow would directly intervene in any US-Iran conflict, and step away from its unbiased player status in the Middle East any time soon. Any decision to provide Tehran with the level of military support that could be considered a game-changer not only puts the Kremlin's balancing act in jeopardy but also undermines the Kremlin's reluctance to become involved in an actual military confrontation.

The above complications highlight that, should a conflict unfold, Moscow's options for effective response and reconstruction of its strategy in the Middle East is constrained, causing Russia's influence in the region to shrink. To tackle this situation, Moscow is likely to increase its diplomatic efforts to mediate between Iran, the US, and Persian Gulf states to prevent tensions from spilling over into an armed conflict. To be successful, this line of policy should go beyond nuclear diplomacy and diplomatic support to Iran. It requires active Russian involvement in preventing a current security system in the Persian Gulf from collapsing. Despite Moscow's limited options for generating significant diplomatic force behind such an objective, Moscow's toolbox is better equipped when it comes to small-scale de-escalation endeavors. Among them is the possibility of using previous crisis management experiences. For example, Russia successfully reduced the chances of collision with the US over Syria through a military-to-military deconfliction strategy. In another case, Russia played a role in managing tensions between Iran and Israel in Syria. Having such experiences, Moscow should take a more active crisis management stand before a new wave of change starts to roll through the Middle East.

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80 Khanzadi, Hossein. (29 June 2019), "Iran and Russia Will Conduct Joint Naval Drill Soon" [in Farsi], *Defa Moghadas News Agency*, <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/355865/> دن نکی م-راز گ رپ-ک رت ش م-ش ی ام ز ر-ی دوز پ-ه ی س و ر-و ن اری ا.

81 Trenin, Dmitry. (12 November 2020), "Moscow's New Rules", Carnegie Moscow Center, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83208?s=09>

82 Divsallar, Abdolrasool and Petr Kurtonov. (27 May 2019), "Moscow's options in the wake of US military confrontation with Iran", *American Herald Tribune*, <https://ahtribune.com/world/3181-russia-iran-us-military-confrontation.html>

83 Moscow Times. (26 June 2019), "Iran won't be alone if US attacks, Russian official says", <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/06/26/iran-wont-be-alone-if-us-attacks-russian-official-says-a66169>

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