



The University of Tehran Press

Journal of Iran and Regional Studies

Online ISSN: 2645-6060

Home Page: <https://ijces.ut.ac.ir>

Russia and China's policies, goals and interests in West Asia and its impact on the Islamic Republic of Iran's interests

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:
Received 19 October 2023
Revised 16 November 2023
Accepted 08 December 2023
Published Online 20 December 2023

Keywords:
*Offensive Realism,
Russia,
China,
Iran,
Interests,
Foreign policy,
Middle East.*

ABSTRACT

The present world order faces a significant rift due to the growing political and economic influence of Russia and China as dissatisfied actors. West Asia (hereinafter referred to as the Middle East) has long remained a strategic region of interest for major powers. Favorable conditions have emerged that allow Russia and China to leverage the anti-American sentiment in the Middle East. Both countries are actively expanding their presence and influence in the region to serve their respective goals and interests. This article aims to identify and compare the objectives and interests of Russia and China in the Middle East, while assessing their impact on Iran's interests. Through the application of Offensive Neo-classical Realism theory, this study reveals that Russia and China pursue a cooperative policy in the Middle East with a common goal of enhancing their positions as major powers within the international system. Iran, possessing a special strategic and geopolitical position, holds significance for both countries. While Russia focuses primarily on political-security matters, China places emphasis on diplomatic, economic, and trade issues. Although Russia and Iran can collaborate to challenge the established US order in the region, their contrasting approaches to stabilizing the Middle East create a divergence of interests. However, recognizing the negative aspects of Russia's policy towards Iran does not imply a complete abandonment of cooperation with Moscow. Meanwhile, China's popularity in Iran is currently on the rise, aided by its willingness to engage in trade and investment under a 25-year strategic agreement, thereby undermining US efforts to isolate Iran and impose international sanctions.

Cite this article: Abbaszadeh Fathabadi, M. & Kamali, Y. (2023). Russia and China's policies, goals and interests in West Asia and its impact on the Islamic Republic of Iran's interests. *Journal of Iran and Regional Studies*, 6 (1), 1-14. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/JICES.2023.95139>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/JICES.2023.95139>

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

Introduction

The current global order is experiencing a deep rift primarily due to the dissatisfaction of Russia and China as major economic powers (Houlden and Zaamout, 2019; Scobell and Nader, 2016). This shift has significantly influenced the foreign policy orientation of major actors in the new international system concerning both international and regional issues. Among the strategic regions in the world, West Asia (also known as the Middle East) has long been the focus of great powers primarily due to its abundant oil and gas resources.

In recent years, various factors have contributed to the enhanced opportunity for emerging powers like Russia and China to exploit the anti-American sentiment prevalent in the region (Trenin, 2016; Stronski and Sokolsky, 2017). These factors include the consequences of 9/11, revolutionary developments in the Middle East and North Africa, and perceived missteps by the United States (US), such as engaging in media and propaganda wars against Muslims and military interventions. Consequently, Russia and China are actively increasing their presence and influence in the Middle East to pursue their respective goals and interests. As major powers, both countries are striving to solidify their positions and expand their ties with different countries in the region across various domains. A key aspect of their strategies lies in maintaining a two-level balance: balancing with the United States (US) and fostering balanced relations between regional powers. China, particularly in recent years, has aimed to curb US hegemony through the development of economic and trade relationships (Houlden and Zaamout, 2019; Scobell and Nader, 2016). On the other hand, Russia seeks to restore its status as a great power in the Middle East and, ultimately, challenge US hegemony (Trenin, 2016; Stronski and Sokolsky, 2017).

In light of these developments, it becomes crucial to examine the dynamics of Russia and China's interests in the Middle East and assess their potential impact. This study aims to offer an analysis of their respective goals and interests, comparing them with each other while exploring their implications for Iran. The main question of the research is what are the goals and interests of Russia and China in the Middle East? And what is its impact on Iran's interests in the region?

1. Literature review

Certainly! Based on various research articles, the different aspects of Russia and China's interests in the Middle East can be summarized as follows. Firstly, in their study on China's rising role in the region, Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi and Mahdi Farazi (2012) examined the impact of obstacles and opportunities in the Middle East on China's strategic objectives. They applied the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and analyzed political, security, economic, cultural, and strategic factors. The article highlights that the Middle East holds significant importance in China's long-term grand strategy, with the Islamic Republic of Iran potentially becoming a key focus and strategic ally for China through certain modifications in its international behaviors.

A study conducted by Alireza Nouri (2020) analyzed the cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Middle East, taking a realistic view of concepts such as order, stability, and balance. With a systematic approach, the article examined the interrelationship of these concepts across different levels and regions. It emphasized the complex and multifaceted definition of stability and order in the Middle East, arguing that the region's stability is not solely dependent on agreements or balances between great powers but is also influenced by regional powers like Iran. The article highlighted that Iran, through its own capabilities and interactions with great powers, has an impact on the balance system, and its cooperation with Russia plays a significant role in macro-level balancing against US destabilizing policies. Moreover, by emphasizing a broad regional balance system, Iran and Russia contribute to moderating and ensuring strategic stability. While Moscow's policy imposes restrictions on Tehran, certain aspects, such as deterring the destabilizing behavior of the US and its allies, work in Iran's favor.

Similarly, Elaheh Koolaee et al. (2018) conducted a study on the factors and motivations behind Russian Middle East policy. They proposed that changes in Russian perceptions of political and economic issues in the "Near Abroad" and the quest for geopolitical balanced equilibrium in its relationship with the West have influenced its Middle East policy. The authors aimed to examine these motivations to elucidate the fundamental principles and overall formation of Russian Middle East policy. The study revealed a shift in Russia's policymaking approach, transitioning from idealistic

principles to realist ones. This shift in Russian policy has specific implications for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Alireza Nouri (2019) conducted a study on the concepts of balance and stability in Russia's Middle East policy and their implications for Iran. The author posited that Russia aims to establish balance and strategic stability at two levels to protect its long-term interests, considering its limited resources and the potential for regional instability to spill over and affect adjacent areas and the international stage. At the regional level, Russia focuses on balancing its relations with the United States and fostering balanced relations among regional powers, with the ultimate goal of ensuring strategic stability.

Catez Therme (2018) shed light on the converging interests between Iran and Russia in the Middle East, as well as areas of friction between the two countries. The author highlighted an internal debate in Iran regarding the formulation of a new regional and foreign policy in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and during the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. As international relationships are not purely bilateral, the Tehran-Moscow relationship is to some extent influenced by US foreign policy.

Roie Yellinek (2016) explained that China has taken significant actions related to the Middle East, signaling a new approach to the region since early 2016. These actions include the visit of the Chinese president to the Middle East, the passing of a new law allowing China to engage in military actions beyond its borders, and the establishment of a Chinese forum aimed at promoting peace in the region. These actions represent a departure from China's traditional stance of non-interference and indicate a shift in China's perception of the region. Furthermore, the execution of the Shiite cleric Nimr Baqr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia, shortly before Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the Middle East, triggered a strong response from Iran. Iran, considering itself the leading Shiite power and an old rival of Saudi Arabia, vehemently denounced the execution.

Parris H. Chang (2011) highlighted the evolution of China's policy toward the Middle East, driven by the country's growing power and changes in the global economic and political landscape. As China gained economic and diplomatic strength, it became increasingly interested in expanding its influence and protecting its interests in the region, aiming to shape geopolitics in a manner favorable to its goals. The development and consolidation of energy resources, as well as the pursuit of investment opportunities and consumer markets for Chinese goods, emerged as major policy priorities since the 1980s, following Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms.

Mordechia Chaziza (2019) examined China's economic diplomacy approach in the conflicts of the Middle East. The study argued that while China adheres to the principle of non-intervention, its economic diplomacy adopts a more flexible and pragmatic interpretation. In the Middle East, Chinese economic diplomacy utilizes its diplomatic resources when necessary to safeguard its investments and assets, and employs economic incentives to advance its well-defined foreign policy objectives in the region's hotspots.

Jiang Liangxiang (2020) highlights three drivers of tension and instability in the Middle East and Gulf region: erratic and unilateral policies of the United States, economic underdevelopment, and growing competition among regional actors. China faces economic challenges arising from the Middle East and is increasingly urged to play a more active role in the region. However, China's capabilities and interests may limit its involvement in certain roles. China's approach to regional security involves promoting political solutions, contributing to economic development, and providing security resources within the framework of the United Nations. China is supportive of Russia's vision for regional security cooperation and favors holding an international conference on Middle East security that includes roles for regional and external actors. Lee Dong Gyu (2021) examines China's policy change in the Middle East, noting that China has expanded its influence by focusing on economic cooperation partnerships. China's strategic goals in the region revolve around securing energy access and promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China prioritizes maintaining the status quo and avoiding involvement in political or religious conflicts in the region, seeking to protect its economic interests and avoid confrontation with the United States. China emphasizes economic relations with countries in the region, adhering to the principle of non-intervention and seeking common ground while acknowledging differences.

It's worth noting that different articles may analyze the goals and interests of Russia and China in the Middle East separately. However, in the present article, the focus is on applying Offensive Realism to examine the goals and interests of China and Russia in the Middle East, and their impact on Iran's interests.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theory of interdependence, proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, asserts that economic issues have gained prominence in the contemporary world, while military and security concerns have diminished in importance (Keohane and Nye, 2011). This theory is often utilized to explain the relations between great powers and the Middle East, particularly in the case of China. China's focus on economic goals and interests aligns well with the theory of interdependence. Scholars such as George Friedman (2012), and Willy Lam (2004) have applied this theoretical framework to analyze China's engagements with the Middle East. They argue that China places a strong emphasis on economic cooperation and seeks to establish mutually beneficial relationships based on interdependence. China's pursuit of economic goals and interests in the Middle East aligns with the theory's assertion that economic and welfare objectives are increasingly important in global affairs.

Decision-making theory, as a micro-level perspective, focuses on the impact of internal structures and decision-makers on a country's external behavior. It delves into the role of national actors in shaping foreign policy (Hudson and Vore, 1995). This theory has been applied in analyzing the foreign policy of Vladimir Putin and the Siloviki group in the Middle East, highlighting the role of decision-makers and their internal dynamics (Bremmer and Charap, 2007).

In contrast, the article introduces the theory of offensive neoclassical realism to explain the goals and interests of Russia and China. This theory considers a country's foreign policy primarily driven by its position in the international system and military capabilities, while also acknowledging the influence of internal structures and mental perceptions of actors (Rose, 1998).

According to John Mearsheimer, hegemony is the ultimate goal of governments, particularly great powers, which are influenced by international politics. While global hegemony is unlikely, regional hegemony becomes a fundamental objective for countries. They seek to build military, nuclear, and economic power to enhance their relative strength within a specific region (Toft, 2005). Offensive neoclassical realism emphasizes an expansionist foreign policy, but it also recognizes the rational and strategic nature of states, incorporating the concept of "calculated aggression" (Mearsheimer, 2006).

It seems that the article argues that the theory of offensive neoclassical realism is better suited to explain the goals and interests of Russia and China in the Middle East. It suggests that both countries are driven by a pursuit of power and seek to limit US hegemony. They have demonstrated their capacity to establish relations with challenging Western countries such as Iran and Syria. Additionally, there is a competition for relative gains between Russia and China, primarily centered around political and security issues. The global policies of both countries are influenced by the perceptions of their domestic elites, particularly during periods of reform in Russia and under the Chinese communist government.

The theory of offensive neoclassical realism, as articulated by Mearsheimer, focuses on the pursuit of regional hegemony to enhance security. This theory can adequately explain the policies of Russia and China in the Middle East, especially after the Arab revolutions and the reduced US presence in the region. Some authors, such as Stephen Walt, Stephen Mosher, and Richard Heydarian, have examined China's expanding role in the Middle East and its potential for hegemony. They view China as an inevitable superpower that will dominate world politics through its economic power. Other authors have also applied the paradigm of offensive neoclassical realism to analyze Russian foreign policy (Koolae and Azizi, 2016). Therefore, the use of offensive neoclassical realism provides a theoretical framework that aligns with the argument made in the article regarding the goals and interests of Russia and China in the Middle East.

Table 1. Concepts and Assumptions of Offensive Realism

Concepts and assumptions of offensive neoclassical realism

- The impact of domestic policy on foreign policy
- Emphasis on the anarchic atmosphere of international relations
- The focus on political and security issues
- The pursuit of relative interests by the great powers
- Pursuit of hegemonic foreign policy by the great powers

Source: authors

3. Research method

Russia and China, two influential states in the Middle East, are engaged in a fierce competition for regional dominance. This research aims to analyze and compare their goals and interests in the region while examining their impact on Iran's interests. To do so, the study utilizes Table 1, which outlines five assumptions derived from Offensive Realism, to explain Russia and China's objectives in the Middle East. The article is structured into three sections. The first section delves into China's goals and interests, followed by a section dedicated to Russia's goals and interests in the Middle East. Finally, the research explores and interprets the consequences of these goals and interests on Iran's interests.

Using a descriptive-exploratory approach, the research identifies the stated goals and interests of Russia and China by analyzing statements from senior government officials and analysts in the media. Data collection primarily relies on publicly available sources, with a focus on public websites. The data analysis employs a simple content analysis technique, with paragraphs and sentences serving as the unit of analysis. For evaluating the impact of Russia and China's goals and interests on Iran's interests in the Middle East, an interpretative approach is applied. Researchers offer their interpretations and categorizations, continually reviewing and refining them until consensus is reached.

4. Research findings

findings are organized into three sections that address different aspects related to Russia, China, and Iran in the Middle East:

1. The first section provides a comprehensive description of Russia's goals and interests in the region. It examines the declared objectives and interests of Russia as expressed by senior government officials and analysts in the media. The focus is on understanding Russia's motivations and aspirations in the Middle East.
2. The second section focuses on China's goals and interests in the Middle East. It explores the stated objectives and interests of China as articulated by government officials and analysts. The section aims to provide an in-depth understanding of China's strategic intentions and priorities in the region.
3. The third section is dedicated to explaining the impacts of the goals and interests of both China and Russia on Iran's interests in the Middle East. Using an interpretative approach, the researchers analyze and interpret the consequences of these goals and interests on Iran. The section aims to present a cohesive analysis of the effects and implications for Iran in light of the competing influences of Russia and China.

4.1 Russia's goals and interests

To establish itself as a major global power once again, Russia has strategically prioritized the Middle East in its foreign policy, particularly during Putin's second term. This heightened attention towards the Middle East can be attributed to Russia's "looking to the East" policy and the prevailing Eurasianist perspective within Putin's government (Koolaei, 2005: 123). In essence, Russia's internal structure, its pursuit of a global policy, and its self-perception as a great power heavily influence its foreign policy approach towards the Middle East (Bochkarev, 2006: 2).

According to the neoclassical view of aggression, Russia perceives the Middle East as a strategically sensitive region essential for advancing its global ambitions. It seeks to restore itself as a major world power, which necessitates a strong presence and control over the Middle East. Russia possesses the capability to engage with key actors in the region, such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, playing a significant role in shaping dynamics within the Middle East (Bochkarev, 2006: 2). Russia's intervention in the Iranian nuclear crisis and the Arab-Israeli conflict serves the purpose of projecting itself as a supra-regional power, aiming to cultivate a favorable image on the international stage. From the perspective of offensive realism, Russia's revival of influence within the regional order of the Middle East serves as a means to challenge the desired regional order championed by the United States (Bochkarev, 2006: 2). In summary, Russia's foreign policy focus on the Middle East is driven by:

Preserving and promoting economic and trade interests is one of Russia's most important goals in the Middle East. Russia has significant energy interests in the Middle East, including nuclear, oil and gas. Rosneft's investment in gas extraction off the Mediterranean coast of Egypt worth \$ 2 billion (2017) and \$ 1.8 billion investment in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region in the production and transfer of oil to Turkey

(2017), as well as investment in southern Iraq to exploit Oil fields (2017) and other such investments in Egypt and Libya are among the most important Russian investments in this field. Lukoil and Gazprom oil and gas companies are also operating in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Oman (Meliksetian, 2018). In this way, Russia increases its influence on the world oil and gas market and, consequently, strengthens its tools of power in world politics. Cooperation in the construction of reactors and nuclear power plants with Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey, and Western protests against it, shows Putin's success in this field (Kozhanov, 2017). Russian companies Lukoil Company and Stroy Trans Gas Company are involved in Saudi and Russian oil and gas markets and Rusatom Corporation is active in the construction of nuclear reactor in Saudi Arabia (Kosach, 2016: 5). In this way, Russia benefits both economically and increases its global prestige.

Arms sales to Middle Eastern countries that have existed since the former Soviet era are also among Russia's goals and interests in the region (Weir, 2012). Russia has exported arms and military equipment to more than 14 countries in the Middle East since 2010. The transfer of the S400 to US partners and allies and NATO members in the region is a significant challenge to Western interests. The Saudi-Russian agreement to purchase the system, the \$ 2.5 billion agreement with Turkey to purchase the system, and similar talks with Egypt (National Interest, 2017) indicate Russia's unprecedented activity in this area. After Arab Spring, the purchase of Russian weapons increased, and in 2017, the Middle East became the first buyer of Russian weapons with a purchase of \$ 15 billion (Brisov, 2018: 37).

Preventing the spread of the terrorist threats to Russia's southern borders is another goal and motivation of Russia to strengthen relations with the Middle East. Attempts to limit the support of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even Yemen for Chechen fighters are one of the factors that draws Russia's attention to the Middle East (Bowker, 2007: 79). One of the reasons for Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad is its deep concern about the spread of Salafi-Wahhabi Islam to the republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia and its Muslim republics. The latest Russian foreign policy document in 2016 addresses threats to the southern borders by Islamic extremists (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

The Arab Spring, which led to the formation of a new regional order in the Middle East, in fact paved the way for Russia to play a greater role in the region. This role-playing in Syria is quite obvious, and today Russian politicians assess the future of the Middle East as dependent on the future of Syria (Mirfakhraei, 2017: 2). Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis in 2015 serves as a clear testament to its commitment to shaping events in the region. This intervention allowed Russia to actively participate in the resolution of the conflict, supporting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. By doing so, Russia not only protected its strategic interests in Syria but also positioned itself as a key player in the Middle East's evolving regional dynamics.

Table 2. Russia's goals and interests in the Middle East

Russia's goals and interests in the Middle East

- Efforts to maintain and expand geopolitical influence
 - Demonstrate power and gain international prestige
 - Strategic resistance to the West (balancing)
 - Prevent the spread of terrorism and extremism
 - Providing economic and commercial benefits and arms sales
-

Source: authors

4.2 China's goals and interests

China intends to increase its relations with the Middle East, and this has been a concern for Western countries. China's Middle East policy has generally been based on the concept of "balancing". Also, the policy of cooperation and competition with the United States, the new Silk Road and Belt project, cultural influence and increasing soft power globally must be mentioned. Many of the region's political leaders are fascinated by China's Westphalian policy of neutrality, respect for independence and national sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

China's foreign policy in the Middle East indeed displays a unique ability to navigate complex relationships and establish good ties with rival power blocs and various parties involved. China maintains positive relations with countries like Iran and Syria, as well as their rival governments such as Saudi Arabia

and Qatar. Additionally, China has cultivated good relations with both Israel and Hamas, which indicates a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to its Middle East policy. From a theoretical standpoint, this approach aligns with the principles of neoclassical realism (Muhammad, 2014: 440), which emphasizes the pursuit of national interests and the balancing of power in international relations. The following strategic objectives and views allows China to chiefly avoid entanglement in regional conflicts, or taking sides, thereby maintaining stability and maximizing its own benefits.

From an economic point of view, relations between China and the Middle East are increasingly tied and expanding at an increasing rate. China has increased its trade with Middle Eastern countries 13 times from 2001 to 2017, to \$ 241 billion, and during the same period, it has increased its export from \$ 11 billion to \$ 126 billion (Trade map, 2018). In 2017, China exceeded the United States in this field by consuming about 9 million barrels per day. China is currently the largest importer of crude oil in the world and imports almost half of its needs from abroad, mainly from the Middle East (Global Energy Statistical Yearbook, 2018). China's dependence on oil energy will increase in the future. Analysts predict that China's share of the global consumer market will double to more than 14% over the next two decades (Xuecheng, 2017: 3). The issue of energy security will be one of the factors influencing the political economy paradigm of the 21st century, including China (Cadler, 2005: 15).

Investment and mutual partnership between China and the Middle East are also very important. In recent years, rich Middle Eastern countries have moved to invest more in China, and in return there is a strong desire to attract investment from Chinese companies that are more willing to transfer technology than Western companies (Weede, 2010: 211). In this regard, China's actions can be analyzed in the form of a "two imports, one export" strategy; That is, importing energy and capital from the region to meet their needs and exporting capital in the field of exploration and development of energy projects in the region (Soltani et al., 2011: 225). According to the offensive neoclassical view of realism, Chinese politicians perceive that a competition for energy resources has begun between the great powers, including China and the United States, based on a win-lose game (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2008: 135,136).

China's strategic coordination with the Arab world is an important part of its "One Belt, One Road" vision, and China has proposed a comprehensive cooperation strategy known as 1+2+3. "One" refers to the need for increased cooperation on energy, "Two" stands for the two wings of infrastructure development, construction and trade/investment facilitation. "Three" relates to breakthroughs that need to be made in the high-tech areas of nuclear energy, aerospace satellites, and renewable energies in order to upgrade practical cooperation between China and the Arab world (China's Arab Policy Paper, January 14, 2016). In October 2014, Beijing committed \$50 billion to form the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), together with several partner countries. The bank aims to raise \$100 billion for infrastructure projects across Asia (Guan, 2016). According to the action plan, China will gain improved access to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia, and to the Indian Ocean through Southeast Asia and South Asia. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed as two paths: one from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, and the other from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific region (Xuming, 2016: 613). In this way, the Middle East is a bridge that connects China to Europe. Now that the Corona crisis has eroded physical infrastructure, China has developed digital communication and information technologies, the so-called digital Silk Road, which requires relatively little financial capital.

China's energy and trade interests will be driven by its energy-oriented political and security interests, and according to the analysis of neoclassical realist theory it will gradually become involved in political and security issues due to the importance of stability and security in the Middle East. Intervention in the Syrian crisis and veto of Security Council resolutions to sanction Syria in October 2011 and July 2012 and opposition to international intervention to overthrow Assad and instead emphasize diplomatic solutions to resolve the crisis confirm this fact (Buckley, 2012). China has declared an interest in establishing basing capabilities near both the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf. A base in Oman would allow China to project naval power in the Middle East, giving it a more direct ability to protect its interests when they are threatened (Agence France Press, 2009, December 29).

Table 3. China's goals and interests in the Middle East
China's goals and interests in the Middle East

-
- Ensuring peace, stability and energy security
 - Providing economic and commercial benefits
 - Increasing influence and change the balance of power
 - Utilization of Middle East transit capacities in the Silk Road initiative
 - Increasing soft power
-

Reference: authors

4.3. Analyzing the impact of Russia and China's goals and interests on Iran's interests

Russia

The increasing cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Middle East can be analyzed based on the prevailing political realities and their shared interests in countering the perceived threat of Western presence. According to Nikolai Kozhanov (2015: 3), both countries seek to prevent the widespread influence of the West, which serves as a common challenge. This cooperative endeavor can be understood through the lens of offensive theory in international relations. Iran's significance for Russia lies in its anti-hegemonic approach and influential position in the security and geopolitical system of the Middle East, making it an important regional power (Kozhanov, 2015). Russia's endeavor to counter American unilateralism in the region is in line with Iran's interests. The Syrian conflict has brought Iran and Russia together, uniting them for the first time in the Middle East in terms of operations. However, it should be noted that there are divergences in the goals of Russia and Iran, which may impact the dynamics of their cooperation. While Iran's primary objective is to uphold the Resistance Front by supporting Assad, Russia aims to secure its future influence by convincing other actors to maintain Assad's position in the government (Rodkiewicz and Kardas, 2015: 3-4). Other key objective by Russia includes:

Russia is pursuing a two-pronged policy on the Iranian nuclear issue. On the one hand, it shares its concerns with the West over Iran's possession of nuclear technology and weapons, and signs Security Council resolutions against Iran, and on the other hand, it plays a moderating role in the case of sanctions (Karami, 2010: 187). In the case of the Caspian Sea, what has made Iran passive is US pressure and consequently the need for Russian political support in the international system. Aware of Iran's limitations in exploiting its geopolitical power, Russia has used all its power in the political and geopolitical arena to prevent Iran's centrality in the energy market through the transit of Central Asian oil and gas. Russia has opposed Iran's joining the Nabucco project and even intends to marginalize Iran in the OPEC gas project by investing in the gas industry, especially LNG.

Russia and Iran also have common interests on the Palestinian issue. Russia ostensibly aligns itself with the Palestinian ideals and supports the two-state solution (Nizameddin, 1999: 131). Although some Palestinian groups are listed as terrorist groups by the United States, these groups have good relations with Russia. But relations between Russia, Israel and Saudi Arabia are also a challenge to Iran-Russia relations. However, Russia tries to balance its foreign relations with different countries in the region and is aware that any strategic relationship with Iran will destroy Russia's relations with these countries (Mamedova, 2016).

In recent years, relations between the two countries have grown at an unprecedented rate. In the field of nuclear power, in 2013, Troy Atom Company made great efforts to complete the Bushehr Power Plant, and in 2014 announced that it would cooperate with Iran to build two more nuclear reactors. In the light of Russia's tensions with the West over Ukraine, relations between the two countries have increased, especially in the area of oil contracts (Borshchevshaya, 2016: 27).

Table 4. Areas of Convergence and Divergence of Russia and Iran in the Middle East

Convergence	Divergence
• Countering US hegemony • Cooperation in Syria • Nuclear and military cooperation • Relative common interests in the Palestinian ideals	• Competition in the energy and oil and gas markets • Different tactical objectives in Syria • Russia's ambiguous policies on the nuclear issue • Russia's close relations with Iran's regional rivals

Reference: authors

China

The relationship between China and Iran is indeed significant, with Iran considering China as one of its preferred options for foreign support. China's economic power and influence as well as its veto power in international trade have granted it a unique position in the global arena. Both China and Iran share a common stance against US unilateralism in the international system, which makes them natural allies at the regional and global levels (Currier and Dorraj, 2010: 61).

President Rouhani has emphasized the strategic nature of the relationship between Iran and China, stating that it has been and will continue to be crucial for Iran (Rouhani, 2019). However, the pragmatic policy pursued by China and the more idealistic policy pursued by Iran can create imbalances in their relations. From China's perspective, energy supply is considered a decisive factor in bilateral relations (Hong, 2014: 409). Indeed, the foundation of China's relationship with Iran rests on energy security. Nevertheless, the imposition of US sanctions on Iran in recent years has significantly affected Iran's energy status. In general while China and Iran have a strategic partnership, their differing policy approaches, particularly in regards to pragmatism and idealism, can pose challenges to the balance of their relationship. Additionally, the impact of US sanctions on Iran's energy sector has undoubtedly had consequences in this regard.

In 2016, president Xi Jinping and Rouhani agreed to increase trade between the two countries to \$ 600 billion within 10 years. They also agreed on strategic relations, cooperation on nuclear energy, and the revitalization of the commercial Silk Road. Tehran and Beijing also experienced joint military projects to deepen military cooperation. Trade between Iran and China increased from \$ 10.4 billion to \$ 37.5 billion from 2005 to 2017 and actually grew by 206%. Iran is also the second largest recipient of Chinese investment in the Middle East, and between 2005 and 2017, Iran attracted \$ 24.3 billion, or 12 percent of China's investment in the Middle East (Motevalli, 2016). In the face of Western sanctions and trade restrictions on Iran, China remained Iran's largest and most important trading partner. China has backed Joint Comprehensive Plan Action and condemned the US withdrawal from it. China's activities in Iran include investing in refining, plumbing, engineering and drilling to extract oil. The two projects of exploration of "North Pars" gas field and development of "Yadavaran oil field" are the most important projects of the two countries. China and Iran have signed a series of agreements worth more than \$ 200 billion called 25-Year Cooperation Agreement in 2021.

While analyzing China's approach to the Middle East and its relationship with Iran, it is important to consider the economic priority China places on its engagements in the region. According to Fallahi and Omid (2020: 549), China's primary focus in the Middle East is centered around economic interests and the associated benefits. However, China has been cautious and responsible in its role as an actor and stakeholder. China faces challenges in becoming a strategic deterrent to Western policies due to the dominant presence of Western powers in the global financial system (Fallahi and Omid, 2020: 549). The impact of Western domination limits China's ability to assert itself as a counterbalancing force. In contrast, Iran's approach to the international system is primarily political, while China prioritizes economic considerations (Fallahi and Omid, 2020). It is crucial to note that China's increasing trade with Iran, particularly in the context of international sanctions, has been significant for Iran's economic outlook (Harold and Nader, 2012: 12). However, when evaluating the relationship between China and Iran, it is important to recognize that China's engagement with the major powers, such as the United States, Europe, and Japan, takes precedence (Hong, 2014: 410). This suggests that China's primary objective is to cultivate stronger relations with the major powers rather than giving high priority to its relations with Iran.

Table 5. Contexts of Convergence and Divergence of China and Iran in the Middle East

Convergence	Divergence
• Countering US hegemony • Cooperation in the field of energy • Cooperation in the nuclear case • Economic, trade and military cooperation • Cooperation in reviving the Silk Road	• China pragmatism and Iranidealism • China and Iran's economic approach to the international system • China's close relationship with Iran's regional rivals • China's relations with the West (US)

Reference: authors

4.4 Analysis of Russia-China-Iran relations

The idea of an anti-American alliance between Iran, Russia, and China is a topic of speculation and analysis. Given the geopolitical landscape and the evolving dynamics among these countries, it is possible to explore the potential for cooperation or alignment against common challenges posed by the United States and Western hegemony. The emergence of a new Cold War between the United States and China, along with increasing pressure on Iran and Russia, raises questions about the potential for closer cooperation among these countries. The 2018 US defense strategy assumes that Russia and China, as revisionist powers, seek to weaken the US position and promote their own models of world order and influence. This perception adds significance to the possibility of an anti-American alliance. However, it is important to consider several factors. Each of these countries has its own interests, priorities, and strategies in the international system. While they may share some common concerns about US dominance, their relationships with the United States and the West are multifaceted and complex. They also have their own geopolitical ambitions and may not always align perfectly in their approach towards the United States.

The theory of offensive realism suggests that states act in their own self-interest and seek to maximize power and security. In this context, if a strong anti-American coalition were to form, centered around a major power like China or Russia, it could attract other governments or even non-governmental actors to join. However, the formation of such a coalition would depend on a variety of factors, including the perceived benefits, potential costs, and the alignment of interests among the participating actors. Such factors include:

Although there is not the slightest prospect of forming an anti-US coalition with the participation of Iran, Russia and China, or even with the participation of at least two of the three countries, naturally each of these three countries will continue to challenge the US and the West separately. And each will surely use its own means against the West, especially as the world realizes the growing weaknesses of the United States and Europe. So far, some important and effective bilateral cooperation has taken place in the triangle of Iran, Russia and China in opposition to the goals and plans of the United States and the West; Such as Iran-Russia political and field cooperation in the Syrian civil war or China-Russia diplomatic cooperation on North Korea and Syria.

China and Russia have concluded that the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Cooperation Program can best serve the interests of both parties. In general, Donald Trump's (2017-2021) presence at the helm of US foreign policy, and at the same time his withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan Action and the adoption of a policy of maximum pressure, led the Islamic Republic of Iran to take a strategic view in line with global power developments and reduce pressure and negative effects of sanctions. In this regard, the 25-year strategic partnership agreement between Tehran and Beijing was taken as the first step in this field in April 2021 so that the two sides can continue and promote bilateral cooperation in the form of strategic partnership in the new space. Iran has also subsequently announced its readiness to sign a similar agreement with the Russian Federation.

Application of the offensive realism theory

Offensive realism indeed posits certain generalizations about the behavior of emerging powers like China and Russia. According to this theory, the international system creates incentives for states to maximize their power and influence, potentially leading to territorial expansion and aggression. Offensive realists argue that conquest and expansion can be beneficial, and that great powers, including China and Russia, have revisionist intentions or are perceived as such by other states in order to safeguard their own security. In an offensive realist perspective, security is considered scarce, and great powers are driven to secure their survival and increase their chances of dominance. (Mearsheimer, 2006: 33) The ultimate goal of major powers is to become a hegemon, as the theory assumes that the most powerful state in the system is less likely to be challenged by weaker powers. According to offensive realists, major or emerging powers are seldom satisfied with the existing distribution of power, as they cannot be certain of other states' intentions. This uncertainty leads to a constant security competition, with states constantly preparing for potential threats.

When it comes to Iran's position in these competitions, offensive realism suggests that Russia and China, as great powers, aim to increase their influence in the Middle East region by strengthening relations with Iran—an antagonist to the international system. In turn, Iran benefits from the capacities

of these two major powers in countering Western pressure. Within the neoclassical realist framework, it is argued that tensions or competition between Russia, China, and Iran are highly unlikely. The pressures exerted by the United States against these countries may contribute to the formation of an alliance between Russia, China, and Iran. The stability of both systemic and unit-level forces driving China-Russia and Iran relations plays a role in this view. However, it is important to note that a change in these relations cannot be ruled out, especially if there is increased pressure from the United States, which can suppress the impact of non-systemic factors and accelerate rapprochement between China, Russia, and Iran.

Conclusion

In the post-hegemonic era of the United States, the redistribution of power and the diversity of centers of power in the international system have led to the inability to form international and regional orders based on a single dominant power. This multiplicity and diversity have changed the power dynamics and coalitions. While the weakening of the American political-security structure in the region may lead to instability, a shift to a new and potentially more stable structure appears inevitable. According to the argument of offensive realism, both Russia and China favor changing the balance of power in the region and seek to increase their influence in the regional and international arena. Their policies are centered around establishing stability and balanced relations with all countries in the region, as well as expanding their influence and role in this strategic area in competition with the United States. Russia's focus leans more toward political-security issues, while China focuses on diplomatic, economic, and trade matters. Therefore, the rise of China is expected to be more peaceful compared to that of Russia.

Russia and China are pursuing a cooperative policy in the Middle East with the common goal of establishing a multipolar international system and promoting their positions as major powers. Iran holds a special strategic and geopolitical position for both countries. Russia has utilized Iran's behavior in the international system to counterbalance and conceal its own geopolitical weaknesses. Iran's foreign policy toward Russia has been driven more by political support and technological needs rather than national interests and geopolitical calculations. In contrast, Russia's policy toward Iran has been influenced by its geopolitical weight and Iran's geopolitical significance. However, the convergence of interests can reduce the costs of balancing for both countries and effectively prevent the formation of a US-centric order. Russia's regional balancing policy serves Iran's interests, but pursuing Russia's balancing policy does impose limitations that may contradict Tehran's interests. Russia's policy of strategic stability is also in Iran's interest in terms of long-term regional stability. However, it goes against Iran's interests as it involves Moscow and Washington interacting as a concert of great powers.

While Russia and Iran can collaborate to challenge the US order in the region, Iran's approach to stabilizing the region may differ from Russia's interest-driven interventions. It should be noted that highlighting the negative aspects of Russia's policy toward Iran does not imply abandoning cooperation with Moscow. Russia recognizes the importance of Iran in the security and geopolitical system of the Middle East. Nonetheless, Iran should base its policy toward Russia on realism and pragmatism. As for China, three influential variables in its Middle East policy are "China's energy dependence," "economy," and support for "stability." China currently enjoys popularity in Iran, and this trend is expected to continue. China's willingness to engage in trade and investment with Iran under a 25-year strategic agreement undermines US efforts to isolate Iran and impose international sanctions. The Islamic Republic of Iran can potentially alter or at least modify some of its behaviors in the international arena to become a focal point of China's macro-strategy and a strategic ally. As China's energy dependence, economic interests, and commitment to stability remain influential variables in its Middle East policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran has the opportunity to shape its behavior in a way that aligns with China's strategic objectives, positioning itself as a key focus of China's long-term strategy and a valuable strategic ally.

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