



## The Russia-Iran Alignment in the Middle East: The Main Dynamics and Limits of the Bilateral Security Cooperation<sup>\*</sup>

*Orta Doğu'da Rusya-İran İttifakı: İkili Güvenlik İşbirliğinin Temel Dinamikleri ve Sınırları*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the main dynamics of the Russia-Iran alignment and discusses its significance in Russian foreign policy and Russia's balancing strategy against the US. In the Middle East, Russia does not embrace an individual state as a constant ally and seeks pragmatic cooperation with all regional states. Despite maintaining close cooperation with Tehran since the 1990s, Russia has avoided building long-term and binding alliance arrangements with Iran. Instead, Moscow has utilized its relations with Iran as bargaining chip vis-à-vis the US and distanced itself from Tehran whenever there has been a rapprochement in Russian-American relations. In this regard, the Russia-Iran alignment is not an example of 'hard balancing' that draws on military alliance formation and mutual arms build-up and aims at confrontation with an adversary. It can be best identified as a 'soft balancing' initiative that relies on less confrontational methods such as informal alignments and limited arms build-up and aims to restrain the threatening behavior of a rival state. Another significant limitation of Russia-Iran alignment is that Russia is unwilling to risk its relations with Israel and Gulf states for the sake of Iran considering the cooperation potential with those states in foreign policy, energy, and arms industry.

### ÖZ

Bu makale, Rusya-İran ittifakının temel dinamiklerini incelemekte ve bu ittifakın Rus dış politikası ve Rusya'nın ABD'ye karşı izlediği dengeleme stratejisinde nasıl bir rol oynadığını tartışmaktadır. Orta Doğu bölgesinde Rusya belli bir devleti daimi müttefik olarak benimsemekten kaçınmakta ve tüm bölge ülkeleriyle ortak çıkarlar çerçevesinde pragmatik işbirliği geliştirmeye çalışmaktadır. 1990'lardan bu yana Tahran ile bölgesel güvenlik konularında yakın işbirliği sürdüren Rusya, İran'la uzun vadeli ve bağlayıcı bir askeri ittifak düzenlemesine dahil olmaktan kaçınmıştır. Bunun yerine Moskova'nın İran'la ilişkilerini ABD karşısında pazarlık kozu olarak kullandığı ve Rusya-Amerika ilişkilerinde herhangi bir yaklaşma olduğunda kendini Tahran'dan uzaklaştırdığı görülmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Rusya-İran ittifakı, askeri ittifaklara ve ortak silahlanma girişimlerine dayanan ve rakip bir devlete doğrudan meydan okumayı amaçlayan 'sert dengeleme' örneği teşkil etmemektedir. Rusya-İran güvenlik işbirliği, gayri-resmi ittifaklar ve kısıtlı düzeyde silahlanma gibi daha az çatışmacı yöntemlere dayanan ve sadece rakip devletin tehditkâr davranışlarını sınırlamayı amaçlayan bir 'yumuşak dengeleme' girişimi olarak tanımlanmalıdır. Rusya'nın ABD karşısında başvurduğu yumuşak dengeleme stratejisinin yanında, Rusya-İran ittifak ilişkileri ikinci bir önemli kısıtlayıcı faktörle karşı karşıya kalmaktadır. Rusya, İran'ı desteklemek pahasına İsrail ve Körfez ülkeleri gibi diğer bölgesel aktörlerle ilişkilerini riske atmak istememekte ve bu devletlerle dış politika, enerji ve savunma sanayi gibi konularda işbirliği potansiyelini değerlendirmeye çalışmaktadır.

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## 1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, Russia's two main foreign policy goals have been to maintain its great power status and to preserve its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area, which are indeed interlinked (see Adomeit, 1995; Gvosdev, 2006; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, Larson, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Russia's relations with Iran have been significant concerning these two objectives. Iran is located at a very critical strategic position between the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This geopolitical position enables Iran to influence significant developments in regional politics in all those strategic areas. Besides, Iran is among the most prominent actors in the Middle East concerning its military and economic power potential. Tehran has also a considerable influence on the Shiite majority in Iraq and other crucial non-state agents in the region, like Hezbollah maintaining its activities in both Lebanon and Syria. In this regard, Tehran would be an essential and indispensable actor in shaping the future of the Middle East concerning regional security affairs and peace processes (see Mudiam, 2018: 471).

Russia's re-involvement in the Middle Eastern region in the twenty-first century is primarily driven by its desire to come back to the 'global geopolitical chessboard' with the status of 'great power' (Trenin, 2018: 21). By definition, great powers are more than just a 'regional power' and they are typically capable of operating in more than one regional context (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 35). In addition to possessing significant material capacities, great powers need to project substantial military and political power beyond their own region to sustain their high-level profile in international security affairs. In that respect, the Middle East appears as a special region where Russia maintains military projections and influence outside of the post-Soviet area. However, Russia has always needed the collaboration of regional allies to sustain such an influence, which share an interest in resisting the US policies in the Middle East. Iran has been at the epicenter of the regional resistance axis against the US with few regional allies. Therefore, Russia has a stake in supporting Iran and its allies in order to prevent the region from falling under American dominance. The establishment of a US hegemony in the Middle East would exclude Russia from the regional politics and peace process and enable Washington to focus more effectively on containing Russia in the post-Soviet region.

In order to ensure the sustainment of its great power status, Russia also needs to preserve its sphere of influence in its neighborhood against the threat of military power projections by other great powers located outside of this region. Great powers are considered to have special interests in their own region which are respected by other major powers in their bilateral and multilateral interactions

(Larson, Paul, & Wohlforth, 2014: 10-11). Also, great powers aim to ensure their strategic influence and pre-eminence in the geographical areas that are physically nearest and closely connected to them in historical, political, and economical terms (see Shakleina, 2016: 45). Since the early 1990s, Iran has collaborated with Russia in impeding Western powers' military and political involvement in the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). The mutual interests of Russia and Iran in their shared neighborhood and their common threat perceptions from the US have led to bilateral cooperation and coordinated actions in a wide range of regional issues in the Caucasus, the Caspian region, and Central Asia. In short, the Russia-Iran alignment in the post-Cold War era has been critical for Russia's two main foreign policy objectives, namely to maintain its great power status and to preserve its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region at the same time.

This article examines the main dynamics of the Russia-Iran alignment and discusses its significance in Russia's foreign policy in general and Russia's balancing strategies against the US in particular. In this regard, it seeks to answer the following questions. What are the main dynamics driving Russia-Iran security cooperation? What are the links between Russia-Iran security cooperation and the great power competition between Russia and the US at the international system level? Could the Russia-Iran alignment be identified as a balancing initiative against the US? If so, what kind of balancing it is? Last but not least, what are the limitations of this alignment concerning Russia's relations with the US and other regional actors in the Middle East?

In general, Russia's balancing strategies represent a mixture of 'hard balancing' and 'soft balancing' initiatives. In the post-Soviet region, Russia appeals to hard balancing which aims at direct confrontation with adversaries and draws on direct means such as military alliance formation and intensive arms build-up. Being aware of its power limits, Russia does not expand this hard balancing strategy beyond the post-Soviet area. The only formal allies of Russia are the small post-Soviet states that are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led regional military alliance (see Yegorov, 2019). Russia avoids establishing formal alliances with extra-regional states such as Iran. Such alliances might result in Russia's entrapment into regional conflicts involving regional powers and global actors, which would likely escalate out of Russian control.<sup>2</sup> An open alliance between Russia and a regional state from outside of the post-Soviet region would also challenge the balance of power in that region and create a long-term security dilemma between Russia and a number of regional states which are adversaries of Russia's would-be formal ally. In the Middle East which is a very unstable and conflict-prone region, such an alliance would result in a worsening of Russia's relations with many other regional

<sup>1</sup> These two objectives came to the forefront, especially after Vladimir Putin's rise to power. In December 1999, as the Prime Minister of Russia, Putin emphasized that "Russia was and will remain a great power." For the first time in the previous 200–300 years, he claimed, Russia was in danger of slipping to the second or third level of power. Putin urged Russians to take action to eliminate this danger and "strain all intellectual, physical, and moral forces." (Quoted in Larson & Shevchenko, 2010: 88). Being a great power that dominates the post-Soviet region also appears to be a matter of existence and identity and for Russia. When a reputed professor who had been Putin's official advisor on foreign affairs for a long period was asked whether Russia's loss of its sphere of influence over the post-

Soviet area would produce threats to Russia's great power status or its statehood and survival, he gave the following response: "Both. Russia has developed into a great power in order to survive." Author's interview with Sergei Karaganov. Higher School of Economics, Moscow. December 7, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For 'the risk of entrapment' in military alliances see Snyder, 1984. As examined later in this study, the Kremlin's avoidance of entrapment into direct conflicts with global and regional powers in the Middle East led to the creation of joint military mechanisms with the US and Israel concerning air force activities in the Syrian civil war which has so far prevented those states from involving in direct conflicts with each other.

states. While avoiding military alliances outside of the CIS, Russia looks for pragmatic, tentative, and limited security cooperation arrangements with regional states like Iran based on mutual interests and common threat perceptions.

This article argues that the Russia-Iran alignment can be best captured through the 'soft balancing' concept, which refers to a form of balancing that relies on less confrontational methods such as informal alignments and limited arms buildup and aims just to restrain the threatening behavior of rival states. In the literature, some scholars cite Russia's relations with Iran as an example of a soft balancing initiative against the US in the current international system (see Pape, 2005; Walt, 2009, Piskunova, 2008). However, none of those studies focuses on how Russia's soft balancing approach determines the content, structure, and limits of Russia-Iran security cooperation. This article tries to make an original contribution to the literature by undertaking a detailed case study on the Russia-Iran alignment from a soft balancing perspective. It examines how Russia's motive of balancing American threatening policies has shaped the course of the Russia-Iran alignment and how the rapprochement periods between Moscow and Washington have resulted in the weakening of Russia's support to Iran. Of course, Russia's choice between hard balancing and soft balancing options in building its approach towards Iran generates implications also for regional affairs in the Middle East and Moscow's relations with other regional states. This article aims to make a second contribution by examining how Russia's soft balancing strategy affects its relations with Iran's adversaries in the region and helps Moscow to avoid serious damage to its relationship with those states which also play significant roles in Middle Eastern affairs.

Today Russia is still a major power with high-ranking military capabilities, while Iran remains a regional power with limited national capacity. This enables Moscow to determine the characteristics and the limits of the alignment relations between Russia and Iran (see Therme, 2018: 549). Given the asymmetrical nature of the bilateral relationship and the theoretical standpoint of the study, this article examines the Russia-Iran alignment predominantly from the Russian perspective focusing on Moscow's strategic interests rather than Iran's own interests and objectives. The article is structured as follows. The first section provides a conceptual framework for hard balancing and soft balancing behaviors and examines these concepts with regard to Russia's approach towards Iran. The second one concentrates on what common global and regional interests lay the groundwork for the Russian-Iranian alignment. The third section focuses on the content of the actual security cooperation between Russia and Iran and how Russia supports Iran in the Middle East. Finally, the fourth section examines the limits of the Russia-Iran alignment considering Russia's soft balancing strategy against the US and the Kremlin's willingness to cooperate with all regional actors including Israel and Sunni Arab states without getting involved in regional disputes and conflicts.

## **2. Soft Balancing Behavior and Russia's Strategy towards Iran**

Hard balancing and soft balancing concepts have both emerged out of academic discussions on balance of power theory which is at the core of neorealist thinking. According

to Kenneth Waltz (1979), the primary motivation of states is survival as they all operate under anarchy. There is no centralized authority that can ensure the survival of states; therefore, they must rely on their own capabilities and the arrangements they can create for themselves. According to the basic tenet of the balance of power theory, weaker states come together to create alliances in order to counter a rising power that would inevitably endanger their security and independence. In this regard, the competition among self-interested states for security and power results in the repeated establishment of balances of power in the international system (Waltz, 1979).

Military alliances are among the most effective instruments to restore the balance of power, which enable states to accumulate their military capabilities together to ensure their security and survival. An alliance can be defined as "a treaty binding two or more independent states to come to each other's aid with armed force under circumstances specified in the *casus foederis* article of the treaty" (Schroeder, 2004: 195). Alliance treaties include a military assistance commitment for the member states in case of an external attack by a third state. After the Cold War, the balance of power theory has attracted increasing criticism as secondary powers have failed to form a counterbalancing alliance against the US to ensure their security and restore the balance of power. Scholars seek to explain the lack of counterbalancing against the US with regard to its offshore position, nuclear deterrence held by other great powers, the disappearance of system-level wars, and accordingly the decrease of existential threat perceptions throughout the world (Wohlforth, 2002; Paul, 2005; Walt, 2009).

However, this does not mean that states do not perceive any threats from specific military actions of the United States. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Washington has pursued quasi-imperial policies in offshore regions through direct military interventions and some indirect methods including the promotion of friendly regimes in strategic regions (Paul, 2005: 55). Such American actions in distant regions inevitably undermine the strategic interests of great powers and regional states which are geographically proximate or have significant political and economic links to those regions (Pape, 2005: 14). Since the 2003 Iraq War, some states disturbed by such aggressive American policies have openly engaged in diplomatic collaboration in bilateral terms and international platforms such as the United Nations. In order to discourage the US from its unilateral military actions, states like Russia, China, and Iran have even developed ad hoc and limited military cooperation with each other (see Paul, 2005; Walt, 2009: 103-106). Yet, those states have stopped short of creating a counterweight alliance against the United States. Scholars call such initiatives 'soft balancing' which is identified as "actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance" but that seek "to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies" (Pape, 2005: 10).

Stephen Walt (2009: 104) underlines the main differences between hard balancing and soft balancing, by concentrating on the primary motivations of these two behaviors. Hard balancing behavior concerns the general balance of power and aims at the formation of a counterweight alliance or coalition powerful enough to hold the predominant power in check. Soft balancing, on the

other hand, does not target or expect to change the distribution of power among states. While accepting the existing balance of power, a soft balancing strategy aims to get better results in specific issues concerning the interests of its practitioners.

Soft balancing occurs when two or more countries form 'ententes' or limited security understandings between themselves vis-à-vis a certain state which potentially threatens them (Paul, 2004: 3). While hard balancing is associated with military alliances, soft balancing is practiced through informal and more flexible 'alignments' (see Paul, 2004: 3; Ferguson, 2012: 204). As a broader term alignment refers to "expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed in future interactions" (Snyder, 1997: 6). There is no necessity to sign a formal treaty to establish an alignment. An alignment emerges just "when a state brings its policies into close cooperation with another state in order to achieve mutual security goals" (David, 1991: 234). Unlike alliances, alignments are never permanent but always fluid (Erkomaishvili, 2019). They constantly shift "with changing patterns of power, interests, and issue priorities" (Snyder 1997: 7). The security cooperation in the context of soft balancing could expand to the military sphere yet in a restricted way, for instance, through limited arms buildup and joint military training. However, soft balancing does not include creating military alliances to openly challenge specific adversaries (Paul, 2004).

Considering the discussions above, the Russia-Iran alignment does not represent a case of hard balancing. Russia has never sought to shift the balance of power in the Middle East vis-à-vis the US and its regional allies by creating a military alliance together with Iran. Instead, Russia opts for pragmatic security cooperation with Tehran which is generally used as a trump card in its Russian-American relations. Moscow provides limited security support to Iran in order to "delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies" but it stops short of creating a military alliance with Iran that would establish a long-term and binding cooperation mechanism. Therefore, the Russia-Iran alignment can be best categorized as a soft balancing initiative against the United States.

As noted earlier, scholars mention Russia's relations with Iran as an example of soft balancing against the US. They draw connections between some elements of Russian-Iran cooperation and Russian-American strategic competition to exemplify how Russia uses its relations with Tehran as a balancing weapon against Washington (Pape, 2005; Walt, 2009, Piskunova, 2008; for a critic of this argument see Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005). However, those scholars do not examine how Russia's soft balancing strategy structures and restricts the Russia-Iran alignment considering the inherent limitations of such a strategy compared to conventional hard balancing behavior. If Russia-Iran security cooperation is structured as a soft balancing instrument aiming at restricting the threatening behavior of the US rather than direct confrontation, one should expect not steady cooperation between the two states but an unstable alignment with changing levels of commitments based on the shifts in Russia's threat perceptions from Washington through different time periods. In this regard,

this study will focus on the fluctuations in Russia-Iran security cooperation in an attempt to explain the course and development of this alignment with reference to Russia's soft balancing strategy.

In general, scholars confirm that Russia's objective to balance the US plays a central factor in the Kremlin's approach toward Iran. For instance, Witold Rodkiewicz (2019: 1) contends that Moscow leverages its collaboration with Iran to strengthen its negotiating position vis-à-vis Washington. Thus, Russia's approach towards Iran is 'not an end in itself,' but rather a piece of a 'bigger puzzle' involving several actors, most notably the US (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 6). According to Helen Belopolsky (2009: 97) the Iran issue is the clearest evidence of how the US factor impacts Russia's alignment strategy. Clément Therme (2018: 562) argues that Russia will continue to leverage its links with Tehran in its relations with Washington, by stepping up its collaboration with Iran in significant areas like the nuclear technology, the defense sector, and the common fight against what they identify as terrorist groups in their proximate regions. Before concentrating on how the Russia-Iran alignment functions, one should first focus on the common strategic interests of these two states to comprehend the foundations of the Russia-Iran alignment.

### 3. Common Global and Regional Interests: The Main Underpinnings of the Russia-Iran Alignment

Iran is located in a crucial geopolitical position with respect to Russia, which allows Tehran to impact the course of regional politics in the Caspian Sea basin, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Russia has felt obligated to cooperate with Iran on a variety of regional issues since the early 1990s, including the Nagorno-Karabakh war and the stability of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Central Asia. Russia and Iran's joint goals and vision concerning these numerous issues precluded a possible geostrategic competition between them, while Iranian support for the Kremlin's stance on those issues assisted Russia in restoring and enhancing its regional position in the post-Soviet area after the USSR's collapse (Kozhanov, 2016: 3). The following pages examine Russia and Iran's shared strategic interests that extend from the CIS region to the global level.

Convergent geopolitical objectives of Iran and Russia originate in their shared desire to limit US influence and dominance in world politics. In this regard, Iran concentrates on its own proximity and works to establish its regional interests at the expense of the US and its local allies, whereas Russia has a broader perspective that aims to establish itself as a key power shaping the international order independent from the US. Hereby, Russia and Iran are united in the pursuit of a 'multipolar' order. They collaboratively struggle against what they call the US 'unilateralism' in the international system and its geographical subsystems (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: Rodkiewicz, 2019). As an alternative, Russia and Iran advocate a poly-centric international system and the consolidation of the United Nations as its institutional base. Russia regards Tehran as one of its vital partners that could help to establish a polycentric order, at least on a regional scale. As examined later, Iran's support to stabilize the CIS region with respect to Moscow's great power role runs parallel to Russia's ideal conception of the multipolar

international order (see Rodkiewicz, 2019; Topychkanov, 2016: 32).

Both Moscow and Tehran strongly believe in conservative norms and values such as the Westphalian conception of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic politics.<sup>3</sup> Russia and Iran seek to avoid international isolation and increase their freedom of action in international politics, by collaborating with other countries who share their discontent with the current global order (Karami, 2016: 26-27). Besides, the two states share a common anxiety about the US and NATO's expansion of military influence into the adjacent Caucasus and Central Asian countries (Kiani, 2016: 73-75). In this context, Iran's stance toward the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 emerged clearly as pro-Russian. Iran demonstrated empathy for the Russian narrative of those regional crises based on NATO's series of provocations (Mousavi & Khodaei, 2013: 198; Motamedi, 2022). On the other hand, the Kremlin and Tehran oppose to pro-Western government changes in the form of 'color revolutions' as observed in the post-Soviet area, or by military methods which were practiced in Syria, according to their perspective (Therme, 2018: 559; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 2-3).

Cooperation between Russia and Iran on such joint stances and objectives dates back to the early nineties. Immediately after the USSR's demise, both governments realized their mutual interest in cooperating in the context of newly emerging regional issues and in opposing Western influence extending to the post-Soviet space (Karami, 2016: 24). In the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Iran collaborated with Russia in backing the Armenian side against Azerbaijan which was an Islamic country but with pro-Western characteristics (Sadegh-Zadeh, 2008). Also, Tehran has adopted a similar stance to those of Moscow on the Caspian Sea issue over marking the areas for the shareholder countries (Naseem & Mahmudov 2018: 99; Belopolsky, 2009: 121-123). In the North Caucasus, Iran distanced itself from the cause of Chechnya Muslims for independence. Tehran avoided open criticism of Moscow's actions in the First Chechen War between 1994 and 1996 and Russia's second armed intervention beginning in 1999 (Paulraj, 2016: 104-106; Brummer, 2007: 192).

Also, Iran did not welcome the growing Islamist groups in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union though it was a non-secular Islamic country. Ironically, religious issues undermined Iran's potential influence in Central Asia, because the majority of Iranians and Muslim populations in that region adhere to different branches of Islam (Mousavi, 2016: 89; Akbarzadeh, 2015: 96). Shiites make up the majority of the Muslim population in Iran, whereas Islamist organizations in Central Asia belong to the Sunni-Hanafi school, which shares ideas with Salafism. Therefore, those Islamic movements have offices in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. These nations are home to Hanafi and Wahhabi

communities that are intrinsically hostile to Tehran. Central Asian Islamist organizations don't have any direct connections to Iran or any offices in that country (Mousavi & Khodaei, 2013: 202; Therme, 2018: 557; Demidenko, 2017: 78-84). In these circumstances, Iran prioritized cooperation with Moscow and secular authoritarian governments in Central Asia over religious groups such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir, the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), and Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance Party (Naseem & Mahmudov, 2018: 99; Mousavi, 2016: 88-90).

Iran's negative attitude toward Islamists and extreme organizations in Central Asia paved the ground for diplomatic engagement and collaboration with the Kremlin to secure and pacify the region. In the Tajik civil war, Russia needed Iran's cooperation for a political solution since Iran has deep ethnic and linguistic links with the Tajik population. In 1994, Russia was able to launch talks between the opposition actors and the government, thanks to Iran's involvement. (Belopolsky, 2009: 120). Both Russia and Iran arranged a number of negotiations, in which Tehran acted as an impartial mediator between the Islamists and the government, rather than as a supporter of the former. In December 1996 when the peace accord was concluded, Yevgeni Primakov, then Foreign Minister of Russia stated that Iran's collaboration was a critical component in achieving peace. (Belopolsky, 2009: 120; Mousavi & Khodaei, 2013: 197; Karami, 2016: 24).

The Afghanistan civil war, which resulted in the Taliban's triumph in 1996, was another topic on which Moscow and Tehran regularly collaborated. Up to the American intervention in 2001, Russia and Iran vigorously backed the anti-Taliban actions of the Northern Alliance, while Russia opened its territory to Iran for the transportation of weaponry to those forces (Karami, 2016: 25). In the years thereafter, the two countries have maintained their diplomatic communication about their shared objective for peacebuilding and decreasing the military presence of the US in Afghanistan (Rodkiewicz, 2019: 7). Iran and Moscow share similar concerns as Sunni extremism spreads across Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. As a result, Russia and Iran are expected to continue their cooperation in these unstable regions neighboring each other (Demidenko, 2016: 83-84). Moscow does not see Tehran as the primary cause of instability in this vast region, which runs contrary to popular belief in the West. Rather, Iran is regarded as a credible partner by Russia in the fight against rising terrorist organizations like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban (Mousavi & Khodaei, 2013: 195-197).

In short, the curbing of the US influence in the Eurasian continent has been the greatest motivation in the Russia-Iran alignment but it is not the only one. The common regional interests of Russia and Iran led these states to enlarge their collaboration into other specific and significant regional issues in the post-Soviet region. In exchange for Tehran's

<sup>3</sup> Russia's conception of Westphalian sovereignty advocates that each state authority has undisputed sovereignty over its territory that is immune from external interventions and international normative concerns. Russia bases its military interventions in countries like Syria and Kazakhstan on the official invitations of the internationally recognized governments of those states, which supposedly have the sovereign right to make such a decision. Russia's invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022 seems to contradict this perspective as the Russian army fights with the Ukrainian government.

However, Russia denies legitimacy to pro-Western regimes rising into power after 'color revolutions' as seen in Georgia and Ukraine. According to the Kremlin, color revolutions have formed puppet governments directed by Western powers, and therefore represented a direct violation of Westphalian sovereignty. This perspective assumes that those regimes could not have legitimate sovereign rights on behalf of their countries (see Minakov 2021: 101; Mitchell, 2022; and Ziegler 2012: 411).

support for Russia's strategic objectives in this vast geographic space, Russia supported Iran in crucial areas such as the nuclear technology and arms industry. However, Russia's support for Iran has been always pragmatic and conditional. The next section concentrates on Russia's security support to Iran and explores the links between Russia's Iran policy and its soft balancing initiatives against the US.

#### **4. The Content of the Actual Security Cooperation: Iran's Nuclear Program, Arms Trade, and the Syrian Civil War**

Today, there are three main issues driving the Russian-Iranian security cooperation in the Middle East: Iran's nuclear program, the arms trade between the two countries, as well as the Syrian civil war. These three issues deserve separate examinations as they constitute the most important components of the ongoing security cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. The examination of those issues in detail will also provide us with a clearer understanding of how Russia instrumentalizes Iran in its soft balancing strategy against Washington.

##### **4.1. Nuclear Energy Cooperation between Russia and Iran**

Since the 1990s, Russia has assisted Iran's nuclear program to gain a bargaining card in its relations with Washington, albeit within certain limits. On several occasions, the Kremlin did not shy away from supporting United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decisions putting economic sanctions on Iran. In addition, Russia had an active role in the nuclear talks with Tehran, which were held in the P5+1 arrangement, consisting of the five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany (Bekkevold, 2019: 151; Hannay & Pickering, 2017).

Russia's assistance to Iran's nuclear energy-producing capability began in the early 1990s. The United States has pushed to terminate this collaboration from the onset through different means, including sanctions imposed on Russia's institutions suspected of aiding Iran's nuclear weapons program (Belopolsky, 2009: 102; Naseem & Mahmudov, 2018: 98). Russia and Iran reached an official agreement in January 1995 to build the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which included Russia's technological aid, the supply of nuclear fuel and three reactors to Tehran, and the training of Iranian nuclear specialists at national institutes in Russia. At the same time, however, Moscow rejected plans to build an Iranian 'heavy-water' reactor that might have been used to make nuclear bombs (Aras & Özbay, 2006: 133; Katzman, 2019: 9).

Iran's nuclear problem reached its peak during the years of 2002 and 2003 when studies from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) indicated that Tehran was developing nuclear capabilities above its international obligations. The Western-Iran relations were even more damaged by the context of the Iraq war and the uprising of the US-Iran rivalry in the Middle Eastern region. Some states, particularly Iran, were referred to as 'rogue states' or 'an axis of evil' by the George W. Bush administration, as they were supposedly conspiring to destroy global peace and international stability (Paulraj, 2016: 100; Mousavi & Khodaei, 2013: 198-200). While nuclear facilities in Iran were being constructed by Russia; Washington, some of its

allies in Europe, and Israel started threatening Iran with further sanctions and even destroying Iran's nuclear facilities with air strikes. Also, the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq posed a huge danger to Tehran, putting pressure on Iran to change its security-related policies, particularly its nuclear program. Nevertheless, Tehran successfully averted the US and Israeli threats to invade Iran, by utilizing its relations with Moscow (Paulraj, 2016). At that point in time, Moscow defended Iran in the UN Security Council and worked against a resolution calling for military measurements based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Russia also issued strong warnings against potential military attacks by Western actors (Parker, 2016).

Indeed, the Russian Federation has not been interested in Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Moscow has even sought to delay this probability on some occasions (see Rodkiewicz, 2019: 1-5). Like other Western countries, Russia has become increasingly skeptical about a nuclear-armed Iran since it might further exacerbate the already unstable Middle Eastern environment. Additionally, Russia has been worried that if diplomatic efforts to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions were to fail, the United States would resort to military force, which would unquestionably destabilize the area further (Paulraj, 2016: 95). Russia has occasionally used Iran's nuclear crisis to up the ante in its rivalry with the US and to deepen its collaboration with Tehran on a number of regional problems. But Russia has also needed to take into account its larger, global interests. The Kremlin aspires to serve as a major mediator on significant matters of global security in order to preserve Russia's standing as a 'great power.' The Russian Federation is unwilling to jeopardize its 'responsible great power status' in the context of global nuclear proliferation (Therme, 2018: 553). All of those considerations, along with Iran's failure to meet the IAEA's demands, altered Russia's position on Iran's nuclear problem. As a result, Russia followed other world powers in pressuring Tehran to enter into diplomatic negotiations by 2002 (Paulraj, 2016: 101).

The initial round of talks composed of Iran and the quartet of the Russian Federation, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany took place between 2002 and 2006. However, it seemed insufficient to guarantee Iran's adherence to the IAEA's standards. The negotiating framework was enlarged in 2006 to encompass five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany, which was called the P5+1 format and maintained between 2006 and 2015 (Naseem & Mahmudov, 2018: 106-107). Between 2006 and 2010, Moscow did not use its veto nor abstained from voting on six critical Security Council resolutions imposing economic sanctions on Tehran. As discussed further below, one of those decisions taken in the Security Council, Resolution 1929, enforced a restricted arms embargo on Tehran. It was passed by the UNSC in June 2010, whilst Barack Obama's presidency was attempting to 'reset' and improve the US-Russian relationship, which had reached its lowest level since the Cold War's conclusion due to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. At the same time, the Kremlin continued to oppose any unilateral sanctions decided outside of the UN Security Council as well as potential Western military attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities (Bekkevold, 2019: 151; Topychkanov, 2016: 33; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 6-7).

It is worth noting that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's 2012 recommendations laid the groundwork for the renewed talks between Tehran and the group of P5+1. This series of meetings resulted in the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Tehran and the P5+1 countries in 2015. This agreement that was shortly called the nuclear deal led to the incremental and partial removal of sanctions against Tehran. The Kremlin was also an effective player in the discussions for the multilateral treaty on Iran's suspension of enriching uranium concluded in July of the same year (Kozhanov, 2016: 2; Rodkiewicz, 2019: 2). Moscow also assisted Tehran in meeting a crucial demand of the accord by transporting off approximately all of its limited-enriched uranium stockpile beginning in late 2015 (Katzman, 2019: 55). Moscow's interest in resolving the nuclear issue was assuring that Iran would not transform to an additional 'hotspot' of regional instability in a proximate area to the post-Soviet region. Furthermore, the Kremlin believed that the nuclear deal would permit Russia to openly collaborate with Tehran on the broad spectrum of shared interests described earlier, without getting charged with backing a 'rogue state' endangering world peace (Kozhanov, 2016: 2). Also, Russia desired to gain from economic and nuclear technology cooperation with Tehran with respect to the restrictions set by Iran's international obligations. During the nuclear talks, Russia finished building the Bushehr nuclear power station, which started operating in 2011. In 2016, the Iranian government declared its plan on building additional nuclear plants with Russian assistance (Nakhle, 2018: 34).

On 8 May 2018, then US President Donald Trump declared America's withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement. This unilateral action was sharply criticized by Moscow, which asserted that it showed Washington to be an 'unreliable negotiator.' Russia also reassured its ongoing support for the nuclear deal in the absence of US involvement. The possibility of US military attacks on the Iranian territory was once again heightened by Washington's resurgent anti-Iranian discourse (Trenin, 2018: 22-26; Naseem & Mahmado, 2018: 108; Sushentsov, 2018: 2018). One may argue that Trump's decision to pull out of the agreement brought Moscow and Tehran closer given Moscow's long-standing displeasure with the US's unilateral actions, which Russia seeks to undermine (Therme, 2018: 560). When Russian-American relations are strained, the relationship between Moscow and Tehran grows significantly more. Therefore, the continuing disagreements in the CIS and the Middle East and such as Ukraine and Syria have continued to strengthen Russian-Iranian cooperation.

#### 4.2. Russia's Arms Transfers to Iran

Similar to the Kremlin's position on Iran's nuclear problem, Russia-Iran cooperation in the arms industry has fluctuated with regard to Moscow's interactions with Washington and other Western powers. The Russian Federation's transfer of arms to Iran began in the early 1990s, due to Tehran's growing need for new arms in the unstable Middle East and

the Russian military sector's urgent need for hard currency. Su-24 and MIG-29 fighter jets, diesel-electric submarines, T-72 tanks, S-200 long-range surface-to-air missiles, and other air-launched missile systems were among the most significant pieces of military equipment delivered to Iran, which significantly bolstered its air force capabilities (Belopolsky, 2009: 107; Naseem & Mahmado, 2018: 98). During the Boris Yeltsin's Presidency in Russia, Moscow tried to allay American worries about Iran's growing military capacity (Belopolsky, 2009: 107). Despite these attempts, Washington's pressure on Moscow led to the secret agreement between then-Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and US Vice President Al Gore in June 1995, which called for the cessation of Russia's weapons supplies to Iran by the year 1999 (Belopolsky, 2009: 98; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 6).

Following his rise to power, President Vladimir Putin revealed and canceled that backroom agreement in November 2000 (Naseem & Mahmado, 2018: 100; Belopolsky, 2009: 127-128). After that point, the military shipments to Iran were used as leverage in the Kremlin's relations with the United States. It was also used to demonstrate that Russia was maintaining an independent great power standing vis-à-vis Washington, which is able to choose freely whom to cooperate with (Belopolsky, 2009: 109-110). As previously mentioned, in 2002, the Bush administration declared Iran, North Korea, and Iraq to be part of an 'axis of evil.' Russia and Iran's mutual threat assessments were enhanced by the US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Mousavi & Khodae, 2013: 198-199; Naseem & Mahmado, 2018: 105). These developments triggered substantially closer defense cooperation with Russia with new contracts for the delivery of SU-25-UBK fighter aircraft and the modernization of outdated SU-24-MK and Mig-29 warplanes. In November 2005, Moscow and Tehran reached another contract concerning 29 TOR-M1 anti-aircraft missile systems, which were to be transferred by the end of 2007. This move was considered a response to the credible danger of the US-Israeli assault on nuclear installations in Iranian territory. Russia and Iran also agreed in 2005 to another deal on the supply of forty S-300 missile system launchers. By 2007, Iran paid Russia \$800 million for the contract (Naseem & Mahmado, 2018: 101; Katzman, 2019: 19; Belopolsky, 2009: 110).

Despite the deep problems between the US and Russia throughout President Bush's two terms in office, Barack Obama's election to the White House in early 2009 led to a fresh upsurge in Russian-American relations. President Obama advocated a distinct and critical view of the American offshore armed interventions in the Eurasian region. The Obama leadership soon declared its intention to 'reset' relations with Moscow which had suffered intensively from Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. By announcing the reset initiative, Washington demonstrated its willingness to disregard Caucasian politics for the sake of Russian collaboration on a variety of more pressing issues like nuclear proliferation, North Korea, and Iran (Rachwald, 2011: 121-122).<sup>4</sup> Russia was pleased to see

<sup>4</sup> At that point in time, Obama endorsed the signature of a civilian nuclear cooperation treaty with Russia as a component of the reset initiative. During an address to Congress asking for approval for that agreement, he

stated that it is no longer necessary to view the Georgia crisis as an impediment, and the degree and extent of American-Russian cooperation

Washington's intention to decrease its military engagement in Eurasia. In such an atmosphere, the Kremlin backed the UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which imposed a restricted arms embargo over Tehran. Russia showed further goodwill by suspending the shipment of S-300 air defense systems to Iran (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 6-7).<sup>5</sup> Between 2010 and 2015, Moscow stopped several other military deliveries to Iran (Rodkiewicz, 2019: 6). The 'reset' attempt, however, failed to produce any fruitful outcomes for Moscow in the longer term, which could compensate for Russia's losses concerning its relations with Iran (Kozhanov, 2016).

Russian-American ties once again deteriorated as a result of the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Russia's military operation in Syria starting in late 2015. It was followed by the resumption of arms transfers from Russia to Iran. In April 2015, Putin overturned the presidential directive prohibiting the supply of S-300s to Tehran. The actual shipment of air defense systems started eventually in 2016 (see Rodkiewicz, 2019: 6-7; Borisov, 2018: 40). Some analysts draw a connection between Russia's growing arms transfers to Tehran and Moscow's discontent with Western military aid to the Kiev government in the continuing civil conflict between the government and pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine (Cohen, 2015). This assertion endorses our assumption that Russia utilizes its partnership with Iran as a soft balancing instrument vis-à-vis Washington to frustrate and undermine its specific threatening policies in Eurasia, particularly in the CIS region.

#### 4.3. The Military Cooperation in the Syrian Civil War

Russia's general Middle East policy has been significantly impacted by Russia's military involvement in Syria, with the air operations beginning in the autumn of 2015. Indeed, Russia's intervention had a deep impact on Moscow's interactions with numerous regional and global actors having special interests in the continuing civil war. Given the scale of this article, however, it is not possible to elaborate on this extensive web of relationships, let alone Russian general strategy towards the Syrian war. This section concentrates on how Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war actually influenced Russia's security cooperation with Iran.

Though Russia and Iran maintained distinct visions and some divergent interests concerning the Syrian war, they had a shared main objective of resisting what they view as an American-led effort to engineer a regime change in that state. Syria mattered to Russia in the context of its major international disagreements with the United States. Russia always seeks to thwart or derail US efforts to unilaterally meddle in domestic politics and impose political changes in many countries on a global scale. Iran's viewpoint, on the other hand, is more focused on its local security interests in the Middle East vis-à-vis the adversarial group of countries including the United States, Israel, and Gulf states (Barnes-Dacey, 2018: 66). Yet Moscow's and Tehran's shared desire in ensuring the continuation of the pro-Iran and pro-Russia Assad regime prompted coordinated activities in the conflict zone, despite significant differences and conflictual

interests between these two governments regarding Syria's future (Sazhin, 2016: 16). In 2016, Tehran even permitted Russian fighter planes to use its airbase in Hamadan to carry out operations in Syria. This marked the first time that Iran allowed a foreign state to utilize military installations on its national territory (Topychkanov, 2016: 32).

With the start of the Kremlin's direct military involvement in the domestic conflict in Syria in late 2015, Moscow and Tehran turned to be informal and de facto allies on a real battlefield (Rodkiewicz, 2019: 3). Russian air operations strengthened the positions of both Assad regime forces and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps which came to support the Syrian government in the civil war (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 4). Along with working with those troops, Russia's military also cooperated with Hezbollah, a paramilitary organization close to Iran, as well as a large number of pro-Iran paramilitary groups, such as those from Iraq. The joint activities of all these armies and groups have assured the survival of the Assad government, though the regime has been unable to recapture total territorial control of Syria. Russia also created security collaboration and intelligence-sharing arrangements regarding the Syrian Civil war with a group of Middle Eastern states, namely Iraq, Syria, and Iran (Barnes-Dacey, 2018: 66; Iraq, Russia, Iran, and Syria coordinate against ISIL, 2015). Additionally, Tehran and Baghdad gave permission for Russia's cruise missile strikes from its navy vessels in the Caspian Sea on specific targets in Syria, which were passed over their territories. This action was seen as a component of Russia's extensive propaganda campaign regarding its potential to project force over the Middle East as an outstanding great power (Rogers & Reeve, 2015).

The defense ministers of Iran and Russia agreed to an ad hoc military cooperation treaty in January 2015 that covered the sharing of intelligence, the communication between their military structures, and joint drills. As a consequence, the two nations started naval drills in the Caspian Sea and Iran's army officers took part in additional military training exercises held in Russia (Rodkiewicz, 2019: 6; Episkopos, 2019). Furthermore, Iranian officials declared that they would conduct joint maneuvers with the navy of Russia in the north of the Indian Ocean and the Hormuz Strait, which constitute strategically contentious waters. In the diplomatic sphere, the Kremlin played a crucial role in the formation of the Astana peace process in December 2016, which brought together Russia, Iran, and Turkey for organized talks on Syria. The Astana meetings aimed to 'de-escalate' the Syrian conflict by negotiating a settlement amongst those three significant foreign actors involved in the civil war. (Lund, 2019: 31-32; Barnes-Dacey, 2018: 66). The soft balancing logic also applies to such Russian moves drawing on diplomatic means which seek to undermine Washington's certain regional plans. In spite of these advancements in the political and military spheres, however, the relationship between Russia and Iran is one of practical security collaboration rather than a long-lasting and stable alliance. Still, there is a lack of a clearly defined strategy and common vision due to the aspects discussed below.

on the Iran issue constitute adequate justification for the treaty (Message from the President Regarding a Peaceful Nuclear Agreement with Russia, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> In reality, the delivery of those armaments could not breach Resolution 1929 because the S-300 systems were not listed in the UN Conventional Arms Registry (Katzman, 2019: 19).

## 5. The Limits of the Russia-Iran Alignment: Russia's Soft Balancing Logic and its Relations with other Middle Eastern States

The current-era security relationship between Moscow and Tehran is a sort of tactical and transitory alignment on specific mutual goals and interests, not an example of a full-fledged alliance. Actually, the Kremlin does not want to abandon Tehran, a valuable regional partner, nor does it want to strengthen Iran to a point where it becomes a threat to both Middle Eastern stability and Russian-Western relations (Naseem & Mahmudov, 2018: 113). In general, Tehran has looked to Russia for unrestricted assistance in fending off perceived foreign threats, notably from the United States and Israel. Yet, Russia entered into cooperation with Iran always on a case-by-case basis (Kozhanov, 2016: 3-4). Moscow's hesitation to openly confront the US and the asymmetry in the Russia-Iran relationship hindered this pragmatic relationship from developing into a well-established alliance (Therme, 2018: 549).

The level of Russia's support for Iran has always shifted from the Yeltsin years to the Putin period. It has also been impacted by critical external factors, for example, from the 'reset' initiative launched by President Obama to the Ukraine crisis and the Syrian civil war. This illustrates that, despite its continued antagonism toward the United States on certain topics like the NATO enlargement and the American unilateral military actions in Eurasia, Russia also seeks to engage with Washington in order to fulfill some of its objectives. On the other side, anti-Americanism has served as the Iranian Islamic State's 'basic ideological foundation' in creating its political structure since the 1979 revolution. Hence, Iran's hostility toward the US goes beyond a simple foreign policy issue (Therme, 2018: 551). In this regard, Iran has deep doubts about Moscow's usefulness as a long-term and stable strategic partner due to Russia's inclination to support international demands and sanctions on Iran, especially when it has better ties with the Western powers. (For the problem of confidence Russian-Iranian relations see Sazhin, 2016: 10-12).

Even though Tehran seeks Russia's assistance for its national security and military interests, Iran is also unwilling to give up its freedom to act in international relations by becoming overly dependent on Russia (see Parker, 2016). Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Tehran has never sought compensation for breaking its close security partnership with Washington by an equivalent patron-client relationship with Russia. Rather, it has sought a more autonomous course of action symbolized in the motto of 'neither West nor East.' In fact, the Kremlin's armed presence in the Syrian civil war challenges to Tehran's ideal conception of the Middle East where Iran would assert an undisputed regional dominance. The military doctrine of Iran underlines the prerequisite of the establishment of an independent Middle Eastern region, where no external global power could exert direct military influence (Therme, 2018: 555). Accordingly, the constitution of Iran forbids the existence of foreign military bases on its soil. For this reason, Iran had concealed the fact

that Russia had been using the Hamadan airbase to support its air force activities in Syria for nearly a year before the Russian media came up with the information. The Tehran government promptly canceled the special arrangement with Moscow on the use of the airbase to avoid a constitutional crisis in Iran (Therme, 2018: 556; Katzman, 2019: 16).

The civil war in Syria triggered an unprecedented level of security and military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran. However, there are also significant differences concerning Russia and Iran's agendas in Syria, and the two states compete for long-term influence there (Rodkiewicz, 2019: 3). The Russian military holds the belief that air operations alone cannot win any war, which has strengthened Russia and Iran's *de facto* military collaboration in the conflict zone. However, the Russian need for Iran's military and paramilitary assistance has incrementally decreased over the years as the Assad regime gradually consolidated its position. Hence, it is anticipated that the relations between the two states would change from one of collaboration to one of rivalry (Murciano, 2018: 4; Trenin, 2018: 23). Moscow has never backed Tehran's aspirations to assert domination over Syria by using its special relations with the Bashar Assad government, the Alawite community in Syria, as well as its growing military presence in that country. As the Kremlin generally advocates the principle of a powerful and centralized government, Russia tries to guarantee that Tehran will not establish 'a state inside a state' in Syria. This accounts for Russia's unstable and precarious relations with non-state groups, particularly the Iran-backed militia groups operating in the country (Trenin, 2018: 23; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 6; Barnes-Dacey, 2018: 67-68). Those concerns by Russia made the Kremlin align closer to the Israeli stance on that problem, while Russia signaled its endorsement of Israel's announcements that pro-Iran military units must withdraw from Southern Syria. In May 2018, Russia even tolerated massive air strikes by the Israeli air force on Iranian positions and installations in Syria on the condition that Assad's troops were not targeted. Some believe that Moscow may even benefit from Israeli measures since Russia shares Israel's desire to reduce Iranian influence but does not have enough leverage on Tehran to ensure that (Murciano, 2018: 5).<sup>6</sup>

Russia's 'fear of entrapment' into military conflicts in the conflict-ridden Middle Eastern region, which may entail the US and Israel, is another pertinent concern by the Kremlin, which impedes the strengthening of the Moscow-Tehran alignment further. When Russia began its armed intervention in Syria, the Kremlin reached agreements with both the US and Israel to develop bilateral mechanisms which would preclude aircraft crashes and other inadvertent events over Syrian soil (U.S., Russia Reach Agreement on Syrian Flights, 2015; Rodkiewicz, 2019: 4). Thanks to the framework established by such an agreement, Israel's air force could assault Iranian forces in Syria without facing the danger of being hit by Russia's air defense systems stationed in Syria's territory (see Rodkiewicz, 2019: 4; Magid, 2022). Unlike the situation in the post-Soviet region, the Kremlin is neither the Middle East's dominant military

<sup>6</sup> Some analysts claim that Israel also prefers the Russians to stay in Syria to limit and constrain Iran's military presence there. See the conclusion

part of the study edited by Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru (2018: 111).

power nor the region's undisputed 'security overlord.' In case of an escalation to a full-fledged conflict between Iran and Israel, Russia does not have the requisite capability and instruments to stop that. In such a scenario, Russia would be reluctant to intervene in support of one side at the expense of its relations with the other. In these circumstances, Russia just strives to reinforce the bilateral deterrence between two adversaries and supports the balance of what it regards as the legitimate security concerns of both nations relative to one another (Trenin, 2018: 25-26).

In this regard, Moscow does not express approval toward the ideological viewpoint of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, which labels Israel a 'Small Satan' coming after the United States and uses harsh language toward that state, even mentioning 'erasing Israel from the map' (Naseem & Mahmado, 2018: 108-109). Despite Israel's deep ties with the US which is generally viewed as Russia's number one adversary, the Kremlin does not identify Israel as an inherently hostile actor. After Putin's ascent to power, Moscow and Israel have cultivated strong ties and engaged in considerable economic, technological, military, and intelligence cooperation (Katz, 2018: 103). If Tehran is identified as a 'situational ally,' Israel is viewed as a 'valuable partner' and another prominent regional actor from the Russian perspective (Trenin, 2018: 25).

In a similar vein, Russia does not back Iran's ideological expansionism across the Middle Eastern region by forging a 'Shia Crescent' that extends across Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Gulf states. Moscow publicly confirms that it does not take sides in the ideological and theological conflict between Shia and Sunnis and invites the two parties to engage in dialogue in order to find a sustainable *modus vivendi*. Russia does everything to keep itself out of conflicts that appear to be Islamic sectarian clashes in Iraq or anywhere else (Sazhin, 2016: 17; Rodkiewicz, 2019: 3-4; Evseev, 2016: 70-71). Moscow's ties with the Sunni Middle Eastern states might be severely harmed by a close alignment with Iran's perspective of local security problems (Kozhanov, 2016: 4). Russia is determined to maintain good relations also with Iran's rivals in the Middle East, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. When an agreement is on oil output discussed among OPEC+ members, for instance, Moscow sometimes adopts a closer stance to the Saudi position than to those of Iran on the basis of its self-defined interests (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016: 8; Trenin, 2018: 26). Additionally in the face the GCC states' expanding military needs after the Arab Spring, Moscow expanded its reach into their markets and secured a number of deals with those regional governments to supply its fighter jets and air defense missiles (Borisov, 2018: 41-42). In this sense, the Kremlin recently achieved to form normal relationships with practically all the Middle Eastern actors, including Tehran's biggest rivals. This situation makes an all-out alliance with Iran a much farther-fetched option for Russia (Sazhin, 2016: 17).

Above all, the biggest impediment to further deepening Russia-Iran military cooperation is Russia's soft balancing strategy toward the United States, which Moscow tends to pursue beyond the CIS region. In the current-era Middle East, Moscow does not directly confront the US, but instead capitalizes on the dissatisfaction of some local states with the policies of the US and European powers by taking

practical steps to undermine those policies. The rapid decline in Russian national capabilities following the demise of the Soviet Union forced Moscow to accept that it can no longer compete with America on equal terms, particularly outside its immediate neighborhood (Bahgat, 2019: 89). In this sense, the Kremlin appears to abandon the conventional zero-sum reasoning in the Middle East, which would call for the formation of a counterweight coalition of local states against Washington's allies in the region. Based on its new pragmatic thinking, Russia is ready to work with all important parties, not regarding any of them as an all-weather ally or foe. In this way, Russia aims to overcome the long-standing hostile divisions in the Middle East (Trenin, 2018: 21). Some analysts argue that Russia has evolved into an indispensable great power influencing significant developments in the Middle East, at least in the short term, thanks to Moscow's dynamic diplomacy and flexible collaboration with all regional actors (Popescu and Secieru, 2018: 6). As previously said, one of the key differences between great powers and regional states is their ability to operate in more than one regional context (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 34). Thus, Russia's expanded involvement in Middle Eastern security affairs supports its aspirations to become a great power which is able to act on the global scale.

## 6. Conclusion

The examination of the Russian-Iranian alignment in this study put forward that the bilateral security cooperation between these two states lacks strategic convergence, a long-term vision, and strong commitments. The reason why Russia supports Iran in the Middle East up to such a level seems to be just related to Russia's objective to "delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies." Hence, the soft balancing perspective could best capture the main dynamics of Russia's strategic approach toward Iran. As suggested by Walt, hard balancing aims to shift the balance of power by creating a countervailing coalition to confront adversary powers, while soft balancing accepts the existing balance of power and just "seeks to obtain better outcomes within it" (Walt, 2009: 104). In its approach toward Iran, Russia seeks neither to overtly challenge the US and its regional allies in the Middle East nor to alter the regional balance of power by creating a counterbalancing coalition with Iran and any other regional states. Instead, Russia tries to preserve the current status quo in the Middle East and seems to be open to collaboration on Iran and other regional issues with the United States unless Washington pursues a regime change strategy and conducts unilateral military operations disregarding Russia's great power role and interests.

In the literature, scholars point to Russia-Iran relations to give an example of soft balancing against the US, the sole superpower in the current international system. They generally take the soft balancing perspective as instrumental to understand what kinds of resistance the US could face in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who will try to balance Washington, and which means and methods are likely to be used to balance the United States (see Paul 2005; Pape, 2005; Piskunova, 2008; Ferguson, 2012; Chaziza, 2014). The application of the soft balancing perspective to the Russia-Iran alignment in this study showed that this perspective could be useful to comprehend not only the competition between the US and

its strategic rivals but also the characteristics of relations between the US rivals themselves which form alignments to resist Washington's unilateral policies. The detailed case study on Russia-Iran security cooperation demonstrated how Russia's soft balancing logic against the United States has limited its support to Iran and kept this alignment at a pragmatic and conditional level. The article also showed that Russia's soft balancing strategy towards the Middle East saved Moscow from serious costs in its relations with the other regional states that are allied with the United States. The examination of Russia-Iran relations also put forward the differences between Moscow's and Washington's approaches towards the region. Unlike the US which always backs Israel and the Gulf states and seeks to ensure an entire isolation of Iran in the Middle East, Russia never embraces Iran or any other regional state as a constant and unconditional ally. Moscow seeks to engage with all local states considering their common interest with Russia and respecting their threat perceptions from each other. This enables Russia to build constructive relationships with all regional states including some of the US allies which have been looking for closer cooperation with Moscow to increase their strategic autonomy. In this regard, future studies examining Russia's approach toward the Middle East may also utilize the soft balancing perspective to analyze how Russia's current strategy could help Moscow to undermine Washington's long-standing leverage over its regional allies in the longer term.

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