

Iran-Russia-Türkiye Triangle: A Challenge for the U.S. Position in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT *The American-centric world order that was shaped after the end of the Cold War is being questioned by dynamically growing “old” and “new” centers of power, namely Russia and China. Entities united in opposition to American hegemony pursue policies that challenge not only the U.S. position but more importantly American interests. This process has been especially visible in the wake of the civil war in Syria. This article aims to analyze the U.S. Middle East strategy in the context of ongoing redistribution of power in the region, influenced by the Iran-Russia-Türkiye triangle. It claims that Syria’s civil war stimulated the formation of this triangle and significantly influenced the further evolution of the balance of power in the region, posing both a direct challenge and an indirect threat to the American position and its interests in the Middle East. The article argues for the necessity of correcting the American Middle East strategy, as the one implemented so far opened the door to other powers to compete for influence in the Middle East.*

Keywords: American Grand Strategy, Iran-Russia-Türkiye Triangle, Syria, Middle East

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Introduction

The Middle East holds a unique position in contemporary international relations. Its geopolitical location at the junction of three continents, with access to crucial communication routes, puts it in the spotlight for global powers. The uniqueness of the Middle East unquestionably strengthens its resource potential, which is not without significance for energy-consuming, global economies.

The history of the empires' feuds in the Middle East has a thousand-year tradition. Naturally, rivalry has also become an inherent feature of contemporary international relations. The region poses a challenge to the interests of the main players in the international arena who shape a specific balance of power through their involvement in the area based on their potential and constantly changing possibilities of action. Each of the power centers, through implementing the principles of its foreign policy and security strategy, strives to maximize its power and limit the activity of its rivals. States are forced to act and build their potential primarily due to the anarchic nature of international relations and uncertainty as to the intentions of other entities. Willingness to withstand the chaos of international relations, distrust, and seeking out security guarantees lays the basis of strategic thinking about the process of shaping their power and position. According to Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, the ultimate goal is to obtain and maintain their full dominance in the structure of the international system, which means being at the top of the hierarchy of the aforementioned relations.¹

The core of the post-Cold War order was the U.S.' dominant position in the region, which allowed the American administration to be given some freedom in building relations with Middle Eastern allies and partners, as well as a lot of room for maneuvering toward regional rivals of the U.S. Thus, the Middle East has become one of the American areas of influence in the global order. The skillful combination of soft and hard power as two complementary instruments of U.S. foreign and security policy spoke in favor of the existence of such a hegemonic order in the 1990s. According to the hegemonic stability theory, the international system is most likely to remain stable when one of the states becomes a hegemon.² As a matter of fact, the first post-Cold War decade seems to have confirmed this assumption.

The 21st century has brought a significant modification in the perception of the American role in the world. The global American-centric balance of power is being successfully challenged by players such as China or Russia, simultaneously, transferring the competition to the regional level, where they effectively pursue their business by questioning the existing status quo. In applying a proactive policy in the region, they are supported by tactical or strategic al-

liances with influential middle-level powers, with which they often share common interests or the will to withstand American hegemony and the revision of the existing world order.

The main assertion that triggered the reconfiguration of the balance of power at the global and regional levels was the fact that the U.S. was unable to create an effective instrument for managing international order at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, basing its hegemony on hard power and the idea of “universal” Western values. This approach was too narrow and short-sighted in the context of a complicated and chaotic international environment. The U.S. global strategy lacks stabilizing instruments and pro-development stimulators that would significantly increase the effectiveness and dynamics of the American world leadership. Thus, the hegemon, along with several other factors, began to play a destabilizing role in the international order.³ Moreover, there was no analysis of the impact of cultural and civilizational conditions on relations with the regions where Americans wanted to maintain a dominant role. This was of particular importance in the case of such conflicting and diverse regions as the Middle East, where subsequent military interventions (for example in Iraq)⁴ only “wound” a spiral of radicalism. That led to the situation where the lack of an individual approach led to the spread of anti-American sentiments. This began to reduce the effectiveness of the U.S. Middle East strategy, which changed the geopolitics of the region⁵ and gave many actors, who are not satisfied with the existing status quo, a broader perspective on their strategic goals.

Under the conditions of a hegemonic order, it is extremely difficult to guarantee benefits to entities other than the U.S., which has not only been noticed by its rivals but also by allies. This is one of the fundamental premises that made several countries question the legitimacy of the existence of an order based on the exclusive domination of one central force. Hence, countries such as Russia, Türkiye, and Iran have begun to create conditions that would guarantee them the possibility of effective implementation of particular interests in the region, with a new redistribution of power on top of that. Their strategy is based on ensuring their security and stability, the possibility of developing economic projects and strengthening their prestigious position as key regional players. This collides with the interests of the U.S. in the Middle East.

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This article focuses on the conflict in Syria related to the so-called Arab Spring,⁶ which became a derivative of the changes taking place in the balance of power in the Middle East. The Arab Spring had a destructive effect on the system of allied ties of the U.S. in the Middle East. It created favorable conditions and opportunities for active policy for players inside and outside the region, thereby strengthening their position internationally. The internation-

alization of the war in Syria interrupted decades of the unquestioned domination of the U.S., and most importantly, allowed new players to impose their narrative in the Middle East. It appeared that despite the giant advantage of the American superpower, using the element of surprise with relatively limited military instruments, Iran and Russia are able, by joining forces, to achieve their strategic goals. Therefore, they are capable of creating conditions for a relative stabilization based not only on military instruments but above all else, on political and diplomatic instruments in the cooperation with Türkiye, thus contradicting the non-alternative American model of managing relations in the Middle East.

It is assumed that the war in Syria not only served as a stimulus for the formation of the Russia-Iran-Türkiye triangle but also significantly influenced the further evolution of the balance of power in the region. This new setup in relations seems to pose a challenge to the U.S.' Middle East strategy. This, in turn, translates into the real possibility of forging relations with these countries, hence forcing Washington to search for a new, more effective, and systemic *modus operandi*.

Middle East in American Policy

The conscious evolution of American policy concerning the Middle East began to take conscious and evolutionary shape during the first half of the 20th century, becoming a permanent element of American foreign and security policy and a manifestation of the U.S. growth to the role of an influential and powerful player in the international arena. The apogee of this trend was achieved when the U.S. attained superpower status, granting it the capacity to independently manage the regional order in the Middle East during the transition from the 20th to the 21st century.

It should be emphasized that the region had gradually gained strategic importance for the security interests of the U.S. Starting in the 19th century, Ameri-

can objectives in the region eventually led to a new version of the U.S. Middle Eastern policy. In the 21st century, the dynamics of shaping the U.S. Middle East strategy coincided with the process of transformation of the international order and the change in the position of the U.S. itself in the world as well as limited expansion of the influence of their prominent adversaries and allies.

In the initial phase of the process of shaping this policy, manifestations of strategic thinking about the importance and role of the region in the world could not yet be seen. However, the strategic documents of the post-Second World War period and contemporary U.S. national security strategies betoken the growing level of strategic culture of the American administration and the broad view of Washington's elites on the influence of the Middle East relations not only on regional but also the global policy of the U.S.

The Middle East, as a part of the international strategy of the U.S., gained particular importance in the mid-1940s. It was generally related to the process of transformation of the world order and new challenges for the U.S. global strategy. The underlying determinant of the American strategy in the Middle East was to maintain a dominant position in the region and to maximize interests defined as power.⁷ At an early stage of the Cold War, the U.S. decided to provide military and economic support to the Turkish Republic (the Truman Doctrine) to prevent the Soviet Union from extending its influence. Undoubtedly, the U.S. would not be able to achieve such influence in the Middle East region if the British were not present there. The disintegration of the British Empire after Second World War created a vacuum of power. Maintaining the U.S. dominant position in the Middle East was served by the doctrine of containment, which was based on supporting countries threatened by international communism with packages of military and economic aid. As a result, the U.S. managed to create a system of relations based on a clientelist model, whose participants enjoyed numerous benefits of political, economic, or military nature.

The domineering position in the Middle East was a perfect fit in the broader scope of the U.S.' grand strategy, whose key element was the creation and maintenance of the world order based on the political-military-economic power of the U.S. The following interests were of fundamental importance in the American strategy in the Middle East: preserving Israel's sovereignty and security, ensuring the stability of power in the Persian Gulf states, and ensuring unwavering access to energy resources.

The realization of American interests in the Middle East, almost throughout the entire Cold War period, was served by the offshore balancing concept, which was based on "using privileged regional powers by a power to suppress the growth of potentially hostile forces towards the aforementioned power."⁸

The 7th Tripartite Summit in Astana Format was held in Tehran, between Türkiye, Iran, and Russia, with the participation of respective Presidents, on July 19, 2022.

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The foundations of offshore balancing were to support local allies and develop the Rapid Deployment Force, which, on the one hand, allowed maintaining the balance of power, and on the other hand, deterred hostile American interventions. At the initial stage of the Cold War, the U.S. implemented offshore balancing using the twin pillars strategy concerning its regional partners: Iran (until 1979) and Saudi Arabia. These countries formed the regional pro-U.S. regional security system.⁹ Even if there were signs of a shift away from offshore balancing, the U.S. consistently avoided steady military involvement and forced transformation of the region, steering the process from the “back seat.”

The U.S. victory in the Cold War gave rise to the *Pax Americana*. However, the new geopolitical balance of power did not significantly influence the reconfiguration of the U.S. interests in the Middle East. The protection of Israel’s sovereignty, the maintenance of the power of the pro-American Gulf states, and uninterrupted access to energy resources remained valid. On the other hand, the means and methods of the U.S.’ Middle East strategy, henceforth defined by unilateralism, militarism, and the promotion of democracy (including force-based solutions), have been rectified.

Per the democratic peace theory, the U.S. assumed that democratic states were reluctant to fight each other.¹⁰ Hence, it was concluded that the spread of democracy in the Middle East would prevent conflicts in the region, render it more stable, and protect the interests of the U.S. and its allies. The spread of democracy was accompanied by the promotion of neoliberal economic policy.¹¹

New challenges and threats to international security, terrorism in particular, the proliferation of weapons of massive destruction as well as “rogue regimes” such as Iran, significantly affected the conceptualization of the American strategy toward the Middle East. The strategic goal was to prevent the emergence of an anti-American, regional center of power that could threaten the status quo and Washington’s priority interests. Undoubtedly, since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has prevailed as the most serious American nemesis. In this context, it has become crucial for the U.S. to prevent Iran from producing weapons of mass destruction as well as means of their delivery, by using different tools of power.



Internal and external challenges have led the U.S. to diminish its involvement in the Middle East, reducing American activity to selective engagement

As the center of the international order, the U.S. based its foreign policy on a new liberal hegemony,¹² whose underlying principles lie in the belief that “the U.S. has the right and duty to manage local politicians everywhere in the world.”¹³ Moreover, it was acknowledged that only strong American leadership was able to ensure the stability of the global order and protect the international community from asymmetric threats. It appears that finding an equilibrium between the needs of American security and international, pro-democratic goals, has become problematic concerning the implementation of the assumptions of the new liberal hegemony. This raises questions about both the American leadership of the international community and the effectiveness of the U.S. grand strategy, which has left its mark in the Middle East in particular. But the effectiveness of the U.S. grand strategy in the 21st century has been undermined not only by international challenges, most importantly the growing power of China but also by internal issues, among which the dispute between internationalists and isolationists has highlighted deep differences in the perception of the U.S. role in the world. Internal and external challenges have led the U.S. to diminish its involvement in the Middle East, reducing American activity to selective engagement. This did not of course mean withdrawing from the region, which remains in the center of the U.S. interest.

Decomposition of U.S. Middle East Strategy in the 21st Century

Since the early 1940s, the U.S. has been implementing a grand strategy of liberal hegemony. “The foundation of liberal hegemony was the development of American military power, whose aim is to overwhelm potential challengers that they will not even try to compete, much less fight.”¹⁴ Liberal hegemony allowed the U.S. to use its power to influence other international relations actors and at the same time promote Western values.

The outbreak of Arab anti-government uprisings was a strategic surprise, analogous to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the terrorist attack of September 11

By attacking Iraq on false premises, Washington triggered a process of reconfiguring the regional status quo, the stability of which it had focused on throughout the Cold War. Although it is easy to criticize the U.S. intervention in Iraq today, one should also acknowledge the circumstances that led George W. Bush to this decision. One crucial aspect is the context of U.S.-Saudi

and U.S.-Pakistani relations. A year before the onset of the intervention in Iraq, Saudi Arabia ordered the U.S. forces to leave their territory. At the same time, Pakistan provided limited support to the U.S. intelligence operations, despite pressure from the U.S. and India. It was generally believed that the U.S. achieved its goals in Afghanistan and shifted the burden of intelligence operations to other countries. Without full intelligence cooperation with the Saudis and Pakistanis, they had extremely limited room to maneuver. Obviously, the U.S. could have waged an intelligence war against al-Qaeda modeled on Israeli intelligence in the 1970s against the Black September organization operating in Europe, but without partners on the ground, the U.S. intelligence capabilities were very modest.¹⁵

The Second Gulf War resulted in the creation of a power vacuum in Iraq, which was soon, ironically, filled by Iran. Contrary to the U.S. intentions, Iran strengthened its regional position and gained the possibility of a real impact on Iraq.

The destabilization of Iraq created ideal conditions for exacerbating Shi'ite-Sunni antagonisms. "The U.S., by destroying Iraqi state institutions, overthrew the sectarian political balance that had been in favor of the Sunni minority since the end of First World War."¹⁶ During the rule of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the power was consolidated by the Shiites. The Sunni minority was deprived of any possibility of exercising political functions, which was justified by the former affiliation with the Baath Party. "The Sunni Muslims soon began to be treated as second-class citizens –persecuted by the authorities and Shiite militias (e.g. the Badr Brigade, Mahdi Army), which initiated their search for security guarantees in terrorist organizations, including those in ISIS."¹⁷ ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took advantage of the escalation of the Shi'ite-Sunni crisis to fulfill his own needs and in 2014 proclaimed the Islamic State Caliphate in Iraq.

The Iraqi strategy employed by the American authorities has proven disastrous, primarily because it was based on miscalculations. The Americans en-

countered surprisingly engineered resistance in Iraq, which eventually turned out to be a part of Saddam Hussein's plan in the event of an external attack. Although President Bush counted on the support of Shiites, adversarial to the Sunni establishment, he ignored their deep ties to Shiite Iranians. Iraqi Shiites saw no point in the emergence of pro-American Iraq. By all means, Washington opened the mythical Pandora's Box. "The chaos that hit Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime brought the country almost to the brink of collapse and implied a series of events beyond the regions."¹⁸ Iraq, though ruled authoritatively over the years, paradoxically, stabilized the balance of power in the Middle East, Iran in particular. This type of balance was also ensured by the dictatorial, yet pro-Western governments of North Africa and the Persian Gulf. The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010 was another installment of the emergence of a new regional balance of power. It had the greatest impact on the foreign policy of Western powers, especially the U.S. After the end of the Cold War, some Arab states looked for the possibility of becoming part of the democratic world led by Washington. However, the U.S. preferred to support authoritarian but stable and friendly regimes, which weakened its credibility among societies of the region. Even the Bush Democracy Promotion Manifesto did not revise the U.S. approach to the aforementioned countries. In fact, the U.S. continued to provide financial and military support to friendly autocratic regimes in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states, not based on democratization benchmarks or developmental objectives, but rather to avoid the political rise of anti-Western groups as an outcome of democratization.

The outbreak of Arab anti-government uprisings was a strategic surprise, analogous to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the terrorist attack of September 11. In all those events, the U.S. did not identify the heralding manifestation of symptoms early enough, which questioned the effectiveness of the American services, placing America in the role of a reactionary state. In the attempt to apprehend the cause of this condition, in the case of the Arab Spring, one needs to recognize three destructive elements to the U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century, i.e., the over-evaluation of past successes, over-confidence in present policies, and insensitivity to warnings critical of existing policies.¹⁹

The Arab Spring showed the lack of a strategic vision of the U.S. in the face of the wave of pro-democratic protests initiated by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bu Zajd in Tunisia. The Obama Administration saw the change in the regional status quo as a threat to traditional interests –especially Israel's security and fuel market stability. The loss of the pro-American client state and their potential replacement with anti-Western forces aroused great concern in Washington. The Obama Administration faced a strategic choice: whether to support a society demanding prodemocratic change or to continue

supporting authoritarian but pro-American regimes. U.S. strategy concerning the Arab Spring was inconsistent, reactionary, and at times chaotic. In the beginning, the U.S. gave its full support to the regional autocrats. Only with their impending collapse did they change tactics, siding with the revolutionaries to maintain the main structures of power that served American interests. This tactic was exercised by the U.S. in the case of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. However, regarding Yemen and Bahrain, Washington opted to maintain the power of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. Yet, the most serious obstacle to overcome was caused by the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011.

The strategy of the U.S., until the outbreak of the civil war, was to isolate Syria in the international arena using sanctions. In accordance with the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003 adopted by the U.S. Congress, the president gained the capability of banning the export of food and medical supplies, the landing and flight of Syrian carriers over the area of the U.S., precluding American businesses from investing in Syria, and imposing severe restrictions on the movement of the Syrian diplomacy. The U.S. decided to reduce to a bare minimum any existing mutual contacts along with blocking transactions in any Syrian government property subject to U.S. jurisdiction.²⁰ U.S.-Syrian relations during this period can be considered hostile, with little likelihood of improvement.

The outbreak of anti-government protests in Syria has created an opportunity to redefine U.S.-Syrian relations. In the removal of the power of Bashar Assad, the U.S. saw the prospect of establishing a pro-Western government and, most importantly, weakening Iran, which, since the time of the American attack on Iraq, has become “the axis around which the Middle East revolves.”²¹ In August 2011, Barack Obama adjured Assad to step down as he was regarded to have lost his legitimacy to exercise power. However, Syria, unlike Egypt, was not an American client state, therefore, not only did Assad persist but also intensified repression against the protesters.

After the failure of the intervention in Libya, the U.S. gave priority to diplomatic actions, both at the regional and global levels, putting military instruments on the back burner. It turned out to be an arduous task for the Americans to gain broader acceptance of the regime change strategy for Syria, both within the United Nations and among Arab allies. The plan to oust Bashar Assad from power was ambitious, and based solely on diplomatic instruments. It proved to be unrealistic and ineffective.²² Washington counted on the Russian Federation to put pressure on Assad to come to terms with an imminent end to his rule. As it revealed itself later, Russia had its own plan for Syria; thereby, the U.S. found itself in a political, diplomatic, and military clinch. American powerlessness against the Assad regime has questioned the durability of U.S. hegemony.

The Barack Obama Administration revised Syria's strategy, though not, as many have believed, at the time of the chemical attack of Assad's forces on Ghouta, which, according to the U.S. president, was crossing the "red line,"²³ but in a situation of increasing extremism of the so-called Islamic State.²⁴ After the capture of Mosul on June 29, 2014, ISIS fighters proclaimed the creation of the self-proclaimed caliphate, the so-called Islamic State (Western Iraq and Eastern Syria). In September 2014, the U.S. launched air-strikes against Syria to prevent ISIS from using its territory to conduct operations in neighboring Iraq. The U.S. established the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, consisting of 83 countries and five international organizations, including NATO, the European Union, and the League of Arab States.²⁵ In September 2014, the first Operation Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) was launched to counter the escalating threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Within three years, the coalition regained the vast majority of ISIS's territory, which significantly weakened the organization and forced its fighters to flee. Although a U.S. raid in October 2019 killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, American military officials warned that the group had been defeated but not completely eradicated. Undoubtedly, defeating ISIS by means of military instruments was part of the American anti-terrorist strategy together with another attempt to stabilize the situation in and around Iraq. However, in the context of the war with ISIS, Washington faced another challenge to its Middle Eastern policy. Proper interpretation of the cooperation of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye proved problematic for the American administration mainly because it had no precedents in the long history of their mutual relations. Moreover, they were entities with such divergent interests that most analysts assessed the formation of this triangle as a passing, temporary, and tactical phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, defeating ISIS by means of military instruments was part of the American anti-terrorist strategy together with another attempt to stabilize the situation in and around Iraq. However, in the context of the war with ISIS, Washington faced another challenge to its Middle Eastern policy

Genesis of the Triangle: Premises, Interests, and Strategic Goals

Undeniably, the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, within which the issue of defeating the Islamic State was only an episode, became an important stage in the transition process of the balance of power in the Middle East. Countries such as Iran, Türkiye, and Russia, which as external participants in the battle for Syria played the role of a game-changer in a complicated game of

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interests between various centers of power, became the beneficiaries and profoundly engaged participants in the conflict. Certainly unexpected, Russia's involvement in 2015 in Syria, which at that time was encompassed in the conflict in Ukraine, not only surprised the international community, but, most of all, triggered new dynamics in Middle Eastern relations. The move thus proved that the exclusivity of

the American order is slowly becoming a thing of the past, and there will be room for more actors in the new balance of power.

The states involved in the Syrian conflict have separate interests, strategic goals, and motivations, which, despite significant differences, sometimes interpenetrate at the tactical and operational levels. For each of the parties, the destabilization in Syria has a direct or indirect impact on their national security. As a result, various, occasionally quite unexpected, geopolitical constructions have been created for the realization of the aforementioned interests. As an example of this, one might see the tactical triangle (higher risk triangle), which connected Iran, Russia, and Türkiye at the stage of pursuing the most favorable *modus operandi* in Syria. Strengthening cooperation was conducive to the relative stabilization of the situation in the territory of the Syrian state (the Assad regime), and also made it possible to delimit their zones of interest, taking into account the potential and power of the three entities involved. The tightening of the tripartite cooperation limited the U.S.' room for maneuvering in its policy toward Syria (eliminating the possibility of implementing the concept of regime change) as well as the Middle East (breaking the paradigm that had been functioning for decades, i.e. the American monopoly on the use of force).

The genesis of the Iran-Russia-Türkiye triangle began with Moscow's effective involvement in the Syrian conflict, which was sought not only by Assad but also by his close ally Iran, knowing that without any significant support, the days of the Assad government were numbered.²⁶ When Syrian and Iranian forces (which had been involved in the conflict since 2011) joined the Russian war machine in October 2015, the situation of the regime, the collapse of which seemed inevitable, changed dramatically. The balance of power, which began to crystallize, stabilized the power in Damascus, yet, most of all, it saved Tehran from a prestigious defeat and gave Moscow new opportunities to act in Syria and the Mediterranean region, strategically pivotal for Russia.



(R-L) Flags of Türkiye, Syria, Russia and Iran hanging during the “Syria-themed” meeting of the respective foreign ministers with the Assad regime in Moscow on May 10, 2023.

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The new configuration forced the further involvement of Ankara, which in the initial phase of the conflict had focused on breaking off relations with the Assad regime and a confrontation with Damascus.²⁷ And in 2015, it had to face the possibility of conflict with Russia.²⁸ However, in the situation of significant changes in the military circumstances in Syria and the political turmoil in Türkiye itself, it reacted instinctively. A tactical adjustment was introduced into Ankara’s Syrian strategy, moving from open confrontation to more veiled methods of pursuing its particular interests. The Turkish side combined military instruments with an effective political and diplomatic offensive, a move that made a visible impact on relations with Moscow.²⁹ It resulted in a fairly “exotic triangle” of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, which began to operate under the so-called Astana Process.³⁰ The three countries aimed to formally and politically regulate the situation on the territory of Syria, including the interests of the Assad regime, the opposition forces, and the three powers, as guarantors of the established order.

It ought to be emphasized that these three countries are linked (or rather separated) by a long and complicated history. This fact certainly impaired the rapprochement of positions and cooperation on the Syrian issue. Yet, it did not betoken extending this cooperation to the regional or trans-regional level. Overcoming mutual distrust, animosity and contradiction required political and diplomatic dexterity from Tehran, Moscow, and Ankara. The process involved the leaders of the three countries, as well as representatives of public and military diplomacy at multiple levels. As a matter of fact, what was pivotal

for the course of the negotiations was the military factor together with the advantage gained on land and in the air by the various parties involved in the conflict. The situation in Syria had gradually been evolving to the point where it was necessary to separate the zones of interest to avoid the escalation of the conflict and the use of excessive force as well as means to achieve goals that could have been realized through political and diplomatic instruments.

Each of the three powers in Syria yields their particular interests, closely related to their foreign policy and security objectives in this strategically vital region. The role of the American factor in the foreign policy of Tehran, Moscow, and Ankara is certainly also a decisive element in establishing cooperation. Iran perceives the U.S. as a hostile country, while American-Turkish relations have shown a kind of dualism in the last decade. On one hand, they are nominal allies, but on the other hand, navigating the framework of an asymmetric alliance. The limitations of the relations restrict Türkiye, additionally stifling its far-reaching ambitions. For Russia, though, the U.S. is a global rival, with which Moscow has been playing the game on a geostrategic level. From this perspective, the motives behind the involvement of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye in the Syrian conflict vary. Nevertheless, there also exists a common denominator such as building a sense of their own security and stability in the region, which affects the stability and security of Eurasia.

The chronology of events indicates that in the first phase of the Syrian saga, it was Iran that was particularly involved in the conflict, officially acting on the side of Damascus. Its interests stemmed from the geopolitically strategic position of Syria, which placed it at the heart of Iran's security doctrine. Tehran's priorities in the Syrian conflict included: the Assad government remaining in power, the possibility of unhampered access to the Lebanese Hezbollah via Syria and Iraq, and the fight for regional leadership in which Iran actively participates. Undoubtedly, the U.S. and its regional allies must have stood in the way of realizing these interests.

The most significant motive of Iran's strategy in the last few decades has been building a position as a major player in the Middle East and beyond. Visible strengthening of Iran has been achieved continuously since the Iraqi operation conducted by the U.S., which resulted in a rather unexpected dismantling of the foundation of Washington's Middle East strategy, i.e. maintaining the balance of power between Iran and Iraq.³¹ The framework drawn up by the American administration during the Cold War has collapsed under the pressure of failures and mistakes committed by it since 2003. As a result, Iran has taken advantage of Washington's problems by strengthening its position in the region.

Tehran's involvement in Syria is crucial to ensuring its position in the regional balance of power in line with its aspirations. The alliance with Da-

musculus gives the Iranian authorities the indispensable instruments to control the situation in the Middle East, but above all, the possibility of exerting influence over Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as Yemen, which allows for an active anti-Israel policy³² –although one of the factors limiting the room for maneuvering of Iran and Hezbollah on the Israeli-Syrian border is the coordination of military operations in Syria under the agreement reached by Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu.

In this way, Iran curbs the influence of the Sunni majority and the appetites of the Arab monarchies, simultaneously hindering the ability of the U.S. and its allies to act in this strategically important region. Establishing an effective network of links with state and non-state actors across the Levant creates a strategic depth that not only protects Iran but also prevents its isolation. Noticing the asymmetry of potentials, Iran skillfully uses its military and economic instruments and plays an effective political and diplomatic game, thus proving that its foreign policy and security are pragmatic, not ideological. As a result, the U.S. and its allies failed to isolate Tehran on the international stage. It found support in the region as well as in countries such as Russia and China.

Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict allowed Iran to reduce the military and economic burdens related to the issue of upholding the Assad regime. In fact, since the onset of the war in Syria, for the first time Iran and officially Damascus have gained effective support from outside the region. The price paid for the entry of the Russian Armed Forces and diplomacy into the game was the recognition of Moscow's dominant role in the resolution of the Syrian conflict, along with its interests in the region. Russia's proactive approach has undoubtedly widened the scope of the internationalization of this conflict. As a result, the interests of regional and global power centers such as the U.S. and Russia clashed in Syria, which unequivocally pushed Iran's interests on the defensive. However, it is worth acknowledging that Tehran's use of the "Russian card" increased the room for maneuvering in relations with the U.S. However, it did not protect the Iranian position from military attacks by Washington, thus opening up space for discussion on the degree of Russian involvement in cooperation with Iran.³³

Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict sparked a debate on its policy in the Middle East. The end of the Cold War forced the Russian Federation to withdraw from many regions. As a result, the Kremlin's Middle Eastern policy has suffered. The Russians left the region under the full control of the U.S. and its allies. The weakness of the Russian state and internal crises significantly



The role of the American factor in the foreign policy of Tehran, Moscow, and Ankara is certainly a decisive element in establishing cooperation

The relatively satisfied needs of the states operating in this tripartite configuration, combined with their ability to flexibly respond to real problems, presented the U.S. with a quite serious challenge in its Middle Eastern policy

limited Russia's ability to act in the international arena. In the post-bipolar world dominated by the West, its position was not seen as the leading one and the status of the great power was uncertain. Only the changes taking place in international relations since the beginning of the 21st century have created the appropriate external and internal conditions that allowed Russia to redefine its concept of foreign policy.

In the last decade, Russia has slowly defined its interests and strategic goals binding it with the Middle East. In this way, it makes it clear that it no longer intends to remain on the margins of Middle Eastern relations but wishes to become one of the leading powers committed to regional security, which it links with the security of its southern flank. Russia's policy toward the Middle East is certainly characterized by pragmatism, flexibility, and caution. In effect, Russia is striving to create a network of ties with the countries of the region that will maximally expand its room for maneuver, without closing any channels of dialogue with individual entities. In this sense, Russia aspires to the role of a revolving state in relations with individual centers of power in the region. Gradually regaining strength and authority in the international arena gave Moscow an additional impetus to build a strategy of flexible alliances with regional players³⁴ and an image of the exporter of stability in the face of the systematically degrading facade of the U.S.

The conflict in Syria has certainly exposed Russian interests in the Middle East and highlighted the wide scope of Russia's aptitude for action in the region together with potential and real cooperators. Seen from this perspective, Syria has become a kind of manifesto for Russia through which Moscow has applied for participation in the Middle East geopolitical game. The Kremlin viewed its involvement in the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to oppose another regime shift inspired by the West.

To strengthen its position in the region, Russia switched from diplomatic and political instruments, including the supply of military equipment to Syria, to an armed intervention to keep the Assad regime. On September 30, 2015, Russia launched a military operation. It must be admitted that the Russian authorities meticulously prepared a diplomatic cover for an armed operation, coordinating their actions with Iran, Israel, and other countries in the region. Moreover, Putin spoke with President Barack Obama about Syria, and on the day the campaign was launched, the Russian side informed the Americans about the need to evacuate the U.S. Army from the territory soon to be under

attack by Russian aviation. The aim was to minimize accidental incidents that could have led to a direct confrontation of powers in Syria.

Nonetheless, the most serious challenge for the Kremlin in the context of the operation in Syria was relations with Türkiye, which oscillated between hostility and cooperation. In this sense, relationships with Ankara became the litmus test of the effectiveness of Russian foreign policy and the success of the Syrian operation. Undoubtedly, the Russians realized that they could not count on Türkiye's neutrality in the situation of the conflict in Syria as it proved to be an autonomous player from the beginning. As one of the strongest countries in the region, whose strategic ambitions extend far beyond the Middle East, it could not fail to react to the challenge it faced in neighboring Syria. Even more so because Ankara –supporting the Syrian opposition– treated the possible regime change in Damascus as favorable to its own interests and took measures to implement this scenario from the onset, counting on intensive support from some countries in the region, but above all, on the involvement of the U.S. Yet, the Americans did not make it easier for the Turkish authorities to play the “Kurdish card” without regard to the security interests of Türkiye.³⁵ That was interpreted by Ankara as a direct threat to state security.

Putin's decision on Russian engagement in Syria on the side of official Damascus weakened Türkiye's position. Russia's intervention led to violent turmoil in Russian-Turkish relations. The most serious crisis in mutual relations was observed after a Russian fighter jet that took part in combat operations in Syria was shot down by Türkiye in November 2015.³⁶ It should be noted that the Russian jet was in Turkish airspace. As a result, Türkiye's position in the Syrian conflict was debilitated, primarily because Ankara did not receive understanding and support from its nominal NATO allies. Ankara was thus left to tackle a one-on-one confrontation with Russia, which defied even a hint of flexibility at that time. Moreover, a crucial factor contributing to the rapprochement between the two countries was the failed coup d'état in Türkiye, which changed the perception of Ankara in relation to its Western allies. In this situation, it established cooperation with Russia to gain influence on the solution of the Syrian issue.³⁷ The Kremlin diligently used the opportunity to involve Türkiye in the process of politically resolving the Syrian problem. Seizing an opportunity to extend the negotiating platform to include Türkiye as the third guarantor of the agreement, the Russians convened a meeting of foreign ministers in Moscow to start trilateral talks on settling the political situation in Syria, thus initiating the Astana peace process.

It must be emphasized that Russia scrupulously used any signs of Ankara's downgraded position resulting from its problems with Western allies. The international climate around Türkiye served as leverage for influencing Turkish policy as well as the trade and economic instruments that hit the Turkish econ-

omy. Under these circumstances, Moscow managed to get Ankara and Iran to the negotiating table. An additional bonus was the return to the high dynamics of economic and trade relations with Türkiye, especially in the energy sphere.³⁸

The importance of relations with the Turkish partner, however, went far beyond bilateral interactions. Without a doubt, the close cooperation of Türkiye as a NATO member with Russia may serve to undermine the cohesion of the alliance, which is in Moscow's interest. The crisis in Türkiye's rapport with the West, in particular with the U.S., results from the continual contestation of the policy pursued by the countries institutionally linked to Ankara. To counter-balance criticism from the West, Türkiye decided to purchase Russian S-400 missile systems, which has further increased the tension in relations with Washington.³⁹ The close Russian-Turkish cooperation has certainly widened the Kremlin's room for maneuvering concerning the Syrian issue, which functions in the conditions of a systemic crisis in relations with the West, legitimizing and increasing the effectiveness of Russian know-how. The ineffectiveness resulted primarily from the absence of some of the forces involved in the conflict at the negotiating table, including Iran, isolated from the negotiations in Geneva on Syria, although the Iranian factor played a key role in the fate of the country.⁴⁰

Thus, each side of this difficult triangle benefited from cooperation, although maintaining the status quo does not seem to be an easy task. First of all, Russia, which plays the role of a "binder" of the agreement, has gained additional arguments in a multi-level game with the West. Secondly, Iran emerged from the shadow of isolation, in defiance of the policy promoted by the U.S. and Israel, and was able to use its long-lasting military engagement in Syria to strengthen its position in the region. It has also gained international legitimacy to participate in a political solution to the Syrian problem. Finally, Türkiye, whose hardly established position in the Euro-Atlantic world and the "ally" of Russia and Iran, allowed it to balance an unorthodox path between the parties, reaping benefits and pursuing its short-term and strategic interests. Not only did Ankara become involved in the political process in Syria, representing the interests of the opposition, but also by using military instruments,⁴¹ it managed to create a controlled zone in the northwest of Syria. In this way, the relatively satisfied needs of the states operating in this tripartite configuration, combined with their ability to flexibly respond to real problems, presented the U.S. with a quite serious challenge in its Middle Eastern policy.

The U.S. and the Russia-Iran-Türkiye Triangle

The U.S. response to the civil war in Syria is based on three main objectives: the permanent defeat of ISIS, the political settlement ending the war, and the

withdrawal of external military forces, especially those associated with Iran. Achieving the intended goals turned out to be extremely difficult, even for a superpower. The main problem lies in the incompatibility of the tools and instruments used by Washington.

Currently, there are 900 American soldiers stationed in the Eastern Syria Security Area (ESSA), tasked with supporting and training the Syrian Democratic Forces to combat Islamic State fighters.⁴² Nearly

100 U.S. personnel are stationed at the al-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria, which is located on a road serving as a vital link for Iranian-backed forces from Tehran all the way to Southern Lebanon and Israel. The primary goal of the American forces in the ESSA is to prevent Assad forces or ISIS from taking control of the oil fields and agricultural resources, as well as prevent the creation of a corridor linking Iran with Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. From a strategic point of view, it is crucial to block the possibility of transporting weapons from Iran to Syria, which acts as a buffer for the main U.S. ally in the region, Israel.

However, the dynamics of events in recent years, which also contributed to the emergence of a new balance of power in the region, cemented Bashar Assad's power. The political and military support provided to Assad by Russia and Iran allowed the president to not only regain control over almost the entire territory of Syria but also buried the chance to adhere to the agreement negotiated between the president and the opposition, providing for the adoption of a new constitution and the holding of elections supervised by UN.⁴³ The initiative passed into the hands of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, whose arrangements determined the shape of the political mosaic in Syria. Some Middle Eastern countries started to normalize relations with Assad's Syria (Jordan and Saudi Arabia). Those countries realized that the regime change strategy for Syria was utopian and that it was in their interest to maintain at least some form of relations. Despite the lack of chance for execution, the U.S. continues to support the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2254. U.S. troops stationed in southeast Syria control most of Syria's oil fields. According to Bassam Thome, Syria's Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources, it is 90 percent of all deposits. The main beneficiary of this state of affairs is the Syrian Democratic Forces and the People's Defense Units, who began taking control of the fields in 2017. However, it should be noted that most of these facilities are operating far below their pre-war production levels.

The U.S., with its minimal presence in Syria, seems to be patiently monitoring the course of events. The "inclusion" of a strategic pause may be treated as evidence of the correction of American activity in the Middle East, which in recent decades has been a series of fundamental errors

If the cooperation between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran became strategic, it could be one of the factors affecting the weakening of the U.S. position both in the region and on a global scale

Yet, Barack Obama's lack of decisiveness contributed to the creation of a vacuum, which was filled by forces pursuing American interests, namely Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. The U.S. has not yet found an effective response to curbing the influence of the strategic triangle in Syria. In addition, the Americans have not developed a complementary strategy that, by taking advantage of the contradictions between the states, would shatter their

common Syrian standing. Washington follows a separate course toward each of the countries engaged, although its antagonistic approach is symptomatic.

During the presidency of Donald Trump, however, the U.S. adopted a particularly hostile stance toward Iran. Tactics characterized by unilateralism, militarism, and economic pressure did not bring tangible results. Since Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) in 2018, a series of escalating incidents have struck the wider Mideast –that includes drone and mine attacks targeting vessels at sea as well as assaults blamed on Iran and its proxies in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁴ In retaliation, in January 2020, Iran announced: “It would completely abandon restrictions on uranium enrichment and heavy water centrifuges, a key provision in the Nuclear Agreement.”⁴⁵

Although Joe Biden has announced the return to dialogue with Iran and the revival of the JCPOA, the six rounds of negotiations held so far have not brought the parties closer to the compromise. In Syria's calculus, unfortunately, the U.S. missed the idea that the road to real settlement goes through a successful American containment strategy, based on supporting the opposition, securing zones, and most importantly, cooperating with allies and neighboring states.

President Biden, referring directly to the Syrian problem, announced that the U.S. will not provide funds for the reconstruction of Syria's areas under the control of the regime as long as it continues to sponsor terrorism and threaten its neighbors. Washington has also stressed that the regime must create safe conditions for the return of refugees.

Even though the relations between the U.S. and Türkiye are of an allied nature, however, cooperation is not easy for both parties. One of the reasons for the lack of consensus is Washington's cooperation with the People's Defense Units (YPG), considered by the Turkish authorities as an extension of the terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).⁴⁶ The U.S., by supporting this terrorist group both militarily and politically, contributed to the dilution of allied relations, which resulted in a shift in the Turkish security strategy. As a

result, Ankara sought multifaceted relations with the Russian Federation.

The U.S. did not take any measures to improve relations with Türkiye, whatsoever. On the contrary, sanctions were imposed on it for the purchase of the Russian S-400s. Antagonizing relations with Türkiye has become a strategic mistake of the U.S. and negatively affected transatlantic relations.

A strategic challenge for the influences of the U.S., including the Middle East, is the return of the Russian Federation to global politics. The successful involvement of Russia in Syria weakened American influence in the region. But paradoxically, Russia's presence in the Middle East may also be beneficial to U.S. interests. The U.S. has not played a leadership role in the Syrian conflict since the early 1990s, which means that it will not be held accountable for any failures. The prolonged civil war will primarily be a problem for its main actors –Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. The U.S., with its minimal presence in Syria, seems to be patiently monitoring the course of events. The “inclusion” of a strategic pause may be treated as evidence of the correction of American activity in the Middle East, which in recent decades has been a series of fundamental errors.

Conclusion

The 21st century has presented many challenges to the U.S., testing its role as a hegemon and superpower in a post-Cold War international environment. One of the pillars of U.S. imperial policy for several decades has been the dogma of exclusive control of the Middle East region as an area of strategic importance to Washington. The disastrous beginning of the new century and a series of errors in regional politics, the effects of which were impossible to compensate for with tactical adjustments, resulted in a partial loss of the initiative of the American establishment there. The attack on Iraq, the unintentional strengthening of Iran, an unclear and inconsistent approach to the Arab Spring, the lack of carefully selected policy instruments toward Assad, and finally the unfortunate timing and style of withdrawal from Afghanistan all gave the impression of a weak superpower that has problems with the effectiveness of power projection. As a result, there is a clear deficit of a complete, flexible, and realistic U.S. strategy toward the Middle East. The Syrian case is no exception. The deep transformation of the balance of power in the region and the destabilization or loosening of a number of allied ties that had traditionally bound the U.S. with the Middle East were reflected in Syria, creating new conditions for American policy.

Summing up the considerations on the impact of the new geopolitical configuration on the U.S.' Middle East policy, it should be stated that the coop-

eration between Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran is currently tactical in nature and does not go beyond the Syrian case. Each of the countries sees the benefits of cooperation, but at the same time the limitations and difficulties that they must overcome when looking for a common denominator. In this context, the functioning of this geopolitical triangle depends on the dynamics of internal factors (e.g., the stability of the political situation, the will of the leaders) and external ones (e.g., the involvement of other centers of power, the stability of the immediate security environment of Russia, Türkiye, and Iran). In the 21st century, the characteristic feature of international relations is their chaotic nature and the transformation of the world order, which oscillates between unipolarity and multipolarity. In this situation, it is difficult to assume that the Russia-Türkiye-Iran triangle will have a stable, long-term, strategic character.

Thus, the U.S. faced a challenge that in the initial phase imposed some kind of restrictions on its freedom of maneuvering regarding Syria, which came as a surprise to both Washington and other participants in international relations in the region. Given the evident decrease in the effectiveness of its Middle East policy, the American administration confronted the challenge and modified its tactics. The adjustment mainly consists of limiting the military presence to the al-Tanf base, which is perceived as a form of counteracting the influence of the Russian-Iranian coalition and controlling the Syrian-Iraqi border, as well as controlling the al-Omar oil field –the largest in Syria. Therefore, the U.S., although somewhat in the shadows, remains in the game and meticulously monitors two key aspects of the Syrian conflict –military and energy. Nevertheless, if the cooperation between Russia, Türkiye, and Iran became strategic, it could be one of the factors affecting the weakening of the U.S. position both in the region and on a global scale. ■

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