

The Middle East and Iran in Russia's Foreign Policy after the Ukraine War

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine and the prospect of continuing and even intensifying tensions in Russia's relations with West have strongly affected its foreign policy priorities. "Look East" Strategy, which has historical roots in Russian foreign policy and has been more seriously pursued by Kremlin since the second half of the 1990s and especially in the last decade, has become the dominant approach in Moscow's foreign policy. In fact, after the war in Ukraine, Russia has no choice but to go east. In this situation, the question is that how the war in Ukraine will effect on Russian policy toward the Middle East and Iran? What changes will happen in Russia's foreign policy regarding this region? It seems that parallel to the dominance of the "Look East" approach on Russia's foreign policy, the Middle East will also find a more strategic position in the country's foreign policy priorities. After the war in Ukraine, Russia will need to maintain and strengthen relations with the Middle East countries especially Iran much more than before in order to reduce the consequences of the political and economic pressures of the West. The methodology of this research is descriptive-analytical and the method of data collection is

library. In this regard, books, articles, documents and Internet resources have been used to collect data.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine war, the West, embargo, look to the East, Middle Eastern policy.

Received: 2022-11-04 Review: 2021-11-14 Accepted: 2021-12-21 Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 2, Summer and Autumn 2021, pp. 493-524.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine has made Russia's foreign policy face a different situation. The West, especially Europe, which has always been the main priority of Russia's foreign policy after the Cold War and has been the country's first trade partner by a long distance, has been united against Russia in an unprecedented way. Russia's ties with the West have been seriously damaged in various fields, and the two sides are moving towards an ever-increasing destruction of relations. In such a situation, the importance and necessity of the "Look East" approach in Russia's foreign policy, with deep historical roots, has been greatly strengthened. In fact, after the Straining of Russia's relations with the West on the Ukraine crisis, Russia has no choice but strengthening and expanding relations with the East to reduce the consequences of the political and economic pressures coming from the West.

One of the regions on which Russia is counting on to reduce the negative political and economic consequences of the West's actions is the Middle East. Therefore, the question is what the position of the Middle East would be in Russia's foreign policy after the Ukraine war? What changes will happen in Russia's foreign policy regarding this region? It seems that parallel to the dominance of the "Look East" approach on Russia's foreign policy, the Middle East will also find a more strategic position in the country's foreign policy priorities. After the war in Ukraine, Russia will need to maintain and strengthen relations with the Middle East countries for regulation of the export market energy prices, transit and trade.

I. Russia's Middle Eastern Policy over Time

Generally, the Middle Eastern policy of Tsarist Russia was based on the relations of this empire with Iran and the Ottoman Empire. In relation to Iran, the policy of Tsarist Russia was based on Iran's participation in containing the Ottoman Empire

and trying to reach the high seas of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean through Iran (as stated in the alleged will of Peter the Great). It was also a plan to maintain and strengthen Russia's presence and influence in the Iranian market. However, in the framework of the competition known as the "Great Game" between Russia and Britain, it was not possible for Russia to reach the high seas of southern Iran and dominate the entire Iranian market. Accordingly, Iran was the competition ground between these two great powers; and the 1907 agreement to divide Iran into three spheres of influence of Russia in the north, Britain in the south and an independent central region was a clear manifestation of such competition (Greaves, 1968: 69-91).

As for the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia considered it a rival in the Caucasus, the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Russia's defeat by the Ottomans in the Crimean War in the middle of the 19th century is considered one of the most catastrophic events in Russian history. In general, Tsarist and Ottoman Russia, as two great powers, did not have favorable ties with each other, and their relation has been complicated with many of conflicts. In addition, Shiite Iran, which considered itself a rival of the Sunni Ottoman Empire, could be useful for Russia in restraining the Ottomans.

with the fall of the tsarist empire in Russia and the formation of the Soviet Union, as well as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Russia's foreign policy changed. While geopolitical issues were at the heart of Tsarist Russia's foreign policy, Soviet foreign policy was based on the ideology of Marxism-Leninism (Trenin, 2007: 95). Accordingly, the Soviet Union, unlike Tsarist Russia, which was mainly focused on the geopolitical issues of its surrounding environment and participation in the order of balance of power between the great international powers, adopted a globalist foreign policy; this

happened especially after World War II. Confrontation with the West as the bearer and agent of capitalist discourse in any part of the world was on the agenda of the Soviet foreign policy.

It was on this solid basis that the Soviet Union started supporting the left-wing movements all over the world. The Middle East was undoubtedly one of the regions of resistance against America and its allies. The Soviet's support of regimes and movements inclined to leftist ideas, including in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Palestine and parts of Yemen and Oman (Zafar movement) was pursued in this framework.

In the context of the Cold War competition between the East and West blocs, in the conflict between the Israel and Arabs, the Soviet Union supported the latter; although the Soviet Union was the first country to recognize the Israel. The Soviet Union provided extensive support to Arab regimes and movements, especially in the field of weapons. Such support is provided by the Western bloc led by the United States to actors such as the Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in order to curb communism. With the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet Union was both happy and worried; Happy that one of the pillars of the balance of power in the region, which was in the framework of the Western bloc (i.e. the Shah's regime), was overthrown, and worried that the ideology of the Islamic Revolution might cause troubles for the Soviet Union, who's some part of its population was Muslims.

In such a situation, the Soviet Union provided large amount of support especially in term of military weapons to Iraq during the imposed war against the Islamic Republic of Iran. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation did not pay much attention to the Middle East in the 1990s due to the Western-oriented discourse of the Yeltsin government, the political and economic instability of Russia, and the government's focus on domestic issues and challenges. Of

course, in the second half of the 1990s, with Yevgeny Primakov replacing Andrey Kozyrov in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then, Primakov's promotion to the position of Prime Minister of Russia, and his attitude of balancing Russia's relations with the East and the West, the Middle East received more attention from the Russian government (Kolaei and others, 2017: 123-152). In the 2000s, when Putin came to power, the situation changed. The Russian Federation came out of the turmoil of the 1990s and gradually, the desire to play the role of a great power in the international system began to grow. Putin's government increased attention to the East and the Middle East, and Putin traveled to many countries in the region as the President of Russia. Many of these trips made for the first time in history or for the first time during the Russian Federation.

Although, during the first two terms of Putin's presidency, Russia still looked more towards the West; but, the importance of the East in Russia's foreign policy was improving. In the 2010s, the situation completely changed. Russia desired to be present and play a greater role in the Middle East and the turning point was its military intervention in the Syrian crisis in favor of Bashar al-Assad. In the last decade, Russia's relations with the state and non-state actors of the Middle East have expanded in an unprecedented way. It seems that after Russia's attack on Ukraine and the increase of tensions between Russia and the West to an unprecedented level, Russia has no choice but to strengthen its ties with the East in order to reduce the political and economic pressures coming from the side of the West.

In this regard, despite the fact that security components have always had the largest share in Moscow's Middle East policy (Kiani, 2007: 367-380), considering its very important role in the world energy market and the need of the Russia for the

income from energy exports, this region has become much more important than before. In addition, to reduce the economic pressures of the West and its commercial transit costs, Russia has found a strong need for transit and commercial routes in the Middle East. Therefore, it is expected that the East and the Middle East will become more and more important for Russians as the priority of the West in Russia's foreign policy is disappearing.

II. Russia's Strategy and Goals in the Middle East

There have been lots of controversial discussions about Russia's policy in the Middle East in recent years, especially after its intervention in the Syrian crisis and also a more limited in Libya. An important question about Russia's approach to the Middle East is whether Moscow has a specific macro strategy regarding the Middle east or not? Some have answered this question negatively. They believe that Russia's attitude towards the Middle East is short-term and opportunistic and is not based on a clear macro-strategy. On the other hand, some others believe that although Russia's attitude and behavior in relation to the Middle East is pragmatic, a kind of macro strategy can be recognized. There is also a third approach that Russia has a strategy in the Middle East and this strategy is "opportunism". The last point of view can be identified, which says that although Russia's policies are based on opportunism rather than a macro strategy, it can be understood and analyzed within the framework of this country's strategy to "restore the position of a great power" (Meddeb, 2018; Talbot et al, 2019: 6-90; Dunne, 2020; Wehrey and Weiss, 2021: 1-20).

Another important question about Russia's approach to the Middle East is what goals and interests does Moscow pursue in this region? One of the most important goals mentioned is Russia's attempt to change the world order and restore the position of a great power. in his analysis of the country's policy

in relation to the Middle East, Dmitri Trenin, a senior expert in Russian foreign policy, believes that Russia is seeking to change the international order based on American hegemony to a multi-polar order in which Russia itself is one of those poles, and other issues such as dealing with Terrorism is second in importance (Trenin, 2017: 63; Trenin, 2018: 21-28). Katerina Stepanova believes that Russia's intervention in Syria should be understood within the broader geopolitical strategy of this country in relation to the West and the international system. In his opinion, Russia looks at the intervention in Syria and Libya as a winning card in its relations with the West and regaining its position in the international system (Stepanova, 2016: 23-35; Stepanova, 2018: 89-111).

Maria Milosevich also believes that Russia's view on the Middle East has nothing to do with this region and its issues, but rather with its view of the world order and the competition of great powers to define and reorganize this order (Milosevich, 2019: 30-53). Some other experts of Russian foreign policy and Middle East have also analyzed Russia's Middle East policy in the context of its attempt to restore its global position and role as a great power and pressure on the West to accept such a position (Rodkiewicz, 2017: 1-12; Sladden et al, 2017: 1-14; Kuznetsov et al, 2018: 24-27; Mamedov, 2021).

Others have stated that the goal of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East is to deal with isolation and to create diversity in foreign policy with the aim of compensating for the economic losses caused by Western sanctions. Nikolai Kuzhanov, a Russian foreign policy expert, believes that the Russia's Middle East policy is not to pressure the Westerners and force them to interact and cooperate with Russia, but to expand Moscow's connections with other regional actors in order to avoid from isolation (Kozhanov, 2018: 28). Barmin also believes that Russia's Middle East policy is aimed at

rebalancing the country's foreign relations to reduce reliance on the West and partnering with the states of the Middle East and North Africa, which is a market for the sale of weapons and nuclear power plants, imports Technology, foreign direct investment and agreements are vital for controlling the energy price (Barmin, 2018: 1-16).

According to Kuzhanov and Barmin, through interaction with regional powers and intervention in conflicts, Russia can achieve the position of a great power, without need to be recognized as a great power by the West (Kozhanov, 2018: 2; Barmin, 2018: 1-16).

Some others have considered Russia's internal issues and concerns and the role of the country's current politicians, especially Putin, as the main driver of the country's Middle East policy. Some believe that Russia is much worried about the possibility of extremism and terrorism spreading to its Muslim regions in the North Caucasus; Especially since people from this region and Central Asian countries have joined ISIS and other extremist and terrorist groups in Syria, and Moscow has serious concerns about their return and activities (Беспалов, 2019). Also, considering the protests in Russia in 2011-2012 following the developments of the Arab Spring or Islamic awakening, some believe that Moscow was worried about the spread of these developments to Russia and its surrounding areas; especially after having an unfavorable experience about color revolutions in its surroundings.

Some believe that Russia's intervention in Syria was aimed at covering up internal problems and mobilizing public opinion around the flag¹. Especially since the mobilizing effect of the annexation of Crimea was weakening and the Russian economy is not in a favorable situation. Based on that, this group believes

1 - Rally around the flag

that in the discussion of Russia's intervention in Syria, the role of domestic issues has been more prominent than geopolitical issues. Dunnruther believes that intervention in Syria helped Putin to strengthen his domestic support. According to his opinion, "Ideational factors" have also played a prominent role in shaping Russia's Middle East policy. These factors, which are manifested in the "Russian idea" given by Putin and around concepts such as authoritarian stability, opposition to Western interventionism, countering terrorism and a form of traditionalism that is tolerant towards other religions and societies are appealing for Many political leaders and even a part of the people of the Middle East (Dannreuther, 2015: 77-94; Dannreuther, 2018: 1-19; Katz, 2018; Casula and Katz, 2018; Issaev and Shishkina, 2019).

Andy Kortunov, one of the Russian foreign policy experts, believes that Russia's policy in the Middle East can be considered as one of the most outstanding international achievements of Vladimir Putin in recent years. With relatively little investment and minimal losses, Moscow was able to become one of the main players in the region and pave the way for solving important regional security issues. However, the question is whether Moscow is able to maintain the current situation in Syria and the entire region for long time or not. This means that Moscow should look for solutions that would allow turning military successes into more stable political influence (Кортунов, 2019).

Alexander Aksninok also believes that the position of the Middle East in Russia's foreign policy priorities has changed from inattention to using it as a card in the great geopolitical game. Russia's three main goals in the Middle East have been achieved, which are: protection of the southern borders against terrorism, adaptability in the fight against new threats and challenges, and stabilization of Russia's military-political

position as a global power. However, the amount of uncertainty is increasing and it is rather difficult to talk about sustainable success in the Middle East (Аксененок, 2021).

III. Components of Russia's Middle East Policy

The events of last decade in the Middle East, especially the Syrian crisis, have increased the presence and focus of Russia in the Middle East. Before the so-called Arab Spring, the Middle East had a low Priority in Russian foreign policy, but the Syrian crisis and civil war have made kremlin one of the active and involved extra-regional actors in this region. The question is, what the components of Russia's Middle East policy are and how that policy can be understood?

Neighborhood: Ever since Tsarist Russia took over Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 19th century, it became a neighbor of the Middle East. Russia's two important southern neighbors, Iran and Ottoman, were the main powers of the Middle East and two competing actors in the Islamic world. Tsarist Russia's relations with these countries have had many ups and downs. The Ottoman Empire was an important rival and enemy to Tsarist Russia, and lots of wars took place between the empires until they both collapsed in the early 20th century. The Crimean War, which caused the defeat of Russia against the Ottomans, although with the support of the European powers, is one of the most important events in the relations between these two empires in the 19th century. Tsarist Russia was also involved in two wars with Iran, in which occupied and annexed many parts of Iran's territory according to the agreements of Golestan and Turkmanchai. Tsarist Russia looked at Iran as a way to access the high seas of the Persian Gulf and the Pacific Ocean and even reach India, which was a British colony at that time.

The Iranian market was also very important for Russia. Moscow was trying to maintain and improve its share of the

Iranian market in competition with Britain. In addition, Shiite Iran was a rival of Sunni Ottomans which was considered a rival and enemy of Russia. After the fall of the tsarist empire and the formation of the Soviet Union, Iran and Turkey were again the two most important regional powers of the Middle East in the southern borders. During the Second World War, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom violated the neutrality of Iran and occupied the territory of Iran in order to send military and logistical aid to the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany through Iran. After the end of the war, the Soviet Union, contrary to its commitments, did not leave the north of Iran and demanded concessions from Iran; which finally leaved after receiving the Northern Oil concession (although it was not approved by the Iranian National Assembly) and the pressure of the Western powers, especially the United States.

During the Cold War, Iran and Turkey were the southern banks of the containing communism policy; which, along with Pakistan, Iraq and England, formed a belt against the Soviet Union known as Baghdad Agreement (which was renamed to "CENTO" after Iraq's withdrawal). In the context of the competition between the East and West blocs during the Cold War, the Soviet Union sought greater influence in the Middle East against the American influence in this region. In this regard, the Soviet Union supported some Arab National Socialist regimes such as Iraq, Egypt and Syria. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia lost its territorial proximity to the Middle East; however, it still borders Iran and Turkey in the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. In the 1990s during Yeltsin's presidency, Russia did not pay much attention to the Middle East. After Putin came to power, the situation changed and once again the Middle East became the focus.

Even though Russia lost its land borders with the Middle East after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Moscow considers Central Asia and the Far East as its exclusive spheres of influence and refer to them as the "near abroad", it is still sensitively concerned about what is happening in the Middle East. Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis is a turning point of Russia's presence in the Middle East after the Cold War. The war in Ukraine and the exerting political and especially economic pressures against Russia by the West have increased the importance of the Middle East for Russians. Therefore, from the perspective of proximity and neighborhood, Russia often pays significant attention to the Middle East, and it seems that this investment will increase even more after the Ukraine war.

Extremism and Terrorism: The threat of extremism from some parts of Russia, which constitute a noteworthy part of the country's population, is another important component shaping Russia's Middle East policy. In the 1990s, Russia was involved in two civil wars in Chechnya, and the violence and brutality used by the Russian government against them caused the growth of fundamentalist and extremist ideas in the North Caucasus. Although, Chechen and its leader Ramzan Kadyrov is a close ally of Putin, but The issue is seen as the calm before the storm and considered one of the major threats to the national security of the Russian Federation. Putin even considers this to be an existential threat to Russia. For example, in 2000, he mentioned that the threat to the integrity of the Russian Federation in the form of the concept of "Yugoslavization of Russia" and said: "I was convinced that if immediate action was not taken to stop extremism [in Chechnya], we could encounter the second Yugoslavia throughout the Russian territories" (Hill, 2013).

In such a situation, Russians are always afraid of the possibility of extremism flaring up in their extremist regions, and for this reason, they are afraid and sensitive of revolutionary, fundamentalist and extremist developments in Islamic countries that can provoke fundamentalists and extremists in Chechnya and North Caucasus. For example, in early 2011, some senior Russian leaders envisioned the Arab Spring as an attempt to incite Muslim rebels in Russia (Katz, 2015).

Rentier Economy: Another important component that plays an important role in shaping Russia's Middle East policy is the rentier economy of this country. Over the past decade, Russia's economy has become more dependent on oil and gas revenues than ever before. For example, in 2004, the share of oil and gas income from the federal income was slightly more than 30%, but this amount has reached more than 50% in 2014. In this way, a direct relation has been established between fluctuations in oil and gas prices and its effect in Russia's GDP (Sabitova and Shavaleyeva, 2015: 423-428). In 2013, the per capita income of Russians was 11.615 dollars, but due to the drop in oil prices in 2015, it decreased to 11.038 dollars. Also, in 2015, wages in Russia fell by 9 percent, adding more than two million people to the poor class of the country (Mauldin, 2016).

Dependence on oil and gas has led to the continuous increase of the share of the government in the country's economy. In mid-2015, 55% of the Russian economy was owned by the government and 20 million workers were directly employed by the government (Nicolaci da Costa, 2017). This situation has made a part of Russia's foreign policy to focus on the oil and gas market, including the production, sale and price of these resources. In addition, in their relations with Europe and neighboring countries, Russians have proved that they use energy as a tool to further their goals and interests in foreign

policy. Considering the prominent role of the countries of the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, in the global oil market, relations with the countries of the region are very important for Russia. OPEC+, which has played a very important role in regulating world oil production in recent years, shows the importance of relations with the countries of the region for Moscow. In the situation after the war in Ukraine, the OPEC+ framework is seen to be more valuable and important for Russia.

Pragmatism: The most notable component shaping Russia's foreign policy in the era after the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially during Putin's leadership, is pragmatism (Kolai and Nouri, 2009: 209-228). The Russian Federation abandoned ideology as the principle of ordering and directing foreign policy in the Soviet era and made pragmatism the basis for pursuing foreign policy. Based on the component of pragmatism, anyone can become a friend or an enemy, and it depends on the interests that Russian leaders define for themselves, and of course, the role that different actors may play in fulfilling these interests. In fact, important point is the criteria of recognition in Moscow's foreign policy decisions and its interests. Therefore, the variable of amity and enmity in the current Russian foreign policy is very flexible; So that any actor can become a friend, rival or enemy of Russia in a short time.

Dmitri Trenin, an expert on Russian foreign policy, has explained this component in Russia's foreign policy as follows: "While the geopolitics of Eurasia, the strategic depth of foreign relations of the tsars, and the advancement of global ideological goals were at the center of the Soviet communist plans, Today Russian preoccupation is Russia itself" (Trenin, 2016: 4). In pragmatic foreign policy, interests are important, not ideology, and it is very important that interests are obtained with the least costs and the most benefits. Russia's foreign policy in the

Middle East can be analyzed on the basis of pragmatism more than anywhere else. Pragmatism has given Russia the opportunity in the Middle East to cooperate with all actors in the region in order to fulfill its interests and goals; without entering regional divisions. Accordingly, Moscow can simultaneously interact with Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt and even non-governmental actors in the region.

Restoring the Position of Great Power: The fourth component shaping Russia's Middle East policy is the historical position of this country in the international system. According to Stephen Kotkin, a professor of history and international affairs at Princeton University and a researcher at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Russia has always been a relatively weak great power in the international system (Kotkin, 2016: 2). On the one hand, the Russians defeated Charles XII in the early 17th century and ended the supremacy of Sweden, and in the 19th and 20th centuries they also defeated Napoleon and Hitler, but on the other hand, they lost the Crimean War in the middle of the 19th century, the war with Japan in 1905, World War I in the early 20th century and the Cold War at the end of the 20th century. Such a situation (relatively weak great power) has created the idea in the Russians that they should play the role of a great power in the international system; however, they have many rudimentary weaknesses and vulnerabilities that have always been a problem for them.

Considering itself as a great power forces Russia to compete with other great powers, especially the United States. This is also true for the Middle East policy; Russia is seeking to increase its influence in the Middle East in order to use the potential opportunities in order to counter America's influence and actions in this region and to create an international balance (Karami and Nouri, 2011: 167-191). America's desire to reduce

its presence and role in the Middle East in the last decade has played an important role in this decision. In fact, this reluctance has encouraged Russia to adopt an active approach in the region and use the existing loopholes to gain benefits and leverage the competition against the United States.

IV. Russia's Interacting Policy in the Middle East

According to the strategies objectives and the shaping components of Russia's Middle East policy, how the country's interaction in the Middle East can be analyzed? Russia's positions on the issues and challenges of the Middle East, as well as the behavior and actions in relations with the countries of this region, show that Moscow always maintains balance in its Middle East policy and does not put itself on one side of the competition. Based on this, Russia has been able to overcome the challenges caused by amity-enmity patterns to a great extent; however, such a policy has deprived Russia of having a strategic ally in the Middle East; although, the Russians don't seem to be eager for such a thing. Having a strategic ally in the Middle East is costly, and Russia is unwilling to pay for it.

Russia's strategy of acting in the Middle East has made Turkey one of Russia's important commercial and political partners; Russian companies find an active role in Iraq's oil industry; A new page has been turned in Russia's relations with the countries of the Persian Gulf, especially after the agreement between Russia and Saudi Arabia regarding the management of the oil market and the formation of OPEC+; Syria will continue to host Russian military bases; Moscow's relations with Israel are complicated but productive for both sides; And Russia's cooperation with Iran is on the path of expansion in various fields (Зелендинова, 2022).

Balance in Relations with Different Actors: In the Middle East, the Russians have fought along with Iran and the

resistance forces in Syria against the Takfiri-terrorist groups and in favor of Assad, and this alignment still exists to a large extent. However, Russia has extensive diplomatic and intelligence relations with Israel, and they have remained silent in most cases against Israel's successive actions targeting the united resistance forces of the Syrian government. While the Russians are involved in serious disputes with Turkey in Syria, and after a Russian warplane was targeted by a Turkish fighter in early December 2014, the relations between the two sides became tenser than ever and even led to sanctions and cut off trade relations for a period. However, they have sold their most advanced missile defense system, the S400, to Turkey and have significant economic and trade relations with Ankara.

Although Russia is sometimes called Iran's ally in the region, Moscow has not recognized the situation in Yemen after Ansarullah's control over the country's capital, and the Yemeni ambassador in Moscow is still the envoy of the so-called Yemeni government in exile, namely the government of Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. This indicates that Russia considers Hadi's government and not Ansarullah as the legal representative of Yemen. Russia has favorable relations with the United Arab Emirates and even its officials have spoken about the possibility of strategic cooperation with this Arab country. The Russians have prominent and effective relationship with the Egyptian government, especially in the military and security fields. In the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the Russians declared neutrality and continued their relations with both countries. Russia attaches great importance to economic and energy cooperation with Doha; In addition, they consider cooperation with Riyadh to regulate the oil market and prevent a sharp drop in the price of this resource, which has a very important place in the Russian economy, to be of fundamental importance.

With Everyone, against No One: Russia's Middle East policy is based on the principle of "with everyone, against no one" and the art of "walking across the fractions and gaps without siding with regional unions and alliances" and its goal is to maintain regional balance, gaining international prestige, dealing with security threats and obtaining the maximum possible economic benefits. In the Middle East, as Bari Buzan believes, the patterns amity and enmity are multidimensional and complex, and "it is difficult for any actor, whether local or global, to support another actor against a common enemy without simultaneously threatening a third party with a friendly approach." (Bozan and Weaver, 1388: 104 and 129) Russia has been able to pursue its relations with all actors in this region beyond its specific patterns amity and enmity; so it can be said that Moscow's relations with none of the alliances and actors of the region are in a tensional status.

In addition, Moscow has no strategic relationship with regional actors and this approach has enabled Russia to fulfill its agenda and interests in relation to various actors with the lowest costs of its intervention. Although some believe that this type of strategy is opportunistic and will cause regional actors to be pessimistic towards Russia, but the fact is that in the regional order based on the components of "power politics" in the Middle East, Moscow seems to have and will continue this method as long as it can meet kremlins ambitions.

V. The Impact of the Ukraine War on Russia's Middle East Strategy

The war in Ukraine has pitted Russia and the West against each other in an unprecedented way. In no historical period, the countries of Europe and America have not been so united against Russia. Such a situation, which is accompanied by the growing economic and political pressures of the West against Russia, has put Russia in a difficult situation; as about 40% of

Russia's total trade (equivalent to more than 257 billion euros) was with the European Union in 2021 (European Commission, 2022). Therefore, the unprecedented Western sanctions have greatly weakened the possibility of cooperation and trade with Europe for Russia, and therefore, Moscow is looking for other roads to compensate the shortcomings. In this regard, Russia has no choice but to strengthen its approach towards the East. In the framework of this approach, India, China and the member countries of the ASEAN Economic Forum are the priority of Russia's foreign policy.

It seems that after East Asia and India, the Middle East has found a more prominent position in Russia's foreign policy than before the Ukraine war. The most important lever and tool of Russia's foreign policy to pressure the West is energy. The Middle East is one of the regions with a very high level of reserves, production and export of energy in the world. The main players of the OPEC organization are located in this region. About 50% of the world's known oil reserves and 40% of the world's known gas reserves are in the Middle East. Based on this, energy strategy of players of this region toward global energy market can have a great impact on Russia's energy leverage against Europe. Besides, the Russian economy is in dire need of income from energy sales. Today's Russian officials, who were born in the Soviet era, realize that the Soviet Union survived the Second World War, but not the sharp crash in oil prices (Gaddy & Kuchins, 2008: 127). For this reason, more than ever, Russia needs to interact with countries with energy resources in the Middle East to regulate the energy market so that it does not lose its energy revenues and its most important leverage of pressure on the West, especially Europe. In fact, the Middle East can play a prominent role in the destiny of the war in Ukraine; As it played a role in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Also, Russia needs the Middle East, especially the Iranian route, for a shorter and more economic access to new markets. The shortest, cheapest and safest access route for Russia to South Asia and Southeast Asia is Iran especially The International *North–South Transport Corridor* (INSTC). In addition, Iran and Turkey are the gateways of Russia to the Middle East; and considering the situation in Syria and Iraq, Iran's land access route is safer than Turkey's. At the same time, the severe limitation of Russia's access to the commercial and technological markets of the West will turn the Middle East into a place for re-exporting goods to Russia. In the new situation, Russia has to provide many of its economic and commercial needs from the Middle East and south neighbors. In addition, in terms of exports, not only the Middle East, especially Iran, provides a short and cheap transit route for Russia, but also the countries of the region have a large market that can absorb more exports from Russia.

Russia is the second largest arms exporter in the world and in 2020, 20% of its total arms exports were specifically targeted to the Middle East; in this sense, the Middle East has had the second place in the purchase of Russian weapons after Asia-Pacific (SIPRI, 2021: 4). In the conditions of Western pressure and sanctions, Russia not only doesn't want to lose the Middle East arms market, but will also try to get a larger share of the huge arms trade in this region. In terms of building thermal and nuclear power plants and participating in the exploitation and development of oil and gas resources, Russia has the possibility of more activities in the region; one of its examples is the recent agreements with Iran to participate in the exploitation and development of Iran's oil and gas resources. Russia is also looking to attract alternative investment from the oil countries of the region after leaving Western companies and investors.

During Russia's war against Ukraine, it has become clear that Russia has been able to get relatively favorable results from its Middle East policy. The United Arab Emirates abstained from the United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Moscow's attack on Ukraine. In return for this abstention vote, Russia also voted in favor of the Security Council resolution against supporting Yemen's Houthis. After the UAE abstained on the resolution against Russia, the Russian Foreign Ministry emphasized its strong ties with the UAE. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the UAE also visited Moscow and expressed his country's desire to continue cooperation with Russia in different spheres especially energy sector. In addition, the embargo on Russian oligarchs by the West has encouraged them to transfer their money and assets to the United Arab Emirates and Turkey to keep their properties safe.

The United Arab Emirates has refused to implement sanctions against Russia and the demand of the Russian citizens in UAE increased unprecedentedly as a safe country for Russians. Although Turkey is a member of NATO, Ankara has not agreed to any sanctions against Russia and despite some military support to Ukraine, Turkey has continued its normal relation with Russia and is even seeking to strengthen it. Relation between Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been also promoted to a new level after the Ukraine war, and the exchanges of political, economic and even cultural officials and delegations between the two countries are much more prosperous than before. Other countries in the region have not joined the Western sanctions against Russia and have adopted cautious and moderate positions regarding Russia's attack on Ukraine (Миргород, 2022). Therefore, not only Moscow's regional allies, but also other countries in the region have refused to sacrifice relations with Russia due to this country's attack on Ukraine (Поляков, 2022).

America's partners in the Middle East have rejected this country's request to increase oil production in order to reduce the pressure caused by the increase in energy prices following the impose of Western sanctions against Russia. The leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have rejected the call to the American president and announced that they will proceed according to the OPEC Plus agreement and will not increase oil production; Which is a big advantage for Russia. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emphasized the importance of continued coordination with Russia in the field of oil production. In this regard, OPEC+'s decision to reduce oil production made Americans angry with Saudi Arabia, and relations between Washington and Riyadh may face more challenges.

Most of the countries in the region have also abstained from the General Assembly resolutions against Russia due to the Ukraine war and Russia's expulsion from the Human Rights Council. Of course, the countries of the region, except for the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was absent from the voting session, all voted in favor of the resolution condemning Russia by the United Nations General Assembly, due to the annexation of parts of Ukraine's territory to their territory; which shows that their tendency to cooperate with Russia has a specific capacity. Even Israel, which is America's most important ally in the region, has tried not to get into agitation with Russia during the Ukraine war; however, in some cases, there have been disagreements between them.

Therefore, it can be said that Russia's Middle East policy is located on balance in relations with the actors of the region and not being on one side of regional competitions and tensions has been able to moderate the atmosphere of pessimism and suspicion against this country and provided a relatively stable environment for the cooperation of Moscow with regional

actors. In general, Russia's view of strengthening relations with the Middle East countries is due to the conditions on the ground, and its perspective seems desirable for the Russians.

Iran in Russia's Middle Eastern Policy after the Ukraine War: Since the Peter the Great onwards, that is, from the beginning of the 18th century, Russia has always been a great power in the neighborhood of Iran. The relations of this powerful neighbor with Iran have been accompanied by many ups and downs. In the modern era, no country has encroached on the land of Iran as much as Tsarist Russia. In the context of the competition between the great powers in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Russia caused a lot of losses to Iran's interests; this has caused a strong pessimism among the people of Iran towards Russia. During the Soviet era, the communist government of the country was considered a threat to Iran both ideologically and politically. After the Islamic Revolution, the Soviet Union was the main supplier of the weapons needed by Saddam Hussein to attack Iran, but because the "other" of the Islamic Republic was the United States and not the Soviet Union, Iran's relations with the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation never worsened.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin's government had a dual behavior with the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the one hand, in the economic and military fields, the relations that were established during the Soviet period, especially at the late of 1980s continued, and even the Islamic Republic of Iran was involved in the Tajik Civil War and the First Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan and had a position close to the Russian Federation. In this regard, Tehran helped a lot to reduce tensions and did not take a hard position against the Russian Federation in the Chechen war, but on the other hand, within the framework of

the Yeltsin government's west oriented approach, sometimes the Islamic Republic Iran was seen as a threat. By Putin coming to power, the relations between Iran and Russia underwent significant changes and developments. At the very beginning of his presidency in 2000, Putin announced the revocation of the confidential "Algor-Chernomordin" agreement, according to that the Yeltsin government had reduced nuclear and military cooperation with Iran.

Of course, despite the significant improvement in relations between Iran and the Russian Federation in Putin era, Russia's dual policies have emerged itself in some issues. For example, Russia did not object to sending Iran's nuclear case from the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency to the Security Council and voted in favor of all Security Council resolutions against Iran at the time. Also, Moscow curbed the defensive cooperation and selling military equipment to Iran and, accordingly, avoided the delivery of the S-300 defense systems to Iran on the due date. The war in Syria put Iran and Russia on a common boat to prevent the fall of the Syrian government. Western pressures against Russia in the Ukraine conflict and the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the application of the policy of maximum pressure against Iran made the desire and will of Tehran and Moscow to strengthen relations more than ever. After the Ukraine war, determination to boost the relations up seems to be stronger than any time in the past, and this is mostly due to Russia's inevitable need to seek transit and trade alternatives to moderate the economic pressures of the West.

The importance of Iran's transit route for Russia has increased gravely in the post-Ukraine war situation, and the Russians emphasize on completing and using the North-South Corridor. Through this corridor, Russia can access its target markets, including South Asia, especially India, Southeast

Asia, and the Middle East, in a shorter time and with lower costs. Also, Iran is one of the largest holders of oil and gas reserves in the world, and its presence or absence in the energy market is so important for Russia, whose economy is highly dependent on oil and gas revenues, and the export of these resources acts as a lever for Russia's foreign policy regarding the West. In fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran has the capacity to influence the energy lever in Russia's economy and foreign policy due to its abundant oil and gas resources.

Therefore, it is very important for Russia that Iran's influence on the energy market does not reduce Russia's income and weaken the leverage of energy in the country's foreign policy. In addition, Iran can become a way to circumvent Western sanctions against Russia. These indicators show that Iran has found a much more prominent position in Russia's foreign policy after the Ukraine war. The increase in exchanging of officials and diplomatic delegations between Russia and Iran and the signing of memorandums of understanding in various fields between the two countries in the post-war period in Ukraine is a clear manifestation of Russia's desire to expand and strengthen relations with Tehran. Russia's support for Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS and even the Eurasian Economic Union can be analyzed in the same framework.

In sum, in recent years, especially after Iran and Russia cooperated in Syria to preserve the status quo, two approaches have been raised about the importance of the relations between the two countries; One believes in the existence of common strategic interests between the two countries in the region and beyond, and from this point of view, considers them as strategic partners, and they consider the two countries' cooperation in maintaining the Syrian government to be the most obvious sign of the existence of strategic relations between them. Based on

this, some believe that Russia's Middle East policy is in line with Iran's national interests. Other view believes in selective and situational relations between the two countries meaning that some common interests or challenges have led the two countries to cooperate case by case, and this does not mean the existence of strategic relations between them. (IRAS, 2015; Farshadghar and others: 139-165, 2016; Khoshnood, 2020).

Even though Russia needs Iran after the Ukraine war, this does not mean that Moscow will prefer deepening relations with Tehran than pursuing diverse and balanced relations with all the actors in the region. Iran has become more important, but in the same proportion, the importance of other actors in the region has also increased in the eyes of Russia. Therefore, Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East will continue to be based on pragmatism and balance. Based on this, Iran will continue to be important in Russia's "Look East" policy and Russia will continue to be important in Iran's "Look East" policy, but it seems that upgrading the relations between these two countries to a strategic level will still face difficult barriers.

Conclusion

Russia's Middle East policy after the Cold War, especially during Putin's era, has been founded on balanced relations with regional actors. Pragmatism has been the philosophical and practical basis of Russia's foreign policy in this era. Built on the principle of pragmatism, Russia's interests are preferable in relation to regional actors to being on one side of regional competitions and conflicts. For this reason, Russia has had favorable relations with most of the actors in the region. It seems that after the war in Ukraine, Russia needs Middle East more than ever. Regulating the oil market with the help of the oil countries of the region within the framework of OPEC+ in order to maintain the revenues and leverage Russia's political pressure on the West, especially Europe, using new transit

routes for trade with alternative Western countries in Russia's foreign trade, finding new markets or export markets. Again with the aim of reducing the effectiveness of Western sanctions and also to prevent further political isolation of Russia are among the reasons for strengthening the position of the Middle East in Russia's foreign policy after the Ukraine war. Meanwhile, Russia has a special view on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran can provide considerable support in Russia's campaign against the West in terms of transit, trade, politics, regional cooperation and joint confrontation. In addition, as the holder of large oil and gas reserves, Iran has the capacity to influence Russia's economic income and leverage its energy in relations with the West.

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