

The Geopolitical Competition of the United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf and Its Impact on the Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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The Persian Gulf has long been one of the most important and vital regions in the world. The presence of vast energy reserves, transportation routes, maritime connectivity, numerous strategic islands, and multiple states has not only transformed the Persian Gulf into a geo-economic environment but has also turned it into a geopolitical and geostrategic arena. There has always been continuous competition among major regional and extraregional powers, including the United States, China, and Russia, in this region. This issue has significant implications for the security and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as these powers compete over energy and economic interests, geopolitical influence, and regional hegemony. The presence and deployment of U.S. military bases in Iran's neighboring environment, particularly in the Persian Gulf states, along with the investment-driven sale and export of security-related goods by the United States, China, and Russia to Persian Gulf countries, as well as China's investments in the region under the Belt and Road Initiative to achieve its geo-economic goals, are key examples of this competition. Under these circumstances, such geopolitical rivalries create a complex security and economic environment for the Islamic Republic of Iran, which, in turn, generates both opportunities and threats for Iran's national interests and security. This study employs a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing books, scholarly articles, and analytical reports as sources. It examines how these competitions influence the Islamic Republic of Iran. These rivalries can lead to increased regional instability, proxy conflicts, and heightened risks to energy corridors and supply routes. Additionally, this study explores how the Islamic Republic of Iran navigates this complex geopolitical landscape. The research argues that escalating competition among major powers has the potential to shape and transform Iran's foreign policy, military doctrine, and defensive diplomacy. Ultimately, the aim of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the great powers' competition in the Persian Gulf and its implications for the Islamic Republic of Iran by examining various variables.

Keywords: Great powers, Persian Gulf, geopolitics, geostrategy, national interests, military doctrine.

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1. Introduction

The Persian Gulf, with its abundant energy resources and reserves in neighboring countries, has always been one of the most strategic regions in the world. Countries such as China, due to their limited domestic energy resources, have been among the key consumers of energy from the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Persian Gulf states, as has the United States. However, energy trade constitutes only a part of the Persian Gulf's significance, reflecting its geo-economic importance. The geopolitical significance of the Persian Gulf, due to the presence of numerous islands belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran and other island states, has elevated its strategic importance, leading to the establishment of military bases. This geopolitical environment has also fueled ambitions among regional states to transform into military powers. For instance, the United Arab Emirates has sought to enhance its naval forces, establish military and intelligence bases both within and beyond the region, such as in the Red Sea, and occupy islands like Socotra in Yemen, positioning itself as the "Sparta of the new world."

The Persian Gulf's connection to the Gulf of Oman via the Strait of Hormuz and its further links to the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea provide significant economic advantages for trade and transit routes. If the import and export of goods to and from Europe via the Persian Gulf were not feasible, alternative corridors would have to pass through the Cape of Good Hope, which is neither time- nor cost-efficient. The trade route through Russia also presents difficulties, requiring a robust railway infrastructure while lacking the economic advantages of maritime transport.

The competition among major powers in this strategic region is shaped by these geopolitical and economic factors. Before the Islamic Revolution, the United States sought to establish the Pahlavi regime as the regional gendarme, exemplified by the arms deal between the Nixon administration and the Shah, aimed at preventing communist expansion into the region. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, through its invasion of Afghanistan, aimed to increase its access to and proximity to the Persian Gulf and warm waters. This historical context underscores the ongoing military competitions and proxy wars undertaken by major powers to secure their hegemony

in the region, such as the Dhofar Rebellion in Oman. However, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the onset of the imposed war, the regional dynamics shifted. The Islamic Republic of Iran, adopting a "Neither East nor West" policy, became an independent dominant power in the Persian Gulf. In response, the United States expanded its network of military bases in the region, while Russia strengthened its influence by supplying advanced military systems.

During the early Cold War, China faced multiple conflicts with the United States and later ideological, political, and geopolitical tensions with the Soviet Union, ultimately leading to the normalization of Sino-American relations. Under Deng Xiaoping, China adopted a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, which increased the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf and global trade for Beijing.

The primary research question in this study is: What impact does the geopolitical competition between the United States, Russia, and China in the Persian Gulf have on the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran? The hypothesis posits that the intensification of geopolitical rivalries among these great powers has elevated the Persian Gulf into a strategic competition zone, with the potential to influence Iran's foreign policy, military doctrine, and defensive diplomacy.

This research employs a descriptive-analytical method, utilizing books, peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and analytical reports. The study initially presents a descriptive account of the topic, followed by an analytical examination of these descriptions to provide a comprehensive assessment.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have examined the geopolitical competition among the United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf and its implications for Iran's security. The following studies have contributed to the development of this research and have addressed various dimensions of this competition.

Sanai and Taheri Mehr (2015) analyzed the impact of NATO's cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on Iran's security. Their study argues that NATO's collaboration with Persian Gulf states under the U.S. security umbrella has been adversarial to Iran's interests. By establishing multiple alliances with Iran's neighbors, NATO seeks to counterbalance Iran's

influence. In response, Iran has conducted military exercises independently and in coordination with regional allies to adopt a counterbalancing strategy (Sanaei et al., 2015).

Ullah and Xinlei (2024) examined the security complex of the Persian Gulf, focusing on the evolving Saudi-Iranian rapprochement within the broader context of great power competition. Their study highlights the complex security dynamics of the Persian Gulf, shaped by numerous actors competing for dominance and stability. They argue that the Saudi-Iranian rivalry extends beyond bilateral tensions and significantly influences the regional security structure. The research adopts a strategic perspective, analyzing how shifts in power dynamics—particularly the decline of U.S. influence and the rise of China—are reshaping regional security (Ullah & Xinlei, 2024).

Torabi and Sanaei (2016) investigated the obstacles to implementing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from the perspective of convergence theory. Their study describes the BRI as a grand political, economic, and geopolitical project encompassing all regional countries. However, it faces significant challenges due to political disputes and obstacles to regional convergence (Torabi & Sanaei, 2016).

Oskarsson and Yetiv (2013) explored Russia's evolving diplomatic, trade, and energy relations with the Persian Gulf. They highlight that while Russian trade with the Gulf states remains relatively modest, commercial and energy cooperation has grown significantly. In the post-Cold War era, Russia's role in the Persian Gulf has expanded. If trade and diplomatic ties continue to strengthen, Moscow may have greater incentives to collaborate with Gulf Arab states on contentious regional issues (Oskarsson & Yetiv, 2013).

Stanzel (2022) analyzed China's geopolitical trajectory in the Middle East, particularly its policies toward Iran. His study argues that China's foreign policy in the Middle East is increasingly at odds with U.S. interests, leading to a significant shift in Beijing's regional approach. China is actively seeking to counterbalance U.S. influence in the region, with Iran playing a key role in Beijing's strategy (Stanzel, 2022).

By reviewing these academic articles, books, and dissertations, this study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical competition among the United States, Russia, and China in the Persian Gulf and

its implications for Iran's security. The research examines military dimensions, such as the deployment of U.S. bases in Persian Gulf states, arms exports by major powers, geopolitical initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, and regional and extraregional alliances and coalitions.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts the Copenhagen School as its theoretical framework, based on the premise that states are the primary actors in international, governmental, and semi-governmental affairs. It is states that determine the levels of security and insecurity, and ultimately, states remain the dominant players in the international system (Alamaifar, 2024).

The Copenhagen School analyzes security across individual, societal, national, regional, and international levels. This study focuses on the regional level, specifically within the Persian Gulf, aiming to explain the role of geopolitical competition among the United States, Russia, and China in the region and examining how these rivalries affect the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Fakhro, 2024).

The Copenhagen School evaluates the referent object of security within five domains: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental. In the military dimension, the focus is on the deployment of military bases by relevant states, the volume of arms exports, the transfer of military technology to the Persian Gulf, and the use of coercion and threats. In the economic domain, issues related to the free market and the geo-economic significance of the Persian Gulf are considered. The political dimension examines how competing states interact with one another and the role ideology plays in shaping these interactions. In the societal sphere, the Copenhagen School places significant emphasis on identity, and within this context, the Abraham Accords are analyzed. Lastly, in the environmental domain, Buzan argues that as long as natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes occur independently of human will, they do not constitute security concerns. Since this study does not focus on environmental issues, they are not considered relevant to the research.

Since the founders of the Copenhagen School, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, are affiliated with neorealism and structural realism, their theoretical approach is predominantly grounded in realism. In addressing the

security dilemma, Buzan introduces two key concepts: defense-security and power-security. He argues that in the defense-security dimension, increased defense expenditures can lead to reduced investment in other sectors, citing the Soviet Union as an example, where excessive military spending resulted in economic and technological stagnation. In the power-security dimension, Buzan identifies two types of struggles: power struggles and security struggles. In power struggles, direct and conscious competition among states is the primary characteristic, with states acting either opportunistically or aggressively. In security struggles, states perceive each other with suspicion or indifference, with the root causes of insecurity, distrust, or indifference stemming from arms races, interdependence, misperceptions, and misunderstandings (Buzan, 1981).

4. Actors and Their Objectives

4.1. The United States

The first actor under discussion is the United States. As previously noted, the U.S. initially entered the region to counter communist influence and Soviet expansion. During this period, it maintained strategic relations with the Pahlavi regime in Iran, signing significant arms agreements, the largest of which was between the Shah of Iran and President Nixon. However, following the Islamic Revolution and Iran's adoption of a "Neither East nor West" policy, U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf declined. Consequently, the U.S. sought a new strategic and security partner. During the Iran-Iraq War, it aligned with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Initially, the U.S. supported Iraq, but as the war became protracted and Iran achieved repeated victories, Washington shifted to a strategy of maintaining a balance of power between Iran and Iraq. Later, the U.S. turned its focus toward Saudi Arabia due to its status as one of the world's largest energy suppliers, particularly in oil production. Saudi Aramco, as one of the world's largest oil companies, played a critical role in ensuring energy flow, securing energy corridors, and protecting U.S. allies (McGlinchey, 2013).

Saudi Arabia's broader defense needs have traditionally been met by its Western partners. Despite political tensions such as the Khashoggi assassination, the United States has reaffirmed its commitment to remaining the

leading arms supplier in the region. During the early Trump administration, the U.S. proposed a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, which included significant investments in the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. In August 2022, the Biden administration approved separate arms deals worth \$5.3 billion for the sale of THAAD missile interceptors to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Patriot missile interceptors to Saudi Arabia (Akçapa, 2019).

Additionally, the United States maintains a significant military presence in the Persian Gulf region. In Qatar, it operates Al Udeid Air Base, one of the largest U.S. airbases outside its borders. Qatar, as one of the world's major suppliers of liquefied natural gas (LNG), plays a crucial role in global energy security (Sharp, 2004). Another major U.S. installation is Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, where approximately 5,000 U.S. military personnel are stationed. The Fujairah Naval Base, located outside the Persian Gulf before the Strait of Hormuz, serves as a strategic logistical link to Jebel Ali in the event of a Strait of Hormuz closure. The presence of numerous U.S. military bases, primarily naval and air installations, in various countries across the region underscores Washington's efforts to reduce dependence on Iran and ensure the security of its regional allies.

However, U.S. efforts extend beyond direct military presence. Washington has sought to provide security guarantees to Persian Gulf states to further isolate Iran. The U.S. previously attempted to establish an "Arab NATO" to serve as a geopolitical counterbalance against Iran in the Persian Gulf. Although this initiative did not materialize, the U.S. has shifted its focus toward developing an integrated regional security framework. This framework aims to enhance security, stability, and prosperity in the Middle East by bolstering deterrence, strengthening defense integration, and improving operational cooperation—particularly in air and maritime defense. The U.S. continues to explore ways to integrate regional air and missile defense capabilities, special operations forces, intelligence capacity, cybersecurity, strategic communications, and shared awareness of emerging threats.

Alongside these initiatives, the U.S. has intensified efforts to encourage Persian Gulf states to normalize relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords. This diplomatic push builds upon earlier normalization agreements, beginning with the 1978 Camp David

Accords between Egypt and Israel and the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty. The process accelerated with the 2020 Abraham Accords, through which the UAE became the first Gulf state to establish formal diplomatic ties with Israel, followed by Bahrain. Sudan and Morocco subsequently joined the agreement on October 23 and December 10, respectively (Yossef, 2021).

This normalization process carries not only political but also deep economic implications. Prior to official normalization, these states engaged in covert trade and economic exchanges, particularly in diamonds, jewelry, artificial intelligence, and agricultural goods. Following the formalization of relations, economic, military, and security investments expanded, facilitating foreign investment and collaboration with Israel. From a strategic perspective, the United States views the expansion of the Abraham Accords as a means to strengthen its security network in the Persian Gulf against Iran while achieving its broader geopolitical objectives. One key initiative in this regard has been U.S. efforts to broker normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. However, the escalation of the Israel-Gaza conflict, particularly the October 7 attacks, has delayed this process (Fakhro, 2024).

Beyond these geopolitical considerations, former U.S. President Joe Biden introduced the concept of an "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor" during the G20 Summit in New Delhi. This initiative seeks to connect India to Europe via a trade route passing through India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. The U.S. envisions this corridor as a strategic countermeasure to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In parallel, the U.S. has promoted the expansion of the I2U2 grouping (India, Israel, the United States, and the UAE), aimed at countering China's economic and strategic influence in the region. These strategic instruments serve Washington's broader security objectives, facilitating foreign investment, arms sales, and the deployment of defense systems such as THAAD and Patriot missile batteries to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. At the same time, this approach helps the U.S. compete with China's economic-security footprint while curbing Russia's ability to evade sanctions related to the Ukraine war (Sheikh, 2024).

This strategy has further complicated Russia's energy maneuvering. Moscow has sought to bypass Western sanctions imposed due to the Ukraine conflict by

engaging in energy swaps and transferring oil exports to the UAE and India. However, U.S. policies have made this strategy increasingly difficult, redirecting Russian energy exports toward the Red Sea. This shift has exposed Russian shipments to additional risks, including disruptions from Houthi attacks and retaliatory strikes by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. These hostilities have significantly impacted supply chains, creating further obstacles for Russian energy exports (Iqbal & Rahman, 2023).

4.2. *Russia*

The second actor under examination is Russia. Historically, the Soviet Union sought access to warm waters, a goal driven by its geographical and geopolitical constraints. This ambition was evident in its invasion of Afghanistan, where it installed a pro-Soviet government to secure its strategic objectives (Radchenko, 2021).

However, the Soviet Union soon found itself entangled in Afghanistan's civil war, incurring heavy costs as it struggled to maintain control. The war gradually turned into a geopolitical quagmire, imposing significant military, logistical, and economic burdens on Moscow. According to declassified documents from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the cost of the war for the Soviet Union between 1980 and 1983 alone was estimated at approximately \$12 billion, with an annual average expenditure of \$3 billion (Alamaifar, 2024).

The Soviet war effort became even more challenging due to support for Afghan Mujahideen from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia, as the strongest successor state, inherited the military, economic, political, and security responsibilities of its predecessor. During the post-collapse period, Russia found itself in a weakened position, struggling to rebuild while navigating a unipolar world dominated by the United States. Initially, Russia had no choice but to coexist with Washington's new order. However, as Moscow gradually regained strength, it sought to reassert its influence in various regions and protect its strategic interests (Hamrah, 2023).

This process accelerated following the September 11 attacks. In response to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, the United States launched its military intervention in Afghanistan. Russia, which was simultaneously dealing with internal terrorist threats,

particularly from Chechen separatists, supported the global counterterrorism strategy. This alignment allowed Russia to increase its engagement in international affairs and expand its presence on the global stage (Krickus, 2011).

In the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf, Russia has sought economic partnerships through petrodollar recycling. Several Arab oil-producing states have accumulated vast financial reserves in sovereign wealth funds, with an estimated total of around \$3 trillion. These wealth funds, managed by state-appointed executives, actively seek lucrative investment opportunities, one of which is the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), established to facilitate foreign investments in Russia. Through such economic initiatives, Russia aims to maintain its competitive standing against the United States and China in the region.

Russia channels these investments into domestic infrastructure and uses the funds to rebuild its economy. Most of these investments originate from Persian Gulf states, including Abu Dhabi's Mubadala Investment Company, Bahrain's Mumtalakat Holding, the Kuwait Investment Authority, Qatar Holding, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), and the UAE's DP World. These entities have collectively committed over \$30 billion to RDIF since 2011 (Popescu et al., 2018).

Before the Soviet Union's collapse, Moscow was a leading global arms exporter, leveraging its technological advancements in military industries. This role became evident with the signing of a \$250 million arms deal between Czechoslovakia and Egypt in 1955, followed by extensive arms sales to Syria. During the 1970s, the Soviet Union expanded its defense partnerships, supplying weapons to socialist-aligned states such as Algeria, Libya, Iraq, and South Yemen. However, after the Soviet collapse, Russian arms exports declined, and China and India emerged as dominant buyers. Russia re-entered the global arms market with a landmark deal in 2006, when it signed an agreement with Algeria.

Between 1989 and 1991, Russia and Iran also signed several military agreements amounting to \$1.5 billion, allowing Tehran to procure advanced weaponry, including MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter jets and S-200 missile systems. However, under U.S. pressure, Russia committed to completing all arms deliveries by 1999 (Secrieru & Popescu, 2018).

After 2000, Russia's military cooperation with Iran was significantly restricted. In 2010, under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, Russia suspended its previously agreed deliveries of S-300 PMU-2 missile systems to Iran. Additionally, Moscow supported the U.N. arms embargo on Libya, which cost Russia approximately \$7 billion in unrealized defense contracts (Khavarinejad, 2024).

In the Persian Gulf region, Russia's major arms clients include Iraq, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Iraq, which predominantly relied on American weapons between 2003 and 2012, signed a \$4.2 billion arms deal with Russia in 2012. By 2014, Iraq became the second-largest importer of Russian arms, following India, acquiring Su-25 attack aircraft, flamethrower systems, and attack helicopters.

Although Saudi Arabia has traditionally been a key U.S. defense client, it has also demonstrated interest in Russian weapons. During King Salman bin Abdulaziz's 2017 visit to Moscow, Saudi Arabia expressed initial approval for a \$3.5 billion arms purchase, which included the S-400 missile defense system, Kornet-EM grenade launchers, and local production of Kalashnikov assault rifles (Turan, 2024).

The UAE has similarly become a target for Russian arms exports. Following extensive negotiations, the UAE expressed interest in acquiring Su-35 fighter jets. Furthermore, Russia and the UAE agreed to co-develop a fifth-generation twin-engine fighter jet based on the MiG-29 platform (Secrieru & Popescu, 2018).

These defense engagements reflect Russia's broader competition with the United States and China in the economic and military spheres. Moscow seeks to solidify its presence in the region by leveraging arms sales, economic investments, and strategic partnerships.

Russia's economic engagements with Israel have also played a role in shaping its influence in the Persian Gulf. Israel benefits from Russia's technological products, and the military equipment Russia exports to Persian Gulf states often incorporates Israeli technology. In essence, Israel serves as a reliable technological partner for Russia in defense exports (Katz, 2005).

Furthermore, the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel under the Abraham Accords has facilitated new economic agreements. Additionally, a significant number of Russian investors and businesspeople frequently travel between the Persian

Gulf states and Israel for trade, commerce, and tourism (Turan, 2024).

All these developments illustrate the geopolitical rivalry among global powers in the Persian Gulf. The region has become a fluid geopolitical arena where states seek to assert influence through military bases, arms sales, economic transactions, and strategic alliances. Each actor continues to maneuver in pursuit of maximizing its own interests.

4.3. China

The third actor to be examined in the geopolitical competition with the United States and Russia in the Persian Gulf is the People's Republic of China.

During the Mao era, China pursued two major strategies: the Great Leap Forward, aimed at a massive economic transformation through excessive production, and the Cultural Revolution, intended to strengthen ideological commitment to the Communist Party. However, these policies led to severe economic and human losses, preventing China from achieving the economic and cultural progress it had envisioned. Consequently, under Deng Xiaoping and later Xi Jinping, China adopted a distinct development model known as "market socialism with Chinese characteristics." This shift allowed China to take a more active role in global affairs. By the 1990s, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, China, along with India, emerged as a significant supplier of strategic commodities and arms to the world, including the Persian Gulf states (Alamaifar, 2024).

China aims to become an integral part of the global value chain. Just as Germany dominates regional and global value chains in Europe and the United States does in the Americas, China seeks a similar position in Asia and beyond. To achieve this, it requires advanced technological capabilities in heavy industries, a skilled workforce, and high-value-added products. China must leverage various tools to accomplish this goal (Alamaifar, 2024).

China's economy and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are structured as a strategic triangle with three key components. The first component involves securing raw materials and mineral resources to supply its industries and factories, integrating China into global economic networks. The second component consists of financial and credit institutions, which issue extensive loans and invest in infrastructure projects in partner countries,

creating economic interdependence between these states and China. The third component includes Chinese state-owned enterprises, which safeguard China's economic interests in foreign markets and territories (Alamaifar, 2024).

Between 2014 and 2019, China's total investments in BRI-related infrastructure projects reached approximately \$573 billion. Unlike Western countries, China does not impose stringent conditions on its investments or loan disbursements, reducing bureaucratic barriers and facilitating its deeper penetration into regional economies (Raeesi-Nejad, 2022).

China's competition with the United States and Russia occurs across multiple domains using several strategic instruments. One of the primary tools is economic diplomacy, manifested in two key initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road. The Maritime Silk Road connects China's coastal regions to Southeast Asia and further extends into the Indian Ocean before reaching the Persian Gulf. Another significant corridor links China's Xinjiang region to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, facilitating access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Additionally, China leverages the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to finance foreign projects, providing loans and investments to strengthen its economic influence (Raeesi-Nejad, 2022).

Another crucial factor in China's regional strategy is its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. This approach is particularly appealing to Persian Gulf states, which seek to maintain their unique governance structures without external intervention. For China, the principle of non-interference aligns with its economic interests, as Beijing focuses solely on maximizing profit rather than engaging in political disputes. Given that China is one of the world's largest crude oil importers—second only to the United States—ensuring the security and freedom of maritime trade routes for energy imports is a top priority (Ebrahimi & Rezaei, 2012).

According to Chinese customs data, China, as the world's largest crude oil importer, imported 11.3 million barrels per day in 2023, marking a 10% increase from 2022. Chinese refineries processed record volumes of crude oil to meet rising domestic fuel demand and support the country's expanding petrochemical sector (Kamrava & Bagheri Dolatabadi, 2024).

A final key aspect of China's strategy is its commitment to multilateralism. This is particularly relevant for countries like Russia, which seek to challenge the U.S.-led international order. China strongly emphasizes dialogue and multilateral cooperation, as demonstrated by its participation in the Iran nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, which culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Roshan & Ranjbar, 2016).

Another example of China's multilateral engagement is its role in mediating the normalization of relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. By brokering this diplomatic agreement, China sought to promote peace and stability in the Persian Gulf, ensuring a favorable environment for its energy investments and trade activities. Given that the Persian Gulf serves as China's primary source of vital energy supplies, it presents both opportunities and risks. Consequently, China has focused on three strategic pillars: economic diplomacy, non-interference, and multilateralism.

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war further reshaped China's role in the Middle Eastern arms market. As Russia faced domestic military needs and international sanctions, it became increasingly constrained in its ability to supply arms abroad. Previously, Russia had positioned itself as an alternative arms supplier to the United States, particularly after the post-9/11 era. However, with Russia's defense industry now under strain, China has stepped in to capture a larger share of the Persian Gulf arms market.

For China, selling arms to any country traditionally aligned with the United States represents a strategic achievement, regardless of whether the buyer distances itself from Washington's influence. By positioning itself as a major arms supplier, China can identify key markets and provide military equipment tailored to regional demands (Barron, 2025).

China's emergence as a significant player in the Middle Eastern arms market marks a notable shift from its historically limited presence. Between 2000 and 2019, the United States maintained its dominance as the region's primary arms supplier, accounting for over 45% of total arms imports. In contrast, China's share during the same period was only about 2.5% (Fakhro, 2024).

Chinese defense manufacturers, including the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation (CASIC), China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC), and Norinco Group, are

rapidly becoming key players in the global arms trade. These firms are propelling China into the ranks of the world's top five arms exporters.

China's competitive advantage lies in offering affordable pricing, flexible payment options, and reliable end-user delivery guarantees, enabling it to steadily expand its global customer base (Khavarinejad, 2024).

As China continues its ascent as a global power, it is gradually assuming the role previously occupied by Russia as the preferred alternative to Western arms suppliers. Arms sales not only generate immediate revenue but also establish long-term relationships, as clients require maintenance, upgrades, and future acquisitions. China is integrating its arms exports into its broader foreign policy approach, forging strategic partnerships and, in some cases, seeking to shift countries away from Western alliances.

This emerging dynamic is expected to have significant implications for the global balance of power, as states reassess their geopolitical alignments in an evolving international landscape. Russia has, perhaps unintentionally, passed the mantle to China, paving the way for Beijing to emerge as the next great power capable of rivaling the United States on the global stage. Furthermore, China's long-standing policy of non-interference is evident in its historical arms sales. During the Iran-Iraq War, China supplied weapons to both sides, maintaining a neutral stance while maximizing its strategic gains. A key example is the supply of the "Silkworm" anti-ship missile, a medium-range cruise missile used in naval engagements during the Tanker War phase of the Iran-Iraq conflict. Both Iran and Iraq deployed this missile extensively in their maritime confrontations (McCarthy, 1992).

4.4. *The Islamic Republic of Iran*

A key focus of this study is the impact of geopolitical competition on the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's geographical position makes it a strategically vital country. To the south, it is connected to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and to the north, it borders Central Asia. This positioning allows Iran to function as a geographic "corridor" linking Europe, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The combined oil and gas reserves of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea account for more than 60% of the world's total reserves, most of which are

transported via the Indian Ocean. With increasing energy demand from China and India, global energy consumption is projected to rise by 49% between 2007 and 2035. Iran holds the world's fifth-largest oil reserves and the second-largest natural gas reserves, giving it significant potential to act as a key player in both regional security and development (Ebrahimi & Rezaei, 2012).

As previously noted, during the Pahlavi era, Iran was designated by the United States as the regional gendarme, serving as a bulwark against Soviet expansion. However, following the Islamic Revolution, Iran adopted a foreign policy based on the principle of "Neither East nor West," rejecting foreign influence and external domination. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is structured around the principles of dignity, wisdom, and expediency, which were articulated by the Supreme Leader in 1992. These three principles are interdependent and must be implemented together for Iran's foreign policy and diplomacy to be effective (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2014).

Several unique geopolitical factors in the Persian Gulf must be considered. A dynamic and proactive diplomatic strategy is essential in this anarchic environment. As previously mentioned, all major powers operating in the region seek to enhance not only their security but also their strategic interests, economic benefits, and global standing. The United States acts as a self-declared security provider in the Persian Gulf, ensuring the safety of maritime trade routes and energy corridors. In response, the Islamic Republic of Iran has pursued a strategy of strengthening its regional military capabilities, particularly in naval and aerial defense. The presence of multiple U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf states has compelled Iran to develop one of the most robust military forces in the region (Cordesman & Kleiber, 2007).

As a result, Iran has prioritized arms procurement from diverse sources, including Russia and China, particularly after the United Nations lifted arms embargo restrictions in 2020. Simultaneously, Iran has emphasized domestic military production and self-sufficiency, particularly in missile and drone technology, as well as air defense capabilities. This dual approach—domestic military development and strategic arms acquisitions—defines Iran's defensive diplomacy and foreign policy (Asaadi & Monavari, 2021).

Another critical component of Iran's strategy is economic diplomacy, particularly its participation in global initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional transport corridors. Iran's engagement in these projects is crucial for ensuring its economic security and maintaining regional trade partnerships.

Following the Abraham Accords between Israel and several Persian Gulf states, which led to increased Israeli economic and military activity in the region, Iran has reinforced its long-standing policy of regional cooperation and neighborly relations. By maintaining strong ties with its neighbors and fostering regional partnerships, Iran can facilitate foreign investment, expand arms trade, and engage in multilateral dialogues that contribute to regional security (Khan & Shahzad, 2021).

Despite extensive Western sanctions, Iran has prioritized domestic empowerment and the enhancement of its strategic assets, particularly in the military sector. Iran's military exercises, conducted independently and in cooperation with allied states, demonstrate its ability to protect the Persian Gulf, secure energy routes, and safeguard trade corridors. In the long term, easing Western sanctions would enable greater foreign investment in Iran, particularly in infrastructure projects such as the development of Chabahar Port. Iran's participation in energy corridors linked to both China and India could further enhance its strategic position.

Establishing positive relations with neighboring states and promoting regional diplomacy have also played a key role in reducing tensions and preventing conflict. The normalization of Iran-Saudi relations, for example, has significantly de-escalated tensions, particularly regarding the Riyadh-Sanaa conflict. However, it is important to note that in April 2024, Iran launched its first direct attack against Israel in response to repeated Israeli aggression. While the United States and its allies have accused Tehran of regional destabilization, Iran has continued to strengthen its diplomatic ties with neighboring states, fostering a policy of regional cooperation (Kamrava & Bagheri Dolatabadi, 2024).

Another strategic tool at Iran's disposal is soft power. Public diplomacy, media engagement, press relations, cultural exchanges, and academic collaborations all serve as effective instruments in Iran's interactions with

its neighbors. Every major power utilizes soft power; broadly speaking, soft power entails the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce. Iran's engagement with Persian Gulf states in scientific fields, including academic exchanges and joint research initiatives, alongside media and press collaborations, can further strengthen regional diplomacy and mutual understanding.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Persian Gulf, due to its unique geopolitical and strategic position, has become a critical arena where regional and extraregional powers compete for influence. The region's significance extends across economic, military, and political dimensions, leading to persistent geopolitical rivalries. Given that the international system is inherently anarchic and fluid, competition among global powers in the Persian Gulf has been an enduring feature and is likely to persist. This competition is not limited to economic or military spheres but encompasses multiple strategic domains.

Each of the major powers seeks to maximize its influence by employing various geopolitical instruments. For the United States, the establishment of military bases and defense agreements with Persian Gulf states has been a top priority. Washington has also leveraged regional and extraregional alliances, such as the Abraham Accords, to advance its strategic objectives, complementing these efforts with economic policies. Russia, on the other hand, has focused on energy partnerships, trade agreements, and Gulf investments, alongside defense contracts to sustain its regional presence. Meanwhile, China has prioritized its Belt and Road Initiative as a primary mechanism for competition, supplementing its influence through arms sales and strategic economic engagements. The Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted a balanced and independent approach, avoiding reliance on major powers for military or defense needs. Iran has made significant strides in domestic military production, particularly in drone and missile technology, while selectively acquiring foreign defense systems to bolster its capabilities in the Persian Gulf. As the principal security provider in the region, Iran plays a vital role in safeguarding energy routes and ensuring the security of maritime trade corridors.

In addition to military strategies, Iran has pursued economic alliances, sought the removal of unjust sanctions, and engaged in regional transport initiatives,

including China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's Mausam Project, to further strengthen its position in the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, Iran has emphasized neighborly diplomacy, reducing tensions with regional states, and fostering cooperative relations to maintain stability. By balancing military self-sufficiency, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement, Iran continues to assert itself as a central actor in the Persian Gulf's geopolitical landscape.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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