

Rusia, Turquía e Irán. El «Gran Juego» de las potencias revisionistas

Resumen:

Rusia, Turquía e Irán son Estados que tienen una visión geopolítica expansiva y entienden que la mejor forma de garantizar su estabilidad interna y el equilibrio regional es a través del control de los espacios geográficos que los rodean. Se trata de una concepción de la seguridad que hunde sus raíces en la historia y que se basa en la disconformidad con el reparto del poder en un orden internacional que consideran injusto y con el que no se sienten cómodos. Los tres son Estados soberanos, pero también mantienen entre sí un alto grado de dependencia derivado de la proximidad geográfica, la competición regional y la convergencia de intereses. El problema se presenta cuando los espacios, que cada uno de ellos considera, están dentro de su área de influencia coinciden con los de sus vecinos, lo que da lugar a diferentes comportamientos de competición o cooperación en el mar Negro, el Cáucaso o Asia central, así como en el norte de África u Oriente Medio. Los actuales conflictos en Ucrania y Palestina les habrían dado una oportunidad histórica de asociarse y adquirir un papel protagonista en el tablero de ajedrez del nuevo orden global, algo que hasta ahora se les había negado y que ahora tienen una buena oportunidad de conseguir.

Palabras clave:

Geopolítica, revisionistas, juego, oportunidades, enfrentamiento, cooperación, trampa.

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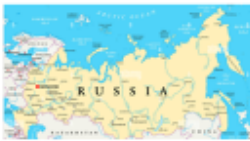


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Russia, Turkey and Iran. The "Great Game" of the revisionist powers

Introduction

Years ago, the American thinker Robert Kaplan wrote a book entitled *The Revenge of Geography*, in which he argued that a nation's power and security strategy are tied to geography, and that it is the use of geography that sustains prosperity and favours the expansion of its influence. This would be the case for Russia, Turkey and Iran, three states for whom only control of the natural geographic spaces that surround them guarantees internal stability and regional balance. The problem arises when the spaces that each of them consider to be within their area of influence coincide with those of their neighbours.

Datos comparativos Rusia-Turquía -Irán 

	Extensión	Población	Tasa de Fertilidad	PIB	FFAA
	17.080.000 Km2	144 millones	1.6 hijos/mujer	5.3 billones \$ (5°)	830.000
	783.000 Km2	85 millones	1.96 hijos/mujer	3.3 billones \$ (11°)	425.000
	1.648.000km2	89 millones	1.94 hijos/mujer	1.6 billones \$ (21°)	575.000

Source: Own elaboration

Russia, Turkey and Iran are three states whose behaviour in the international order fits quite well with an essentially realist conception of relations between powers with geopolitical aspirations. All three are sovereign states, but they also maintain a high degree of dependence on each other stemming from geographical proximity, regional competition and convergence of interests.

Sovereignty is understood as the ability of each of them to address their own security problems based on their national power measured in terms of size, demographics, wealth and military might. Their behaviour is thus defined from a national interest perspective;

that is, in terms of the amount of power they have vis-à-vis other powers both regionally and globally. The more of these factors they have, the more powerful they are.

Thus, the different attitudes of confrontation or cooperation in the geographic scenarios of the Black Sea, the Caucasus or Central Asia, but also in North Africa or the Middle East, respond to a conception of security that is rooted in history and is based on disagreement with the distribution of power in an international order that they consider unjust and in which they do not feel comfortable.

At every moment, or historical circumstance, each has sought to increase its national power usually by imposing itself on its neighbours, but also, if this is not possible, by cooperating with them. Their national policies are essentially geopolitical and based on the principle that the only "adequate" level of security is to be dominant in the geographic spaces in which they compete or, if that is not possible, to form alliances of circumstance to prevent any of the others from being so.

This does not mean that confrontation is the natural permanent state of affairs between them, nor that competition is limited exclusively to neighbouring geographic spaces or military terrain, but it does mean that each pragmatically defines the strategy that best serves its interests, often at the expense of the others. In this way, Russia, Turkey, and Iran can decide whether or not to use force and when best to do so depending on the importance they attach to their national interests in each geographical scenario. This means that confrontation has been a constant in their history, and also that war between them could break out at any time.

However, as pragmatic states, their politics are driven by national interest rather than ideology, so they are capable of allying with each other as long as they understand that the opportunity cost of doing so is acceptable, and to do so both temporally and geographically.

Commonalities between Russia, Turkey and Iran

When we look at these three powers and compare them in geopolitical terms, Russia is more powerful. Its geographical size is ten times that of Iran and twenty times that of Turkey. Its population of 140 million is much larger than that of the other two countries, which are only 85 million each. In economic terms too, Russia is richer than the other two

countries, with a gross domestic product in terms of purchasing power three times that of Iran and one and a half times that of Turkey. If we look at the military aspects, and discount the attrition caused by the war in Ukraine, Russia's armed forces are equivalent in quantitative terms to those of Turkey and Iran combined. Russia's military industry is also much more powerful than that of the other countries, although Turkey's has been growing strongly in recent years and has some areas of specialisation in which it is a technological leader, such as drones.

In other words, in purely quantitative terms, Russia has some of the characteristics of a great power, although its involvement in the war in Ukraine, the weakness of its demographics and its inability to master the most advanced technologies mean that it can also be defined as a power in decline, as its military and economic power suffers and it moves further away from the dominant global powers of the US and China.

Conversely, Turkey and Iran's non-participation in the war in Ukraine, their improved demographics and greater economic growth in recent years, despite the current crisis in Turkey and sanctions on Iran, have increased their geopolitical weight in absolute terms and decreased their gap in relative terms with Russia. This greater levelling of the three powers is naturally reflected in the power relations between them.

If we analyse in geopolitical terms and try to identify some of the common features that characterise these three powers, we could highlight the following. First, all three have a messianic vision of themselves and believe that they are destined to play a fundamental role in the future of history.

Secondly, these are three revisionist powers that see themselves as victims of the liberal order and therefore question it. From different positions, they believe that the way it is conceived is detrimental to them. Some reject it outright, as in the case of Iran, which sees it as an order dictated by the West from which it has been excluded, to the point of being relegated to the status of a "pariah".

Others such as Russia seek to create, in conjunction with China, an alternative order in which international power is more evenly distributed and in which the United States is no longer the dominant power. Finally, Turkey does not openly question the liberal order; rather, it believes that, in the current situation of uncertainty, it can benefit from it by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by competition between the great powers.

Third, all three states have a strong ideological component to their international behaviour and are led by authoritarian leaders. All three also have expansionist ambitions. These are either geopolitical in nature, seeking to extend their influence in peripheral regions - what Russia calls its 'near abroad' - or ideological in nature, as in the case of Iran, which seeks to extend the influence of Shia-style Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and Central Asia, or a combination of both, as in the case of Turkey, with an increasingly Islamist drift, but also with geopolitical ambitions in neighbouring areas that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire and which it considers to remain within its sphere of influence.

Fourth, all three powers are willing to use force to advance their interests either directly, through proxy actors - the so-called proxies - or opportunistically using hybrid strategies, such as Russia using the Wagner company in Syria, Libya or the Sahel, or Turkey using Azerbaijan as a proxy actor against Armenia in its attempt to assert itself in the Caucasus.

Finally, all three are pragmatic powers, capable of reaching agreements with antagonistic powers and of allying with each other in certain scenarios while competing in others.

The influence of geopolitics on relations between Russia, Turkey and Iran

While the three powers have geopolitical models with many features in common, each has its own characteristics that set it apart from the others. Russia has always had an imperial vocation and has always seen itself as one of the nations chosen by providence to carry out a messianic project: that of serving as an intermediary between East and West, while at the same time becoming the guarantor of the rights of the Slavic peoples.

Its history has traditionally been characterised by an expansionist policy based on the use of force to conquer the vast spaces stretching from Western Europe to the Pacific. For centuries expansion has been directed southwards to the Caucasus Mountains and the mountain ranges of Central Asia, eastwards to the Pacific Ocean and northwards to meet the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean. However, Russia's westward expansion has had the disadvantage of lacking natural obstacles to serve as a natural border and of clashing with historically powerful European powers. Russia's geopolitical conception in this region has been based on relying on the creation of buffer zones, the so-called "buffer states",

to prevent direct confrontation with Central European states that have always been wary of Russian expansionism.

Russia's geopolitics since its origins as a state has therefore been a quest for secure borders. But this expansion has not been peaceful, but profoundly aggressive¹. Since the time of Peter *the Great*, the true architect of the Russian nation, Russian leaders have repeatedly proclaimed the need to use force in the interests of Russia's prosperity and greatness, even if it meant keeping the nation in a perpetual state of war.

In this sense, the Russian state's vision has been fundamentally geopolitical, using to its advantage its geography - with an abundance of fast-flowing rivers running north-south and south-north that favour penetration - and the characteristics of its harsh climate, which has protected it at critical moments from European invasions. The Eurasian steppe has also been a natural communication and expansion route to and from eastern Siberia and the Pacific Ocean.

This Russian attitude reflects a geopolitical behaviour that realist theorists such as John Mearsheimer consider normal for great powers: first they expand regionally, then they expand globally and in doing so confront other previously dominant powers². The heyday of Russia's expansion was during the Cold War and its end, with the consequent geographical decline, was a profound trauma for a Russian state that had always considered itself a global power.

Its contemporary geopolitics has therefore been aimed at reconstituting lost spaces as far as possible. The Eurasian Union, which Russia is going to promote from the second decade of this century, responds to this regenerative purpose in which Central Asian countries, historically belonging to the Turkic world and, to a lesser extent, Iranian, as in the case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are combined with other European countries such as Belarus. In this political experiment, Ukraine plays a decisive role in preventing an excessive shift of Russia's centre of gravity towards Asia. The same is true of the Caucasus, which Russia understands as belonging to its near abroad and is therefore within its sphere of influence.

¹ OHANYAN, Anna. "Why Russia starts so many conflicts on its own borders", *The Washington Post*. September 12, 2018.

² MEARSHEIMER, John J. "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 6. New York, Nov/Dec 2021, pp. 48-58.

The problem with such an ambitious design is that Russia does not have sufficient geopolitical weight to undertake the recomposition of its sphere of influence without clashing with its neighbours Turkey and Iran, so its geopolitical ambitions outweigh its own chances of success. Its GDP is modest in comparison with other major powers and its population is in sharp demographic decline, meaning that only its military and nuclear capabilities and its natural resources, mainly energy, will allow it to maintain its aspirations to be a global power, a condition that will be determined by the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

Russia's expansionist behaviour has historically brought it into confrontation with neighbouring powers Turkey and Iran, creating an almost permanent state of conflict in which Russia has traditionally prevailed. Today, however, the situation has changed. The war in Ukraine allows Turkey and Iran, which also have interests in the same border areas, to take advantage of the current situation of increased Russian weakness to advance their positions in regions that have traditionally been under Russian influence.

In this sense, the geopolitical behaviour of Turkey and Iran is in line with what might be called 'the awakening of the middle powers'³. In Turkey's case, its position straddling Asia, Africa and Europe allows it to exert strong influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans and the Middle East and to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the disarray in the international system to become a dominant regional power, capable of competing on balanced terms with Russia and on advantageous terms with Iran.

In recent years, Turkey has been developing an intelligent policy of expansion - which the war in Ukraine has accentuated⁴ - based on the exploitation of conflicts and the generation of tensions, as well as taking advantage of the power vacuums produced by the withdrawal of other powers such as Russia, the United States and France from certain geographical areas.

To this end, it has used questionable but successful instruments of power, such as the use of double-dealing in NATO in a scenario like Ukraine, where its role is controversial to say the least. This concept also includes the use of its "soft power" for geopolitical purposes - such as its intermediation in the agreement to export Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea

³ "The new world order and the rise of the middle powers", *Financial Times*. February 28, 2022.

⁴ KHAN, Leena. "Erdoğan's opportunism in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war", *Middle East Institute*. July 6, 2022.

-, its alliance with Russia at certain times in the Syrian scenario, or the use of delegate states such as Azerbaijan to advance its interests in the Caucasus.



Source: Own elaboration

The traditional Turkish geopolitics designed in the era of Kemal Atatürk, based on the principle of "peace in Turkey, peace in the world"⁵, has been replaced by a certain neo-imperialism, the ultimate goal of which would be the reconstruction of the former Ottoman Empire on the widest possible geographical terms.

This has meant a shift in the foreign policy of President Erdogan's AKP party, which at the turn of the century was based on the principle of 'zero problems with neighbours', whereby Ankara sought to expand Turkey's influence by building trade links, promoting democracy and emphasising its Islamic identity⁶. Since the 2000s, however, this policy has become more authoritarian at home and more assertive internationally. Turkey now considers, in the words of former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu⁷, that it possesses 'strategic depth' as a country in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian, the Mediterranean, the Gulf and the Black Sea, enabling it to implement a multi-directional foreign policy and claim a central role in global politics.

⁵ MURAT SEYREK, Demir. "Was Turkey's Atatürk an authoritarian leader or a visionary European?", *Euronews*. November 10, 2023.

⁶ DAVUTOGLU, Ahmet "Turkey's Zero-Problems", *Foreign Policy*. 20 May 2010.

⁷ MURINSON, Alexander. "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*. 2010.

The doctrine of strategic depth, which has become the AKP's foreign policy guide, envisages a Turkey that can simultaneously exert influence in all these regions and claim a global strategic role. Turkey must develop a proactive policy commensurate with its historical and geographical depth, amplified by its Ottoman legacy. This doctrine developed to its full extent puts Turkey on a collision course with its Russian and Iranian neighbours.

Similarly, its 'Blue Homeland' strategy⁸ would be aimed at expanding Turkish influence in the region, the ultimate goal being for Turkey to dominate the Mediterranean and regain the commercial and maritime power once held by the Ottomans. This expansionist strategy represents, in addition to an expanded vision of Turkey's maritime borders in the Mediterranean, an attempt to reposition Turkey as a maritime power. In this sense, and according to the narrative of its creators, Turkey's geopolitical interests are essentially driven by geopolitical motivations and at their core lies Turkish discontent with the West.



Source: Own elaboration

Moreover, Turkey has a geopolitically important geographical asset in the form of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, vital sea lanes connecting the Black and Aegean Seas through which hundreds of millions of tons of cargo pass each year. Its control was

⁸ DENIZEAU, Aurélien. "Mavi Vatan, la "Patrie bleue": Origines, influence et limites d'une doctrine ambitieuse pour la Turquie", *Études de l'Ifri*. Avril 2021.

granted by the 1936 Montreux Convention and the war between Russia and Ukraine has dramatically increased its strategic value.

But Turkey's ambitions do not end there. President Erdogan aims to further project Turkey's power, especially in the Middle East, where a reduced US presence and Russian weakness have left a vacuum that Ankara hopes to fill. This entails an assertive shift in Turkish foreign policy aimed at expanding its military and diplomatic footprint.

Turkey has in recent years launched military interventions in countries such as Iraq, Libya and Syria; supplied drones to partners such as Ethiopia and Ukraine; built Islamic schools abroad; and used Azerbaijan as a 'proxy actor' in its dispute with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region⁹.

Iran's geopolitics is conditioned by history, which is the key element in understanding its relationship with the rest of the world. Iran has never accepted to become anyone's client state, nor to be dominated by foreign powers. Even during the time of the Shah of Persia, Iran sought to maintain its sovereignty and become a true partner - not a client - of the United States. In that sense, the 1979 revolution and the four decades of grievances against the US that followed are the driving forces behind Iran's worldview, a country that sees the West as irredeemably imperialist and as an element to beat¹⁰, over and above any disagreements it may have with its Russian and Turkish neighbours.

Despite the Islamic Republic's attempts to distance itself from the country's pre-Islamic past and from Shah Reza Pahlavi's Iran, the Islamic Republic continues a deeply rooted and historically conditioned tradition of Iranian strategic independence that drives its international behaviour. Three factors in this tradition are particularly important for understanding Iran's relationship with its neighbours Russia and Turkey, as well as the rest of the world: Iran has always fiercely resisted foreign domination; Iran has often sought a benevolent ally outside the region to support its sovereignty; and Iran has always wished to be seen as a serious power that deserves the respect of its neighbours.

The war in Ukraine has been, in this sense, an excellent opportunity to bring the Ayatollahs' regime back onto the international stage as a major geopolitical player in the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, in Central Asia. Iran has made good use of its cards

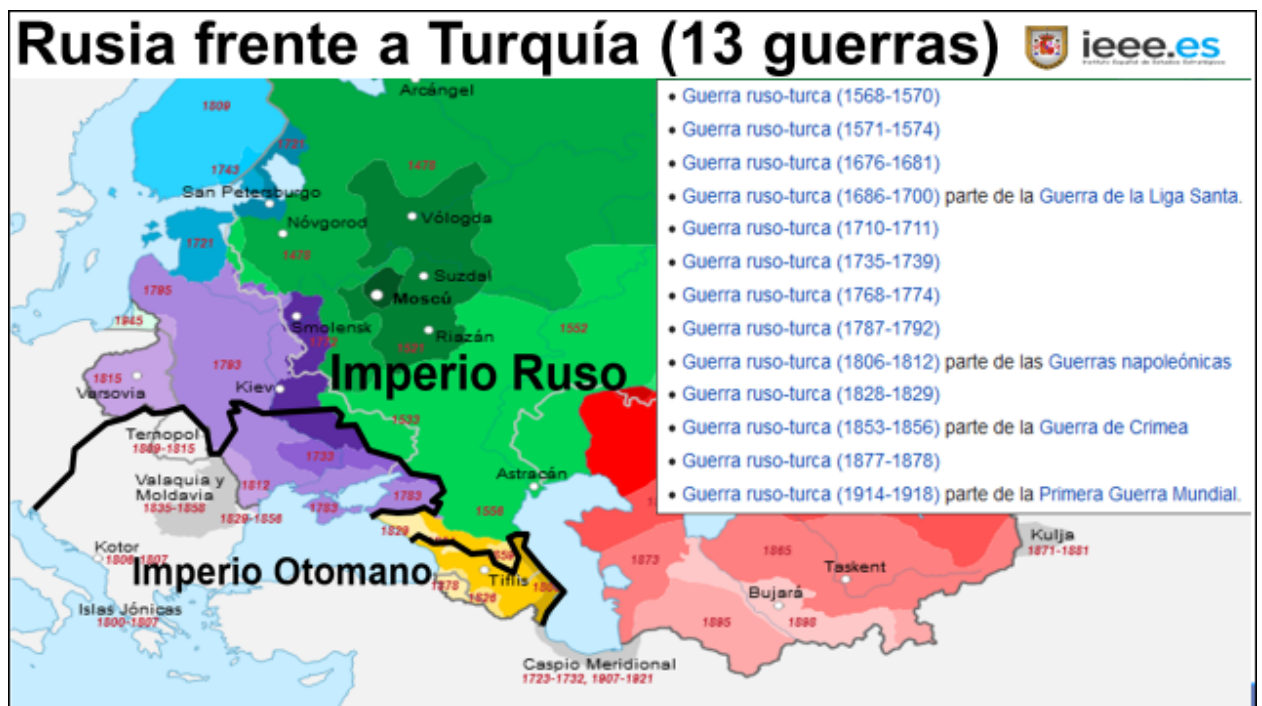
⁹ CHAMPION, Marc and HALPIN, Tony. "What's Nagorno-Karabakh and Why Do Azerbaijan and Armenia Fight Over It?", *Bloomberg*. September 20, 2023.

¹⁰ KARBALAEI, Ali. "The decline of U.S. imperialism", *Tehran Times*. April 16, 2023.

by rebuilding its relations with Russia, China and even with Saudi Arabia, its geopolitical and religious competitor in the Muslim world, with whom it reached a "coldly calculated" Chinese-sponsored agreement¹¹ to establish diplomatic relations.

Russia and Turkey. Between competition and cooperation

Relations between Russia and Turkey have traditionally been competitive and on many occasions confrontational. Russia's expansion into the Black Sea came at the expense of Turkey, with which it fought thirteen wars from the mid-16th century to the early 20th century. Not surprisingly, during the Cold War period, relations between the two powers were openly hostile, although Russia, more powerful militarily, was in a dominant position in the border regions of the Black Sea, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia where its interests converged with those of Turkey.



Source: Own elaboration

Since the end of the Cold War, relations between Turkey and Russia have swung from geopolitical competition to self-interested cooperation that has allowed the two powers to

¹¹ CAFIERO, Giorgio. "Iranian-Saudi deal: They didn't do it for love", *Responsible Statecraft*. September 08, 2023.

pursue parallel strategies of cooperation that have brought them mutual benefits, despite disagreements. This would be the case of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, a pharaonic construction financed by a Russian company on Turkish soil, which was inaugurated in 2023 in the midst of the invasion of Ukraine and is expected to provide 10 % of Turkey's electricity consumption by 2026¹².

Another prominent example of this cooperative policy would be the agreements for Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 missile defence system. This purchase coincides with Turkey's desire to achieve greater strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the West in the aerospace and defence industry through diversification in the acquisition of its weapons systems¹³, while meeting its security needs.

However, it does not seem to be in Ankara's interest to overdevelop its relations with Russia in order to avoid uncomfortable dependence. In the Russia-Ukraine war, Turkey has sought a difficult balance between the two countries, showing little scruple in 'keeping a foot in each camp'¹⁴ and managing Russia's attrition to its advantage. Turkey has supplied critical military hardware for Ukrainian defence, such as the fearsome Bayraktar Tb2 combat drones, supported the UN General Assembly vote condemning the Russian invasion, banned all warships from Turkish straits and blocked Russian aircraft bound for Syria from its airspace.

But also, conversely, Turkey has opposed Western sanctions on Russia because of its own energy needs and has kept the doors open to Russian tourism. This ambivalent position has allowed it to position itself as a mediator in the conflict and to use its soft power to help negotiate a deal to supply Ukrainian grain to global markets¹⁵.

This ambivalent relationship between Russia and Turkey has an additional strategic dimension in the peripheral regions, where the changing situation in the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East has forced both countries to assume new geopolitical positions. Russia has pursued a policy of border security, seeking to control areas in its near abroad, but keeping costs and risks manageable. Its assertive policy has been accompanied by a strategy of asymmetric "friendship" that has allowed Russia,

¹² BURGE, Joanne. "IAEA Chief Highlights Sustainable Energy as First Nuclear Fuel Arrives in Türkiye", *IAEA*. April 28, 2023.

¹³ SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Felipe. "Turkey, between the S-400 and the wall", *IEEE*. 23 February 2022.

¹⁴ EDWARDS, Maxim. "Erdogan Is a Key Player in Ukraine-on Both Sides", *Foreign Policy*. May 22, 2023.

¹⁵ GABER, Yevgeniya. "Grain drain: Why Turkey can't afford to ignore Russian grain smuggling from Ukraine", *Atlantic Council*. July 25, 2022.

through increased interdependence relations, to prevent the emergence of a Turkish-led bloc of neighbouring states against it.

For its part, Turkey presents itself as a revisionist power that is making good use of the opportunities provided by the current turmoil in the international order to balance its asymmetries in bilateral relations with Russia and achieve greater independence in international affairs. This has translated into greater interventionism in the regions that belonged to the former Ottoman Empire and that Turkey considers to remain part of its sphere of influence¹⁶.

The result is that Russia and Turkey can strike deals in the Black Sea for grain exports and, at the same time, be geopolitical rivals in neighbouring regions. The Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus are the areas where Russian and Turkish interests most intensely converge and compete. Syria would be the ultimate testing ground for this competition, with the two countries backing opposing sides. Russia supports President Assad's government, while Turkey has occupied a border strip in the north of the country, which the Damascus government opposes.



Source: Own elaboration

¹⁶ AKYOL, Mustafa. "From Ataturk to Erdogan: Turks rewrite history', *Al Monitor*. November 20, 2014.

This has not prevented both states from being able, together with Iran, to agree on the peace process launched in Astana in January 2017 to end the war in Syria, with support for Syria's territorial integrity being the common ground for consensus. However, Turkey's security concerns, which have resulted in the occupation of a large border area in the north, have prevented the transformation of this limited area of agreement into effective collective security management in the entire country. Despite this difficulty, the Astana dialogues have not been abandoned and remain central to managing the volatile situation in Syria.

In any case, the Turkish government is aware of the risks of polarized relations with Russia, in a context where the Kurdish issue and the Islamist-secular divide pose major obstacles to the realization of Turkey's strategic potential and pose a serious drawback to its aspirations to become the dominant regional power.

Russia supports General Khalifa Haftar and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives that dominates the eastern Cyrenaica region, while Turkey supports President Dbeibah's national unity government that controls Tripolitania, including the capital Tripoli.

At the same time, Turkey shows a growing Eurasian geopolitical tilt towards the republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan) with which Turkey has a historical, ethnic and linguistic affinity, yet which have until recently been part of the Russian zone of influence.

Azerbaijan's victory in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2023, largely thanks to Turkish support, would have been unthinkable before the Ukrainian war, given that Russia would never have consented to such aggressive Turkish penetration into a territory it has always considered under its influence and where, until the Ukrainian war, it had been fiercely hostile to any attempt at penetration by neighbouring powers.

Russia's passivity is reportedly favoring Turkish intentions to seek a greater role in the Caucasus and Central Asia by establishing closer relations with Turkic states, over which Ankara has some ascendancy as a result of common origins.

Similarly, Turkey could play a more relevant role in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal¹⁷, where it would seek to fill the gap left by the US. Therefore, the recreation of a Turkic space controlled by Ankara could be one of the intellectual, ideological and geopolitical drivers of its external action in the coming years.

If so, the competitive, if not conflictual, nature of Turkish-Russian relations would come to the fore. After all, much of the Turkish world is also part of the post-Soviet space. It is likely that Turkey's turn towards Eurasia, if implemented geopolitically, would put it on a collision course with Russia, with repercussions felt in different regions, in different formats and varying degrees of intensity.

However, neither Russia nor Turkey has an interest in the competition reaching dangerous levels, so both countries have developed a system of damage control based on high-level dialogue, isolating contentious issues and maintaining cooperation, especially in Syria and Libya, where Ankara and Moscow have different approaches¹⁸.

The aim is to keep channels of communication open so that Turkey's ambitious expansionist policies to Russia's detriment are manageable for both states and do not escalate dangerously. In any case, as a geopolitical rival, Turkey will take advantage of any Russian weakness to advance its interests in those arenas in which they compete.

Russia and Iran. A common threat perception

In terms of relations between Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, these are two countries that have been historically antagonistic and whose complex relationship has turned the war in Ukraine into a partnership of convenience¹⁹. If President Vladimir Putin has revived Russia's imperial ambitions, Iran appears to be an area that has traditionally been part of its sphere of influence. Russia has never seen Iran as an equal but as a country to be controlled, as imperial Russia sought to do.

However, the new international context has recently altered this almost 'paternalistic' Russian view. Both powers share geopolitical interests, but above all a mutual opposition

¹⁷ LEVENT, Kemal. "Turkey's role in Afghanistan: a major risk", *Al Jazeera Centre for Strategic Studies*. August 26, 2021.

¹⁸ CHAMPION, Marc. "Erdogan's Putin Meeting Was More about Damage Control than Grain", *The Washington Post*. September 5, 2023.

¹⁹ GERANMAYEH, Ellie and GRAJEWSKI, Nicole. "Alone together: How the war in Ukraine shapes the Russian-Iranian relationship", *Policy Brief*, ECFR. September 6, 2023.

to the US-dominated world order, from which they feel excluded and which they see as threatening their identity and security. This common threat perception has become the cornerstone of Russian-Iranian convergence in recent years and has resulted in an increasingly strong relationship between the two countries.

Since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow has dramatically deepened its cooperation with Iran. In exchange for Iranian combat drones and other military equipment, Russia has stepped up its defensive support for Tehran, including assistance for its missile and space programmes²⁰. At the same time, Russia and Iran work closely together in areas such as the de-dollarization of their economies and trade in other international currencies.

Russia opposed the US denunciation in August 2018 of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal - which has seen the reintroduction of sanctions against Iran's nuclear programme. Russia has stopped pressuring Iran to make progress in the nuclear talks, creating a de facto shield for Iran's quasi-nuclear status. In doing so, Moscow seems to have become convinced, especially among its hardliners, that a nuclear-capable Iran would be less dangerous than an Iran close to the West.

Conversely, Russia is also the target of US and European sanctions in reaction to the annexation of Crimea. The common threat of sanctions has provided a justified reason for Moscow and Tehran to deepen their ties, leading to a flexible strategic partnership rather than a formal alliance, as Russia does not want to antagonize countries such as Israel or the Persian Gulf states. This pragmatic partnership would be driven not by ideology but by grievances and its ultimate goal would be to confront the West.

This growing partnership is in line with a geo-political vision for Iran that has been brewing since President Raisi took office in 2021. Iranian leaders, guided by the revolutionary motto of 'neither East nor West'²¹, have traditionally sought to avoid becoming dependent on any one power or bloc. But since 2023, that strategic balance has tilted sharply

²⁰ KADAM, Tanmay. "Drones for Nukes? Russia Is Helping Iran with Nuclear Program 'In Exchange' For Missiles & UAVs", *CNN Report. The Eurasian Times*. November 7, 2022.

²¹ PENNARGUEAR, Corentin. "Russie-Iran, le grand rapprochement qui perturbe l'Occident", *L'Express*, 30 August 2022.

towards an increasingly close relationship with Moscow, spurred by the war in Ukraine²²

Iran has helped consolidate Russia's position in the Middle East since the beginning of its involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2015, in a geographical setting where both countries support President Assad. In Syria, Russia and Iran have found common cause in opposing, in a combined effort, US forces stationed in the northeast of the country with a mission to prevent an Islamic State resurgence, support like-minded Kurdish forces, and thwart Iranian and Russian ambitions.

On the other hand, it is also in Russia's national interest to maintain good relations with Iran. This is directly related to the remarkable size of Russia's Muslim population and Tehran's ability to influence the twenty million Muslims there, a number that has doubled in the space of three decades. Russia needs to prevent this population from becoming radicalised and Iran from provoking political and social unrest among different sectors of its Muslim population.

Moscow also has an interest in preventing the Shia-Sunni confrontation in the Arab world from spilling over into its territory and would seek Iran's support in preventing its territory from becoming a battleground in the struggle between different religious currents. As Russian President Vladimir Putin states, 'relations between Russia and Iran are multifaceted and multilateral' and this relates 'to the issues of stability in the region and our joint efforts to combat terrorism, including in Syria'²³.

Both countries understand that radical jihadist groups such as Daesh, radical Sunni insurgents and Wahhabi extremists pose a threat to internal stability in Syria, but also in Iran and Russia. Indeed, in January 2015, the two countries signed a military agreement to jointly combat terrorism, which stipulates that they will exchange training of military personnel and allow reciprocal use of port facilities for their naval forces²⁴.

Common threats to stability and security, accentuated by the war in Ukraine, can be expected to facilitate a deeper relationship between Iran and Russia, so that the more pressure is exerted on Iran, the greater the incentive for Moscow and Tehran to develop

²² HADIAN, Nasser. "Explainer: Iran's Strategic Pivot to Russia", *Iran Primer*. United States Institute of Peace, May 18, 2023.

²³ G. JONES, Seth, BERMUDEZ JR. Joseph S. and HARRINGTON, Nicholas. "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria", *CSIS*. July 16, 2019.

²⁴ GADY, Franz-Stefan. "Russia and Iran Sign Military Cooperation Agreement", *The Diplomat*. January 21, 2015.

a co-dependent relationship that consolidates in all areas. In this sense, Iran would no longer have an imperative need to maintain diplomatic and especially trade relations with the West, because it would have found a satisfactory alternative in Russia.

In any case, if history serves as a warning, Iran must still be wary of Russia's intentions and just as the Islamic Republic believes it cannot trust the US, so too remains a sense of wariness towards Russia, deeply embedded in the collective memory of Iranian elites²⁵. It seems reasonable for Russia and Iran to proceed with caution by collaborating in regions where the two powers have common interests, but also by avoiding areas of tension where they lack synergies.

Turkey and Iran. Sensible management of disagreements

But alongside Russia's relations with Turkey and Iran it is also necessary, for a complete picture, to understand those between Iran and Turkey, two countries that represent the obverse and reverse sides of the same coin. In addition to sharing a 534-kilometre border that has not changed since 1639, the two countries have competing interests in some of the world's most volatile geopolitical regions such as the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As descendants of empires with hegemonic histories and heirs to great civilizations that were often at odds with each other, Turkey and Iran are deeply unhappy with an international order that they understand has underestimated their importance as relevant regional powers.

Their historical relations have historically been marked by mutual suspicion, conflict and competition, and in modern times have vacillated between cooperation and conflict, mainly due to tensions over Syria, Iraq and the South Caucasus²⁶.

The 1979 Iranian revolution has accentuated tensions and differences as a result of Tehran's ambitions to change the regional order and Iran's perception of Ankara as an ally of the West and therefore a potentially hostile state. Also on the religious front, the two countries are at odds over the ideological drift since the 2002 elections of Turkey's

²⁵ ROME, Henry. "Making Iran's Support for Russia More Costly", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. January 5, 2023.

²⁶ JENKINS, Gareth H. "Occasional Allies, Enduring Rivals: Turkey's Relations with Iran", *Silk Road Paper*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, May 2012.

ruling Justice and Development Party, which has Sunni roots opposed to Iran's militant Shi'ism.

In the competition between the two states, Turkey has a better chance of becoming a dominant local power, given its full integration into the global economic system, its greater economic and military power and its dense network of alliances starting with NATO. Iran, on the other hand, is isolated by international sanctions related to its nuclear programme and US hostility.

However, the war in Ukraine and the realignment of major and middle powers are changing this situation. Both states now have pragmatic governments that have been able to cooperate especially on energy issues and on how to deal with the Kurdish problem²⁷. Divergent foreign policy priorities and conflicting interests have not prevented Turkey and Iran from being able to compartmentalize their relations in order to reasonably manage contentious geopolitical and economic issues in isolation from those where their interests converge. Proof of this is the signing on 29 November 2021 by the presidents of Iran and Turkey on the occasion of the 15th summit of the Economic Cooperation Organization in Turkmenistan of a 'memorandum for the comprehensive improvement of bilateral relations'²⁸.

This agreement is in line with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's 'Neighbours First' policy, which aims to reduce tensions between Iran and its immediate neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It also responds to the regional 'charm offensive' that President Erdogan is reportedly pursuing with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE²⁹.

Despite the willingness of the two countries to work on 'a roadmap for long-term comprehensive cooperation'³⁰, the realities that determine the future direction and dynamics of bilateral relations are more complex. The fact that Iran and Turkey have managed to avoid confrontation based on the principle of reasonably managing bilateral

²⁷ KIRISCI, Kemal, "Post-Revolutionary Iran and Turkey at forty: Pragmatism and convergence", *Brookings*. April 4, 2019.

²⁸ AGHAIE JOOBANI, Hossein. "Under Ebrahim Raisi, Iran and Turkey may be entering a new phase of bilateral ties", *The Atlantic Council*. January 20, 2022.

²⁹ CAGAPTAY, Soner and JEFFREY, James. "Turkey's Regional Charm Offensive: Motives and Prospects", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. Jun 27, 2016.

³⁰ "Iran, Turkey agree to draw up new roadmap for long-term co-op", *Tehran Times*. November 15, 2021.

disagreements does not necessarily mean that the list of disagreements on regional issues is short.

In the Syrian civil war, which has become a 'frozen conflict', the two countries have opposing positions, although they have managed their relationship reasonably well, especially when it comes to the fate of the northwestern province of Idlib, the last major rebel stronghold, which remains a bone of contention between the two countries. Turkey's military offensives in northern Syria since October 2017 have reinforced patterns of competition between Iran and Turkey, with Iranian-backed militias clashing with Ankara-backed forces for control of Idlib province.

Beyond their antagonism in Syria, Ankara and Tehran also have other overlapping interests. Both actors are concerned about the US presence in Syria, which they oppose. Ankara sees continued US support for the Kurds in northern Syria as an obstacle to its efforts to prevent autonomy dominated by the Democratic Union Party and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers a terrorist group and an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)³¹.

For Iran, an ally of President Assad, its foreign policy goal is to drive the US out of the region. US military forces concentrated around the Syrian-Iraqi border are seen as a threat to Iranian ground access to Syria via Iraq.

The same is true of northern Iraq - in particular the disputed Sinjar district - which remains a focus of immense geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Turkey. In Sinjar, Iran is reportedly using its Shi'a proxies 'by proxy' to bolster its military presence, while Turkey uses the excuse of fighting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (recognized as a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and Turkey) to control the region.

Similarly, in the Caucasus region where the *status quo* changed in favour of Turkey and Azerbaijan after the Nagorno-Karabakh wars in 2020 and 2023, which resulted in Azeri victories, both Ankara and Tehran are seen as competing for a larger economic and geopolitical footprint.

³¹ "What is the Syrian Kurdish YPG?", *Reuters*. October 5, 2023.



Source: Own elaboration

Turkey supports Azerbaijan, a country with which it shares important historical, ethnic and linguistic ties, while Iran supports Armenia as a way to avoid nationalist contagion in the northern part of the country whose population is mostly Azeri. In any case, Iran has more limited geopolitical room for maneuver north of its border, where Turkey has managed to assert itself militarily by using Azerbaijan³².

In this scenario, political pragmatism has led Tehran to accept the so-called '3+3 Initiative', a proposal put forward by Ankara that includes the three South Caucasus countries along with Turkey, Iran and Russia and aims to 'address regional challenges without the intervention of trans-regional and Western powers'³³. It seems that both Turkey and Iran would be willing to align with Russia in shaping regional dynamics in the South Caucasus without Western interference.

In any case, while Iran and Turkey may have too many geopolitical differences and both seek to assert themselves in regions where their interests collide, both powers believe that their disagreements can be handled diplomatically. Presumably, they will remain interested in maintaining their pragmatic strategy of compartmentalization, lest diverging

³² RUBIN, Michael. "Understanding the Armenia-Iran Relationship", *The National Interest*. October 23, 2023.

³³ "Iran supports Turkey's 3+3 mechanism for South Caucasus", *Daily Sabah*. Istanbul, November 23, 2021.

interests at the regional level end up irreparably damaging the core of bilateral relations and setting them on a collision course.

Gaza as an opportunity for revisionist powers

There is no doubt that the future geopolitical behaviour of these three powers will depend very much on the evolution of the war in Ukraine, but also on Palestine where all three defend their own interests, albeit with varying degrees of intensity and convergence.

The most committed country is Iran, a state that has backed Hamas, the terrorist group that has ruled Palestine since 2007, on the principle that Palestinians have been treated 'with historical injustice'³⁴. Iran is a known supporter of militant groups opposed to Israel in the Middle East, providing them with training, weapons and logistical support. Iran would also be behind any decision by the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah to attack Israel, which, if it were to happen, would further escalate the conflict in Palestine.



Source: *The World Order*. Available at: <https://elordenmundial.com/mapas-y-graficos/eje-resistencia-hamas-iran/>

³⁴ BOZORGMEHR, Najmeh. "Iranians see both sides of the Israel-Gaza conflict", *Financial Times*. November 15, 2023.

Iran's support for a broad network of militias and armed groups in the Middle East, which would include Palestinian groups, would aim to consolidate its influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, as well as in Gaza. The aim would be to create a heavily decentralized alliance known as the 'axis of resistance'³⁵, which would include all militant groups that have dedicated themselves to opposing Israel's right to exist, notably Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi movement in Yemen.

Moreover, war in Palestine would further Iran's geopolitical interests in breaking the Abraham Accords, signed in August 2020 by Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. Iran strongly opposes these because it understands that they are directly directed against it, its influence, or its regional interests.

Iran understands that the cessation of these agreements would weaken the US position in the Middle East while enhancing Iran's own. Not surprisingly, on 3 October, just four days before Hamas launched its attack on Israel, Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, characterized the establishment of Arab relations with Israel as a "losing bet"³⁶.

In this sense, Iran's strategy appears to be succeeding, allowing Tehran to capitalize on changing regional circumstances and the growing anti-Israeli sentiment in the Muslim world triggered by the invasion of Gaza following the 7 October attacks. Even Saudi Arabia, the main target of the Abraham Accords, has reportedly been forced to change its favourable position on the agreements, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stating: 'The kingdom's firm position to support the Palestinian cause'³⁷, moving away from the possibility of reaching an understanding with Israel.

By maintaining a well-crafted doctrine of "plausible deniability"³⁸ in any responsibility for Hamas attacks, Tehran has avoided direct involvement in this conflict, which if proven would have devastating consequences, as it could be seen as a declaration of war against Israel.

³⁵ LEÓN, Jaime. "What is the Axis of Resistance? These are Iran's tentacles in the Middle East", *El Periódico*. 2 November 2023.

³⁶ "Iran's Khamenei says normalising Israel ties is a losing bet - state media", *Reuters*. October 3, 2023.

³⁷ "Saudi crown prince, Iran president hold first call to discuss Israel's Gaza war", *The New Arab Staff & Agencies*. October 12, 2023.

³⁸ VAKIL, Sanam. "Iran's regional strategy is raising the stakes of Hamas-Israel war", *Chatham House*. November 10, 2023.

Thus, while the Islamic Republic regularly threatens to wipe Israel off the map and supports Hamas militias that have attacked the Jewish state, it will find it difficult to achieve sufficient social consensus - as the regime and its supporters would like - in an increasingly secular Iranian society if the argument is that the Palestinians should be supported solely because they are Muslims.

Regardless of public opinion, however, Iran will continue to champion the Palestinian cause while using the "axis of resistance" formed by Tehran-backed militant groups and allied state actors and perfected by the Islamic Republic over the past four decades as the core element of its strategy to oppose the West, Arab enemy states and, primarily, Israel³⁹.

In the case of Russia, the country has always defended its decision to maintain ties with both sides in the Israel-Hamas conflict, although Moscow is reportedly readjusting its foreign policy to move closer to Hamas, as evidenced by the visit of Hamas leaders to Moscow in October 2023.

Russia has always maintained close relations with Hamas, an organization it has never recognized as a terrorist group, but this does not imply that it has been a puppet of Moscow. Nor is there any evidence that Russia supported Hamas in planning or executing its surprise attack on Israel in October 2023⁴⁰. Similarly, Russia has been quick to criticize Israel's invasion of Gaza, while remaining reluctant to cut ties with Israel altogether.

Russia's recent pro-Palestinian stance, unthinkable a few years ago, indicates an effort to align itself with the pro-Hamas Arab mainstream as a way to improve its position in the region. The Gaza conflict allows Moscow to gain a foothold in the Middle East peace process, from which it had been excluded, and to return to the international stage in the critical Palestinian arena from which, with the invasion of Ukraine, it had been expelled.

At the same time, Russia's attitude reflects a preference for a closer relationship with Tehran and its allies in the region, including Hamas, as a way to keep Iran as one of Russia's main arms suppliers for the war in Ukraine.

³⁹ SCOLLON, Michael. "Iran's 'Axis Of Resistance': A Network Designed To Create Chaos, Fight Tehran's Enemies", *Radio Liberty*. October 19, 2023.

⁴⁰ HAMMER, Mathias. "What Russia Hopes to Gain from the Israel-Hamas Conflict", *Time Magazine*. October 30, 2023.

But above all, it is clear that a new war in the Middle East is in Moscow's interest to divert Western attention and resources away from Ukraine by cultivating new global pressure points and distractions⁴¹. Russia would benefit from the West's shift of attention from Ukraine to Palestine in order to have greater freedom of military action in the Donbass, which would facilitate the consolidation of its territorial control over the parts of Ukraine it dominates and the occupation of new territories. Extending tensions with the West to the new Palestinian theatre would force Americans and Europeans to divide their military support efforts between two theatres of operations, which would ease the pressure on Russia in Ukraine.

Finally, Turkey has maintained a more ambiguous initial position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Turkey and Israel were close regional allies for a long time, but President Erdogan's accession to the government soured the relationship given his outspoken criticism of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. Israel, for its part, opposed the Turkish government's attempts to favour the Palestinian militant group Hamas, with whom Ankara shares a certain common ideology, on the doctrinal basis of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This deterioration of relations came to a head in 2010 when the two countries recalled their respective ambassadors after Israeli forces attacked a Gaza-bound flotilla carrying humanitarian aid for Palestinians that broke an Israeli blockade, resulting in the deaths of nine Turkish activists.

In recent years, however, the Turkish government has favoured reconciliation with Israel, with which it regained full relations in August 2022, while maintaining more nominal than real support for the Palestinian cause. As Turkish foreign minister Cavusoglu told Haber Global television: 'Dialogue (with Israel) will allow us to better defend the Palestinians', without implying that 'Turkey will make concessions'⁴².

Turkey's comfortable and ambiguous position was shattered by the Hamas attacks of October 2023, forcing President Erdogan to take a much more forceful stance, spurred on by a public opinion largely favourable to the Palestinian cause. This has put relations with Israel in a 'deep freeze'⁴³.

⁴¹ MELKOZEROVA, Veronika. "Putin hammers Ukraine with West distracted by Middle East crisis", *Politico*. October 16, 2023.

⁴² "Turkey's Erdogan promises continued support for Palestinians amid reconciling with Israel", *Euronews with AP*. August 23, 2022.

⁴³ WILKS, Andrew. "Gaza war pushes tumultuous Israel-Turkey ties into 'deep freezer'", *Al Jazeera*. November 14, 2023.

In the current Palestinian standoff, Hamas militants, an organization Turkey never considered terrorist, have become 'liberators protecting their land', while Israel has become a state whose 'army behaves with great inhumanity' and its 'disproportionate' attacks in Gaza are 'a massacre' for which Western powers are ultimately responsible⁴⁴. Ankara now sees support for Hamas as part of its policy of championing the Palestinian cause as part of a broad strategy of leading the anti-Israeli resentment sweeping the Arab world.

Turkey is in any case in a complicated position, where the need to support Hamas has hindered its efforts to normalize relations with Israel. Hence, President Erdogan is looking to diplomatic efforts to bring calm to the clashes between Israeli forces and Hamas fighters as a way to recover and reconcile with the Palestinian cause without completely ruining relations with Israel.

A two-state solution would in Turkey's view be the only way to de-escalate tensions and achieve regional peace. Promoting this proposal, popular in the Arab world, would allow Turkey to become a prominent regional actor by replicating Ankara's success in mediating between Ukraine and Russia over grain exports. At the same time, it would cater to Turkish public opinion that calls for greater Turkish government support for the Palestinian cause.

But it will be difficult for Turkey's efforts to find a lasting solution to be frustrated without a meaningful compromise between the two sides, and this will ultimately depend on how the conflict evolves and whether Washington and Europe are genuinely interested in Turkish mediation.

Conclusions

Russia, Turkey and Iran are states that have an expansive geopolitical vision and understand that the best way to guarantee their internal stability and regional balance is to be the dominant powers in the geographic spaces around them. This is a conception of security that is rooted in history and based on disagreement with the distribution of

⁴⁴ "Israel recalls diplomatic staff from Turkey after Erdogan's accusations of war crimes", *France24*. October 29, 2023.

power in an international system that they consider unjust and with which they do not feel comfortable.

The geopolitics of the three powers seek to correct this situation by improving their relative position on the great chessboard that is the world, and to this end, their strategies converge or confront each other in the different scenarios in which they coincide, depending on their interests. As pragmatic states, their foreign and security policy is driven by national interest rather than ideology, which is why they see the open conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine as opportunities to ally and modify to their benefit an international order that they reject and defy.

The great game, which these powers are currently playing, presents all the elements to turn the international system into a trap, following Thucydides, for Western hegemony, as well as a historic opportunity to deal it a blow, perhaps a definitive one, and replace it with a new chessboard on which they can play a leading role that they have so far been denied and which they now believe they can achieve.

The eventual association of these revisionist powers in a common strategy poses a serious risk to an international balance already sufficiently strained by the challenge posed by China and its challenge to the global south, which could drag the United States and Europe into an unresolvable war scenario.

Fortunately or unfortunately, we do not know how the future will turn out and whether the revisionist powers will achieve their goals, but we do watch with concern as the world has never experienced such dangerous times since the end of the Cold War. The behaviour of the revisionist powers increases the negative view of the international scene and reinforces the natural tendency of individuals, and societies, to pessimism. This is probably because human beings are biologically prepared to try to survive at all costs by imagining the worst in order to avoid it. In the end, prevention is always better than cure and containment is better than combat, at least as long as we can hope that, in a world that seems doomed to war, sanity rather than recklessness will prevail.

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