



<https://dorl.net/dor/20.1001.1.23224525.2023.6.7.1.3>

Russia and the new security system in the Persian Gulf; Approach and strategy

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Received Date: March 12, 2023

Accepted Date: June 1, 2023

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine Russia's approach and strategy regarding the new security system in the Persian Gulf. The region of the Persian Gulf, which is strategically important for the whole world, is experiencing extremely alarming trends. Ensuring security in the strategically important area of the Persian Gulf is one of the key regional problems of our time. Over the past decades, tensions have not subsided in the Persian Gulf zone. This negatively affects security, political and economic stability in the region and in the world. In the meantime, Russia maintains traditionally friendly relations with all the countries of the Persian Gulf region without exception, and builds interaction with them on an equal and mutually respectful basis. The Russian concept of security in the Persian Gulf zone, which provides for the priority of regional cooperation and the participation of neighbors, instead of focusing on non-regional players, can be effective in ensuring peace and de-escalation, which at the same time faces various problems. This article uses qualitative methodology and based on Barry Buzan's theory of regional security to answer the question, what is Russia's approach and strategy to the security of the Persian Gulf region. Russia seeks to create a Long-term and lasting peace in the Persian Gulf Region by providing a concept of collective security and tries to act as a mediator. Russia's strategy for the security of the Persian Gulf is to replace the US plan and cooperate with all influential actors in the region.

Keywords: Russia, Persian Gulf, security strategy, GCC, Iran.

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Introduction

The Persian Gulf and the Middle East have historically been considered the world's poles due to their geopolitical importance. Global security is inextricably linked to security in the Persian Gulf. The economic security of industrialized countries also depends on the export of crude oil from this region, which is vital to them. The emergence of economic and political crises, conflicts and competition of regional players, extra-regional intervention, the emergence of radical movements, border disputes, and so on, chronically hinder seeing a bright perspective in the security doctrine in the Persian Gulf.

The geostrategic position and the supply of most of the world's energy have led to the intervention of world powers in the region under the pretext of establishing security and, in fact, in favor of these powers beyond their borders, as well as to guarantee the transfer of capital to their countries. The potential or actual engagement of other external powers in the Persian Gulf cannot be ignored, especially because of the region's hydrocarbons. But any of these actors need to be involved in a new security structure for the region. In the Persian Gulf region, there is one of the most important strategic narrow places in the world for world trade - the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 35% of the world sea trade in oil, in addition to natural gas and other goods (Khlopov, 2021: 42).

Among the world powers, Russia is a neighbor of the Middle East. Russia's relations with the Middle East and Persian Gulf have a long history. Russia and the peoples of the region have long had different economic, cultural and political ties. These long-standing ties have made Russia a key player in the Persian Gulf scene, especially in resolving conflicts and resolving problems in the region. The Kremlin is also concerned about security in the region.

Russia already plays roles in the Persian Gulf, notably in the so-called Quartet for Arab-Israeli peacemaking. It has involved itself in the issue of U.S. supply routes to Afghanistan, and it has a strong interest in the transportation of hydrocarbons from Central Asia and the Trans-Caucasus. It is seeking, in general, to return to the ranks of great powers, which implies increased engagement in issues of the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia. Perhaps most

consequentially, Russia has been part of ongoing negotiations regarding the future of Iran's nuclear programs. No doubt, however, it has its own interests regarding Iran and the region as a whole (Hunter, 2010).

after the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, Russia lost some of this influence in the region briefly during the early Arab Spring, which Russia describes as a series of coups against governments started in some countries of North Africa in 2011 by the US private services, where Russia saw the hands of the West, especially the United States of America in these coups, which threatens the interests of Russia in the region, including security interests (Almaqali 2018: 31). Thus, should Russia be invited to join a new security structure for the Persian Gulf. the main question is what is Russia's approach and strategy to the security of the Persian Gulf region. Russia seeks to create a Long-term and lasting peace in the Persian Gulf Region by providing a concept of collective security and tries to act as a mediator. this paper comes to try to identify the range of challenges facing Russia in the implementation of its security strategy in the region, specifically in the Persian Gulf, after the events of the Arab Spring.

Russia's foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf is inseparable from its broader diplomacy in the Middle East. Since the beginning of Russia's military deployment in Syria in 2015, Moscow importance for regional and non-regional players has been based on two pillars: an expanding Russian military presence in the Middle East (first of all, in Syria, but also in Libya) and a "pragmatic" balancing between key regional players (see, e.g., Rumer 2017; Donaldson and Nadkarni 2018; Berthelot 2017). That core set of priorities shaping Moscow's approaches to the region, and consequently the GCC has remained unchanged. This list includes Russia's ambitions to project power, the Kremlin's endless quest for economic profit and Moscow's domestic concerns. What has shifted over the last five years is the nature of the impact of these factors on Russian strategic thinking. These factors are constantly evolving in turn adding new shades to the Kremlin's approaches (Issaev and Kozhanov, 2021: 888).

In the geopolitical sphere, Russia's leadership always looks at the Middle East and the Persian Gulf through the lenses of its goal of projecting power globally and confronting the West (see, e.g.,

Trenin 2017; Vasiliev 2018; Vasiliev et al 2019). Regional priorities play a secondary role. Moscow's involvement in the conflicts in Syria and Libya, its close contacts with the Palestinian authorities and Israel, as well as attempts to maintain good ties with Iran, on the one hand, and the GCC, on the other, seek to underline to demonstrate to the US and the EU Russia's importance as a global player, thus compelling the West to further take Russia's worldview into account and to keep communication channels with Moscow open.

To write this article, should briefly explain literature review and its relations with the topic. Russia's growing involvement in the Middle East over the past years has brought about plethora of authors looking into different aspects of its regional presence. In these studies, scholars have also begun to address in more detail the issue of Moscow's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (see, e.g., Borshchevskaya 2016; Katz 2018a, b; Ramani 2020a; Shumilin and Shumilin 2017; Sim 2018). At the same time, the majority of recently published studies on the Russian presence in the Middle East still only touch upon Russia's ties with the GCC members states within the broader discussion of Moscow's regional approaches thus not extending sufficient attention (see, e.g., Rumer 2019). Those that do not tend to be too narrow are either concentrating on the dynamics underlying bilateral Russian-GCC ties with a selected GCC country or focusing on just one aspect of the Russia's dialogue with the GCC, primarily the energy dimension (Bradshaw et al 2019). Ekaterina Stepanova (2020), mentions that Russia has become a major external player in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region due to its military engagement in Syria since 2015, it has acted as a balancer and mediator in several regional controversies and has continued to serve as a security guarantor for the Syrian state. However, entering the 2020s, the risks of more active engagement in the Middle East have also mounted, making Russia's balancing act more difficult. In three cases where Russia's involvement has been visible (Syria, Libya and the Israeli-Palestinian problem), evolving developments challenge Moscow's acquired influence and multi-vector approach, but also create new opportunities for its engagement and mediation. A process-oriented blueprint for inclusive multilateral security in

the Persian Gulf proposed by Russia in 2019 is a step in the right direction, but to be activated it may need to come as part of some broader international initiative. Oleg Anatolyevich Khlopov (2021), analyses the changing nature of relations between the United States and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and the reasons of the beginning of the slow withdrawal the USA from the Persian Gulf region, which is a symptom of a structural shift in the balance of world power. The article analyzes the factors that has led to the change of the international order in the Persian Gulf and marked the beginning of the weakening of US' power and the strengthening of the influence of Russia and China in this region. The author argues that the United States expects from its closest regional partners to share the burden of responsibility for maintaining security in the region, based on the balance of power and the concept of offshore balancing. Russia offers a broader format for dialogue that could lead to the creation of a regional system of collective security in the Persian Gulf zone, including all countries of the region, as well as external actors the United States, China, India, the EU and other interested parties. Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov (2021), discussed that the interaction between Russia and Gulf countries represents the story of ups and downs, severe conflicts and sharp warmings that can largely be explained by the permanently changing role and place of each of these players at the global and Middle Eastern political arenas. After Russia's "return" to the Middle East in 2012–2015, Moscow's foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf can be explained in terms of a bargaining strategy. Russia is trying to underline its importance and relevance to the GCC by putting forward diplomatic and political initiatives. The Kremlin uses its direct or indirect presence in the key regional conflicts such as the Syrian, Libyan and Yemeni civil wars as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran's nuclear issue. While, in the near future, the qualitative evolution of Russia's relations with the GCC is hardly possible, there are still options for their deepening within the current level of interaction between Moscow and the Persian Gulf. Ahmed Alqedra (2022), discusses the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC, by addressing the basics of Russian policy during the era of President Vladimir Putin, in order to restore Russia's role and active position in the international environment.

This article also discusses the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC and then focuses on the most important Russian determinants towards the GCC, specifically the economic and military. The study reached a main conclusion, which is that the Russian policy towards the GCC comes in the context of the strategic goals towards the Middle East, which comes within the Russian vision of a multipolar international system through a network of alliances and relations with countries of the world and participation in them.

The innovation in this article is that other existing literature focused only on a specific issue, for example economic or military in a country, However, this article has tried to examine all the military and security aspects of Russia in the Persian Gulf after Moscow's attack on Ukraine, and has emphasized the role of Iran in this section. The research method in this article is qualitative analysis. The author tries to examine Russia's security strategy, the reasons and factors that shape it, especially focusing on the relationship between the geopolitical environment, political discourse and the thought of the Russian statehood. Then, on the basis of the latest official document issued by Russia President called "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation" in July 2021, provide an analysis of the reasons and factors associated with the development of Russia's national security strategy in the Persian Gulf.

1. Theoretical Framework

Researchers in security studies have long considered emphasis on the level of the region as one of the main levels of analysis in security issues. The regions, which after the end of the decolonization period and their greater independence from the European multipolar structure as one of the main subsystems have gained great importance in international relations, since the years after the end of the Cold War, their importance as one important levels of security analysis have been added to international relations, and as Acharya puts it, "a growing demand for regional security arrangements in the Third World is emerging as a feature of the post-Cold War security agenda" (Acharya, 1992: 2). With the publication of Buzan's book "People, States and Fear", the security agenda in security theories entered a new phase. According to Buzan, the events that took place in the international system at

the end of the Cold War have both raised new dimensions of security and spread the source of security from governments to communities and Trans-state and substate actors. He believes that macro and micro level analyzes cannot respond to changes in security dimensions and reference (Buzan, 1999).

In his book, *A New Framework for Security Analysis*, Buzan and Weaver offer two perspectives on security. The old military-government view of security and the new view that calls into question the military and government priorities. According to the Copenhagen School, the most obvious difference between the new security framework and the traditional approach to security investigations is the acceptance of a multi-part order instead of a one-part agenda. Contrary to traditional security studies, which always give priority to one (military) sector and one actor (government), and at the same time devalue any connection between other sectors, Buzan divides one-dimensional security into five military sectors. It has expanded politically, economically, socially and environmentally (Buzan and Weaver, 1998: 51).

Security complex is an analytical term; security is a political practice that we have distilled into a specific, more precise category based on the way the concept is used. The speech act approach says only that it is the actor who by securitizing an issue—and, the audience by- accepting the claim—makes it a security issue. At that level, the analyst cannot and should not replace the actor.

The securitization approach serves to underline the responsibility of talking security, the responsibility of actors as well as of analysts who choose to frame an issue as a security issue. They cannot hide behind the claim that anything in itself constitutes a security issue (Buzan, 1999: 34). In the framework of regional security complex theory, the major parts of the security and non-security processes are reflected in the clusters of regional complexes. On the other hand, security features are stable at the regional level. These traits are essentially self-sufficient, not because they are independent, but because they have a security scan that exists spontaneously, even without the influence of other players (Buzan and Waever, 2009: 58). Accordingly, the regional level is emphasized as the main level of analysis in regional security complex theory. Thus, Buzan defines a regional security complex as: "A set of units in which the major security and non-security processes, or both, are so

intertwined that security problems cannot be analyzed separately or to be solved” (Buzan and Waever, 2009: 55).

Security is a process that leads to putting some issues in the context of security, while not previously in this area; it is possible to provide security in all military and civilian areas and not in all dimensions of security. It works. According to Buzan, in addition to security actors and efficient actors, security requires two conditions. First, the legitimacy of existential threats to break the normal political process. In other words, the issues in question must be possible in order to be secure within the concept of threat, and that its acceptance by the audience must be based on consent, coercion, or a combination of consent and coercion. Because the Copenhagen School emphasizes various aspects of security, it makes the study of security issues more comprehensive. On the other hand, due to the large military expenditures, directing the issues to the civilian and insecure areas leads to savings (Sheikh Zadeh, 2012: 34).

For some reason, the Persian Gulf seems to be an area suitable for the application of the theoretical framework empirically. First, this is due to its complex and contradictory nature. The region has experienced several violent wars between government and government since the early twentieth century. the Persian Gulf is significant for Moscow’s Middle East diplomacy, and particularly over the past five years. This is not surprising: both the GCC member states (especially Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar) and Iran played an important role in ensuring the success of Moscow’s activities in the Middle East (including, but not limited to ones in Syria), as well as the achievement of broader foreign policy objectives that are relevant to the country’s economic development strategy and national security. the active promotion of the security concept simply allows Moscow to stay in trend. This not only includes the Vienna talks on the fate of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but also talks between Iranian and Saudi officials to restore bilateral relations and address the political situation in Lebanon and Yemen. It also includes Qatari reconciliation with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, as well as the resumption or improving of Saudi-Syrian relations. Russia’s Concept of Collective Security for the Persian

Gulf is an attempt to demonstrate that Moscow has also something to say about the regional situation, thus, hoping to play an important and influential role in the new architecture of regional security and international relations. It wants to ensure that concepts promoted by the West or regional powers will not undermine Moscow's interests.

2. Persian Gulf and Russia's Security Strategy

Who controls the Persian Gulf? For over three decades, this unanswered question has formed the basis for America's massive military buildup in the Middle East's most strategically important region, the vital waterway through which around 30 percent of all seaborne-traded oil passes. The unstated reason behind American involvement has been to prevent one single power from controlling the region's resources. Through a combination of physical presence, training and arms sales to Persian Gulf Arab allies, and, in the case of Iraq, military intervention, the United States has become deeply enmeshed in the region's security affairs (Wehrey, Sokolsky, 2015).

Ensuring security and building confidence in the Persian Gulf is a priority of Russia's foreign policy and pressing global agenda.

Given the continued volatility in the strategic Gulf region, the initiation and ultimately implementation of a regional security mechanism that engages all regional as well as relevant external actors is certainly something that demands closer attention. At this point, such a mechanism does not exist. Institutions such as the League of Arab States (LAS) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are venues where exchanges and discussions can take place but their membership is restricted and as such, they do not offer a platform where all regional actors can engage and interact with one another. The Organization for Islamic Cooperation headquartered in the Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, would on the other hand be too broad in order to focus on the core security elements at play in the Persian Gulf. Proposals such as the recent Middle East Strategic Alliance or "Arab NATO" also fall short given their exclusion and actual targeting of Iran (Farouk, 2019). Given the centrality of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry to much of the tensions in the broader Middle East, it would therefore make sense to explore alternative and new security mechanisms beginning in the Persian Gulf region [Ghattas

2020: 90-91]. It would further be more viable at the outset to begin this process from a sub-regional approach rather than focusing on the entire Middle East as a whole. The Gulf region has its own unique set of security challenges and a clear geographic focus (Koch, 2020).

Although the Persian Gulf occupies the third place in the Russian priority after Europe and Asia, the Persian Gulf is of strategic importance to Russia, which stems from a number of reasons, including: physical-geographical proximity between Russia and the Persian Gulf, where Iraq is about 600 km from the Chechen capital «Grozny». There is no ideological or physical wall that separates the Russian Muslims — who make up about seven of the population of Russia — with their brothers in the Persian Gulf, and any religious or political unrest in the region will certainly be affected by Russia. The Persian Gulf is rich with energy resources, not to mention that about 20% of the Jews in Israel are of Russian origin and speak Russian [Almaqabali 2018: 32].

Ensuring security and building confidence in the Persian Gulf is a priority of Russia's foreign policy and pressing global agenda. Building on proposals elaborated in the late 1990s and amended in 2004, 2007 and 2019, the updated Russian security concept for the Persian Gulf area is based on the following principles.

1. The commitment of all States to international law, the fundamental provisions of the UN Charter and UN Security Council resolutions. Our common goal is a prosperous Middle East sustaining interfaith and inter-ethnic peace and coexistence. The establishment of a security system in the Persian Gulf region is seen as an integral part of the overall effort to ensure stability in the Middle East as a whole.

2. Multilateralism as a way of ensuring the participation of all stakeholders in joint assessment of the situation and adoption and implementation of decisions. It is counterproductive to exclude any party from this process for whatever reasons.

3. The universality of the security system in the Persian Gulf. The relevant multilateral architecture is based on the principle of common and indivisible security, respect for the interests of both regional and extra-regional actors, including military, economic, energy, transport and environmental components.

4. A step-by-step movement towards an inclusive security system in the Persian Gulf, starting with addressing the most pressing and urgent problems facing the sub-region. This relates to ensuring freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, a commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and a joint struggle against today's acute challenges, above all international terrorism (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in 2015 on the eve of the start of the Russian military operation in Syria, stressed the need to create a single anti-terrorist coalition. At the time, the United States and its allies opposed the issue, and Russia was left alone. In recent years, the Russian Foreign Ministry has presented a document entitled "The Concept of Security in the Persian Gulf," which proposes to strengthen trust and transparency in the region and create a regional organization to ensure security in the Persian Gulf zone. Russia proposed a concept for strengthening security in the Persian Gulf, ending the military presence in non-regional countries and preventing tensions in order to ensure collective security in the region (pars today, 2020).

Overall, the 2021 Russian National Security Strategy seeks to adapt the country to a still interconnected world of fragmentation and sharpening divisions, in which the main battle lines are drawn not only—and not even mostly—between countries, but within them. Victories will be won and defeats suffered largely on domestic turf. Accordingly, it is the Home Front that presents the greatest challenges, and it is there that the main thrust of government policies must be directed (Trenin, 2021).

The Russian side proposed holding consultations on the basis of multilateral negotiations and creating an initiative group to prepare for an international summit on security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf zone (Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf Area). Measures proposed by Moscow include enhancing dialogue between political and military officials and experts in regional countries, coordinating military maneuvers, operations and flights, familiarizing both sides with military weapons, and refusing to deploy paramilitary groups in the area. The Russian authorities believe that the parties concerned can hold consultations on the conclusion of agreements on arms control and

the creation of specific non-military zones in the region, and in the future, perhaps, create an organization for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf zone. In addition to representatives of the Persian Gulf states, representatives from Russia, the USA, China, India, EU member states and other regional influencing countries can participate in the organization as observers.

According to Andrey Baklanov, deputy chairman of the Association of Russian Diplomats, who has repeatedly taken part in negotiations on the creation of a collective security system in the Middle East, one of the most difficult issues that will have to be addressed is how to develop a mechanism for monitoring the military-political situation and peacefully overcoming emerging contradictions. There was an idea to place such a communication and monitoring center in Qatar, but it was not implemented. Now, the diplomat believes, the bitter experience of recent years can push the countries of the region to closer cooperation (Belenkaya, 2019).

Some experts, especially in Western countries, believe that an important part of Russia's strategy towards the Persian Gulf stems from Moscow's ambitions in world politics. In recent years, Russia has been able to break out of its defensive position in the 1990s and gain strength in most important international crises, such as the crises in Syria, Ukraine and Venezuela. Although all these crises were created by the Americans, in the end, the Russians, in heavy competition with the United States, impeded the implementation of Washington's plans and goals. That is why the confrontation with the United States and increased competition and geopolitical conflicts play an important role in increasing Moscow's attention to the Persian Gulf.

3. Russia and the Persian Gulf states

The Persian Gulf region has long been a geopolitical attraction for Russia but the Cold War prevented Moscow from gaining access to this sub-region. Except for Iraq and to some extent Pahlavi's Iran, during Soviet times and even before, there were very limited interactions between Moscow and GCC littoral states, especially with the newly independent Arab states of Saudi Arabia, established in 1932, Kuwait in 1961, and Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Bahrain in 1971 (Jokar, 2020).

The Persian Gulf states are a strong strategic partner for energy and Weapons with Russia and a competitor at the same time, as the Persian Gulf states have a large strategic stock of oil and gas, and the Gulf market is an important market for the consumption of Russian high-tech products. Relations between Russia and the Persian Gulf states – with the exception of Iran – have their roots in the Not so long ago; in most cases, after the end of World War II. The Cold War period in particular shaped the USSR's role in the region, mainly in relation to Iran, a great ally of the United States and a dominant player in regional politics and security.

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR drastically reduced the relevance of the Persian Gulf region for the Russian interests, which in turn decreased Russia's relationship with the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council for some years. Russia, engaged in conflict with Chechen separatists in the mid-1990s, suspected many Middle Eastern countries of providing financial support and arms to the Chechens, further limiting Russia's diplomatic relations in the region to the bare minimum (Melkumyan, 2015).

Russia's relationship with the Persian Gulf region changed with the appointment of Vladimir Putin as President, when a clear shift in the federation's foreign policy was marked by the start intense contacts with each of the Persian Gulf countries. Russia, in Putin's vision, returned to play an active role throughout the Middle East by pursuing a stabilizing policy in contrast with that of the United States and Europe. Thus, defining its own priorities and policy projects, Moscow aimed at reclaiming a role in the region (Mezran, Varvelli 2019).

The US interventions in first Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003 did not change the direction of Russian policy in the region. what matters to Russia is to preserve its interests in the region by making every event in a country separate from the events in the region. To ensure that their interests remain with other countries such as the Persian Gulf states where Russia is interested in preserving its interests with the Persian Gulf states, although Russia's interests with these countries are of a short-term dimension, for the most part, Russia is not in depth in the Persian Gulf region, unlike the United States of America with long-term strategicInterests (Trenin, 2010).

Relations between Russia and the countries of the GCC, after the Russian military campaign in the North Caucasus, were characterized by a kind of controversy. Whereas, Russia had accused the GCC of financing Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus region. However, after Russia regained control over the situation in Chechnya, and after the economic recovery in the mid-2000s, relations between Russia and the GCC began to improve. Despite this, the relations took on the nature of common concerns, both with regard to terrorism, and even in the framework of economic cooperation in global energy markets (Frolovskiy, 2018: 83). Also, the Arab Spring revolutions posed challenge to relations between Russia and the GCC. The Kremlin considered that the Arab Spring revolutions that began in 2011 and the subsequent changes in some political regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen), and the Syrian crisis, undermine its long-standing alliances and partnerships in the region and threaten its geopolitical influence (Frolovskiy, 2018: 84).

During the last years, Russian relations with the GCC have witnessed a remarkable development. Those relations were based on a complex and intertwined set of factors such as: the increasing Russian presence in the Middle East, especially in Syria; the changing dynamics in U.S. relations with Russia and the GCC; developments and challenges facing energy markets globally; Ongoing tensions in the Middle East, along with ongoing shifts in the foreign policy of the GCC (Kozhanov, 2020: 6).

The events of recent years have shown that the Middle East occupies a central place in the directions of the new Russian foreign policy. It is widely believed that the Kremlin seeks to fill the void created by Washington's strategy of de-emphasizing regional issues and moving toward Southeast Asia to deter China, as well as an apparent cooling of relations between the GCC and Washington. Moscow took advantage of the situation in the; and it managed to become an effective international force in the region. As a result, and with its abandonment of ideological orientations, Russia began years ago to establish relations with the GCC (Alqedra, 2022: 53). There are two pillars adopted by the Russian strategy for expansion in the Middle East. The first is solid alliances: that is, building a kind of continuous alliances with a

number of regional actors. And the second, the compatibility of necessity: which is to put aside historical differences and achieve a high degree of rapprochement that but did not reach the level of alliance, just to consistent with the merits of the stage, in addition to the stability of the Middle East free of conflicts guarantees its Russia the stability of its southern regional borders (Alqedra, 2022: 54).

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, relations between Russia and the GCC have deteriorated sharply because of the differences between the two parties on the future of Syrian President «Bashar al-Assad», has supported Russia, «Assad» strongly claiming that his regime is a bulwark against Islamic extremism, while supported by the GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia to overthrow «Assad», because the demise will reduce the regional impact to Iran, in addition to war the Russian oil is Saudi Arabia because of the Russian position on Assad, which has led many analysts to say that Russia's relations with the GCC countries are in a historical turn. Nevertheless, Russia has sought to strengthen its economic relations with the rest of the GCC countries such as Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia it has failed to develop strategic security alliances with the rest of the GCC, prompting Saudi policy makers to consider Russia a marginal player in the Gulf, while before the Syrian crisis, Saudi Arabia considered Russia's policy in the Persian Gulf to be completely mercenary, as many of the decision makers Saudi and many Saudi policymakers now believe that they will be able to obtain Russia compliance with Riyadh's policy because of Riyadh's preferences for Russia, simply by preventing Iran to be business partner and purchase of Russian weapons (Ramani, 2016).

4. Moscow's win-win strategy in the security of the Persian Gulf

The Russian view of the Middle East, as a neighboring region on the southern border, has increased relations with it due to the escalating security and military developments, especially during the war on Iraq and the interventions in Afghanistan and Georgia. President Putin used the cards owned by Russia to revive its role in the Middle East, especially in various fields and the arms market (Zeidan, 2013: 205). This fact is confirmed by the Russian

orientalist Victor Bosvalak, who said: “The strengthening of Russia’s role in maintaining security and stability in the Persian Gulf region is evidence of the positive role that Russia intends to play in the region. It is true that the Cold War has ended, but the competition it still exists and the old anti- Western rhetoric fits the new Russian diplomacy” (Al-Rawi, 2008: 175).

In this context, after Putin came to power, Russia sought to strengthen its military presence in the Persian Gulf region and participate in security arrangements, as announced by Valbri Malinoy, stressing the importance of the Persian Gulf in Russia’s new military doctrine, and that Russia does not rule out the possibility of a military presence in the Persian Gulf region. The starting point of Russian interest in the GCC was after the events of September 11, 2001, and relations between the United States and the Muslim world soured due to accusations made by America to the GCC, including Saudi Arabia, regarding terrorism. Russia and the GCC had shared visions after the events of September 11, 2001. Both Russia and the GCC attach special importance to the issue of international terrorism (Yassin, 2016: 198-199).

Gulf security is no longer limited to the GCC, but Russia has also become interested in it. Russia views the GCC as a strategic necessity, as it is concerned with reducing U.S. influence in the region, especially since Iran is on its banks and is addressing the defense of Iran, and at the same time concerned about Iran’s nuclear program. So, Russia sees tightening sanctions on Iran directly harms its economic interests in Iran and around the world. Therefore, Russia has a role in the balance of power and regional security in the Persian Gulf region, and by virtue of its strong relations with Iran and at the same time its continuously evolving relations with the GCC can play a key role in supporting regional security, peace and stability in the region.

Russia seeks to thwart US efforts to build coalitions in the region. Moscow sees the US plan as a very dangerous that could both increase military presence in the region and enhance the likelihood of conflicts. So, the Kremlin is trying to prevent the US-led coalition from escalating tensions in the region.

The goal of the Russians is to provide a mechanism for countries in the region to engage in dialogue and coordinate their military

interactions; and to prevent further tension and conflict in the region. Russia's plan, of course, is that the organization should be formed with the presence of all the countries in the region and major governments such as the US, Russia, China and even the European Union. If Russia insists on US presence, it is because it does not want a country to think that Moscow's plan is against anyone. The Russians want to show that they are seeking a global coalition to prevent a growing crisis in the region. So, Russia's coalition plan aims to reduce tensions, but the US coalition plan may increase tension and conflict in the region (Shouri, 2019).

The GCC is one of the largest importers of Russian weapons; The GCC has become a sub-regional partner for international and regional politics, and its importance has increased with regard to the Syrian crisis in the Middle East. This could be another avenue for cooperation between Russia and the GCC; Russia can cooperate with the countries of the GCC to enhance their national security and the national security of the GCC and to combat extremism and any terrorist attacks (Al-Mukhaleh, 2019: 38-39).

In this context, Russia is the second largest exporter of major arms in the world. In 2009-2018, Russia was the second largest arms supplier to the MENA region. The country accounted for 18% of the total volume of arms imports by MENA states, following the U.S. (44%), the world's leading exporter of arms. In recent years, Russia has further expanded its arms transfers to MENA seeking to reestablish its influence in the region. To MENA countries, acquiring arms from Russia is advantageous. It allows them to diversify their sources of arms supply and thereby become less dependent on Western suppliers. Consequently, this has enabled Russia to compete with other established arms suppliers such as the U.S. and France (Kuimova, 2019: 1).

Thus, it can be said that the Russian military and security determinant towards the GCC comes in the context of the Russian desire to export military technology to the Persian Gulf market, within the context of the broader Russian vision of increasing its network of interests and relations in the geopolitical sphere of interest, allowing it to strengthen its position in the region. In addition, the export of arms to the GCC provides a wide scope for enhancing cooperation and common visions towards security arrangements in the Middle East, and combating terrorism.

5. Russia's Gulf security initiatives and Iran's security position

Since the mid-2010s, when Russia became an increasingly active player in the Middle East, its main proposal for a broader regional security initiative has been the Security Concept for the Persian Gulf (Stepanova, 2020: 16). Moscow's previous regional initiatives of the late 1990s, 2004 and 2007 were vague, boiled down to well-intentioned lip service, and hardly went beyond an abstract idea of a collective security architecture for the Persian Gulf, modelled upon the all-inclusive but weak Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

In 2019, Russia came up with a more down-to-earth proposal that promoted direct dialogue between the region's main antagonists as the first step to more inclusive multilateralism. Russia's initiative focused on the acute regional controversy involving Iran and the Persian Gulf states, grossly aggravated by the US and Israeli angles, as the line of tension that could escalate to a regional war and easily become further internationalized (Stepanova, 2020: 16).

After his visits to the GCC states and Iran in March–April 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov drew the international community's attention to the 'Concept of Collective Security in the Persian Gulf' – a set of Russian initiatives promoted by the minister during his meetings with Middle Eastern officials. The concept's core idea, which is to launch a multi-format dialogue between key regional players to discuss existing issues, is not something new. Since the late 1990s, and to varying extents over this period, the Kremlin has been promoting this concept at the international scale (usually recalling it during the periods of diplomatic crises, such as periodical exacerbations of tensions in Israeli-Palestinian relations, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the 2006 International Atomic Energy Agency report on Iran's nuclear non-compliance to the United Nations Security Council, and others) (Kozhanov, 2021).

The catalyst for Russia's new regional security concept was growing escalation of the crisis in the Gulf, mainly due to the progressively more bellicose approach to Iran taken by the US administration after it pulled out from the Iran nuclear deal – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – in May 2018 regardless of

Iran's abiding by the agreement. In the summer of 2019, in the context of the "strait for a strait" (Dehghanpisheh, 2019) escalation involving the capturing of an Iranian tanker in the Strait of Gibraltar and a British one in the Strait of Hormuz, Washington further emphasized "restoring deterrence", "protecting freedom of navigation" and "increas[ing...] force posture" (US State Department, 2019).

The central long-term task, according to this initiative, is to create an organization for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf zone, where, in addition to the Persian Gulf countries, the rights of observers or associated members would include Russia, China, the USA, the EU, India and other interested parties.

The Russian approach is based on the involvement of a wide range of participants in a dialogue, which, ultimately, could lead to the formation of an international forum to discuss regional threats and security architecture, which should strive to expand measures to strengthen the military between the military countries, as well as Iran and Iraq. At the same time, Iran and Iraq should be members of such a forum. A common goal would be such a safety environment in which each state would feel that its main interests of security and goals of national development are observed by all its neighbors. The long-term implementation of these goals helps to lead to the creation of the organization on safety and cooperation in the Persian Gulf zone (Khlopov, 2021: 46).

The only form of multilateralism admissible for Washington seems to be exclusive, confrontational blocs or coalitions, formed with the main purpose of opposing Iran, such as a bid to create a US security alliance with six Persian Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan ("the Middle East Strategic Alliance", commonly known as the "Arab NATO"), or an explicitly anti-Iranian International Maritime Security Initiative (a US-led group of close allies, such as the UK and Australia, and Persian Gulf powers created in September 2019 to patrol the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman).

Hassan Rouhani, Former President of Iran spoke at the UN General Assembly October 2019 with a regional peace project called the Hormuz Peace Initiative or Coalition of Hope, which aims to involve regional states in ensuring the security of the Persian Gulf. In August of the same year, Russia presented the

concept of collective security and the establishment of sustainable peace and stability in the Persian Gulf.

The objectives of the Hormuz Peace Initiative project are to strengthen solidarity, mutual understanding, expand peaceful relations, interaction between the countries of the region in order to ensure territorial integrity and political independence, as well as help in eradicating terrorism, extremism and sectarian tensions and ensuring energy security, freedom of navigation and free flow of oil. Iran has always stressed the need to form security mechanisms in the Persian Gulf with the participation of all regional players. In their plan, the Russians clearly stated that the countries of the region must ensure regional security and that all countries must participate in this process. In fact, the absence of any country in the region could damage the overall process of establishing security in the region. Russia's plan has been welcomed by countries that prefer peace and stability in the region to insecurity and tension (pars today, 2020).

Russia's collective security concept for the region, presented in mid-July 2019, should be seen and explained in such a context of increased Russian interest in the region, but it is equally important to understand how Tehran perceives Moscow's new policies. Iran and Russia share not only borders but common interests and concerns at the regional and international levels. Russia has gradually but deeply turned into a strategic partner for Iran on significant issues directly related to Iran's national interest, from the nuclear file to resisting US unilateral sanctions imposed on both Tehran and Moscow and, more importantly, on number of regional issues including Syria and Afghanistan. Of course, bilateral relations have not been without challenges, but the two capitals have managed their differences to minimize divergence (Khatibzadeh, 2020).

The Russian initiative is inclusive and tries to include all stakeholders, even those who are not at the core such as India, but it is still mainly focused on the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (Baklanov, 2019). Although supported by China, the initiative was not well received by most of Europe and the US (Bhaya, 2019). As the United States and the United Kingdom had proposed their own plans for the Hormuz area, which were not

embraced by other European countries, they tried to ignore the Russian proposal. EU members including France and Germany also failed to respond decisively. The littoral states by contrast either welcomed the proposal, as Iran and Oman did, or avoided rejecting it, as the Saudis and Emiratis did. In addition, it appears that, as the Russian initiative includes both national states as well as a few weak and divided regional organizations such as the GCC and the Arab League, the proposal does not reflect the new power relations and realities of such organizations (Khatibzadeh, 2019).

The plan proposed by Iran and Russia was practically not welcomed by all players, since most of the Arab states on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, which largely depend on the United States, did not accept a transparent position on this plan or silently passed it by. Russia's plan is very similar to the ideas put forward by the Islamic Republic of Iran to create and maintain security in the region, and it can largely implement the strategic interests and goals of the independent players in the region.

Russia is keen to preserve its interests in one way or another, on other hand we find that Russia is making concerted efforts to become a major supplier of arms to the countries of the region and the Persian Gulf states. Russia faces a number of challenges in achieving its objectives in the Persian Gulf region:

- 1) US-GCC Relations. Given the size of its economy and its political and military capabilities, the United States will remain the most prominent player in the Middle East. Its strategic relations will remain stronger than any other country in the region, especially the Persian Gulf states and Israel. The United States has maintained its strong relationship with the Persian Gulf states in addition to maintaining Israel's security. The events of the Arab Spring have not affected this great and strong position of the United States of America with the Persian Gulf states, a major challenge for every country seeking to strengthen its influence in this region are China and Russia (Keiswetter, 2012).
- 2) Russian-Israeli Relations. Although Russia has adopted the Israeli position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of many Russian factors and interests with Israel, Russia is not trying to lose its interests with the Arabs, especially with the Persian Gulf states. Russia appears to be the neutral mediator

between the Arabs and Israel, which is a major challenge to strengthen Russian relations with the Persian Gulf states, since the Russian position is exposed to the Arabs that Russia is leaning towards Israel (Trenin, 2010).

- 3) Russia's interest in the Syrian issue. Russia played the role of a strong ally of the Syrian regime led by President Bashar al-Assad against the popular revolution that sought to overthrow him. Russia has done everything to stabilize the Assad regime for many reasons. The Assad regime is the most efficient to prevent radical Islamist movements from growing, which, as we have seen, has led to the deterioration of Russia's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that sought to topple Bashar Assad's regime.

In addition to all these challenges, if Russia wants to identify and pursue a comprehensive long-term security strategy in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, Russia must have the economic and military potential to achieve this comprehensive security strategy. Russia lacks soft power potential compared to the West.

The substantive input of the Russian concept rests on inclusive multilateralism as the founding principle for a regional security mechanism. The concept suggests that inclusive multilateralism is more likely to result from a long process. At the earlier stages, the need to establish direct contacts between the main players – and keep those going no matter what – is underscored, as well as a special role for confidence-building measures including military-to-military hotlines. Initial dialogue could later lead to agreements on select issues of mutual interest (demilitarized areas, arms control and limitations, mutual security guarantees). In a sign of realism – and in a bow to Persian Gulf states that depend on the US military role for their security – the concept suggests to consider reducing foreign military presence in the Persian Gulf only when tangible progress towards more inclusive multilateralism in regional security matters is achieved. As with any concept that pretends to offer a strategic vision, the most ambitious goal is a long-term one: the ultimate endgame is the formation of a regional organization on security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf where the world powers (China, the EU, India, Russia and the United States) would only play the role of observers.

Ironically, while not part of the Middle East, Russia feels itself more comfortable and more “an equal among equals” in its engagement with regional MENA powers than in the exclusive, Western-centric, EU/NATO-dominated postmodern European order that claims political, economic, cultural and moral superiority, while also lacking self-reliance in security terms. Posing as a peacemaker in the Middle East is also of major importance for Russia’s overall relations with the Muslim world, as a macro-regional power that is not outside, but on the periphery of that world. Finally, the possibility to contribute constructively, as a responsible “honest broker”, to launching and sustaining inclusive regional security dialogues in the MENA is of particular value for Russia from the point of view of boosting its global profile.

Conclusion

Despite the resurgence of its role in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR – which for a decade allowed Russia to build a promising framework of political, economic, security and strategic relations in the Persian Gulf region – the outbreak of war in Syria changed the dynamics again, freezing much of the progress achieved in the previous decade.

Due to insecurity and tensions in the Persian Gulf, the United States and some European countries are trying to strengthen their military presence in the region by presenting various plans, could be a more reasonable proposal for the future of the Persian Gulf. For this reason, Russia's plan has been welcomed by countries that prefer peace and stability in the region to insecurity and tension.

At the same time, it should be noted that the realization of the Russian plan faces several challenges; For example, the countries of the region must first put aside the fundamental differences they have with each other. Of course, even if the Russian plan does not materialize, in the current situation it could disrupt the implementation of Western military alliances. From this perspective, the timing of Russia's plan for the Persian Gulf is very important. The plan came at a time when the United States was seeking a military alliance to protect the Persian Gulf and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and tensions between Iran and the West were rising more than ever in the region. Also, while some Western countries have claimed insecurity in the Strait of Hormuz and

blame Iran for this insecurity, Russia not only does not agree at all with this approach of the United States and some European countries such as Britain, but also causes tensions in the region sees the presence of extra-regional forces and the consequences of US regional policy. As a result, Russia's plan to establish a security mechanism in the Persian Gulf emphasizes both endogenous security in the region and is at odds with Western plans.

Moscow believes that the solution of the problems in the Persian Gulf should lead to the stabilization of the situation in the Middle East as a whole.

The concept does not forget about the traditional problem for the Middle East - the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. "In the future, in the context of achieving an Arab-Israeli settlement, the OBSMZ may enter the region-wide security system," the document Russia's collective security plan in the Persian Gulf says. This is a claim to an alternative to the plan for the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is being unofficially called the "deal of the century", being developed by the Trump administration.

It is clear that there are no special hopes that the Russian concept will be implemented now. Especially considering the state of Moscow's relations with the West. And yet, in the 12 years that have passed since the publication of the previous version of the concept, a lot has changed. The role of Russia in the region and the level of its interaction with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf have grown. The positioning of Moscow on international venues has changed. In addition, in Washington, too, more and more voices are heard about the need to move to multilateral formats on security issues in the Persian Gulf with the participation of a wide range of states. Russia's concept is broader, more process-oriented and more strategic than two other main lines of thought on regional "collective security". One of these suggested the Gulf Cooperation Council as a core of any "collective security" system. While unacceptable for Iran, this idea also assumes a fully consolidated approach on the part of the Persian Gulf states (which was put in question by the 2017 Saudi- Qatari rift). The other was Iran's initiative to strike a "non-aggression" and "non- interference in domestic affairs" pact among regional actors, known as "Coalition for HOPE" (Hormuz Peace Endeavor) and introduced by President

Hassan Rouhani at the United Nations in September 2019. It declared a trans-regional, trans-Gulf approach, but seemed unlikely to reverse the deep distrust between the main regional parties.

The extent to which Moscow is able to guarantee and implement what it suggests is unclear – as is the region’s need for Russia in doing so. Indeed, multilevel and multilateral diplomatic efforts in pursuit for peaceful settlement of regional conflicts seem already underway without (or at best with the minimal participation of) Moscow. The regional distrust towards the Kremlin’s intentions is also strong among regional players, as is their understanding of Russia’s weaknesses. As a result, in spite of the fact that the Concept of the Collective Security for the Persian Gulf is initiative presented by pro-Kremlin experts as a new perspective and Russian strategy, this is just a set of idea doomed for failure.

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