

A 'Soft' Balancing Ménage à Trois? China, Iran and Russia Strategic Triangle vis-à-vis US Hegemony

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Maria (Mary) Papageorgiou¹ , Mohammad Eslami² 
and Paulo Afonso B. Duarte^{3,4}

Abstract

The recent rapprochement among China, Iran and Russia reveals the emergence of a new, unexpected, regional strategic triangle with the potential to balance the United States' dominant position. By focusing on the evolution of this strategic triangle in the post-Cold War period, this article investigates the driving forces that bring the three states together, namely the US power and unilateralism as materialised in NATO's eastward expansion, the sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, the sanctions against Iran, the US trade war with China and the hostile US posture during the coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic. Drawing on soft balancing theory, this article provides an empirical assessment of China–Iran–Russia strategies in countering the US power. Thus, this article aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by investigating this triangular relationship and its balancing potential under the analytic construct of a strategic triangle. Finally, the analysis demonstrates that the three states have employed soft balancing mechanisms, primarily economic strengthening and entangling diplomacy in international institutions. At the same time, territorial denial was sought on various occasions due to the regional importance of this triangular relationship. In conclusion, the article also offers insights into potential hard-balancing behaviour in the long run.

Keywords

China, Russia, Iran, soft balancing, strategic triangle, cooperation

¹ Department of Political Science, University College London, London, England

² Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

³ Universidade Lusofona, Lisbon, Portugal

⁴ University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

Corresponding author:

Maria (Mary) Papageorgiou, Department of Political Science, University College London, London, England, 29/31 Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9QU, England.

E-mail: id7645@alunos.uminho.pt

Introduction

The post-Cold War period saw an increase in ambitious middle powers opposing the US unilateralism.¹ This opposition has been reflected in the formation of different types of alignment, such as partnerships, with the Sino-Russian strategic partnership at the forefront (Papageorgiou & Vieira, 2021). However, while there is broad academic literature on the Sino-Russian relationship and its potential to express a balancing behaviour (Allison, 2018; Korolev, 2019; Lukin, 2021), the addition of Iran to the calculations of an alignment front to challenge the US unipolarity is still underdeveloped. Drawing on such a void, this study seeks to provide added value by depicting and assessing the formation of a strategic triangle between China, Iran and Russia and, consequently, accounting for its implications for the international balance of power.

The newly emerged China, Iran and Russia axis has signalled uneasiness in the United States, which in its turn has characterised these three countries as adversaries and strategic competitors (Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2018; Zhu, 2020). Over the years, Beijing, Moscow and Tehran have initiated and enhanced their cooperation on various dimensions: economic, military and political. The relationship of the three states with the West, and particularly the United States, ranges from tense to conflictual, while all three, on many occasions, have expressed their shared worldviews for a multipolar world and their dissatisfaction with US unilateral actions.² This tendency has been particularly evident after the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the respective sanctions against Iran (Eslami & Vieira, 2020, 2022; Eslami, 2021).

The strengthening of Beijing, Moscow and Tehran ties also has geopolitical implications since it stretches from Northeast Asia to Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific Region covering the so-called Heartland (Bassin & Aksenov, 2006). Thus, the growing cooperation between China, Russia and Iran, alongside their shared viewpoints and dissatisfaction with the US's unilateral actions, has fuelled considerations of revisionism (Izadi & Khodaei, 2017; Puri, 2017; Schmitt, 2018) and a potential balancing behaviour.

Despite expectations of the realist theory on hard balancing in the form of arms builds and military alliances, such behaviour was not evinced in the post-Cold war period (Iqbal & Amin, 2016; Steff & Khoo, 2014). However, a new form of state behaviour, 'soft balancing', gained prominence during the period for its ability to frustrate the hegemon's policies without the costs of direct confrontation. Soft balancing utilises non-military tools such as international institutions, economic statecraft, or diplomatic arrangements to delay, interfere with, or oppose the interests of a hegemon state. As a result, it constitutes a 'viable strategy for second-ranked powers to solve the coordination problems they encounter in coping with an expansionist unipolar leader' (Pape, 2005, pp. 15–16). Given, however, that it represents a risky endeavour, the close coordination and reliability among those undertaking it require that the participating members share the same driving forces and express the collective power to do so.

Expressions of soft balancing have been observed in individual strategies of all three states. China's foreign policy towards the United States has made use of

‘soft balancing’, as seen in the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Chan, 2017; Zhou & Esteban, 2018). As for the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, it has been referred to both as a soft balancing act itself (Ferguson, 2012) or as a means to express such behaviour, for instance, through BRICS and joint vetoes in the United Nations Security Council (Chaziza, 2014; Hurrell, 2006). As for Iran, despite suggestions that anti-American regimes could express soft-balancing behaviour by partnering with Russia and China (Fergusson, 2012), there still is a lack of studies examining this potential. Nonetheless, there are also studies that have revealed a lack of soft balancing by Russia and China vis-à-vis the United States as examined during the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) crisis (Papageorgiou & Vieira, 2021), while the theory has been criticised as flawed, with no empirical justifications to differentiate it from typical diplomatic friction (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005; Lieber & Alexander, 2005).

This study intends to investigate whether China, Iran and Russia as a strategic triangle have employed soft balancing vis-à-vis United States. The consideration of a strategic triangle between the three states serves as an analytic construct, the existence of which is still unacknowledged in the literature. Bringing Iran into calculations, the present contribution argues that soft balancing against the United States has been reinforced by the formation of a strategic triangle between China–Iran–Russia in the post-Cold war period, especially since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018. Therefore, by drawing on soft balancing theory, the present article traces the systemic forces that have brought the three countries together and seek to ascertain whether ‘soft balancing’ initiatives have been undertaken so far to counter the US power.

The findings indicate that China, Iran and Russia, as a strategic triangle, have used several soft balancing mechanisms such as entangling diplomacy, territorial denial, economic strengthening and regional cooperation that excludes the United States, to counter the hegemon’s power and unilateral policies. However, the signals to resolve to balance, a mechanism that serves as a predecessor to hard balancing, is yet missing, with the closest indication presented during the war in Ukraine.

This article is structured as follows. It begins by introducing the theoretical framework, namely soft balancing theory. The following section presents the concept of the strategic triangle and traces the evolution of both bilateral relations and the triangular dynamic. The third section outlines the driving forces underpinning this strategic triangle, followed by the empirical analysis demonstrating the soft balancing mechanisms employed on different occasions. Finally, we explore the triangle’s implications for the US foreign policy, as well as the three countries’ short to medium-term balancing behaviour.

Soft Balancing as Theoretical Framework

The end of the Cold War resulted in an unprecedented moment in which the United States remained the sole superpower, and the international system transitioned towards unipolarity ‘a system with only one superpower is that no other

state is powerful enough to balance against it' (Pape, 2005, p. 11). According to realist theorists (Layne, 1993; Waltz, 2000), this shift in the system's polarity would catalyse second-tier powers to balance against the hegemon and stimulate a specific behaviour by balancing³ the preponderance of the US power. Although great power competition has increased in the post-Cold War period, with countries such as China and Russia regaining regional and global influence, there has been no evidence of hard balancing behaviour against the United States (Paul, 2005), whose military and economic power has remained unrivalled (Ikenberry, 2002; Nye, 2010).

Given that the realist school was unable to account for the lack of hard balancing in the post-Cold War period, other researchers, such as Ferguson (2012), suggested that 'new balancing logic' emerged as state strategies under unipolarity. This view was further aided by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which marked the beginning of a period of US unilateralism that was met with opposition from both traditional allies and adversaries, fuelling speculation that a new form of 'soft balancing' had emerged (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005). According to Paul (2004, p. 70), 'in the post-Cold War era, second-tier major power states have increasingly resorted to soft balancing strategies to counter the United States' growing military might and unilateral tendencies without harming their economic ties to it'. As a result, soft balancing has been associated with a US-centric focus and as a response to US unipolarity and unilateralism since its inception (Tziampiris, 2015).

Thus, soft balancing is frequently defined as a second-tier state strategy that employs indirect tactics to counterbalance the interests of the hegemonic power (Joffe, 2002; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Walt, 2002), and it is considered to hold 'much more promise than any other approach in the contemporary globalized world order' (Paul, 2018b, para. 4). It aims to delay and frustrate the hegemon's aggressive military policies (Pape, 2005) by increasing the costs of action (Chaziza, 2014) and undermining the threatening state's relative power (He & Feng, 2008). Moreover, Paul (2018a) also considers that soft balancing seeks to achieve specific goals against the hegemon: to limit its ability to profit from bad behaviour (such as economic sanctions); to increase the marginal cost of carrying out specific plans; to delegitimise its behaviour on the eyes of third states and to signal the possibility of hard balancing. As a result, a successful soft balancing strategy could result in significant shifts with implications for the US-dominant position, while 'its ability to impose its will on others would decline' (Walt, 2004, p. 17). Nonetheless, as Walt (2005, p. 126) points out, in order to initiate such behaviour, the relationship between the soft balancers is critical in order 'to obtain outcomes contrary to US preferences', which cannot be achieved unless they 'give each other some degree of mutual support'.

Soft balancing mechanisms include 'territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening and signalling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition' and can 'weaken the military power that the superior state can bring to bear in battle' (Pape, 2005, p. 36). As described by Pape (2005), entangling diplomacy refers to ad hoc diplomatic manoeuvres in international institutions to delay a superior state's policies or plans for war. Economic strengthening seeks to increase trade and economic growth for members of regional trading blocs

while directing trade away from non-members. Finally, for states to cooperate repeatedly, there must be signals of a certain level of mutual commitment to resist the superpower's future ambitions. Other authors, such as Ferguson (2012) and Paul (2018), also acknowledge the formation of bilateral strategic partnerships as soft balancing tactics. Soft balancing, nonetheless, also has a regional focus, as it utilises a region as a buffer zone 'to reduce or remove an outside power's military presence and external influence from a specific region' (Ferguson, 2012, p. 200).

Aside from 'soft assets', however, Paul suggested that soft balancing could also be based on 'limited arms build-up, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions' (Paul, 2004, p. 3). Hence, soft balancing also has a military component 'in the sense that states engaging in soft balancing need to convey the message that they can deploy armed forces in support of their strategic objectives' (McDougal, 2012, p. 4). Regular visits between defence delegations, port calls, joint exercises, strategic dialogues and joint production of defence systems could reflect this military component (Paul, 2019). Accordingly, soft balancing may evolve into hard balancing (Pape, 2005) 'if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening' (Paul, 2004, p. 3). He and Feng (2008) view that '[soft balancing] may [actually] be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies'. However, as Paul (2018a) later explained, such a transition would first lead to limited hard balancing, which would rely on limited arms build-up and semi-formal alliances, such as strategic partnerships, that allow for joint efforts and the sharing of strategic resources, while an existential threat to a state's survival would eventually see the expression of hard balancing.

Finally, specific driving forces or preconditions must also be met for soft balancing to occur. According to Paul (2005, p. 59), the hegemon's power and military behaviour are cause for concern. As a result, the hegemon gives 'other major powers reasons to fear its power' (Pape, 2005, p. 9). On the other hand, the hegemon is a major source of public goods in both economic and security areas that cannot be easily replaced. Finally, the hegemon's retaliation is difficult to justify because other states' balancing efforts are not overt and do not directly challenge its power position through military means.

Strategic Triangle: The Evolution of China–Iran–Russia's Relations

This article argues that in order to examine whether there is a soft balancing behaviour exhibited jointly by China, Iran and Russia, their relationship needs to be viewed as a 'strategic triangle', thus touching upon a rather neglected topic in International Relations literature (Paul & Underwood, 2019). In this study, the term is used as a useful analytic standpoint of this relationship's internal logic, with its formation unaffected by the three players' disparities in power capabilities (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

There have been several conceptual considerations on what the term strategic triangle entails (Dittmer, 2012; Hsiung, 2004; Shambaugh, 2005). The 'strategic triangle may be understood as a sort of transactional game among three players'

(Dittmer, 1981, p. 485). However, the formation of such a triangle takes place under certain circumstances in which all the involved sides should realise the prominence of the triangle, and each player has to be ratified and recognised by the others in an equal term, and the relationship between any two will be affected by each player's relationship to the third. Thus, 'complementary interests may vouchsafe continued cooperation' (Dittmer, 2012, p. 663).

Dittmer (1981, 2012) has introduced a variation in strategic triangles as a function of the rules of the game and exchanges of the players: the 'menage a trois', consisting of symmetrical amities among all three players; the 'romantic triangle', consisting of amity between one 'pivot' player and two 'wing' players, but the enmity between each of the latter; and the 'stable marriage', consisting of amity⁴ between two of the players and enmity⁵ between each and the third' (1981, p. 489). A menage a trois represents the most desirable pattern providing incentives for all three to continue their cooperation at a minimal cost; however, it is also 'a relatively unstable and transient configuration' (Dittmer, 2012, p. 665).

Accordingly, a 'strategic triangle' forms under certain conditions, such as when three participants are sovereign, rational actors who pursue foreign policies based on national interests while taking into account the interests of the other members (Dittmer, 2012). In the case of the China–Iran–Russia triangle, all three states are either great powers (China and Russia) or regional powers (Iran)⁶ with distinct foreign policies and are deemed politically significant actors both at the regional and international levels.

Regarding the bilateral relationships between the three states, they have been developing at different pace in the post-Cold War period. The Sino-Russian rapprochement of the early 1990s has received widespread scholarly attention (Papageorgiou & Vieira, 2022), particularly after important landmarks in their bilateral relations, such as the 'Strategic Partnership of Equality, Mutual Confidence and Mutual Coordination in the 21st Century' signed between China and Russia in 1996 (MFA PRC, 1996), and the 'Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation', signed in 2001 (MFA PRC, 2001). Since then, the two states have strengthened their economic, military and political affairs. China has developed an extensive network of strategic partnerships since the mid-1990s, with Russia being considered one of the most important (Papageorgiou & Cardoso, 2021).

Both states oppose US unilateralism, NATO's expansionism and the deployment of missile systems in Europe and the Pacific (Muraviev, 2014). Their growing and expanding cooperation has raised uneasiness in the Western world, mainly in the United States, on the potential of a hard-balancing behaviour expressed by the two states (Korolev, 2016; Turner, 2009). Still, despite the claims of the two states converging views on international issues, both have displayed hesitation in supporting one another at the regional level. For instance, China never openly supported Russia but also never criticised or took an anti-Russia stance on the Georgia and Ukraine crisis. Similarly, Russia has never openly supported China in the South China Sea disputes (Korolev & Portyakov, 2018). Thus, there is no consensus among scholars as to whether the strategic cooperation between China and Russia can be seen as an alliance in the making, a 'pseudo-alliance' or an 'axis of convenience', given their distinct priorities (Baev, 2019; Korolev, 2019; Lo, 2009). Nonetheless, the

relationship between the two states is mutually beneficial, with the aim of encouraging joint political, military and economic interests (Perovic & Zogg, 2019) and is thus characterised as a positively valued relationship.

The relationship between China and Iran dates back centuries. There is no history of major conflict between them (Garver, 2006). Beijing and Tehran started their diplomatic relations in 1971. Since then, their relationship has significantly deepened despite the changes brought by the Islamic revolution (Liu & Wu, 2010). Economic and energy relations have been the cornerstone of the two states' cooperation over the years, with China becoming Iran's leading trade partner since 2006 (Garver, 2013). In addition, Iran is one of the main beneficiaries of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has also assisted Iran with the transfer of knowledge and technology for its missile development and nuclear program (Currier & Dorraj, 2010; Eslami et al., 2023). The growing relationship between the two states gave China a role to play in the Middle East and obvious economic benefits. The year 2016 was an important milestone, as 'President Xi Jinping's visit to Tehran in January 2016 laid the foundations for the Iran–China comprehensive strategic partnership agreement' (Chaziza, 2020, p. 3). This 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement was signed in 2021 and covered a wide range of economic activities, including oil and mining, banking, and promoting Iranian industrial activity, as well as transportation and agricultural collaborations (AlJazeera, 2021; Eslami & Kemie, 2023, p. 579; The Diplomat, 2021).

In turn, Russia's relationship with Iran dates back to the Tsarist period (1721–1917), with a series of territorial annexations that generated frictions over time, fluctuating from hostility to warmer ties depending upon regimes and periods (Paulraj, 2016). The two states developed their cooperation since the end of the Persian Gulf War of 1991 (Tarock, 1997), which came to grow in the late 1990s with the Kremlin assisting Iran with infrastructure and arms sales (including missile technologies; Wehling, 1999). Russia became virtually the sole supplier of Iran's nuclear sector, taking the leading role in constructing the Bushehr nuclear reactor (Katz, 2013). The two states have also cooperated closely during the Syrian war. Albeit Russia and Iran are considered 'energy competitors' (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2021, p. 3), the two states have explored opportunities for cooperation by signing a five-year strategic cooperation agreement and establishing an energy sector working group (Sputnik News, 2016) while Russian companies, Lukoil⁷ and Rosatom have expressed their interest in developing projects in Iran. Furthermore, the two countries signed a historic US\$20 billion (Trotman, 2014) energy deal in 2014, allowing Iran to offset its oil with Russian military production regardless of US objections (Freniok, 2020; Shokri, 2019). Russia and Iran have also extended their relationship by signing an agreement on cyber security cooperation (MFA Iran, 2021), while expanding their cooperation, as reflected by the 'Treaty on the basis for mutual relations and the principles of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation', which was signed on 12 March 2001 (UN Treaties).⁸ The cooperation of the two states in the last twenty years shows that both countries have found common grounds for closer economic, political and military cooperation (Eslami, 2022).

Overall, their bilateral relations can be described as flexible and win–win, with all three parties agreeing on some issues and the triangle’s dynamic based largely on a positive-sum game that serves mutually shared interests. Nonetheless, the actors in this triangle have their own goals and ambitions and occasionally divergent interests, particularly in Central Asia (Asiryian & Yiming He, 2020; Duarte, 2013; Wishnick, 2009). Overall, the China–Iran–Russia strategic triangle consists of symmetrical amities among all three states (despite the closest convergence of the Sino-Russian relationship), preserving the balance and providing incentives to all three to continue their cooperation at a minimal cost. Still, any such formation is affected by the insecurity that characterises diplomatic relations and a suspicion that appears endemic to the anarchic character of the international system (Dittmer, 1981).

Over the last decade or so, the three countries have developed closer trilateral ties, which have been facilitated by the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. In the aftermath, Iran abandoned its desire to normalise relations with the West and adopted a ‘look to the East’ policy, seeking to strengthen its cooperation with Moscow and Beijing, as well as other Asian countries (Sahakyan, 2021). Furthermore, the three states share the same values regarding non-interference in domestic affairs, as well as an aversion to political participation via modern technology, specifically social media, which has been the target of various forms of censorship and control (da Silva Nogueira & Papageorgiou, 2020). At the technological level, the three states have also engaged in closer cooperation on cybersecurity and artificial intelligence (Rubin, 2019). Besides, their coordination of offensive cyberspace campaigns during COVID-19, particularly of disinformation narratives regarding the origin of the virus, dubbed an ‘Axis of Disinformation’ (Whiskeyman & Berger, 2021), was regarded as a threat to the United States (NCSC, 2018).

Thus, the present contribution argues that the strategic triangle between China, Iran and Russia is a ‘ménage à trois’ that maintains balance and provides incentives for continuous collaboration at a low cost (Dittmer, 1981) due to complementary interests that vouchsafe their cooperation as indicated by triangular logic (Dittmer, 2012). Moreover, the description of China–Iran–Russia naval cooperation as ‘the new triangle of power in the sea’⁹ echoes this categorisation in the three countries’ political and military rhetoric. Thus, the strategic triangle serves as a check-and-balance mechanism against the US power, also providing ‘new opportunities for states when balancing’ (Paul & Underwood, 2019, p. 363).

Driving Forces Behind China–Iran–Russia Balancing Behaviour

Understanding how soft balancing occurs requires examining the driving forces of such behaviour. In the case of China, Iran and Russia, all have expressed strong dissatisfaction with the US hegemony and unilateral actions and have sought to challenge the unipolar order by supporting a multipolar system (Ahmad, 2021). This has resulted in a close alignment forged by shared interests in confronting the influence of the United States in regions of geopolitical importance to them like

Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East (Koolae et al., 2020), in addition to countering US unilateralism and interference in their domestic politics (Ahrari, 2001).

US Unilateralism and Relations with Iran

Even before the 1979 Islamic revolution, relations between the United States and Iran were confrontational (Dorman & Farhang, 1987). Since then, Iran's foreign policy has been characterised as antagonistic to the geostrategic interests of the United States in the region (Alarqan, 2020). Following 9/11, it appeared that the relationship between the two countries went through various stages of 'mutual accusation, careful contact, and antagonism' (Zhilong, 2007, p. 5). George W. Bush's 2001 speech, in which he included Iran in the 'Axis of Evil', portrayed Iran as an aggressor and a threat to international peace and stability (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). To this end, the United States imposed a comprehensive sanctions regime against the Islamic Republic, with its main target being the Iranian oil and natural gas industries, considered to be of vital importance to the country's economy (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). The sanctions led Iran to call for a rejection of American interference in the domestic policies of other countries and condemned it as unilateral actions (Moshirzadeh & Nazifpour, 2020). This, in turn, contributed to intensifying mutual accusations marked by openly competitive rhetoric between the two countries and the consolidation of Iran's anti-US rhetoric (Tabatabai & Esfandiary, 2018).

Furthermore, Washington's unilateral invasion of Iraq and the expansion of its military dominance in the region made the US threats to Iran more tangible than ever by bringing the US forces near its borders (Ajili & Rouhi, 2019). Nonetheless, this military invasion gave Iran the opportunity to develop relationships with other neighbouring countries, including Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, and also paramilitary groups in the Middle East to oppose the US presence in the region (Steinberg, 2021).

During Ahmadinejad's final years in office (2011–2013) and Hassan Rouhani's first presidential term (2013–2016), Iran's relationship with the United States was centred on nuclear negotiations. However, the United States engaged in several hostile acts against Iran, including an oil embargo, freezing Iran's assets in international banks and imposing gold and currency sanctions, travel bans and trade and financial restrictions. These acts have been described as 'unfriendly unilateralism' aimed at pressuring Iran to accept US standards and a more intrusive oversight arrangement (Hakimi, 2014).

Thus, the negotiations and signing of the JCPOA (2015) were viewed by Iranian officials as a way to 'fight US unilateralism' by relying on multilateral capabilities (Maleki, 2018). However, Trump's subsequent withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the new unilaterally imposed sanctions posed an immediate threat to Iran's national interests (Simon, 2018).

The assassination of General Soleimani and Professor Fakhrizadeh in 2020 further exacerbated the tensions between the two states overturning the moderate narrative in Iran's foreign policy that had been promoted in the previous years (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Henceforth, radical ideas against US unilateralism were

consolidated and were reflected in the statement of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: 'the discourse of superpowers came to its end (Khamenei, 2020) and the corrupt presence of the US in this region should come to an end' (Irna News, 2021b).

As such, we can observe that the systemic pressure of US unilateral policies has had an important impact on Iran's foreign policy direction. In fact, Iranian officials have openly shown their dissatisfaction with US unilateralism, as expressed in a tweet from the country's Foreign Ministry for the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the UN: '#UNDAY is a reminder that the world has to reject unilateralism & coercion' (@IRIMFA_EN, 2020).¹⁰

US Unilateralism and Relations with Russia

Interestingly, the trajectory of United States–Russia relations followed a different path. The two states showcased warming trends in the early 1990s with hopes of Russia's integration into 'the North Atlantic political, economic and security community' (Lynch, 2002, p. 161).

However, by the mid-1990s, Russian elites had concluded that the US unilateral approach had been detrimental to both its security interests and international standing (Simes, 1999). The growing US unilateralism and the first wave of NATO's expansion to former Soviet republics and allies in Eastern Europe were met with frustration by the Russian elite and officials that considered that United States and NATO had crossed a red line (Goldgeier & McFaul, 2003; Kuchins, 2010). Despite initiatives such as the inclusion in the G7+1 and the NATO–Russia Council, Russian leaders continued to perceive the United States-led order as a threat to Russia's core interests, such as Russian geopolitical influence in its neighbourhood and potential threats near its borders.

Furthermore, the 1999 war in Yugoslavia, the US withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty, the 2003 war in Iraq, the United States-led overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya and the opposition to the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were perceived by Russia as unipolar actions intended to promote US unipolarity, and to create power vacuums and imbalances in the broader Middle East region (Allison, 2013; Stepanova, 2016). Particularly, the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo, supported by the United States and most EU countries, was perceived as strong evidence of a US drive for a unipolar world, thereby undermining the authority of the United Nations, international law and Russia's security interests and international status (Ambrosio & Vandrovec, 2013; Hughes, 2013). In addition, the 2004 further NATO eastward expansion and the deployment of Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems were perceived by Moscow as plans to encircle Russia and minimise its influence in the neighbouring countries, but also as a threat to Russia's geopolitical interests in Europe. Moscow's opposition to further NATO enlargement, according to Shleifer and Treisman (2011, p. 128), is 'hardly surprising: no state would welcome the extension of a historically hostile military alliance up to its borders'. Thus, the pressure of US power and unilateralism promotion caused fears of further NATO expansion that, according to several authors (Cohen, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2014; Walt, 2014),

contributed to Russia's reaction and the 2008 war with Georgia, the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

This worsening trend in United States–Russian relations hit a new low after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Wenzhao & Shengwei, 2020). The unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU on Russia were interpreted by the country's leadership as an assertion of dominance and punitive measures demonstrating that the United States would use all available tools (economic, military and information) to impose unipolarity and global hegemony (Suslov, 2016). Consequently, Russia's responses can be seen as a reaction to external pressures rolling back the growing influence of foreign powers on its doorstep (Karagiannis, 2013). During the Ukraine war, Russia repeatedly claimed that NATO expansion poses an existential threat to the country (Mearsheimer, 2022),¹¹ while both sides intensified their competition and levelled accusations.

Moreover, the US support for colour revolutions and the Arab Spring was perceived as interfering in other countries internal affairs, and thus the object of severe criticism from the Russian side, considering that non-interference in domestic affairs is an important principle of Russia's foreign policy (Krajev, 2007). Later incidents, such as the accusation of Russian interference in the 2016 and 2020 US elections (US Department of State, 2020; US Homeland Security, 2016), the poisoning of Russian critic Navalny (US Department of State, 2021), the devaluation of Sputnik V vaccine (with US officials urging Brazil to reject it; Washington Post, 2021), and President Biden remarks that 'Putin is a killer', have raised the stakes of the United States posing a threat to Russia's regime and status (Deutsche Welle, 2021), thus leading to an openly conflictual relationship between the two states (Sawka, 2017). The conflict in Ukraine strained relations even further, with Russia openly accusing NATO expansion and US influence for the escalation of the conflict. All at the same, the new NATO expansion with bids from Sweden and Finland exacerbated Russia's threat perceptions as well as its sense of isolation and encirclement (Ohlbaum, 2022).

Hence, objections to unipolarity and unilateral actions have been a permanent theme in Russian foreign policy in the post-Cold war period, particularly since 9/11, and have even been integrated into Russian foreign policy concepts and national strategic objectives (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the UK, 2016; Kuchins, 2010). For Russia, the US interventionism and unilateral decision-making behaviour produce a dangerous imbalance (Tsygankov, 2019) and act as a driving force for a balancing response.

US Unilateralism and Relations with China

Although Sino-American relations have experienced an oscillation between cooperation and conflict throughout history, tensions have risen in recent years, reaching a turning point (Duarte, 2017; Medeiros, 2019). The strategy implemented by President Bush just before the end of the Cold War is considered by Canrong (2001) as 'a turning point in US strategy from a defensive policy of containment to an offensive policy of beyond containment' (pp. 311–312). However, under Trump's

presidency, the competition became transparent with the official designation of China as a strategic competitor (Tellis, 2020). Moreover, the overlapping and competing interests between China and the United States in regions such as Central Asia and the Pacific have further amplified the geopolitical competition for primacy, resources and allies (Mazarr, 2020; Scobell, 2021). Other impactful episodes in the two states' relationship were the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis; NATO's bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, in the midst of the Kosovo crisis (Yong Deng & Moore, 2004). This particular incident shocked Chinese society and led thousands of Chinese to protest throughout the country (Shepperd, 2013). The Chinese also considered the US War on Terror (WoT) as an American unilateralist tendency under the pretext of strengthening its global hegemony in a unipolar world. Overall, the episodes listed below—that cover a vast period following the end of the Cold War until nowadays—enable us to recognise a certain legitimacy in Womack's (2016) work that describes the two states' rivalry as a 'marathon' that is 'played out in a stream of grander global changes' (p. 1464).

As a matter of fact, China–US 'strategic distrust' (Womack, 2016) is not the result of a specific or single event but rather a number of circumstances that are included in a historical spectrum. This distrust is reflected in official Chinese internal documents, which see post-Cold War American strategic interests as aimed at isolating, containing, diminishing and dividing China, as well as sabotaging the Chinese leadership (Rudd, 2015). Such an example has been the 'US pivot to Asia', as outlined in 2011 by then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Beijing characterised it as an attempt to counter China's growing influence worldwide (Chen, 2013). China's suspicion was even more exacerbated as then-President Barack Obama announced that the United States had reached a Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement with countries in the region.¹² These aspects indicated the 'departure from past US policy as gratuitous, expansionist, and threatening' (Ross, 2012, p. 79).

Trump's administration imposed new tariffs on Chinese goods as a response to the alleged Chinese theft of US intellectual property and technology, while the signing of the US National Defence Authorization Act of 2018 and the Taiwan Travel Act infuriated the Chinese government (Zhiye, 2010). Moreover, in 2019 the Trump administration's assertive campaign warned other countries not to use Huawei equipment or build 5G networks while labelling China a currency manipulator. On 17 November 2019, Trump signed a bill supporting Hong Kong protesters, which once again contributed to raising Beijing's anger. On 23 July 2020, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo¹³ declared that 'the era of engagement with the Chinese Communist Party was over by condemning its unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and aggressive moves in the East and South China Seas' (Council on Foreign Affairs, U.S.–China Relations).

Given that Taiwan and disputes in the South and East China Seas are, in practice, the most sensitive issues for China, they also raise the stakes for igniting a military war. In addition to hostilities in the economic field, COVID-19 has introduced aggressive and controversial diplomacy, largely nurtured by Trump's view that COVID-19 is a 'Chinese virus' (BBC, 2020). This new 'battle of narratives' has prompted a repositioning towards decoupling while threatening to erode the

mutually beneficial interdependence between the United States and China that has kept their rivalry within bounds (Bahi, 2021).

The Biden administration has also kept tense relations with China, including the Summit for Democracy held by President Biden in December 2021, which included Taiwan (US Department of State, 2021). Adding the renewal of the American alliance network (including the Quad¹⁴), security presence in the Indo-Pacific and arms sales to Taiwan have further exaggerated security concerns in China, which feels that the US pressure not only hinders its goals for a peaceful rise but also China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, and regional influence in Asia. In March 2022, a Biden delegation paid a visit to Taipei, pledging support for Taiwan 'in the face of Chinese threats'. At the same time, the Chinese government heavily criticised the United States for drawing an 'analogy' between Taiwan and Ukraine.¹⁵ Adding up, US power and aggressive capabilities and intentions have prompted the Chinese leadership to give it serious consideration (Mannan, 2020), revealing it as the driving force behind soft balancing alongside Russia and Iran.

The China–Iran–Russia Strategic Triangle's Soft Balancing Expressions

According to this article, the three states' strategic triangle has promoted joint initiatives that corroborate a soft balancing behaviour against US unipolarity. In light of this, we examine how they have used soft balancing mechanisms to delay, impede and raise the costs of the hegemonic power.

Territorial denial is one of the non-military mechanisms that enables soft balancing and seeks to 'reduce or remove the military presence and external influence of an outside power from a specific region' (Ferguson, 2012, p. 208). A manifestation of this mechanism can be found in the three states' stance during the Syrian war, which was to oppose intervention or regime change in Syria and, as a result, to support Bashar al-Assad in the face of American pressure (Khatib, 2021). However, such efforts, aside from reducing US influence in the Middle East, indicate that the three states want to 'obtain more influence together' (Walt, 2005, p. 113), as a strategic triangle, which is also evident in the Afghanistan crisis following the American withdrawal in August 2021, with the three states holding a number of joint meetings on the situation.¹⁶

Economic statecraft has also proven to be an effective means of frustrating and undermining US interests. For example, during the period when US sanctions were reinstated against Iran following Trump's administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, dubbed the 'maximum pressure' campaign, China and Russia concluded several agreements with Iran on energy, infrastructure, mining and agriculture, which was seen as a significant impediment to US sanctions (Butch, 2021). Not only has this mechanism limited the United States' ability to profit from this 'bad behaviour', but it has also demonstrated that the three states are 'ignoring or refusing US demands' (Walt, 2005, p. 113). Similarly, the three states have begun to abandon US dollars in their trade relationships in order to mitigate the

impact of sanctions and reduce their reliance on the US currency (McDowell, 2020). The use of national currencies has been reinforced, particularly since 2018, covering a significant portion of Iran's trade with China and Russia (Iranian Foreign Policy Strategic Council, 2021), indirectly undermining US supremacy and its efforts to isolate Iran.

Furthermore, the 'Interim Agreement for the Formation of a Free Trade Area' between the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Iran (EAEU Commission, 2018), which aims to reduce or cancel import customs duties on a broad list of goods, is another initiative that intends not only to strengthen Iran's inflected economy but also to advance a form of 'economic territorial denial' that seeks to deny the hegemon the capacity of using a region for economic profits. In addition to being linked to the Chinese BRI, the cooperation with Iran strengthens the regional trade bloc that prioritises connectivity and strives to restrain the US economic activities in the region. At the same time, it also promotes President Putin's vision of a 'Greater Eurasian Partnership', which aims to shape 'a world order free from the domination of a single country, no matter how strong it is, and taking into account the interests of all countries in harmony' (President of Russia, 2016). Thus, implying that opposing US power is the driving force behind such an initiative. Eventually, Iran's acceptance as a full member of the EAEU would solidify the strategic triangle's soft balancing behaviour.

Finally, another example of economic strengthening occurs in the technological realm, with the three states deepening cooperation under China's 5G communication network. Iran and Russia have attempted to remove US-made components from their networks and have turned to China, defying US accusations that Beijing poses security risks (Weber, 2020). This joint initiative provides financial incentives to Russia and Iran, both sanctioned, while also indicating 'disobedience' to the US promotion of protectionist tendencies.

A different mechanism of soft balancing is entangling diplomacy, seen as the ad hoc diplomatic manoeuvres used by second-tier states to undermine the plans and policies of the leading state by 'initiating, utilising, and dominating multilateral institutions' (He, 2008, p. 492). An example of this mechanism is voting convergence in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Given that soft balancing is considered 'the conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to US preferences' (Walt, 2005, p. 126), voting in the UN reveals the political proximity, shared worldviews and policy inclinations of states (Bailey et al., 2017). At the same time, it can also illustrate a soft balancing apparatus when it comes to 'votes on issues which directly affected important United States interests and on which the United States lobbied extensively' (US Department of State, 2016–2020).¹⁷ To this end, the UN General Assembly has been used by the United States as a platform to advance its interests, and as such, a low convergence indicates an effort to undermine US policies. In fact, China, Iran and Russia exhibit a low 'voting convergence' with the United States overall¹⁸ and even lower on the resolutions considered as important to the United States, with the three states having voted similarly in most such resolutions.¹⁹ Thus, this opposition to US-promoted resolutions seeks 'to deprive the powerful actor of the legitimacy it needs to maintain its authority, especially in the institutions it uses to

justify coercive military actions' (Paul, 2018a, p. 30) and eventually oppose unilateral actions. A more recent example of entangling diplomacy has been China and Iran's voting against Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council due to the war in Ukraine (UN News, 2022). China called it an 'act of politicisation' that would set a 'dangerous new precedent' (South China Morning Post, 2022). At the same time, Iran has also used the same rhetoric to oppose this United States-initiated resolution, claiming that it would undermine the UN's impartiality (Fars News, 2022). Furthermore, China and Russia have used entangling diplomacy in the UN, for example, by sending separate letters to the UN Secretary-General expressing their opposition to extending the arms embargo on Tehran, as suggested and lobbied by the United States (MFA PRC, 2020; TASS, 2020), without their revised resolution being accepted in the UN Security Council (MFA PRC, 2020; TASS, 2020).²⁰

When referring to entangling diplomacy in international institutions, it also includes 'the cooperation among major powers that excludes the United States' (Pape, 2005, p. 40). In this regard, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has been described as a representative example of a soft balancing mechanism, acting as a geopolitical counterweight to the United States in Central Asia (Ferguson, 2012; Song, 2013). In addition, it also demonstrates territorial denial by keeping the United States out of Central Asia (Rolland, 2019). Even though the member states of the organisation have refrained from referring to it as an alliance or a security entente, 'the tone of the founding documents of the organisation repeatedly censured US hegemony and favoured instead the establishment of a multipolar world order' (Hanova, 2009, p. 64), thus, clearly indicating an aversion to a unipolar order and US presence in Central Asia.

Iran was admitted to the organisation with observer status in 2005, but its full membership was halted due to UN sanctions.²¹ Nonetheless, both Russia and China supported Iran's upgrade to permanent status (President of Iran, 2016). Its subsequent acceptance as a permanent member in 2021 represents another important step in demonstrating a certain level of mutual support among the three states, as well as a countervailing front against American interests in the region. As Iran's President, Ebrahim Raisi, stated, Iran's acceptance as a full member of the SCO shows that 'the world has entered a new era. Hegemony and unilateralism are failing. The international balance is moving toward multilateralism and redistribution of power to the benefit of independent countries' (AlJazeera, 2021).

Additionally, the recent and unprecedented appointment of a Chinese representative to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is an example of entangling diplomacy that focuses on cooperation that excludes the United States (OIC, 2021).²² Given that Russia has held observer status since 2005, this new development, as an indicator of regional cooperation, can also advance other soft balancing mechanisms, such as territorial denial, with the three states promoting joint initiatives that seek to reduce the US influence in Islamic states in a broader geographical region.

Furthermore, 'limited arm build-up and ad hoc cooperative exercises' have been attributed as soft balancing mechanisms and predecessors to hard balancing (Paul, 2018). The three countries held their first joint naval exercises in the Persian Gulf in

December 2019 (Trilateral Exercise in the Persian Gulf, 2019), and in the Indian Ocean in December 2021 (The Moscow Times, 2019). The timing of this first exercise was not incidental, taking place one month after the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC)²³ had started operations in the Arabian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Oman; thus coming at a period when tensions between Tehran and Washington were at an all-time high (Katzman et al., 2020). Many international experts and academics, such as Gorenburg (2019), agree that the timing of this military cooperation, as well as its location signalled it as a political event. As a result, these ad hoc cooperative exercises indicate the use of another balancing mechanism that seeks to frustrate US initiatives and undermine its influence in the Persian Gulf and the wider region, while also attempting to achieve territorial denial. Nevertheless, more frequent exercises and regular visits between defence delegations could eventually indicate a transition to limited hard balancing.

At the same time, the lifting of the military embargo on Iran in November 2020 has created an opportunity for both China and Russia to provide Teheran with new military systems and arms transfers, as outlined in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with China and negotiations with Russia. Given that Russia has previously supplied Iran with arms transfers, including the S-300, this mechanism is considered a soft balancing expression. However, it could have wider ramifications, leading to limited hard balancing or hard balancing, as such steps would pose a direct challenge to US power and signal a willingness to deploy military forces together.

The final mechanism to be discussed is the 'signals to resolve to balance', which corresponds to 'helping to coordinate expectations of mutual balancing behaviour' (Pape, 2005, p. 37). This mechanism generally refers to openly declaring one's willingness to act collectively or forming a countervailing alliance. Furthermore, it denotes 'a commitment to resist the superpower's future ambitions' (Pape, 2005, p. 37), serving as a transitional point for the expression of hard balancing. As a byproduct, this mechanism already assumes a certain level of mutual support to guide joint initiatives (Walt, 2005). However, despite the expressions of mutual support and coordination in the three countries' statements and positions on various occasions, yet they have refrained from implying the formation of an alliance or the signing of a formal defence agreement. Their naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman, the '2022 Marine Security Belt' (Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 2022), in January 2022,²⁴ is an example of this reluctance. Although the exercise took place in a highly conflictual environment between the United States and Russia, given the Ukraine standoff and worsening relations between China and the United States due to fears of an invasion in Taiwan, the three countries avoided referring to it as an indication of an emerging alliance. Their respective statements framed it as efforts to 'jointly safeguard maritime security'²⁵ and 'support world peace, maritime security and create a maritime community with a common future'.²⁶ Additionally, they highlight that although the three states have not yet used the 'signals to resolve to balance' mechanism as an indication of an imminent alliance, they nonetheless have used ad hoc cooperative exercises to express a soft balancing behaviour.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of General Soleimani's assassination, both China and Russia emphasised that US actions have the potential to seriously aggravate

the situation and called for restraint while maintaining a rather neutral stance on the incident (President of Russia, 2020; The Moscow Times, 2020), highlighting yet another instance of reluctance to stand more firmly with Iran and engage in a hard balancing against the United States. In a similar manner, during their joint exercises, which were promoted by Iranian military officials as a ‘new triple alliance in the Middle East’ (ISNA, 2022), China and Russia have refrained from such characterisations, stating that their joint exercises constitute routine anti-piracy operations and highlighting their peacekeeping priorities (Haider, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there was strong mutual support and a similar stance in denouncing the US narrative of coronavirus being called the ‘Chinese’ or ‘Wuhan virus’, with Iran even refusing to recognise American vaccines and relying solely on domestic production, and the Russian and Chinese proclaiming their effectiveness (Aljazeera, 2021; Khamenei, 2020; Papageorgiou & Melo, 2022). Similarly, all three have called for sanctions against Iran to be lifted amid the pandemic and criticised the United States for refusing to do so (CIIC, 2020; @MFA China, 2020).

Mutual support was also evidenced during the negotiations that resulted in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding Iran’s nuclear program, with the US unilateral withdrawal in 2018 being heavily criticised. In its aftermath, China and Russia encouraged Iran to attend the talks and to continue multilateral negotiations while holding trilateral meetings expressing full agreement and coordination to revive the agreement.²⁷ During the Ukraine war, however, minor tensions arose between Russia and Iran over Russia demanding guarantees that the sanctions imposed on Moscow for the war would not impede trade, investment, or military–technology cooperation with Iran. However, Iran’s Foreign Minister stated that the Islamic Republic ‘we will not allow any foreign factor affect [realization] of the country’s national interests in the Vienna talks for the removal of sanctions’.²⁸ Following the relaxation of Russia’s demands and subsequent talks between the two sides, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian stated that ‘Russia will pose no obstacle to reaching an agreement and there will be no link between the developments in Ukraine and the Vienna negotiations’.²⁹ At the same time, he stressed that ‘Russia would continue to stand by Iran until the end of the Vienna process and throw its support behind a final deal, which can be inked if an agreement is reached with the US side on the remaining outstanding issues’.³⁰ Such incidents reveal nonetheless the two states’ mistrust and the prioritisation of individual national interests (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2019), whilst highlighting the driving force in their relationship: countering US power and influence.

On top of that, the war in Ukraine has revealed a shift in China’s diplomatic rhetoric, which had previously refrained from openly condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea due to the value it places on the sovereignty principle (Korolev & Portyakov, 2018). Indicative of this has also been the ‘Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development’, which seemed to pave the way for an ‘unlimited cooperation’ (MFA PRC, 2022a). During the Ukraine war, however, China’s official statements have referred to it as a counterreaction to US power and NATO expansion. As stated during a phone conversation between China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and EU officials:

China believes that the security of one country should not come at the expense of the security of other countries, still less should regional security be guaranteed by strengthening or even expanding military blocs [...]. Given NATO's five consecutive rounds of eastward expansion, Russia's legitimate security demands ought to be taken seriously and properly addressed. (MFA PRC, 2022b)

More explicitly, China has referred frequently to the United States during the war, blaming Washington for hypocrisy and unilateralism (MFA PRC, 2022c), and has emphasised the importance of its relationship with Russia indicating that:

No matter how the international landscape may change, China will continue to strengthen strategic coordination with Russia for win-win cooperation, jointly safeguard the common interests of the two countries and promote the building of a new type of international relations and a community with a shared future for mankind. (MFA PRC, 2022d)

In its turn, Iran has repeatedly emphasised that US unilateralism and NATO expansion pose a threat stating that 'unfortunately provocative moves by NATO spearheaded by the US have led to a situation which has pushed the Eurasian region on the cusp of a big crisis' (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 2022). In a similar tone, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi admitted in a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that 'the expansion of NATO is a serious threat to the stability and security of independent countries in different regions' (Raesi, 2022). More importantly, both China and Iran used the term 'special military operation' (Mehrnews, 2022), referring to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is a term designated and used by Russian officials instead of invasion or war. Moreover, instead of condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine, both countries called for diplomacy and dialogue and the non-interference of external actors, implying indirect support for Russia.

Yet, despite these expressions of support, the lack of consideration for closer defence cooperation shows that the three states have not expressed signals of resolve to balance the United States, which can be justified by Sino-Russian concerns about Iran's international behaviour (Conduit & Akbarzadeh, 2019), Russia's current economic and military status and divergent interests. According to soft balancing tenets, if 'security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening' (Paul, 2004, p. 3), then the possibility of hard balancing could also arise. Given the United States' increasingly competitive posture, as expressed with NATO's upcoming acceptance of Sweden and Finland, the promotion and strengthening of US alliances in the Indo-Pacific, statements of military assistance to Taiwan in the event of Chinese invasion and the continued isolation of Iran,³¹ poses a critical stress test for both consolidating the strategic triangle and for indicating signals to resolve to balance.

Overall, this analysis verifies that China, Russia and Iran have employed soft balancing mechanisms both to frustrate the ability of Washington to act with 'impunity' and to constrain its power, particularly since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. As the findings indicate, there is stronger evidence of employing economic statecraft, entangling diplomacy and territorial denial in areas of

geographical importance for the triangle. Given, however, that the triangular logic is dependent on bilateral dynamics and that ‘the bilateral relationship among any two of these actors is contingent on their relationship with the third’ (Dittmer, 2005, p. 1), the respective relationships between them would determine whether or not this soft balancing *ménage à trois* could remain intact, and its future prospects.

Conclusion

This article attempted to fill a gap in the existing literature on balancing, which has mainly focused on the Sino-Russian potential, by examining the two states’ relationship with Iran under the notion of a strategic triangle following its evolution and the driving forces behind it; US power and unilateralism.

This article endeavoured to provide a systematic analysis of soft balancing mechanisms by utilising a framework of international relations theory. By empirically applying soft balancing mechanisms to China, Russia and Iran’s joint initiatives, mainly since 2018, we have found that there is significant evidence that the three states have expressed a soft balancing behaviour by employing entangling diplomacy in international institutions, territorial denial and economic strengthening in an attempt to frustrate and undermine US unilateral decisions. In addition, ad hoc cooperative exercises and limited arms build-up add to these mechanisms, despite not to the extent that could indicate a tendency towards limited or hard balancing. The only mechanism that seems the three states have not resorted to, at least yet signals to resolve to balance. Nonetheless, indications of stronger alignment between the three states during the Ukraine war could potentially lead to the transition from soft to hard balancing.

When it comes to the United States, the growing ties between the three states have caused concern in Washington, which sees the Moscow–Beijing–Tehran triangle as an axis of adversaries and strategic competitors in a vast space spanning from Northeast Asia to Central Asia and to the Asia-Pacific, thus raising significant geopolitical and geostrategic implications for US interests. As a result, the United States will seek to reassert its influence and exert pressure on key issues affecting the three countries. Therefore, whether the three states will continue to engage in soft balancing largely depends on the United States’ power and unilateralism. However, aggressive American policies, particularly after the war in Ukraine, are likely to harden the alignment of the three states, potentially leading to limited or hard balancing in the long run. Nonetheless, in the short to medium term, the three states are more likely to continue employing soft balancing to counterbalance the United States without directly engaging with American military power.

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ORCID iDs

Maria (Mary) Papageorgiou  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7672-3342>

Mohammad Eslami  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0283-1839>

Notes

1. According to Maynes (1999, p. 515), US unilateralism is perceived as ‘a tendency in Washington to take decisions without much regard for the interests or views of its own allies or the rest of the world’.
2. See examples: Letter dated 15 May 1997 from the Permanent Representatives of China and the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General. See <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/234074>. Statement of China’s ambassador in Tehran on 20 June 2020. See [سفرایران در چین: تلاشهای تهران و پکن برای ایجاد جامعه جهانی چندقطبی](http://www.irna.ir) (irna.ir) President of Russia (2007). Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (see <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>). Embassy of the PRC in Zimbabwe. President Jiang Zemin Held Talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin (2 December 2002). See <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cezw//eng/xwtd/t149242.htm>.
3. Balancing can be expressed with internal means, such as military arm build-ups and with external means as the formation of alliances (Waltz, 2010). Both are classified as hard balancing.
4. A positively valued relationship.
5. A negatively valued relationship.
6. Based on Buzan’s coding of 1+ X framework (Buzan, 2004).
7. Lukoil to develop oilfields in Iran. See <https://irandaily.ir/News/166708.html?catid=3&title=Lukoil-to-develop-oilfields-in-Iran>
8. UN Treaties archive. See <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=080000280080a13>
9. Statement by the Iranian Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani (Irna News, 2021a).
10. Twitter account IRIMFA. (2020 October 24). 75th anniversary of the UN. https://twitter.com/irimfa_en/status/1320031803164495874
11. ACURA ViewPoint: Transcript of John Mearsheimer’s April 7th Presentation—American Committee for US–Russia Accord (usrussiaaccord.org).
12. During the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) held in November 2011, the leaders of the United States, Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam announced the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement Remarks by President Barack Obama in Meeting with Trans-Pacific Partnership | United States Trade Representative (ustr.gov).
13. US Department of state. Communist China and the Free World’s Future, JULY 23, 2020. <https://2017–2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>

14. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue consisting of USA, India, Japan, and Australia was initiated in 2007 and was revived in 2017, Australian Government Quad | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (dfat.gov.au).
15. Spokesperson发言人办公室 on Twitter: 'As Taiwan authorities collude with the #US, some even deliberately draw an analogy between Taiwan and #Ukraine despite their completely different nature. This is playing with fire. Those who play with fire are bound to get burned. <https://t.co/J4VB7zliyR>'/Twitter.
16. Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/595566/iran-russia-china-pakistan-discuss-afghanistan-developments>. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, see О четырехсторонней встрече России, Китая, Пакистана и Ирана по ситуации в Афганистане «на полях» саммитов ШОС и ОДКБ в Душанбе - Новости - Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации (mid.ru).
17. US State Department Voting Practices in the United Nations - United States Department of State.
18. All three states are included in the ten countries with the lowest convergence in the last 6 years.
19. An average of voting convergence or coincidence with resolutions that are considered important to the US, see China at 15, 28%, Iran 11, 46% and Russia 19, 2%.
20. US revises UN resolution to extend UN arms embargo on Iran - *ABC News*.
21. As considered in the SCO charter, see Dmitry Medvedev stated that 'countries experiencing legal issues cannot apply for SCO membership. This is particularly related to the states under UN sanctions'. See <https://insidearabia.com/irans-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-membership-remains-elusive/>
22. Relations between China and the organization (conference)—ministry of foreign affairs of the people's republic of China (fmprc.gov.cn).
23. The IMSC 'was formed in July 2019 in response to an increase in threats to the freedom of navigation and the free flow of trade for legitimate mariners in the international waters of the Middle East region'. Its members are: Albania, Bahrain, Estonia, Lithuania, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. See <https://www.imscsentinel.com/>
24. China, Iran, Russia carry out joint naval drills amid rising US headwinds | *South China Morning Post* (scmp.com).
25. Statement made by Beijing officials, *South China Morning Post* (21 January 2022). See <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3164278/china-iran-russia-carry-out-joint-naval-drills-amid-rising-us>
26. Statement made by Iran's Rear Admiral Mostafa Tajoldini, spokesman for the drills (21 January 2022). See <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/21/world/iran-china-russia-naval-drills-intl/index.html>
27. Iran, Russia, China: US must lift sanctions all at once as prerequisite to rejoining JCPOA (presstv.co.uk), 27 April 2022.
28. Iran will never allow any foreign factor affect sanctions removal talks with P4+1 in Vienna: FM Amir-Abdollahian (presstv.ir), Monday, 7 March 2022 and Iran FM: Sanctions should not affect Iran's cooperation with any country, including Russia (presstv.ir), Monday, 7 March 2022.
29. Iran urges US to drop 'excessive demands' to facilitate deal in Vienna (presstv.ir).
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31. Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack - *The New York Times* (nytimes.com), Finland and Sweden formally submit bids to join NATO military alliance | News | DW | 18 May 2022.

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