



The American War in Iran Is Not a Victory for Russia. Here's Why



by Nona Mikhelidze

- The US war in Iran may boost oil prices, but economic gains for Russia remain uncertain and limited due to export disruptions, discounts to buyers and broader structural weaknesses in its economy.
- Russia seeks a system where all formally follow international law, while a select few can break it with impunity. Rather than validating this vision, the Middle East crisis exposes Russia's growing irrelevance within it.
- Major powers now take strategic decisions without factoring in Moscow, marking a sharp break from the recent past, when Russia was still seen as a relevant regional player in the Middle East.

Much has already been written about the disastrous US war against Iran: the breach of international law, the erosion of already fragile norms and the risk of spiralling into uncontrollable chaos in the Middle East. But even through a cynical lens of international relations – one where power dynamics matter more than rules – a war fought without a clear strategy or defined end goal can only be judged a failure. The aim of this piece, however, is not to retread that ground, already well covered. Instead, it challenges a different narrative that has taken hold remarkably fast in international discourse: the claim that this war somehow amounts to a victory for Moscow.

The media has been flooded with headlines making precisely that case, built on an apparently solid premise: as the conflict



escalates, oil prices surge and Russia stands to benefit from a windfall in revenues, offering much-needed breathing room to an already strained economy.

But is that really the case? And even if Moscow is pocketing some extra cash, does that automatically translate into a strategic win for the Kremlin? To answer that, we need to start with a more fundamental question: what values, priorities and conditions would lead Vladimir Putin to see himself as winning?

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A glimpse into the Kremlin's great power logic

Even if we accept that the Russian system functions as a kleptocracy, where luxury and personal enrichment are a way of life among elites, the country's economic well-being has never been the Kremlin's guiding star. If it were, Moscow would not have launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, nor would it have pressed on with a multi-year war at the cost of over a million casualties and a shattered economy. And above all, Putin would not have turned down Trump's generous offer – a ceasefire that would have left roughly 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory under de facto Russian control, sanctions relief, no reparations for Kyiv and, one can reasonably assume, no international war crimes tribunal. Yet Russia declined. To the West's considerable surprise – except for the countries of Eastern Europe, which know all too well the most common mistake the West makes regarding Moscow: projecting its own rationality onto a system that operates by entirely different logic.

What has always mattered to the Kremlin – and still does – is recognition of Russia as a great

power, capable of projecting influence well beyond the post-Soviet space: in Latin America through alliances with countries like Venezuela and Cuba, in Africa through paramilitary proxies, in the Middle East through Iran, and in Asia through partners like North Korea. Against the backdrop of Russia's imperial retreat from nearly all of these geopolitical spaces, any economic benefits from higher oil prices amount to little more than a consolation prize.

Reaping fragile gains – if any

For one thing, those gains are far from guaranteed. Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian energy infrastructure have severely disrupted the country's export capacity. Key terminals such as Ust-Luga, along with the ports of Primorsk and Novorossiysk, have been damaged or partially taken offline. According to market-based estimates **analysed** by *Reuters*, up to 40 per cent of Russia's oil export capacity has been temporarily knocked out, one of the most significant disruptions in its modern history. These attacks not only reduce export volumes; they also complicate logistics. Redirecting oil to alternative ports requires time, infrastructure and additional rail capacity – resources Russia does not readily have. There is also a second constraint: even with elevated global prices, Russia is still **forced to sell** its oil at steep discounts – between 20 and 30 dollars per barrel – to major buyers such as China and India.

Meanwhile, the broader macroeconomic picture of Russia remains fragile. Growth is stagnating, the budget deficit is widening, and structural issues such as inflation and dependence on the military-industrial sector cannot be solved simply by higher revenues. As Russian economist Alexandra Prokopenko **recently put it**, the country's economy has reached what climbers call the “death zone” – the altitude above 8,000 meters where resources are consumed faster than they can be replenished.



Russia's growing irrelevance

If the economic benefits for Russia from the Middle Eastern conflict are uncertain and limited, the strategic picture is far clearer – and far more negative. For years, Vladimir Putin has promoted a worldview rooted in spheres of influence, balance-of-power politics and the dismantling of the Western liberal order. This does not mean that Russia favours a complete absence of international law. Rather, it seeks a system in which all formally adhere to it, but only a select few have the power to break it with impunity. In theory, the Middle East crisis should validate that vision. In practice, it exposes its limits and, more critically, Russia's growing irrelevance within it.

The US intervention in Iran has shown that Washington can act unilaterally without regard for Moscow's reaction. A telling example came even before the crisis: following the capture of Nicolás Maduro, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio remarked that Russia, tied down in Ukraine, was no longer a variable worth to consider.

Returning to Iran, the killing of Ali Khamenei effectively marks the fourth loss of a key geopolitical partner for Moscow in a relatively short period of time. After the erosion of ties with Armenia, the toppling down of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, the leadership of Iran has now also been struck. Russia has long viewed Tehran as both a crucial economic partner and a strategic ally – a central node in the North-South transport corridor and in efforts to bypass Western sanctions. Just last year, the two countries formalised this alignment with a sweeping agreement **described** as a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. Against that backdrop, the destabilisation of Iran is a punishing blow to Russia's global power projection.

And the outlook could worsen still. Trump has hinted that toppling the Cuban regime,

one of Russia's closest partners in the Western Hemisphere, might be next on the agenda.

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The psychological fallout

There is also a psychological dimension that should not be overlooked. The assassination of Khamenei likely evokes, for Putin, the memory of Muammar Gaddafi's death – an event widely believed to have had a profound impact on him. The Libyan leader had been someone Western heads of state shook hands with and cut deals alongside, only to be overthrown and killed in brutal fashion. Now the United States has directly eliminated the leader of a sovereign state with airstrikes. In a context where Ukrainian drones are daily overflying Russian territory and pounding energy infrastructure, news like this lands on Putin with enormous force.

Worse still and deeply frustrating for Moscow is that in the midst of so-called negotiations with Washington over Ukraine, Putin cannot even afford to openly protest the US attack on Iran. Hoping for a favourable outcome – ideally for Russia, one in which Trump pressures Kyiv into capitulation – the Kremlin has limited itself to **condemning** “armed aggression”, without even naming the perpetrator: Donald Trump.

Summing up, the Kremlin will undoubtedly seek to maximise any economic gains from rising energy prices, not least to sustain its war effort and ease domestic pressure. Yet from a strategic standpoint, the American debacle in Iran can hardly be described as a victory for Russia. Even if Iran ultimately “wins” or simply manages to hold its ground politically, as may be the case, this does not automatically translate into a Russian success.



The immediate outcome of the conflict is not, in itself, decisive. The more consequential issue lies elsewhere: in the steady hollowing out of Russia's role as a systemic actor in global decision-making.

What we are witnessing is a qualitative shift. Major powers are now taking strategic decisions without meaningfully factoring in Moscow – not even as a risk variable, despite its status as a nuclear power. This marks a sharp break from the recent past, when Russia was still widely seen as an actor to be consulted, a potential mediator as some European governments hoped, or at the very least a player whose position in regions like the Middle East had to be taken into account.

In this context, even if Russia derives some indirect political benefit from current dynamics,

such gains are passive, almost incidental. They do not stem from initiative or influence, but from the actions or miscalculations of others.

The real issue, then, is not who “wins” in the short term, nor the economic balance sheet (oil prices included) but the broader strategic picture: a Russia that no longer shapes events, but absorbs them, waiting in the hope that external developments might open up room for advantage.

Thus, if anything, this moment underscores a bitter historical irony: the cruel, power-driven world Putin dreamed of may indeed be taking shape. Just without him at the helm.

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-
- 26 | 18** Nona Mikhelidze, *The American War in Iran Is Not a Victory for Russia. Here's Why*
-
- 26 | 17** Akram Zaoui, *Netanyahu's Long Game to Reorder the Middle East*
-
- 26 | 16** Pietro Rinaldi, *Europe Wanted to Quit Russian Energy, Iran's War Just Complicated That*
-
- 26 | 15** Rafael Ramírez, *The Heavy Price of the Iran War on the Energy Markets – and Beyond*
-
- 26 | 14** Zeynab Malakouti, *The Khamenei Succession: Hereditary Power and Democracy in Iran*
-
- 26 | 13** Diego Caballero-Vélez, *"No to War" Again? Spanish Foreign Policy vis-à-vis the Iran War*
-
- 26 | 12** Clemens Chay, *Washington's and Tehran's Gambles Plunge the Middle East into Crisis*
-
- 26 | 11** Riccardo Alcaro, *The Long, Dark Shadow of the War on Iran*
-
- 26 | 10** Elena Potitò, *Europe's Migration Governance Dilemma*
-
- 26 | 09** Filippo Simonelli, *The Mattei Plan after the Addis Ababa Italy-Africa Summit*
-