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[Home](#) > [Russia- Iran-China- A New Strategic Trilateral in the Making:](#)

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## Russia- Iran-China- A New Strategic Trilateral in the Making:

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Russia-Iran-China in adversarial crosshairs of United States seem to be emerging as a new 'Strategic Trilateral' in the making astride waterways of the Gulf Of Oman and the North Arabian Sea, both, of immense strategic significance to the United States and its national security. The strategic rationale prompting this Trilateral arises chiefly from US Policy Establishment's persistent stubborn resistance to "reset" United States policy formulations on Russia.

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So cornered more particularly in December 2019, Russia, Iran & China have decided to hold Joint Naval Exercises in the waters of the Gulf of Oman and the North Arabian Sea segment of the Indian Ocean. Presently, the global strategic community could be dismissive that this is just one more political signalling by these three Nations in adversarial relationship with the United States. This argument basically arises from the fact that Russia and China also enjoy good relations with Saudi Arabia, strong ally of the United States, in an intense regional power struggle with Iran. This factor may not permit Russia and China to move beyond political signalling to the United States.

Bur contextually, Saudi Arabia too sensing that US power and US pressure on Saudi domestic policies may be on the decline has developed strong relationship with Russia including sizeable purchase of Russian arms and equipment.

However, it is my contention that what may be political signalling presently has an inherent potential to acquire more substantive contours as a 'Strategic Trilateral' which could generate grave concerns for United States continued military embedment in The Gulf Region, Indian Ocean and Afghanistan.

Strategic convergences of an erstwhile Superpower Russia now resurgent to reclaim that status, the present Superpower contender China and the predominant regional power of the Middle East all contribute to bring these three powerful nations together. Russia, Iran and China's territories occupy by themselves geostrategic locations and wield great geopolitical influence in their surrounding regions. So the overall strategic impact would be significant.

Russia under President Putin has re-embedded itself conspicuously in the Middle East as a Power rivalling United States presence and influence in the Region. China though not militarily embedded in the Middle East like Russia has made beginnings by stationing its naval flotilla under cover of protecting its merchant ships against Somali pirates' threats in Gulf of Aden. Iran is the naturally predominant geo strategic Power and military Power in this Region. Iran is militarily powerful in the Region with appreciable indigenous defence production setup facilitating in-country production of missiles and military equipment besides suspected nuclear weapons programme,

Middle East balance-of- power would get seriously impacted by the Russia-Iran-China Strategic Trilateral taking substantive shape as the United States as the undisputed predominant external Power in the Middle East has no matching Strategic Trilateral to offset or countervail the Russia- Iran-China Trilateral.

Other than Saudi Arabia and The Gulf monarchies the United States has no weighty alliance or strategic partnership to offset the Trilateral in The Gulf Region. Israel lies on the Western fringe of the Middle East and that geographical distance away from the Gulf does not add much strategic weight to the United States.

Turkey which was in a strong alliance relationship with the United States and NATO has now moved away from the American orbit. Turkey has also now a strong relationship with Russia and sometime back its Air Force had carried out Joint Air Force Exercises.

Iran was till the Seventies the favoured sheet-anchor of United States security architecture in the Middle East and United States built up Iran's military capacities to emerge as the predominant power in the Region and also in the North Arabian Sea. It is also worth recalling from my earlier writings on Iran that it was the United States that laid the foundation of Iran's nuclear capabilities under the Shah of Iran. With the toppling of the Shah Regime in 1979 by Khamenei's Islamic Revolution, the follow-up holding of US Teheran Embassy hostages for a year or so and the abortive US military operation to rescue the hostages, relations between United States and Iran nose-dived.

The past four decades United States has cornered Iran politically and economically with severe sanctions. US demonization of Iran and

playing up that Iran was a terrorist state has resulted in Iran becoming more defiant of the United States where countries like Russia and China have assisted Iran to circumvent the full impact of US economic sanctions. Despite sanctions, in December 2019 Iran stands out as a substantial Middle East and Gulf Region Power of substance and strategic weight.

Notably, continued US efforts to bring about regime change in Iran and position a pro-US government in Teheran have not been successful with even countries like Pakistan in the past offering their territory bordering Iran for US clandestine operations

Another factor operating in favour of Iran is that United States European Allies like Germany and France do not fully favour United States policy of complete diplomatic isolation of Iran and so also many Major Asian countries dependant on Iranian oil supplies.

Contextually therefore, the emergence of a Russia-Iran-China-Trilateral was a logical outcome of all three nations being markedly in US crosshairs in December 2019.

The moot question that emerges is that does the United States have any viable options to discourage the emergence of the Russia-Iran-China Trilateral or at the very least not let it emerge with integrated military contours? Or let it sputter out of steam like the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral, the subject of my analysis in the last few years, with Pakistan being a weak link?

The United States has two viable options to offset the emergence of the Russia-Iran-China Trilateral and either adoption could possibly lead to further strategic evolution of this Trilateral. Both options centre on United States exhibiting flexibility in its entrenched foreign policy mindsets of not “resetting its policy formulations on Russia and Iran.

The United States in a Nixonian Moment could reclaim Iran in its Strategic Fold by normalisation of US relations with Iran to its pre-1979 levels recognising that Iran despite all odds imposed by United States stands out in December 2019 as the naturally predominant Regional Power in the Gulf Region. Iran also today exercises considerable influence on the Shia Crescent of the Northern Tier of the Middle East.

With one diplomatic stroke the United States could radically change the entire security landscape of the Middle East in its favour. The only possible holdback in this option would be US considerations towards Israel and Saudi Arabia. Logically, Iran would have no pressures to look for countervailing options against the United States.

The second option for the United States would be to “reset” its Russia-policy from one of Cold War adversarial mindsets to one of mutual accommodation and shared management of the global security systems especially in critical strategic regions of the world like the Middle East.

A United States Russia-policy “Reset” was attempted by US President Trump in the initial stages of his Presidency but his initiative was

overtaken by domestic political policy tussles. United States reset of Russian policies would enable United States to focus all its energies on the more potent China Threat in Indo Pacific Region and more pointedly in the Western Pacific where China has the potential and the strategic aim to unravel US security architecture in the Pacific.

In terms of global power tussles, United States has a shared experience of manging global security system with Russia's predecessor the Soviet Union. Russia is a predictable entity for the United States policy establishment. China is a Revisionist Power firmly intent on emerging as the rival Superpower contender to the United States. China in December 2019 has both the military capacity and the intentions to challenge the United Sates. China therefore comparatively is a more uncertain and unpredictable strategic entity for the United States.

Concluding, either way, these are the only two viable options for the United States to offset emergence of countervailing alliances against the United States and the United States needs this pressingly as perceptions have already started emerging that United States as a Power is on the decline.

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