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Great-Power Restraint and Regional Fragmentation during US-Iran War 2026

Ameer Hamza

Visiting Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University,
Faisalabad

ameerhamza@gcuf.edu.pk

Muhammad Waqas

M. Phil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University,
Faisalabad

Waqasminhas076@gmail.com

Rabeea Rizvi

M. Phil. Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University,
Faisalabad

rabeearizvi@yahoo.com

Qamar Saqlain (Corresponding Author)

M. Phil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Government College University,
Faisalabad

qamarsaqlainsipra@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines the strategic implications of the war that erupted between the United States and Israel and Iran on February 28, 2026, following an attack that killed Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, with hostilities continuing since mid-July 2026. Moving beyond its initial framing as a great-power rivalry, the research reveals the conflict's broader dimensions: regional alliance dynamics, energy security, and the legality of great-power action. Using qualitative, open-source documentary research drawing on reports, diplomatic correspondence, and scholarly commentary from February to July 2026 the study applies hegemonic stability, power transition, and realist theories, focusing on alliance formation. Findings show that the war's systemic effects stem less from direct great-power military confrontation, as Russia and China avoided direct involvement, than from its erosion of international law, with many states, including coalition members, questioning the legitimacy of force under the UN Charter. The study concludes that despite continued US dominance, the war underscores a shift toward global multipolarity.

Keywords: 2026 Iran War, Geopolitics, Great-Power Politics, Multipolarity, Hegemonic Stability, Strait of Hormuz, International Law, Gulf Security, Alliance Politics.

1. Introduction

Nation-states are organized not only to fulfill material interests but also to form alliances, to negotiate, and to assess one another's strength, and thus wars between states are crucial tests of their stability. On February 28, 2026, the US and the third state, Israel conducted an attack on Iran, which included killing its Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in one of the first days of the attack. It has triggered a regional conflict, which has made the largest war between states since the Iraq war of 2003. Five months after its beginning, the war has not ended yet. The memorandum of understanding, signed in June has already failed several times, and presently, in mid July 2026 the US resumes attacking Iranian positions, blockades Iranian ports, and continues to fight despite ongoing diplomatic efforts to restore the status quo ante. Unlike the present one, the essay that was written to accompany this presentation does not attempt to be a comprehensive history of the war, or to adjudicate the myriad disputes about what happened in wartime – since the conflict is still going on. The purpose of this paper is more limited in scope, being confined to an analysis of what the war says about the international system: how the great powers and regional powers are reacting to it, how alliances have been formed and re-formed, how energy arteries are being used as leverage, and what the war says about law and force in the international system.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Ever since the war started, people have been trying to analyze it from different points of view. Most such analyses are focused on only one particular aspect of the larger conflict. Articles about the consequences of the war on the global energy market, pieces discussing various legal issues related to the war, and op-eds about the effects of the war on geopolitical balance in the region, are not integrated into a united narrative. Moreover, many sources that appear in the media on a daily basis are written in a rushed manner due to the constant need for information regarding such a significant event. This leads to some ideas being ignored, as war is a system where many different factors interact with each other, often in complex ways. It is difficult to capture the entire phenomenon at once, so most articles attempt to address only a small aspect of the larger issue. However, there are fewer pieces that try to provide an overarching perspective on the conflict, taking into account different factors and providing synthesis. Perhaps, due to these reasons, a certain disconnect can be observed between articles analyzing the war in detail and those discussing its larger consequences. In addition, many pieces fail to acknowledge the war's constantly evolving nature, which means that information from such articles may soon become outdated. This study attempts to synthesize different perspectives on the war and provide an integrated analysis. Additionally, it aims to comment on the war's current state and acknowledge the restrictions imposed by its volatile nature.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is multifaceted. First, it contributes to the discussion of the international-political theory of the relationships' character between the hegemon and the alliance, as well as the patterns of systemic transformation taking place (Gilpin, 1981; Organski, 1958). Unlike previous research, which used historical cases, this is a current and ongoing event. Second, the study integrates, in contrast to existing literature, separate articles and reports on contemporary great-power politics, Gulf and energy security, global politics of nuclear energy, and other topics to address the implications of the war in terms of systemics. Third, it provides the basis for the strategic assessment of the consequences of war for alliances with the major powers for the Gulf states, Europe, and the United States in particular, which can be useful for analysts and policymakers. Finally, fourth, the significance of the study also

lies in participating in the academic debate on whether contemporary Great Power Politics is characterized more by American hegemony or a transition to a multipolar international system, with Iran's 2026 war serving as the basis for analyzing this issue.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How did the United States, Russia, and China navigate the 2026 Iran war, and what does their positioning say about the efficacy and limitations of great-power alliances within the international system?
2. How has the war affected regional alliances within the Middle East, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council, and what does this imply for the future of US centered security in the region?
3. Does the war confirm the tendency to the growing multipolar balance of power in the modern world, or, on the contrary, does it not show the prevailing of the US military might despite all the diplomatic, fiscal and political costs?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The current research explores the effects of the 2026 Iran war on international politics through an interpretative synthesis of theories of hegemony, power transition, and alliance behavior. According to Gilpin's (1981) theoretical framework, a hegemon's increased use of power to enforce international norms and punish deviations is "a manifestation of its centrality to the system," and as such, "its very existence is a demonstration of hegemony's continuing strength." Thus, a hegemon's resort to overwhelming power to compel a recalcitrant international actor to conform to the status quo is interpreted as an assertion of its preeminence. On the other hand, Organski's (1958) power-transition theory conceptualizes the same hegemon's actions as "an action that hastens the advent of a new distribution of power," as the hegemon's failure to achieve complete victory undermines its capacity to extract concessions and remuneration from the weaker but more determined adversary.

These two frameworks intertwine and are read simultaneously to a more skeptical set of contemporaneous commentary, which complicates both by noting that the war actually has the character of a multi-polarity power distribution without that of multi-polarity action, as both Russia and China, two massive geopolitical players with substantial stakes, refused to throw their collective power behind the conflict, making the U.S. the only country willing to commit large-scale assets to the fight. In tandem, this skepticism highlights how the war is less about the conflict between America and other powers, which under-represents the role of the shifting hedging, balancing, and opportunism on the part of others, which have affected the distribution of power, alliances, dependencies, and acceptances of responsibility, which realism's alliance theory recognizes through its contextual fluidity of dependence, interest, and commitments. These concepts can explain why allies such as Spain, Germany, or the UK, were willing to provide only minimal support to the US-led intervention, which limited the war's scope, while also explaining how other great powers such as Russia and China were able to increase their own relative influence with little military risk on their parts, and how the war's costs and benefits, opportunities and risks, were distributed unevenly among different international actors.

2. Literature Review

This section discusses the relevant literature on the topic of great-power crisis management, responses by the U.S., Russia, and China to the war in 2026, the effects of the war on regional alliances in the Gulf and the region, and the impact of the war on energy security and international law.

2.1 Great-Power Behavior in Contemporary Interstate Crises

Classical theories of hegemonic order posit that the willingness of the hegemon to employ its military to enforce nonproliferation of rival hegemonies and counterterrorism measures is an indication of its centrality within the international system (Gilpin, 1981). Power-transition theory, conversely, holds that the costs – fiscal, jurisprudential, and reputational – borne by the hegemon in such circumstances create pressures for an accelerated transition to a new hegemonic order, in which states that have distanced themselves from the hegemon's expenditures derive relative gains (Organski, 1958). Analysis utilizing Gilpin's framework in regards to the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz in 2026 have interpreted the incident as a systemic stress test of the postwar liberal economic order, with the revisionist status of the US hegemony to be determined by the crisis outcome rather than any individual engagement. Commentary from outlets such as the Tehran Times, Countercurrents, along with a geopolitical analysis published on Substack, which drew upon the commentary of the Russian Valdai Club, interpreted the conflict as an event that predicated the advent of a multipolar world order. This analysis suggested that the war accelerated the shift towards friend-shoring and the de facto breakup of the international economic order. Commentary which took a more skeptical view of the prospect of multipolarity, noting that while the distribution of power was becoming multipolar, the concentration of military power still lied with the hegemon, cautioned that the end of US hegemony was far from certain.

2.2 Great-Power Responses to the 2026 Iran War

A significant amount of analysis from both contemporaneous and past research provides insight into the position of the US, Russia, and China towards the war. US domestic legal and political analyses (Just Security, 2026; DAWN, 2026) provide the perspective on the lack of congressional approval and of a Senate resolution that would have limited the scope of the attack. The pieces authored in Russia Matters (2026), Chatham House (2026), The Institute for Security and Technology (2026), and Center for European Policy Analysis (2026) center on the theme of Russia's calculated opportunism and its economic benefits from the war, which were reported on in Telegraph (2026) and Reuters (2026). In addition, Moscow's indirect support for Tehran through intelligence sharing, but not military aid, is discussed. The foreign policy analysts from Brookings (2026), the CSIS China Power Project (2026), East Asia Forum (2026), and Bruegel (2026) explore China's interest in the stability of the Gulf region due to its energy import needs via the Strait of Hormuz and its geopolitical position, shared with Russia, as permanent members of the UN Security Council vetoing relevant resolutions.

2.3 Regional Alliance Fragmentation in the Gulf and the Wider Middle East

A parallel literature focuses on the tectonic geopolitical fault lines which the war uncovered or exacerbated. The Soufan Center (2026), Brookings (2026), and Foreign Policy (2026) report on Saudi Arabia's calculated distancing itself from direct confrontation with Tehran, favoring diplomatic channels and de-escalation measures, while at the same time the UAE is forging far tighter military cooperation and alliance-type relationships with both Israel and the U.S., including the reported receipt of Israeli Iron Dome batteries by the UAE. This literature also explores the emergence of a Saudi-Qatar-Turkey-Pakistan-Egypt "containment coalition" (vs. the UAE) which seeks to balance both Iran and Israel, while the U.S. Congressional Research Service (EveryCRSReport, 2026) and the Arab Center Washington DC (2026) highlight Gulf State economic differences due to their varying reliance on alternate

maritime trade routes outside the Strait of Hormuz as a critical factor explaining divergent approaches.

2.4 Energy Security and the International Legal Order

A final set of articles provides an insight into the war's economic and legal aspects. Congressional Research Service (2026) and Oxford Institute for Energy Studies (2026) reports examine the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and its impact on Gulf economies as well as the European and Asian regions, while The Diplomat (2026) journal highlights China's historical concerns about the strait's security. In turn, the legal framework of the conflict is demonstrated by Just Security (2026), OHCHR (2026), UN Meetings Coverage (2026), Security Council Report (2026), and PassBlue (2026) articles, which reveal the opinion of international law scholars and the UN Security Council about the attack's illegality and the inefficiency of Iran's response.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design that focuses on interpretive analysis, rather than quantitative analysis that employs statistical evaluation. The study's objective is to analyze the current active conflict and not a concluded military activity, which allows considering the research question from the perspective of multiple sources. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, three groups of sources were analyzed: (a) intergovernmental information, including UN Security Council documents, resolutions, and statements from UN human rights agencies; (b) research reports published by various institutes with different geopolitical foci on their own platforms, including Brookings, Chatham House, Russia Matters (publishing translations of articles commenting on the situation from the Russian geopolitical perspective), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, the Soufan Group, East Asia Forum, and others; and (c) news publications, including Al Jazeera, Bloomberg, Reuters, CNN, the Associated Press, etc.

In a process that lasted from February to July 2026, information was extracted from various sources searching for statements from statesmen and scientists in office or those cited by repute. The documents found were thematically categorized according to the following themes: balancing and restraint in great-power rivalry; unraveling alliances; energy markets and chokepoints; great-power lawfare; and transatlantic tensions. Each theme was thematically analyzed using the theories and frameworks developed in Section 1.4. The analysis focuses on the trends that have taken place up to mid-2026, making it difficult to predict how the outcome will turn out. This has been so because the conflict was still ongoing at the time of writing this essay. Additionally, if future events take place after mid-2026, they would be too late to affect the final outcome. The theoretical framework relied on the theories of hegemonic stability (Gilpin, 1981), power transition (Organski, 1958), and alliance geopolitics, among others.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented below, organized according to the coding themes from Section 3, and interpreted through the theoretical outlook introduced in Section 1.4. The analysis reveals that the war's value lies primarily in its implications for the strategic behavior of other major and regional powers, which have demonstrated considerable hesitancy, maneuvering, and opportunistic posturing.

4.1 The United States: Coercive Capacity and Its Costs

In its initial statements, the Trump administration cited a number of reasons for America's attacks, including stopping Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, retaliation against Iran's domestic crackdown, regime change, and securing Iranian oil and gas assets. The campaign employed a massive display of America's military might, including B-52 bombing runs over Iran and the possible use of a submarine torpedo in attacks which at the minimum obeyed the law of armed conflict, if not the domestic law in Iran in their execution. The costs of the war to the taxpayers were nothing to sneeze at either, with the price tag reaching \$113,3 billion for the taxpayers by June 2026. Finally, there was a discussion of the Constitution, as the Trump administration acted unilaterally, without a declaration of war or even a resolution authorizing the President to do so from Congress. A Senate resolution meant to limit the President's war powers, passed by the Senate but vetoed by the President, revealed the limits of the opposition to the President's actions.

4.2 Russia: Calculated Distance and Quiet Gains

Russia's Position Concerning the War Coursework

Russia's position concerning the war is paradoxical, as it focuses on criticizing the enemy while providing only limited support to its Iranian ally. Russia's Foreign Ministry termed the initial attack as an act of unprovoked aggression, while President Vladimir Putin expressed sympathy for Khamenei's family after his death, despite condemning the US. Russian officials have explicitly stated that the twenty-year-old alliance with Iran is not built on a treaty of mutual defense. Moreover, Russia joined with China to veto a UN Security Council resolution, which censured Iran for its attack on Gulf States, and formulated a competing draft resolution that was also rejected. Russia is pragmatic about supporting Iran, as the profits from oil sales reached 760 million USD for the last day of fighting based on the estimates from the Kyiv School of Economics Institute. Furthermore, the country's Duma representatives have wished that a lasting peace in Ukraine and the diversion of America's military efforts from the Russian border could be achieved due to Washington's preoccupation with Iran. However, Russia wishes to sell arms to both warring nations, which highlights its opportunistic approach to the conflict. Nevertheless, Russia's position as a mediator in the Russia-Iran nuclear deal appears weakened as the deal's collapse has diminished its influence in international affairs. Additionally, Russia's position in the Middle East is further weakened by its inability to control the chaos that erupted after the fall of the Assad regime.

4.3 China: Energy Exposure and Strategic Ambiguity

China's reaction was primarily dictated by the fact that almost a third to a half of China's oil imports typically transit through the Persian Gulf, functioning as a critical energy bridge. Beijing's public position focused on advocating for de-escalation and free navigation. China was insulated from an immediate shortfall due to the drawdown of strategic petroleum reserves held by the state, which totaled four months' worth of oil imports at the time, but it nevertheless suffered consequences due to disrupted access to the waterway. Chinese crude oil imports from the Persian Gulf dropped by an estimated twenty-five percent year-on-year in March 2026. In addition, dozens of Chinese ships were stuck in the Persian Gulf despite Beijing's diplomatic efforts to secure safe passage for them. China, alongside Russia, vetoed the draft resolution in the Security Council that sought to protect commerce in the Gulf, which it later opposed in favor of a Bahraini resolution to ensure the safety of shipping in the region. It provided Iran with limited unofficial support regarding the conflict, similar to its policy of

non-intervention in Russia's war with Ukraine. With regard to the strategic implications, the incident exacerbated Chinese concerns, which have persisted since the Hu Jintao administration at the earliest, over the vulnerability of its energy imports due to the potential closure of the Malacca Strait.

4.4 Regional Fragmentation: The Gulf Cooperation Council

Perhaps, most importantly, the regional balance of power saw the Gulf Cooperation Council split into two major camps. With the UAE having suffered the largest number of Iranian attacks, it has turned to the closest cooperation with both the US and Israel, reportedly acquiring Israeli Iron Dome missiles and retaliating in kind against Iranian targets with the support of Israeli intelligence. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia took a more conciliatory posture, calling for de-escalation and organizing both the Pakistan-mediated Islamabad talks and a Saudi-Tehran dialogue in the spirit of the 1975 Helsinki declaration on the non-aggression pact. From this detente, a new geopolitical bloc emerged, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt, all balancing Iran and limiting aggressive Israeli actions on the region, with Pakistan's nuclear arsenal serving as an informal guarantee of Saudi security. As a result of the war, economic performance differentiated the Gulf states depending on their access to alternative transit routes, with those avoiding the Strait of Hormuz coming out as overall economic winners, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia saw diminished strategic value as the US security guarantors. The regional order now favors shifting towards diversified security relationships with China, Turkey, and Europe.

4.5 Israel's Regional Position: Tactical Success, Strategic Isolation

Israel's campaign against Iran and its regional proxies has proven to be one of its most comprehensive, if not tactical, military undertakings, with local media citing thousands of attacks on Iranian positions and targets with thousands of missiles. Meanwhile, although broadly popular at home, Israel was never as confident of this campaign's strategic success as its tactical successes have demonstrated, as a March 2026 opinion survey revealed a large chunk of the Israeli population to be in favor of continuing the attacks, while a June 2026 survey showed that most Israelis believed that Iran had won the war in a strategic sense and had weakened Israel's strategic position in the region. In other words, Israel secured tactical victories in its campaign against Iran and its allies, but these victories proved to be pyrrhic, as the region's diplomatic balance has shifted decisively against Israel, with only the UAE among the Gulf states set to pursue its alliance with Israel, and regional rivals using the war to advance their own interests against Israel.

4.6 Energy Chokepoints as Instruments of Geopolitical Leverage

While the Strait of Hormuz was the scene of the most critical economic confrontation during the war, it is the most critical strategic waterway in the world for international trade, with about a quarter of global seaborough crude oil and a fifth of liquefied natural gas transiting through it usually. In the period of conflict, the Strait of Hormuz was closed by Iranian forces, which led to a significant decrease in the amount of oil traded, with the number of ships passing through the waterway dropped from a daily average of 150 before the war to 13 during the peak of the crisis. The price of Brent crude oil reached a peak of \$126 per barrel in March, with the increase being the largest energy crisis in the last decades since the Arab oil embargo of 1973. The effect of the embargo was disproportionately large on the economies of the United States and Russia, increasing their incomes by \$50 billion and more than \$15 billion, respectively, due to increased export prices even though both countries restricted their production during the conflict. On the other hand, the value of the crisis for China was

different, serving as a useful demonstration of the potential danger to its economy, with the strategic value of chokepoints being highlighted yet again, with the ability to interfere with the distribution of more than a quarter of global energy supplies being a substantial leverage for political and economic pressure despite being a relatively minor player among Gulf states.

4.7 International Law and the Erosion of Charter Constraints

The war produced an unprecedented convergence of expert legal opinion, including over one hundred U.S. based experts, regarding the illegality of the initial American-Israeli attacks under the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force except by Security Council approval or in self-defense. The UN Secretary General and a special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism agreed with the experts that the attack on Iran's nuclear facilities was unauthorized and illegitimate under international law. The Security Council's response to the crisis is further evidence of the inconsistency with which states are enforcing the Charter's proscriptions. Resolution 2817, adopted March 11 by a vote of 10-2-2, after initially being vetoed by China and Russia, blamed Iran for authorizing attacks on its own territory but said nothing of attacks launching from American and Israeli territory, a pattern, observers note, also occurred in the Council's debates on Ukraine and Gaza.

4.8 Strain Within the Western Alliance System

The war revealed the extent to which the United States and its European allies differ. When President Trump requested assistance from his European counterparts in re-opening the Strait of Hormuz, they refused, with Spain banning the use of its air bases and calling the intervention illegitimate, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom warning against getting dragged into a larger war, and the Defense Minister of Germany declaring that it wasn't Germany's war to fight. Poland declined the request to participate, arguing that a conflict in the Middle East would drain resources away from Ukraine just as the West was beginning to regain ground against Russia, and that Russia would benefit from a prolonged conflict in the Middle East. The pattern of objections to Trump's Middle East adventure represents a significant (if still limited) shift in the international standing of the U.S. as it begins to lose its unrivaled status as the leader of the free world.

4.9 Synthesis: Contested Meanings for the Global Order

The evidence suggested that there are two mutually irreconcilable readings of this war as far as its systemic significance is concerned, which were similarly discussed at length in Section 1.4. The first reading stresses the uniqueness of American hegemony, under which only one state had the means and the will to undertake a prolonged bombing campaign against another sovereign state, decapitate its leadership, and not face immediate opposition from other great powers. The other, however, was becoming more widespread, particularly in the reviewed articles; and it claimed that, rather than American dominance, the tendency to a new multipolarity was more evident, as the war had undermined the US's ability to impose its diktat through Gulf fragmentation, European isolationism, the paralysis of the Security Council, and the very fact of a lesser power successfully choking off a global economic lifeline. Hence, it was reasonable to conclude the discussion with a proposition that while the war did make the systemic distribution of power more multipolar, it did not lead to a multipolarity of actions, as the ability to engage in a major open conflict still belonged to one state, however temporarily it might have been. The systemic consequences of this observation were difficult to predict in 2026, as it could take years for the US to recover from the war's toll.

5. Conclusion

This study attempted to identify the geopolitical trends that would emerge as a result of the 2026 Iran war. The results showed that Russia and China did not gain from backing down but all profited from the war in terms of economic and geopolitical influence and regional alliances. The Gulf monarchies found themselves divided and accelerated their efforts to reduce their reliance on the United States for security. The European allies distanced themselves from a potentially illegal war, and the Security Council's limited response diminished the force of the Charter doctrines. These results align with the theory, as they suggest that the global balance of power was not restored, and America's status as the sole superpower was not undermined. However, the shift was not simple, as the war by a single state still triggered significant geopolitical changes on a global scale.

Whether these trends represent an acceleration (or emergence) of "a multipolar world, as many commentators have argued", or "American coercive primacy, despite America's diplomatic and ideological costs", as mentioned in the study, will be evident only when the war finally ends, which, as of the time of writing, is still far from being the case. The study's value is limited to documenting and analyzing events in the contemporary moment, as it relies solely on documents and articles published to date; no individual interviews were held, and the statistical analysis of either alliance voting patterns or trade flows was undertaken. Future research could build upon this study in several ways. First, individual interviews with political and economic analysts could provide more insight into regional affairs. Second, a quantitative assessment of voting in the UN Security Council relevant to the war could be undertaken, comparing the trends identified in the 2026 Iran war and the Russia-Ukraine war and, potentially, the Gaza war, if any votes are taken there. Third, once the situation stabilizes, a post-crisis assessment study could be conducted to understand what happened more comprehensively. Fourth, the effect of the war on public opinion and the informational environment in the region and how individual governments and social media outlets shape and utilize it could be evaluated, as suggested by several of the cited articles. As the war continues to unfold, with no clear winner in sight, this study should be considered a snapshot of the current political situation, one that may soon grow stale.

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