

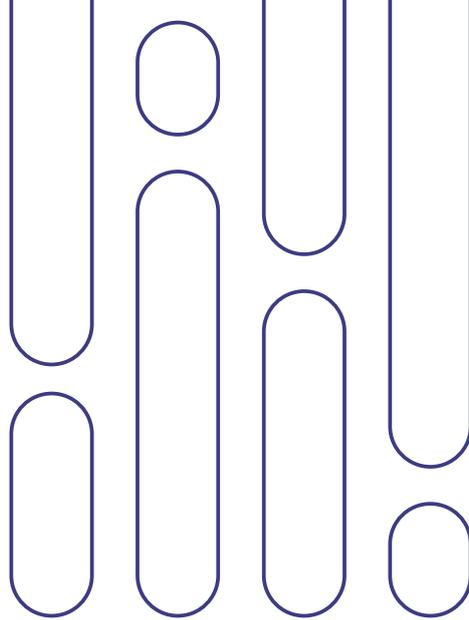
POSITION PAPER

The Russian Attack on Ukraine and Its Implications for the Gulf States and Iran

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Two days after the Russian recognition of Donetsk's and Luhansk's independence from Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin on the morning of February 24, 2022, decided to launch a military operation to protect the region of Donbas in southeastern Ukraine. Upon the decision, Russian forces waged an attack against multiple targets in Ukraine. Putin warned that any regional or international intervention on the side of Ukraine would bear disastrous consequences. This caused the dispute to escalate between the Russian and Ukrainian sides. Moscow's decision to launch its military operation drew international condemnation, given its dangerous consequences for international peace and security as well as its implications for international trade, oil supplies and energy prices. The aforesaid paints a gloomy picture of a looming global crisis that will accelerate the transition to a multipolar world order.

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian dispute is not limited to the geopolitical sphere of the two countries — spilling over into several other central and peripheral countries. Amid the mounting escalation, whether due to the Russian moves or the United States and NATO member countries providing Ukraine with weapons and armored vehicles, and the Europeans threatening economic sanctions on Moscow, there are a number of important questions that arise: are the aforementioned developments connected to the geopolitical shifts in the international arena? What are the factors that contributed to the Russia-Ukraine crisis escalating? And what are the positions of the influential

actors involved in this dispute? These questions are in addition to the question: what is the impact of this crisis on the Gulf states, Iran, and the entire region in case the tensions continue to escalate?

In light of the aforesaid, we can read the current landscape and paint a picture of the crisis — including its consequences for the Gulf and Iran — through discussing it through three dimensions. First: the Ukrainian crisis in light of international geopolitical shifts. Second: the factors leading to the crisis escalating and the influential actors involved. Third: the consequences of the crisis.

The Ukrainian Crisis in Light of International Geopolitical Shifts

The Russian-Ukrainian dispute broke out in light of the shifts the international arena has been witnessing over the past decade, primarily Russia's desire to restore its standing and its growing concerns about NATO expanding to its Eastern border. This expansion poses a threat to Russia's national security and spells the end of its geopolitical ambitions in its traditional spheres of influence. This Russian concern coincides with growing US concerns that its standing on the global arena is threatened and that the balance of power could be tipped against it.

In fact, US awareness of the danger threatening its standing in the international arena — from the rapidly rising China and Russia that seek to reposition themselves — pushed US President Joe Biden to pursue a policy of containment instead of engagement that has been embraced by Wash-

ington since the end of the Cold War. This policy marked the start of a new cold war between the United States and both Russia and China. This policy is essentially based on the premise that there is a new international reality and the United States is to enter confrontation with the major world powers — sooner or later. It also aims to restore the US strategic balance in Europe and Southeast Asia.

The conflict broke out while the United States was holding discussions, as part of its strategy, about reshaping transatlantic relations. It seems that there is a desire to outline a relationship according to a new vision that upholds the standing of both the United States and Europe in the international arena. This conflict has arisen in the context of growing European concerns about defense and security. These concerns have been heightened by Washington intending to pivot its resources toward the Far East and withdrawing from the Middle East and North Africa. This is in addition to the absence of coordination and consultation, which was apparent in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US-British tensions with France following the nuclear submarine deal with Australia and the European countries' concerns about the United States establishing new axes and alliances away from them. Thus, the crisis is a litmus test for US-European relations. It also has disclosed the limits of US commitment to Europe's defense and security.

The crisis not only represents a test for transatlantic relations, but it also came at a time when the Europeans are reconsidering their security strategy. It seems that NATO

is no longer a sufficient security umbrella that meets the aspirations of the Europeans and the Americans themselves. The United States has given signals about the need for stronger European defense capabilities which complement NATO. The United States has also stressed that Europe should increase its military spending and avoid too much reliance on its support. This does not mean that the United States is not committed to its essential duties toward Europe. The latter remains a key pillar in the current international balance as it is made up of powers satisfied with the current global order.

The Western camp is seeking to reposition itself to uphold the current global order. Meanwhile, the active major world powers are seeking to enhance their standing, primarily China, which is inching firmly toward changing the rules of the current global order. Russia shares the Chinese position toward the current balance of power and desires to change it though its economic position does not allow it to remain an influential power in the ongoing international balance since its GDP does not even fall within the top 10 worldwide. But Russia is a nuclear superpower and has major clout in the international arena. Its relations with China, the United States and the European Union (EU) influence the geopolitics of Europe, the scope of which extends into the Middle East and Africa. Russia is attempting to maintain its international standing. Its foreign policy in the face of the United States focuses on maintaining some sort of strategic balance and military intervention in key strategic spheres when necessary. Undoubtedly, Russia

takes advantage of its Soviet legacy in restoring part of its clout in the global arena. It is exercising an active policy to restore its clout in the former Soviet sphere — extending into the Middle East. Being a veto-wielding UN Security Council member, Moscow plays an effective role in protecting its strategic interests — let alone obstructing US policies regarding several issues.

Amid these developments, Russia has taken its dispute with Ukraine to a new level. This could potentially redraw the European map again and reverse Washington's efforts to stabilize its relations with Russia. The aforesaid has occurred against the backdrop of a boost in Russia's recent political and economic confidence. On the political front, the Russian regime has cracked down on its political opponents and restricted their room for maneuver. In addition, Russia has rebuilt its financial status since the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014. Moscow has \$620 billion in foreign exchange reserves. Furthermore, it has strengthened its clout with regard to Europe due to the spike in gas prices and the shortage in energy supplies. In addition, the intra-European disputes, transatlantic differences, and focus on China are considered as weaknesses that have allowed Russia to enhance its strategic presence in the European sphere — given the fact that Ukraine is a secondary concern for the United States, and maybe for the West in general. Thus, the crisis was preceded by heated Russian rhetoric about its red lines concerning Ukraine — let alone the fact that the flow of Western weapons into Ukraine is considered a security threat to Moscow.

Factors Leading to the Escalation of the Crisis and the Influential Actors Involved

The Factors Exacerbating the Crisis and Its Evolution into War

Tensions have mounted since early 2022 between the Western parties and Russia. Speculation increased, especially in the United States and the UK, that there will be a full-scale and overwhelming Russian attack on Ukrainian territories during the remaining days of February 2022 — which happened. The crisis is mainly due to Russia's rejection of Ukraine joining NATO and its vehement opposition to any attempt to deploy NATO missiles on Ukrainian territories. Meanwhile, the West, reflected through the remarks of the NATO secretary general, believes that Ukraine joining the alliance is a sovereign decision that rests solely with the Ukrainian government and no foreign power has the right to obstruct this decision, as it would undermine international law and norms.

Despite Western capitals threatening to impose sanctions on Russia to prevent it from attacking Ukraine, it paid no heed, moving ahead with the assault. This could be attributed to the growth of its military capabilities over the past decade and the increase of its influence on regional and international issues — and, more importantly, the preemptive steps taken by Russia to curb the impact of Western sanctions. Over the past years, the Russians have reduced their dependence on the US dollar. Russian assets in the US dollar went down to 50 percent during the period from 2013 to 2020. By 2021, Russia announced replac-

ing the dollar in the country's sovereign wealth fund and curbing its use in settling commercial accounts with the Eurasian Economic Union and the BRICS bloc. The country also bolstered its foreign exchange reserves to \$630 billion, the fourth-biggest in the world. Russia's foreign debt plummeted, becoming the lowest debt rate in the world. Moreover, Moscow reduced the share of bonds owned by foreigners in the country.

At the international level, Russia's dismissive attitude toward Ukraine joining NATO was not a surprise for even Western circles, given Moscow's moves over the past decade — which focused primarily on restoring its global standing as a major power and the legacy of the Soviet Union. Russia has also attempted to tighten the noose around its Western foes and quash the threats posed by the deployment of their weapons and military bases around what Russia considers its vital geopolitical sphere.

Such Western moves happened when Russia restored its presence to a certain degree on the international stage. This appeared early, when Russia took back Chechnya by force, and the recent offensive and annexation launched on the Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and taking control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Such takeovers occurred under the pretext of having historical rights and defending ethnic Russians there. Yet Russia entered Syria in 2015 in the hope of creating areas of conflict with its regional and international foes — away from its territories and the lines of contact within its vast geographical area.

The map of the dispute between NATO and Russia indicates

that the Ukrainian arena will be a theater for a head-on collision between them, especially amid the Russian desire to place curbs on the alliance's expansion toward Russia — the Western expansion that includes most of the Eastern European countries, especially the countries that joined the alliance after 1997. Russia receives support from Belarus and is deploying its troops there. Meanwhile, it continues to denounce the military activities of NATO in Eastern Europe. It demands missiles not to be deployed in countries like Poland and Romania. It also calls for the pulling out of NATO combat forces from Poland and the three Baltic republics: Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. There is no question that the Ukrainian revolution, or what Russia deemed a coup against the former government in 2014 dealt a huge blow to Moscow, which prompted it to invade the Crimean Peninsula, deepening the rift in relations with Ukraine.

By contrast, Washington has been calling on the Russians to clarify the circumstances of their military movements on the border with Ukraine since last November. The two sides also traded blame that they had carried out provocative military drills. Despite the continued media blitz, the Americans and Europeans are aware of the Russian concerns while the Ukrainian request to join NATO is in the alliance's interest and helps expand its clout. Europe in particular is aware of the significance of the economic engagement with Russia, especially in the field of energy and natural gas supplies. Europe imports nearly 40 percent of its gas needs from Russia. Yet Russian energy policies overshadow the European front, with Europe trying

to reconcile between its needs and the economic needs of Ukraine, which is no longer the only corridor for the passage of Russian gas pipelines into European territories. For example, Nord Stream 1 and 2 pass via the Baltic Sea directly to Germany.

No doubt that the dispute among the global world powers is one of the pillars explaining the Ukrainian crisis. The sparks are mainly related to the regional geopolitical problems. However, the present international balance of power and the global shifts are the prime motives behind the strategic plans being crafted behind the scenes —whether by the United States to counter Russian excesses or by Russia which seeks to reshape the current global order to exert dominance over what it deems to be its vital sphere and its legitimate right to restore historical Soviet territories. It should be noted that the other powers in the world are cautiously following the Ukrainian crisis — we chiefly mean here the main political and economic powerhouses such as China, India and Brazil, along with the EU.

The Forces Driving the Crisis

Despite the Western and American assertions that Russia was preparing to launch a full-scale war against Ukraine, the Russians reiterated that they had no intention to start a war and all Western intelligence reports and the remarks of US President Joe Biden on Moscow's preparedness to wage a war against Kyiv in the coming days were "delusive" and aimed to foment tensions in preparation for imposing fresh sanctions on Moscow. Russia added that Washington and the West released such reports to justify

the expansion of NATO eastwards toward its borders to encircle it and threaten its national security through providing military hardware to Kyiv and support it to carry out more drills in the Black Sea and near the shared border. Washington reiterated again that its satellites had captured Russian military movements near the border with Ukraine. Hence, it called on American citizens to leave Ukrainian territories. Consequently, NATO member countries called on their citizens to leave the country, in reference to the imminent outbreak of a war. Despite Moscow's decision to take cautious steps to pull back part of its forces posted at the border and end the military drills, the Biden administration is still concerned about a full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine. It reiterated that the forces deployed at the border are in a position that allows Russia to wage an attack on Kyiv any time.

In light of the current developments of the dispute, a few questions arise: what is the real aim behind the increasing Russian escalation against Ukraine? And what prompted Russia to attack Ukraine? We can say that the dispute seems bigger and more complex than Ukraine itself and that there are major international shifts at the time being in this geopolitically critical part of the world. This explains the nature of the European and American positions, with both warning Moscow of invading Ukraine — which turned into an arena for settling complicated accounts between the major global actors; the United States and Russia and a geopolitical gateway for Moscow to expand its vital sphere in its traditional backyards. In addition, Ukraine

has become part of Moscow's policy of repositioning itself in Europe after seizing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and restoring its prestige at the global level.

Putin's aggression toward Ukraine increased following his annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 in response to Ukrainian protests that toppled President Viktor Yanukovich, an ally of Russia, over his refusal to sign a partnership agreement with the EU and opting instead to enhance ties with Moscow. Russia subsequently became aware of concerted European efforts to make Ukraine part of NATO, especially following the listing of Ukraine among the countries desiring to join the alliance. Russia does not accept the presence of security threats on its border with Ukraine in case the latter joins NATO. Ukraine is a buffer state, along with Belarus and Crimea, and a main gateway for Russia to maintain its traditional vital spheres. These countries are the only remaining ones not to join NATO. Since the late 1990s, NATO expanded to include most of the former Soviet republics and Eastern European countries, the last of which was North Macedonia, which joined the alliance in 2020.

Russia is aware that in case Ukraine joins NATO, this will mean a direct border threat to Russia. It will make it possible on the ground to deploy medium-range US missiles on the border with Russia — putting Moscow under military threat. Thus, Putin's message was clear: stopping Western advancements toward the border of his country. To end the crisis, Putin wants a definite pledge from the West that it will not accept Ukraine as a NATO member. Yet, Putin

wants NATO to withdraw from the countries of confrontation such as Poland (where the United States set up a military base, one of the reasons behind Russia's growing concerns), Romania and Bulgaria. In other words, Russia seeks to redraw the security map in Europe to protect its security, strengthen its clout and ensure the expansion of its geographic and political reach. In case the United States and NATO dismiss such demands, escalation and military war could be the Russian option to secure its demands. It seems the scene is complex and all options are on the table.

On the other side, major actors in NATO, including Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, and the UN Security Council, have rejected Russia's use of military force against Ukraine. They have warned it of the consequences of using the military option, threatening it would pay the price. Germany, France, and Britain made diplomatic efforts to ease tensions between Moscow and Kyiv, all of which came to nothing —as the Russians are sticking to their demands not to let Ukraine join NATO. The aforesaid countries then resorted to sanctions as a weapon against Moscow to dissuade it from waging war on Ukraine. They are preparing more massive sanctions against Moscow. The Russians did not pay heed to the sanctions, launching military strikes against Ukraine.

It is worth mentioning that several observers argue that the genuine US position on the dispute — despite the United States issuing threats to Russia — is not to prevent Moscow from invading Kyiv. The reasons for this are primarily

related to a US desire to plunge Russia into crisis, drain its financial resources and exacerbate its economic problems. Moreover, the United States seeks to obstruct the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which will carry Russian gas to Germany, from entering into service since it will allow Russia to secure greater clout in Europe. Perhaps this US aim was achieved when Germany announced suspending the measures to license the Russian gas pipeline Nord Stream 2 and multiple Western countries imposed sanctions on Moscow, including Canada, Australia, the UK, and others. These European moves serve the US objective to isolate and besiege Russia.

Russia possesses powerful levers through which it can exert pressure on NATO member countries to meet its demands. Such levers enable Putin to pull the strings. Foremost among these levers is the gas exported to Germany, Italy and France and the difficulty to find an alternative energy option. Neither Washington nor Doha can guarantee the volumes of gas that Europe needs if Russia decides to suspend gas exports to Europe. This US and Qatari inability is mainly due to considerations related to the difficulty of adapting European infrastructure to accommodate LNG instead of raw gas. This is in addition to the high cost of transporting American gas to European countries. Yet the amounts of Norwegian gas are not sufficient to make up for the gap that a suspension in Russian gas supplies would cause, especially amid several international reports suggesting that Norwegian gas amounts would decline by 2024. In addition, Qatar is committed to long-term agree-

ments to provide gas to Asian countries.

We cannot also remain heedless of the impact of the timing of the Russian escalation on the European position in winter — at this time Europe is in dire need of Russian gas as a result of the significant spike in energy consumption. If Russia decides to ban gas exports to Europe, this will create a massive crisis, particularly given that Russia has reduced the pumping of gas over the past few months. This reality enables Putin to have a free hand in controlling the crisis and influencing the US and European positions — especially at this time when Washington needs energy prices globally to be relatively stable. The Russians have further insisted on keeping Ukraine away from NATO. Despite the US threat to impose sanctions on Russia, the major actors within NATO are aware of the Russian lever (gas supplies), Europe's need for it and the disastrous consequences of the upsurge in energy prices, especially given that Russia's allies, like Venezuela and Iran, are expected to adopt positions strongly supportive of Moscow.

In the context of the international positions toward the crisis, Beijing — the global strategic rival of the United States and Moscow's strategic ally — accused the United States of fueling the Ukrainian-Russian escalation to start a war. China, which has trade ties with Ukraine, will not support any war against Kyiv. China always prioritizes its economic and trade interests around the world. So far, there has been no official Chinese support for Russia; the remarks of the Chinese government reflect the country's non-biased position on the crisis. This is the same position China

embraced during the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Beijing reiterated that its relations with Moscow are based on exchanging benefits and common interests between the two allied countries. They do not come at the expense of any other third country — yet Beijing supports Russia's opposition against any NATO expansion and its threats to Russian security as well as not allowing Ukraine to be part of NATO.

Given the nature of this position, it becomes clear that the Ukrainian crisis and the Russian escalation against Ukraine is linked to a large-scale geopolitical dispute over the areas of influence and vital spheres. This is in addition to the cutthroat global competition over oil, gas and lines of international trade in the context of a new global strategy that goes far beyond Ukraine itself. The conflict plays out in the context of the current global shifts and the disputes over areas of international power, influence and standing among the global powers wielding the biggest influence in the international arena, including Russia, and the countries seeking to preserve the current global order — primarily the United States.

Consequences of the Crisis

The ongoing global dispute over Ukraine shows the heightened nature of the dispute among the dominating world powers: the United States and Russia. The latter is one of the world's revisionist powers that seeks to end US hegemony and switch to a multipolar world order, along with China. Therefore, some believe that this crisis could mark

a crossroads for the current global balance of power — let alone the triggering of an open-ended dispute, which could amount to a Third World War. The war could present the world with disastrous challenges at the humanitarian and economic level, especially in light of the military buildup which is reminiscent of the Cold War atmosphere and the Russian decision to invade Ukraine. The Gulf states and Iran could face some of the consequences of the war, such as the following:

Consequences for the Middle East

- *The geopolitical consequences:* The impact of the Ukrainian crisis is not confined to Eastern Europe. Rather, it has consequences for the Middle East given that the parties to the conflict have vital interests in the Middle East and engage in the region's conflicts in one way or another to a degree no less than that of the ongoing dispute with Ukraine. The Gulf states are important allies for the United States and Europe. Iran has an important alliance with Russia and China. The more the dispute intensifies in Ukraine, the more it reverberates throughout the region, which is considered one of the most significant strategic competition arenas between the major world powers. Russia announced its intent to conduct naval drills in the Mediterranean and that it had moved its bombers and aircraft equipped with hypersonic missiles to its air base in Syria. This is an indication that the region is not too distant from the dispute and tensions growing in the Ukrainian crisis and an extension of this dispute could emerge tomorrow in

any areas of tension and dispute in the Middle East.

- *The consequences of regional disputes:* Syria is an arena which is awaiting to be impacted the most by the crisis. The pressure on Russian clout in Syria represents a lever that the United States and Europe can possibly use. Some indicate that settling the dispute over Ukraine could mean reaching a certain compromise on Syria, which will impact the Gulf states, Iran, and Turkey. Ankara seems to be faced with tough options in light of its fluctuating relations with the United States, Russia, and the West— with their interests evidently intersecting in Syria. It is worth mentioning that when Russia wanted to mitigate the European and American pressures exerted after Moscow's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, it decided to intervene in the Syrian conflict in 2015 on the side of the Syrian regime. Among its motives was the creation of a balance and an epicenter of dispute away from its vital geopolitical sphere. This is in addition to controlling the energy transfer projects of competitors, as well as encircling NATO from its southern flank on the Mediterranean — plus besieging it in the Black Sea and creating new geostrategic positioning points that hold together the vital areas in the Russian sphere. Thus, a war in Ukraine or tensions escalating further will lead to the forging of new alliances and might spark a new cold war.

- *The economic consequences:* The global economy presently is suffering from poor economic growth and a sharp rise in inflation. The crisis has already fueled surges in the prices of oil and gas, base metals, electronic conductors,

and fertilizers. There is no doubt that the Ukrainian crisis is getting out of control, and it will have disastrous consequences for the European economy — particularly Germany — and the global economy. Europe — which depends on Russia to secure one-third of its oil and gas needs — will face a severe shortage in energy supplies before finding suitable alternative options to make up for the shortfall. Until then, oil and gas prices will rise at rates greater than the current ones, creating new challenges for economic growth. This could perhaps lead to an increase in the costs of production, shipping and insurance services and obstruct supply chains again. Along with oil and gas, Russia is a prime producer and exporter of products that contribute to a considerable share of the global market like fertilizers and minerals (nickel, aluminum, palladium, and platinum). If the crisis escalates and becomes uncontrollable, the prices of these products will witness hikes.

On the other side, besieging Ukraine will create challenges related to global food security, given the comparative advantage that Ukraine enjoys in the agricultural sector and its export of key grains such as wheat, corn, meat, poultry, and other basic food items. This crisis will cause the prices of such items to surge at a time when the world's countries are tirelessly attempting to curb price hikes following the coronavirus pandemic, given their knock-on effect on increasing poverty rates and diminishing the overall purchasing power of citizens. Ukraine is considered an important trading partner of several Arab countries and a chief supplier of strategic products and commodities,

primarily wheat. Thus, the escalation of the dispute or war breaking out will no doubt impact trade and harm the economies of some countries. Moreover, this economic crisis could lead to social and political turmoil, let alone governments rushing to find alternative options, including the United States, which will definitely set its own terms, demands and dictates, to secure vital products and commodities.

There is no doubt that the American and European sanctions that will target Russia will surely include its trading partners. The sanctions could target Russian individuals, firms, and official entities, and harm some of the region's countries which have important economic relations with Russia, obstruct cooperation with it as well as suspend the arms deals already signed or those expected in the future.

The Consequences for Iran

- *Opportunities for the energy sector in Iran:* The crisis and the intensification of competition will enhance the US desire to cling to the diplomatic path in its approach toward Iran in the hope of easing tensions in the region. Yet Washington hopes that reviving the nuclear deal will open the door for accommodating and integrating Iran. This will allow Iranian gas and oil to enter the energy market. Iran possesses massive resources. When the nuclear deal is revived, Iran has the capacity to be one of the chief gas suppliers to Europe along with Qatar. This will enable Europe to secure an alternative source to Russian gas and oil that passes through Ukraine or even the Nord Stream

2 pipeline which passes through the Baltic Sea. This will put more pressure on Russia. This economic opportunity grants Iran more maneuverability to implement its agenda which is centered on pressuring the United States and the West through improving ties with the countries in the East.

- *Economic consequences:* As Putin opts for the military option, Iran's trade with Russia will face more consequences than its trade with Ukraine, which is considered limited to a great extent. Trade between Russia and Iran is over \$4 billion per year while the import of commodities from Ukraine in 2021 amounted to nearly \$111.71 million. Tehran exported goods to the country worth \$48 million. The \$160.29 million trade between the two countries suggests a 76 percent rise compared to the same period in 2020. The agricultural sector has seen growing partnership between Iran and Ukraine, especially since the former started agricultural projects in the latter over the past years. Many Iranian companies seized large swathes of land in Ukraine. They are working there to cultivate wheat and other crops at a lower cost because of the eroding fertility of Iran's agricultural land.

- *Enhancing Iran's alliance with Russia and China:* Perhaps some believe that the Vienna talks could be a possible bargaining chip with the West in regard to the Ukrainian issue. Putin may work to push forward the Vienna talks and join the forces exerting pressure on Iran in return for concessions in Eastern Europe. But there is no doubt that the intensification of the dispute distracts the United States

from the dangers posed by Iran. The latter will take advantage of this atmosphere to continue its policy and gain more time to proceed with its schemes — let alone winning more support from Russia. The possibility of the United States imposing more sanctions on Iran will prompt Russia to enhance strategic and economic cooperation with Tehran — in defiance of US sanctions.

China could support this policy, creating a front to allow Iran to enhance its clout and preserve its gains. In addition, this support will enhance the likelihood of Iran concluding a deal on better terms in Vienna. Russia's insistence on embracing an approach reminiscent of the atmosphere amid the Cold War will prompt it to boost its ties with its allies, particularly in the Middle East which is one of the theaters where Moscow wants to revive its ambitions in the global arena. Iran is given priority as it is an important ally for Russia in the region. Russia will be keen for the West and Iran not to normalize ties.

- *Russia's enhancement of regional rivalry:* This could be achieved through Russia providing military support and concluding arms deals and trade agreements that no doubt will contribute to creating a complex regional environment for the United States. Of course, China will take advantage of this regional rivalry and pursue a “confrontation outside the sphere” approach by deepening competition in the Middle East in line with Russian orientations and supporting Washington's enemies — including Iran. However, the significance of OPEC+ alliance for Russia could shackle its rapprochement and rush toward Iran.

The Consequences of the Crisis for the GCC Role

- **Economic opportunities for the Gulf states:** As for the oil and gas producing countries, primarily the Gulf states, the crisis offers an economic opportunity. The crisis will increase the significance of their gas and oil resources, emerging as an alternative to Russian oil and gas. The United States and some European countries have made contact with several regional countries as well as Western companies working in the gas and oil sectors to discuss the opportunities for providing Europe with energy supplies as an alternative to Russian gas. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE could ease the pressure on oil prices in case Russia invades Ukraine. The Ukrainian crisis opened the door for the region's countries to introduce themselves to Europe as alternative sources of energy.
- *Political gains:* Not so far from the economic aspect, the crisis provides the Gulf states with some political standing in the current global arrangements via their ability to ease price surges, especially as the Ukrainian crisis worsens. In addition, any escalation of the dispute could grant the Gulf states bigger opportunities for maneuvering and flexibility.
- *Easing US pressures:* The Ukrainian crisis enhances the US realist approach when dealing with the Gulf states. The dispute reflects the US need for support from its traditional allies in the Gulf, especially in the strategic and economic aspects. There is no doubt that this will steer US behavior toward more realism when dealing with some

governments in the region — regardless of the differences regarding some issues and policies. Perhaps this is what prompted President Joe Biden to phone the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz — given Saudi Arabia's importance in stabilizing the energy market during times of global dispute.

- *Breaking from US restrictions and pressure:* It is possible that the US need for the Gulf states amid this dispute could contribute to some of these countries breaking free from some of the restrictions placed on them by the Biden administration, particularly in the field of weapons imports. This appeared in Washington removing its reservations about massive arms deals to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This change in the US approach will make the region's countries dispense with their rapprochement with Russia and not proceed with the implementation of the arms deals signed with Russia and China. Russia will lose due to this shift, especially given that it had restored some of its prestige as one of the most important arms suppliers to the region's countries over the past decade.

To conclude, the outbreak of war scenario will have the biggest impact on the Middle East. It will most likely mark an important shift in global policies as well as the orientations of the major world powers. Given that the Middle East is at the heart of the ongoing balances and one of the important spheres for the disputants in the Ukrainian crisis, the region will no doubt pay inevitable costs and bear considerable consequences. The impact of the potential

losses the region is expected to experience due to the current crisis are effectively likely to be more than the potential economic gains for some countries and the likelihood of political maneuvering — especially if war breaks out — which will mark the start of a new era of disputes erupting among the global powers to enhance further their respective dominance and influence. If the United States and the West deal with the Russian recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk and the offensive on Ukraine as a *fait accompli* imposed by Putin and do not undertake deterrent steps — as was the case in Georgia or when Russia annexed Crimea — Putin will succeed in imposing a new *fait accompli* on the dispute in Eastern Europe. But this does not mean that the confrontation will stop. It will be a strategic competition and the region will not be spared its consequences — though less cutthroat.

