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## **The US intervention in Iran shifts the geopolitical balance of power**

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### Summary

The US intervention in Iran marks a turning point in foreign policy and a shift in the geopolitical balance of power in favour of the US and to the detriment of China and Russia.

### Zusammenfassung

Das Eingreifen der USA im Iran markiert eine außenpolitische Wende und eine Verschiebung der geopolitischen Machtverhältnisse zugunsten der USA und zulasten von China und Russland.



The US has attacked Iranian nuclear and uranium enrichment facilities with bunker-busting bombs. If the information is correct that Iran was on the verge of possessing enough enriched material to build a nuclear bomb, then this military intervention was right and necessary.

Israel has no bunker-busting bombs and no aircraft capable of carrying them to their target. For just over a week prior to the US bombing, Israel had gained air supremacy over Iran with its attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities, air defence positions and other military infrastructure and had carried out the necessary preparatory work. The extent to which this division of labour was agreed from the outset or whether Israel succeeded in forcing the USA to intervene on Israel's side by courageously storming ahead will occupy contemporary historians. Some media are already reporting that the US operation is said to have been in preparation for months. For the financial markets, the more important question is whether the US intervention will lead to an escalation of the conflict between Israel and Iran and whether other states will become involved in this conflict or whether it might now be possible to limit or even freeze the entire conflict. Furthermore, the question arises as to whether the geopolitical balance of power between the USA on the one hand and China and Russia on the other has shifted in favour of the USA as a result of the US intervention.

## I.

Increased attacks by Iranian forces as well as Hamas, Hezbollah or the Houthi on US facilities and ships are very likely. Similarly, terrorist attacks in the USA and other Western countries cannot be ruled out. The scale of such retaliatory strikes remains to be seen and is likely to depend not least on which states side with Iran and the extent to which these states grant Iran freedom of choice and are interested in which forms of escalation.

Since the terrorist attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023, behind which Iran is suspected and which was not aimed at improving the lot of the Palestinians but at shifting geopolitical power in the region in Iran's favour by stirring up chaos and conflict,<sup>1</sup> no major state in the region has sided with Iran. This means that Iran's calculation to become a regional hegemonic power by means of the Palestinian issue has not worked out. States in the Middle East that have had no interest in Iran expanding or even defending its power in the region are unlikely to switch to Iran's side now. Saudi Arabia and Jordan have no interest in the escalation of the war between Israel and Iran and the expansion of chaos in the region. This also applies to Syria, which has yet to find domestic political stability following the ousting of

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<sup>1</sup> See NORBERT F. TOFALL: *G20+, BRICS+ and China. Global economic and political minefields*, commentary on economics and politics by the FLOSSBACH VON STORCH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 11 September 2023, online:

<https://www.flossbachvonstorch-researchinstitute.com/de/kommentare/g20-brics-und-china-globale-oekonomische-und-politische-minenfelder/>



the Assad regime. Foreign policy conflicts, including armed conflicts, could quickly cost Syria's current rulers the power they have just gained.

A different set of interests is likely to apply to Russia and China, which have so far been the actual beneficiaries of the entire conflict since 7 October 2023. For Russia and China, who want to shift the balance in international relations and the global economy in their favour - which is facilitated by terrorist chaos à la Hamas and Hezbollah and instability - it was worthwhile to include Iran in the group of extended BRICS states: <sup>2</sup>

- Firstly, the West had to take care of Israel and the Middle East as well as Ukraine, which is useful to Putin in Ukraine.
- Secondly, the ongoing conflict with Israel has further increased polarisation in Western countries.
- Thirdly, war and chaos in the Middle East are causing increased instability in international relations and the global economy. Keyword oil price and the Strait of Hormuz.
- Fourthly, China has benefited from the fact that the West, and the USA in particular, are becoming increasingly embroiled in conflicts that distract them from the Taiwan conflict.

Although China is trying to create the appearance of a mediator and a benevolent representative of the interests of the Global South, China's actions are by no means aimed at minimising or even resolving conflicts. As China's geo-economic struggle on Russia's side shows, China is striving to reorganise the global distribution of power in its favour. To this end, armed conflicts are not ruled out, even if others are nobly allowed to take precedence. Although China is by no means minimising conflict, it has a great interest in minimising its own costs.

Russia should not lose its war in Ukraine but must not outgrow its new role as China's junior partner. Iran should quietly join forces with Hamas and Hezbollah to stir up chaos and conflict in the Middle East but should not rise to become an independent hegemonic power in the Middle East. And the Palestinians, who have been suffering since Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, are useful cannon fodder to, on the one hand to further position the Global South against the West and to escalate internal social tensions and conflicts in the West.

Due to its cost calculations, China will probably continue to endeavour not to become militarily involved in the war between Israel and Iran. However, increased economic support for Iran for further cheap oil supplies is likely.

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<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*



Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015 triggered the European refugee crisis. However, Russia's hands are now largely tied by the war in Ukraine. If Russia intervenes in the war between Israel and Iran, there is a risk for Putin that US President Trump will abandon his restraint towards Russia's war in Ukraine and provide greater military support to Ukraine and the Europeans. Overall, this means that Iran is likely to receive only very limited support from its BRICS+ friends.

If the interests of the Middle Eastern states and those of China and Russia as described above are to prevail, Iran's only real option is to end or freeze the war with Israel after a few face-saving retaliatory strikes. Iran cannot win a war against Israel and the USA in the current situation.

In addition, following its bombing of Iran's nuclear and uranium enrichment facilities, the USA could exert pressure on Israel to stop Israeli attacks on Iran if Iran in turn stops its missile attacks on Israel. If the US government's claims that Iran's nuclear weapons programme has been destroyed prove to be true, Israel will then no longer have an argument that could stand up in front of its own population to continue the war against Iran. The US intervention in the conflict could therefore have laid the foundations for limiting or even freezing the conflict.

## II.

In order to place the current conflict in a wider context, it should be remembered that as early as 1997, the former National Security Advisor to US President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had already outlined the dangerous scenario of a future grand coalition between China, Russia and Iran in his book "The Grand Chessboard". This coalition would not be united by ideology, but by complementary grievances. In scope and reach, it would.

It would be reminiscent in scope and reach of the challenge once posed by the Sino-Soviet bloc, even if this time China would probably be the leader and Russia the follower.<sup>3</sup>

Building on this prophecy by Zbigniew Brzezinski, which unfortunately came true, the British-American historian Niall Ferguson argues that the new Cold War is emerging faster than the old Cold War after the Second World War:

"For now, fortunately, we are in Cold War II, not World War III. However, Cold War II is proceeding rather faster than Cold War I. If the Russian invasion of Ukraine was our equivalent of the Korean War of 1950-53, we have (thus far)

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<sup>3</sup> See NIALL FERGUSON: *The Second Cold War Is Escalating Faster Than The First*, Bloomberg, 21 April 2024, online:

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-04-21/china-russia-iran-axis-is-bad-news-for-trump-and-gop-isolationists?srnd=homepage-americas>



skated past a second Cuban Missile Crisis - over Taiwan - and have already entered a period of détente, a sequence that took two decades last time around. Since last November's presidential summit in Woodside, California, the Chinese have seemed genuinely keen to avoid a showdown and want to engage in serious, if frosty, dialogue with their American counterparts, reminiscent of 1969-72.

But the surprise attack on Israel by Hamas last October propelled us all the way to 1973... In short, in Cold War II we seem to be getting the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s compressed together in a somewhat bewildering mash-up."<sup>4</sup>

However, this parallel should be viewed with caution. Does China really want to come to an understanding with the USA and the West today as it did in the period from 1969 to 1972? Or does China want to keep the USA and the West quiet? At the very least, China cannot do without the export markets of the USA, Europe and Japan.

Back then, China was economically at rock bottom and did not play a major role in the global economy. Today, China is almost as big as the USA in terms of GDP.

In 1969, the Ussuri River incident led to the climax of the rift between China and the Soviet Union. This border conflict on the Ussuri River almost led to a major war between China and the USSR, after a number of armed clashes had already taken place. Today, China is firmly on Russia's side in the Ukraine war.

Furthermore, although China warns against the formation of new blocs, it is actively promoting them itself. On the one hand, China is trying to forge new strategic alliances and regional trade agreements and, above all, to create dependencies through the One Belt, One Road strategy. On the other hand, China is blocking existing international organisations such as the WTO or the UN Human Rights Committee.

But will the new coalition of China, Russia and Iran really last in the long term? How long will this axis last? Or is this axis currently breaking up because Iran has fulfilled its role as Moscow's and Beijing's fifth column and could now become a block on the leg?

Russia and China have geopolitically pushed Iran into the role of chaos generator and conflict multiplier, which is exactly where they wanted Iran to be in 2023 by joining the BRICS+. But neither China nor Russia will accept Iran as an equal partner. Overall, therefore, the axis of China, Russia and Iran is indeed - as Zbigniew Brzezinski surmised back in 1997 - a coalition without ideology, united by complementary grievances and - it must be added - by common enemies: the USA and the West.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*



For this reason, Niall Ferguson can be agreed with when he emphasises that the armed conflicts and disputes in distant countries must ultimately concern us. They are part of a single war being waged by a new axis against our fundamental values: Democracy, the rule of law, individual freedom. Niall Ferguson predicted that the counterarguments of the isolationists will therefore not last long.

This is probably one of the reasons why China is playing the geopolitical innocent. Neither the Global South nor the isolationists in the USA and Europe should be woken from their cosy slumber. This is because the China-Russia-Iran axis could break faster than expected if it comes under the pressure of a consistent security and foreign policy like that of NATO in the 1970s and 1980s.

The war between Israel and Iran and the US intervention on Israel's side are likely to have awakened quite a few isolationists in the US and Europe. This is another reason why China could now urge Iran to quickly agree to a peace settlement or a ceasefire and a suspension of its nuclear weapons programme before further geopolitical power shifts develop in favour of the USA. This is because the US intervention in Iran is likely to mark a turning point in foreign policy. Since US President Donald Trump took office, China and Russia have had to do little to move closer to their goal of reorganising the global economy and international relations in their favour. Now there is even a risk that the USA will rediscover its interest in consistently supporting Ukraine in its defence against Russia in such a way that Russia does not win its war of aggression. This would also reduce the likelihood of Russia attacking other parts of Europe and testing NATO's willingness to defend itself. By intervening in Iran, the USA has not only signalled unmistakably that it has not yet left the world stage, but that it is still prepared to confront other powers with military means, or - depending on how you read it - is prepared to do so again.



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