

Great Power Spillover from the Iran War: Implications for China, Russia, Turkey, and Europe

by [Grant Rumley \(/experts/grant-rumley\)](#), [Henry Tugendhat \(/experts/henry-tugendhat\)](#), [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#), [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#), [Souhira Medini \(/experts/souhira-medini\)](#)

Mar 6, 2026



Brief Analysis

Washington Institute experts explain what U.S. officials and military planners should be on the lookout for as great power competitors and close allies outside the region consider their responses to the crisis.

Trump's Next Steps Will Reverberate Beyond the Middle East

By Grant Rumley

President Trump's decision to attack Iran adds another layer of unpredictability for America's great power competitors to navigate. His approach to military conflict during his first term in office was markedly different from his second-term approach. At times during the first administration—most notably when tensions arose with [North Korea \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39542990\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39542990) and [Iran \(https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/17/us-to-send-1000-additional-troops-to-the-middle-east-citing-hostile-behavior\)](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/17/us-to-send-1000-additional-troops-to-the-middle-east-citing-hostile-behavior)—the president surged forces to a theater only to back down before using them. Over the past year alone, however, he has already [used military force \(https://www.newsweek.com/trump-us-military-strikes-first-year-more-than-biden-11351433\)](https://www.newsweek.com/trump-us-military-strikes-first-year-more-than-biden-11351433) in Yemen, Venezuela, Nigeria, and Iran (twice).

The manner in which he is using the military has shown distinct differences as well, including standoff strategic strikes (i.e., last year's use of B-2 bombers against Iran), a conventional buildup in support of a targeted covert operation (Venezuela), and a conventional buildup in support of a conventional air and maritime campaign (the current Iran war). While each was operationally different, they all reflected the same strategic principle of using decisive, overwhelming force to achieve a precise objective. For Russia (which is currently engaged in a major war of its own) and China (which is contemplating a potential future conflict), Operation Epic Fury only adds to their uncertainty over whether and how the Trump administration might respond to their activities.

In the Middle East, however, Trump's next decisions may present Moscow and Beijing with an opportunity. The president [has stated \(https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/06/us/politics/trump-unconditional-surrender-iran.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/06/us/politics/trump-unconditional-surrender-iran.html) his desire for Iran's "unconditional surrender" and the emergence of "acceptable leaders." Yet if U.S.-Israeli operations do not accomplish these objectives, Russia and China will no doubt seek to capitalize on America's latest entanglement in the region. This would presumably include increasing their support to—and thus leverage over—Tehran and luring U.S. partners in the Gulf to their side with offers of mediating between them and Iran.

Accordingly, the Trump administration should focus on addressing the needs of the Gulf states and other partners during this conflict, in part by including them in discussions over Iran's future. Washington must also follow through on shaping a postwar Iran that is conducive to U.S. and partner interests. Not doing so would only add heft to Russia and China's critiques of the United States as an unreliable and ultimately self-interested partner.

China's Calculated Inaction

By Henry Tugendhat

A great deal of analysis has been devoted to China's lack of tangible support for Iran and the strategic losses it might face as a result of this war. But beyond the fact that the Chinese government has a "[no alliances \(https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article-abstract/10/2/151/3788013?login=false\)](https://academic.oup.com/cjip/article-abstract/10/2/151/3788013?login=false)" policy by default, the reality is that Beijing has very little to lose in this war, at least for now.

China's biggest vulnerability is long-term disruptions to the Strait of Hormuz, since around [45 percent \(https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-faces-oil-supply-risk-if-israel-iran-conflict-escalates/3606285\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-faces-oil-supply-risk-if-israel-iran-conflict-escalates/3606285) of its oil imports come through that waterway. Rising oil prices could pose a problem for the Chinese economy, which is already suffering [deflation \(https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2025-china-deflation-cost/\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2025-china-deflation-cost/). Its artificially [low currency \(https://www.reuters.com/world/china/what-can-china-do-slow-down-its-rising-currency-2026-02-27/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/what-can-china-do-slow-down-its-rising-currency-2026-02-27/) makes it more expensive to buy non-sanctioned (i.e., U.S. dollar-denominated) oil, assuming that Russian exports cannot completely replace flows from Iran.

Yet several factors may work to China's advantage. First, Beijing began building up its [strategic oil reserves \(https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/where-china-gets-its-oil-crude-imports-in-2025-reveal-stockpiling-and-changing-fortunes-of-certain-suppliers-including-those-sanctioned/\)](https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/where-china-gets-its-oil-crude-imports-in-2025-reveal-stockpiling-and-changing-fortunes-of-certain-suppliers-including-those-sanctioned/) last year and now has the equivalent of around 104 days' worth of imports socked away—not a huge amount, but above the International Energy Agency's [minimum recommendation \(https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/data-tools/oil-stocks-of-iea-countries\)](https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/data-tools/oil-stocks-of-iea-countries) of 90 days. Second, in the weeks before the war, [multiple reports \(https://iranopendata.org/en/article/311-iran-oil-export-crisis-ghost-fleet/\)](https://iranopendata.org/en/article/311-iran-oil-export-crisis-ghost-fleet/) indicated that masses of Iranian oil were still being held on tankers because Chinese demand dipped last year, among other reasons. Those stocks can be drawn on as well if necessary. Third, selling oil to China is still Iran's main source of income, so the regime has a major incentive to find a carve-out for Beijing if current stocks run out or prove undeliverable through normal channels.

As such, China will likely be fine on the energy front as long as the war does not go on too long. It is also benefiting strategically from the diversion of U.S. military assets. Hence, there is no reason to expect it to behave any differently in the coming weeks. China will likely keep selling the regime the weapons and inputs it can afford to spare, but sending its own military assets to Iran would pose far greater risks than waiting to see where things land.

For Russia, a Setback and an Opportunity

By Anna Borshchevskaya

Russia's response to the war has been predictable so far. Vladimir Putin offered bland verbal condemnations of the U.S. and Israeli strikes as "unprovoked aggression" without issuing any threats, red lines, or offers of help to Tehran. The Kremlin then attempted to position itself as a mediator by making a series of calls to leaders in the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar, noting its "constant contact" with Iranian leaders.

Putin was never going to come to Tehran's rescue. He was not formally obligated to do so when entering last year's bilateral strategic partnership treaty, which notably lacks a mutual-defense clause. Putin knows he would lose any direct military fight against the United States. Siding too closely with Iran would also jeopardize Russia's relations with Israel and the Gulf states, undermining Putin's longstanding policy of maintaining good ties with all Middle East

actors.

To be sure, failing to come to Iran's aid and losing another Russian-aligned regime in the region would be a setback for Putin. But he still has cards to play in the Middle East and will seek to use this crisis to extract advantages. He will most certainly keep positioning Russia as a mediator. He might also provide Iran with limited military and security assistance, such as equipment to help suppress protests or raise the costs of the U.S. campaign.

Notably, Putin's main focus when making such moves will be more on Ukraine than Iran. For one thing, he likely hopes that successive crises in Iran will continue distracting the United States from pressuring him about the Ukraine war. Russia will also likely benefit from the current rise in oil prices.

In short, the war's potential setbacks for Moscow's position in the Middle East may be outweighed by the opportunities it creates. Russia has a history of rebounding from failures, and Putin is adept at playing the long game in the region.

Turkey Caught Between Iran and the United States

By Soner Cagaptay

Turkey and Iran are historic competitors who share a nearly 400-year-old border, signifying the longstanding power parity between them. Accordingly, Ankara has opposed Tehran's bid to acquire nuclear weapons because this would upend their age-old parity and expose Turkey to direct Iranian threats in the future. At the same time, Ankara does not want to see Iran disintegrate, in part because such a collapse could result in regional chaos and another massive flow of refugees toward Turkey.

Turkish officials are also worried about the emergence of ungoverned spaces in Iran if the regime collapses. Ankara's domestic nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), recently disbanded under Turkish pressure, but if Iran falls apart, the group could come back to life under the banner of its Iranian affiliate, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK). This prospect is especially alarming to Ankara given **recent reports** (<https://www.cnn.com/2026/03/03/politics/cia-arming-kurds-iran>) that the United States and Israel might be planning to partner with PJAK and other Kurdish groups to weaken the Iranian regime. If such plans are put into motion, they would drive a wedge between Washington and Turkey for the duration of the war, and perhaps longer. At the same time, the March 4 Iranian missile attack aimed at targets inside Turkey has put Ankara in a bit of a bind. If such attacks continue, Turkey would be hard-pressed not to move to the U.S. side in the war, at least rhetorically and diplomatically.

Thus far, Ankara has been agnostic in its public remarks, with a February 28 Foreign Ministry statement **expressing concern** (<https://x.com/MFATurkiye/status/2027764118699004200>) over attacks by all parties. The neutral tone of this statement—and Turkey's overall stance toward the war—can be explained by both the strong chemistry between Trump and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the recent reset in U.S.-Turkish ties. Barring further Iranian attacks on its territory or a serious U.S.-Israeli effort to open a Kurdish front into Iran, Ankara will likely push for an end to the fighting once Washington and Tehran are ready—and then ask for a substantial Turkish role in mediating a political solution.

Despite Its Skepticism, Europe Will Have to Take a Military Role

By Souhira Medini

When Cyprus—a European Union member state—was **struck by an Iranian-made drone** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g74npdwnyo>) this week, Europe became unwillingly embroiled in the Iran war and is now forced to resolve a dilemma. On one hand, several European countries support the U.S.-Israeli military campaign, convinced that if it succeeds in weakening or changing the Iranian regime, then

European security will be better off. This view is largely rooted in the fact that Tehran remains a critical enabler of Russia's war in Ukraine. Shortly before the Iran war, the EU even **took the big step** (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/02/19/eu-terrorist-list-council-designates-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-as-a-terrorist-organisation/>) of adding Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to its list of terrorist organizations.

On the other hand, many European countries take a dim view of the Trump administration's **frequent disregard** (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/hegseth-insists-the-iran-conflict-is-not-iraq-and-is-not-endless>) for international law. They are aware that condoning Washington's current actions in the Middle East could undermine their ability to oppose comparable behavior should it arise closer to home (e.g., in Ukraine or **Greenland** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/08/us/politics/trump-interview-power-morality.html>)). They also worry about worst-case scenarios like civil war in Iran, since that could result in a surge of terrorist attacks and refugee flows similar to what Europe saw when the Syria war erupted a decade ago.

Given these concerns, the Trump administration would be wise to continue briefing its European partners about U.S. operations while coordinating with those who are willing and able to play a military role—though any such role would be limited to operations conducted under a framework that is compliant with international law. In a **joint statement** (<https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/03/01/joint-statement-by-the-leaders-of-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom-on-indiscriminate-iranian-attacks-on-countries-in-the-region>) issued March 1, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom underscored their readiness to take “necessary and proportionate defensive action to destroy Iran's capability to fire missiles and drones at their source.” The UK has already allowed U.S. forces to use British military bases for **agreed defensive purposes** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-oral-statement-on-iran-2-march-2026>), while France dispatched Rafale fighter jets to **shoot down drones** (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/macron-orders-frances-nuclear-powered-aircraft-carrier-to-move-from-baltic-sea-to-mediterranean>) threatening the airspace of its regional allies. Paris has also ordered its lone nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to the Mediterranean Sea to help protect allied assets. Yet European commitments will likely be strained by limited resources due to their ongoing support for Ukraine's defense against Russia. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Grant Rumley (</experts/grant-rumley>)

Grant Rumley is the Meisel-Goldberger Senior Fellow and Director of the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Henry Tugendhat (</experts/henry-tugendhat>)

Henry Tugendhat is a Soref Fellow in the Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great-Power Competition and the Middle East.



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Senior Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[Souhira Medini \(/experts/souhira-medini\)](/experts/souhira-medini)

Souhira Medini is a 2024-26 Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute, currently in residence from the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Assessing U.S. Progress in the Iran War](/policy-analysis/assessing-us-progress-iran-war)

Mar 6, 2026

◆
Michael Singh

[\(/policy-analysis/assessing-us-progress-iran-war\)](/policy-analysis/assessing-us-progress-iran-war)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Abiding Question of the Iranian Bomb](#)

Mar 5, 2026



Richard Nephew

[\(/policy-analysis/abiding-question-iranian-bomb\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Energy and Shipping Risks in the Iran War](#)

March 9, 2026, startnig at 1:00 p.m. EDT (1700 GMT)



Lauren Holtmeier,

Matt Smith,

Richard Nephew,

Tomer Raanan

[\(/policy-analysis/energy-and-shipping-risks-iran-war\)](#)

TOPICS

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Great Power Competition \(/policy-analysis/great-power-competition\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)