



PERSPECTIVES

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All Quiet on the Middle Eastern Front

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The consequences of the war in Syria; the military opportunism displayed across the region by Iran; and the ploys by China and Russia to chip away at American global standing lost through President Obama's "strategic patience" bode major foundational shifts in the power equations of the Middle East. The Chinese and Russians are openly pursuing the objective of establishing a multipolar international system. Vigilance and careful preparation are needed to face the coming upheaval.

Russia's military involvement in Syria, in cooperation with Islamic Iran and an Islamizing Turkey (and against the backdrop of Moscow's concern over US policy as well as developments in the Baltics, eastern and central Europe, Georgia, and central and south Asia) is creating a new regional dynamic likely to shift the balance of power in the Middle East. This dynamic is the direct result of the "strategic patience" shown for nearly a decade by the world's once proactive, and now seemingly reluctant, sole superpower.

The Trump administration, confronted with both internal and external challenges, is realizing that none of those problems can be whisked away through grandiloquent rhetoric or symbolic acts. The Middle East in particular is in an accelerated transition period that presents its own dangers. What is required of the US is a substantive grand strategy befitting a superpower in a world readying to accommodate a global multipolar geopolitical reconfiguration.

Beijing is pursuing a "post-American world order," the political-economic effects and geopolitical consequences of which will affect the Middle East (which China is preparing benignly to dominate). China just inaugurated a new military base in Djibouti, a few miles from the US's only base in Africa. With regard to the North Korean crisis, Beijing has been aloof and supercilious towards the US, and sought to diminish the US by proposing it become

Pyongyang's sole direct interlocutor. China issued a joint declaration, with Russia, that the world is irrevocably evolving "into a multipolar international system." Its 68-country, \$150 billion "Belt and Road" initiative, intended to link the Far East to the West via the Middle East, will stand in direct competition with the existing transatlantic trade route.

Pakistan, in close collaboration with China, continues to pursue its behind-the-scenes interests in the Middle East as India seeks greater security cooperation with the US and Israel. Iran, having voted in a budget increase to boost its ICBM program, continues to build military complexes in Syria even as it deepens its grasp on Iraq and Yemen.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, and Egypt finally turned on Qatar for two reasons: its obstinacy in continuing – in collaboration with an increasingly activist Turkey – to support the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots (notably Hamas); and its accommodation with Tehran, with which it shares colossal underwater energy reserves in the Gulf.

A Shiite front will soon surround the Sunni bloc (excluding Turkey), extending from Lebanon-Syria, around Iraq-Iran, up to Yemen and perhaps beyond. That front is now busy gluing together all the hitherto disconnected Shiite elements in the region.

Tehran's ballistic missile program, which relies on North Korean military technology, is predicated on an anti-American ideology. This explains why ballistics has formed the core of Iran's and the DPRK's high-level technological cooperation since the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, and also why Tehran's EMAD and Pyongyang's Rodong missiles look like twins.

The Iranian-North Korean collusion, in defiance of all international countermeasures, is not merely transactional but cooperative. Tehran is both a contributor to and a benefactor of Pyongyang's thirst for nuclear prowess, and is thus a major threat to both the Sunni Arab states and Israel. If Iran is not, even at this late stage, decisively and successfully encouraged to assume a less belligerent stance, Shiite supremacy is unavoidable.

Iran's adoption of the DPRK's BM-25 Musudan missile system may shift the regional balance of power in the Middle East, should Washington's adherence to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty prevent it from developing short-/medium-range missile deterrents capable of neutralizing missiles in that category. This begs the question of who is to confront a "nuclear" Iran connected to Pyongyang and Beijing, stretching from Lebanon-Syria to Iraq-Yemen, and staring down at a dismayed GCC. The only GCC state to remain

apparently unthreatened is Qatar, which just reestablished full diplomatic relations with Iran to spite Saudi Arabia.

Syria, which was supposed to have been emptied of the chemical weapons it used on its own people, surprised the world by using them again. In August of this year, two vessels were seized carrying North Korean supplies of deadly chemicals on their way to Syria. Recall that Russian 9K79 Tochka (SS-21/Scarab-A) missiles sent to Syria in 1983 found their way to the DPRK in 1996 (where they were reverse-engineered and tested in 2004 and 2005; manufactured in 2006; paraded in 2007; and put into service in 2008). It is worth considering what illicit links Damascus might enjoy with Pyongyang tomorrow, either directly or via its Iranian ally, should Moscow happen to be looking the other way and the US be absent.

As for the Palestinians, North Korean military advisors provided the PLO with instruction and training in paramilitary and terrorist operations in the Middle East and in North Korea. On this year's remembrance day of "Korea's" victory over Japan in 1945, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas sent a telegram to Pyongyang to voice the Palestinians' admiration of "the great sacrifices [endured by the DPRK] for the sake of its freedom and dignity." During an earlier visit to Beijing, Abbas urged the Chinese leadership "to use its relationship with Israel to remove the obstacles that obstruct the Palestinian economy." (China's conditioning its trade and cooperation with Israel to such an end is unlikely.)

In 2013, Israel claimed it had hit a "shipment [of Iranian Fateh-110 guided ballistic missiles] in Syria, destined for Hezbollah" in order to prevent game-changing weapons from falling into terrorists' hands. The same year, Israeli media reported that reconnaissance satellites had caught the Syrian army training a battery of Tishrin missiles (the Syrian version of the Fateh-110) towards Tel Aviv. In 2014, Iranian and Lebanese sources reported that Hezbollah had received and integrated Fateh-110s with a 250–350 km range (thus capable of hitting the northern Negev when fired from Lebanon). These reports attest to the security threats and ominous systemic changes under way in the Levant.

The world is waiting to see how the US administration will align its rhetoric to an actual posture, not only against the military threat to its territory from the DPRK, but also in response to the challenges to its long-neglected leadership in Middle Eastern politics.

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