



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Will There Be a New Russian-Chinese Security Architecture in the Gulf?

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,287, September 13, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russia, backed by China, is hoping to exploit mounting doubts in the Gulf about the reliability of the US as the region's sole security guarantor. It is [proposing a radical overhaul of the security architecture](#) in the area, which is home to massive oil and gas reserves and some of the world's most strategic waterways.

Chinese backing for Russia's proposed [collective security concept](#), which would replace the Gulf's US defense umbrella and position Russia as a power broker alongside the US, comes amid heightened tensions as a result of tit-for-tat tanker seizures and a beefed-up US and British military presence in Gulf waters.

In early August, Iranian Revolutionary Guards [seized an alleged Iraqi tanker](#) in the Gulf of Hormuz. Iran said the vessel was smuggling oil to an unidentified Arab country.

The taking of the Iraqi ship followed the [Iranian seizure of the British-flagged tanker Stena Impero](#). The seizure was in response to [the impounding off Gibraltar of an Iranian tanker suspected of breaching EU sanctions against Syria](#).

The Russian proposal entails the creation of a "counter-terrorism coalition (of all stakeholders)" that would be the motor for the resolution of conflicts across the region and promote mutual security guarantees. It would involve the removal of the "permanent deployment of troops of extra-regional states in the territories of states of the Gulf" – a reference to US, British, and French forces.

The proposal calls for a "universal and comprehensive" security system that would take into account "the interests of all regional and other parties involved, in all spheres of security, including its military, economic and energy dimensions."

The coalition, to include the Gulf states, Russia, China, the US, the EU, and India, as well as other stakeholders (a likely reference to Iran), would be launched at an international conference on security and cooperation in the Gulf.

It was not clear how feuding Gulf states like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran would be persuaded to sit at one table. The proposal suggested that Russia's advantage was that it maintains good relations with all parties.

Chinese backing of the Russian proposal gives it significant added weight.

Some analysts suggest that the US, which is no longer dependent on Gulf oil imports, is gradually reducing its commitment despite a temporary spike in the number of US troops dispatched to the region as a result of tensions with Iran.

They suggest that the US response to Iran's ratcheting up of tensions has been mostly theatrics, despite the Trump administration's bellicose rhetoric. Warnings of "[severe consequences](#)" have proven little more than threats.

["The United States is leaving the Persian Gulf.](#) Not this year or next, but there is no doubt that the United States is on its way out... Leaders in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, and Muscat understand what is happening...and have been hedging against an American departure in a variety of ways, including by making overtures to China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey," said Steven A. Cooke, a scholar at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

Recent tanker statistics suggest that Saudi Arabia is sending an [ever-larger portion of its crude to China](#). And on a visit to Beijing last month, UAE crown prince Muhammad bin Zayed and Chinese president Xi Jinping elevated their countries' relationship to that of a [strategic partnership](#).

Perceptions of a reduced US commitment may make the Russian proposal of a multilateral approach more attractive in the short term. However, longer term banking on a continued Russian-Chinese alliance could be tricky. The alliance could prove opportunistic rather than strategic.

That could force Gulf states to accelerate the process of taking charge of their own security. So far, greater Gulf assertiveness has been a mixed bag.

In addition to their uncertainty over US reliability and their anxiety about regional Iranian expansionism, the Gulf states are facing persistent popular discontent across the Middle East and North Africa produced by the debilitating Saudi-UAE intervention in Yemen, a failed Saudi effort to [force Lebanon's prime minister to accept the kingdom's dictate](#), and Saudi and UAE projection of military force and commercial clout in the Horn of Africa.

A [recent meeting between UAE and Emirati maritime security officials](#), the first in six years, as well as a [partial UAE withdrawal from Yemen](#) could, however, signal an emerging, more constructive approach.

If adopted, the Russian proposal could suck China and Russia into the Middle East's multiple conflicts and force them to take sides, despite their having been able so far to maintain close ties to all parties of the regional divides – particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran. A multilateral approach could also bring latent Chinese-Russian differences to the fore.

Dubbing the Russian-Chinese alliance "[Dragonbear](#)," geo-strategist Velina Tchakarova cautions that it is "neither an alliance nor a marriage of convenience, but rather a temporary asymmetric relationship, in which China is predominantly the agenda-maker, while Russia is mostly the agenda-taker."

The Russian-Chinese rapprochement operates, in Ms. Tchakarova's words, according to the maxim "'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' A status quo relationship would remain acceptable and be further developed so long as China's rise is not a direct threat to Russia's strategic interests of self-determination and security along its peripheries," including the Middle East.

The question is not whether Russia will begin to perceive Chinese interests as a threat to its own interests, but when. One divergence could be energy, given that Russia is one of the world's major oil suppliers while China is its top importer.

China may not, over the longer term, wish to be dependent on Russia for both its imports and the arrangements that would secure them.

Said Russia and Eurasia scholar Paul Stronski, referring to the sustainability of the Russian-Chinese alliance: "With China now recognizing it may need to strengthen its security posture..., it is [unclear how long that stability will last](#)."

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.