Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East & North Africa: Shatter Belts & Great Power Rivalry

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In geopolitical parlance, a "shatter belt" is a region that is highly fragmented and prone to conflict. Shatter belts are "instability generators" that can spread insecurity into surrounding regions and disrupt the flow of international trade and commerce. Moreover, shatter belts are geopolitical arenas in which Great Powers compete for advantage through client states and proxy forces or seek to maintain stability by intervening against aggressive regional powers.

The modern Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the epitome of a shatter belt. One decade ago, the MENA region was relatively stable by today's standards. Most regional countries were dominated by long-lived autocratic regimes that had imposed a brittle form of domestic stability, and the main regional conflicts of concern were focused on Iraq and Israel. The United States was the undisputed external military power in the region, Russia's geopolitical influence was at a post-Soviet nadir, and China was only then beginning to develop significant economic and commercial interests in the area.

In stark contrast, the MENA region today is exponentially more volatile: Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen remain mired in violent conflict, generating a degree of insecurity that is unprecedented in the region's modern history and revolutionary in its implications for regional and international order. Each of these fractured states radiates fissures of instability far beyond its boundaries, and it remains an open question whether any of them can ever be stabilized within their current internationally recognized borders.

Today, the US continues to play a significant role in regional affairs, but doubts about its "staying power" that emerged during the administration of President Barack Obama linger. Russia has returned and is now involved in a loose alliance with Iran to protect the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. China is beginning to exert a naval reach commensurate with its substantial and growing maritime and commercial interests in the region. European and Asian powers, including the United Kingdom, France, India, Japan, South Korea, and others also play important roles in regional affairs. However, the US, Russia, and China will have an outsize effect on the MENA shatter belt that could either ameliorate or aggravate its inherent propensity for conflict.

The Arab Spring & the Progressive Fracturing of Regional Order

The Arab State system's inability to prevent conflict and maintain regional stability has long been a defining characteristic of Middle East geopolitics. However, the regional wave of "Arab Spring" demonstrations during early 2011 deeply fractured the regional geopolitical order in fundamental and seemingly irreparable ways. The Arab Spring not only caused the ouster of longtime autocratic rulers in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, it also ignited region-shaking conflicts in Libya and Syria. Momentous second-order consequences of the Arab Spring include the Islamic State's invasion of Iraq in mid-2014 and the eruption of civil war in Yemen in 2015.

Depending on the estimate, well over 300,000 people have been killed in Syria's civil war and approximately 4.8 million refugees have fled to neighboring countries. About 6.6 million people remain internally displaced within Syria. The conflict started as a Sunni Arab uprising against the minority Alawite-dominated Assad regime, but over time this conflict devolved into a complex, interlocking set of sub-conflicts

Photo: Ahmed Shamloo Fardi / Wikimedia Commons

Iraqi Army and Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces gather to fight the Islamic State.

Photo: Erfan Kurdi / Wikimedia Commons

Kurdish Peshmerga fly their flag in northern Iraq.

Photo: Voice of America / Wikimedia Commons

War damage in Azaz, Syria

Photo: Joseph Allen / Wikimedia Commons

A US soldier trains Iraqi counterparts to fight the Islamic State.

that are alternately centered on the Assad regime, the Islamic State, and the Syrian Kurds. Moreover, the intervention of external and regional powers — the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar — has transformed the Syria conflict into a "proxy war" in the heart of the Middle East that could reshape the regional geopolitical order at the expense of the US and its regional allies.

In Libya, rebel forces ousted the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011 with limited US, European, and Gulf Arab military support. However, central rule was never restored and the country has long since fragmented into multiple feuding regions, where heavily armed local militias remain the ultimate source of power. The Islamic State has also established a strong presence in the country, which continues to attract US military attention in the form of precision strikes directed by Special Operations forces. Libya is a particularly damaging transmitter of instability into North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. The flow of weapons and militants from the country has adversely affected Egypt, Tunisia, Mali, and other countries, and Libya is also a major point of departure for refugees seeking safe haven in Europe.

An internationally backed transition of power was ultimately arranged in Yemen following the Arab Spring unrest, but the country's fragile internal balance of power collapsed in 2014. Civil war erupted in February 2015 when an alliance of northern factions under Houthi rebel leadership, combined with military forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, toppled Yemen's internationally backed government. This development provoked a major Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015, which was grinding on as of early 2017.

The rapid spread of conflict throughout the MENA region since 2011 has enabled al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to grow considerably stronger, and their competition for leadership of the global jihad movement has caused the jihadist threat to evolve at an accelerating pace. Al-Qaeda has established major branches in Syria, Yemen, and North Africa. The Islamic State, an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, captured vast areas of Syria and Iraq, emboldening the organization's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdad, to declare the rebirth of the Islamic Caliphate in June 2014.

Outside the Islamic State's core territory in Syria and Iraq, the organization is active in Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, among others. However, the Islamic State has steadily lost substantial territory in Iraq and Syria since mid-2015 due to US-supported military operations, and it remains under growing military stress. In response, the Islamic State has increased its emphasis on conducting terror attacks in Europe and Turkey and goading individual "lone wolf" attacks in the US.

Global Commerce, European Cohesion & Gulf Arab Stability

While the MENA region is a negligible producer of manufactured goods, it plays a uniquely important role in global energy production and maritime transportation. The region holds 872.1 billion barrels in proved crude oil reserves, or 52.5% of the world total. In 2016, MENA crude oil production averaged 27.6 million barrels per day, accounting for 30.1% of total world oil production. The region also holds 3,096.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves, or 44.6% of the global total.

The MENA region also sits astride three well-known maritime "chokepoints": the Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean and Red seas, the Bab al-Mandab, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the energy-rich Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The maritime transportation of crude oil through these chokepoints accounts for about 45% of total world maritime oil trade. Maintaining the free flow of energy and commerce through these chokepoints is essential to the uninterrupted flow of international trade, and the presence of US, European, and Asian naval forces continues to play a critical role in deterring piracy and other land-based threats to international shipping.

One of the most serious interregional effects of the MENA shatter belt is visible in Europe, which now hosts over 1 million refugees, mostly from war-torn MENA countries as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan. The rapid influx of refugees is a major factor undermining popular support for the European Union, and is goading the rise of rightwing political parties. The EU must also simultaneously deal with a resurgent Russia, an increasingly nationalistic US, sluggish economic growth, and high levels of debt.

The Gulf Arab monarchies deflected the wave of mass anti-regime demonstrations by cracking down on voices of dissent and by increasing socioeconomic spending to undercut domestic sources of resentment. However, the persistence of low oil prices since 2014 has compelled the monarchies to implement significant austerity measures, including the reduction of energy subsidies. At the same time, the Gulf Arab states are spending more on national defense in response to Iran's growing military strength and expansive regional presence.

The Relative Decline of Pax Americana in the MENA Region

During the Obama years, the US significantly reduced its military presence in the MENA region, mainly by withdrawing all its combat forces from Iraq in 2011. However, the US also continued to maintain the largest Great Power military presence in the region, including ground and air combat forces based onshore in Gulf Arab countries and at sea in regional waters and a growing missile defense architecture stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. The US also sustained close military relations with Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey despite experiencing considerable strains in bilateral relations with each.

In retrospect, the general US stance during the Obama years was avoidance of any major "Iraq style" military interventions in the region combined with the reiteration of traditional US interests. For example, in September 2013, Obama announced that the US would use "all elements" of its power, including military force, to secure "core interests in the region". These core interests included protecting regional allies from external aggression, ensuring the "free flow of energy from the region to the world", combatting "terrorist networks" that threatened the American people, and preventing the regional proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Under Obama's administration, US military involvement in regional conflicts continued, but on a much smaller scale. In 2011, US forces helped Libyan rebels oust the Gaddafi regime. In mid-2014, the US dispatched a small number of combat troops and advisers to Iraq in response to the Islamic State's rapid military gains. US forces were active in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and some African states in operations aimed against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. The US also remained the largest exporter of arms to the Middle East, with approved sales totaling $33 billion since May 2015.

President Donald Trump inherited this geostrategic portfolio, and his initial regional steps aimed to restore relations with longtime allies that became severely strained under Obama, with Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia at the top of the list. Trump also intends to shift US policy in a more activist direction: his chief priority is to defeat the Islamic State and other "radical Islamic terror groups", perhaps in cooperation with Russia.

The immediate priority is to continue supporting local military offensives against the Islamic State in Iraq and in Syria, and preventing its operatives from conducting terrorist attacks abroad. Al-Qaeda franchises in Africa, Syria, and Yemen will also continue to be targeted, but the Islamic State will receive concentrated attention.

Confronting Iran's regional rise is also a priority. The new administration's intention is to strengthen the US and allied ability to deter Iran. At the time of this writing, the administration's Iran policy was evolving in a general hardline direction and toward strict enforcement of the July 2015 nuclear deal.

Russia Returns to the Middle East

One of the core goals of Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin is the restoration of Russia as a leading global power and an indispensable power broker in the MENA region. Ensuring the survival of the Assad regime and a permanent Russian military presence in Syria is critical to the expansion of Russian power and influence in the MENA region.

Russia has long maintained access to a Cold War-era naval facility on Syria's Mediterranean Sea coast, but in mid-2015 it deployed a small, yet potent, military expeditionary force to bolster the Assad regime's faltering military effort against the rebellion. In September 2015, this force conducted it first attacks, striking various rebel opponents of the Assad regime, including groups backed by the US, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Russian interest in striking Islamic State forces, which occupy significant portions of eastern Syria, has been limited at best.

By working closely with the Assad regime's military and Iranian-backed proxy forces, Russia decisively tipped the balance in favor of the regime. In December 2016, the Russian-led military coalition ousted rebels from Aleppo, Syria's largest city, which stands as the Assad regime's greatest victory in the six-year conflict. Russia then quickly took the lead on international diplomacy to halt the fighting and to arrange a settlement to the conflict. Russian diplomats brokered a ceasefire deal between the regime and several rebel groups that went into effect on Dec. 30, 2016.

Russia then organized a new round of multilateral negotiations on Jan. 23, 2017, in Astana, Kazakhstan, involving Iran and Turkey, but not the US. In January 2017, Russia signed an agreement with the Assad regime to expand its military presence in Syria, including the deployment of additional naval vessels. This new arrangement will enhance Russia's ability to project military power in the Eastern Mediterranean and could impede US, Israeli, and European ability to conduct military operations in this critical maritime region during a future crisis.

During the Cold War, Libya was the leading Soviet client state in North Africa, and prior to the 2011 uprising against the Gaddafi regime, Russian energy companies and arms manufacturers had signed contracts reportedly worth between $4 billion and $10 billion. In 2016, Russia upgraded its diplomatic involvement in the Libyan conflict by hosting meetings with leaders of the main factions, including the UN-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli and the competing eastern government in Tobruk.

So far, Russia has pursued a relatively "soft" approach to the conflict in Libya, but there are indications that it might offer "hard" military support to the eastern faction. In January 2017, Russia deployed a naval flotilla off the Mediterranean coast of Libya and hosted the military leader of the eastern faction, Gen. Khalifa Haftar. There is some risk that Russia could frustrate Libyan national reconciliation, if only to

Photo: Russian Ministry of Defense / Wikimedia Commons

The Admiral Kuznetsov, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, returning to regional waters

increase its leverage with the US and Europe on other issues of interest to Moscow, including the lifting of Western sanctions.

Russia is similarly cultivating closer relations with Egypt, which has experienced significant strains in bilateral relations with the US and its chief regional patron, Saudi Arabia. In October 2016, Russian paratroopers conducted a joint counterterrorism exercise with the Egyptian military, marking post-Soviet Russia's first bilateral military exercise in the country.

With Iran, Russia has formed a military alliance of convenience to protect the Assad regime, and Russian strategic bombers have used an Iranian airbase to launch airstrikes against targets in Syria, an unprecedented development. However, there are visible strains in Russian-Iranian relations centered on Iranian fears that Moscow might agree to a deal with Washington on Syria in return for the alleviation of US sanctions on Russia. Russia's support for the Assad regime also places it at fundamental odds with Saudi Arabia, but Moscow and Riyadh negotiated an oil production restraint agreement in December 2016 to push oil prices higher.

Post-Soviet Russia has clearly reemerged as a key player in regional geopolitics, which is cramping US freedom of military and diplomatic action to a significant extent. Moscow is systematically leveraging its intervention in Syria to build influence with regional US allies, and after the US, Russia intends to build on its position as the second-largest exporter of arms and military equipment to the Middle East.

China's Long Game & the Maritime Silk Road

Since the mid-1990s, China has steadily acquired major economic and energy interests in the Middle East. China has invested considerable sums in the development of Iranian and Iraqi oil fields, and China has long since eclipsed the US as a major importer of crude oil from the region. China is also involved in the construction, financing, and operation of ports in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey in the Mediterranean region as well as in Eritrea and Djibouti on the Red Sea.

China is investing an enormous amount in Egypt: $45 billion in the Suez Canal Economic Zone and an additional $15 billion in Egyptian electricity, transportation, and infrastructure projects. These investments are integral to China's ongoing development of a "maritime Silk Road", which skirts the southern edge of the Eurasian land mass into the Mediterranean Sea to ensure access to Europe's vast market. At the same time, China continues to develop the "blue water" naval capability and string of bases necessary to project military power along the entire length of its maritime Silk Road.

In historical terms, however, China is a military newcomer to the MENA region. China's first naval visit to the Mediterranean occurred in 2009. In 2010, China's navy conducted its first visit to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and in 2011 and again in 2014 the Chinese military evacuated Chinese nationals from war-torn Libya. In April 2015, China's navy evacuated foreign nationals from Yemen, marking the first time it has ever rescued non-Chinese nationals from the dangers of an escalating regional conflict. That same year, China also conducted joint naval exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean Sea, gaining additional experience in conducting long-range naval operations. In 2016, China commenced construction of a naval base in the East African country of Djibouti, which also hosts the largest US military base in Africa.

Over the same period, China avoided playing any major military role in regional conflicts. Beijing adheres to a relatively low-key diplomatic stance concerning conflicts in Syria and other regional countries. For now, Beijing is willing to let Russia, the US, and other countries wrestle with these conflicts while it concentrates on the steady expansion of its commercial and naval reach and develops stronger relations with regional states, including key US allies.

Photo: Simon Yang / Wikimedia Commons

The Liaoning, China's first aircraft carrier, dockside

Regional Geopolitical Risk & the Global Pursuit of Power

The US is no longer the sole external military power in the MENA region due to the recent expansion of Russian and Chinese military activity, but it is capable of projecting enormous military strength into the area at relatively short notice. Russia is again playing a major military and diplomatic role in the region, but it is economically constrained and more focused on advancing its geopolitical goals in Europe in competition with the US. China is systematically expanding its power and influence, but this is a slow, steady process that may not come to fruition if slowing economic growth forces Beijing to choose between domestic imperatives and long-range foreign policy goals.

The evolving pattern of global competition and cooperation among the US, Russia, and China will have major implications for regional order and stability well into the 21st century. At times, their interests will overlap, and cooperation aimed at restoring regional stability could occur. However, at the end of the Obama years, the region was at high and immediate risk of being divided into contending spheres of US and Russian influence. As of early 2017, it is unclear if this emergent phenomenon will harden into a prolonged bipolar standoff reminiscent of the Cold War. **JS**

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