



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

The Northern Tier and Great Power Competition in West Asia

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ABSTRACT

West Asia has experienced a series of crises and conflicts since 2011 that have reordered the nature of regional politics. This article examines what it means, in historical terms, to conceptualise politics in West Asia in terms of an informal Northern and Southern Tier alignment. Dynamic geopolitical developments rather than commercial interests are behind these new strategic alignments, which have emerged in the broader context of an emerging global great power competition between China, Russia, and the United States.

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the subsequent Syrian war, and the rise of the Islamic State movement in 2014 have led to a reshuffling of regional and international politics in West Asia. In Syria since 2016, Russia, Iran, and Turkey have actively coordinated their efforts to preserve the territorial integrity of the Syrian state. This development raises the question of whether this partnership to prevent the break-up of Syria could be more than simply a temporary marriage of convenience to save Syria; perhaps it contains the potential for a more multidimensional relationship along the region's Northern Tier.

The Arab Spring upheavals have also prompted a more active Iranian political and military engagement in the Arab world, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This has led to greater security cooperation between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, which all view Iran's increased political and military activity in the Arab world as an urgent threat. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is viewed as an obstacle to even greater regional security cooperation to confront Iran. Consequently, some have argued that an updated version of the Arab Peace initiative, brokered by the United States and with diplomatic support from Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, could pave the way for a more explicit regional alignment between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Therefore, a shared threat perception is leading to greater security cooperation between the states along West

Asia's Southern Tier, raising the question of whether these nascent security ties could lead to broader, more sustained cooperation in this part of the region.

THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN TIERS: FROM PAST TO PRESENT?

The Northern Tier, which initially included Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, originated in the 1920s as a neutral buffer zone between the British and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union needed “breathing space” to regroup in the 1920s, and it sought to reduce the threat from the countries on its southern frontier by ensuring they would not be included in pro-Western collective security agreements. During the 1930s, increasing Soviet pressure and threats, and later the threat of imperial expansion by Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany, eroded the Northern Tier's effectiveness as a neutral buffer zone. Following World War II, Iran became the first site of Cold War confrontation, and the Northern Tier became a primary arena for the emerging global competition. The 1955 Baghdad Pact was a Western-initiated security architecture that was intended to bridge the pro-Western North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and limit Soviet influence in the Middle East. In short, the Soviet Union before World War II and then the United States after it attempted to use the Northern Tier as a means to manage great power competition in West Asia.

A discrete “Southern Tier” of states in West Asia, analogous to the “Northern Tier”, has never existed in name. However, in practice the British exercised authority over the coastal regions of West Asia that linked the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the British established ports and lines of communication between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. These ultimately extended from Haifa in Palestine to Alexandria and the Suez in Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea coast down to Aden in Yemen, extending to Socotra in the Arabian Sea, and continuing through to Oman onto the Persian Gulf, where the British oversaw the Trucial State system until 1971. While the Northern Tier received more attention from strategists during the Cold War, in practice, it was the West's control over the Southern Tier that the Soviet Union vigorously challenged from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. At the time the British were ending their imperial commitments East of Suez and the United States was bogged down in fighting in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union saw an opportunity to destabilise the West's principal suppliers of oil in the Gulf region. But perhaps more importantly, it was America's deployment of its nuclear-armed Polaris submarines to the Mediterranean in April 1963 that ultimately made the Southern Tier states bordering the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean a national security priority for Moscow. The Polaris missiles, which could target Moscow and Leningrad from the eastern Mediterranean, were a “milestone in the Cold War nuclear deterrence calculus.”¹ A geopolitical Southern Tier, despite not existing in name, stretched from the

¹ Lyle J. Goldstein and Yuri M. Zhukov, “A Tale of Two Fleets,” *Naval War College Review* LVII, 2 (2004), 27-63.

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Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. It was a contested arena of critical commercial and strategic importance for great powers throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

TEMPORARY BEDFELLOWS? THE GEOPOLITICS OF TODAY'S NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN TIERS

It has been converging security interests in the Syrian war that has brought Iran, Russia, and Turkey together. In September 2015, in the immediate aftermath of signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the international deal on Iran's nuclear programme, Russia and Iran escalated their direct military intervention to reinforce a weakening Assad regime in Syria. In December 2016, Russia and Turkey organised an alternative diplomatic track to the UN-led Geneva process, which ultimately led to the establishment of de-escalation zones in Syria in May 2017. Beginning in 2017, Iran and Turkey have acted together to prevent the independence of Kurdish autonomous entities in Iraq and Syria. In 2018, Russia and Turkey increasingly coordinated their actions in Idlib Governorate to contain and ultimately eliminate the remnants of the most radical elements of the jihadi opposition in Syria. Coordination between Iran, Russia, and Turkey has stabilised large portions of western Syria, and largely ended major military engagements between the opposition and the regime.

However, it is important not to overstate the nature of these ties. In 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian warplane in Syria, precipitating a serious crisis and potential confrontation between the two countries. Turkey's need for Russian support in Syria led to an apology by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in June 2016, and the rapprochement was cemented with Russian President Vladimir Putin's support for Erdoğan in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, but more broadly, Turkey's relations with Russia allow it more freedom of action to manoeuvre between Russia and NATO. Yet, Turkey and Russia remain wary of one another, and Turkey has concerns about Russia's expanded influence in the Black Sea and southern Caucasus. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 has antagonised Turkey's Islamist regime and led Turkey to a military build-up in the Black Sea. Further, Russia and Turkey are on the opposite sides of the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Iran and Turkey also are uncomfortable partners in Syria. They sit on opposite sides of the Sunni-Shi'a Islamist divide. Turkey's outspoken calls for Bashar al-Assad's ouster for the past seven years stand in stark contrast to Iran's steadfast support for Assad's leadership in Syria. Further, Ankara's close ties with elements of the jihadi opposition in Syria is viewed with disdain and deep suspicion in Tehran. Recently, Iran has expressed its discomfort with Turkey's efforts to repopulate occupied Afrin, in northwest Syria, with elements of the anti-Assad opposition that include anti-Iranian jihadi fighters. Iran fears that Turkey's sphere of influence in northwest Syria, extending west from Manbij

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to Afrin, will ultimately make it more difficult for the Assad regime to re-assert full sovereignty over Syrian territory.

Russian and Iranian support has preserved the Assad regime in Syria. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Russia and Iran also compete for influence with the Ba‘thist regime, providing Assad with some room for manoeuvre between them. Russia’s history of imperial domination in Iran during the 19th and early 20th centuries has not been forgotten in the Islamic Republic. For Russia, the Middle East is a means to a greater end, and Iran is mindful that Russia is playing a global game. Russia’s call for Iran to withdraw its militias from Syria, whether in earnest or not, is a clear indication that Russia and Iran’s interests are not fully aligned in Syria. What fuels their cooperation is a shared opposition to US hegemony in the region.

Similarly, the potential for a “Southern Tier,” which might refer to closer ties between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, converges on two principal issues: Iran and the Palestinians. Increasing regional security coordination between Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been driven by Iran’s expanding regional presence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The Trump administration’s plan to try an “outside-in” approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is based, in part, on converging regional security interests between Israel and Saudi Arabia. It appears the US plan is to leverage American incentives to Israel, while the Saudis, Egyptians, and Jordanians will provide incentives to the Palestinians in order to push the two reluctant sides towards a renewed effort to implement a two-state solution. An active diplomatic process on the Israeli-Palestinian track would provide greater legitimacy to the expanding security cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Further, it would pave the way to greater economic integration between Israel and its neighbours, given the massive Red Sea regional development plan envisioned by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

CONNECTING THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN TIERS

In contrast to the shifting tides of both the Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, trade and economic development offer the strongest prospect for long-term engagement within and between a “Northern Tier” and “Southern Tier” in West Asia. The Northern Tier has the potential to create a new natural gas corridor to deliver Russian and Iranian gas to central and eastern Europe. This Northern Tier also has the potential to play an important role in developing and delivering the eastern Mediterranean’s natural gas resources to market, which would link the Northern and Southern Tiers of West Asia. Further, as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan demonstrate the ability to fulfil the commercial and tourist potential of the Suez-Red Sea corridor, with mega-projects like the Suez Canal Economic Zone and Saudi Arabia’s NEOM, there may be greater exchange between the Northern and Southern Tiers as the natural land-sea bridge connecting trade between Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Israel already serves as an active and robust commercial link between the Northern and Southern Tiers of today's West Asia: a significant portion of Turkey's exports to the Arab world transit through Israel to Jordan. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Israel has hovered between US\$4 billion and US\$5.5 billion for each of the past three years. In 2017, Israel exported US\$1.4 billion in goods to Turkey and imported US\$2.9 billion. This trade has continued at an even level despite the tenuous state of political relations between Turkey and Israel during the last nine years. Israeli and Cypriot natural gas offer another potential area for stronger commercial ties linking a prospective Northern and Southern Tier of West Asia, particularly given Israel's plans to deliver gas to Jordan and Egypt.

RUSSIA'S MOMENT IN WEST ASIA

Focusing on West Asia's geography and potential for economic development should not obscure the fact that the historical logic driving a "Northern Tier" grouping was strategic, not commercial. That logic is no different today. The Northern Tier has emerged in Syria in response to US pressure. Likewise, the key actors in a prospective Southern Tier — Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UAE — have coalesced in response to Iran's "forward defence" in the region. In other words, geopolitical conflict, not commerce, has led to these emerging strategic alignments.

It would also be a mistake to view Russia as part of today's Northern Tier. It is more suitable to think of it as the architect of such a grouping, rather than a constituent member. Russia has been the most effective link between the states of the Northern and Southern Tiers. It has successfully positioned itself as the arbitrator in any Syrian diplomatic initiative. It is playing a critical diplomatic role coordinating with both Israel and Iran as the Assad regime pushes towards reconsolidating its sovereign authority over pre-war Syria. Russia has also been actively coordinating global oil policy with Saudi Arabia, in lieu of or in parallel with OPEC. Russia has expanded its military basing rights and energy interests in Egypt. And, the crisis between Qatar and the Saudis and Emiratis has not affected Russia's ties with either side in the dispute.

Russia has demonstrated that, despite a weak economy and a shrinking population, it has retained the important tools of a great power, as well as the ability to use them to maximum effect. Russia has positioned itself between the United States/Europe, on the one hand, and China, on the other, in order to maximise its freedom of action and avoid being subordinated to what it sees as the hegemonic ambitions of the other two great powers. Therefore, Russia's role as an arbiter of West Asian security should warrant more careful attention, as the tactics it has employed in West Asia in recent years are likely to be employed on a global scale, as the international community continues to accommodate the increasing power and centrality of Asia in global affairs.

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