The Idea of the Northern Tier
A New Order in the Middle East?
Director’s Foreword

A Two-tiered Middle East: The Stakes

In this volume, Middle East Institute scholars Serkan Yolaçan and Nisha Mathew delineate the shape of a new order that may be emerging through the apparent chaos of the Middle East. Their concepts of a Northern Tier and a Southern Tier present a rare macro framework that connects many of the disparate dots of events since the eruptions of the “Arab Spring” beginning in 2011, and their headjerking aftermath. Collaborators flesh out dimensions of the framework while also counterposing evidence that tests its limits.

Opening the Pandora’s Box

In my reckoning, this confounding series of events was touched off by the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the destruction of Iraq, the battle-tested military power of the Arab world, at the hands of his former master, the United States, no less. This rare event cracked the mystique of invincibility enjoyed by his strongman colleagues across the region for three decades, and opened the psychological floodgates that led to their overthrow. The revolts consumed a string of presidents-for-life, but notably stopped at the borders of the monarchies save Bahrain. In a dramatic U-turn from chequebook diplomacy, the oil-rich Gulf monarchies instead sent out fighter jets and mercenaries to their neighbours to hold the flames at bay, their confidence in American protection shaken by the fall of Egypt’s Mubarak and the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Internally, they swept their schools and ministries clean of Muslim Brotherhood elements that had built up their modern educational and religious institutions, as inoculation against the forces of political Islam that had swept into power in republican Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia, and were contesting presidential thrones up for grabs in the region. In Iran, organised political Islam fused with sectarian rivalry to present a further threat in the form of a “Shi’a Crescent” stretching from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, running through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.
Even as the Gulf monarchies held the line in their common front against populist revolt, cracks within the GCC split wide open, between Qatar on one side, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on the other. The division put paid to any modicum of cooperation they may have had in neighbouring countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, where the flames of revolt were still raging, doing little to help douse them. The military extension of their rivalry to the Horn of Africa gave the impression of chaos in the Middle East spilling beyond the region. All this served to underscore the new-found pre-eminence of the small and rich Gulf states in shaping regional affairs.

Syria was where events truly defied conventional analysis. The multiple fronts and dimensions of the conflict confounded any overarching structure of analysis. There, Iran and Turkey were opposed over support for Bashar al-Assad's government, but united in their front against Kurds everywhere. Likewise, the United States and Russia were at odds over regime survival, but coordinated in their fight against ISIS, which flew a Sunni flag. In contrast, America's allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for their part, saw in Syria the further extension of Iran's long Shi'a militia arm after its takeover of Iraqi politics. The Pandora's box that was opened up in Syria when internal conflicts became entangled with external rivalries seemed to come right out of Hafez al-Assad's playbook: he had warned that only a stable Syria could keep all the genies in the bottle, and even Israel had largely agreed. For his prescience he managed to die in office and successfully transfer power to his son.

Emergent Order in Process?

In the face of fragmentation, Serkan Yolaçan's concept of the Northern Tier begins from an analysis of the Syrian situation. Stepping back from the more common transactional views, he discerns in the course of events a process through which Russia, Turkey and Iran have been learning to work with one another, despite holding on to conflicting agendas and interests. Through compromise, co-ordination and a willingness to lower rather than escalate stakes over a series of meetings in the capital of Kazakhstan, this "Astana group" has emerged as "the sole political guarantor of the Syrian peace process", in his analysis.

Looking beyond conflict and war to potentials for cooperation in trade and geostrategy, Yolaçan locates this Northern Tier of countries within a larger West Asia that neighbours Europe on one side, and Central Asia on the other. His view is informed by deep expertise on the intimate historical and modern relations among the former territorial empires of Russia, Turkey and Iran, which have always been neighbours; that will not change anytime soon. Contiguity and cultural inter-penetration make for multiple dimensions of understanding and channels of communication. While such a view may have seemed naïve in previous decades, American sanctions on all of them from the outside, coupled with American absence on the ground, gives them reason and opportunity for making common cause. Further pieces of a wider assemblage come into view with the recent settling of Caspian Sea disputes, and China's entry into Central Asia as a reliable buyer of energy, builder of infrastructure and welcome new buffer against Russian domination. While the western European pieces of the puzzle remain further afield, there the push and pull of American unpredictability and exports to China are factors working in the same direction. The fact that all these countries share a Eurasian transcontinent at a remove from Anglo sea power creates a centripetal force for the westward orientation of China's Belt and Road, and for the corresponding geostrategic calculations of other players, in West Asia and on both its "wings". As a joke on H.J. Mackinder, this is not an Eurasia determined by geography as the pivot of history. Instead of the settled West building order out of the Asiatic hordes pouring across the steppes from the East, it is the barbaric hordes contingently, opportunistically, and incrementally piecing together a potential continental order under the constant pressure of a capricious American air, sea and technological regulatory power. Of course, how far they get, and in what time frame, is anyone's guess.

One attractive or contentious feature of the Northern Tier concept is the way in which it conjoins or conflates recent events in the Middle East with larger historical and geographical trends or fantasies, depending on one's taste. Certainly we hope the mix of reality and conjecture includes enough of each to stimulate further debate, be it among scholars whose job is the pursuit of truth, or political actors whose art is to contrive the possible out of the improbable.

The Northern Tier concept comes out of research conducted by the Arabia-Asia cluster of MEI, which is focused on all dimensions, contemporary and historical, of this geographical and cultural axis that connects Arabia and its West Asian region to Singapore and its Asian neighbourhood. A forthcoming series of MEI Insights being
prepared by the cluster will elaborate on the counterpart Southern Tier concept, an outline of which is presented in this volume by Nisha Mathew. Dr Mathew is an expert on the contemporary rise of Dubai, and the historical dynamics of cities formed by gold, trade and diasporic movements between the Persian Gulf and South Asia. While the Southern Tier concept is informed by her historical and geographical understanding, it is fully grounded in recent developments coming out of the UAE, in the first instance. While Yolaçan’s account of the Northern Tier began with politics, Mathew’s Southern Tier analysis begins with economics: Dubai Ports World’s branching out of its home port to encompass a wider network, piggy-backing off the British P&O maritime network of ships and ports. This expansion put Dubai in the driver’s seat of a global network inherited from Britain’s maritime empire. Mathew’s conception of the Southern Tier builds on this economic kernel, to view the UAE’s military expansion in terms of creating corridors for its protection stretching out to South Asia on one side, and East Africa and the Mediterranean on the other. This home-brewed, D-I-Y reconstruction of the Mediterranean-Indian Ocean sector of prior British trade and security networks comes at a time of heightened threats from Somali pirates, terrorists and Iranian expansion, coupled with post-Iraq American military fatigue. Arguably, the wealth that can flow through a UAE at the nexus of an enlarged flow of world trade at the junction of Asia, Africa and Europe is a larger prize than outsized influence over intractable Middle Eastern politics.

The Southern Tier concept contributes to our understanding of Middle Eastern politics precisely because its framing transcends the Middle East. The Gulf states and their populations were created out of the larger maritime world, and their decision-makers continue to chart a course driven by markers pinned on a larger map. While they are currently punching above their weight in Middle Eastern affairs, their larger orientation provides points of articulation that enable other players, from Europe, Africa, South Asia and beyond to understand the range of their motivations, and to engage them where desirable or necessary despite the risks of being caught up in yet another Middle Eastern imbroglio.

The original motivation for this framework of analysis came out of practical questions about how to maintain good relations with countries in the region without being caught up in their rivalries. It is also driven by well wishes and genuine feelings of goodwill to all in the region. To the extent that the Northern and Southern Tiers congeal and solidify, it becomes possible for external parties to work with each separately. To the extent that players in each tier are able to create efficiencies and produce value within their internal relations, and grow their economies in conjunction with external parties east and west, threats from the other tier may appear smaller in perception, and they may see less reason for directing energies and resources into pre-emption, intervention or outright war. That recognition at least is our hope. While this may have echoes of a Sykes-Picot line for the new century, the goal of amicable self-division is to preserve self-rule, not to impose colonial rule. Good fences make good neighbours, allow each to tend to his own house and garden, and develop the self-confidence needed to host strangers who may indeed become valued partners.

ENGSENG HO
Director, Middle East Institute
Muhammad Alagil Distinguished Visiting Professor of Arabia Asia Studies, Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore

Professor of Anthropology and History
Duke University
Editor’s Introduction

This volume has come out of a conversation that began sometime in late 2017 among those of us in the Arabia-Asia Cluster of the Middle East Institute in Singapore. That year, two unexpected developments in the Middle East had caught us by surprise. First, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had softened his anti-Assad stance on Syria and agreed to compromise with Iran and Russia in response to his reeling partnership with the United States. Turkey’s shunning its former Cold War ally for closer relations with its neighbouring rivals propelled the Astana talks, a trilateral diplomatic dialogue among Turkey, Iran, and Russia over Syria that quickly stole the spotlight from the corresponding Geneva talks. Second, the GCC countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, together with Egypt, imposed an economic blockade on Qatar later that year, accusing their neighbour of sponsoring Islamist terrorism. Boycotted by his GCC partners, the Emir of Qatar turned to Iran for alternative airspace routes and to Turkey for food supplies, both of which proved vital for Qatar’s surviving the initial shock.

Some of us began to observe the effects of these dizzying developments first-hand in our visits to the region. Those who were used to shuttling between Dubai, Doha, and Riyadh, for instance, found themselves having to choose between one or the other. Others saw the new lines drawn in the sand in the meetings they attended: A conference in Istanbul on regional security was crowded with participants from Turkey, Iran, Russia, and Qatar, with no attendees from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Egypt save their dissident scholars in the diaspora. We thus began to ask: Were these new divisions and partnerships simply a result of conjuncture and chance that would dissolve sooner or later with changing circumstances? Or were they here to stay? What held together these new partners with diverging interests? If the Gulf countries in the south and the Iran-Turkey-Russia trio in the north were drifting apart from each other, what of the Middle East as a geopolitical category? Was Russia a Middle Eastern power now? Why did these new partnerships map out geographically? Questions proliferated.

As I ruminated on these questions, particularly on the prospects of the Turkey-Iran-Russia dialogue, I found myself going back to the earlier episodes in the interconnected histories of these three countries that I was familiar with from my own research. Not only do these three neighbours share a long history of imperial rivalry and emulation that went centuries back; there are also curious parallels in their modern histories, such as the triple constitutional revolutions that shook their imperial domains (Russia in 1905, Iran in 1906, and the Ottoman Empire in 1908) or their mutual transformation into nation-states – in the Soviet case, a socialist union of many nation-states – in the 1920s. Other examples include the parallel state-led nationalisation policies in the 1930s and the more recent soft power projections (Russia’s neo-Eurasianism, Iran’s Shi’a revivalism, and Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism) that overlapped in the Caucasus and Central Asia. As I looked back to these historical developments, their unmistakable synchronicity explained why the newfound Iran-Turkey-Russia dialogue had a familiar ring to it for me. The trio’s synchronised move towards a more direct, state-to-state dialogue in their relations seemed like yet another round of the same historical pattern: whatever happens in one domain affects the other, and whatever happens in two affects the third.

Happy though I was to discover the echoes of my own work in the puzzling geopolitical developments of the day, I was equally struck by the absence of any geographical framework in the literature that can capture the historical pattern that binds the modern histories of these three major states. As if the fact of being long-time neighbours and a sense of common fate, while being crystal clear to the leaders of these countries, were lost on the scholars who study them. Questions proliferated once again: Was it possible to see Iran-Turkey-Russia as part of a single, interconnected geography in a historically meaningful sense? If so, what would we call it? What would the implications be for the conventional cartographic divisions such as the one that separates the Middle East from post-Soviet Eurasia? Would an Asia-centric view help us identify the different strands that criss-cross the Middle East, connecting its various parts to the adjacent regions? Would the category of West Asia be helpful, for example, in opening up the closed box of the Middle East to Russia and Central Asia in the north and the rest of Asia in the east? If the relations within those cross-regional strands are tighter than those within the region, then should we start re-conceptualising the Middle East in terms of those strands rather than as a region unto itself?

The Idea of the Northern Tier came as an imaginative response to these questions and is meant to serve as an invitation to look at the Middle East with a fresh set of eyes, especially a time when old alliances are crumbling, and China is entering the scene as a new pole of attraction for investors and politicians alike. In the Arabia-Asia Cluster we had the advantage of being perched in Singapore, where we had enough distance from the Middle East to not be tied up in its day-to-day politics, yet an intimate view of the city’s strong historical ties to the region via the Indian Ocean to imagine it in a trans-regional frame. Moreover, by virtue of being in Southeast Asia, we could monitor a new round of inter-Asian connectivity driven by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Taking advantage of our prized location, we organised a workshop in July 2018, titled “A Northern Tier in West Asia? States, Networks, and Informal Diplomacy”, which brought together anthropologists, historians, and political scientists from around the world. The essays in this volume came out of that conference and the ensuing conversations. Together, they offer a closer examination of the Northern Tier as an emerging axis of Eurasian integration and explore its historical conditions and future possibilities as an interconnected political landscape across West Asia.

My opening essay (p. 11) provides a broad, schematic map of a new, two-tiered geopolitical order emerging in the Middle East while connecting it to the adjacent regions of Central Asia, East Africa, South Asia, and the East Mediterranean. Composed of two main strands, a territorial one in the north and a maritime one in the south, this new order can hardly be explained by differences in religion, ideology, or political system. Focusing on the Northern Tier, the essay identifies a new set of dynamics – namely, partial solutions, strongmen leaders, and a sense of shared fate among old neighbours – to argue, somewhat provocatively, how their interplay may create “an overland strip of peace and order” across Eurasia at a time when China is slowly carving its West Asian passage into Europe.

The second essay by Brandon Friedman (p. 23) provides a valuable historical reminder: the Northern Tier has a genealogy. Initially comprising Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, the Northern Tier was conceived in the 1920s as a buffer zone between the British and the Soviet Union and continued to be an arena of big power competition during the Cold War, with the United States replacing the British as the primary Soviet foe. Although the Soviet collapse ended Moscow’s influence on the Northern Tier, leaving it open to the competing claims of the West and the Islamists, Russia under Putin has made a comeback recently after years of building confidence in the former Soviet orbit.

“Russia’s moment in West Asia”, as Friedman calls it, extends well beyond the Northern Tier. Moscow’s growing relations with the Gulf, which Li-Chen Sim (p. 30) examines in her essay, is a case in point. Sim shows how the Kremlin is fashioning itself as an extra-regional arbitrator in the many conflicts of the Middle East, from Yemen to Libya, by developing relations with the opposing sides to the same conflict. This is a strategy, she argues, that “Russia has already perfected in the former Soviet republics, where it plays a significant role in entrenching multiple ‘frozen conflicts.’” This strategy allows Russia to build influence outmatching its resources.

Iran and Turkey showed similar capabilities by partnering with or patronising transnational networks. However, the ideological overtones of their respective projects also drove a wedge between the two neighbours. Sabri Ateş (p. 38) offers a cautionary tale of lurking sectarianism in Turkish-Iranian relations by taking us back to the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry of the 16th century. Ateş also shows us a way out by presenting the gradual secularisation of relations since the 19th century as another, and indeed a more desirable, path forward for the two states.

Serik Orazgaliyev (p. 46) takes us to the Caspian Basin, where developments in the Northern Tier come into sharp focus. The resolution of the Caspian dispute there gives the post-Soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan ample room to develop commercial and energy links in all directions at once. The Caspian region, already home to the Astana group, is likely to serve as their bridge to China.

Diplomacy and commerce are inextricably entangled along this northern corridor, and such entanglement brings to the fore mobile societies, whose expansive economies and solidarity networks offer alternative avenues for resolving political conflicts and brokering trade deals. Magnus Marsden (p. 54) presents diasporic Afghan merchants as one such society and discusses their transnational networks as channels of informal diplomacy across the Northern Tier and beyond.
The volume concludes with Nisha Mathew’s essay (p. 62) on the UAE-Saudi alliance, whose maritime ambitions are re-ordering the Middle East from the south, widening its catchment area into the littoral areas of South Asia and East Africa. She illustrates how the two oil-rich states, alarmed by the prospect of Iran’s re-integration into the international economy, have successfully reset traditional political alliances in the region with the backing of both the United States and Israel.

SERKAN YOLAÇAN
Research Fellow and Co-ordinator, Arabia-Asia Cluster
Middle East Institute

A Two-Tiered Middle East
Prospects for the Asian Century

By Serkan Yolaçan

Abstract

States in the Middle East today are coming together not on the basis of shared sectarian or ideological lines. Rather, they are coalescing along two rival lines of alliance: (1) a Northern Tier that connects Iran and Turkey to Russia and Central Asia and (2) a Southern Tier that ties the Arabian Peninsula to coastal South Asia, the Horn of Africa, and the southern Mediterranean. Conflicts and rivalries in the Middle East, when seen along these two lines, reveal a clear, operative rationale capable of piercing through the smoke of burning towns and the tangled web of relations that otherwise paint an image of disorder in the region. If these two alliances solidify into blocs, will their rivalries intensify, pulling neighbouring states into proxy wars? Or will they step back to conclude that good fences make good neighbours, divide the region between them, and calm down the countries caught in between? How they handle their rivalries will have consequences for how China’s Belt and Road Initiative may pass through or bypass them.

The Middle East today looks chaotic. The ongoing wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya have each spawned a web of friends and foes on top of old enmities and rivalries in the region. Caught up in these webs, political leaders often make puzzling geopolitical moves that appear to follow a sectarian logic in one moment while defying it in the next. Differences in religion, ideology, and political system in the Middle East help little in navigating its ever-changing political landscape, while any fleeting glimpse of a regional order quickly dissolves in its inexorable anti-Westphalian politics.

The chaos, however, contains an order that becomes apparent when we re-imagine the Middle East by first expanding it to include adjacent countries in West Asia and then dividing it along a north-south axis. States in the Middle East today are coming together not on the basis of...
shared sectarian or ideological lines. Rather, they are coalescing along two rival lines of alliance: (1) a Northern Tier that connects Iran and Turkey to Russia and Central Asia and (2) a Southern Tier that ties the Arabian Peninsula to coastal South Asia, the Horn of Africa, and the southern Mediterranean. Conflicts and rivalries in the Middle East, when seen along these two lines, reveal a clear, operative rationale capable of piercing through the smoke of burning towns and the tangled web of politics that otherwise paint an image of disorder in the region. But what are these alliances, and why do they map out geographically?

Partial Solutions

The Northern Tier comes into clear view in the Kazakh capital, Astana, where the foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey, and Russia have been regularly meeting to broker a peace in Syria. This trilateral dialogue, known as the Astana talks, was ushered in by a rapid dive in Turkish-American relations, which has drawn Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan closer to his counterparts in Russia and Iran. The three presidents, strained by their failing ties with Washington, have begun to tone down their mutual differences to find much needed additional strength in one another.

Though their collaboration does not imply a convergence of interests, the three leaders are keen to learn how to pursue diverging agendas without stepping on each other’s toes. The key to such a delicate dance, as they seem to have discovered, is to proceed with partial solutions to big problems, one step at a time. Let not the perfect be the enemy of the good, as they say. In contrast to total solutions, whose high stakes can cause gridlock, partial solutions raise the prospect of agreement by lowering the stakes for all parties.

The efficacy of partial solutions was demonstrated in the Syrian province of Idlib, the last standing territory of the Syrian opposition. There, a human disaster was prevented by a last-minute agreement between Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi to create a demilitarised zone, a decision endorsed by Tehran as well.¹ By compromising with one another over Syria, the Astana group managed to have a collective say in that country’s future. In fact, they recently shook hands on the composition of a committee to write a new constitution for post-war Syria.² With the withdrawal of American forces from Syria, the Astana group will effectively be the sole political guarantor of the Syrian peace process.

Old Neighbours

Russia, Iran, and Turkey constitute the backbone of what I call the Northern Tier. As long-time neighbours, these three former empires share a long history of imperial competition and emulation. Although their rivalries at times played up sectarian differences such as the Shi’a-Sunni divide, policing of these identities was neither consistent nor absolute. The three imperial neighbours had ethno-linguistic and religious communities straddling their domains, and these cross-border ties remain today. By using these ties, the three states are able to reach out to populations abroad and create cultural and economic hinterlands beyond their sovereign domains.

Russia, Iran, and Turkey constitute the backbone of what we call the Northern Tier. As long-time neighbours, these three former empires share a long history of imperial competition and emulation.

A distinguishing feature of the Astana group, then, is their ability to punch above their weight by partnering with communities that harbour transborder sentiments and resources. Their imperial pasts, which offer inspiring symbols and moral narratives, are hardly incidental to the process. Narratives and symbols help these powers to cast their commercial and military ventures abroad in terms not only of national security but also of historical and moral obligation. Russia’s annexation of Crimea, for instance, would not have unfolded so smoothly if it were not for the pro-Russian sentiments of the Crimean majority and the Kremlin’s ability to capture those sentiments in a moral frame by resurrecting the historical term Novorossiya or “New Russia.” It was not merely a military affair.

Iran and Turkey have shown similar capabilities in the recent past. Following the US invasion of Iraq, Iran successfully established a

¹ On his Twitter account, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, wrote: “Intensive responsible diplomacy over the last few weeks – pursued in my visits to Ankara & Damascus, followed by the Iran-Russia-Turkey Summit in Tehran and the meeting [in] Sochi – is succeeding to avert war in #Idlib with a firm commitment to fight extremist terror. Diplomacy works.”

zone of influence stretching from Iraq to Lebanon by partnering with transnational Shi'a networks of militias, Islamic law experts or mujtahids, and pilgrims. Shrines of Imam Hussain in Iraq and his sister Zainab in Syria were important symbols in mobilising public support for the expeditionary operations of Iran's Revolutionary Guards in these countries. Iran's Shi'a revivalism was paralleled by Turkey's neo-Ottomanism, a term used to describe the country's active foreign policy under Erdoğan. In partnership with diasporic religious communities, such as the one led by Fethullah Gülen, Turkey stepped up its diplomatic and business engagements in the region and elsewhere, and found the moral ammunition for its outward-facing activism in the many episodes and places of Ottoman history.

**Strongman Leaders**

The warming of relations among these old neighbours owes a great deal to their strong leaders. This point is especially true for Turkey and Russia, where the leaders’ firm grip on domestic politics brings them confidence and agility in their foreign relations even if it feels suffocating at home. Unlike institutionalised states, these strongmen embody their own states can make unexpected U-turns or reach last-minute deals without any fear of a major domestic backlash. This strongman capability helps explain the Astana group’s ability to make rapid progress through partial solutions to problems on which they disagree.

Such elastic diplomacy, driven by strong leaders and partial solutions, has emboldened other leaders to come in and capitalise on the collaborative atmosphere that prevailed in the past two years. The recently resigned Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is one of them. Soon after successfully mediating between Erdoğan and Putin in the wake of the November 2015 Turkish-Russian jet crisis, he turned the Kazakh capital into a neutral ground for the three powers to negotiate over Syria. And, much to the surprise of many, the Astana process has proved to be much more effective than the UN and US-backed Geneva peace process that produced little more than a blame game.

Another leader who is riding the tide is the Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev, who has been stepping up his economic and diplomatic engagements in all three directions. In 2016, he brought Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, and Putin to Baku, where they discussed matters of security, energy, and transportation infrastructure across the Caspian.

Last year Aliyev was in Ankara for the inauguration of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) that transports Caspian gas to Europe via Georgia and Turkey. The pipeline is important as it may be a harbinger of things to come in the Northern Tier. For one, the project is likely to extend into Iran, linking its natural gas supplies to the European market.4 Reportedly, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are being lobbied to join in too.

It is no stretch of the imagination to see these energy routes as potential extensions of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that looks to connect East and West Asia via Central Asia. A big obstacle in the BRI’s path was already removed in August 2018 when the decades-long dispute over the legal status of the Caspian was partially settled, allowing for the laying of pipelines on its seabed. The landmark deal among the five coastal states was achieved thanks to their leaders’ shared commitment to focus on the low-stakes aspects of the dispute while leaving the thorny issue of how to split up the hydrocarbon-rich subsoil territory to future bilateral negotiations. The resulting convention was a big win for strongmen pragmatism in foreign relations and their “partial solutions” approach to entrenched conflicts.

**The Two Wings**

With the Caspian gridlock resolved, we may see the proliferation of energy routes across the Northern Tier, tying it to the markets in China and the European Union on each end. Pipelines underground are only half the story. Iran, Turkey, and Russia, whose economies are in dire straits, stand to gain from the Trans-Asian network of highways, railroads and dry ports that connect them to their more affluent neighbours in Europe and East Asia.

This broader commercial infrastructure and its further development incentivise leaders in Europe and Asia to keep the doors open to the Northern Tier countries despite political disagreements, past conflicts, or economic sanctions by the United States. When US President Donald Trump threatened Turkey with sanctions in the summer of 2018, for instance, it was German Chancellor Angela Merkel who reached out

---


to Erdoğan, “offering Germany’s credibility to avert a spillover of economic turmoil.” Similarly, the US-imposed sanctions on Russia and the new tariffs on Chinese goods drew Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, closer together. The two voiced interest in using national currencies in reciprocal payments while flipping pancakes in Vladivostok last year. Last but not least, all of the above countries reiterated their support for the Iran nuclear deal even after Trump’s decision to withdraw from it. In short, the Astana group draws additional strength from China and the European Union – the two wings of the Northern Tier – to counter Washington’s volatile stance against them.

A Southern Tier?

What does the Northern Tier mean for the rest of the Middle East? What kind of a regional order does it imply? The spectre of the Astana group’s growing clout in the region has already alerted Gulf leaders to counteract this northerly force by cementing their own alliances in the south. The Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), who signed multi-billion dollar agreements with Egypt and charmed American notables from coast to coast, has been leading the way. His recently announced plan to “bring several states lining the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden into a bloc to improve trade and maritime navigation” is another step in the same direction. These moves help consolidate what we may call the Southern Tier, which comes into view in the seas surrounding the Arabian Peninsula.

The spectre of the Astana group’s growing clout in the region has already alerted Gulf leaders to counteract this northerly force by cementing their own alliances in the south.

---


3 It was perhaps a telling coincidence that on the day Erdoğan was hosting Putin and Rouhani in Ankara in April 2018, the prince was wrapping up his weeks-long, jam-packed US tour.

The Southern Tier first crystallised in the Persian Gulf, where a total blockade on Qatar by a Saudi-led coalition in June 2017 created a rift in the region, pushing Qatar closer to Turkey and Iran while laying bare a tightening partnership among Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Saudi-Emirati partnership extends into the war in Yemen, where the Emiratis took control of strategic outposts on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait connecting the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea. What has turned into a real quagmire for the Saudis became an opportunity for the UAE leadership, who are using their presence in Yemen to assert control over some of the world’s busiest shipping lanes.

What pipelines and dry ports are to the Northern Tier, maritime routes and port cities are to the Southern Tier. The UAE’s DP World, a global port operator, has been quietly laying that maritime infrastructure through port-related company acquisitions, terminal projects, and counter-piracy initiatives that comprise navies from around the world, including that of Singapore. The UAE’s maritime ambitions, which are a major impetus in its competition with Qatar, place the Southern Tier within an oceanic space, primarily between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, but also across the globe.

The prospects of the maritime Southern Tier are not lost on their neighbours in the Horn of Africa, who have already moved to claim their share. Landlocked Ethiopia has just found an outlet to this busy maritime corridor by making peace with its long-time adversary, Eritrea – the deal was brokered by the Saudis in Jeddah. Geographic proximity and a sense of shared fate have come into sharp focus in this part of the world just as it has in the Northern Tier. This partly explains why the new alliances map out geographically.

On land, the Southern Tier countries are propelled by their anti-Iran and anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments. While Turkey, Iran, and Qatar are at home with political Islam, the Saudi-Emirati-Egypt alliance sees it as an existential threat to their regimes. This ideological rift is essential because while the Northern Tier countries, particularly Iran and Turkey, can mobilise volunteer groups beyond their borders through ideological, religious, and imperial symbols (and this on top of their large armies), their Southern Tier counterparts lack such cross-border volunteer energy.¹⁹

Instead, they mostly rely on airstrikes and mercenaries. This is most visible in Yemen, where the Saudis are trying to win a war in their backyard primarily through airstrikes, while the Iranians, with little direct role in Yemen, gain a lot of leverage by inspiring the Houthi leadership’s worldview.¹⁰ The limited ground capability of the Southern Tier is also evident in Aden, where the Emirati troops are essentially a mercenary force primarily drawn from Sudan.¹¹

What underpins these airstrikes and mercenary forces is a big pot of money. If the Northern Tier are led by former empires with large armies and ground capability, the Southern Tier is driven by new states with lots of money. The only outliers in this categorisation are Egypt and Qatar. Whereas Egypt harbours a potential reserve army for the Southern Tier (though that potential has not materialised yet – Egypt refused to provide any troops for the Saudi-UAE forces in Yemen), Qatar brings money to the Northern Tier, as evinced by its US$15 billion investment offer to Turkey in the wake of the Turkish Lira’s plunge.

The emergent new order in the Middle East outlined here comes into view on a West Asian scale, stretching from Russia and Central Asia to the Arabian Sea and the Horn of Africa. West Asia sits in the middle of the Old World, between Europe and East Asia. It was through this middle chunk that the West went east in the past, and it is through there that the East is going west today. A two-tiered West Asia, if it solidifies, is likely to have far-reaching consequences for what has been called the Asian Century, and the most obvious one is this: the future integration of the Old World along two parallel tracks. While one path would connect Europe and Asia through overland routes along a contiguous geography, the other path would follow the Indian Ocean littoral, connecting the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula to East Africa and South and Southeast Asia, and tie up with the West via the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

This picture roughly coincides with the maritime and overland routes of China’s BRI going west. In the 19th century, when the British

¹⁰ Although reports have linked the Houthi acquisition of missiles to Iranian support, the scale of such support is not comparable to the Saudi capacity for missile strikes in Yemen.

wanted to build telegraph lines going east, they were faced with a dilemma. If they were to lay the cables under water, it would require a big investment initially, but that disadvantage would be offset in the long run by low management costs, thanks to British maritime control. It would be much cheaper to lay the cables overland instead, but then the management costs would be much higher as it was more difficult to provide security overland across several imperial borders and conflict zones. Having tried the overland option, the British eventually switched to the sea, creating the submarine telegraph cables that proved critical for their imperial control across far-flung colonies. Today, China going west faces similar infrastructural and security concerns. Unlike the British in the 19th century, China in the 21st century may not have to choose between land and sea because the possible emergence of a Northern Tier across West Asia may create an overland strip of peace and order stretching across and connecting Russia, Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey into Europe.

The Northern Tier and Great Power Competition in West Asia

By Brandon Friedman

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

12 I thank Ameem Lutfi for bringing this history to my attention.
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.

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 could be more than simply a temporary marriage of convenience to save Syria.

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 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.” A geopolitical Southern Tier, despite not existing in name, stretched from the 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 have 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.

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.

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 are 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 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.
Russia-Gulf Relations
A Case Study of North-South Relations within West Asia

By Li-Chen Sim

Abstract

Russia’s relations with the Gulf, which have long been an under-studied topic, have now become more pertinent in view of Russia’s recent activism in the Middle East. Russia’s contemporary interests in the Gulf are built on three pillars: regional stability, recognition of Russia as a great power, and energy market strategies. This article evaluates the tenor and challenges of Russia-Gulf interactions in these areas and argues that despite Russia’s use of military force in Syria, improvement in Russia-Gulf relations will continue to be achieved by non-military means.

The Middle East’s Northern Tier countries of Russia, Iran, and Turkey have been active in their formal and informal interactions with states and transnational groups in the Southern Tier. This paper focuses on the relationship between Russia, the largest of the Northern Tier countries, and the Arabian Gulf states, in the Southern Tier. It identifies three pillars that frame Russia’s relations with the Gulf and analyses the motives behind the Kremlin’s interest in the region.

Regional Stability

Russia’s prime concern in the Middle East is to minimise the potential for conflicts there spilling over into its traditional “soft underbelly”, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and into the Russian heartland itself. These conflicts include civil uprisings such as those during the Arab Spring, which were perceived to have inspired domestic constituencies in Russia to do likewise between 2011 and 2013, as well as today, most recently over pension reforms. In justifying Russia’s intervention in Syria, its defence minister argued that Russia had “helped solve the geopolitical task of breaking the chain of ‘color revolutions’ replicated in the Middle East and Africa.”

Terrorism in the Middle East is another concern for Russia. Up to 5,000 Russian citizens and 4,000 citizens from other post-Soviet states were estimated to have fought in conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The fear is that returning militants may bolster long-standing local insurgencies in Russia or radicalise the large numbers of Central Asian migrants in Russia. In this connection, President Vladimir Putin declared at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015 that “now that those thugs have tasted blood, we can’t allow them to return home and continue with their criminal activities.” His defence minister duly reported that “over 2,000 criminals who have come from Russia have been eliminated in Syria, including 17 field commanders.”

Consequently, Russia’s relations with the Gulf states are informed by the latter’s leverage over key actors or groups in the Middle East. The Gulf states’ religious soft power, support for local proxies, and financial muscle are influential in intensifying or de-escalating conflicts. On the one hand, Kuwait-based donors were very active in funding rebel groups in Syria, and Saudi-born fighters have played prominent roles in terror attacks in Russia. On the other hand, the UAE has invested in reconstruction projects in Chechnya, funded an anti-extremist Islamic conference there, and played host on multiple occasions to Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of Chechnya and Putin’s ally; its role in promoting stability was acknowledged through the conclusion of the June 2018 Russia-UAE Declaration of Strategic Partnership, the first such agreement between Russia and a Gulf state. As for Saudi Arabia, the recent efforts by its Crown Prince to rein in the export of ultra-conservative Wahhabist practices — long a bone of contention

with Russia – are partly responsible for the uptick in Russia-Saudi Arabia relations. The visit of King Salman to Russia and the agreement to purchase US$3 billion worth of Russian weaponry, both of which are a first, underline this new phase in relations.

**Recognition of Russia as a Regional and Global Power**

Consistent with its goal of being recognised and treated as a global power, Russia's second interest in the Middle East is to insert itself opportunistically into conflicts so that it becomes an indispensable extra-regional power. This way, all roads to conflict resolution in Syria, Libya, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen pass through Moscow. It is a strategy Russia has already perfected in the former Soviet republics, where it plays a significant role in entrenching multiple “frozen conflicts”. Engaging the influential Gulf states as interlocutors, therefore, strengthens Russia's credentials as a global power that can project influence beyond its backyard. A few examples should suffice.

In Libya, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the patrons of General Khalifa Haftar, who is opposed to the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). While Russia provides diplomatic, financial, and military support for Haftar, it also maintains friendly ties with the GNA and an alternative power centre, the Misrata brigade. These ties have disconcerted the two Gulf states because the GNA and Misrata are suspected of harbouring radical Islamist orientations; additionally, their Gulf rival Qatar is a patron of the GNA. Which way Putin eventually leans is of crucial importance to Saudi Arabia and the UAE because of the perceived implications of the conflict on the security of Gulf regimes. In contrast, for Russia, Libya is of less importance than it is to the Gulf states. While Libya is, like Syria, a long-standing Soviet client state and a recipient of Soviet weaponry and military advisers, it is geographically more remote (which makes access rights to its naval bases less attractive), and its relationship with Russia did not in Soviet days, nor do they in present times, have the strategic depth of Russia-Syria relations. Hence, as noted by a former US diplomat, “there are a number of Russian ‘nice to haves’ with respect to Libya, but few ‘must haves’”.5 Russia can, therefore, afford to hedge its bets in Libya and demur on taking sides while being courted by the Gulf states.

Likewise, in Yemen – and again unlike in Syria – Putin has adopted the “support opposing sides simultaneously” approach.6 He is probably wary of Russian overstretch and of the potential for being exploited by local “clients”, as the Soviets sometimes were in the past. While recognising the government of Abdrabbuh Hadi, Russia also received Houthi delegations in Moscow – the Houthis had previously offered the use of Yemeni airports and ports – and played host to the former president of South Yemen in 2017 and 2018. Then, in March 2018, Russia vetoed a Western-backed resolution to condemn Iran for fuelling the conflict in Yemen through its alleged support of the Houthis. Consequently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE appear to have accepted that the best way to extricate themselves from the brutal and expensive three-year long war in Yemen is through Russian mediation, given the latter’s contemporaneous relationship with all concerned parties and its significant influence in facilitating the reunification of Yemen in 1990.

**Engaging the influential Gulf states as interlocutors strengthens Russia’s credentials as a global power that can project influence beyond its backyard.**

The purchase by Abu Dhabi’s sovereign wealth fund of a 44 per cent stake in an oil subsidiary of Russia’s Gazprom, the pre-qualification of Russia’s Rosatom to build two nuclear plants in Saudi Arabia, the latter’s interest in investing in Russia’s Arctic liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility, Qatar’s purchase of a 19 per cent stake in Russia’s state-owned oil giant Rosneft and its interest in procuring the advanced S-400: air defence system may, therefore, be attempts by various Gulf interlocutors to incentivise a desired Russia response.

Moscow, it should be noted, has no desire to upend American hegemony in the Gulf. For one, America’s bases in and alliance with the Gulf Arab states have brought relative stability, predictability, and unprecedented prosperity, which serve to underpin Russia’s growing trade and investment ties with these countries. Also, America’s deep engagement in the Gulf and the Middle East acts as a lightning rod for extremist fighters and critics of Western policies; its departure would

---

5 E. Chorin, “Russia’s Strategic Waiting Game in Libya,” Barcelona Center for International Affairs, 2017

re-focus the attentions of extremist fighters and critics on Russia’s transgressions in the north Caucasus and Central Asia. In addition, Putin is acutely aware that Russia’s resources are comparatively limited and must be used judiciously.7

This implies that for a relatively non-core region like the Gulf and the wider Middle East, Russia’s focus is on accumulating bargaining chips there to trade off with Europe/the United States over key priorities such as sanctions relief and Ukraine.8 Another focus is achieving anti-access and area denial (or A2AD) capabilities. Russia’s imminent delivery of an S-300 air defence system to Syria, expansion of its permanent naval presence at Tartus, Syria, and previous use of air bases in Turkey and Iran all constrain the freedom of manoeuvre that the United States once enjoyed in the Middle East. Henceforth, the Gulf states are obliged to take into account Moscow’s interests, something they had not done for almost 40 years.

Energy Markets

The third pillar of Russia-Gulf interactions concerns energy. As the two largest exporters of oil whose budgets are largely financed by oil revenues, Russia and Saudi Arabia compete for customers and market share. Russian officials, for example, claimed that Saudi Arabia’s overproduction in 2014-15 to drive down the price of oil and thereby weaken Iran’s geopolitical hand did more damage to the Russian economy than sanctions imposed by the West.9 Saudi Arabia has also watched in dismay as Russia became the largest supplier to China in the past two years. Whereas in 2013, Russia was the source of 9 per cent of China’s oil imports, this share grew to 14.6 per cent in 2017. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, found that whereas it was the source of 19 per cent of China’s oil imports in 2013, in 2017, its share fell below

9 For instance, Russia accounts for 3.6% of global GDP compared to the US share of 15.3%; Russia’s GDP is less than 8% of America’s; Russia’s annual military expenditures are 11% of America’s military expenditures. See IMF, “GDP, current prices,” IMF Datamap, 2017; IMF, “GDP based on PPP share of world,” IMF Datamap, 2017; SIPRI, World Military Spending, 2017.


Russia’s share to 12.6 per cent. Over the next few years, Russia—which delivers its oil to China via pipelines—is likely to expand its share of the Chinese market as the latter looks to diversify away from seaborne oil, the source of 80 per cent of its oil imports. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also keeping a wary eye on the activities of Russian oil companies in Iraq. LUKoil, Rosneft, and Gazpromneft have been partly responsible for the growth in Iraqi oil production to a level that now exceeds that of the UAE and, with it, the implications for power distribution within OPEC.

Notwithstanding the above, the degree of competition in oil markets should not be overstated. Despite a poor historical record of cooperation, Russia and the Gulf states managed to abide by an agreement to reduce production levels so as to prop up prices from a low of US$28 in 2015 to over US$70 today. As a result, Russia’s federal budget in 2018, which was projected to run a deficit of minus 3.2 per cent of GDP, is likely to run a surplus for the first time in three years.10 This coordination in oil markets is likely to continue in the short term to mitigate against two scenarios. On the one hand, rising oil prices will only encourage more shale oil and alternative energy projects. On the other hand, giving in to pressure to increase supply – to finance diversification in the Gulf, to replenish the coffers of the National Reserve Fund in Russia, and to slow down uptake of renewable energy – may result in another collapse in oil prices.

The global gas market also contains elements of Russia-Gulf rivalry. In Europe, where Russia’s Gazprom makes the bulk of its profits, Poland and Lithuania have switched from Russian pipeline gas to LNG to reduce their vulnerability to Russia’s propensity to use the “gas weapon”. In energy-hungry China, Russia’s desire to expand its multi-billion “Power of Siberia” gas supply agreement has been tempered by a deal that China signed in September 2018 to purchase LNG from Qatar for the next 22 years. Nevertheless, a closer look at the structure of Russia and the Gulf states’ gas exports suggests some complementary aspects. Russia dominates in pipeline exports, where 93 per cent of its gas exports are via pipeline, while Qatar has some complementary aspects. Russia’s share to 12.6 per cent. Over the next few years, Russia—which delivers its oil to China via pipelines—is likely to expand its share of the Chinese market as the latter looks to diversify away from seaborne oil, the source of 80 per cent of its oil imports. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also keeping a wary eye on the activities of Russian oil companies in Iraq. LUKoil, Rosneft, and Gazpromneft have been partly responsible for the growth in Iraqi oil production to a level that now exceeds that of the UAE and, with it, the implications for power distribution within OPEC.

10 B. Aris, “Russia Inc goes into profit as the budget break even price for oil falls to $53,” The Moscow Times, January 26, 2018.

and re-gasification capacity to cover only one-third of its gas demand, although additional terminals are being built or planned. For its part, Russia, given its lack of LNG export facilities, is unable to quickly re-focus on and compete for consumers in Asia, the destination for two-thirds of Qatar’s LNG exports. In any case, with China’s gas demand expected to soar by 60 per cent between now and 2023, there is plenty of room for more suppliers.

**Conclusion**

Particularly in the United States, there is a tendency to see in Syria a harbinger of Russia’s future military involvement in regional conflicts, accompanied by a clarion call to take firm action against Russia’s expansionism. This paper has tried to highlight that Russia’s behaviour in Libya and Yemen is different from its more one-sided intervention in Syria. Similarly, conflating Russia’s intervention in Syria with a potential military role in the Gulf is misguided. First, Syria is a long-standing client and ally: diplomatic relations between the two were established in 1944, the Soviet Union/Russia has been Syria’s top weapons supplier, Syria is home to a Soviet/Russian naval base and it used to host thousands of Soviet/East European political and economic advisers. The political and strategic depth of Russia’s relations with Syria has a different tenor from Russia’s more pragmatic engagement with the Gulf states. Second, a Russian security role in the Gulf is far more likely to be met with a robust American response, compared to the Russian security role in Syria, since the Gulf is of vital interest to the United States in terms of energy and its ability to maintain command of the global commons. Third, Russia’s intervention in Syria against anti-government forces was shaped by a desire to prevent a blowback in terms of emboldening grassroots movements in Russia. In contrast, none of the Gulf states seeks a Russian security guarantee in view of monarchical resilience.

As a leading Russian commentator has noted, discussions of Russian foreign policy in the Gulf and wider Middle East are usually highly securitised, thus raising fears that Russia is seeking a military foothold or presence. While there is a security element in Russia’s policy towards the region and legitimate cause for concern, the relationship is also much broader and encompasses energy market interactions. Russia under Putin, no doubt, desires to reduce America’s footprint in the Gulf and consequently seek a larger role for itself, commensurate with its self-identification as a great power. But it looks to achieve this goal through non-military means.

**Conflating Russia’s intervention in Syria with a potential military role in the Gulf is misguided.**

In his opening essay (p. 11), Serkan Yolaçan intimated the existence of a two-tiered, rivalrous Middle East. This article suggests that while there are elements of competition between states in the Northern and Southern Tiers, there are also shared interests. For Russia and the Gulf states, the synergies include coordination in global energy markets, combatting terrorism, and conflict management in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. In addition, the two tiers are not entirely determined by geography; the UAE, for instance, has a strategic partnership with Russia but maintains a blockade against Qatar. Such fluidity in terms of bloc membership is a consequence of power and ideological multipolarity in the Middle East today.

---


Iran, Turkey and the Historical Ties that Bind

By Sabri Ateş

Abstract

This paper suggests that the history of Iran-Turkey relations is one of secularisation notwithstanding the intense religious wars that consumed them in the early 16th century and their recent antagonistic projects in places like Syria. Shi'a Iran and the Sunni Ottoman Turks signed their first treaty in 1555 and recognised each other despite sectarian differences. Subsequently, 10 years before the establishment of the Westphalian state system, the two parties signed a treaty emphasising the principle of non-interference in each other's affairs and respect for territorial sovereignty. Iran-Turkey relations thereafter closely mirrored the development of European ideas about territorial sovereignty and non-sectarianism in international relations. The paper concludes that, given this history of secularisation, Iran and Turkey are likely to manage their inter-state contention in the long haul.

One of the anomalies of the Syrian war is Iran and Turkey’s seeming cooperation. This is happening despite their pursuit of diametrically opposing agendas. Iran has been a staunch supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; Turkey is a staunch supporter of the Syrian opposition, which includes groups that deem Iran a neo-Safavid entity deceitfully trying to finish what the two Shi'a revolutions of the past (1501 and 1722) failed to do, that is, establishing Shi'a supremacy in the Middle East. For some time, Turkish dailies like the government mouthpiece Yeni Safak were trying hard to convince the Turkish populace that the endgame of Iran and its Shi'a minions is not only to dominate the Middle East, but conquer Mecca and Medina as well. With their neo-Ottoman hubris in full swing, the sons of the Ottomans were not going to let this happen. Yet, to many observers’ surprise, Iran and Turkey, under the gaze of big brother Russia, put their differences aside and are now cautiously cooperating in Syria.

No doubt, their shared antagonism towards the United States and its presence in eastern Syria make this unholy trinity stick together. However, there is another factor behind this cooperation: Iran and Turkey's shared antagonism towards the sizeable Kurdish minority in each country and the Kurds’ demands in the larger Middle East. This became clearer in their cooperation in choking the Kurdish referendum movement in Iraqi Kurdistan. Another temporarily autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, Afrin, is now under Turkey and its allies’ control, with the blessings of Russia and Iran. These developments put a temporary break on the intense anti-Shi'a, anti-Iranian rhetoric of the pro-government press in Turkey.

While Turkey extends its protection to a variety of Sunni groups in Syria, since the beginning of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings Tehran has accelerated its decidedly Shi'a global mobilisation. According to various press reports, Iran arms, trains, and equips militia from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan à la Hezbollah. Lured by the sectarian pitch of protecting the Shi'a holy sites in Syria and beyond, or, in the case of Iraq, the promise of defending the country and its people against the Islamic movement ISIS, those groups help strengthen sectarian boundaries and the sectarian affiliations of the communities they belong to. Reports about Iran's attempts at changing population dynamics in favour of Shi'a or affiliated groups in parts of Syria, and Shi'a popular mobilisation and its multi-dimensional consequences, including the domination of the Iraqi state, are a daily news feature.

The sectarian animosity reached its ugly climax with the rise of ISIS. In their propaganda leaflets and videos, the jihadists have been referring to Iraq as al-Rafidah, or those who reject the path of Sunna, and as the Safavid Iraq, in reference to the Safavid dynasty that successfully turned Iran into a Shi'a majority land between 1501 and 1722. Iran, as to be expected, is the Safavid Empire reincarnated in this mindset. The jihadists are not alone in this respect. The Qatar-based influential Sunni cleric Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi and the Muslim Scholars Association of Lebanon, to give two examples, voiced similar opinions. Qaradawi issued a fatwa labelling Hezbollah and Iran, the supporters of the Syrian government, enemies of Islam, “more infidels than Jews and Christians”, while the Sunni clerics of Lebanon urged...

1 My observations here are based on the Turkish press; the Iranian press and rhetoric have not been considered.

their co-sectarians to support the Syrian Sunni rebels lest the Safavi project spread.¹

To a historian's ears, the words of Qaradawi and the likes are eerily familiar. They are part and parcel of a strand of politics and what Charles Tilly called a repertoire of contention. Like a script staged over and over by theatre troupes, such fatwas, declarations, and acts that follow share common characteristics that are put into the service of political actors time and again.⁴ Depending on the politicians' use of this repertoire, this legacy provides us with two alternative scenarios of future co-existence in the Middle East: an increasingly prevalent sectarian animosity that dominates decision making and threatens the delicate balance of power in the region; or, a non-sectarian, secular, state-to-state co-existence based on international law which privileges national interests over sectarian identities. A brief analysis of Ottoman-Iranian relations shows that the region has a veritable repertoire of both perspectives to rely on.

**Legacies of Sectarianism**

When the Iranian ruler Nadir Shah Afshar sued for peace with the Ottomans after the disintegration of the Safavid state in the 1730s, he reportedly lamented, “How much time has the family of Ḍūthman since the reign of Selim spent mobilising troops, expending wealth, and destroying lives in order to halt the cursing of the first three caliphs”?⁵ His words refer to a long-running Ottoman grievance, namely, the ritual cursing (tabarru'), by the Safavid Shi'as, of the companions of the Prophet, including his wife Aisha, and the first three caliphs, for not supporting the Prophet's cousin Ali as his successor. Ottoman requests for the cessation of this practice, and its defiant continuation, made it a sine qua non of Ottoman-Iranian negotiations and treaties from 1555 to 1823. A longue durée look at these negotiations could let us follow the trajectory of the secularisation of Ottoman-Iranian relations.

The Ottomans and Safavids started their reigns almost around the same time, the former as a temporal worldly dynasty and the latter as a religious brotherhood. In 1511-1512, in danger of losing Anatolia to pro-Safavid rebels, Ottoman religious and military leaders took decisive action. The highest Sunni religious authority of the time, Mufti Hamza, declared the Safavids and their followers to be apostates, worse than infidels. He affirmed that it was permissible and even incumbent upon Muslims to kill their men and divide their goods, women, and children, and pronounced that any holy warrior who died in this pursuit would be considered a martyr. Emboldened by such fatwa, Sultan Selim (r. 1512-1520) marched towards Iran. He defeated Shah Ismail but was not able to crush the nascent Safavid state.

The Safavids provided Selim with an excuse to confront another Muslim rival, the Sunni Mamluks of Egypt. Accusing their ruler, Kansuh al-Ghawr, of forming an alliance with the heretic shah, Selim defeated the Mamluks, bringing Egypt, the greater Syria, and, more importantly, Mecca and Medina under Ottoman suzerainty. Ruling Mecca and Medina was of symbolic importance, allowing the Ottoman establishment to claim the championship of Islam and the universal caliphate. This was also the beginning of what many have described as the Sunnisation of the Ottoman Empire that accompanied the ongoing Shi'isation of Iran. From then on religious animosity remained an unchanging facet of relations between the Ottoman Empire and the dynasties ruling Iran. Their “deviant” half-brothers to the east provided

---


the Ottomans with an opportunity to show what the straight path was and who strayed from it. Their worldview was shaped by Safavid religious and geopolitical challenges to their authority, including their hegemony over Mecca, Medina, and more importantly Baghdad, while the Safavids’ worldview was shaped by Sunni Ottoman (and Uzbek) challenges to their sovereignty.

In 1639, before the European states established the Westphalian state system, the Ottomans and Safavids signed a treaty that emphasised the principles of non-interference in each other’s affairs and territorial sovereignty.

The sectarian rivalry was taken one step further by Selim’s son, Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566), and Ismail’s son, Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524-1576). Wanting to take advantage of post-Ismail disorganisation in Iran, Suleiman started a period of campaigns against Iran. Two of the most influential religious authorities of his long reign stepped in to clear the way. The famous Ottoman chronicler and Sheikh al-Islam Kemâlpașazâde published a variety of pamphlets and fatwas declaring war against the Shi’as to be the highest jihad and condemning Shah Ismail and his followers as apostates and heretics whose “possessions, women and children would be considered spoils” and whose men “should be killed unless they become Muslims.”

Kemâlpașazâde’s successor, the famed Ottoman Sheikh al-Islam Ebu’s-su’ud, issued similar anti-Shi’a fatwas.

While the Ottomans issued such fatwas, anti-Ottoman propaganda reached its peak during the time of Shah Tahmasb, when the tabarred become institutionalised. In the Safavid capital, Qazvin, Tahmasb would himself interrupt Friday prayers so that a Shi’a preacher could ascend to the pulpit to vilify Ali’s enemies, or the Sunnis. Persecution of Sunnis was accompanied by an aggressive promotion of Shi’ism. Preventing the official cursing ceremonies, therefore, became a constant of negotiations between the Ottomans and Iranians in the following period. Suleiman carried out four major campaigns against Iran between 1533 and 1554, rebuffing Tahmasb’s offers of reconciliation and arguing that he was required by law, religion, reason, and the fatwas of the learned and pious to remove the shah from power.

A Fractious Peace

Following many libellous exchanges, the Safavids and Ottomans signed their first political treaty in Amasya on 21 May 1555. The treaty marked the first time the Ottomans recognised the Safavids as a legitimate entity. Significantly, this is the year that the Treaty of Augsburg was signed, officially establishing the legal basis for the existence of Protestant and Catholic sovereigns in the Holy Roman Empire. Similarly, with the Amasya Treaty, Safavid Iran and the Ottoman Empire acknowledged each other’s respective domains. However, neither the treaty of Amasya nor that of Augsburg put an end to the religio-political confrontations they sought to ameliorate. In both cases, confrontations, sometimes bloodier than ever, continued.

After 30 years of war (1618-48), in which religion played a primary role, the European states established what has been called the Westphalian state system of 1648. A decade earlier, following more than 10 years of confrontation, the Ottomans and Safavids signed the Treaty of Zohab in 1639. Very much like the Westphalian system this treaty emphasised the principles of non-interference in each other’s affairs and territorial sovereignty. Indeed, the peace this treaty brought lasted for some seven decades.

However, when the Afghan occupation of Iran and the end of Safavid rule overturned the West Asian order suddenly, Istanbul did not hesitate to disregard the previous treaties. The 1639 frontiers were abruptly obliterated, resulting in years of renewed upheaval. Before the Ottoman forces marched towards Iran, Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703-1730), like his predecessors, obtained fatwas legalising the killing of the Shi’a men who refused to become Muslims and declaring war against the apostate Safavids superior to jihad against infidels. With such fatwas that basically quoted a long tradition of fatwas, or the fatwa repertoire, the secularisation of the relationship that previous treaties brought about took a major blow.

Yet, to the detriment of the Ottomans, the Iranians soon recovered from the Safavid disintegration. Under the enigmatic Nadir Shah Afshar, they were able to push the Ottomans back and forced them to accept Iranian territorial sovereignty based on the treaties of 1555 and 1639. The Treaty of Kurdan in 1746 defined a new basis for relations between Iran and the Ottomans. That basis was a secular, state-to-state co-existence based on territorial sovereignty.

4 For these fatwa see Adel Allouche, The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict (906-962/1500-1555), (Berlin: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1983), 111-112.
Stabilisation

With the rise of a new dynasty, the Qajar, at the turn of the 18th century, and its attempts to establish hegemony over most Safavid-controlled lands, a new era of Ottoman-Iranian antagonism began, in which borderlands emerged as the most contentious matter. In the early 1820s, taking advantage of the Greek War of Independence against the Ottomans, two ambitious Qajar princes tried, unsuccessfully, to expand Iranian frontiers at the expense of the Ottomans.

Following this period of less-known contention in the 1820s, similar to the Concert of Europe, the Ottomans and Iranians established a process that started less than a decade after the Congress of Vienna. The parties signed what could be called the First Treaty of Erzurum in 1823. Concluded after two years of confrontations, the treaty marked a turning point in Ottoman-Iranian relations: it sidestepped Shi'a-Sunni points of contention and instead highlighted Islamic brotherhood. Emphasis was placed not on their religio-sectarian frontier but on their geographical limits.

Yet, less than two decades after their sporadic and inconclusive war of 1821-1822, Tehran and Istanbul were again at loggerheads due to rising tension on their borderlands. While the parties were preparing for a new confrontation in 1840, the two dominant imperialist powers of the time intervened. As a result of the intense diplomatic activity of Russian and British representatives in Tehran and Istanbul, the two Muslim powers agreed to a negotiated resolution of their problems and to settle their frontiers for good. Consequently, Ottoman and Iranian diplomats and technical teams, accompanied by their British and Russian counterparts, set out to inscribe the idea of fixed boundaries on the two states and the inhabitants of the borderlands, transforming an imprecise and constantly shifting frontier into a clearly defined and increasingly monitored border. The long and arduous process of boundary making – lasting nearly seven decades from 1843 to 1914 – ended the liminal space that Iran had occupied in the Ottoman worldview. Iran was no more the abode of war to be subjugated but a neighbouring state like any other.

Conclusion

The secularisation of Ottoman-Iranian relations was now effectively completed and sanctioned by the dominant international balance of power. Seen from this perspective, the history of the Ottomans and dynasties ruling over Iran is a history of the gradual secularisation of their inter-state relations, which reached its climax during the authoritarian regimes of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Reza Shah. The reversal came with the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 that made Iran a country ruled according to Shi'a Islamic jurisprudence and governed by clerics. A year later, despite their avowedly Kemalist declarations, the Turkish generals carried out a coup d'état whereby state policy in Turkey became what has since been called the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. One could argue that it is this synthesis that gifted the world Turkey’s ruling religio-nationalist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP). With an agenda of further (Sunni) Islamising the country, and a not-so-hidden neo-Ottomanist foreign policy, the ground for a return to sectarianism against an increasingly Shi'a Iran is being made increasingly fertile in Turkey. Developments surrounding the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, and the emerging tensions between Turkey and its allies on the one hand and Iran and its allies on the other (not to mention the tension between Iran and the Saudi coalition) are threatening the process of secularisation that has this long history behind it.
From Conflict to Consensus
Energy Geopolitics in the Caspian Region

By Serik Orazgaliyev

Abstract

On 12 August 2018, the five Caspian riparian states, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, marking a breakthrough in resolving a longstanding maritime border dispute. Although the five still must agree on their borders on a bilateral basis, the document is a major step towards closer regional integration. This paper attributes the consensus on the legal status of the Caspian Sea to two geopolitical factors. First, the introduction of Western sanctions against Russia and Iran led to a convergence in the positions of these two countries on many issues, including the Caspian dispute. Second, China’s increasing participation in Central Asia and the Caspian region prompted Russia and Iran to try to re-establish regional cooperation to counterbalance China’s influence.

Meeting in Kazakhstan for their fifth summit, the leaders of the Caspian riparian states, namely Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea on 12 August 2018. The convention stipulated that each state shall have its own national sector of the seabed, while the surface of the sea shall be treated as international waters. Although the countries still must agree on their borders on a bilateral basis, the document represents a major step towards integration in the region. This paper will argue that consensus on the legal status of the Caspian Sea was reached mainly due to two geopolitical factors. First, the imposition of Western sanctions against Russia and Iran led to a convergence in the positions of these two countries on many issues, including the Caspian dispute. Second, the increasing participation of China in Central Asia and the Caspian region led to attempts on the part of Russia and Iran to re-establish regional cooperation to counterbalance China’s influence. China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI) as well as its cooperation with the Caspian states is expected to foster closer economic integration in Eurasia but it has also intensified competition between the geopolitical actors in the region.

Lake or Sea?

Before 1991 the Caspian was shared by only two countries – the Soviet Union and Iran. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the number of riparian states increased from two to five: Azerbaijan in the south-west, Iran in the south, Kazakhstan in the north-east, Russia in the north-west and Turkmenistan in the south-east. The five littoral states could not agree on the demarcation of the sea and exploitation of its resources. Given that the Caspian seabed contains considerable oil and gas reserves, the issue of its legal status had been a contested issue for the last 27 years.

The key point of contestation was whether the Caspian is a “sea” or a “lake”. The legal status is important because it determines which international treaty applies in regulating ownership rights over the sea and its resources. If the Caspian were to be formally defined as a “lake”, norms of international customary law would apply. From the beginning of the dispute, Iran and Russia expressed solidarity in advocating the “lake” classification. They argued that prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the sea was owned jointly by the two countries and that such regime should continue to hold. The two countries further claimed that joint ownership was needed to protect the Caspian ecosystem from environmental damage, caused by the irresponsible development of hydrocarbon resources.

Alternatively, if the Caspian were to be given the status of a “sea”, relations between the riparian states would be regulated by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). According to UNCLOS, each state can claim a 12-nautical mile territorial sea area as well as an exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles. In addition, articles 69 and 124-132 of UNCLOS provide that landlocked states have a right to claim access to the high seas. Having
the larger share of the Caspian hydrocarbon deposits along their coastal lines, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan maintained that the Caspian should be classified as a sea and supported its division into national sectors because the “lake” status and joint approach would have threatened their newly won political and economic independence from the Soviet Union.

**Routes in Competition**

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, newly independent Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan faced the challenge of delivering their oil and gas exports to world markets. All three are landlocked, which makes it impossible to ship to world markets directly from production sites. To deliver oil to the nearest distribution points, new pipelines had to be constructed. The three Caspian states had similar choices for future pipeline routes:

(i) The “Western route”, lobbied by the United States and the European Union. This was designed to deliver oil and gas from the Caspian to Georgia and Turkey bypassing Russian and Iranian territories. Accordingly, the East-West Energy Corridor initiative included the construction of energy transportation infrastructure connecting the Caspian region with Turkey through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and the South Caucasus pipelines. Furthermore, the three Central Asian states planned to build Trans-Caspian pipelines, connecting the East Caspian states (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) with Baku in Azerbaijan.

(ii) The “Northern route”, actively advocated by Russia. This offered Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan access to the Russian port of Novorossiysk in the Black Sea. Moscow convinced Kazakhstan to build the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline, which runs through Russian territory.

(iii) The “Eastern route”, offered by China, which by the beginning of the 21st century had gradually become one of the world’s biggest energy consumers. The Central Asian states’ desire to diversify their export routes matched China’s struggle to diversify its energy supplies.

In the end, the strategic competition among the regional and external powers greatly influenced the trajectory of the new pipeline routes in the Caspian region. The competition for the energy resources of the Caspian Sea had often been named the “New Great Game”, in which the Caspian region and Central Asia had been the playground. Each of the global powers had its own agenda for influencing the direction of the pipelines. The United States advocated its East-West Energy Corridor initiative, which diverts the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian region to the West, effectively bypassing China, Iran and Russia. Moscow had been attempting to maintain its influence in the region through different mechanisms, including regional integration within the framework of the newly created Eurasian Economic Union. China was a latecomer to the Caspian region as its investments poured into the region only from the late 1990s. In 2013, China announced its BRI initiative, which is designed to foster trade and energy cooperation within Central Eurasia and between Asia and Europe.

The competition for the energy resources of the Caspian Sea had often been named the “New Great Game”, in which the Caspian region and Central Asia had been the playground.

These competing routes gave the Caspian states economic options but with political obligations, limiting their ability to benefit from alternative options and build relations in different directions simultaneously. Several pipeline projects connecting the Caspian region and Europe had been suspended owing to lack of consensus on the legal status of the Caspian. For example, the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) was supposed to connect the Turkmen city of Turkmenbashi with Baku. However, facing strong opposition from Russia and Iran, the project was suspended. Another pipeline was expected to connect the Kazakh port of Aktau with the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. However, this project also was shelved owing to the lack of consensus on the status of the sea. With the adoption of the new convention on the Caspian Sea, these restrictions may be lifted, although new pipeline routes still must be negotiated by the riparian states.

---

Iran’s Return to the Caspian

Economic sanctions re-introduced against Iran in 2018 might have pushed Tehran towards closer cooperation with Russia and the other Caspian states. Iran’s position on its Caspian neighbours has been changing since the beginning of the dispute. During the first few years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and Iran jointly advocated the “lake” status of the Caspian and joint ownership of the sea and its resources. The uncertain status of the Caspian allowed the two countries to block new alternative pipeline route proposals. In the post-1998 period Russia changed its position to support the sectoral division of the Caspian Sea, while Iran insisted that until unanimous agreement was reached the Soviet-Iranian Treaty of 1940 should prevail to determine the ownership of the sea.

On the development of resources, Tehran favoured a “condominium approach”, stating that all resources in the Caspian should be developed jointly. Iran’s interests in the region are not only strategic but also economic since Iran claims oilfields in the South Caspian, such as Alov/Alborz. Tehran stood against the classification of the Caspian as a sea because it possesses only about 13 per cent of the Caspian shoreline, which would leave it with the smallest share of territorial waters. Iran also opposed the idea of dividing the Caspian into national sectors, agreeing to accept this option only with the condition that each state would get one-fifth of the sea.

Because of the sanctions and pipeline projects that bypassed Iran, it had become an isolated regional player in the Caspian region over the past decades. Tehran’s intransigent position on the legal status of the Caspian Sea also was an obstacle to its fruitful cooperation with its newly independent Caspian neighbours. However, Iran signed short-term swap agreements with these countries to provide energy supplies to its densely populated northern regions. The former Soviet states considered several possible oil pipeline projects via Iran, including a pipeline which can deliver oil from Kazakhstan’s Kashagan field to the Persian Gulf. The signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian could now potentially facilitate Iran’s closer cooperation with the Caspian states.

China in the Caspian Region

China’s increasingly active participation in Central Asia’s energy sector was one of the important factors that prompted the five Caspian states to agree on regional cooperation. First of all, in the absence of pipeline routes across the Caspian, China offered the Central Asian states alternative export routes in an eastern direction by constructing the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline and Central Asia-China gas pipelines. Second, China’s more visible participation in the region enabled the Central Asian states to play a balancing act vis-a-vis the various geopolitical actors, namely, Russia, Iran, the United States and the European Union. The more cooperative strategy pursued by Russia and Iran in the Caspian Sea could be seen as attempts to counterbalance China’s increasing influence in the region.

As a result of active involvement in the region since 1998, China achieved significant participation in Central Asia’s energy sector.

Chinese President Xi Jinping made an official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013 during which he announced the BRI initiative, which indicated China’s continued dedication to cooperate with the region. As a result of active involvement in the region since 1998, China achieved significant participation in Central Asia’s energy sector. Although building pipelines from the Caspian region required substantial investment, this has not deterred China. Over the second decade of its independence, Kazakhstan grew to become China’s primary oil supplier in Central Asia, whereas Turkmenistan is now China’s major gas supplier.

Some analysts have argued that China is playing an increasingly important role in the region and some have gone as far as to state that China will replace the United States and Russia in the region. Others argue that Chinese investment is largely predetermined by energy security concerns and it does not seem to be challenging the geopolitical domination of the United States and Russia. China’s main motivation for its involvement in the Caspian region has been its increasing domestic energy demand. Having limited access to Persian Gulf oil supplies, China hastened to ensure the security of its energy

supplies from the Caspian basin. Therefore, in diversifying its energy supply sources, Central Asia is China’s natural choice as no shipment is required.

The inauguration of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which connects China to the main production fields in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, took place in December 2009. This 1,800 km long pipeline is projected to carry 40 billion cubic metres of natural gas annually. The launch of the pipeline was considered a turning point in the development of Central Asian resources. This pipeline met the Central Asian states’ expectations of diversifying their export routes.

Between 2002 and 2009, China also invested heavily in the construction of a direct oil pipeline from Kazakhstan. At the time of its completion, the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline was the world’s longest pipeline, with a length of 2,228 km. For Kazakhstan, the new outlet provided a much-needed diversification of its export routes while diminishing its heavy dependence on the existing pipelines. For China, the pipeline became its first direct import route, which eased Beijing’s concerns about its dependence on imports from the Middle East through the Straits of Malacca. As the supplies through the China-Kazakhstan pipeline route represent a relatively stable source of energy for China, it is expected that the latter’s cooperation with the Caspian states will strengthen.

**Conclusion**

In the final analysis, both the Caspian energy producers and their importers have benefitted from the diversification of pipeline routes in the region. Particularly, a more visible presence of China allowed the Central Asian states to strike a balance between Iran and Russia. Furthermore, the geopolitical rivalry between the global powers positively influenced the Central Asian countries’ bargaining powers in relation to investors. The newly constructed pipelines have connected the Caspian region with Europe in the West and China in the East. Competition, trade and cooperation were the primary drivers behind the development of the new pipeline projects in the region.

The multiple new energy routes, driven by fierce competition among the geopolitical actors, have become complementary routes for Eurasian integration, paved by the new Caspian Sea convention and China’s BRI.

On the eastern part of the Caspian, China is investing heavily through its BRI project to facilitate trade links and energy cooperation with Central Asia. In the Caspian, closer cooperation between the riparian states could lead to greater connectivity and rapprochement between them. These developments have the potential to shape the development of regionalism and integrational processes in Eurasia for decades to come.
Transcending West Asia’s Northern and Southern Tiers
Afghan Trading Networks, Geopolitics and Everyday Diplomacy

By Magnus Marsden

Abstract

Central Asian transnational commercial networks play an important role in connecting much of West Asia. Since the traders who form such networks are multi-lingual and able to inhabit multiple cultural spaces, they are helpfully thought of as “everyday diplomats” skilled especially in the art of negotiation. This article focuses on commercial networks made up of Afghans. It identifies two major corridors of Afghan mobility in West Asia: one connecting West Asia’s Northern Tier to East Asia and the other connecting its Southern Tier to Turkey and Central Asia.

On 1 January 2018, the attention of security experts came to focus on a category of actors that had hitherto rarely been popularly associated with global jihadism. Abdulkadir Masharipov – a citizen of Uzbekistan who was fluent in Russian, Turkish, Chinese and Arabic, and had ties to Uyghur communities in Central Asia and Turkey – played a leading role in the attack on Istanbul’s Reina nightclub that resulted in the deaths of 39 people. He was eventually apprehended by police after having dropped off his four-year-old son in a house in Zeytinburnu, an Istanbul neighbourhood that had long been home to Central Asians. Masharipov had purportedly received military training in Afghanistan.

Transnational communities and networks of Central Asia are playing an important role in creating transregional connectivity across multiple West Asian contexts, yet in ways that contrast with the connectivity illustrated by Masharipov. Like Masharipov, the traders who form such networks are multi-lingual and able to inhabit multiple cultural spaces.

The principal concern of such actors, though, is commerce rather than religious militancy. Mobile merchants offer a distinct lens into Central Asia’s connections to adjacent regions.

Among such networks, those made up of Afghans are especially prominent. There are two major corridors of Afghan mobility in West Asia: one connects post-Soviet Eurasia to China via the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia; the other binds Turkey, the Hijaz, and Central Asia in a triangle. Afghan merchants simultaneously connect West Asia’s Northern Tier to East Asia and its Southern Tier to Turkey and Central Asia.

A strong case exists for treating Central Asia’s transnational actors as “everyday diplomats” – a term that emphasises the capacities that particular groups and networks of persons have in the skills of diplomacy, especially those of negotiation and cultural/linguistic versatility. Nation-states beyond Central Asia have increasingly recognised how the diplomatic skills of sections of their populations can add another dimension to their foreign policy agendas and another layer through which interstate relations are formed. The Central Asian states could similarly capitalise on the pursuit of informal diplomacy along human-commercial routes. Yet, in order to do so, one-sided stereotypes that circulate about traders from the region need rigorous contesting. These states also need to develop a vision of West Asian transregional connectivity that embraces the region’s Northern and Southern Tiers.

Afghans In West Asia’s Northern Tier

A regional context in which Afghan traders have demonstrated themselves as being especially adept operators is the former Soviet Union – West Asia’s Northern Tier. Mobile Afghans in Central Asia are largely viewed by officials from the region and beyond either as costly refugees or terrorists/criminals. In recent years, policy relating to Afghan traders has been confused. States in the region have introduced policies specifically targeting the commercial activities of Afghan traders. Less frequently, policy makers have sought to encourage Afghan merchants to invest in the commercial and agricultural sectors of their countries, as in Uzbekistan today.

Afghan commercial networks in the post-Soviet space were established by Soviet-sympathising Afghans who studied in Soviet universities, technical institutes and party schools during the 1970s and 1980s. These students engaged in petty trade on the side. They dealt in foreign currency and clandestinely sold Indian-made cloth and jeans from Hong Kong to Soviet citizens. On home visits to Afghanistan, they transported air conditioning units made in Azerbaijan as well as Russian-made tea pots. Such goods also found their way to Pakistan along established smuggling networks. The trading activities of these Afghan students built on a deep knowledge of the historical trade in Muslim Central Asia and Eurasia. Various Afghan networks – including those made up of Sikhs and Hindus – had been active in the trade between British India and Central Asia/the Russian Empire, stretching as far as the city of Murmansk, close to the Arctic Circle.2

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Afghan traders helped to ensure that the populations of the Soviet Union's successor states received basic foodstuffs. They re-exported to Central Asia foodstuffs imported from Iran and Pakistan. In the same years, they also cornered the wholesale market in Chinese commodities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Doing so involved establishing trade routes between China and the post-Soviet states, interacting with officials and negotiating market access with other influential trading communities.

Many of the Afghans who moved to the former Soviet space after the 2001 US-led invasion of the country and officially registered themselves as refugees found informal employment in the region's “container markets” as “sellers” for the established Afghan merchants. Such activities continue to be important for the region's economies today, although in some settings new legislation has curtailed the scope of Afghan businesses.

After the Eurasian Customs Union was launched in 2015, Afghans began shipping goods to Russia and Belarus using Kazakhstan's port and rail network. They are now diversifying their range of activities: supplying raw material (such as Russian wood) to Afghanistan and investing in China's café culture in the city of Yiwu.

Afghan merchants operating in this expansive context communicate with one another in Farsi and Pashto. But they are always fluent in both Central Asia's Turkic and Persian languages, as well as Russian and often also Mandarin or Cantonese. Their skills in informal diplomacy have occasionally been latched upon by authorities in the countries where they work. An Afghan trader in Ukraine was said to have helped in August 2015 to secure the release of a Ukrainian citizen captured by the Taliban. In Yiwu a trader from Afghanistan was elected as representative of the city's 13,000 or so foreign traders. He is now a regular feature at official meetings organised by the city's municipal government and widely featured on Chinese television.

Although the Central Asian states frequently depict Afghans as terrorists or criminals, the region's public widely regard them as successful and adaptable traders.

For such networks to function, merchants cultivate and sustain close relationships with regional officials. Such relationships help to insulate traders at times of political sensitivity. As a trader remarked during a conversation with me in Yiwu in January 2018, “We Afghans have lots of experience of states grabbing our money. That's why the only people who invest in China are those who know officials in high places who are ready to inform them of new policies coming our way.”

Although the Central Asian states frequently depict Afghans as terrorists or criminals, the region's public widely regard them as successful and adaptable traders – “instead of reciting the Qur'an into the ears of newborns, Afghans drizzle honey and raisins in their mouths to foster a love of money”, a Tajik who works in one of Dushanbe's universities once remarked to me. Indeed, most Afghan traders in West Asia's Northern Tier seek actively to reject the association of Afghanistan with radical Islam. They largely lead secular lives in which the shared ideal of “living well” is achieved through the demonstration of commercial success and participation in public forms of entertainment. This personal ethics of the good life is combined with a strong collective and cultural commitment to Afghan national identity. This aspect of the traders' identity is reinforced by the policies towards migrants in the post-Soviet states: state officials monitor, fashion ties with and channel available support to “migrant communities” through formally established “diaspora associations”.

Afghans in West Asia’s Southern Tier

A second key human-commercial corridor brings to light the activities of traders originally from the border regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia, who currently live and work in two of West Asia’s greatest religious, commercial and political centres: Istanbul and Jeddah. Most of these traders claim descent from families who lived in the Bukharan emirates of Central Asia until they emigrated across the border to Afghanistan in the 1920s against the backdrop of persecution by the Bolsheviks. These Bukharan émigrés lived in Afghanistan until the early 1980s. They were active in the country’s industrial and commercial sectors – especially in the fur and carpet businesses – and also played a leading role in the development of modern industry in the country. Elite Central Asian families became close to Afghanistan’s urban elite and achieved high-level positions in government. Some of these elite families began to leave Afghanistan for Saudi Arabia, Europe and the United States after the 1973 coup d’état that resulted in the overthrow of Afghanistan’s monarchy.

After the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, thousands of less wealthy émigré families fled to Pakistan, fearing that their lands and capital would be confiscated by the communist regime in Kabul. While community elders supported various anti-Soviet mujahidin organisations, many migrated so that their children could evade conscription into the Soviet army. In Pakistan, they continued to be active in the Central Asian carpet manufacture and trading industry. In the late 1980s, hundreds of these families moved from Pakistan to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, where Central Asians had lived in the Bukhariyyah neighbourhood since at least the 1850s and were followed by a later flow of Central Asians in the 1920s.

The Central Asian émigrés who arrived in Jeddah in the 1980s rapidly established themselves there as well as in Mecca and Medina. They initially filled niches in the economy that had been vacated by earlier waves of Central Asian migrants, such as restaurants selling the Saudi “national” dish, ṇaq al bukhari (bukhari rice). They then became active in the import from Turkey and then China of machine-made prayer carpets and cheap ready-made clothing, both items purchased by hajjis and overseas labourers as gifts to take home.

The kafala system – whereby foreign businesses must be registered in the name of a Saudi sponsor – means that conducting business in Saudi Arabia is inherently risky for foreigners. The most successful of Afghanistan’s Central Asian émigré merchants in Saudi Arabia moved their capital to Turkey. Initially, they bought homes in Istanbul’s Central Asian neighbourhood, Zeytinburnu. Increasingly, they invested in new developments that have sprung up under the regime of President Tayyip Erdoğan. Rising living expenses in Saudi Arabia, partly arising from the “family tax” introduced in 2016, resulted in many Saudi-based Afghans closing their business in the kingdom. Those with sufficient capital secured access to Turkish residency permits and sometimes citizenship.

There exist two core axes of Afghan mobility in West Asia that are disconnected and characterised by contrasting cultural and political priorities and outlooks. It is increasingly likely, however, that changing political and economic circumstances in West Asia will lead to reconfigurations in the dynamics and geographies of these human-commercial channels.

These merchants regularly emphasise their ties to Turkic communities in Central Asia: doing so legitimates their collective and individual citizenship claims in Turkey. Associations established by Afghans in Istanbul are frequently formulated in relationship to an explicitly ethno-linguistic Turkic identity, most conventionally that of “Afghan Turk”. Many Afghans in Zeytinburnu say, however, that they came to emphasise the Turkic aspects of their identity after moving to Turkey: “Back in Afghanistan we knew we were Uzbek but we only ever spoke Farsi. I learned more Uzbek in Istanbul than in my homeland”, a representative of one such cultural association remarked to me in August 2017.

---

3 See for example, Audrey Shalinsky, Long Years of Exile (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1993).


Afghan traders in West Asia’s Southern Tier are culturally and linguistically versatile. They are at home across the Muslim societies of South and Central Asia, the Hijaz and the Arabian peninsula more generally, as well as Turkey. They speak Arabic, Farsi/Persian, Central Asian Turkic languages and modern Turkish. Those who travel to China for trade also often speak fluent Mandarin and/or Cantonese. Most are fluent in Urdu.

There are, however, some limits to the type of worlds across which they traverse. In contrast to the Afghan networks in West Asia’s Northern Tier, the émigré traders in the Southern Tier often remark that their people chose to live in Saudi Arabia because there are few greater blessings than living close to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. They also say they are most happy in countries where they can “hear the call to prayer”. Indeed, some émigré families that are commercially active in Western Europe often arrange for their elderly parents to live in Zeytinburnu.

**Conclusion**

There exist two core axes of Afghan mobility in West Asia that are disconnected and characterised by contrasting cultural and political priorities and outlooks. It is increasingly likely, however, that changing political and economic circumstances in West Asia will lead to reconfigurations in the dynamics and geographies of these human-commercial channels. Policy towards foreign traders in Saudi Arabia has already resulted in some of these traders permanently moving to Turkey but also seeking new commercial opportunities in Eurasia (especially in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the latter being a country where ethnically Turkic Afghans benefit from a citizenship policy directed at diasporic Kazakh communities).

In the context of such geopolitical shifts and the effects these are having on the geographical location of traders, commercial networks that were hitherto disconnected in political and geographohical terms will gradually fold into one another, regardless of the ideological differences among those who make them up. Afghan traders will be well positioned to act as a driving force behind a form of transregional connectivity that builds off but transcends the geopolitics of West Asia’s Southern and Northern Tiers.
Old Problems, New Solutions
An Emirati Perspective on the Southern Tier in the Middle East

By Nisha Mathew

Abstract

The Obama administration’s signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 marked a shift in America’s Middle East policy, hinged on an alliance with Saudi Arabia and military protection to the Gulf states. Seeking to deter Iran and fill regional security gaps left by the United States, Abu Dhabi has laid the foundations for a new geopolitical order we call the Southern Tier. At the core of this emerging maritime order stretching out in a broken continuum of ports, naval bases and strategic locations across the Indian Ocean is DP World, Dubai’s global port operator, and its logistical assets in East Africa. Abu Dhabi’s militarisation of Dubai’s ports network against rising regional threats is the focus of this article.

As Britain was preparing for its military exit east of the Suez, its diplomats in the Foreign Office warned the incoming Americans of two key issues in the Middle East. The first was the danger of a serious conflict between the Arabs and the Iranians, a conflict that could potentially culminate in the Persian Gulf’s invasion by the latter. The second was the Gulf states constantly feuding among themselves, with an ambitious Abu Dhabi vying for control over Bahrain and Qatar. Fifty years later and as the American regional security cover wears off, history has turned full circle. An Iran finding its way on the back of new commercial and military partnerships with Turkey, Russia and others, and the splintering of the GCC following the Qatar blockade both point to old problems rising from the tombs of the past. Iran’s regional ambitions and the growing encrelement of the Persian Gulf by its Shi’a allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen are pushing Abu Dhabi once again to rise to the challenge.

Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, otherwise known as MBZ, rightly guessed that the problems plaguing the Middle East are intractable and not resolved through conventional diplomatic or military methods. Embarking on a new strategic and defence partnership with his counterpart and the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, popularly known as MBS, the Emirati leader began to make moves that laid the foundations for a new geopolitical order in the Middle East to the south of what previous articles in this volume referred to as the Northern Tier. This emerging new maritime order stretches out in a broken continuum of ports, naval bases and strategic locations across the Indian Ocean. How MBZ was able to piece together the Southern Tier as a creative solution to the problems challenging the region is addressed in the next two sections.

DP World and a Competitive Commercial Model

Abu Dhabi’s maritime strategy and geopolitical vision for the Middle East trace their seemingly unlikely origins to the business ventures of Dubai Ports World, or DP World, in the early years of the millennium. Faced with increasing regional competition, DP World began to pursue...
an aggressive supply chain strategy by expanding its logistical operations beyond the port of Jebel Ali. Its acquisition of a port and container terminal in Djibouti in 2004 marked the first significant entry by a Gulf state into Africa, a continent that had not yet begun to show double-digit growth figures. Dubai’s keen business acumen saw DP World secure lease concessions in Aden a year later and a multi-ports deal by 2006 that brought the terminals and stevedore operations of P&O Ports within its portfolio. This was a bold move that upscaled Jebel Ali’s own shipping capacities and pushed the company into the league of global port operators like Hutchison Port Holdings and PSA Corporation.2

Abu Dhabi’s maritime strategy and geopolitical vision for the Middle East trace their seemingly unlikely origins to the business ventures of Dubai Ports World in the early years of the millennium.

A new commercial milieu in which shipping lines, carriers, port operators and public authorities competed vigorously to integrate their operations, with a view to reduced transportation costs and enhanced value creation in logistical services, was evolving. DP World, with its advantage of an early start in Africa, could extract monopoly rents, acquire more ports, bar the entry of other players and dominate the global supply chain.3 Insofar as manufacturing and global trade were growing, the super profits accruing to Dubai in port and logistics operations could be seen as those amassed by a corporation rather than as strategic advantage gained by a state. Other countries, including its neighbours in the Gulf, dismissed these moves as a flawed overreach by an insignificant state. That, however, was no longer the case when the economic recession of 2008-9 hit, and states themselves began to enter the fray as competitors in global trade.

Economic Downturn and the Scramble for Africa

The post-recession world of global trade witnessed states attempting to integrate their existing cross-border markets with the logistical operations and global supply chains to gain competitive advantage over rivals. China, pursuing an aggressive export-oriented policy since 1979 and securing markets the world over, was the first to see potential in the DP World model of expansive commerce. It was a realisation that eventually led to its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has since its announcement in 2013 seen Chinese state-owned companies such as China Merchants Group (CMG) and China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) acquiring about 42 ports in different parts of the globe.

Africa remains central to China’s economic vision, just as it does to Dubai’s. While Dubai took the maritime route to East Africa with an eye to the continent’s major gateway terminals, China had more conventional trade partnerships with a number of African countries dating back to the 1980s. Sourcing the raw materials necessary for its factories from Africa in exchange for manufactured goods, China was instrumental in creating a new class of consumers on the continent.4 With the 2008-9 economic crisis eroding the power of European and North American markets, it seemed only natural that China would lean even further towards Africa to tap into its consumer base. However much one looks at China’s port and supply chain strategy in Africa as a corollary of its three decades long export-oriented manufacturing, there is no discounting that it was also facilitated by DP World’s slowdown, sometimes to the point of a complete standstill, in the wake of the recession.

The space opened up by the downturn and slack in western markets brought new players like Turkey, Qatar and Iran into the picture as well. Turkish involvement in Africa built through long years of diplomatic outreach and humanitarian aid has added a new dimension to Middle Eastern politics.5 It has allowed Iran, pushed out of Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea by the Saudis and Emiratis, to covertly find its way back into these geographies, much to the latter’s disadvantage. Similarly, as Qatar’s ties with Iran grow — over their shared South Pars/North Dome gas fields and the city-state’s increasing alienation from its Gulf neighbours following the blockade of 2017 — the two, along with Turkey, are creating new economic, political and diplomatic hurdles

2Jebel Ali is a trans-shipment port where shipping lines transfer containers en route to different destinations and was therefore more vulnerable to competition from other ports. With the acquisition of P&O, DP World’s container traffic was moving away from trans-shipment to gateway traffic, which gave Dubai access to sources and markets in different geographical areas. This change in portfolio was what put DP World on the list of global port operators like Singapore’s PSA, which it had outbid in its P&O purchase. For details on gateway terminals, see Robert Wright, “DP World gains strategic advantage,” Financial Times, February 10, 2006.


for the Emiratis. The commercial space that an enterprising Dubai had attempted to monopolise was now crowded with players that were fiercely competitive and had greater resources at their command. An alarmed Abu Dhabi had no option but to act.

**Ports as Naval Bases: Abu Dhabi’s Project of Militarised Commerce**

Abu Dhabi took off from where a debt-ridden Dubai paused to keep at the latter’s commercial objectives, albeit adding a military dimension to these. Deploying DP World, which it had bailed out following the crisis, Abu Dhabi is continuing its mission of linking a chain of ports extending out from Jebel Ali and Jeddah to Doraleh (Djibouti), Berbera (Somaliland), and eventually Limassol and Benghazi (Libya) in the Mediterranean. Opening its first overseas naval base in Assab (Eritrea), the Emiratis have been launching attacks against Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, bringing Aden, Socotra and Hodeida under their control. This ensures the UAE’s domination of trade in the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Aden – the maritime corridor deemed the most significant in the world.

Pursuing state-to-state partnerships and controlling ports that serve both as commercial sites and naval bases, Abu Dhabi has been consolidating a Southern Tier that takes the Middle East into Africa, and, as we shall later see, South Asia. With the Southern Tier, Abu Dhabi is advocating and implementing what I call a sectional approach to a snowballing set of problems, of which Iran remains but one element. This approach, targeting selected geographies and involving multiple stakeholders as allies and watchdogs, hinges on a fundamental premise – commerce without the armed support of states can only be a losing battle in the 21st century.

The opportunity to test this premise first presented itself in the counter-piracy efforts of 2011. The scramble for supply chain control had opened up space for a set of non-state players – terrorists and maritime pirates – who had begun to attack for ransom ships in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and even the Arabian Sea close to western India. Spearheading an approach designed to address the root cause of the problem, Abu Dhabi urged states in Africa to partner with it in fighting poverty and unemployment and create new avenues for economic development. Entering into bilateral agreements with states from Somalia to Libya, the UAE acquired ports, built container terminals and opened special economic zones. In return, it offered aid and healthcare services, recruited civilian and military labour, trained soldiers and provided them with access to advanced combat technologies and defence equipment in their fight against pirates and terrorists.

**The Southern Tier as the Emiratis’ Outsourcing Approach to Middle East Questions**

Abu Dhabi’s project of militarised commerce may not have been entirely successful, as the recent setbacks in Somalia and Djibouti against the Emiratis show.6 Turkey, Qatar and China may have lobbied Mogadishu and Doraleh to push DP World out of their territories and close down Emirati naval bases.7 However, these setbacks and failures have not developed into full-blown crises, as had generally been feared. Why has that been the case?

Abu Dhabi’s nimble-footedness as a small state with disproportionate amounts of wealth, and its ability to play power broker in international politics, including with the United States and Israel, allows it to strike a balance between coordination, competition and collision with different states in the game. It is this characteristic that accounts for the basic difference in the mode of operation of the Southern Tier vis-à-vis the Northern Tier. If the latter, as Serkan Yolaçan argues (p. 11), works through the imperial legacies of its constituent states and the deep social ties of their mobile populations in inter-cultural spaces, the Southern Tier works by cashing in on the differential capacities and strategic goals of cooperating states in a horizontal integration. Simply put, it is adding new layers and dimensions of state power and resources to the DP World, or the transnational terminal operations (TTO), model, which constitutes the very base of the Southern Tier.

This fundamental principle defining the Southern Tier and Abu Dhabi’s own limited capacities to defend its ports network in East Africa have pushed it to mobilise the power and resources of multiple states within a larger Indian Ocean geography. While an alliance with Israel hinges on intelligence sharing and that with Saudi Arabia on military combat

---


against Iranian proxies, Emirati partnerships with Egypt, Sudan and Somalia are defined by their provision of mercenaries for the protection of ports. A significant feature of the Southern Tier is that a partner state can be supplanted by another of similar capacities without upsetting the larger order of things.

**Pursuing state-to-state partnerships and controlling ports that serve both as commercial sites and naval bases, Abu Dhabi has been consolidating a Southern Tier that takes the Middle East into Africa, and, as we shall later see, South Asia.**

Abu Dhabi is able to assemble the different bargaining chips in the Middle East and East Africa on the basis of money and its history of offering asylum to exiled politicians, but, more importantly, by offering avenues sought by ambitious states for expansion. The latter is where its relationship with India comes into view.

Only second in position to China as Africa’s trade partner, India, in Abu Dhabi’s eyes, is an ally and power capable of keeping a tab on China’s complete takeover of the continent and offers room for joint entry into potential markets. While Abu Dhabi builds the necessary infrastructure to pre-empt China’s further entry into the ports network system, India can provide a wider regional naval security umbrella along the lines partly of the United States. India, which does not have an ill repute for fomenting sectarian conflicts like Iran does, may be even useful to blunt Abu Dhabi’s own hawkish image in the game. For India, surrounded by China on every side of the subcontinent – from Bangladesh in the east and Pakistan in the west to Tibet in the north and Sri Lanka in the south – riding the Abu Dhabi wave into Africa may be one of the ways it can maintain its hegemony as a regional, perhaps even global, power in the Indian Ocean.

---

**Author Biographies**

**Serkan Yolaçan** is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. His research examines diasporic networks of business, religion, and education as conduits of social and political change in the Middle East and post-Soviet Asia. He is currently working on a book project that brings to light the role of the Azeri diaspora in connecting the modern histories of Iran, Turkey, and Russia. He holds a PhD in cultural anthropology from Duke University and a master’s in sociology and social anthropology from the Central European University.

**Brandon Friedman** is the Director of Research at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. Brandon is also the Managing Editor of the Dayan Center’s journal *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review*. His research interests include contemporary Middle East geopolitics and historical analysis, nuclear arms proliferation, and the political history of the Middle East during the modern period. Brandon’s PhD research focused on the political relations between the rulers of the Persian Gulf littoral during the period of British military withdrawal from the region (1968 to 1971).

**Li-Chen Sim**, an Assistant Professor at Zayed University (UAE), is an expert on contemporary Russian politics, in particular the impact of oil and nuclear energy on Russia’s foreign policy. Her concurrent area of research concerns the political economy of energy in the UAE. Her latest co-edited book, *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, was published by Routledge in August 2018.

**Sabri Ateş** is an Associate Professor in the History Department of the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. He is the author of *The Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
Serik Orazgaliyev is an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University. He was a visiting Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, in 2017. Dr. Orazgaliyev’s main areas of research include: Caspian energy geopolitics, governments and multinational enterprises (MNEs), institutions and development policies, and anti-corruption reforms.

Magnus Marsden is Professor of Social Anthropology and Director of the Sussex Asia Centre at the University of Sussex.

Nisha Mathew is Joint Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute and Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. She received her PhD in History in 2014 from the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, where her research explored the methodological possibilities of Indian Ocean studies in the making of a contemporary urban space such as Dubai. She is currently working on her book titled “24 Carat Cities: Gold, Smuggling and Mobility in the Western Indian Ocean”. It tells the story of Dubai’s rise to prominence as a 21st century global city with gold as the protagonist.

Notes