



TIME FOR RUSSIA TO HAVE A NEW MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGY

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Abstract

The article examines the situation in modern International Relations around Palestine and Israel conflict of 7 October and suggests new Middle Eastern strategy for Russia. Israel's military campaign in Gaza has brought Middle East back to a central position in the global geopolitics. US pivot to Asia-Pacific stands derailed as now it has to focus its attention and resources back to the region. US unconditional political, diplomatic and military support to Israel and its continued vetoing of cease fire resolutions in UN Security Council has damaged its position of neutrality as an external power. The big challenge that the Arab world faces today in the Middle East is the maintenance of security and strategic balance in the region. Given the current conditions and loss of US credibility in the Arab world, Russia as an external power must formulate a new Middle Eastern Strategy designed to fill the power vacuum created in the region by loss of US credibility.

Key words: Balance of Power, Hedging, Russia, Middle East, United States.

Introduction

President Joe Biden's predecessors, the two US Presidents and their administrations chose to place Middle East lower down in the list of US foreign policy priorities and Joe Biden on becoming US President maintained this foreign policy priority. Therefore, the US entrenchment from Middle East continued [1]. The Middle Eastern countries were quick to see this shift in the power politics in the region and made the rationale choice of looking somewhere else for its security guarantees. While one great power was retrenching, other great powers were moving in Middle East to take its place [2, p.87]. Russia's most pronounced interference in Middle East in the past decade has been its military intervention in Syrian civil war in 2015. China, on the other hand, interfered diplomatically and brokered the peace deal between the Saudi and Iranian theocracies [3]. By helping Bashar al -Asad, Russia saved Bashar's dying regime and also gained a military foothold in the region whereas China raised its status as a credible power that could be relied upon as a trusted mediator. Contrastingly, while Russia and China the two other external powers were trying



to bring stability to the political landscape of the Middle East, US was busy not only pursuing regime changes in Syria, Libya and Egypt but also retrenching from the region. The dissimilarity and contrast of the role that great powers were playing in the region was hard to miss by the leadership of Middle East's regional powers. Finally, when Israel responded with an unproportioned military action in Gaza, backed by US diplomatic and military support, that resulted in thousands of Palestinian civilian casualties, the Middle Eastern countries were forced to conclude that US as a great power was taking sides and was contributing more instability than stability in the Middle East. Rising China and aggressive Russia were the reasons that US was pivoting towards Asia-Pacific, but that pivot has now been derailed by the transfer of US attention and resources back to the Middle East [4]. The Middle East has taken back a central position in the global geopolitics where the great powers will now compete and US may no longer be the only power behind which the Middle Eastern countries may hide. The big challenge that the countries of the region face today is maintenance of stability and strategic balance and this will only be possible if powers in the Middle East participate on the right side of the power politics unfolding with great speed in the region. The current Israeli military campaign against Hamas in Gaza is a big game changer in the Middle Eastern politics. The diplomatic stand that Russia takes on the issue will have a definite bearing on the trajectory that the Russian Middle Eastern policy will take in future.

It is in the nature of great powers to use "hard power" to achieve strategic ends but the use of force as a political instrument should be the last resort as mostly instead of creating political success and consensus it results in political dilemmas. Israel's military campaign against Palestinians supported by the United States and western powers is a true and classic reflection of this fact. Historian Jeremy Black posits that historically there has been a changing relationship between purpose, force, implementation and effectiveness [5, p.2]. If we consider J. Black's theory in the context of Israel's military operation in Gaza, 'effectiveness' stands out as the most important deliverable of Israel's military strategy. The current military strategy that Israel has employed in Gaza has a definite purpose behind it. Utilizing military power to achieve national objectives, Israel is focused on claiming as much Palestinian land as possible. Therefore, it employs all possible military resources to attain this objective. The state of Israel has gained considerably more territory than it was awarded under the UN partition plan [6]. Moreover, about 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled and about 85% of the Arab population of the territory was captured by Israel and the Palestinians were never allowed to return [7]. Israel's current military strategy and its ongoing war in Gaza is an articulation of its purpose, which is designed to achieve two things: send a clear message to the world of what Israel wants to achieve and let the men and women of its Armed Forces clearly know and understand what the national priorities are. Having created this higher sense of purpose, Israel is using excessive force to achieve it. For this reason Israel's military strategy in Gaza is ruthless and Israel considers it beyond questioning. Israel's military strategy is bounded by time and conditions and its effectiveness is subservient to the role that many great powers and actors may end up playing in the conflict [8].



Neither the international rules-based system nor the international institutions could so far force Israel, which is backed by United States and its allies, to agree to a cease fire in Gaza [9]. More than 11000 Palestinians have so far been killed in Gaza since 7 Oct 2023 and most amongst them are women and children [10]. In Israel's military campaign against Gaza, US position of neutrality has suffered a great deal and this loss of moral ground for US would result in a reluctance by all the Middle Eastern stake holders to consider US as a future mediator or interlocutor for the resolution of this dispute [11]. The countries in the region, much like many countries in other parts of the world, are also influenced by the Russian narrative about the Ukrainian conflict's "real aggressors" being US and its western allies. This taps into a widespread existing resentment against the US in how the war in Ukraine, US-Chinese rivalry and now war in Gaza have diverted attention and resources from many other urgent global concerns about climate, debt, energy, food, and health [12]. When the credibility of a great power suffers, it creates a big diplomatic vacuum and the great power may no longer be trusted to act as neutral and independent mediator. The creation of such a diplomatic vacuum in the Middle East has created great opportunities for Russia to draw some pertinent conclusions and push itself to fill this vacuum and assert its presence in the region. If there ever was a time for Russia to craft a new Middle Eastern strategy, that time is now, and it should center around resolving the Palestinian issue.

Russia has always maintained deep interest in Middle East. In the XIX century, Russia fought Turkey, England and France for access to the Mediterranean to protect fellow Christians under the Ottoman rule, and to secure a foothold in the Holy Land [13]. 'Even in the post-World War II era Soviet Union was a major force in the Middle East and Moscow even supported the Palestine Liberation Organization in its struggle against the "Zionist entity" [13]. Egypt and Syria waged wars against Israel with Soviet weapons, help from Soviet military advisers, and occasionally even Soviet pilots [14]. Soviet engineers and money helped build Egypt's Aswan Dam [15]. Then, in the late 1980s, the Soviet Union fell on hard times and rapidly withdrew. For the two decades that followed, Russia barely registered a presence in the Middle East and in its absence US grew accustomed to acting as the region's hegemon—waging wars, dictating its political vision, and punishing governments that defied its will [16]. But today US support for Israel's war in Gaza has compromised its influence and credibility in the region [17]. There is now a clear division between the countries of global north and global south, in how these countries perceive the Israeli war in Gaza that is leading to innocent deaths of Palestinian civilians [18].

The Power Vacuum in Middle East and Russia's Middle Eastern Strategy

According to Biden-Harris National Security Strategy and country's actual policy, we can see that United States has been pivoting towards Asia-Pacific leaving the Middle East on the second roles. Are there strong enough powers to fill the void, which will be left after American politics' shift? Today, Israel has enough military power to dominate all other states in the Middle East but has to resolve its internal situation, deal with international pressure for its politics in Gaza and urge from certain countries to adopt two state solution in Palestine. So the likely powers that can fill the US role are Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Yet none of them is a great power like US, China or



Russia. So, for the power vacuum to be filled an outside great power will have to play an active role and Russia must see this as a great strategic opening and debate, articulate, formulate and operationalize the diplomatic, economic and military components of its Middle Eastern Strategy with great urgency.

Moscow may initially utilize economic and military aid to assert authority in the region but the real goal would be to eventually shift the geopolitical balance of power in the Middle East. The central argument of this paper is that Russia must determine a choice of strategy to compete as a great power to fill this power vacuum in a time frame, in which the Middle East in the words of Gregg Carlston “will become nonpolar with no one in charge of it” [19]. The balance of power theory in international relations suggests that other states must secure their survival by preventing a powerful (and nuclear capable) state from dominating them and for this they have to rely on an extra-regional balancer, a role in which Russia can easily fit in. Therefore, the proposed Russian Middle Eastern strategy is designed to create balance of power in the Middle East taking lead from what NATO achieved for the European continent during the cold war period.

Every strategy is backed by a strategic logic, which is the intellectual foundation on which it rests. The strategic logic of America’s Middle Eastern strategy is to ensure the security of Israel at all costs. It is based on the assumption that Israel will capitulate and cease to exist if American political, economic and military support is withdrawn from it. Israel’s military success has a lot to do with the American patronage. Arab countries also need patronage under the nuclear umbrella of a great power to restore balance of power in Middle East. Israel’s nonstop aggression since 7 October 2023 in Gaza despite the condemnation by the world and ruling by International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court is a testimony of what lack of balance does to a region [20].

According to John J Mearsheimer, the advocate of realist school of thought, the current structure of international system which is no longer bipolar or unipolar now favors great power balancing under the balance of power logic. He considers that the US led world order of liberal internationalism is collapsing because of the change in the structure of international system [21]. Liberal internationalism as a world order, he suggests, could only proliferate in unipolar system, where a single world power did not have to fear any other power and not worry about other great powers balancing against it. The intellectual foundation of US world order of liberal internationalism was Francis Fukuyama’s theory of end of history [22]. The rise of China and resurgence of Russia has proved that the history has not ended yet.

As the US interest in the Middle East wanes and disengages in the Middle East to pivot Asia, Russia can take over to reassert its image of a global power broker. The assumption of such a role for Russia is indicative in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during his speech in UN General Assembly in 2023. He said that “the Palestinians have been waiting for more than 70 years to have their own state, which was solemnly promised to them, but which the Americans,



who monopolized the mediation process, are doing everything in their power not to allow. We call for a pooling of efforts of all responsible countries to create the conditions for a resumption of direct Palestine-Israel negotiations” [23] Russia has used the recent conflict in Gaza to highlight Western hypocrisy and this has resonated well with the receptive audience in the Middle East. Diplomatic component of Russian strategy in the Middle East is again reflective in the words of Russian foreign minister in the same speech in UN. He said, “It is gratifying that the Arab League has got its second wind and is stepping up its role in the region. We welcome the return of Syria to the Arab family, and we welcome the start of the normalization process between Damascus and Ankara, which we are shoring up with our Iranian colleagues” [23].

Thomas P. M Barnett the author “The Pentagon’s New Map: War and peace in Twenty-First Century” developed a geopolitical theory that divided the world into the “functioning core” and the “left behind gap” [24]. People in most countries in the Middle East, like in most of the global south, consider themselves as part of “the left behind world”, and when Russian Foreign Minister lays the blame of this divided world on the west, his words resonate with this group of people. In the words of Sergei Lavrov, “Western collective, continue to spawn conflicts that artificially partition humanity into hostile blocs and hamper the achievement of its common goals. They are doing everything they can to prevent the formation of a truly multipolar and fairer world order” and that “Associations such as BRICS and the SCO are on the rise, providing the countries of the Global South with opportunities for joint development and defending their rightful role in the multipolar architecture, which is emerging beyond anyone’s control”[23].

Iran is a country on which Russia will have to rely a great deal in order to gain a foothold in the Middle East. Iran’s recently deceased President Ebrahim Raisi also agreed with Russian perspective of the changing world and demonstrated that by saying at UN during his speech that, “the world is changing amid the emergence of a new international order and the path is irreversible... Western policy of domination is no longer an answer for the world and the old liberal order that served the ruling elites and capitalists has also been abandoned... The project to Americanize the world has failed... the resistance and awareness of nations has increased more than ever... An independent and robust neighborhood presents an opportunity for the entire region. We will welcome any extended hand quite warmly... The people of the region see Iran as a secure partner for their own security” [25]¹. Considering that the power in Iran is controlled by the Rahbar, Supreme Leader, and all matters of foreign policy are defined by him and Supreme National Security Council the continuity of Iran’s politics in general and in relations with Russia in particular is ensured after the new President is elected.

In his famous observation H. R. McMaster, a retired United States Army Lieutenant General who served as the 25th United States National Security Advisor (2017 – 2018), states that, “any strategy

¹ United Nations, General Assembly, General debate, His Excellency Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi President. 19 Sep 2023, Accessed on 31 May 2024



without resources is a fantasy” [26, p.330]. For Russia to assume any kind of leadership role in the Middle East, it should, first of all, make a rational assessment of its military and economic presence in the region. Russia is under western sanctions and is committed to executing special operations in Ukraine. However, Moscow’s increase in influence and leverage in the Middle East can be attributed to the loss of influence and leverage by US as well as the growing trend of middle powers of the region to resort to the policy of hedging as all of them seek not alignment but opportunities in the changing world in the future [27]. CIA Director W. Burns ascribed these countries to the category “hedging middle,” as they have a clear “intent on diversifying their relationships in order to expand their strategic autonomy and maximize their options,” as well as “see little benefit and lots of risk in monogamous geopolitical relationships” [28]. In our opinion, Russia must grasp this opportunity offered by the moment in which hedgers are not taking sides, apparent by many regional countries choice of not condemning or sanctioning Russia on its invasion of Ukraine thus keeping the door of diplomatic relations open with Russia as a resurgent power.

War in Ukraine and now war in Gaza have contributed to global division and some Middle Eastern countries are taking advantage of the situation to raise their own regional and international profiles [28]. Take the example of Qatar, geographically a tiny state but it is already leveraging its relationship with Hamas to make itself into an indispensable regional player—one with more influence than both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) [29]. Daniel Hamilton and Angela Stent in a recently published article in *Foreign Affairs* after a series of conversations with the scholars and private sector experts from Brazil, India, Indonesia, Israel, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey state that there is “across the board, reluctance to take sides in what is largely seen as a strictly European conflict” [28]. This speaks of how the world stands divided on many matters in which they have a different view than US and its western allies. This division of world opinion is also about European mindset - an idea most vividly explained by the Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar. Speaking at the GlobSec 2022 forum in Slovakia and responding to a question on India’s official position on the Ukraine conflict, he noted: “Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems” [30].

Moreover, Russia’s military footprint is already in the region. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, since 2012, Russia has accounted for roughly 16 percent of all arms sales to countries in the Middle East and North Africa, second only to the US [31]. Its largest regional clients over the last five years have been Algeria (which purchases 70 percent of its arms imports from Russia), Egypt, and Iraq [31].

Russia is also an observer country in OIC and President V.Putin addresses the Muslim heads of states from OIC platform, through numerous events like annual International Economic Forum “Russia-Islamic World” in Kazan, The Strategic Vision Group Russia – Islamic World, etc. and this direction of Russian Foreign policy has intensified since 2022. Russia hosts the biggest population of Muslims in Europe and some 16 million Muslims make 10 percent of Russian



population [32]. Considering that its many surrounding countries are also Muslim or hold dominant Muslim population, Russia's pivot towards the Middle East and its engagement with the regional countries will create a very positive image in its own Muslim population and also the surrounding Muslim world. Economic interests should also drive Russia's Middle Eastern strategy as trade with the Middle Eastern countries will play a major role in offsetting the effects of western sanctions. The immediate strategic logic of Russian Middle Eastern strategy should be that Middle Eastern countries should start seeing it as an alternative to US. Presenting Russia as an option vis-à-vis US will be initiation of creating strategic balance in the region.

The Contours of Russia's New Middle East Strategy

Saudi Arabia as a country maintaining good working relations with almost the entire Arab world, Israel and even Iran with which it has restored its diplomatic relations can be the anchor of Russia's new Middle Eastern strategy. President V.Putin has already reached out to Riyadh by carrying out a surprise visit to the country on 6 Dec 2023 [33]. The New strategy could be two pronged. Firstly, it might encourage Saudi Arabia to use its influence to lead the Muslim world and push forward the Israel-Palestinian peace process based on the principle of two state solution. Secondly, Russia may push for regional peace in Middle East based on the European experience: under US protection that guaranteed Europe more than 70 years of continental protection, prosperity and peace [34]. By creating NATO and through its readiness to arbitrate relations between member states, US prevented the occurrence of any major war in Europe. What Middle East needs is a NATO like security guarantee the creator of which can be Russia and its allies and partners and not US. In the changing world order if Russia joins with other powers like China, Iran and Turkey to create NATO like security guarantees in the Middle East than it will create the much-needed strategic balance in the region and the chances of any Gaza like aggression by US and Israel against any Arab country in the future will reduce significantly. US has been leading Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey and has been thwarting Israel and Iran in the region. Both US and Israel share a common goal of keeping the Middle East disunited and Russia's new Middle East policy should aim at bridging these Middle Eastern countries' disunity. It is not the Palestinian issue that will decide the balance of power in the Middle East but the fate of the failing states of Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, and in all these countries Iran exercises ample influence. The future center of gravity of the Middle East will not be in Levant but in the Persian Gulf and thus the countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran will play a significant role in determining the future of the region [35].

Critics claim that US policy of containing Iran has promoted Sunni extremism in the region. It has taken clear side of Israel as its patron and ignited conflict after conflict in the region. Russia's policy in the Middle East should aim at fostering a new framework in the region in which regional integration will lead to a stable status quo. President Putin's surprise visit to UAE and Saudi Arabia and hosting the Iranian President back at Moscow within two days speaks of the initiation of this new Russian Middle Eastern policy and President Putin's likely assessment of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran playing a meaningful role in assisting future Russian Middle Eastern strategy may be



based on correct assumptions [36]. Russia can utilize dialogue, trade and commerce to begin an era of Russian dominance in the region where a new and parallel security arrangement can be made available to the region under the Russian umbrella. Exploiting the gradual decline of US influence in the Middle East, Russia can begin a process of state building of countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Lebanon. With the end of geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia the conditions are set for Russia to begin the rebuilding of a new political framework that advances the security and economic interests of the Arab world and in which the non-state actors and different militias and proxy wars should have no future.

The Counter Argument

West considers that although Russia is a great power, it is still vulnerable and its vulnerability comes from the regime's concentration of power in one man's hands. That his eventual death or incapacity may throw the regime into disarray. War in Ukraine has also triggered unprecedented sanctions and has caused a number of Russians to flee the country. West considers that the geopolitical influence of Russia is in a state of decline as many European countries have cut their dependence on Russian energy supplies. US not only retains its allies' political support (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and even Iraq) but also its military presence in these countries. How can then it be said that US is pulling out of the Middle East and there is a power vacuum getting created in the region?

Before exiting the Middle East, Washington wanted to put its hope in a new security architecture that it was seeking to leave behind. This security architecture was being built around the normalization efforts between Israel and the Arab states through Abraham Accords, and centered against a mutual fear and threat of state of Iran. But over seven months of fighting in Gaza has already debunked the myth that this security architecture can prove a counter weight against Iran. The sense of shared interest through Abraham Accords has been destroyed by ongoing unpopular and unproportionate military response by Israel against Hamas' attack in October 2023. Today, however, Israel and a U.S.-led coalition are fighting Iranian proxies in five places—Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen—and the Gulf states are nowhere to be found. They have instead doubled down on détente with Iran.

As far as the vulnerability of President Putin's regime is concerned, today all but a few European countries recognize the need to challenge Russia head on. The sanctions' effect is also being mitigated due to the new found trade and commerce agreements of Russia with China and India and many East Asian and Middle East and African countries. The response to the question "What happens to Russia if something happens to President Putin?" has no certain answer. However, it is best expressed, in our opinion, by Prof John J Mearsheimer when he quotes the example of Israel. He suggests that there are worst hardliners in the Israeli cabinet that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and who could take over and do worse than what Israel has done to Palestine under Netanyahu. Mearsheimer says that the world cannot be sure about who takes over from President Putin and in his view President Putin has so far demonstrated restraint in the war in Ukraine that



anyone else taking over from President Putin might not [37].

US alliance and partnership with some of the Middle Eastern countries and its military presence in the Gulf clearly suggests that UAE, Saudi Arabia and some of the other Middle Eastern countries may not be able to replace US with Russia as their security guarantor in the foreseeable future but that should not stop Russia from operationalizing its Middle East strategy as the limited goal of this strategy initially should be to provide many Middle Eastern governments the alternative relationship with Russia as a means of asserting more autonomy from Washington.

Conclusion

US must realize that it is no more a hegemon in the Middle East. It is just another player amongst many other players. The dawn of multipolarity on the region dictates this reality. Russia needs to execute an assertive approach and despite its military commitment in Ukraine it must divest its attention and resources towards the region. Critics of this Russian strategic commitment to the region must know that Russia's strategic engagement with the Middle Eastern powers will go a long way in offsetting the disadvantages of the western imposed sanctions. This strategy would also have a positive bearing on the Muslim population of Russia as engagement with Muslim countries will enhance the government of Russia's image amongst its Muslim minority. US unflinching military support to Israel has raised many doubts in the minds of the Muslim countries that so far had been US client states. Russia should sense the opportunity as it comes right at the time when most countries in the region are hedging and the world is also fast moving towards an international system based on multipolarity. Keeping Saudi Arabia and Iran in the forefront and as anchors of its new strategy in the region Russia should attempt to create a NATO like security organization, bearing in mind all the shortcomings of the Collective Security Treaty Organization's activities, that should bring balance of power in the region.

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a regional and international system that continues to evolve, ideas, concepts and relations change. Only those countries make the right strategic choices that continue to follow the changing tendencies and make the best strategic choices in the given circumstances in the interests of their states. Russia may consider making that right choice by drafting and fine tuning its Middle Eastern strategy keeping in view the changing circumstances.



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