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Weathering a Global Transition: The Middle East's Balancing Momentum*

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Abstract

Regional trends strongly influence and are influenced by global power flows. For decades, international politics have been shaped and reshaped by a bipolar and, after the break down of the USSR, a unipolar world order. Both orders played a significant role in shaping and directing Middle Eastern politics. Yet the unipolar order is no longer at play. And since the global flow of power is ongoing, a new world order is being shaped in what seems to be a lengthy transitional period. This article focuses on the effects of the global transition of power in the Middle East and the region's efforts and mechanisms to cope with it. I argue that the spill-over of international volatility into the Middle East creates a less stable regional politics, and that efforts for balancing are pursued by regional powers to increase their maneuverability as well as their coping capabilities in a volatile era by distancing their policies from global actors' priorities and standoffs. The article is structured such that after an introduction, I delve into the meaning and nature of the global transition of power, which serves as the paper's the conceptual framework. In the ensuing four sections, I discuss the imbalanced nature of regional politics as well as the way in which the region is interpreting and thereupon coping with the global change.

Keywords: Iran, Middle East, Regional Powers, Transitional Period, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, World Order

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1. Introduction

The global order is in a power-transition mode. New trends in global politics, including the steady rise of a peer competitor to the United State on a global stage—China—have been doing away with the unipolar world order. As opposed to the 1990s, the United States is no longer the sole dominant power directing world politics. Besides a rising China, Challengers such as Russia are taking part in the reshaping of the global order by exacerbating the transformative nature of the new period. Washington played a key role in turning the tide against the global order it was leading by overstretching its expensive military muscles far-and-wide, invading Afghanistan and Iraq in the process. This is while challenging and rising powers used the momentum to increase their share in the yet-to-come global order. Over time, the overstretch brought up the need for a more darted "pivot-to-Asia" strategy in Washington that focuses on the main international threat to its global role.

In such a volatile situation, middle powers, both within the US orbit and without, started drifting away from their traditional role in observing the US-led "roles based system" and the resulting world order. Yet obviously the United States remains an active international power, shaping much of the regional trends in the Middle East. For US client-states in the region, for instance, the US remains the main security provider. Although the US pivot to Asia and its decreased interest in direct involvement in the region could potentially change the regional equation in the long run, in the short-to-medium term, US security guarantees are sought and paid for! This is especially true when it comes to smaller states who try to shield behind a US presence and backing against their neighbors' "mal-intentions". As a result of continued US—real or perceived—

effectiveness, countries such as Iran focus on a region "free of US presence" while simultaneously follow a policy of alignment with its challengers on a global stage.

Generally, the Middle East is securing its share of the friction between the US and its rising competitors. This paper is an effort to deal with a two-fold question: first, how is the transitional period affecting international relations in the Middle East and second, what are the ways in which the Middle East is coping with that change. The hypothetical answer to the first question is that the spill-over of international volatility into the Middle East creates a flued, less stable region, and to the second is that, despite differences, efforts for balancing are pursued by regional powers to firstly increase their maneuverability by balancing off global powers against one another and secondly to increase their coping capabilities in a volatile era by distancing their policies from global actors' priorities and standoffs. Countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, for instance, try to balance their ties with the US by building stronger relations with US challengers. The Ukraine war was a clear indicator of this "balancing act". Countries falling outside of the US orbit—such as Iran—become more assertive in pushing for a regional—and even a global—change.

2. A Structure in Transition

The Cold War, starting after World War II, pitched the two superpowers and their allies against each other in two rather rigid coalitions[1] (Tucker & Roberts, 2007). Changes were rare and often times led to proxy wars between the two superpowers. The wars in

1. See Swift, 2003

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the Koreas, Vietnam and Afghanistan were only the most visible ones. Tens of other conflicts—inter-state and civil—were fought throughout the Cold War. This rigidity with many proxy wars in between, led to an intense arms race between the two superpowers and their allies/proxies. Number of nuclear warheads in the USSR and USA were enough not only for a "second strike capability," but also for rendering the entire world in uninhabitable ruins.

In such circumstances, and to avoid being played in proxy conflicts, countries of the so-called "global south" tried to forge a coalition independent of the two global blocks. Non-alignment gave the global south more agency; yet could not save if from falling as a proxy theatre to much of the two blocks' conflicts[1] (Kullaa, 2011). As such, the end of the Cold War was—as expected—good news to some and bad to others in the global south. The US ascendance as the sole superpower with global reach was good news to its allies who lived under the threat of nuclear war for over four decades. Yet, for many independent states, who tried to make use of the Cold War to increase the scope of their maneuverability, an international system with the US as the only pole was alarming. To put that into perspective, one should take into account the importance of having a second option in the face of superpowers' coercive policy. The duality of global powers gave many nations a wide room to act independently, therefore balancing off superpowers against one another. As the end of the Cold War approached, these ambitions soon disappeared.

As other states react to concentrated power by counterbalancing[2], fearing its current or future behavior (Waltz, 2000, p. 1), the era of American "unipolarity" was short-lived.

1. See Allison, 1988
2. See Levy, 2003

Beside the counterbalancing endeavor, the unipole's own deeds are also of significance. As the story of many mighty powers illuminates, the unipole starts acting with less consideration to the limits of its might once there is no peer rival. Additionally, revisionism is not confined to other powers in a unipolar order. Robert Jervis argues that unipolarity offers powerful structural incentives for the leading state to be revisionist[1]. The United States occupied Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively—an endeavor proved lethal to its global status over time. It had to spend energy and treasure in extended amounts and bandwidth at a time when its to-be global rivals were accumulating wealth, investing in their innovative economies and human capital.

Changes in the US global position came clearer when the country decided that it was no longer capable or willing to keep occupying Iraq and/or Afghanistan. It therefore soon came up with the "pivot to Asia" strategy. To explain the essence of the new strategy, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote that "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action" (Clinton, 2011). The strategy was a rebalancing effort focused on countering the rise of China as a rival potential superpower (Goldberg, 2016) rather than divesting Washington's global efforts and limited treasure on different issues with varying degrees of significance. This included regions around the globe including Europe and the Middle East, two of the main priorities for the US global agenda during and after the Cold War.

Besides a calculating United States, the new era in global politics is marked with three intertwined characteristics with global

1. See Jervis, 2011

reverberations. First is an inconsistent US policy: While pivoting to Asia was and remains a bipartisan strategy in the United States, the election of President Trump with an inward-looking America-fist perspective, weakened the US global posture vis-à-vis its global competitors as well as its ties with allies/proxies. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the Iran nuclear deal—is an illuminating example. While Washington attempted to undermine the accord by violating its commitments toward the deal (Trump, 2018) and pushed for a "better deal" with Iran, its own European allies views were closer to those of China and Russia in handling the aftermath of US violation of the deal. Other examples include Trump's withdrawal from many international agreements including the Paris Climate agreement (Galbraith, 2019). Although the Biden Administration tried to remedy the past by reverting back to many of the pre-Trump policies, the inconsistency and its possible recurrence moving forward remains in place.

A second feature of the new architecture is the continuous rise of a peer competitor in Asia—China. While at odds with the US in many aspects of global politics, Beijing has been enjoying a rapid economic/trade growth in the same global system the US has been rocking for some time now. A rising China is incrementally providing the world with a "second option" and an increased level of maneuverability that went lacking after the Cold War. Although creating more volatility in the international arena, this is welcome news to the global south, as Washington's imposing posture is dwindling and, as such, their own strategic autonomy and position vis-à-vis the US is emboldened.

A resulting third factor is increased friction between the leader of the status-quo ante and the rising/challenging actors as well as an increased level and possibility for global conflicts. The Russia-

Ukraine war, the Israeli invasion of Gaza and the instability ignited by and spreading around it, the Iranian-Israeli conflict and the potentialities surrounding old conflicts such as the Taiwanese, the Koreas, etc. are all cases to be reckoned with in the transitional period moving forward. Increased military expenditure by countries relying on US support, such as Japan and Germany to 1.6% and 2% respectively (Nagatomi, 2024) is quite telling on the volatilities surrounding the transitional period and its future possibilities.

Historically, transitional periods tend to be more volatile and instable—hitting weak states and crisis-driven regions with a higher frequency than usual. Robert Gilpin explores a variety of arguments on conflicts arising between an established hegemonic power and a rising/challenging one, and focuses on the changes and fluidity that it creates in world politics[1]. A transition is bound to increase instability and fluidity. Nonetheless, once in place, due to the anarchy underpinning them, international orders are not to guarantee stability, yet they provide consensual or forced top-down order. As such, the main question for the Middle East—and other regions—would focus on their ways of coping with the transitional period moving forward.

3. An Imbalanced Region

Strategic imbalance has been a salient feature in the Middle East for decades. Security strategies and planning by regional states are reflective of that imbalance. The imbalance has to do with both the distribution of capabilities and the strategic planning to cope with changing environments and rising challenges/threats. Distribution

1. See Glipin, 1981

of military capabilities shapes states' intentions (Zakaria, 1998, p. 9), and the way in which they try to cope with (re)distribution of power shapes their strategic culture. Differing levels of power and strategic modalities have led Middle Eastern countries to adopt different strategies and mechanisms to address their security needs.

Bandwagoning is one strategy adopted by countries such as the GCC member states to do away with their security challenges. The bandwagoner "hopes to receive a share of the spoil, or at least be destroyed last, in exchange for its loyalty" (Motin, 2024, pp. 19-20). Although providing them with security, bandwagoning limits their strategic autonomy and puts a cap on their "strategic maturity"—which results from lengthy independent strategic planning. While banking on great powers—England after World War II and the US since the 1970s—provided conditioned security, it however kept those at the receiving end of it short of strategic maturity and autonomous security planning.

States such as Iran prioritized *balancing* as opposed to bandwagoning and over time carried out policies to embolden their balance against threats via both a regional alliance-building effort and capability-building within. As an outcast in the US-led security order in the Middle East, and as balancing in general and capability-building in particular imposes heavy costs on an economy and a society (Mearsheimer, 2014), Iran had to endure immense pressure for its move towards strategic autonomy. Over the decades, however, Iran managed to strengthen its deterrence with a credible conditioned-threat posture—through a set of symmetric and asymmetric capabilities build both within Iran and around the Middle East.

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The regional strategic imbalance is rooted in the divergence between a home-grown security strategy and planning on the one hand and an imported and dependent one on the other. While the first provided security by regional states and had a crucial effect on independent strategic planning, the second provided security by importing it from global powers—widening the regional gap over strategic maturity and independence.

The gap is strongly related to the level of power that a state has or aspires to achieve. While middle powers usually have a history of independent strategic planning and/or aspire for one, small powers lack that history and/or aspiration or both. Furthermore, the gap creates a strategic asymmetry over the decades that cannot be easily filled. Wars are, historically, ignited by that asymmetry. As Mackinder once put it, War is "the outcome, direct or indirect, of the unequal growth of nations" (Mackinder, 1962, p. 1) for decades, small states in the Middle East tried to fill the gap by bandwagoning and using a great power umbrella to tackle their own security challenges. This is becoming a more problematic strategy with a security-provider focused on pivoting to Asia as its main strategic priority.

Efforts to localize defense industries and "go-it-alone" on strategic positioning in the region is part of a struggle to cope with the regional asymmetry that have deemed perilous to national security in an age of global transition of power. "Saudi Arabia and the UAE's endeavors for developing indigenous defense industries can be seen as part of a broader effort to hedge against the US and assert their own regional power" (Gulec & Atalan, 2023, p. 8). Those attempts towards balancing could potentially usher a new phase in regional balance, yet the shift requires unwavering determination and a continued years—if not decades—long effort

in the face of structural and geopolitical challenges (Gulec & Atalan, 2023, p. 9).

Another aspect of the gap concerns the role that global politics play in directing national policies around the region. One significant feature is what can be termed as *secondary effects*—global politics flowing into and through regional actors' behaviors and priorities without necessarily relating to their own agenda. The maximum pressure of the Trump administration is an example among many. Regional states such as Qatar, Iraq, Turkey and others have had close ties with Tehran and were working on developing those ties. Yet, when the Trump administration started its maximum pressure campaign, an adapting phase started in those states' policies towards Iran beyond their own priorities. Such *secondary effects* of a US primary policy are neither unique to the Iranian case nor confined to the US's usage of its global power. Middle Eastern politics has always been, in one way or another, in a coping mode with global politics spill-over effect into the region.

4. Regional Reverberations

Structural developments on the global stage are reverberating in the Middle East inter-state relations and strategic planning. While the United States' pivot to Asia is a move beyond the traditional role that Washington played on the global stage during the Cold War and afterwards, it has been a cause for regional strategic revision and adaptation around the Middle East.

States that have, over the decades, bandwagoned with Washington to offset challenges and address security needs, are starting to incorporate balancing as a new foreign policy strategy. Thereupon, the Middle East is going through a "balancing

momentum" within which, on the one hand traditionally balancing actors are ratcheting up their autonomous push against the hegemon in the world system, and on the other hand security-importing states[1] such as Saudi Arabia are moving towards balancing as a novel statecraft strategy—thereby enhancing ties with non-Western global powers, specifically the rising ones, and keeping a visible distance from a US-led global struggle aimed at cornering those powers. With the growing GCC influence in the Arab World in what is termed as the "Gulf moment"[2], the drive for strategic autonomy is likely to widen throughout the region over time.

The resulting regional shift boils down to three strategic elements that are likely to shape much of the future of international relations in the region. The first is a newfound regional "agency" not only on the part of non-Western-allied powers in the region, but also those traditionally allied with Western powers. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, the new "hyper-nationalistic approach" is focused on balancing its domestic and regional interests to ensure its security. Kardash and Sinkaya (2024) provide a Turkish account of the change, suggesting that a realist foreign policy approach to counter external actors by relying on coercive instruments and unilateral policies will underpin Turkish policies in the Middle East. Rózsa (2024) writes on how Egypt is positioning itself as a responsible regional actor through its policies towards the conflict in Gaza, a posture that, she reiterates, is part of a redefinition of the identity of *Egypt/republic* built by President Abdel-Fattah Sisi. Generally, the agency momentum around the region is coming up

1. States that rely mainly on a superpower/hegemon to either enjoy a security umbrella against foes/challengers or import sophisticated weapon systems to balance off against them.
2. See Abdulla, 2024

with a new set of strategies to cope with the global transition. The adaptation is unveiling unprecedented regional agency at the expense of an accustomed to, patron-agent model, in which US-allied regional powers look at Washington for strategic guidance.

A second widespread feature is the regional actors' opting for balancing as opposed to bandwagoning in previous decades. From Iran's "looking Eastward" to Saudi Arabia's growing ties with China on strategic levels—leading up to arm procurement and building both civilian and military technological linkages with Beijing, as well as Egypt's enhanced ties with both Russia and China despite its traditionally strong military/security alliance with Washington, and Turkey's balancing role between the NATO—in which it is a member state—and Russia, a proliferating "balancing momentum" in the region is felt and is enhancing by the ongoing global transition of power. This is not to suggest that former US-allied regional powers are to necessarily move away from strong ties with the US anytime soon. This however may well be the advent of a regional movement beyond a US-centric order. As a bandwagoning state loses control over its destiny and may ultimately pay the price for failing to balance (Motin, 2024, p. 20), a move from bandwagoning towards balancing usually becomes *the option* once feasible. Balancing in the Middle East is, after all, about balancing off the US and other global powers against one another to enhance ones maneuverability and interests.

A third feature is an enhanced focus on internal military capacity-building throughout the region. Although this cannot and should not be viewed only through the military industry prism, yet when military industry is being developed in traditionally security-importing states, and taking into account the limits placed on security-importers, including in their procurements over the

decades, one can see the unprecedented capacity that such an endeavor is adding to the patron-client model in the region. It provides the backbone for strategic autonomy on the one hand, and creates a hard-means-based balancing mechanism between arms producing regional states in the long run on the other—with obvious risks of home-grown arms races.

Iran's defense industry, as well as its nuclear developments, usually catch headlines; yet, such depictions are inaccurate in that they confine the trend to Iran and do not map out a balanced picture of a regional move towards autonomy-driven internalization of defense capabilities. Besides Egypt and Turkey, who started developing their military industries decades ago—and have been ratcheting them up lately, Saudi Arabia's newly focused policy on internalizing needed military technology with the primary support that it is receiving from Chinese firms, is yet another case. Vision 2030[1] is usually cited as the source of inspiration for Saudi developments, including in its military industry, yet a closer look shows that Riyadh has grown more focused on its indigenous military industry due to problems of arms procurement from Western countries—preconditioned on other issues of difference (Czulda, 2024).

The question as such would be the way in which those developments filter into a traditionally strong and multilayered strategic asymmetry in the region. The global transition of power could in theory work to the favor of bridging the region's strategic gap. Moving beyond the traditional asymmetry emanating from a dichotomy that the balancing-bandwagoning macro strategies have

1. An official vision of the Saudi government, specifically its Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, aimed at reform and diversification in the Saudi economics, social and cultural life.

produced, towards more balanced regional relations that can push forth the integration on the basis of autonomous strategic planning, is one scenario. Yet the region is not immune to the negative externalities of the global transition of power.

While regional powers proved capable of drawing their own line of neutrality during the Ukrainian war, the transitional period's volatility spilling over to the region is a potentiality that can pressurize regional actors well beyond the Ukrainian case. A war scenario in Taiwan, for instance, would include direct or indirect conflict between the two superpowers—both of which have strong ties with regional actors. Will Saudi Arabia or even Turkey be able to fend off the immense pressure and stick to their neutrality? Can Iran stay out of such a conflict? Will all regional players try to keep the region away from such a conflict or will some of them bandwagon? Such questions will arise in each and every conflict that includes global powers.

5. The US in a Region in Motion

Strategic shifts come as necessities. They tend to force adapting parties to revisit their previous priorities. Increased agency, balancing and capability-building have all been trending in the region as necessities for adaptation with the global transition. Regional changes have emanated from Washington's own adaptation to new global trends. When the United States occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, it was not prepared for the day after, as it was for the war itself. The days and years after proved so costly that Washington had to recalibrate its strategies. The revision included a "Status of Forces Agreement" with Iraq to incrementally withdraw US forces from the country (DCAF, 2008), an

engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan with the aim of reaching an agreement that can decrease US burdening presence on Afghan territories[1].

Besides the costs of occupation, the US was bogged down by a never-ending insurgency-combatting mission in the two countries while its global rivals, China in particular, were enjoying an unmatched economic growth that was to turn it into a peer competitor to Washington. The *Pivot to Asia* as a strategy was a US adaptation effort with the new reality, calling for decreased presence in and attention to areas of less strategic significance to US global role on the one hand and an increase of focus on the US to-be peer competitor—China on the other[2].

Besides Iraq and Afghanistan, US-Iran standoff was to be settled in a way to stop Iran short of acquiring nuclear weapons while allowing for a regional integration that could free US hands in a region in constant turmoil. President Barak Obama voiced this in a reverberating comment suggesting that Iran and Saudi Arabia should learn to share the region (Goldberg, 2016). As part of its pivot to Asia, a "leading from behind" strategy in the Middle East was to free US direct role in the region by banking on regional partners' capabilities and regional role-seeking-thirst—as was the case for smaller wealthy states in the Persian Gulf [3].

Regional reflections on the US shift varied in accordance with the strategic asymmetry mentioned above. While Iran embraced the moment by signing the JCPOA, US traditional allies in the Middle East, accustomed to relying on Washington for their security needs,

1. See Maizland, 2020
2. See Bader et al., 2012
3. See Lizza, 2011

went anxious about it. Their policy was two-fold: opposing the JCPOA and trying to undermine and stop it short of normalizing US-Iran relations on the one hand and struggling to secure stronger security guarantees from the US on the other. Obama's Washington could satisfy none. As much a curse Trump was to Iran's newfound ties with the US, he was a gift to Iran's rivals in the region. By violating the JCPOA and imposing "maximum pressure" on Iran[1], the Tehran-Washington standoff was revived and went well beyond previous stages—accompanied by a heightened brinksmanship around the region.

Under immense economic pressure, Iran and its allies started pushing back against the US policy. To do that, Tehran did not need to move far and wide around the region. It only focused on making use of its rivals' own made crises in Yemen, Qatar and elsewhere. Iran's aim of Bogging down Riyadh in a protracted war in Yemen was what brought the Yemeni Ansarallah movement closer to Tehran. In this sense, it was the Saudi war on Yemen that pushed Ansarallah closer to Tehran. Iran's aim of stopping the Qatari siege short of forcing Doha to succumb to Saudi demands also drew Qatar closer to Iran[2]. Attacks on Shipments in the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea, although never claimed by Tehran, leveled up regional escalation unprecedentedly.

Iran's messages were two-fold: firstly to showcase US inability to protect allies; secondly to make clear that cornering Iran could not result in a safe Persian Gulf or a secure region. Iran's shooting down of a US Global Hawk drone over Iranian territorial waters was a clear indication of Iran's willingness to resist the US

1. See ICG, 2021
2. See Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2021

coercive policy to new highs. Nevertheless, it was the attack on Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Aramco facilities, which cut Saudi oil production by half with no human casualties (Gambrell, 2019), while leaving no trace of Iranian involvement, the straw that broke the camel's back. Although the Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack and Iran denied any involvement, the attack was indicative of how regional escalation can engulf the entire the region, and not only Iran or its allies.

While the Saudi's felt fortified by US air defense batteries and a US commitment to their security beforehand, the attack showcased in broad daylight the flaw in that policy. A change was necessary and ergo, strategic necessity forced a shift on Saudi's regional policy. The UAE, a country used to abrupt shifts in its foreign policy came first, reviving its maritime security dialogue with Tehran in 2019 (Reuters, 2019). Riyadh followed suit by engaging Iran in a dialogue that led to a deal in Beijing. Other diplomatic tracks in the region ushered a novel regional atmosphere, focusing more on diplomacy and dialogue, less on arms and battles.

6. A Regional Shift

The strategic asymmetry came daunting on US-allies in the region after the Aramco incident. The realization that imported security fell short of addressing vital security needs was to force US-allies to think twice about outsourcing their security. It was also as much significant to realize that engaging in military conflicts around the region was a waste of energy and treasure with no aims realized. This proved true in Syria and Yemen and elsewhere in the region. As such, strategic adaptation started taking a new shape through diplomatic tracks in different cases. Among much movement, three

major diplomatic tracks could be identified as pertaining to changes in policies of three regional powers: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Iran's diplomatic track went through a reengagement process with Saudi Arabia and led to a visible change in its relations with other Arab nations. For many reasons, including its perceived regional effect, the Iran-Saudi track caught much attention. The two countries embarked on a mediated discussion in Oman and Iraq in 2020 and 2021. "Iraq and Oman subsequently hosted several separate rounds of discussions between Saudi and Iranian intelligence and foreign ministry officials" (ICG, 2024, p. 4). The agreement restored bilateral ties, put a cap on regional standoffs and sat guardrails towards normalizing relations and reviving the détente that existed between the two sides in the 1990s and 2000s. The two sides agreed to implement the Security Cooperation Agreement of 2001 as well as the General Agreement for Cooperation in the Fields of Economy, Trade, Investment, Technology, Science, Culture, Sports, and Youth of 1998 (FMPRC, 2023). Those agreement were to serve as guiding commitments to back a normalization that could potentially include regional theatres. This was a pivotal development between the two regional heavyweights with reverberations beyond their bilateral ties.

Before restoring relations with Saudi Arabia, the "regionalist" administration of the late Ibrahim Raisi was able to resume maritime security talks with the UAE (Vahdat & Batrawy, 2012), which expanded to include broader range of issues after the Iran-Saudi Agreement. Tehran also started a track with Bahrain, which led to the high level discussions between the two sides in 2024 after the Bahraini Foreign Minister's partaking in the Raisi funeral and the Bahraini King calling for a normalization of ties with Tehran (RT, 2024). Feeling a change in regional geopolitics and after

successful mediation in the Iran-Saudi track, Iraq started a regional dialogue which included Iran, Turkey and various Arab stated including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, presenting the country as a regional promoter of dialogue and reconciliation (Daga, 2023, p. 72). The new Iraqi initiative gave Iran yet another platform to advance its regionalist agenda.

For Saudi Arabia, diplomacy did not start with Iran, nor did it end with the Beijing Agreement. After five tumultuous years following the ascendance to power of King Salman and his son, MBS, and after going through unprecedented recklessness in a traditionally conservative Kingdom, Riyadh had to shift its gears. It firstly normalized ties with Qatar after the 2017 Saudi-led quartet siege on Doha went on short of achieving stated goals. An invitation was extended to the Qatari Emir to attend the al-Ula summit on January 2021, which led to the restoration and normalization of ties between Riyadh and Doha (Doha Institute, 2021).

Another track, seemingly accelerated by the Beijing Agreement, was a Saudi-Ansarallah deal, which brought the Yemeni war into a halt after six years. Although affected by the Iran-Saudi talks and agreement, the Yemeni track was first and foremost a result of Riyadh's search of a way out. A ceasefire was agreed upon on April 2022 (Ghobari & Swilam, 2022). Ansarallah, preserving their control over approximately the entire Yemeni north throughout a lengthy war, preconditioned the ceasefire on the removal of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi of the internationally recognized government; a demand that was met right after the ceasefire (Transfeld, 2022). A lengthy diplomatic process aiming at a peace deal was ensued; a draft was agreed-upon and was to be finalized by the United Nations before October 7th, 2023. Israeli

military campaign in Gaza and Ansarallah's attacks on shipments coming from and going to Israel to pressurize the latter stopped the deal short of signature, yet the terms of an acceptable deal remain on the table with no major changes in San'a or Riyadh's positions. It seems that the Saudis, sensing a military stalemate between the US Navy and the Houthis, are impatient to end their engagement in Yemen, even if it leaves the Saudi-backed Aden government as perceived losers in the process—with the US greenlighting this for Riyadh to pursue (Wintour, 2024). As such and despite the uncertainties, the prolonged ceasefire between the two sides is likely to continue and, could potentially lead to a peace deal.

Turkey, another regional heavyweight, also started its share of regional diplomacy aimed at easing regional tension pertaining to previous standoffs during the Arab Spring. Ankara's aim is to free itself of the political/ideological box in which it has found itself since the onset of the Arab Uprisings and to lessen the economic cost of its geopolitical activism in the time of a deepening economic crisis at home (Dalay, 2022a).

A de-escalation with Saudi Arabia started the Turkish track back in April 2022, when Turkey met a Saudi precondition for normalization of ties by halting the Khashoggi trial and transferring the file to Saudi Arabia (Kucukgocmen, 2022). Turkish President, Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia during that same month and ended the bumpy previous phase in the relationship. The Alula Summit, which normalized Saudi-Qatari relations played an important role in the Turkish revision. This is because besides Riyadh's backing of the Egyptian coup in 2013, the siege on Qatar in 2017 caused a spike in the Ankara-Riyadh tensions, back tracking to a resemblance of the zero-problem neighborhood policy of Ahmet Davutoglo prior to the Arab Spring in what was described as "a

policy of bridge-building across the Middle East" (Dalay, 2022b, p. 1).

Turkish diplomatic messaging has also been a key element in repairing relations with Egypt, which were interrupted after the 2013 coup in Egypt and Turkey's assertive policy in defending the ousted Mursi government. In an incremental track, both countries moved to settle the lengthy standoff. High level talks were held in 2021 and 2022. On July 4, 2023 both nations announced that they would be elevating their diplomatic relations to ambassadorial status (Eldoh, 2024). The main regional shift in the Turkish policy is yet to bear fruit on Syria, where talks have been ongoing on-and-off for years. Differences over the way to bridge gaps on occupied territories in northern Syria, the future of Idlib and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territories as well as the sensitive Kurdish issue are still on the table. Yet, the mere fact that talks have replaced settling differences on the battlefield has been a major change. Turkish efforts to bridge resolve differences with UAE bore tangible fruits during the same period and it has been another case for the prevalence of diplomacy in Turkish regional posture.

Generally, wary of the ongoing global transition with tense reverberations seen within and around the region, in places such as Ukraine and Palestine, regional powers have been hedging in an effort to cope with the new global transition on the one hand and deal with internal and regional challenges arising in the new era on the other.

7. Conclusion

While the global order is being reshaped by emerging trends and

rising actors as well as a resisting established power, regional reverberations of those developments are quite eye-catching throughout the Middle East. With the retreat of the unipolar world order, Washington can no longer maintain allies in line at a time when its security guarantees are not trusted as they were before. Bandwagoning as such is not paying off for US-allied states in the Arab World to keep placing their security bets in a single basket.

While the global transition of power is troubling for the bandwagoner, the problem of regional asymmetry in power and strategic capabilities makes bandwagoning an even worse a strategy. As such, a move towards strategic autonomy is engulfing the region. This article focused on the effects of the global transition of power on the Middle East, as well as the region's efforts and mechanisms to cope with it. As argued in the article, the spill-over of international volatility into the Middle East creates a flued situation and decreases regional stability.

Instead of bandwagoning, efforts for balancing are pursued by regional powers to increase their maneuverability vis-à-vis global powers and to enhance their coping bandwidth in a volatile era by keeping a distance from global actors' priorities and standoffs. A regional balancing effort has been trending in an era of diminished unipolarity and increased global volatility. As discussed, balancing efforts are not new in the region; however, the US-allied state' move toward balancing is a rather new phenomenon. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and others are diversifying their strategic partnerships globally and are focused more on capability-building internally.

While the strategic question of the new era focuses on the way to cope with the global transition of power, the overwhelming regional answer and practice suggest that balancing came front-

and-center. Already adopted by none-US-allied states such as Iran, balancing is now being incorporated by US-allied states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt. Turkish balancing between the NATO, an organization it is a member of, and Russia is an illuminating case of the new reality in the region. Despite balancing, regional volatility and instability are a broader concern than the way the region deals with global power politics. While the balancing moment in the region can potentially provide the necessary space for regional integration/cooperation by enhancing the strategic symmetry around the region, it is yet to be seen if the moment is seized upon by regional powers to that end.

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