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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FOREIGN INTERESTS AND THE ROLES OF COMPETING SUPER POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF UNITED STATES, RUSSIA AND CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The United States and Russia have a long history in the involvement in the affairs of the Middle East while China has not really been an active actor in Middle East politics. Maintaining a balance between China's relations with Israel and the Arab States as well as between the Sunni Arab States and Iran has been a guiding principle of China's Middle East policy. China has cordial relations with Israel but at the same time it supports a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and supports a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD)-Free Zone in the Middle East. This study discussed the interests and roles of the United States, Russia and China in the Middle East, emphasizing more on the historical context. The study adopted qualitative method. The population for the study was the Middle East, particularly the Arab states and Syria and Iran. Data were collected through documentary review of publications as well as journals and materials from the internet. Data were descriptively analyzed in the historical context. The study found that the Middle East is arena for foreign interests' competition amongst the superpowers of United States, Russia and China. In addition, the Gulf States' disillusionment with the US, along with their economic pragmatism in light of the global power transition to the East, motivated them to diversify their political and security relations. Furthermore, Russia whose interest was to engage the Middle Eastern states economically, played a marginal role in the economies of the Gulf States. The study concluded that Middle East is volatile region that has faced immense challenges. The strategic location and the energy richness of the region is a contributing factor that has attracted outside powers to expand their influence in the region. The regional rivalries have been harnessed by the outside powers by directly supporting the states and their proxies. In this regard, the Syrian case was the best example to illustrate the involvement of regional as well as extra-regional states and the drastic consequences of such involvement for regional peace and stability. The inherent instability which is caused by ethnic, tribal and sectarian conflicts and strategic competition between regional as well as extra-regional powers Russia and the US make the Middle East a crisis ridden region.

INTRODUCTION

The United States and Russia had long been involved in the affairs of the Middle East but China, though heavily dependent on energy resources of the Middle East, was not really an active actor in Middle East politics. For the first time in history in January 2016, China issued a White Paper on its relations with the Arab States. Maintaining a balance between China's relations with Israel and the Arab States as well as between the Sunni Arab States and Iran has been a guiding principle of China's Middle East policy. China has cordial relations with Israel but at the same time it supports a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and supports a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD)-Free Zone in the Middle East. This study discusses the interests and roles of the United States, Russia and China in the Middle East, emphasizing more on the historical context.

Interests of great powers in the Middle East: The Middle East has remained an arena of strategic competition during the 19th and 20th centuries between Western European imperialist powers and Czarist Russia. Even before the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire in 1919, Britain, the most important colonial power, had strategic goals in the region and opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 provided it with an opportunity to be the dominant commercial power in the world (Alam, 2016). The joint control of Anglo-Egyptian forces over Sudan gave Britain access to the western shores of the Red Sea to complement the base on the other side at Aden, which commanded the strait of Bab-al-Mandeb, the exit to the Indian Ocean. Moreover, British protectorates were established over Bahrain (1867), the Trucial States (1892) and Kuwait (1899), which became bases to pursue the power struggle. Other European powers also got engaged within the Middle Eastern region. France strengthened its foothold in the Levant

(Lebanon and Syria) and also took hold of Djibouti, on the African shore of the Gulf of Aden, while developing the port into a commercial and strategic rival to British Aden. Similarly, Italy seized Eritrea and got access to landlocked Ethiopia, which became the central focus for Italy's imperialist ambitions in Northeastern Africa. Meanwhile, Czarist Russia sought expansion towards territories around the Caspian Sea, bringing it into conflict with the Ottoman Empire and Persia. In the mid-20th century, the Western European powers' influence in the Middle East started to decline as France gave up its influence over Lebanon in 1945 and over Syria in 1946. Britain granted independence to trans-Jordan in 1946, and after a year, it withdrew its mandate from Palestine as well (Alam, 2016). The war ravaged European states – Britain and France left the space for the United States which became the dominant Western power in the region. As part of its containment strategy (Barret, 2014) United States made defense arrangements with Middle East states and in response, Soviet Union also formalized a policy of alliances beyond its borders. The Suez Crisis of 1956 provided Moscow with an opportunity to emerge as the patron of Egypt, providing it with military and economic assistance, while establishing military and air bases in the country and subsequently enhancing its influence in the Middle East. Soviet alliances with Middle Eastern states enabled it to deploy naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. At different times, Soviet navy had access to bases in Libya, Egypt, Syria, in Ethiopia's Eritrea province and Somalia (Bardhan, 2014). It is against this backdrop of external involvement in the Middle East, that the interests of United States, Russia and China are discussed below.

United States' interests in the Middle East

The sole objective of the US has been to maintain its predominance in the region and to achieve this end, US is ready to employ all elements of national power including the use of military force. This objective was clearly enunciated in the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 and in the Carter Doctrine of 1980. The Eisenhower Doctrine pronounced US commitment to the security and stability of the Middle East by employing peaceful means – economic and military aid as well as through the use of force, while the Carter Doctrine stated that 'any attempt by an outside power to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be considered as an attack against vital interests of the US and will be deterred by any means necessary including military means (Miller, 2014) Similarly, US governments from time to time have expressed their interests in the Middle East as core interests. Ensuring the protection and free flow of oil has been the most constant, and the most important, US interest in the Middle East. Olaf Caroe, a British official, recognized the importance of Middle East energy resources especially in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, and identified a role for the US to maintain preeminence in the region (Naim, 2014). Since the 1970s, America's strategic interest in the region has been not only securing easy access for itself but also ensuring an open and secure market for its allies in East Asia and Europe. Middle Eastern countries, especially the states of the Persian Gulf, are key oil producers and exporters. Europe, China, and Japan all depend on imported oil to meet their energy needs. In recent times, given US Iran hostile relations, Iran has been considered as a potential threat to the free flow of oil (Norton, 2017). To prevent the spread of nuclear weapons has been another key interest of the US in the Middle East. This policy intends to

prevent any hostile state from gaining enough power to threaten US interests regarding oil security or the security of Israel. Initially in 1981, Israel's preventive attack on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor eliminated the possibility of Iraq's developing of nuclear weapons. Similarly, Israel attacked Syria's al-Kibar nuclear facility in 2007. But it is ironical that any effort on the part of regional states to strengthen institutional mechanisms regarding non-proliferation could not gain desired attention from the major powers. In this regard, it is worth noting that the proposals to make the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Free Zone could not produce any dividends. The original proposal as put forward by the Egyptian Representative during the NPT Review Conference in 1995 has been revived from time to time, even in the last NPT Review Conference (May 2015). Apart from Israel, which has always remained indifferent to the proposal, the US has also been reluctant to support such a proposal (Reuter, 2015). The United States maintains extensive security cooperation with Israel. Washington helps Israel preserve its "Qualitative Military Edge", with legislation ensuring Israel's superiority over "any conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non state actors. US and Israeli defense companies often work together on projects, including missile defense programmes such as the Arrow and Arrow II anti-missile systems. The "Iron Dome" anti-missile system, which helps protect Israel from Hamas and Hezbollah rockets, was a joint US Israel effort (Haynes, 2014) ` Since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has prioritized counter-terrorism in its policy towards the Middle East. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen rank high regarding bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation. As far as counterterrorism is concerned, through cooperative efforts, the United States gains access to vital intelligence, local services use their agents and capabilities to target and disrupt terrorists at home, and in some cases, such as Yemen, the United States secures physical access in order to launch drone strikes. To meet its interests, the United States maintains a range of security relationships in the Middle East. These include defense cooperation agreements, basing and access rights, and the prepositioning of military assets. The current US force structure in the Gulf consists of bases in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE (Ross, 2015). The US has been the largest arms supplier to the regional states. US military commitments and its security guarantees have been the cornerstone of the Middle East security architecture. The US security umbrella has allowed Gulf monarchies to stand up against their powerful regional rivals – Iraq and Iran. The US invasion of Iraq and later on withdrawal of US troops from Iraq without signing any Status of Forces Agreement has shifted the regional order in Iran's favor. Moreover, President Obama's focus on East Asia and its engagement with Iran on nuclear issue was considered detrimental to the Gulf States' interests and created fears and doubts in the Gulf capitals about America's commitment to Gulf security. The Gulf States' disillusionment with the US, along with their economic pragmatism in light of the global power transition to the East, motivated them to diversify their political and security relations. In this regard, since 2005 onwards, relations with China, Russia and Western countries were also enhanced (Lynch, 2015).

Russian interests in the Middle East

In the post-Cold War era, Russian engagement with the Middle East states can primarily be seen through the prism of countering secessionist movements in the North Caucasus as

Moscow had been accusing Gulf entities of funding the separatists and extremists in Russia. In the past, Moscow had blamed Gulf-based charity organizations for introducing radicalism in the region and financing extremist groups in the North Caucasus (Humud, 2016). Russia, while fighting the Chechen wars, faced severe criticism from Muslim countries, especially the Middle Eastern countries which termed the Chechen fight against Russia as a struggle for achieving right to self determination. The War on Terror provided Russia with an opportunity to cooperate with the West and classify its military operation in Chechnya as part of the terrorist strategy (Hudson, 2015). Russia's opposition to the Iraq war and its anti-Western rhetoric helped it to improve its relations with the Muslim states. In this regard, granting Russia an observer status in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in 2003 was a breakthrough, which led to the improvement of relations between Russia and Muslim countries and subsequently changed the stance of Muslim countries towards Russia's actions and policies towards its Muslim population in the North Caucasus. It is reported that Russian Muslims have been participating in the war in Syria as part of the rebel forces and constitute the second largest group of foreign fighters in Syria after Libyans (Rudner, 2013). Similarly, militants from the North Caucasus have joined high military ranks in DAESH in Iraq and Syria (Norton, 2017). This has been a cause of concern for Russia as these fighters will come back with more battlefield experience and might try to mobilize a global Jihadist movement against the Russian government after the end of the Syrian conflict. Secondly, Russia is interested in engaging Middle Eastern states economically but, despite its continuous efforts, it plays a marginal role in the economies of the Gulf States. As per 2013 statistics, out of the Gulf Cooperation Council's \$1.47 trillion total trade with the world, Russia-GCC trade was valued at \$3.74 billion (Stephane, 2014). Economic relations remain focused on three areas: arms sales, energy, and investment. The region is the second largest arms export market for Russia after the Asia Pacific. Despite having political differences on issues of Iran, Syria and Palestine, Russia has established strong economic relations with Israel, with bilateral trade reaching \$3 billion in 2009. While making arms deals with Middle Eastern states, Russia has given due consideration to preserve strategic equation vis-à-vis Israel and the Muslim states of the Middle East. Apart from Israel, Russia has also established strong economic relations with Turkey. Their trade volume has been constantly increasing and has reached to over \$34 billion in 2012. As regards Russia's relations with the Gulf countries, energy has remained the most significant component of economic relations. Energy generates over 40% of Russia's federal fund and over 75% of foreign hard currency earnings (Joyner 2015). Russia has been continuously engaging Iran, Qatar, Algeria and Libya, the key gas producers of the region, to cooperate and coordinate their policies regarding gas. The Russian objective is to contain Europe's efforts to diversify its sources of energy (as Europe imports 80% of Russia's gas) away from Russia. To achieve this end, Russia has adopted a three pronged strategy (Shapovalova, 2016). First, to ensure that Russian controlled pipeline routes – Nord Stream and South Stream – are constructed and alternative pipelines circumventing Russia cannot be developed. Second, to engage gas producing Central Asian states such as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to ensure that they sell their gas through Russian controlled pipelines. Third, to persuade the other gas producing countries (Middle Eastern) to collaborate and coordinate with Russia in deciding market share in the

European gas market. The loss of Iraq as the major importer of Russian weapons was a setback to its interests in the region but after the US refusal to sell arms to Egypt in 2013 following the military takeover, Russia stepped in and signed arms deals with the Egyptian government. Apart from Russia's economic relations with the Middle Eastern states, the Arab uprisings in 2011 provided Russia with an opportunity to expand its strategic influence in the region. Initially, Russia remained neutral regarding developments taking place in Tunisia and Egypt as part of the Arab Spring because these two countries were not of much relevance to Russia. Developments in Libya and the subsequent Western military intervention for regime change alarmed Russia, which abstained from Resolution 1973, authorizing NATO's airstrikes against the Qaddafi regime and sanctioning military support for opposition forces to topple the Qaddafi government. While opposing Western interventions, the Russian stance on the Syrian conflict seems highly uncompromising. The Syrian conflict has become a litmus test for confronting the concept of humanitarian intervention, as in 2008 the Russian intervention in Georgia was to set redlines against NATO enlargement (Zurn, 2016).

China's interests in the Middle East

China's primary interest in the Middle East has been continued access to energy resources. China has surpassed the US as the largest importer of Gulf energy resources. Since 1995, the Middle East has been China's number one source of imported petroleum (Ross, 2016). In this regard, Saudi Arabia and Iran are of immense importance. According to 2012 statistics, Saudi Arabia was the number one source of petroleum while Iran was the fourth most important supplier of imported Chinese oil. As regards China's energy relations with Iran, despite expressing public opposition to sanctions, China has complied with the UN and the US sanctions against Iran and later on played important role in negotiating P5+1 Iran Nuclear Deal. Moreover, rising tensions in East Asia have compelled Chinese policy makers to look westwards. It was suggested that in 'China's far west, Washington does not have a network of alliances to block Beijing from breaking out, thus China has greater opportunities to enhance its geopolitical and economic influence in Central Asia, the Middle East and beyond (Haynes, 2014). After much deliberation in 2013, the Chinese leadership declared the launching of two initiatives – the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, adopting the name of the ancient trade route between China and the West through Central Asia and the Middle East. To pursue these initiatives, China has been constructing and financing ports in Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Turkey in the Mediterranean region as well as in Eritrea and Djibouti on the Red Sea. In this regard, China has been heavily investing in Egypt, pledging \$45 billion in construction of the Suez Canal Economic Zone and an additional amount of \$15 billion in Egyptian electricity, transportation and infrastructure development projects (Bush, 2016). Another of China's interests in the Middle East has been preserving internal security at home and around its periphery. China considers the Middle East as a strategic extension of China's periphery; as the issues unfolding in the Middle East will have a direct influence on China's internal security and stability. These concerns make China a very cautious player in Middle East affairs. Historically, China avoided military presence in the region, and its first naval visit to the Mediterranean occurred in 2009. In 2010, the Chinese navy visited Jeddah and in 2011 and 2014, it conducted rescue operations to evacuate its nationals from Libya (Berti, 2016).

Similarly, in April 2015, it evacuated foreign nationals from Yemen while in the same year; it conducted joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea for the first time. In 2016, China started constructing a naval base in Djibouti, an East African country that is at the southern entrance to the Red Sea on the route to the Suez Canal and that also hosts the largest US military base in Africa. In July 2017, after completion of the facility, China sent ships carrying troops to China's first overseas military base.

Political dynamics in the Middle East and super power competition in Syria

After analyzing the interests of US, Russia and China it is imperative to highlight the regional dynamics that attracted the active involvement of extra-regional powers. Emile Simpson identifies three trends that unveil Russian and the US confrontationist policies in the Middle East. The US and its Western allies, in responding to the Arab Spring, intervened for regime change in Libya and later on attempted it in Syria by backing the rebel forces. But a weakening of moderate rebel forces and strengthening of extremists and hardliners in each case paved the way for Russia to support the regimes on the pretext of preventing 'Islamist chaos'. The best examples of this are Gen. Haftar in Libya, President Assad in Syria, and the Sisi Government in Egypt (Corbeil, 2016). Secondly, after signing the Nuclear deal with Iran, the Obama Administration and later on Trump Administration have taken a hard line stance against Tehran while Russia strengthened its relations with Tehran and acted as a broker between Saudi Arabia and Iran to set up the November 2016 OPEC agreement. Apart from the US-Russia stand-off on many issues in the Middle East, China has remained persistent in its stance of non-intervention in internal affairs of states and opposed Western efforts to regime change in Libya and later on in Syria, while emphasizing peaceful resolution of the conflict rather than overthrowing the Assad regime (Pierce, 2014). The prolonged Syrian civil war attracted the regional as well as extra regional powers to get involved in the conflict to enhance their own interests. A significant reason for the involvement of these states has been Syria's geostrategic importance in the Middle East. Apart from its own natural resources, Syria serves as the centre of thousands of kilometers of oil and gas pipelines that run through the Middle Eastern states. Another reason that signifies its geostrategic importance is the fact that Syria is one of only two Arab states that share borders with non-Arab neighbors, as it shares borders with Turkey and Israel. The status of being a frontline state adjoining Israel gives Syria an exceptional stature in the Arab world and makes it pivotal in international efforts to resolve the Palestine-Israel conflict (Seeberg, 2016). Syria considers Israel as a continuous external threat and its loss of the Golan Heights, its natural defense against Israel, only augmented its insecurity and fear. Apart from external threats, the current Syrian conflict can be traced back to the so called Arab Spring of 2011. The large-scale protests against President Bashar al-Assad and his government prompted a violent response from the Assad government. The subsequent deterioration of the situation paved the way for external involvement in the Syrian conflict. Since the outbreak of the current crisis, the external powers have sought to shape the outcomes of the conflict (Mahmoud, 2016). It is more pertinent to classify external actors into three groups: the first group comprises those who support the Assad regime – Iran, and Russia; the second group consists of those that oppose the Assad regime – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) states, the US and its NATO allies; and a third group that cannot take sides in a decisive way; Jordan, Lebanon and Israel. All the actors supporting or opposing Assad regime have different interests and different strategies. Saudi Arabia and the US both have a convergence of interest in reducing Iran's influence in Syria (which they consider enables Iran to exert influence in the Levant) with regard to preserving the regional balance of power. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states also share these concerns (LaPira, 2014). The states that support the Assad regime have their own reasons. Syria is the only Arab ally of Iran that reduces its regional isolation, and provides it leverage vis-à-vis Hizbullah and Lebanon, and helps it challenge the regional order supported by the US.⁸¹ Likewise, As regards extra-regional powers, Syria has been a strategic ally of Russia since the Cold War, and to protect Syria, Russia has exercised its veto power at three crucial times – in 2011, 2012 and 2014- to block the imposition of sanctions or use of force against the Syrian regime. The absence of sanctions has allowed Russia to provide President Assad with military support when the regime was close to collapse. Russian warships patrolled in waters close to Syria and its military advisors provided support to the Syrian army (Simon and Stevenson, 2016). One significant reason for Russia's technical as well as military support for Syria is Russia's access to its strategic base at Tartus. The base is a refueling station and provides logistics facilities to Russian navy ships while providing the Russian navy with the ability to maintain a regular presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Tartus port gives Russia greater ability to navigate in the strategically important Gulf of Aden as well. Apart from strategic interests, it is noteworthy to highlight Russia's economic interests vis-à-vis Syria, which is a transit state with regard to energy pipelines. Initially, Russia also favored noninterference and non-intervention in Syria but later on it got actively involved in the conflict by supporting the Assad regime not just diplomatically and politically but by extending military support as well. Russia has been launching airstrikes in Syria since September 2015, nominally against DAESH targets but critics negate Russia's claim and assert that Russia has also been targeting rebel forces fighting against the Assad regime (Tsingou, 2014). It is estimated that Russian airstrikes have strengthened the Assad regime for the first time in the long civil war that is approaching its seventh year, enabling Syrian forces to retake strategic territory near Latakia. As for as the US role in the Syrian conflict is concerned, after its inability to get authorization from the United Nations Security Council to resort to military action, it elicited the support of Arab states in bringing forth the Syrian National Coalition in an attempt to unify diverse opposition forces and to get them international recognition. In response to the Syrian military's suspected poison gas (chemical) attack on Khan Shiekhoun, a rebel controlled town that resulted in heavy civilian casualties- 86 people including 27 children- the US launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles targeting the Shayrat airfield in Homs province from where the chemical attack was launched. It has been termed as the first direct US military attack on Assad forces that was strongly condemned by the Russia, terming it detrimental to US-Russia bilateral relations (Shangai, 2014).

Conclusion

The Middle East, a volatile region, has been facing immense challenges. The regional states' mutual distrust and suspicions about each other perpetuate instability in the region. While the

strategic location and the energy richness of the region has been a contributing factor to attract outside powers to expand their influence in the region, regional rivalries have been harnessed by the outside powers by directly supporting the states and their proxies. In this regard, the Syrian case is the best example to illustrate the involvement of regional as well as extra-regional states and the drastic consequences of such involvement for regional peace and stability. The inherent instability which is caused by ethnic, tribal and sectarian conflicts and strategic competition between regional as well as extra-regional powers Russia and the US make the Middle East a crisis ridden region. Much of the instability was fueled by the Syrian conflict, but whether resolution of the Syrian conflict will address other sources of instability is yet to be seen.

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