A deceptive graveyard peace

There are signs of détente in the Middle East. But beneath the surface, it is churning

In Europe, a war is raging, with no end in sight. Not only are relations between Moscow and the West at a low point, but those between Beijing and the traditional global power in Washington are also at rock bottom and seemingly still sinking. Not since the end of the Cold War has the global risk of escalation been greater. That said, one region that's always been associated with war, refugees and violence is taking a different tack.

In the Middle East, there are signs of détente. Where deadly enemies recently faced off, there is new pragmatism, with rivals that used to hate each other's guts now reconciling. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey and Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Egypt's President Sisi and the Emir of Qatar, and Israeli Presidents and Tehran – even the 'butcher of Damascus', who was banned from the Arab League for 10 years – are being reciprocally received with pomp. The recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two hegemonic anti poles whose hostility made the whole region nervous, is the culmination of this process. Should *that* last, it would be Beijing's global political masterstroke, the final proof that China has become a global power – on a par with Washington.

A pragmatic détente

In the Middle East, this rapprochement primarily means that foreign relations have stopped being viewed through an ideological lens. Twelve years after the Arab Spring started, calm has set in – a deceptive graveyard peace. That's because the autocrats who are reconciling are the ones left. The young, liberal, ambitious democrats who – along with the grimmer, but no less dynamic, promoters of political Islam – which had once challenged the autocrats are worn out. The leaders have been kicked out, squelched, locked up and assassinated. In Tunisia, the last bit of democracy has just been done away with, and the government in (still) democratic Israel is bent on destroying the division of powers. Meanwhile, the brutal regime in Tehran is demonstrating that it takes more than street protests to do away with a dictatorship.

The mullahs' heavy hand at home contrasts with their new-found foreign-policy pragmatism. Riad and Tehran appear to realise that their great hegemonic visions are out dated. Perhaps that's belated satisfaction for Barack Obama, who had insisted that Saudi Arabia needs to 'share the region' with Iran. Exactly what the brash crown prince of Riad did not want to do for a long time. But after getting a bloody nose in Yemen, he, too, has concluded that there's no point in trying 'to fight the Iranians to the last American' (in the words of the former US Defence Secretary Robert Gates).

For Iran, too, embracing former arch-enemies is a pragmatic necessity.

So, it may well be that it was the Americans' withdrawal that made the easing of tensions possible in the Middle East. However, Iran is there to stay and as a power about to produce an atom bomb, it is better to form friendships, especially given rising antagonism towards the West. After all, American bases in the Gulf are in Iran's immediate proximity and easy for Tehran to attack in response to Israeli-American airstrikes.

Yet, for Iran, too, embracing former arch-enemies is a pragmatic necessity. Washington's policy of 'maximum pressure' had afflicted the regime more than it wants to admit. The most recent, most radical protests were especially dangerous for the Iranian rulers because they involved more of the population than the already anti-government wing. Years of economic misery caused by sanctions have eroded the support of the Islamic Republic's traditional supporters. Iran needs economic relief to continue its reckless foreign policy. And sustaining anti-West confrontation on a global level requires peace in the region.

Global aspirations

The global level is also where the regional powers are pushing. Like Tehran, they see the multipolar world order as both an ideological goal and an opportunity to boost their influence and economic vitality. For decades, Iran was a mere supplicant of Russia and had to fight hard to be at eye level with it. Now, its solidly anti-American alliance with Russia is intensifying cooperation. Meanwhile, the basically pro-Western allies led by Ankara and Riad are navigating the rough multipolar waters with breath-taking chutzpah. It is a balancing policy at the highest level that can be observed there.

Turkish President Erdoğan, who leads a NATO member state, met with Russia's President Vladimir Putin on the latter's first foreign trip since he

launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – in Tehran, of all places. The Saudi government is also more closely calibrating oil production rates in OPEC+ with Moscow than ever before. There's no sign that Russia is isolated in the Middle East. In the event of a showdown with China, the West would be downright stupid to expect the rulers to behave any differently. Ignoring the economic collateral damage suffered by parts of their populations, most big regional heads of government are the political winners of the new area – for now.

Iran remains the biggest risk to the fragile and superficial peace in the Middle East.

A graveyard peace at home, reconciliations with rivals and global aspirations: the triad hasn't yet produced any stable equilibrium. It is churning beneath the surface. None of the basic contradictions that gave rise to the Arab Spring have been resolved. In many countries beyond the Gulf, which is swimming in money, it is mostly the lack of any socioeconomic perspectives that prevents political consolidation. The Iranian revolt has been broken by massive repression – for the moment. It won't be the last.

Iran also remains the biggest risk to the fragile and superficial peace in the Middle East. The oddly asynchronous developments are creating a momentum towards escalation that will be hard to stop. The regime's fragility at home sharply contrasts with its swaggering foreign policy of rapprochement with regional competitors and growing antagonism towards the West. Even if both sides want to avoid a big conflict, it is not clear if the spiral of escalation can be stopped politically. How could a new nuclear agreement be secured? What could ensure that the *de facto* nuclear state does not cross the final threshold? Especially when Russia no longer wants to play a constructive role.

In Moscow these days, everything is subordinated to the aim of harming the West, even if that involves damaging themselves. China could well be the only great power that can still mediate. Beijing imports almost half its oil and gas from the Gulf and would be seriously impacted by a war in the region. Compared with solving the Persian nuclear Gordian knot, reconciling Saudi Arabia and Iran seems like child's play. Thus, this brief moment of peace in the Middle East may be just a breathing space. The calm before the storm.



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