

Rivalry Further Afield

The Probable Consequences of Great-Power Competition in the West Asia and North Africa Region

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Scenario building has become an essential element for the advancement of the policy-making process. The aim of scenario building has been posited to be to invigorate diverse perspectives or illustrations pertaining to the future of a particular theme aimed toward assembling a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of probable future routes and likelihoods. Scenarios have been described as “archetypal images of the future that nevertheless often interpret current realities.” Scenarios are internally reliable, mutually distinct, credible narratives regarding a course from the present into the future. Scenarios may also encompass conflicting perspectives concerning the future; however, they can facilitate enhancement and innovation of policy advancement.¹

Moreover scenario building, which is an evolving and unceasing process, helps to shed light on the drivers of change, their interactions and acute ambiguities. Notably, experts expound that scenario-building methodology is the means for the enunciation of distinct “futures with trends, uncertainties, and rules” over a particular time period. Scenario building likewise demonstrates each conceivable and feasible prospect and illuminates crucial trends, which becomes critical as it permits decision makers to be able to make an informed decision at the current time. Scenario methodology similarly works to promote the practice of erudition and “reperceiving existing assumptions,” thus enabling adjustment to a novel situation.²

Scenario building is observed widely in terms of its underlying dynamics involving “trends, continuities, discontinuities, and uncertainties” that intend to construct a collective framework wherein strategic assessment, multiplicity and increased understanding of peripheral transformations, distinct pathways, shifts, and opportunities is revived.³ Policy makers also are better informed about the repercussions of various alternative futures and prodigious uncertainties about the trajectories as well as future security permutations. Consequently, the objective as well as process of scenario building is seamlessly complemented with the functional requirements of the military, political, and economic sectors.⁴

Scenario building takes special significance in the case of great-power competition that is transpiring in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region as immense understanding of the contemporary dynamics is essential to absorbing

its contribution to the subtle nuances of global great-power competition. Consequently, the variables considered for building scenarios have been slated by most experts and strategic analysts to be highly likely to transpire, retain the potential to have most wide-ranging effects in the region, or can lead to consequences that will have a discernible impact on the global trajectory of great-power competition.

Regional Dynamics and Their Impact on Great-Power Competition

Regional dynamics in numerous diverse theaters in the future will have the probability to generate global insecurity and contribute to great-power competition, especially as the conflicts in the WANA region continue to mount. Furthermore, regional dynamics have an outsized impact on great-power competition; for instance, the effect of non-Arab states such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel who are slowly accumulating more power in the region. Other developments promulgated by experts such as the breakdown of the House of Saud may inflict enormous damage geopolitically for the United States and its influence in the region and Egypt; the advent of a radical Islamist government might aggravate regional frictions. Disintegration alongside ethnic and religious schisms in Iraq and Syria could provide a haven to violent nonstate actors and an opening to Russia and China while democratic reform in these countries could bring them more in alignment with the United States.

Scenario 1: Iran–Saudi Arabia Strains and Their Bearing on Great-Power Competition

One of the more impactful of these regional dynamics concerns the sectarian disputes that have transformed into proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Enormous amounts of resources, blood, and treasure have been expended by both countries in the past two decades to achieve supremacy and to actively deny the other country significant victories in the region. Both countries have been referred to as nationalist players seeking strategic advantage in places where there has been a power vacuum—particularly in Syria and Iraq. These developments been called “the mobilization of a new animus” aided by the “instrumentalization of religion and the sectarianization” of political struggle.⁵ Furthermore, scholars have proposed that Saudi Arabia and Iran have strong inducements to preserve the existing enmity as the United States is thereby devoted to the defense of its allies in the region while the Islamic Republic is provided with an exterior “threat to legitimize its power.”⁶

There are also concerns that the new terms to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will make Iran more assertive⁷ as the United States is consider-

ing “wholesome rollback” of sanctions.⁸ This also provided increased incentive to Gulf Cooperation Council countries to diversify their financial and military links with Russia and China while circumventing extreme dependence on the United States. Strategic analysts have stated that this possibly will drive some Gulf Arab countries to bolster security links with China or house Chinese military bases.⁹

Furthermore, great-power competition is likely to make the resolution of various conflicts in the region aggravated by sustained rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, improbable. The involvement of great powers has ensued in a deadlock and impotence pertaining to a joint approach that results in cessation of conflicts. Additionally, the subjugation of Saudi Arabia’s Shia minority has intensified as the government aims to inhibit the expansion of anti-Saudi violent nonstate actors both in the country and on the battlefield.¹⁰ Experts have also observed that the Saudi government has not been preventing terror strikes directed at Shia in the country.¹¹ This could provide the pretext for a heavier push from Iran into Saudi Arabia and may result in another conflict for great powers to manipulate. Saudi Arabia’s rivals, Iran and Turkey, are attempting to utilize their ties with Syrian tribes for their own aims.¹² However, US withdrawal from the region might lead to a reassessment of “provocative politics and behavior,” especially as security and stability becomes a predominant aspiration due to the epoch of economic stress.¹³

Scenario 2: The Israeli Rapprochement with WANA Countries and Its Effect on Great-Power Competition

Notably, experts have postulated that the normalization of links between Israel and the countries in the WANA region has transformed regional interest subtleties and has shifted the balance further in the direction of the Gulf states’ anti-Iran alliance.¹⁴ Additionally, the most instant advantage of the normalization agreements is expected to be economic. However, China has acquired substantial leverage as the biggest trading partner of the region’s countries, which might be reduced owing to the reproachment and increase in regional trade especially by countries that are crucial to its the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework.¹⁵

There are also proposals that state that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) might come up as an alternative to China in projects that require funding in Israel due to US opposition and for the sake of better diversification opportunities for Israel. Experts likewise opine that Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain may demonstrate their ability to hold China liable for its regional policies including its support for Iran. These enhanced relations and increase in trade can also be an opportunity for US allies to pool their resources together for common goals, which is very likely to

free the assets of the United States engaged in regional conflicts to focus more on the great-power competition in the region. Thereby, decreasing China's potential to be able to free ride as the United States provides security in the region. The rapprochement has also amplified the perception of the persistent skill of the United States to appeal to allies and create partnerships between them. The United States can further focus on the Asian theater, which China is forced to pay more heed to than the WANA region.

Furthermore Russia, which has been selling arms to countries in the region and has been attempting to build ties through defense activities and exercises, can be forced to give a share to Israel, a powerhouse in respect to defense equipment. Therefore, the rapprochement in the future could provide an advantage to the United States at the expense of China and Russia.

Scenario 3: United States Endures/Strengthens Influence

By the mid-2020s, the United States has discarded the careful strategy of a “light footprint” followed by the Obama administration and is keeping a notable military presence in the region, which is ungirded by increasing regional economic and geopolitical linkages. Civil wars have provided the context for great-power intervention in the past years by Russia and China, which has likewise made brokering peace extremely arduous. Furthermore, both China and Russia are intensifying their engagement in the region.

These developments along with counterterrorism priorities can compel the United States to deploy armed forces and military hardware in the region to attempt to be able to compete in the burgeoning great-power competition. The United States can also increase its reliance on private military contractors (PMCs), which can risk the igniting of conflicts with China, Russia, and Iran in various hot spots across the region.¹⁶ Despite risks, the plausible deniability and the reach gained through PMCs make them a compelling instrument of statecraft.

However, to deter and dissuade its near-peer competitors, US armed forces have been enhancing their capabilities in “cyber and electronic warfare and unmanned systems” as well as sharpening their abilities pertaining to intelligence collection.¹⁷ Notably, the United States considers China to be “a three-pronged threat that’s strategic, commercial, and technological.”¹⁸

Saudi-Israel-US Partnership

The Biden administration has spoken about Saudi Arabia “forging a historic peace with Israel.”¹⁹ The United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel share the same threat perceptions to an extent regarding Iran. All three countries have intelligence-

sharing activities between themselves, albeit clandestine in the case of Saudi Arabia and Israel. The partnership has been referred to as “a coalition of circumstance.”²⁰ Scholars have proposed that both Saudi Arabia and Israel have an interest in keeping the United States as an “active regional military hegemon.” Both countries are likely to push the United States to militarily defeat Iran.²¹ This can lead to the intensification of great-power competition as there are economic interests of China in Iran regarding the BRI and Russia is a partner of Iran on various issues. Both Russia and China could provide Iran with weapons, PMCs, and further support. These actions could also prompt Tehran to have a Chinese or Russian military presence in Iran to deter and deny the US-Israel-Saudi partnership.

There could also be an expansion of the definition of terrorism from Saudi Arabia as nonviolent political rivals of the Saudi regime, who habitually also argue against normalization with Israel,²² as public opinion of Palestine is still highly positive in Saudi citizenry.²³ This could drive US resources away from great-power competition disproportionately toward counterterrorism activities.

Scenario 4: Substantial US Retrenchment from the WANA Region

Strategic analysts have propounded that “decline is a relative phenomenon” that can have two consequences, namely diminishing the leverage of the declining power and increasing the potential of military conflict as states attempt to navigate the status quo that is likely to mimic the novel and shifting power relations.²⁴ There is a perception in the United States that Washington has “strategically overinvested” in the region.²⁵

The United States can attempt to decrease its presence and engagement in the region and practice offshore balancing as well as focus on reconstruction efforts. The countries in the region will be forced to rely more on China and Russia for their security and defense collaboration. Great powers can also utilize the “Mubarak scenario,” whereby enormous popular revolts can lead to political transitions and introduce new actors who can then work with other countries such as the United States and Muslim Brotherhood parties in Egypt and Tunisia to retain or enhance their influence in the region.²⁶

Furthermore, persistent Russian and Iranian presence in Syria is likely to keep Assad in power. Russia might also be able to enhance its ties with traditional US allies such as Egypt and NATO ally, Turkey. China on the other hand will have to step up either as a security provider, which the countries in the region are likely to request, or keep its engagement limited to economic and strategic spheres.

Scenario 5: Russia Increases Its Footprint

In the past, Russia had become extremely important in preventing oil-price shocks in the region, which was able to provide the Kremlin with substantial leverage in the region.²⁷ However, following Russian adventurism in Ukraine and Kazakhstan,²⁸ the United States has emerged as the calming force in the hydrocarbon domain.²⁹ This has effectively led to involuntary ceding of critical ground by Moscow to Washington in a region where geopolitics is dictated by oil and gas. Furthermore, since US president Joe Biden came to power, the leaders in the region “have been working to reduce regional tensions by rekindling strained bilateral relations” that could reduce the maneuvering space for revisionist powers such as Russia.³⁰ These developments could serve as a motivator for Russia to try and reclaim its losses in the region since the invasion of Ukraine. Russian actions in Ukraine have also forced Russia to rely more on Turkey and Iran in the region to make up the financial damage suffered by the country as a result of its actions. Notably, a thorough understanding of the asymmetry in power will lead Russia to continue to engage in great-power competition with the United States and China in the region through “economic coercion and information operations,” which Moscow considers to be part of warfare. Russia has been trying to create a narrative that the United States was supporting Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and other violent nonstate actors in the WANA region while Russia has toiled with violent nonstate actors in Syria, Libya, and Lebanon. As the great-power competition intensifies, Russia’s cooperation with such groups will likely increase. Moscow can strengthen its attempts to dismantle stable geopolitical constructs in the region to the detriment of the United States. Experts have also promulgated that increased Russian presence in Syria may possibly constrain US counterterrorism missions.³¹

Furthermore, Russia is likely to attempt to gain control of a choke point in the region such as the Bab al-Mandab strait and to acquire a bridgehead in Yemen and the strait, which could also provide access to the Horn of Africa and guarantee the security of Russia maritime missions and energy transportation routes. Moscow can cooperate with Saudi Arabia to acquire access to the north of the country while collaborating in the south with the Houthis. The Kremlin can also cooperate with Iran and its PMCs to gain a foothold in the country.³² Furthermore, in the future, countries in the region are likely to be compelled to change the “size, structure, and force posture” of their defense and security forces owing to emergence of new threats. This can provide an opening for increasing Russian influence especially in the technology and defense sectors, which have emerged as part of Russia’s arsenal to acquire greater presence in the region.³³ Moscow has

also offered to mediate in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute.³⁴ All these developments are likely to provide Moscow with an advantage in the great-power competition in the WANA region.

China and Russia in the Great-Power Competition

Strategic analysts have propounded that the power struggle between China and Russia can lead to “tangible conflict, given their mutual interests in the region.” Russia has been in the region historically and has gotten “used” to the US regional influence while extensive Chinese influence is a relative novelty. Both countries maintain a “strategic partnership,” however, there has been the emergence of the WANA region as a fresh theater for impending hostility. Additionally, the expanded spread of Chinese arms may create frictions between both countries as they compete for the same niche arms market and nuclear exports to the WANA region.³⁵ Scholars have also opined that China and Russia are on a “collision course” in the region.³⁶

Scenario 6: Russia Decreases Its Footprint

As Russia becomes increasingly embroiled in its own neighborhood, Moscow can decrease its priorities in the WANA region. For instance, Russia has called the mercenaries from the Wagner Group, which was heavily involved in Africa and West Asia, to participate in the war in Ukraine to the detriment of Russian ambitions in the WANA region.³⁷ Notably, President Putin has already once exhibited his inclination to withdraw Russian troops from Syria.³⁸

The withdrawal of Russia from the region can lead to a decrease in the power of Iran and destabilize the Assad regime as well as the position of Haftar. The Western countries can also employ stringent sanctions against Russian allies. There can also be reprisals against Russian allies in the region as was witnessed after the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan. The unrest caused by the reprisals can provide the space for US or Chinese allies to acquire more power and influence.³⁹ Countries in the region are also looking for alternatives to grain and oil imported from Russia and Ukraine, which could decrease dependencies over time.

Furthermore, Russia can lose control of its leverage over Saudi Arabia over the hydrocarbons as Russia not only controls its own hydrocarbons but also the reserves of Syria and Libya as well. Terrorism can also increase in the traditional Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia. This concern emanates from the capabilities and reach of countries in the WANA region such as Iran that have the power to cause disruption in Central Asian nations. As Russian influence deteriorates from the region, its leverage over these countries declines as well.⁴⁰

Central Asian countries are at the “nexus of a number of interlocking regions,” including the WANA region, where Russian retrenchment can contribute to intensification of instability and the creation of a haven for violent nonstate actors.⁴¹ Russia’s withdrawal is also likely to be the Russian abandonment of its great-power ambitions and will provide regional powers such as Turkey and Israel along with great powers the United States and China opportunity to thrive.

Scenario 7: China Boosts Its Presence

Scholars have promulgated that the “BRI is a sophisticated Chinese plan to transfer hegemony” from the United States to China short of warfare or conflict.⁴² To obtain hegemony, China is likely to enhance its economic and military links with countries such as Qatar that share Beijing’s “normative synergies, threat containment desires, and China’s growing interest in extra-regional diplomacy.”⁴³ China has blamed the cold war mentality of its rivals for conflicts in the region—in sharp contrast to its focus on forming a new security mandate centered on burden-sharing and public goods, which is also likely to foster lasting stability and development.

The region has been reimagined by Beijing to subside in its nearest concentric circle outside of China. Therefore, the region has become a focal point for Chinese diplomatic efforts, which have been mainly exerted vis-à-vis under the BRI context.⁴⁴ As China increases its presence, it is likely to engage more in security and defense cooperation to guarantee the protection of its growing interests in the region. Additionally, China’s investment in strategic assets could lead to institution of “a platform for expeditionary military operations” in the region as well as a way to disrupt unfettered US access to the region.⁴⁵ Beijing’s interest in Israel could culminate in unfettered access to the region, which could provide it with a distinct advantage against its competitors. This is likely to raise the threat perceptions of the United States and Russia and can result in increased military buildup in the region.

China-Iran-Russia Nexus

In sharp contrast, one of China partners has been focusing on irregular warfare. Iran has been able to obtain daunting irregular capabilities guided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force, which has assisted militias and proxies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Tehran has also been able to preserve the “largest ballistic and cruise missile force” in the region due to Russia and China who also support the Islamic Republic on the United Nations Security Council.⁴⁶ Russia has also backed Iran’s request to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges. Furthermore, the

China-Iran-Russia nexus has been referred to as a “new maritime power triangle” and a demonstration of power to the United States as well as its regional allies.⁴⁷

The United States is likely to have to focus not only on the JCPOA but would also have to emasculate Iran’s irregular warfare in the region. However, the threat perceptions of the China-Iran-Russia nexus originate and are reinforced by the US practice of “predatory unilateralism.”⁴⁸ As long as these perceptions persist and are enforced by the actions of the United States in other theaters that affect all three countries individually, it provides the context for further China-Iran-Russia cooperation. Furthermore, the China-Iran-Russia nexus is also afforded a common cause and the motive to comparatively cost-effectively undermine US influence in the WANA region.

Scenario 8: China Reduces Its Presence

Beijing understands that it has isolated countries with its wolf warrior diplomacy and concerns have also been raised regarding the BRI. These developments have provided the United States with opportunities that it can easily capitalize on.⁴⁹ These events can also provide the pretext for diminishing Chinese presence in the region along with the Kindleberger Trap wherein China has to replace the United States as the guarantor of global public goods; however, it is incapable or unwilling to do so. Moreover, China is more likely to give precedence to its immediate neighborhood in its security considerations as opposed to the WANA region.

This, according to experts, can lead to the downfall of the “global system into depression, genocide, and world war.” China is going to feel the massive impact of its too-cautious approach as the biggest powers can get the most benefit from their contribution and the most harm from their refusal.⁵⁰ This can lead to Chinese withdrawal from the great-power competition and the region. As without strong security and strategic commitments, economic or other engagements become too risky and costly.

Violent Nonstate Actors and Their Influence on Great-Power Competition

The region itself has been suffering from low oil prices and it is implausible to estimate that there will be a swing back to the prices seen in the second half of the twentieth century. This has led to limitations on payments and subsidies from countries in the region to their citizens. Furthermore, this likewise leads to a rise of conservative religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and

other Islamist movements across the region who can provide social services and salvation and therefore emerge as a “direct threat to country and regime stability.”⁵¹

Scenario 9: Upsurge of Violent Nonstate Actors and Its Impact on Great-Power Competition

Regional stability has been challenged by violent nonstate groups owing to various conflicts, anarchy, and a security vacuum. Terror attacks have undermined democratic reform in Tunisia while terror groups struggled to take command of territory. In Algeria, groups oriented toward al-Qaeda have been involved in low-level guerrilla warfare. A significant number of fighters who went to fight ISIS were from North Africa.⁵² In 2020, ISIS attacks were witnessed in Syria and Iraq with the group enhancing its online recruitment and getting hold of sizable stockpiles of funds as well as encountering the possibility of acquiring a foothold in these countries by taking advantage of the changing geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, the underlying ailments that led to the establishment of ISIS are there including “lack of security apparatus, ethno-religious grievances and porous borders.” Iran’s proxy militias are also leading to frictions as well as deepening the divide in the region between the Shias and the Sunni. Furthermore, the pandemic in the short run has led to great powers focusing on their domestic concerns, which is likely to further empower emerging and affluent terror groups operating in the region.⁵³

Notably, experts have noticed that while al-Qaeda and other groups traditionally have fixated on the United States, the focus on the “great enemy” is diminishing with US withdrawal from the region and the terror groups can’t utilize US credibility as a “lightning rod for anger” any longer. Notably, these terror groups are very canny, and show a capability to “flex across the battlespace.” This becomes extremely concerning to China, which aims to ensure the security of its BRI projects, and this could lead to greater security engagement by both Beijing and Moscow, which can further aggravate tensions between the great powers and propel the great-power competition to lethal levels.⁵⁴

Subsequently, great-power competition has made scenario building extremely important for analyzing, predicting, and reacting to the unfolding of various future scenarios. Particularly, as Iran–Saudi Arabia strains seems to be exacerbated and both nations appear primed for feuding by the prospect of the lifting of sanctions on Iran and increased possibilities for Tehran under the Biden administration.⁵⁵ Concomitantly, Israel, a stalwart US ally, has been focused on rapprochement with WANA countries, which has been encouraged by the United States and has been the culmination of decades of Israel’s efforts to advance Tel Aviv’s aspirations.⁵⁶

The United States, on the other hand, under the past two administrations has been concentrated on retrenchment from the region, which is slated to have dramatic effects on the region while encouraging great-power competition between Russia and China. While increased US presence in the region is expected to limit penetration by other great powers as well as constrain the severity of great-power competition while strengthening Saudi-Israel-US partnership, in contrast, substantial US retrenchment from the WANA region will be apropos to provide space for US near-peer competitors and great-power competition to thrive.

Some of the most probable scenarios have focused on China's policy, which is slated to "remain pragmatic and restrained" notwithstanding the increase or reduction in the regional presence of China. However, the China-Iran-Russia nexus appears to have been provided with significant justifications to collaborate as US allies strengthen their linkages. Russia is expected to preserve its diplomatic prowess while maintaining its military leverage in Syria and Libya. This can enhance the conflict of interests between Beijing and Moscow as China further expands into and monopolizes the region. However, decline in Russian presence can spell disruption for Central Asian republics and Russia's sphere of influence.

However, there are also important areas of convergence for China and Russia in the great-power competition such as in crushing US naval dominance in the Gulf and in defying sanctions against Iran. These aims require instituting diplomatic, economic, and defense bastions to draw from in the region. The region is likely to experience great-power intercession in regional conflicts that are "almost ubiquitous in civil wars, and that the resultant deadlocks and quagmires" necessitate the emergence of a credible external guarantor, which was previously undertaken by the United States.⁵⁷ 🌟

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Notes

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