

S. Enders Wimbush

Managing Partner of State Various LLC, a global strategy consultancy

Tectonic Shifts in the Middle East's Strategic Environment

The future of the Middle East will be the result of the interaction of events occurring in the region itself with forces and dynamics occurring beyond its borders. I am particularly interested in the latter – the external forces and influences that will contribute to the strategic architecture of the Middle East going forward. We tend to focus on profound changes within the Middle East's states and societies as evidence that the future is likely to be rather different from today. I wish to concentrate attention on the tectonic shifts occurring all around the Middle East that ultimately will go far toward shaping what happens here. These shifts are among both old actors and new.

Perhaps no other region of the globe has been affected so powerfully by the interests of outside actors, whether they seek to harvest the region's abundant resources or enhance positions in an ongoing geostrategic competition that occurs elsewhere, or both. I will not speak of the United States, whose interests and strategies can be described better by other participants in this conference, except to register my own view that despite the political, economic, and social turmoil America's recent involvement in the Middle East has caused at home, I doubt that the United States' appetite for pursuing what it considers vital national interests in the Middle East has dimmed as much as most media pundits and a few candidates for the presidency would have us believe. To the contrary, I anticipate that U.S. interests will remain strong here, and that any new administration will adjust strategies to facilitate the United States remaining a strong player and constant presence for the foreseeable future.

Russia, one of the Middle East's formative actors and an aspiring player once again, will not be a durable presence in the Middle East. Today, Russia is a declining state across virtually every measure of its corporate viability. While Putin's ambitious and assertive Kremlin has behaved as if it is a regime on the geopolitical ascent by most indicators, the Russian state is actually on a downward trajectory.

The elements of Russia's national unraveling – and thus, the unraveling of Russia's sources of state power – are more or less well-known. They include :

- Severe and intractable demographic constraints, including an ongoing and inescapable long-term labor force contraction, a seemingly irresolvable public health nightmare, profound and rapid population aging where “greying” starts at the shockingly young, and other deep dysfunctions in the realm of human resources

- Ethnic imbalances favoring “population replacement” by non-Russians that are fundamentally changing the complexion of Russia's overall population, especially its younger cohorts, and its institutions (e.g., the military)

- One-commodity economy – hydrocarbons – whose volatile global price keeps Russia at the precipice of economic crisis, while the state's dependence on energy prices for public finances smothers human resource-based development policies

- A remarkably underdeveloped and ineffectual “middle class”

- A seemingly unstoppable brain drain, with many of the brightest of its younger generation opting to participate in the global economy from countries beyond Russia

- Degradation of “knowledge production” capabilities, caused by the collapse of both elite and mass education and the exodus of skilled talent with scarce opportunity in a Russia
- Brittle political system, with few safety valves for dissent, succession planning, and an entrenched stake-holding political elite
- Rapacious leadership, which takes every opportunity to harvest the state’s wealth for personal gain, while parking its profits abroad
- Military decline (notwithstanding its successful adventures in the near abroad), and the loss of the technical ability to produce the next generation of weaponry

This is an almost classic depiction of a waning power.

Russia’s leadership knows that Russia’s window of competitive advantage is small, and that the window is closing rapidly. It will take increasingly greater risks to remain in the game while employing a variety of dicey strategies and tactics to remain competitive. It must of necessity play its cards with greater abandon, letting the risks and attendant missteps mount while embracing chancy, and in all likelihood precipitate, behaviors with high probabilities of failure. Russia is likely to seek new supporters for its risk-taking from amongst state and, particularly, non-state actors who share Russia’s risk-taking mentality and antipathy toward the United States in particular and the West generally while bringing to the relationship high mobility and geographic reach. This will include, prominently, the Middle East.

The Middle East’s other traditional actor, Europe, is also declining in its capacity to play a major role here, for reasons in plain sight. The united Europe that its framers dreamt about has not come to pass, and today one sees what could be the beginnings of a long drawn out process of its dissolution. One should always speculate with caution about the viability of such a group of dynamic states, but, certainly, one alternative world – increasingly plausible – is a disunited Europe, where the European Union has devolved into an unmanageable mélange of increasingly conservative nationalistic states, with immigration, not least from the Middle East, as the touchstone of their nationalism.

That Europe is an unlikely candidate to exert strong influence on the shape or activities of a new Middle East, although individual states – for example, Germany, France, or Great Britain – could pursue more traditional historic interests in the Middle East without the anchor the European Union to restrain them. Most of this engagement will be economic, but no European state will have the capacity to project more than anecdotal military power into the region in any significant way. Investment in military capacity is down in virtually every European state. The trend lines on this are clear. Most European states are slowly going out of the defense business.

It is not difficult to imagine a Europe in the not too distant future that is divided, weak, and whose deep unhappiness is reflected in the bitter rhetoric of its increasingly dominant extreme political parties.

In contrast, China’s visibility in the Middle East is likely to increase and persist. Many of the Middle East’s ports have already entertained visits by Chinese warships. We can be confident that China’s blue water navy will grow apace with its interest in the resources of both the Middle East and Africa. These include energy from both the Middle East and West Africa and land for producing food to export to China, where food shortages loom due to water scarcity and environmental degradation.

Some strategists assume today that American interest in protecting sea lanes from the Middle East to Asia will wane as the indigenous production of the energy accelerates in the United States. It is conceivable that the U.S. may lose interest in this way, although I doubt it. The Asian economies kept afloat by Middle East energy

are the lifeblood of the American economy, so the U.S. can abandon at its peril energy security measures that might lead to disruption in Asia's economies.

Whether the U.S. stays or goes, one should expect the Chinese navy to assume a growing role in the protection and control of sea lanes in this region, rather than to remain a free rider for sea lane security on America's navy as it is today. China's continued development, indeed its economic wellbeing, depends fundamentally on an uninterrupted supply of energy from the Middle East. To protect energy supplies and to enhance its geostrategic position relative to the United States and, importantly, to rising India, China will invest heavily in securing a strong strategic position in the Middle East, including establishing military installations and relationships.

India is not a new player in this geostrategic game, although it has been a muted one. India's diplomatic, economic, and, at times, military influence in the Middle East – or West Asia, to Indian planners – is a strategic concern of long-standing, especially in the Arabian peninsula (e.g., Oman) and Iran, where Indian influence is deep. India is rising, as is reflected in recent economic growth rates. In contrast to China, its population will remain young for a long time. Its new leadership shows promise for creating a more assertive, outwardly focused India than its predecessors. One example of this intention is India's development of substantially more military power, with special emphasis on naval power, especially submarines, aircraft carriers, and aircraft.

China's expanding inroads to the Middle East will spur India to compete for influence and advantage with considerable vigor. It views China's economic diplomacy in Central Asia and its naval expansion into the Indian Ocean and the Middle East as efforts to outflank India strategically. Of particular concern to India in this regard is China's pursuit of new port and air facilities stretching through the Middle East to Africa, and even into the Mediterranean. Indians see China's leading involvement in the development of the western Pakistan port of Gwadar at the top of the Middle East as emblematic of China's powerful push westward into regions of strong Indian strategic interest. India's warming to a strategic relationship with the U.S. should surprise no one in this context. Balancing China will be a preoccupation of both India and the United States. Their strategic interests in this regard will converge in the Middle East.

All of these actors –new, old, rising, or declining – will place Iran near the center of their strategic planning. Its size, location, and resources make this inevitable. The tectonic tremors that would result from Iran becoming a nuclear weapons power would affect the strategies of all of these competitors powerfully.

We should assume, I believe, that the willingness of the United States to publicly contemplate Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability – which most Middle East states understand as the subtext of the current negotiations between Iran, Europe, Russia, and United States – will propel a number of them to begin planning nuclear futures for themselves. They are unlikely to await clarity on Iran's intentions to either continue developing a nuclear capability or disavow it, or the United States' willingness to tolerate this capability or its readiness to destroy it. Good strategic planning would anticipate the worst and begin building strategies to deal with it. Dealing with it will lead some to developing or buying nuclear weapons of their own. If this is correct, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and perhaps others, will begin planning their own strategies for survival in a more fluid nuclear world ; indeed, this planning is probably well underway already.

Thus could the Middle East's future strategic landscape feature more nuclear actors with small arsenals that lack the traditional ability to deter, while simultaneously offering strong incentives to incorporate these weapons in doctrines of use, even first strike. The strategic complexity of such a landscape is

difficult to imagine, but one hopes that organizations like Maison du Futur dedicates itself to doing so.

The Middle East I see will thus increasingly become a tapestry of intersecting strategic interests of relatively new players, while some traditional competitors and forces of restraint – for example, Russia and Europe – will fade. The forces and dynamics that produce these tectonic shifts could also draw others into the Middle East competition in new ways, for example Japan, which has begun to flex its muscle more openly as China exerts itself in regions where Japan has vital interests, including the Middle East. At the very least, the strategic architecture of the emerging Middle East will have many more moving parts represented by new actors with significant capabilities pursuing unfamiliar strategic outcomes.