

Opinion & Comment

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Exploiting the Mideast power vacuum

To appreciate the shifting tectonic plates in the politics of the Middle East, it might be useful to invoke the NATO Istanbul summit, which took place six years ago this month. The summit was intended to herald the recovery of the transatlantic partnership from the tensions caused by the U.S.-led war in Iraq, and to underscore NATO's primary global role, by having allies on both sides of the Atlantic commit to promoting a stable, more democratic and socioeconomically developed Middle East. Turkey was to be the paradigm of this endeavor. Standing beside Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president George W. Bush claimed: "Your country, with 150 years of democratic and social reform, stands as a model to others, and as Europe's bridge to the wider world."

Bush also took upon himself to actively advocate Turkey's admission to the EU, stating: "America believes that as a European power, Turkey belongs in the European Union. Your membership would also be a crucial advance in relations between the Muslim world and the West, because you are part of both."

Now, a mere six years later, the dwindling influence of the transatlantic powers and their decision to relinquish their efforts to promote progress in the Middle East are molding a new regional balance of power. Mired by overwhelming economic crises and other domestic concerns, the United States and Europe have been scaling down their international roles.

The new American course is far more significant than Europe's. American officials and opinion-shapers justify the apparent U.S. scaling down in terms of a "post-imperialist pragmatic realism." The desire to achieve more substantial results with far fewer resources, and to concentrate efforts on the domestic agenda for the sake of rebuilding U.S.

power, has led engagement to become the epicenter of U.S. strategy. Yet, this strategy can't help but adversely affect the perception of American political and strategic prowess in the region.

This not only entices America's adversaries to raise their stakes; it also drives U.S. allies to fend for themselves. Enter, Turkey.

The power vacuum created by dwindling Western influence in the Middle East, far more than its realization that EU membership is not on the cards, is guiding Turkey in shaping a neo-Ottoman regional strategy. To be sure, this strategy has not emerged overnight; it was, rather, based on an incremental build-up of Turkey's own economic power and a warming of relations with two states it previously regarded as adversaries, Iran and Syria. Turkey and Iran now share extensive commercial ties. For instance, Iran accounts for 30 percent of energy-resource imports to Turkey, while the latter is becoming a major investor in the former's gas sector. Turkey has also sought to cultivate closer relations with Syria, marked by a high-profile joint military exercise in 2009.

Furthermore, the future of Iraq appears to have solidified this triangular relationship into a strategic partnership: With the upcoming departure of U.S. troops, Iran's, Turkey's and Syria's complementary interests and aspired-to spheres of influence in Iraq are encouraging the formation of a political crescent of allies, stretching across the northern periphery of the Middle East, with Iraq's future to be determined. Emboldened, the two more powerful partners seek to jointly enhance their projection of power across the Middle East – hence their respective involvement in allegedly supporting the Palestinian cause. However, the Iranian and Turkish pro-

Palestinian campaigns are at odds with the Palestinian Authority, and are, rather, aimed at supporting Hamas, an Iranian proxy backed by Syria.

As the U.S. is viewed in the neighborhood as incapable of containing the expanding power of the northern crescent, the two main Arab regional powers, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are forming a southern crescent to protect their vital interests – from Iraq, through the Arabian Peninsula to Gaza – and to contain a potentially nuclear-backed northern alliance.

One cannot understand the Lebanese abstention on (as opposed to voting against) the recent UN Security Council resolution on sanctions against Iran, except as a clear rebuff from the south aimed at both Iran and Turkey. Saudi Arabia must also have been involved in orchestrating the June 12 meeting of Iraq's top political rivals to undermine Iranian attempts to form a Shi'ite coalition government.

Confronting the waning influence of its staunchest ally and a new emerging balance of power, Israel finds itself on the front line, yet with a clear choice. The leaderships of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel would serve their shared strategic interests best by creating a new relationship, which would also include a regional approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. From the Israeli perspective, this strategy is not risk-free, but Israel, as the rest of the Western world, has a vested interest in preserving political stability – among and within – the countries comprising the southern periphery of the Middle East.

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