



China Urged to Play a Greater Role in Middle East Turmoil

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Abstract

As the Trump administration plans to draw down US military footprint in Syria and the Middle East, the West can leverage China's increasing regional role and financial wherewithal for Syrian stabilization efforts. By encouraging Coalition partners such as France and other regional actors to support the Syrian Democratic Force's anti-Isis campaign in Syria, coupled with China's economic investment for post-war reconstruction via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reducing US military posture in Syria would therefore not leave a vacuum for Isis to fill. Rather, it could usher in a new era of Sino-US accommodation and partnership, and perhaps a new geopolitical realignment to restore order and stability in the Middle East.

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Analysis

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week had what has been described as a “tense” phone call¹ with President Donald Trump over the recent decision by the Americans to leave Syria. The conversation is said to have centered on Netanyahu’s concerns that US withdrawal would allow Israel’s enemies — Iran and its affiliated militias — to gain a further foothold in the neighboring country.

However, while the concerns of allies are important, the US president’s primary duty is not to satisfy Israeli or Saudi interests in the region, but to the American people — and taxpayers — who elected Trump on the promise to end foreign adventurism and start rebuilding their crumbling country.

America is suffering from imperial overreach and is teetering on implosion. As Doug Tsuruoka argued in Asia Times,² the West is plagued with “stagnant growth rates, political discord, anti-immigrant racism, mass shootings, opioid addiction and other post-industrial maladies. Brexit and Catalonia may herald greater political divisions to come.” Indeed, secession³ movements in California (Calexit), Texas (Texit), and other American states remains an underlying concern.

Regime-change wars are a costly venture

Americans are also tired of carrying the burden of endless regime-change wars in the Middle East. As Forbes⁴ pointed out, last year’s defense authorization bill required the defense secretary and Internal Revenue Service commissioner to publish online the full cost, “including the relevant legacy costs, to each American taxpayer of each of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.”

With an estimated US\$5 trillion spent on Iraq and Afghanistan alone, and adding “relevant legacy costs” — like long-term healthcare commitments to US veterans and interest on the debt incurred by these wars — the total is projected to top \$12 trillion by 2053 and cost the current 120 million taxpayers a cool \$100,000 a head. That doesn’t include expenditures in Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Moreover, President Trump promised to help veterans, not create new wars and new veterans to add to the more than 40,000⁵ homeless ones currently neglected by the US government.

¹ “Netanyahu Had ‘Tense’ Call with Trump Over U.S. Plan to Leave Syria, White House Officials Say, *Ha’aretz*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/netanyahu-had-a-tense-phone-call-with-trump-over-plan-to-leave-syria-1.5977504>

² Doug Tsuruoka, “What gives the West the right to remake China in its own image?”, *Asia Times*, April 6, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/gives-west-right-remake-china-image/>

³ Melia Robinson, “It would be incredibly difficult for California to pull off a ‘Calexit’ and secede from the US”, *Business Insider*, April 2, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.de/calexit-california-versus-texas-texit-2017-2?r=US&IR=T>

⁴ Bonnie Kristian, “American Taxpayers Must be Told the Real Cost of War”, *Forbes*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/02/01/american-taxpayers-must-be-told-the-real-cost-of-war/#17d4cea85246>

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/06/568755985/the-number-of-homeless-veterans-rises>



In addition to the government’s neglect of veterans, what is the outcome for expensive US interventions in the Middle East? It seems to be increased chaos and instability, with Taliban and Isis⁶ actually increasing⁷ their presence in Afghanistan after 17 years of US “stabilization” efforts. As such, the Washington, DC narrative that the US needs to maintain a long-term military occupation in Syria for “stabilization” rings hollow.

As observed by military historian Ret. Col. Andrew Bacevich, recent history “shows that U.S. military involvement in the region simply does not work.” In Iraq, a poignant *New York Times* column by Iraqi novelist Sinan Antoon⁸ entitled “Fifteen Years Ago, America Destroyed My Country” underscored the devastating carnage and chaos⁹ the US unleashed on the country and its people during the illegal 2003 invasion.

In Libya, a country that once boasted the highest living standard¹⁰ on the African continent, now boasts of an open slave trade¹¹ and infestation of ISIS and other Salafi terrorists after the US/Nato invasion. In Yemen¹², the US/Saudi bombing campaign prompted Congress to pass the Lieu amendment¹³ to the National Defense Authorization Act to try to prevent the US military from further abetting what some have described as war crimes against the Yemeni people, as incredible as that may sound.

⁶ Jack Moore, “Coalition Made in Hell: ISIS and Taliban Join Forces for Massacre in Afghansitan”, *Newsweek*, August 7, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-taliban-join-forces-deadly-attack-afghanistan-647166>

⁷ Paul Shinkman, “New Year May Bring Renewed War to Afghanistan”, *US News & World Report*, December 30, 2015, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015-12-30/isis-taliban-surge-in-afghanistan-could-provoke-us-escalation>

⁸ Sinan Antoon, “Fifteen Years Ago, America Destroyed My Country”, *New York Times*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/opinion/iraq-war-anniversary-.html>

⁹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/iraq-invasion-illegal-war-of-aggression-by-peter-singer-2018-04>

¹⁰ Peter Singer, “Crime and No Punishment for the Iraq War”, *Project Syndicate*, April 6, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-24472322>

¹¹ Phyllis Bennis, “Commentary: How America Bears Responsibility for Libya’s Slave Auctions”, *Fortune*, December 8, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/12/08/libya-slave-market-trade-slavery-africa-2017/>

¹² Christina Lin, “Obama Apologizes to Laos over cluster bombs, then sells them to pound Yemen”, *Asia Times*, September 8, 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/us-cluster-bombs-obama-apologizes-to-laos-sells-more-to-pound-yemen/>

¹³ “Rep. Lieu Statement on House Passage of NDAA with Lieu Provisions on Yemen”, U.S. House of Representatives, November 4, 2017, <https://lieu.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-lieu-statement-house-passage-ndaa-lieu-provisions-yemen>



Despite the endless incantation by Beltway pundits that the US is in the Middle East to promote “freedom” and “democracy,” most people outside the Beltway echo chamber do not buy that narrative. The emperor has no clothes, and as the late Zbigniew Brzezinski argued, perhaps it’s time for a policy shift and new geopolitical framework for the Middle East.

The West can leverage China’s Silk Road Funds for Syrian stabilization

In an April 17, 2016 article in *The American Interest*¹⁴, Brzezinski, diplomat, political scientist and former national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, argued that as an era of US unipolarity and global dominance ends, Washington needs to take the lead in realigning the global power architecture.

He argued that while the US is still the world’s preponderant power militarily, politically and economically, given the geopolitical shifts in regional balances and the “rising rest,” it needs to adopt a new paradigm to stabilize the Middle East that can only be effective if “it forges a coalition that involves, in varying degrees, also Russia and China.” Russia, he urged, must be discouraged from using unilateral force against its neighbours, while China should be “disabused of the idea that selfish passivity in the face of the regional crisis in the Middle East will prove to be politically and economically rewarding to its ambitions in the global arena.” In other words, China should stop being a free rider and become a responsible stakeholder in the Middle East.

Indeed, Beijing has demonstrated its increasing willingness to be more proactive on global governance issues, whether on climate change, continued globalization, the Iran nuclear deal, anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, or injecting billions into a US stimulus package during the 2008-9 global financial crisis. Most visibly, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Eurasia is promoting economic integration and reducing ungoverned space for terrorist actors to thrive.

In that regard, the US and its EU and Gulf allies can leverage China’s financial wherewithal via the BRI for Syrian reconstruction and stabilization, and deny Isis a safe haven. Beijing also has more security interest than Washington to stabilize Syria, given the presence of Chinese Uyghur jihadi colonies¹⁵ in Idlib that can launch attacks against China and its overseas interests. In fact, Turkistan Islamic Party — the Chinese Uyghur al Qaeda — took part in Turkey’s offensive against Kurds in Afrin¹⁶, now with an eye towards Manbij. This makes Kurds natural allies¹⁷ for China to counter the same adversary.

¹⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Toward a Global Realignment”, *The American Interests*, Vol. 11, No. 6, April 17, 2016, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/04/17/toward-a-global-realignment/>

¹⁵ Christina Lin, “Chinese Uyghur Colonies in Syria—A Challenge for Beijing”, *Asia Times*, May 21, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/chinese-uyghur-colonies-syria-challenge-beijing/>

¹⁶ Erdogan is the guarantor of the “National Army”, *Sigma Turkey*, January 29, 2018, <https://sigmatrueky.com/2018/01/29/erdogan-guarantor-national-army/>

¹⁷ Briton Huang Lei Leads fighters on mission to avenge Kurds in Afrin”, *BBC*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/briton-huang-lei-leads-fighters-on-mission-to-avenge-kurds-in-afrin-25wcn8wb>



The US is also not good in post-war reconstruction or stabilization efforts. As Geoffrey Aronson¹⁸, Middle East affairs expert and chairman of the Mortons Group consulting firm observed: “We’re ... not in the business of rebuilding infrastructure and development not directly related to our military presence” (e.g., airstrips, military infrastructures). Whereas the US at first refused to spend money until Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s departure, or even worse, spent it solely on dropping bombs, Aronson said China saw a chance to cash in on post-war reconstruction.

Beijing thus does not want instability to harm its assets and citizens in either Syria or Israel — the latter where it is injecting large amounts of investments and infrastructure workers. As such, given China’s good relations with Jerusalem, Damascus, and Tehran, Israel and the US could try engaging China to help mediate a post-war consensus for Syria, including potential joint exploitation of energy reserves in the Golan Heights.

By encouraging Coalition partners such as France and other regional actors to support the Syrian Democratic Force’s anti-Isis campaign in northern Syria, coupled with China’s economic investment for post-war reconstruction via the BRI, reducing US military footprint in Syria would not therefore leave a vacuum for Isis to fill. Rather, it could usher in a new era of Sino-US accommodation and partnership, and perhaps a new geopolitical realignment a la Brzezinski to restore order and stability in the Middle East.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published in *Asia Times* on April 8, 2018.

¹⁸ Tom O’connor, “China may be the biggest winner of all if Assad takes over Syria”, *Newsweek*, January 19, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/china-did-not-fight-syria-won-war-754644>