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International Roles in Middle East Policies

Posted: 10/23/2014 9:39 pm EDT | Updated: 10/23/2014 9:59 pm EDT

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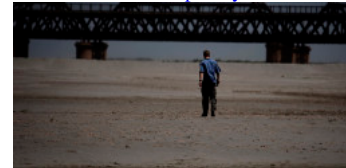
China has no strategy, but it has a policy. This is what Chinese experts have said in the course of explaining -- or justifying -- Chinese policy toward the countries of the Middle East. Russia is clinging to its policy because it is a state that understands strategy and what makes a strategy, from geography to natural resources. Russian speak in this manner, sometimes condescendingly, with their Arab counterparts. The Europeans are fragmented and they confess to their disunity. Their strategy is tactical in nature. For their part, the Americans take turns in refusing to blame the United States on the one hand, and in admitting their tactical mistakes, on the other. When it comes to a long-term US strategy, most American experts almost deny its existence, arguing instead that US policy is the policy of respective presidents and administrations. This is some of the most prominent impressions that came out of the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate forum, organized by the Emirates Policy Centre (EPC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the UAE earlier this week. The goal of the event is to reach a common understanding amongst international and regional actors about tendencies of regional and international powers, as well as enhance efforts of policy-making among those actors. EPC is headed by Dr. Ebtisam Al Qutbi, the first woman to ever head a think-tank in the UAE. Going into the details of the topics addressed by the meeting, including the impact of hotspots on in the region on the Gulf, as the conference put it, the international actors seem to have brought interesting insights with them to the Middle East region, deserving pause for the sake of a better understanding of current regional and international developments.

In the opening session, Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash identified the main outlines of UAE policy, calling for a "clear vision," a "comprehensive strategy," and "coordinated efforts" regionally and internationally to tackle challenges including, but not limited to, ISIS. Gargash considered war on extremist groups a necessity because extremists "were not amenable to moderation," and urged a clampdown on the flow of money and fighters to where these groups are, and also called for promoting education, culture, and openness.

Concerning Syria and Iraq, Gargash blamed sectarian and exclusionary policies. He expressed "cautious hope" in the new Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi, but described his comments on the statements made by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden

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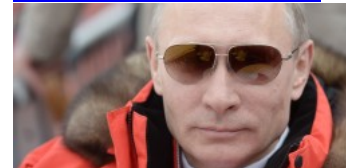
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attacking the UAE and Saudi Arabia by saying, "Unfortunately, they undermine the willingness to turn the page on the past," and raise "doubts."

Egypt represents the "cornerstone of stability in the region," as per UAE foreign policy as Gargash said. Gargash stressed that Egypt must regain its historical and key position in the region and the world.

Iran is a neighbor with whom warm relations should be sought, Gargash also said, but he stressed that there was a difference between Iran as a state and society, and Iran as an expansionist foreign policy. Iran's policy has provoked sectarian wars, exacerbated instability, and promoted chaos in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. As for nuclear negotiations, the Gulf countries want them to lead to an airtight agreement. Otherwise, these countries will have to think about what better suits their interests.

Gargash stressed that the UAE had no ambitions for a greater regional role, preferring to be a model for "moderation" in the region that refused attempts to "change our world through extremist movements."

The first intervention came from Dr. Vitaly Naumkin, director of the Institute of Oriental Studies and a professor at the Faculty of Global Policy at the University of Moscow. He said that the Middle East is not high up on the list of priorities and strategic interests of the Russian Federation, albeit it remains of interest to the Russians. Naumkin stressed that the oil and gas factor is extremely important to Moscow, indicating that there are a lot of conspiracy theories involving Russia and the Gulf. In particular, he referenced an article by American journalist Thomas Friedman in which he wrote that there was a US-Saudi conspiracy against Russia behind the dramatic fall in oil prices in the past few weeks.

There have been voices saying falling oil and gas prices were part of a new strategy to harm Russia, being one of the world's top exporters of oil and gas. It has also been said that one of the goals of this strategy was to push Iran to show more flexibility in nuclear negotiations, which, if successful, would lead to lifting the sanctions on Tehran.

Russia is committed to the alliance with Iran in the Middle East and this was clear through all the Russian interventions made at the Abu Dhabi Debate. The Russian participants were almost in complete agreement in the main topics of their interventions, which did not diverge much from official Russian policy.

What is frustrating about a large number of interventions made by the Russians, whether by speakers behind podiums or in the course of their comments on the sidelines of the meeting, was the extent of arrogance and condescendence they displayed toward Arab attitudes and interventions. There was a kind of contempt and ridicule of the Arab character, and not just of the various opinions expressed by the participating Arabs. The goal of the forum, which invited more than ten Russian figures, was to open the door for interaction and the exchange of experiences. Unfortunately, the Russian presence was characterized by mocking Arab "sentimentality" and by belittling the Arab positions, which insist in their majority on independent decision-making within the Arab region, away from Iranian meddling in Arab countries.

The Russian comments -- including the ones made by Dr. Elena Suponina, director of the Middle East and Asia Center, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies -- stressed that Iran is not only a key player in solving the problems of the Arab countries, but must also be a leading player in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Suponina downplayed Arab roles and leaders, and suggested that the UAE follow Russia in lifting the sanctions on Iran, given that the UAE has the highest trade volume with Iran in the region. Suponina completely ignored Arab objections to Iran's military roles in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Dr. Ekaterina Stepanova, head of Peace and Conflict Studies unit at the Institute of the World Economy & International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow, summed up the conditions that govern whether or not a given issue is seen as important in Russian foreign policy as follows: First, the issue has to be a source of concern for society, such as the Afghan refugees and the situation in Ukraine. Second, it has to be linked to energy, because Russia is affected by the state of oil and gas. Third, it must be linked to the issue of extremism and terrorism, because Russia assigns great importance to the impact of ISIS and extremism in general on Russian Muslims.

Back to Naumkin, he said that Russia is willing to cooperate in the fight against ISIS as part of a joint comprehensive strategy that he said "has not been adopted yet." Naumkin called for including Tehran and Damascus in this strategy as a condition. He said that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad wants to participate in the US-led coalition against ISIS, and that Russia "is willing to support his efforts in the fight against terrorism."

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The fact of the matter is that there is no change in Russian policy in terms of the centrality of its alliance with Iran and its commitment not to backtrack from supporting Tehran's regional ambitions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. There is no change in Russian policy in terms of supporting Bashar al-Assad's bid to remain in power. Moscow is pleased to have the members of the anti-ISIS coalition wage a war on its behalf to a certain extent. If the war against ISIS were confined to within Syria, this would most likely affect Russia and Iran more than others. Hence, practically and realistically, Russia and Iran are not in a hurry to take part in the coalition against ISIS. They are both satisfied by the developments in the war, because it relieves some pressure on them, even if provisionally.

This does not mean, from an American perspective, that Syria is no longer a quagmire for Russia and Iran's own "Vietnam." There are still those who insist on the theory regarding the long-term US strategy that sees the developments in Syria as an opportunity for US interests, first because Russia "winning over" a Syria in ruins, a Syria that is torn apart, and a Syria that is overrun by terrorism and extremism is not a strategic victory. Second, Iran's "victories" in Syria pave the way for a broader and deeper immersion for Iran and its regional ambitions in a bloody war like the one raging in Syria.

Here, returning to the issue of the difference between strategy and policy, i.e. tactic, the United States appears to have a strategy, while the policies of the administration governing it appears to be a tactic. For this reason, the majority in the Arab region is convinced that everything that is happening is part of a US plot. US experts reject this view, and accuse its proponents of conspiratorial thinking.

In the context of the equation of strategy versus tactics, the Chinese participants voiced some interesting opinions during the Abu Dhabi event. The first surprise came in an intervention by Dr. Chen Yiyi, head of the Center for Middle East Peace Studies at Shanghai University. He said, "China has no strategy or a vision on the Middle East." He said he asked himself how China wronged Syria in the context of the argument that no one is innocent in what happened in Syria, but was not convinced by the answers. He spoke about the negative perception of China in the context of the rift with the Gulf countries. He talked about the US policy based on not sending US troops to the battlefield, and said that the "Israelization" of the US has reached a peak. Yiyi declared that China does not believe in quick change because it runs the risk of failure, saying that China had no experience in building institutions but had a unique experience in building an administration for a large number of people, and was determined to press ahead with economic development as the mainstay of its policy.

For his part, Dong Manyuan, Senior research Fellow specialized in Middle East Studies, China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Beijing, stressed the core constant principles in Chinese policies related to absolute respect for countries' sovereignty. He said that China is working to strengthen its relations with Arab countries and at the same time to maintain relations with Iran. He defended the triple Chinese veto in the Syrian issue at the Security Council and said: Arabs wanted a different stance from China in the Security Council, but China adheres to the principles of international relations such as non-interference. When he was confronted with some tough questions, he ignored them completely and made a passionate and combative speech on the Palestinian issue instead, in a deliberate move to outmaneuver the Arabs at the conference.

His colleague Dr. Jisi Wang, President of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University, Beijing, called on the United States and the Arab countries concerned to abandon their demand for Bashar al-Assad to step down. He diagnosed the practical aspect of Chinese policy on the basis that China has no well-defined policies, and instead rely on policies related to the needs of the market. As is known, China has enhanced and developed its economic ties with Iran and military ties with Israel simultaneously, even as Chinese experts were engaging in one-upmanship over Palestine and defending the veto without any attempt to understand Arab criticisms.

Because China and Russia are allies of Iran -- and also have advanced relations with Israel -- it is perhaps worthwhile to note the Iranian interventions at the event by Dr. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Associate Research Scholar at the Program on Science and Global Security at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and Dr. Mohsen Milani, Professor of politics and Chair of the Department of Government and International Affairs at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

Mousavian called on the Arabs to alter their strategy and refrain from supporting continued sanctions on Iran because a nuclear agreement would be good for the region, and said that there was a need to promote regional cooperation to achieve stability in oil prices. Mousavian said agreeing to consider ISIS the largest threat was a good beginning for fostering cooperation between Iran and the Arab Gulf countries,

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calling for the creation of a new regional security system (practically replacing the Gulf Cooperation Council). Mousavian also said that Iranian-Gulf negotiations must take place without preconditions, which include for example the demand that Iran withdraw from Iraq and Syria, and so on.

Milani summed up Iran's major objectives in the region, including: maintaining a good relationship with Iraq; managing the mini-cold war with Saudi Arabia that has been raging for years; and agreeing on regional security arrangements to maintain the security of the region and to ensure the continued flow of energy supplies.

Milani challenged the accusations against Iran of pursuing sectarian policies, saying that Iran acts as a state based on its interests, though it may use sectarianism as a tool like any other. Milani said it was important to contain sectarianism, especially since Shiites do not account for more than 20 percent of the population in the region. Interestingly, Milani criticized the Arab objection to Iranian intervention in the affairs of Arab countries when Iran is not an Arab nation, considering this to be "discriminaiton."

It was very useful to listen to Iranian, Chinese, and Russian opinions, though it would have been better if the messages were expressed with less arrogance. The goal of such conferences, in part, is for experts to influence one another and convey a useful gist that would help shape policies, be they tactical or strategic in nature. Hopefully, the next round would see less patronization and more attentive engagement. Dr. Ebtisam Al Qutbi did well to design a forum that highlighted the importance of international roles in the Middle East, beginning with Russia and China, and not ending with Europe and the United States.

Translated from Arabic by Karim Traboulsi

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