

Making History: China and Russia Are Transforming “Enemies” into “Friends”

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Global Research, October 18, 2017

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In the previous articles, the [military](#) and [economic](#) means by which the United States initially aimed for global hegemony were addressed, detailing how the US became the (declining) superpower it is today. In both analyses I highlighted how the threat of US military power is no longer credible, and how sanctions and the strong-arming behavior of corporate giants and international bodies (IMF, World Bank, BIS, etc) have ceased their effectiveness.

This has made the United States increasingly irrelevant, leaving in the process a vacuum to be filled by emerging powers like China and Russia, which effectively ushers in a new world order based on multipolarity. In this third and final part of the series, I will dive into the specific events that show how the military, economic and diplomatic combination of Iran, Russia and China have forged, by known as well as less-known means, an alternative world order to the unipolar American one.

Russia, China and Iran have in recent years drawn enormous benefit from the declining military and economic power of the United States, further propelled by a general mistrust of Washington's diplomatic and political abilities, both with Obama and now with Trump. The two previous articles showed that Moscow, Beijing and Tehran, even as they addressed different situations, shared similar interests and came to coordinate their military, economic and diplomatic strategy.

The success of the Euro-Asian triptych is based on the essential principle of transforming enemies into neutral players, neutral players into allies, and further improving relations with allied nations. In order for this project to be realized, economic, military and diplomatic efforts are variously employed, depending on the country and the general regional context. The flexibility shown by Moscow and Beijing in negotiations has delivered historic deals, not only in the energy sector but also in the military sphere and also in education and poverty reduction, as seen in Africa.

Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria are three countries that, when analysed individually, reveal this precise strategy of Russia, China and Iran. Particular attention is focused on the Middle East for several reasons. It is the region where America's declining military power, unable to achieve its geopolitical objectives in Syria, meets with the progressive loss of Washington's economic influence, highlighted by the increasingly precarious position of the petrodollar that is about to be challenged by petroyuan deals between Saudi Arabia and China.

From Enemies to Neutrals

The military defeat of Syria's enemies was mainly due to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) together with Iran (plus Hezbollah) and Russia's military cooperation, together with Beijing's

diplomatic and economic support. Thanks to the strategy adopted by Putin in Syria, Russia was able to stop the advanced project of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, France, the United Kingdom, Jordan and Israel to dismantle Syria. The Russian Federation gradually entered into the Syrian conflict, and the military results immediately favored the axis of resistance, the US military unable to intervene directly to change the course of events.

The consequences of this choice have led historic allies in the region to doubt Washington's real commitment to the region and America's military ability to intervene in a conflict in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and change its course in favour of Riyadh, Doha, Ankara or Tel Aviv. The new Trump administration has showed itself not to live up to the expectations of Saudi regional hegemonic plans, even though the Kingdom agreed to buy up to \$110 billion worth of US weapons and commit to further investments in the US.

Riyadh is in an even tighter position than one would ordinarily think. It has to individually support the weight of the petrodollar, which is increasingly shaky thanks to the Chinese desire to eliminate forms of payment in US dollars by switching to the petroyuan. Moreover, Riyadh sees little tangible benefits to the US militarily backing its aggressive anti-Iran policies, even though Trump has shown to different ideas than Obama on the Iran deal. Saudi Arabia shares a common interest with Israel in the region with regard to their shared anger concerning Washington's diminishing effectiveness in the region.

From the Saudi point of view, everything went downhill within a relatively short period. The defeat in Syria that coincided with the agreement on the nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - JCPOA) between Iran and the 5+1 countries. In both these scenarios, Riyadh feels the profound betrayal of its old North American ally. The Chinese economic pressure on Riyadh to accept yuan payments for oil, coupled with the growing ability of Moscow to effectively intervene in the region, and the renewed diplomatic and political role of Iran thanks to the JCPOA agreement, has left Riyadh on a certain path to destruction. The only solution is a strategic change that could affect the region in a significant manner.

The visit of Saudi King Salman to Moscow to sign trade agreements (an investment fund of over 1 billion dollars has been created) was of symbolic importance. The King's actions, conducted in person, reflected recognition of Russia's new dominant role in the Middle East as a result of American intentions to withdraw influence in the region. The need for the Saudi king to appear in person in Moscow also directly concerns the succession to the throne, with Mohammed bin Salman to inherit the keys to the kingdom, in spite of the disasters in Yemen and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis caused by the clash with Qatar. In a situation of extreme weakness, especially with oil prices so low, the Saudi monarchy is left with few cards to play and has to initiate a dialogue with Moscow and possibly start some kind of cooperation in various fields related to energy and investment. Initially, the main excuse for the Moscow meeting between Putin and the Saudi king was to coordinate the production and sale of petroleum and gas, a necessity for both countries given falling oil prices over the last 24 months. The first goal achieved by Putin and the Saudi king appears to be a spike in oil prices to acceptable levels, following Washington and Riyadh's failed strategy to bankrupt Moscow by plunging oil prices.

Secondly, the meeting focused on the acceptance of Riyadh's defeat in Syria, recognizing Assad as the only legitimate leader of the Syrian Arab Republic.

A lot is developing behind the scenes, and this is evident with Riyadh now recognizing a political solution as the only way to end the conflict, something never mentioned by Saudi state representatives. It will be very difficult for Riyadh to give up the regime-change project, even if the political, diplomatic, military and economic pressure from China and Russia increases. A common faith accompanies Riyadh and Tel Aviv, as shown with both repeatedly trying to persuade Putin to abandon his friendship with Iran and Assad, but without success. The loyalty demonstrated by Moscow to Tehran and Damascus has also had a positive effect on the Saudis, who must recognize that while Putin may have different views on certain issues, he is a man of his word; unlike the United States, where new administrations may sometimes throw friends under the bus, Putin maintains his promises, even under extreme pressure. In this sense, Trump's decision to decertify the Iran deal is a demonstration of good will to Israel and Saudi Arabia by the new administration.

Saudi Arabia finds itself with very low monetary reserves as a result of the lowered price of oil and involvement in several wars. To add to this is a military defeat in Syria and an even bigger debacle in Yemen. To cap it all off, the United States, its most valuable ally, is increasingly disinterested in the fate of the Saudi monarchy and the kingdom, thanks to increasing energy independence as a result of fracking. Adding to this, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has split as a result of the economic warfare against Qatar, representing another example of Washington not supporting Riyadh to the full extent the monarchy in Saudi Arabia would have been expecting. The reasoning for Riyadh is as simple as it gets. If Washington is not able to support Saudi Arabia militarily, but Riyadh has to bear the burden economically, then the Kingdom is in enormous trouble and needs alternatives like Russia and China. It is unthinkable for Saudi Arabia to continue supporting petrodollar hegemony while Iran becomes a regional leader in the Middle East.

The best way is by negotiating with the main players, and Russia looks like the perfect mediator, as recently announced. China is just waiting for all these disputes to settle down to bring to bear its economic power to definitively relegate to the past the last forty years of chaos in the region stemming from Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

For Riyadh, even if the attempt to separate Russia and Iran were to fail, it would nevertheless bring about relations that send a clear signal to the West. The purchase of S-400s is a clear demonstration of expanding Russian influence in the Middle East, and Riyadh perhaps has an understandable fear of American retaliation in the event that it starts to change course regarding the sale of oil in currencies other than the dollar.

Moscow has achieved a diplomatic miracle with Saudi Arabia, thanks to the military efforts in Syria, Chinese economic pressure through the issuing of petroyuan, and Iranian diplomatic success, stemming especially from the nuclear energy agreement, which has served to rehabilitate Tehran on the international political scene.

The purchase of advanced Russian weapons systems sends a clear signal and indicates that the Saudi kingdom is ready to assume a more neutral position and has started to knock on the door of the multipolar world, an acknowledgement of Chinese economic power and the military-technological predominance of the Russian Federation.

From Neutral to Friends

In transforming itself into a more neutral country, Riyadh may be attempting to balance American economic and military influence with Russian and Chinese support. The

importance for Russia and China in having a neutral country with great spending capacity in the region should also be noted. In the case of Turkey, Russian intervention in Syria, coupled with Turkish aspirations to become a Euro-Asian energy centre, progressively pushed Moscow and Ankara together. As a result of effective diplomatic work following Turkey's downing of a Russian jet, relations have gradually improved, occurring in parallel to the operational success achieved by the Syrian army and Russian Air Force against Turkish-backed terrorists. The military defeat of Turkey was already clear twelve months ago. In the last three to four months, Erdogan seems to have changed priorities, focusing on the Kurdish issue and on growing relations with Qatar (the political movement of the Muslim Brotherhood is key in both countries and essential to their relationship). In the meantime, Turkey is distancing herself from her NATO allies, gravitating more and more towards the orbit of the "axis of resistance" that consists of Iran, Iraq and Syria.

The Syria peace talks held in Astana laid the foundation for diplomatic efforts by Tehran and Moscow to persuade Ankara to abandon the military option (even though this was already clear once Russia decided to intervene). Instead, Ankara would be encouraged to open up important energy deals between Ankara and Moscow. It seems that Ankara has now decided to become an energy hub, carrying Turkish Stream gas from Russia to Europe as well as gas from Qatar and Iran. It even seems that China has every intention of connecting with the Turkish facilities for the supply of gas and oil, thus increasing Ankara's role as a central energy-transit hub for the region.

The other aspect that has firmly convinced Erdogan to yield on Syria concerns the Kurdish issue. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), consisting mainly of Kurdish fighters, operate in Syria under the command and on behalf of the US-led international coalition. Ankara has nominated the Kurds of the SDF as an armed extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), considered a terrorist group in Turkey. This divergence between Washington and Ankara has continued to grow, even during the Trump administration, contrary to forecasts during the US election period.

With the progressive use of the SDF in Syria by the international coalition headed by the US, Trump and Erdogan's strategies have ended up clashing. Trump needs to give his domestic audience the impression that the US is devoted to fighting ISIS, even if this means relying on Kurdish soldiers that entails severing relations with Turkey. Erdogan sees this as a matter of national security. The situation has escalated to a point where a few days ago, a diplomatic dispute led to the suspension of the issuing of visas from the respective embassies in Ankara and Washington. Erdogan considers American aid to the Kurds as a betrayal of the worst kind from a NATO ally. A natural reaction to these actions by the US, therefore, was the agreement between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey to preserve territorial integrity vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue.

The blessing of the Chinese and Russians is evident in this situation. In order to pacify the region, rebuild it and incorporate it into the One Belt One Road project, the Maritime Silk Road, and the North-South Transport Corridor, wars have to stop and diplomacy must prevail. For Ankara, it is a unique opportunity to exit the war in Syria without appearing as one of the defeated factions (hence the Turkish participation in the Astana talks with Russia and Iran). At the same time, Turkey emphasizes the importance of its geographical position as a centre for energy distribution on the Eurasian supercontinent. This is all at the expense of the US, with Turkey breaking free from Washington's pressure.

Moscow has already removed all sanctions against Turkey, and vice versa, greatly

increasing trade with considerable prospects for growth in the coming years. As for weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, Russian influence is expanding, thanks to the S-400 systems in the process of being sold to Ankara over the vehement protests of many NATO countries. The S-400 system is a further effort to deter US aggression, but is also the first indication of Ankara's will to diversify, this time militarily, constituting a pillar of the new multipolar world order.

Ankara, after numerous diplomatic and military failures, has rebuilt its role in the region alongside Iran and Qatar, in a context where its partnership with Moscow and Beijing will guarantee Erdogan a margin of maneuver to progressively disengage from the NATO system that has brought so many problems to the country. A future entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could seal Ankara's passage into the multipolar world, becoming in the process a fully fledged ally of Moscow and Beijing. In the meantime, it is already possible to say that Moscow and its allies have succeeded in the unlikely task of turning a nation that was on the brink of a direct involvement in Syria in the effort to remove Assad into one of the most important guarantors of Syria's territorial integrity. Erdogan has agreed to Assad staying in power into the near future, and has even agreed to help fight terrorists in Syria, as evidenced with the recent Turkish military operations in Idlib.

How deep these new friendships between Moscow, Riyadh and Ankara are yet to be tested. Erdogan and the Saudi monarchs have been known not to keep their word. At it stands, this appears to be an economic, political and military masterpiece of the Iranian, Russian and Chinese triad. The war in Syria has almost been won; the terrorist groups supported by the Saudis and Turks have been neutralized; and the conditions for a full Eurasian economic and military integration of Riyadh and Ankara have been set.

Supporting Friends in need.

Ultimately, it is worth pointing out the contribution of Russia, China and Iran to the Syrian government and people. Over the six years of aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic, Iran has never failed to contribute in terms of manpower, equipment and logistical support in the battle against terrorism. Moscow, in the early stages of the conflict, even before intervening directly, took steps to settle the Syrian foreign debt to Russia, and in fact lent money by providing armaments, energy and logistics as a way of actively contributing to the defeat of terrorists in Syria.

The People's Republic of China has already paved the way for the future of Syria in economic terms, declaring the country an important transit route and a final destination of a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese economic power will allow Damascus to rebuild a nation devastated by six years of terrorism and foreign aggression. With Russian military capabilities, Damascus will have all the necessary means to end the conflict and stabilize the country, laying the foundation to prevent any future Western aggression. From a political and diplomatic point of view, the joint actions of Tehran, Beijing and Moscow, together with Damascus, are an integral part of the axis that stretches from Iran to Iraq and Syria and arrives at the Mediterranean, or could even go to Turkey. With the combination of economic, military and political elements, Syria has survived almost unprecedented aggression, emerging as the winner, thus ensuring its ability to determine its future autonomously without external impositions.

Series Conclusions

The path traced by Moscow, Beijing and Tehran is expected to stabilize the Middle East, thanks to the resolution of the Syrian conflict. Some key elements of this global change we are witnessing are: Chinese economic pressure on the Saudis to accept payment for oil in yuan; the eradication of terrorism in Iraq and neighbouring countries, thereby circumventing sanctions imposed on Iran by the US and its allies; and transforming Turkey into a regional energy-distribution centre.

The RPC intervenes economically in a number of regions, particularly in the Middle East, to support Russian military power through money, diplomacy, economic investment (OBOR) and by providing liquidity to allies, as seen with Moscow when it was hit with Western sanctions. For Beijing, the decline in terrorism is a key factor in fostering China's development of the Silk Road 2.0 infrastructure, allowing Beijing to enter into areas destroyed in the Middle East to offer easy reconstruction plans. At the moment, Syria, Egypt, Libya and Pakistan seem to hold great importance for China's future strategies.

Russia and China lead organizations such as the BRICS, the UEE, the SCO, and the AIIB. The grand strategy is to support the creation of an alternative to the US dollar-based neoliberal world order and to contain the effects of declining US empire. Nations will increasingly have to choose between two systems: whether the multipolar world order, based on friendship and win-win cooperation, or the unipolar one, based on the America's declining military and economic power.

Strong Chinese economic support, together with Russian military might as well as Iran's importance in the Middle Eastern region, are successfully shielding countries like Syria from American military interventions, driving a wedge between old US allies and paving the way for Washington's planned economic and military isolation in the region. Thus, countries similarly facing US pressure, such as South Korea, Mexico and Venezuela, will increasingly gravitate toward the multipolar world led by Russia and China, accelerating the decline and influence of the United States beyond the Middle East.

The multipolar world order is here to stay. The US is no longer the lone superpower but rather one among two other nuclear-armed powers. The sooner the US realizes this, the better it will be for humanity and for peace around the world.

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