

IRAN, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE RENEWED BALANCE OF POWER

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Considering the current trend of developments in the political arena of the Middle-East, the view on the regional security regime based on Balance of Power aimed at safeguarding security and stability of the region, requires revision. Balance of Power is based on a Win-Lose game and increasing the relative strength of rival actors which in turn has the potential of resulting in tension, lack of confidence, and conflict.

Considering the new developments in the region a new security balance among the major regional and global actors seems to be a more suitable option to restore stability and security. Such approach seeks a Win-Win game and increasing the relative security of rival actors. It is from such system that cooperation, stability, and constructive rivalry can emerge.

Currently, Iran and the United States of America are the only two regional and global players which have the capability to lead military operation and form coalitions in the region. Thus, the new balance should logically form between these two actors. In this framework, the key for the formation and continuation of any successful and unwavering security regime in the region requires resolving Iran's security threat, redefining Iran's role as source of regional insecurity in America's foreign policy strategy, and pragmatic acknowledgment of Iran's regional significance.

The widespread view in most of 'the West' and the Arab world seeks security and stability in the Persian Gulf region based on an old-school system of Balance of Power. In such view, the traditional Balance of Power between Iran and Iraq used to maintain interests of the United States and her allies in addition to providing security for Arab countries of the region. However, the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq distorted this balance and as a result of that it is essential to re-establish a new kind to contain Iran and preserve regional security. The United States has realized that the new Iraq can no longer play that role and therefore has directly taken over the role to sustain the balance. Consequently America's constant effort to minimize the role of Iran in the new equation has resulted in a new security dilemma in the region.

Since the instigation of crisis in Iraq, there has been a steady struggle between Iran and the United States to dictate the new roles in the region. In other words, what has been considered by the United States to be increase of security and satisfying her national interests has simultaneously been defined by Iran as threat to her national security and loss of national interests.

Self-preservation, containment, and equilibrium are key basics of Balance of Power, but application of such themes with a raw view in the current security condition of the Persian Gulf region can only lead to further tensions and fresh rivalries. Persian Gulf region's security regime based on Balance of Power was

engineered and developed mainly by major international players and their regional allies on the basis of threats among states during the cold war and the specific conditions following five decades after the Second World War. The system seeks contradictions and disagreements and therefore in essence has the potential of promoting mistrust in its raw form.

However, considering the geopolitical developments following the Iraq crisis, it has little chance of achieving success in the region. Arms race, foreign military presence, new security dilemmas, illogical dependence on foreign security support, tension, rivalry, distrust, and conflict are high risk results of such approach. Some of the palpable negative implications to be considered are the rise of Saddam and the attack on Kuwait, the current legitimacy crisis of Arab totalitarian regimes, increase of religious fanaticism and terrorism. Such undesirable implications have not only wasted national resources of the regional players but have also brought more rotten fruits for American foreign policy and interests. In the atmosphere of insecurity, instability, constant conflicts, useless support of Israel's perpetual territorial and security demands, hopeless effort to keep dictators who pledge allegiance no matter what the consequence regardless of their popular legitimacy, the only result is most likely to be more of the same and probably even worse. In addition, this is in clear contrast with the American policy of a democratic Greater Middle East as in such circumstance the chances of its implementation are almost none.

In the new Iraqi political scenery, power and influence of Shiites and Kurds have been laid and as such Iran's influence from within the society has increased. Both countries now endeavor to form regional coalitions if so mutually desired. This, once again, implies the need for redefining the regional power setting and acknowledgment of changes.

The logic of Balance of Power in the American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region suggests that in order to defend American national interests in the region and secure the smooth transfer of oil, the United States needs to make sure that no single regional actor shall gain enough power to disturb the equilibrium in the region. Obviously it is reason for long years of American military presence in the region which is not likely to end and as such the United States also needs to show strength to her allies to depend on her security guarantees.

However, President Nixon had a somewhat different approach. Nixon's bipolar policy in the region depended on two regional players to maintain Balance of Power and achieve American objectives. Iran acted as the military and security stronghold and Saudi Arabia as the financial one. This policy was also in harmony with the general American foreign policy approach of localizing security concerns. But the revolution in Iran distorted the whole picture as the newcomers took Iran out of the Western camp. Same policy relatively remained in action for long years with few tactical shifts, most important of which was conflict instead of apparent calm, and application of Iraq as the military agent.

President Bush strategy applied means like military might, regime change, and promotion of American model of democracy. However, this strategy was doomed to fail following the consequences of the war in Iraq. But the more important implication was a direct confrontational approach between Iran as the major regional power and the United States as the sole global super power on one side, and Iran and other Arab countries of the region including Saudi Arabia on the other. Indeed the radicalization and extremist tendencies of the ruling regime in Iran contributed generously to this conclusion.

Following Iraq's dismissal as the strategic rival of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel are the most likely American chosen candidates for replacement. The question is whether they would qualify though. Iran and Turkey seem to be determined to pursue a peaceful and cooperative path. The Islamist government of Turkey seeks its Ottoman aspirations in the Islamic world and therefore is biased to increase cooperation with neighboring Muslim countries to strengthen its role as the elder brother and problem solver. Saudi Arabia has always been a major regional actor but has never had the political, social, cultural, and even military capability to enter into a fierce strategic rivalry with Iran. As for Israel, the truth of the fact is that except for the recent nuclear issue and unsettling comments of the ruling fanatics in Iran and their negative and unnecessary impact in Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, Israel has never really sought a strategic rivalry with Iran as it is also much engaged with its own Arab headaches. Thus it is only natural for Israel to remain behind America and uses only influential political lobbies. And all this leaves the United States with no other choice but to take over the role of balancer explicitly and directly. However, the situation can be improved by change in perspective even if in a long shot as the current status is quite gloomy as it is.

The American goal of containing Iran has so far been interpreted by Iran as a major security threat. Iran's policy of 'if not me then all for me' implies that in case continuous security threats of the United States actually materialize then the whole region shall pay for it. This offensive defense approach is considered to be self-preserving. However, the key to a Win-Win situation would be to somehow remove the atmosphere of hostility and insecurity and absorb Iran in a constructive regional role. The current regional Balance of Power following the decade's developments have shift to the advantage of Iran. The United States should acknowledge this fact and redefine her policies in the region accordingly to have Iran as a partner for maintaining security rather than the source of insecurity. It is granted that the empowerment of extremists within the ruling regime in Iran does not help the idea but that does not dismiss the need for change in policy. It only adds a myth to the equation. Any successful security regime in the Persian Gulf region can only be sought by the United States having Iran on her side not the opposite one. It is the key to protect both actors' security and national interests.