

The Middle East: Intensifying Competition for Hegemony over a New Regional Order



The Wailing Wall, Sep. 2017, the Old City of Jerusalem (Photo by Mari Nukii)

Since the “Arab Spring” there has been a continuing power vacuum in the Middle East at three levels: national, regional and international. At the national level, countries such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq have fallen into a state of civil war due to their weak cohesiveness as nation-states and their inability to govern, allowing other countries to intervene and armed non-state actors to run rampant. On the other hand, certain states exempt from civil war have become more authoritarian, neglecting to solve the fundamental problems raised by the “Arab Spring.” A power vacuum has also occurred at the regional level as countries in the Middle East prioritize their own interests rather than

fulfill their responsibility to establish an order for the entire region. What makes these crises even more serious is the Middle East policy of US President Donald Trump, who places top priority on strengthening his domestic support base.

The Trump administration’s policy toward the Middle East is characterized by its efforts to improve relations with pro-US partners such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, which had deteriorated during the Obama administration, and to form a “coalition to contain Iran” with these two countries as its pillars. The US administration believes that its policy can stabilize the region.

President Trump apparently wants to withdraw US troops from the Middle East in the near future so that the security of the region can be shouldered by pro-US countries. Having chosen the Middle East as his first overseas destination after taking office in May 2017, he agreed to sell \$110 billion in weapons to Saudi Arabia, and stopped by the Jewish holy site of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem as the first incumbent US president to visit Israel. In December, the Trump administration formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, pleasing its support base of Christian evangelicals in the United States and the Netanyahu government in Israel.

In May 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the Iranian nuclear agreement and, in May 2019, it imposed a total embargo on Iranian oil imports and dispatched aircraft carriers and bombers to the Middle East. On June 20, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps shot down US drones over the Persian Gulf. A sequence of events, including attacks on oil tankers and facilities, pushed the United States and Iran to the brink of war. The United States has called on other countries to join a “Maritime Security Initiative” (a coalition of the willing) to ensure

the safety of navigation in the Persian Gulf, but only a few countries officially supported the idea. On the other hand, Iran, judging the possibility of a military attack by the United States to be low, has refused to hold talks with President Trump, and is showing signs of reducing its obligations under the Iranian nuclear agreement and resuming nuclear development on the grounds that it has not received any economic rewards.

The prevailing view is that the Trump administration’s policy of maximum pressure toward Iran has been unsuccessful, not only because it has been unable to change Iran’s behavior (support for pro-Iran organizations, mainly Shiites in neighboring countries, and missile development), but also because it encourages hardliners in Iran who insist on nuclear development. Hence, it has not received sufficient international support. While the Obama and Trump administrations share in common the perception of a threat from Iran’s growing influence and an inclination toward withdrawal from the Middle East, they differ in tactics (the Obama administration’s engagement policy and the Trump administration’s containment policy). Even if a US administration seeks to withdraw from the Middle East, it

will be unable to renounce its anti-Iran policy in consideration of the strategic importance of the Middle East, including energy supply and terrorism issues, as well as the “special relationship” with Israel. This contradiction has forced the US administration to engage in conflict in the Middle East.

President Trump’s policy of withdrawing US troops from Syria and tolerating Turkey’s cross-border attacks on Kurds in Syria have confused the countries concerned in the region and the international community, and benefited the Assad regime and its allies Russia and Iran. Many in the United States oppose Trump’s decision, saying it would betray the Kurdish militia (YPG) that has cooperated with the US military in the war against the Islamic State (IS) and allow IS to resurge. However, President Trump does not seem interested in Syria, which does not have much oil and which offers few opportunities for arms sales.

On October 27, President Trump announced that US special operations forces had killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib. It has been reported that this operation, which was carried out based

on information from Kurdish groups and the Iraqi government, had the cooperation of Russia (which opened its airspace to US forces), the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and Turkey. The killing of Baghdadi is thought to have a certain effect in containing domestic and international criticism of the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, as well as in impressing the public with the “end of the fight against the Islamic State”. However, there has been no change in the US government’s decision to abandon its involvement in war-ravaged Syria, around 6 million of whose citizens are refugees, and to leave its fate in the hands of Iran as well as Russia and Turkey.

On the other hand, Israel, wary of Iran’s military consolidation and the expansion of logistical support routes into the Mediterranean, has repeatedly launched attacks on suspected Iranian military bases in Syria. Should a major military conflict break out between the two countries, the international community may have to face the worst possible scenario of Israel remotely attacking the Iranian mainland and Iran fighting back, resulting in exchanges of ballistic missiles between the two.



Tehran's Former U.S. Embassy, Feb. 2014.
(Photo by Mari Nukii)

In June 2019, President Trump announced his “deal of the century” aimed at resolving the Palestinian problem, but only in the economic arena. Although the ostensible intention was to promote relations between Israel and pro-US Arab countries, the political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was shelved and the fundamental principles of international law as well as the opinions of the Palestinian side were completely ignored. As a result, many Palestinians are disappointed, thinking that the international community has abandoned a two-state solution. Since 1993, Japan has provided \$1.9 billion in assistance to the Palestinian Authority to support a two-state solution for the coexistence and co-prosperity of Israel and the future independent Palestinian state. These projects include the development of the Jericho

Agricultural Industrial Park (JAIP), tourism development projects, and improvements to Palestinian refugee camps. The Japanese government has made efforts to enhance the Palestinian Authority’s governance functions through grassroots assistance, such as improving residents’ self-governance capacity and fostering small and medium-sized enterprises. These projects aim to cultivate regional cooperation, economic independence and mutual trust with neighboring countries such as Israel and Jordan, and with international donor bodies and countries in Asia. This Japanese-style assistance system, which places importance on the participation of local residents, has not been as flashy or high-profile as the “deal of the century” but it has been highly praised for empowering the weak. It would be advisable for the Japanese government to continue its steady support by involving private companies and individuals interested in contributing to society alongside the countries and organizations concerned in order to prevent the radicalization of Palestinian youth who are desperate due to their political and economic stagnation.

While the United States is attempting to scale back its involvement in the Middle East, Russian influence is increasing. Not only anti-American countries such as Iran and Syria but also traditionally pro-American countries such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and Turkey are willing to build amicable relations with Russia, fearing the Trump administration's unreliable policies and retreat from the Middle East. A member of NATO, Turkey decided to purchase and deploy the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia in 2019, despite objections from the United States. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also begun procuring new weapons from Moscow, as well as purchasing large amounts of weapons from Washington.

Israel, which is concerned about Iran's move to construct bases in Syria, including the Golan Heights near the border with Israel, has asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to check Iran. Russia seems to be taking advantage of the decline of US power in the Middle East to increase its international presence and use "the Middle East card" as a means to counter the United States. However, its involvement is still opportunistic in nature and Russia does not necessarily intend to take on

an active and responsible role in the stabilization and establishment of a new order in the region.

Aside from tensions between pro-US forces and anti-US (pro-Iran) forces, the power game of Turkey and Qatar versus Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt is defining intraregional relations. From around 2010, a struggle for supremacy between the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa began to surface. Behind this is the fact that in recent years, as the conflict between Iran and the United States and their allies (especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE) in the Persian Gulf has escalated, the "Red Sea Shift" has been accelerating as both oil suppliers and shippers seek out a safe energy transport route.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE began intervening militarily in Yemen by setting up bases in Djibouti and subsequently Eritrea and Somaliland. As a consequence of these developments, some African countries are wary of the incursion of outside forces, while others are actively seeking to build relationships in order to extract assistance by taking advantage of the competition among countries. There are also examples that have contributed

to peace to a certain extent. Ethiopia dramatically restored its relations with Eritrea in 2018, as a result of a consensus on concerns and interests among China, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Ethiopia. The Red Sea and the Horn of Africa are transportation and logistics nodes that connect Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. They are also important chokepoints for maritime trade and energy transportation in the world economy. Despite their geopolitical importance, the absence of a multilateral framework to manage security in the region has in some ways escalated the competition for hegemony. In future, the Japanese government will need to formulate a strategy and an international framework for cooperation to protect energy supply routes and freedom of navigation with a comprehensive perspective that links the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea under the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.■