

ASIA PROGRAMME

SYRIA'S WARS ARE ALTERING POWER BALANCES IN ASIA

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MARCH 2017

ASIA FOCUS #20



S yria has become a malignant tumor spreading steadily in various mutations throughout most of the world. Its military chaos, political collapse, perversion of religion and human suffering are infesting Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

The world order so neatly enshrined in treaties and laws by the victorious United States (US)-led World War II allies is being battered. Donald Trump could deal the *coup de grace* if he implements the views he declared during his campaign on foreign policy, including the Middle East, Europe, Russia, and China.

Law and order, human kindness and moral compass are already fading under the horrors of Syria's wars. Refugees and other economic victims fleeing the bloodshed are threatening to unravel history's finest experiment in weaving bonds of affinity around the ideals of human rights and democratic freedoms to replace centuries of wars.

The great "Never again!" experiment after World War II, best embodied by the now 28-nation European Union (EU), is shaking at the foundations. It is under onslaught from refugees, migrants and terrorists spawned by social collapse and chaos spreading partly from violent Islamic fundamentalism, of which Syria is a focal point.

Brexit – Britain's expected exit from the EU – is an early hurtful blow triggered partly by these upheavals. The EU's persistent economic troubles are aggravating the shocks. These will only worsen if Trump insists on extracting a higher price from Europe for privileged military and trade ties with the US, thus weakening the resilience of European democracies.

Severe erosion is occurring in the values of Enlightenment propagated from Europe, including universal respect for human rights and the rights of women and children, so painstakingly spread around the world over the past half century. This is partly because the US-led liberal Western democracies seem bewildered by assaults from forces of disorder, including Sunni jihadists, Iran's theocrats and militarily resurgent Russia and China.

NATO, the 28-nation defense arm of those democracies, can destroy enemies many times over and its members' wealth exceeding \$32 trillion by far surpasses all other countries. But neither military power nor money could contain the challenges to those values.

The US has led military coalitions, including NATO, to fight the forces of disorder for more than 15 years in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Yet, the enemies it sets out to destroy have grown more powerful. Instead of being fearful, they have spread out of area through affiliates all the way from the Asia-Pacific to West Africa.

In the past, wars brought clarity after horrendous suffering. Not anymore. None of the world's great democracies and fine thinkers know how to deal with all of this. People of good will, compassion and common sense are collectively at wit's end. Hatred, violence, bigotry, intolerance and fear of the other are taking many of us back to instinctive and visceral reactions.

Does the above sound like pessimistic overstatement? Take a closer look. You might conclude that those in the West who still believe Syria is a local calamity not metastasizing around the world are nostalgic for bygone primacy, or place faith in muddling through and hopeful thinking.

This analysis draws attention to the lethal dangers for peace and stability in the family of nations, including security in Asia. Much depends on whether the current key players – Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Iran, US, Russia, and Turkey – continue their lamentable proxy wars inside Syria.

LETHAL DANGERS

The outlook is pessimistic, especially if the US and Russia continue to use Syria as a chess board to gain influence in the Middle East and around the world. Dangers can but grow if the US and its World War II allies cannot find peaceful paths to handle Russia's military resurgence. Geopolitical space must also be found to accommodate China's great power ambitions, Iran's duplicity in the Mideast, Turkey's prideful jingoism, and India's prickly nationalism.

Each of these challenges reduces the military and diplomatic influence US-led democracies have enjoyed without significant challenge since the Soviet Union's demise in 1991, and subsequent expansion of NATO and the EU.

There is no need to appease aggressive behavior by Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Iran. The best resistance would be to focus on spending more energy on preventing escalation of military rivalries, instead of apportioning blame for this or that.

Challenges escalated following Russia's successful war with Georgia in 2008, when the self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia declared independence. Russia annexed strategically vital Crimea in March 2014 and continues to support fighters in east Ukraine rebelling against the Kiev government. It entered Syria on 30th September 2015 and has successfully turned the war's tide in President Bashar al Assad's favor. Its defiant actions are undermining US-led allies with impunity.

At the time of this writing, the US, the EU and the United Nations (UN) were reduced to impotent rage. The best they could do was to denounce the atrocious bombings of east Aleppo by Russian and Syrian planes as possible war crimes. By November 2016, all

efforts to provide meaningful cease-fires to facilitate deliveries of humanitarian aid had failed. Some analysts were accusing Russia of readiness to devastate parts of Aleppo held by US and Saudi-backed rebels for nearly five years – much like the utter destruction of Grozny in Chechnya. Russian offers of temporary lulls in bombings to allow people to leave east Aleppo were left unheeded.

Russia claimed it was only trying to push out Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists intermingled with US-backed rebels since Washington and its allies were vacillating in doing so. Syrian wars had widened to a show of power by Russia to confront the US in the Middle East and intimidate America's friends elsewhere. Like it or not, peace is now impossible without Russian acquiescence, which means making concessions to Moscow. Many in Asia would see such concessions as a victory for Russia, thus weakening Washington's influence in several capitals.

Even as Russia bolstered Assad, the US was using Syrian Kurds to painstakingly advance towards Raqqa, the Islamic State's capital in Syria. Alarmed by Washington's growing closeness to the Kurds, Turkey suddenly sent warplanes, tanks and soldiers into Syria, along the border areas to disrupt Kurdish military power. Thus, Turkey inserted itself as a player into any eventual peace for Syria. Ankara also made new moves to overcome previous coolness with Moscow, in order to secure more diplomatic space as an independent actor, rather than being a pliant US ally.

Turkey dreads the establishment of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish region along its border with Syria. Ankara sees the US-backed Syrian Kurds as terrorists and is also wary of Iraqi Kurds. It placed a small Turkish force inside Iraq, near Mosul, to obtain a role in final negotiations, in case Iraqi and Kurdish forces retake the city from the Islamic State.

The US, Saudi Arabia and Turkey might have to admit defeat of their efforts in Syria if the already fragmented Syrian moderate (Sunni Arab) rebels disintegrate. This is a likely outcome of defeat for the US-backed rebels in east Aleppo. Turkey's military presence inside Syria to defeat the Syrian Kurds constitutes muscular action against the *protégés* of the US. Such open disagreement between NATO allies makes the Russians rubbing their hands with satisfaction. Yet, Vladimir Putin may feel more pleased if Trump would weaken American commitment to NATO in Europe.

Russia's success so far in securing gains for the Assad regime contrasts with more than five years of unsuccessful fighting by rebels, including the Free Syrian Army. The latter being equipped, trained and funded by the US and its allies. Much depends on the US-sponsored advance of Iraqi troops and militias since October 2016 to recapture Mosul in Iraq from the Islamic State.

If unsuccessful, the US may lose influence in the entire Gulf region for a long time, to the advantage of Iran and Russia. That will have very significant geopolitical implications for Washington and its European allies. Donald Trump might become a nail in this coffin.

Emboldened by America's floundering in Iraq and Syria, China is openly challenging US naval influence near its shores and is undermining the US as a Pacific Ocean power. The rivalry intensified in 2014-2016, after China claimed unusual security zones for its aircraft and warships in the North and South China Seas, raising apprehension of clashes with Japanese or American naval and air forces.

For a short while, it seemed that the Philippines scored a diplomatic victory for its American ally when an international maritime tribunal ruled in its favor against China. The tribunal agreed with Manila that China does not have legal bases for claiming ownership over islands and rocks in the South China Sea. But Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte abruptly changed his tone in October 2016, after meeting China's Xi Jinping. He threatened to end most military ties with US, which would be a significant diplomatic gain for China in the region.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak's visit to Xi Jinping in November 2016 could result in another snub for Washington from a so far reliable supporter in the region. In a sign of warming ties with Beijing, Najib is expected to buy a high-speed railway and a fleet of fast Chinese patrol boats capable of carrying missiles. Such a slant towards Beijing would have significant impacts on the region.

Washington might recover influence in both Manila and Kuala Lumpur but trust is unlikely to be the same again. That would affect so far firm South East Asian support for the US naval role in the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits. Thailand and Indonesia, which have been good friends of the US, are also starting to hedge their bets. India might remain as the only safe partner for Washington because it refuses to be intimidated by Beijing. But it is a complex cauldron of politics that is not easy to influence.

Even Saudi Arabia, a staunch US ally, is challenging the US-led security order in the Middle East to exploit the mess after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In 2015, the Saudis brashly disregarded Washington to begin intensive air attacks in Yemen, in an unsuccessful attempt to defeat Shia-affiliated Houthi rebels. The latter earlier overthrew a pro-Riyadh Sunni regime in Sana'a. Over 10,000 people, including some 4,000 civilians, may have been killed so far, mostly by Saudi air attacks, Houthi bombs and attacks by IS and Al-Qaeda affiliates. More than 14 million people out of the 26 million population were short of food and medicines, and over 7 million were suffering from food insecurity in September 2016, the UN estimated. The US has not been able to influence Riyadh because its trust in Washington tumbled after Obama struck a nuclear deal with Saudi Arabia's arch-enemy Iran in January 2016 - causing the UN to lift economic sanctions against Tehran.

Early brazen defiance of Washington came in mid-February 2016, when Turkey shelled Syrian areas near its border held by Kurds supporting American goals. That prompted German General Harald Kujat, a former chairman of NATO's Military Committee, to tell the *Huffington Post* that "the Turkish intervention has the potential to transform the Syrian conflict into a global catastrophe".

Because of these and other factors, the US is finding it harder to continue enjoying previous levels of cooperation from allies and has less freedom for its diplomatic and military actions. So, a thorough rethink to find new modalities and accommodations is overdue in the Mideast and beyond, including balances of power among US, Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and India.

The US can no longer lead with only the support of its Western allies. It needs more friends if the post-World War II order is to be preserved as the foundation of a modified global security order. Its awesome power and wealth no longer evoke sufficient fear to acquire loyal friends in distant places without repeatedly demonstrating American reliability as a friend.

The huge sacrifices of blood and treasure that the US has made over decades to build alliances and support allies in the Middle East and Europe are bringing fewer dividends in the form of cooperation with American security and foreign policy goals. That is unlikely to change regardless of pressure from Trump, who is convinced that America is being short-changed by its allies, especially in the Gulf and Middle East. In addition, the quality and capabilities of America's rivals and enemies have risen, bringing unforeseen challenges for Trump even if he decides to play hardball.

The choice now is between significantly modifying the existing order in a controlled and consensual manner, or surrendering to radical changes forced upon all of us by the cancers spreading from Syria. Importantly, the multiple wars in Syria are changing the security architecture in Asia, including America's military and political influence in it.

Chaos in the Middle East may not start the unravelling of US military and diplomatic influence on a global scale, because the region is too small and fragmented. But notable changes in the balances of power in Asia stretching from Russia through Iran, China, India and Japan could end the preponderance America has enjoyed since World War II. The Syrian implosion has the potential to trigger those changes.

Washington's post-World War II influence in the Middle East, West Asia and South Asia was based upon its ability to protect allies and prevent or defeat potential threats to its partners. Its prolonged stumbling in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan despite huge sacrifices is forcing its friends and partners to think again about the efficacy of US power. They are moving towards standing on their own feet with less US support.

Such moves are gathering impetus, not because Washington is weak but because it looks like a fair-weather friend, rather than one with the political will to stand firmly behind a partner in need. Trump's rhetoric so far has heightened these perceptions. The chief fault lies with the sharp partisanship of domestic American politics and the ups and downs it causes in foreign policy commitments. Almost all the countries of South and South East Asia are hedging their bets by turning towards China and Russia, even as they seek American military presence in their regions to deter China's hegemonic ambitions.

The rest of this decade will be vital for shaping Asia's security balances. The choice for the region's countries is between kowtowing discreetly to Chinese pressures because of military and economic weakness, or standing a little taller under an informal umbrella of American friendship. The pivotal factor will be the reliability of Washington's friendship.

The key question to be clarified in coming years is the extent of obeisance Trump and the US Congress will demand from Asian governments. That could depend on whether Congress responds more to domestic partisanship and short-term populism than to longer-term US strategic interests in Asia. These internal divisions in the US are likely to worsen during the Trump presidency.

At the core, lie cultural differences between the US and most Asian nations. American democracy demands quick gratification of voter lobbies and fuels partisanship, whereas most Asian governments can afford to adopt longer-term outlooks.

QUANDARIES OF INDIA, EUROPE AND TURKEY

The main implication of seeking greater self-reliance is less compliance with Washington's demands, especially those stemming from its rivalries with Russia and China. India, a significant military power, is starting to wonder whether it chose the right side when it broke with decades of history to weaken proximity to Russia and lean towards Washington, Britain and France for military relationships. It has already begun to strengthen bridges with Russia, including purchase of new generation fighter aircraft, leading-edge missiles, submarines, and nuclear power plants.

India's self-reliant Prime Minister Narendra Modi again increased options by buying nuclear plants and high speed trains from Japan during a visit to Tokyo in November 2016. He is moving resolutely to increase India's military strength and readiness in all key areas, including land, air, naval, and cyber warfare. His views on India's role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean are not militaristic but are sufficiently nationalist to prompt a thorough review of balance of power with China and its informal ally, Pakistan.

Relations with Russia could also play a more prominent role if difficulties in Syria and Iraq cause US politicians and Trump to demand more from friends. Even a semblance of

subservience to Washington's regional agenda would be anathema to most Indian politicians fearful of losing votes.

More ominously, distance is emerging between Washington and its European allies. It could set in motion a longer-term erosion of the entire international security order established after World War II. The rising tensions between Washington and Moscow are placing strains on key European allies – Germany, Britain, France, and Italy. They would prefer less sabre rattling and more economic and diplomatic bridges to Putin, despite his anti-democratic authoritarianism and militarist ambitions. They do not want to appease Putin but would also prefer not to confront him too aggressively.

They are loath to follow the US into a new Cold War with Russia over Syria, Ukraine or anywhere else. There are differences among them but in general, they prefer not to weaken Russia through economic sanctions when its people are already hurting, because of lower earnings from major exports, including oil, gas, and commodities. Washington may prefer an enfeebled Russia, yet Europeans will find it worrisome to live next to an extremely well-armed but politically weakened and therefore unpredictable neighbor.

Key European powers are also apprehensive about following the US towards more tensions with China, despite President Xi Jinping's troubling military and economic ambitions. France, Britain, Germany and Italy are scrambling for more exports to and investments from China.

European relationships with Iran are less jingoistic than those of Washington. New opportunities have opened because Tehran was freed from harsh UN sanctions in January 2016, in return for substantially dismantling (or faking dismantlement of) its nuclear infrastructures. Europeans are unlikely to follow Trump if he tries to disengage from the deal. They are already scrambling for early advantages from more exports and business with Iran ahead of US companies. But European banks continue to be very cautious because separate US laws penalizing trade with Iran have not yet been revoked.

Tehran has repeatedly accused Washington of backtracking on commitments to permit financial and economic relief. Its relations with the US and Europe may worsen in 2017 if American sanctions continue to increase pain for the Iranian people. That would play into the hands of hard-liners and Tehran may walk away from Western influence for many more years. It is already embroiled in bloody proxy wars against America's Saudi-led allies in Syria and Yemen.

Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and Syria have alarmed all Europeans and America's Sunni allies in the Middle East. But Europeans have failed to intimidate Russia in Ukraine, while the US is alone on the front-lines in Syria with minor help from Arab allies, France, and Britain.

Washington is trying to keep Turkey's Tayyip Erdoğan in check in Syria and Iraq, partly because the EU desperately needs his help to slow down the torrent of refugees and migrants. Germany's Angela Merkel struck a deal with him in return for almost six billion euros and other concessions, but that could unravel if Erdoğan changes his mind.

China's aggressiveness in the South China Sea has caused concern all the way from Europe to Japan, South Korea, South East Asia, and India. But only the US navy is in the front-line and regularly buzzes Chinese installations, causing protests and warnings from Beijing, but no change of behavior. An accident or unintended violent clash between the US and Chinese navies is a constant worry.

Europeans are in quandary because they do not want to be caught in the undertow of Washington's growing coldness towards Russia and China, which are trying to exploit new opportunities stemming from American troubles in Syria and elsewhere. Key Europeans are trying to shape their own bilateral relationships with Moscow and Beijing, without succumbing to pressure from Washington to follow its lead. Their reaction to changes made by Trump to Obama's policies may be to seek more space for their own strategies. They are worried that Putin's adventurism in Syria might place strategically important Damascus beyond the reach of Western influence for a long time. The early signs are that they will try to hedge their bets whatever Trump does.

The malignancy spreading from Syria is not limited to issues of security and competition between democracy, authoritarian governance, or dictatorship. The most perilous mutation is the spread of barbaric nihilism that is capturing the hearts and minds of large numbers of disenfranchised and desperate Sunni Muslims across the world.

Disorder and complete disregard for rule of law as conceived after World War II are the driving forces of this nihilism among Islamic jihadists. Like cancer, this type of sustained disorder destroys its own host. Social cohesion and individual freedoms within communities are lost to totalitarian negativity.

Trump has said he will "totally destroy" IS, both as a territory and as a fighting force. Even if the end game is to join Russia to destroy IS and leave Assad in place, the doctrines of violent jihadist terrorism have already spread to at least 60 countries. Trump's harshness might win many more recruits within the US and Europe for IS ideology. Thus, Trump might end up worsening the nightmare for the West.

SYRIA'S CANCEROUS SEEDS

The downhill slide to destruction from within of human freedoms can start anywhere and spread if unchecked at the start. Dealing with it requires compassion for people's

suffering, without any hubristic agenda among rival powers seeking influence in the region.

The American Cancer Society notes: “Cancer can start at any place in the body. It is not just one disease. Cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body.” Such words seem to describe Syria as it stands today. Many cancerous seeds are being sown in Syria and spreading elsewhere. The hope is that cessation of hostilities, ceasefire, and a new inclusive government in Syria will occur, despite the current hatreds and pitiless proxy wars. It underlies negotiations sponsored by the United Nations to push Syria’s many warring parties towards compromise.

But the hope cannot be realized if the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, and Turkey continue their plays for power, instead of common sense and compassion for human suffering. Several experts have warned that Syria could turn the US-Russia relationship into a new Cold War by whatever name. In February 2016, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev went further when he told the Munich Security Conference, “NATO’s policy with regard to Russia has remained unfriendly and opaque. One could go as far as to say that we have slid back to a new Cold War. Almost on an everyday basis we are called one of the most terrible threats either to NATO as a whole or to Europe, or to the United States.”

Medvedev was speaking to German media on the eve of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) meeting in Munich. At the same time, US Secretary of State John Kerry reported a “nationwide cessation of hostilities” to permit immediate aid deliveries to Syria’s war zones and hopefully open paths to a wider truce and political settlement.

Top diplomats from more than a dozen countries, including the US and Russia, struck the deal but it was ill-fated because of the chaos in Syria. The worst terrorist groups, including Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Nusra Front (linked to Al-Qaeda), are specifically excluded. Nor is there agreement on which anti-Assad rebels deserve a seat at the negotiating table, because they are not terrorists, and which rebels are terrorists who must be kept out. Assad brands all violent opponents as terrorists.

(The ISSG comprises the Arab League, China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States.)

By November 2016, the deal had collapsed and the US openly accused Russia of “barbarism” in Aleppo. But it seemed distraught. Any serious attempt to militarily defeat the Russian presence in Syria would unleash a wider war. It would also destabilize power relationships in Asia among China, India, Iran, and the Gulf Arabs because

pressure will grow on all those countries to lean towards either the Russia-Iran-Assad-Hezbollah axis, or the US and its autocratic Arab allies.

That could unravel the post-World War II security order led so far by the US and its key European allies Britain, France, and Germany. It is already being gravely undermined by the rise of well-armed Islamic terrorists and jihadists linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS. They are proliferating across East to West Africa; almost the entire Middle East, including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia; most of South Asia, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar; as well as western China.

Jihadists are also threatening hard-won civil liberties and religious tolerance in European democracies. And the flood of refugees and economic migrants hammering at Europe's doors are seriously jeopardizing the stability and political cohesion of the EU, which was painfully won over centuries of fratricidal wars culminating in the unprecedented tragedies of World War II.

RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

Russia flung a brick into a hornet's nest when it entered Syria alongside Assad, Iran, and Lebanon's Hezbollah. It immediately upset Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the US, forcing them to review their previous attitudes of muddling through in Syria.

Obama's view is that Assad is the problem, not the solution. So, Russian warplanes should not attack US-backed militias rebelling against Assad. Instead, they should join a US-led coalition to destroy ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and other affiliates. Trump has not yet spoken in depth but seems to admire Putin as a decisive doer and could overturn Obama's policies, but joining Putin in Syria to destroy IS.

Putin claims he wants to destroy ISIS and Al-Nusra Front terrorists but his first goal is to stabilize Assad by helping him to destroy all militants, including those armed and trained by US-led allies. After that, he would use Assad's army to destroy ISIS and other jihadists, with or without coalition with the US.

Historians will dissect the Russian intervention in due course but a prime motivation seems to be to bluntly tell Washington that it cannot overthrow regimes on humanitarian grounds, as with Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. Putin is convinced that the US and its European allies were behind the 2014 removal of the pro-Russian President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych, who was forced to flee to Russia.

The situation in Syria is more confused than ever. After five years of continuous internal conflicts among numerous warring factions, about 400,000 people are dead (some put

the number at 500,000). Five million languish in refugee camps, while about eight million are internally displaced, out of a population of 23 million.

Thousands are said to have been killed by Russian airstrikes (there were no clear figures) and hundreds of thousands are fleeing the country. But most are blocked at the borders of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, all of which were closed or letting in trickles of people.

The United Nations Human Rights office says the human tragedy is unprecedented and the UN Refugees agency warns that the condition of refugees in camps is worsening daily. UNICEF, the children's agency, reports that about 3 million Syrian children cannot go to school.

Meanwhile, the rhetoric of war and hatred is reaching crescendo. The central antagonism is between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif told CNN: "Unfortunately, the Saudis have had the illusion that, backed by their Western ally, they could push Iran out of the equation in the region." He pointedly noted that 15 of the 19 hijackers on September 11, 2001 were Saudi citizens.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir was scornful. "It is Iran that has mobilized sectarian militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan to support this dictator (Assad), not Saudi Arabia."

The Saudis fear the US is losing its appetite to overthrow Assad because he is "the lesser of two evils" compared to ISIS and other jihadists. Almost every major country interfering in Syria is at cross purposes with others. For instance, the US prefers to destroy jihadists (like ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates) capable of conducting terror strikes in the homeland and in allied countries. Ousting Assad seems to be a secondary objective.

Russia wants to prop up Assad and retain a friendly regime in Damascus, in order to secure long-term naval and air bases that tilt the military balance against NATO in the Mediterranean, Middle East, and West and South Asia.

Iran's theocrats want hegemony in West Asia and make territorial gains through friends and allies. They want to strengthen the Shia version of Islam against centuries-old pressures from Sunni Islam, which is now led by arch-conservative Salafi and Wahhabi doctrines emerged from Saudi Arabia. Those doctrines also motivate ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and other violent jihadists.

The Saudis want leadership over all Sunni Muslims because Mecca and Medina are the birth places of Islam. This is ambitious because the Saudi population of 29 million is a

tiny fraction of the 1.6 billion Sunnis world-wide, including an Arab population of about 368 million. An additional 220 million Muslims are Shia.

The Salafi school of thought is said to have started in the mid to late 19th century as an intellectual pursuit at Egypt's Al-Azhar university. It sank strong roots only in Saudi Arabia and there may be 22 million Salafis living mostly in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and Egypt. At about 850 million, Muslims in Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Turkey outnumber Arabs by far. Some count Egypt's powerful Muslim Brotherhood among Salafis because its founders were inspired by such doctrines in the early 1920s. But the Egyptians have never been subservient to Saudi religious leaders.

Turkey's motives are complex. The Turkish Ottoman Empire was the hegemon of all Muslims for centuries. Now Erdoğan would prefer to prevent Saudi spiritual hegemony over all Sunnis, since most Sunnis are not Arabs or Salafis.

He also wants to prevent any rebellion within Turkey by Kurds, who might be inspired by autonomous Kurdish territories in Iraq and the ongoing bid by Syrian Kurds for autonomy. He is particularly wary since Washington is enamored of Kurds as effective fighting forces against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

France and Britain are cautious participants alongside the US in Iraq and Syria. They want to punish and prevent attacks on their homelands perpetrated by ISIS and Al-Qaeda supporters, but they still avoid dipping more than a toe in the Mideast quagmire.

CHINA AND INDIA

Any weakening of the US-led security order in the Middle East and Asia provides opportunities for China but is not on India's wish list.

Beijing is a low-profile onlooker of the Mideast wars but sent Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, who heads international military cooperation, to Damascus in August 2016. As a wealthy long-time weapons supplier to Syria, it probably has eyes on reconstruction contracts in case the Russian intervention succeeds in stabilizing Assad. Beijing is already an important trade partner of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In recent years, it has strengthened business ties with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and Israel. The visit might also have been a chance to needle the US by returning to the heart of the Middle East.

Xi Jinping is trying to build economic and infrastructure ties across Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe as part of his new One Belt One Road project, which revives the ancient Silk Road and affirms China's economic leadership.

Beijing is trying to push back American influence in the Far East, South East Asia, and South Asia. In contrast, India would like to keep the US deeply engaged in the region but without compromising its foreign policy independence and security perceptions.

Modi wants much closer ties with the US in all spheres, including economic affairs, defense, and regional security. But he and his political supporters are prickly, so they cannot appear to be compliant with American strategic needs. He must appear to be an equal partner, even if India is a much weaker country. However, he has no need to place obstacles in the paths of US policies in the region or towards China. Delhi is watching Trump's arrival with caution, but some influential voices suggest that Modi and Trump might become friends because both are authoritarian nationalists who want to destroy Islamic terrorists.

For its part, China is a rival of the US. It does not hesitate to stick a finger in the eye of Washington and the Pentagon. Modi is trying to woo China for trade and economic gains but a consensus is emerging in Delhi that China is a potential enemy. India has several unresolved disputes over its long borders with China, and both militaries are eyeball to eyeball in several places, including frozen heights of the Himalaya Mountains.

Delhi hopes that Washington will help India to become a military co-equal of China, so that Beijing is deterred by India's conventional military and economic strength in addition to its nuclear weapons. It also hopes that Washington will lean towards India against arch-enemy Pakistan, which is an informal military ally of China.

India's connections with Syria and the Arab Middle East, as well as Iran, are more than 2000 years old and North Indian culture is heavily intermingled with Arab and Persian influences. Therefore, Indians are emotionally affected by the immense suffering and awful wars in the Middle East. Their homeland is also threatened directly by Islamic jihadism. Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS have been linked to terrorist attacks that killed hundreds in India during the past decade. Some of them are alleged to have been sponsored by Pakistan's intelligence services, influenced by Wahhabi preachers from Saudi Arabia.

Consequently, American inability to deal with the Mideast quagmire, or its diplomatic defeat at the hands of Putin in Syria, will force Delhi to lean less towards Washington and seek accommodations with Russia and China, since both are its near abroad.

Elite Indians and large businesses have a spontaneous preference for the universal values propagated by secular thinkers in the US, EU, and UN. Those values are closer to Veda-based spirituality that permeates modern Hinduism, practiced by nearly 900 million people. Most Indians also love democracy and the English language is widely used.

Any regime in Delhi would prefer to retain and strengthen the world security order put in place after World War II. But the balances of power Delhi must maintain are with China and within the South Asian region. It will be forced to strike new balances if the US fails to prevent erosion of the existing order by malignancies seeping out of Syria.

More importantly, Delhi will revise relations with Washington if Trump's America hinders accommodation with Russia and China, or speeds the spiral towards new tensions or a Cold War. That would also happen if Trump turns the US into an isolationist power, as some of his rhetoric suggests. ■

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ASIA FOCUS #20

SYRIA'S WARS ARE ALTERING POWER BALANCES IN ASIA

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MARCH 2017

This paper was already published in *Cahiers du Comité d'Asie* n°12 (Spring 2016).

ASIA FOCUS

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