

Lecture Notes

BEYOND POLARITY: THE MIDDLE EAST'S EMERGING STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS

Amid the shifting strategic landscape of the Middle East and the changing relationships shaping the region, Fiker Institute hosted Dr Lina Khatib, scholar of Middle Eastern geopolitics and security, Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative, and Chatham House Associate Fellow, to discuss the implications of these pivots for regional security, diplomacy, and the evolving balance of power in the region and beyond. The below brief includes key takeaways from the lecture by Dr Lina Khatib.

WHERE IS THE REGION HEADED?

In the current geopolitical moment in which we find ourselves, a sentiment that we are living a 'new normal' of never-ending cycles of war, in which deterioration is possible at any given moment, is emerging. However, a more optimistic perspective can read the current situation as a really important historical period of change that is ending a half-a-century-long status quo in the Middle East. Moving away from this deeply entrenched status quo will by no means be easy. Indeed, it will be a long, arduous, costly, and non-linear process. Setbacks, including economic strains, security concerns, and political tensions even between allies, all of which incur steep human costs, are an inherent part of the transformation of order.

However, the Gulf's position as the Middle East's center of power is promising, as a sub-region that is forward-thinking and focused on national interest but not in a myopic way. There is a recognition in the Gulf that national peace and prosperity can only go so far if the whole surrounding neighborhood remains unstable. As a result of this recognition, there is a true desire for peace and genuine effort being put into achieving it.

WHAT IS POLARITY & IS IT A USEFUL CONCEPT TO DESCRIBE THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM?

Polarity is a concept in international relations which was especially popular during the Cold War era in describing the two geopolitical poles of the United States (US) on the one hand, and the Soviet Union on the other. At the time, many countries were aligned with one side over the other, some more explicitly than others, while some adopted an official position of non-alignment. The notion of polarity, and that of bipolarity in particular, thus made sense at the time as a way to describe this struggle for dominance in international relations between the US and Soviet Union.

When the Cold War ended, the US rose as the only superpower in the world, but in more recent years, other states have attempted to assert their geopolitical or geo-

economic weight in the international system. Russia, for example, tried standing up to the West through its involvement in Syria, and later on through its invasion of Ukraine. China has risen to become a major economic heavyweight in the world, while India in many ways is asserting itself as a rising tech and economic heavyweight in its own right. Some analysts see the rise of these countries as an attempt to challenge the US for geopolitical supremacy. However, a pole is defined not just by its strength, but also by its ability to influence other actors in the system. Considering the case of China, while it certainly seeks influence in the economic sphere through access to countries it sees as emerging markets, it is not aspiring to export a particular political model for other countries to adopt. In other words, the assertion of heft and weight in geopolitics and geoeconomics does not automatically give a country the status of a pole.

Multipolarity refers to the existence of multiple influential actors, and it is regarded by many as a more nuanced and accurate characterization of the contemporary international system than bipolarity, particularly given emerging blocs such as BRICS. While BRICS membership has grown both in number and diversity, a closer look at the states making up the grouping casts doubt on the extent of the challenge it can pose to the US or the West more broadly. Brazil currently happens to be on very good terms with the US, and it is not in any way presenting itself as an antagonistic counter to the latter's dominance. Russia, on the other hand, uses its BRICS membership more as a form of signaling to the US that it is not an isolated actor in the international system than as a means to pose an actual threat. Despite some appetite for cooperation, intense competition between China and India demonstrates that BRICS is not a coherent geopolitical bloc, but rather a grouping of states with very different foreign policy interests. The limitations of the concept of multipolarity can also be seen in economic terms, as the centrality of the US dollar in the international economy remains unchallenged, with no alternative coming close to dominating.

Unipolarity & Hegemony

If both bi- and multipolarity fail to capture the nuances of the contemporary international system, what of the concept of unipolarity to describe US dominance? While the US does reign supreme in international relations, supremacy does not necessarily translate into unipolarity. Supremacy itself is not a fixed concept either. Hegemony is a popular term used to describe the US' position, but the problem with this notion is that it does not take into account changes within US behavior. In its contemporary era of supremacy, the US desires self-sufficiency for its partners (so that they can become reliable friends and allies) more than it wishes for them to be dependent or subservient, as in previous eras.

Beyond Polarity

The concept of polarity obscures three realities that are evident in this part of the world

and for Gulf countries in particular. The first is the issue of agency, which is a state's power to make choices and shape aspects of global politics in ways that serve its national interests. In this region, we can see a lot of agency being exercised by Gulf countries; the US is certainly not making choices on their behalf. Additionally, the exercise of agency by a country in pursuit of its national interests shows that geopolitical and geoeconomic alignment are by no means an all-or-nothing calculation. Indeed, the Gulf states have shown that it is possible to have an economic agreement with China while at the same time maintaining defense partnerships with the US.

The second reality that the concept of polarity tends to obscure is that of sovereignty, referring to a state's ability to act independently in international relations. Finally, the issue of strategic optionality is also not sufficiently captured by the concept of polarity. Strategic optionality for a state is minimizing vulnerability by avoiding dependency: maintaining sufficient choice in times of crisis through balancing relationships. In practice, this is achieved by the pursuit of issue-specific rather than ideologically informed partnerships, that serve national interest. Such partnerships are by definition fluid, requiring constant adaptability as the means to serve national interest shift. The Gulf states have for years been acting to conserve their agency, sovereignty, and strategic optionality, and in fact, these three priorities have been the key driver of their behaviors during the most recent war.

For the reasons above, the idea of polarity has perhaps lost its utility in being able to accurately describe the international system, and is not reflective of the fluidity of its dynamics or the dynamics of this region today.

HOW WILL REGIONAL POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST EVOLVE?

The assertion of agency, sovereignty, and strategic optionality by states in the Middle East forms a strong foundation for regional power and its evolution. The historic shift the region is undergoing at present is one that will see the end of the Iranian regime's decades-long ability to be the region's spoiler.

Will there be a shift away from the US, particularly in the Gulf?

While the most recent war has seemed to invite a reconsideration of the so-called US 'security umbrella' in the Gulf, what may appear as a pivot away from the US' role as the primary provider of regional security is actually the Gulf states pursuing strategic optionality, alongside asserting their agency and sovereignty. Signing defense deals with other partners such as France and South Korea does not negate US supremacy in these sectors. Furthermore, the political interests of Gulf countries and the US are largely mutual. Overall, then, it is unlikely that a shift away from the US' current role

will be observed in the region, particularly in the Gulf.

The End of the Status Quo of Iranian Regional Dominance

Iran's position in the region has irrevocably shifted such that it is now highly unlikely to return to the status quo of being the regional spoiler. Israel, which since October 7 has had a drastically different risk appetite, will have a big role to play in the prevention of the return to this pre-war status quo, alongside the current American administration, which is prepared to go a lot further than most people imagine. Trump in particular has expressed that he will not allow the results of the midterm elections to derail such ambitions. The next administration will likely carry this forward, if not through war then through the continued application of punitive measures such as sanctions and other means of economic and political isolation.

One way or another, we are going to witness the end of the status quo of Iranian dominance in the Middle East, not least because it threatens the interests of much of the region's countries, including Israel, the Arab Gulf states, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. The so-called 'Axis of Resistance,' a key pillar of Iranian power, has considerably weakened since the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. While Iran is trying to adopt a 'business as usual' approach, attempting to impose a new reality in the Strait of Hormuz and gaining from recent Houthi escalations, these attempts can be read as acts of desperation for a regime that has no other remaining cards to play in the region. The full-scale reactivation of its networks abroad through the conduct of terrorist activity remains another card, but suicidal in that Iran will create even more enemies for itself.

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