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THE UNRAVELLING OF UNIPOLARITY: HOW WEST ASIA'S SHIFT TO MULTIPOLAR HEDGING SIGNALS DECLINE OF AMERICAN SUPREMACY

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Abstract: The United States of America has been a dominant hegemonic power in the Middle East for close to three decades since the end of cold war. However, this dominance is crumbling. The unipolarity where American dominance had no peer competitor is slowly declining and is evident from the multi polar hedging by the West Asian countries. The article describes the deterioration of United States' absolute supremacy as it is viewed as an unreliable superpower. It discusses the changing foreign policy of the Gulf monarchies and creation of new security niches by middle powers. The article describes the effect of multi-front war between Iran and Israel/USA since late 2023 which is leading to creation of a post-American regional order.

Keywords: US Hegemony, Post American regional order, West Asia, Multipolar hedging, Iran-Israel conflict, rise of middle powers.

Introduction

The United States has been a dominant hegemonic power in the Middle East for close to three decades since the end of the cold war. There are U.S. military bases all over the region ranging from Qatar to Bahrain. Its Navy sailed in the Persian Gulf while its diplomats managed peace processes and its arms trade secured allies for the US. The age of unipolarity where American dominance had no peer competitor was seemingly entrenched in the region's security dynamics. However, as the second quarter of the 21st century comes into being, this structure is being shattered. American dominance is not crumbling down abruptly but its decline has begun and nowhere does this become clearer than in the emerging paradigms of West Asia, i.e. Pax Americana to multi-polar hedging.

This essay posits that the demise of American unipolarity in West Asia is not caused by any single catastrophe or even a spectacular retreat. Rather, it is a result of a combination of long-lasting structural changes due to the reprioritization of US interests, rising alternative great powers, increased regional states' agency, and unexpected effects of being involved in a conflict zone. This essay proceeds in several stages. First, the essay describes the deterioration of the absolute supremacy of the United States in West Asia and the emerging view of the unreliable superpower. Second, it describes the development of omnidirectional foreign policy of Gulf monarchies and hedging of security risks by them. Third, it deals with the involvement of China in the security sphere, followed by the consistent military presence of Russia and creation of security niches by the middle powers. Finally, it describes the effect of a multi-front war between Iran and Israel/U.S. since late 2023 and how this war proved the power and, at the same time, the diminishing influence of American military. Conclusion states that West Asia is no longer the arena for the unipolarity but has become a web of various influences, a harbinger of post-American regional order.

The Erosion of Uncontested Hegemony

Post-1991 American hegemony in West Asia rested on three pillars: military predominance, diplomatic primacy, and the function of being an external guarantor of energy transit and friendly regimes. Although there is debate about how successful and/or misguided it was, the 2003 intervention in Iraq marked the high-water mark of unipolar self-confidence regarding the American capability to topple a sovereign regime and forcibly reshape its society, without any other major power being able to block the project. However, in recent years, these three pillars have appeared increasingly unstable, and by 2026, while the United States continues

to be the predominant foreign military power in the region, it seems to have lost the capacity to shape political outcomes accordingly.

The explanation for this decline lies in a fundamental strategic pivot, the so-called "pivot to Asia." Having been launched by the administration of Barack Obama and continued, albeit with different rhetoric, by his successors, Washington saw China as the pacing challenge and the Indo-Pacific as the key theater of confrontation (The White House, 2022). For the countries in West Asia, this resulted in an evolving process of balancing their assets and focus. In 2021, the U.S. military evacuated combat forces from Iraq upon stating that the combat mission is now officially completed. The U.S. has evacuated Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia and continuously seeks to lower its military footprint in the area to focus on Asia. However, even despite having tens of thousands of troops and a strong navy presence in the Gulf, it became clear to the regional nations that America had already shifted its priorities away from the Middle East.

This belief turned into conviction particularly, following the hasty American evacuation from Afghanistan in August 2021, during which the sight of panicked crowds trying to enter the Kabul airport as well as the swift disintegration of the U.S. trained Afghan army severely damaged America's reputation as a reliable security ally. Lesson learned was that while the United States may ultimately decide to go home, when it decides to do so, it will probably do so quickly, regardless of any costs involved. The United States' inability to stop the Houthi rebels of Yemen from blocking the Red Sea to international traffic for an entire year during 2023 and 2024 was another illustration that even absolute military superiority cannot ensure the safety of a critical global common. When a non-state entity has powerful weapons, it creates a cost for which the United States will find it hard to lower without starting a wider conflict (International Crisis Group, 2025).

In light of internal political divisions and exhaustion from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, this consensus changed. Countries that had previously relied on nothing else for their survival except the United States asked themselves the following question – what if America goes away or becomes distracted? The solution to this issue did not lie in abandonment of the American alliance, but rather in addition to it or even in creating alternatives to it. The era of hedging started.

The Rise of Omnidirectional Foreign Policies

One of the most overt signs of post-unipolar thinking is the foreign policy of the Gulf monarchies which can be described as omnidirectional. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar remain in security cooperation with the US. The latter allows the Americans to keep their military bases there, supply fighter jets and missile defence and work together on counter-terrorism issues. Nevertheless, at the same time, they form close strategic partnership with China, Russia, India and even with countries that used to be their rivals before.

The reasons behind this policy are both economic and security-related. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's Centennial 2071 and other plans of such kind are crucial for the future of West Asian countries. Thus, continuous warfare, instability, and anti-Iranian position become threats to these plans since they scare tourists, investors, and infrastructure from becoming victims of retaliation. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has already admitted that "the Kingdom cannot risk going to war that could affect its investments in the NEOM megacity and the Red Sea tourism projects"(Qining & Razali, 2025). For the new calculus, stability with many centers of power is more favorable than division that has only the distant superpower as the anchor.

The examples of such a balancing act are abound. In October 2022, Biden administration sought to reduce gas prices before the mid-term elections but the OPEC+ led by Saudi Arabia reduced oil production despite Biden's administration express desire to do the opposite and Russia was a partner in doing so. It was an open demonstration that Saudi Arabia could and would place its interests alongside those of Moscow despite the United States being its main protector (Hokayem, 2022). The UAE took similar steps by expanding its ties with China by playing a vital role in 5G networks of Huawei as well as serving as a test site for fintech and surveillance technologies of China. Moreover, in 2021, Abu Dhabi halted the procurement of F-35 fighter jets from the United States due to stringent conditions imposed by it and began considering Rafale aircraft of France and L-15 trainer aircraft of China, signaling its intention of breaking away from being dependent solely on one supplier.

Qatar, on the other hand, is adept at hosting, having the largest American airbase in the region in Al Udeid while at the same time having diplomatic ties with Iran and a political office of the Taliban. Qatar is highly

committed to Turkey, and it also has a close partnership with China regarding LNG. The three Gulf nations have all faced US pressure in choosing sides in the Ukraine conflict and maintain ties with Russia and do not wish to economically isolate Russia.

What results from all these actions is a situation where alignment is not black and white anymore. Countries want to be everybody's friend at once, making themselves indispensable bridges whose manipulation is hard. The USA still remains an important ally but is no longer the only choice.

China's Entrance as a Security Actor

For if there was ever an instance that highlighted the reality of a multipolar world in West Asia, then it was the meeting in Beijing that took place on 10 March 2023. In an exceptional case where officials from both Iran and Saudi Arabia came together for a diplomatic engagement, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, informed about the restoration of ties between the two nations that had been severed for seven years. Even though a minor agreement in practical sense, it was revolutionary in its symbolic sense. The message was loud and clear: it is not America anymore that can bring peace in the Middle East (Fulton, 2024).

China has been the largest trading partner of the GCC for more than a decade now, and has already overtaken the US as the largest oil importer in the world several years back. What is different now is Beijing's readiness to use its economic clout in influencing security and diplomacy. Belt and Road Initiative has created ports, railways, and industrial areas stretching from Djibouti to the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. Chinese firms have developed ports like the Khalifa Port of the UAE and Duqm Port of Oman that now serve as major points of Chinese Naval logistics. There has been a rise of security interests because of this kind of presence that China can no longer disregard. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has recently taken part in naval drills with Iranian and Russian navies in the region. The PLAN also conducts anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.

China wants to provide an alternate security paradigm in the region where there will be no conditionality attached with economic engagement and non-interference in internal matters. Such a security paradigm looks very much appealing for the gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, etc., in comparison to the security paradigm provided by the US because of conditions attached with arms sale of U.S. with respect to human right records and willingness to impose sanctions anytime. China is providing sophisticated drone and AI driven surveillance systems to Saudi Arabia and UAE. China is also playing a significant role in civilian nuclear program of gulf countries. Either it is not available with the US or it is available with the US but with certain conditions. China is now providing an all-encompassing alternative security framework to that of America but without having any military obligations which could lead to confrontation with the US.

Russia's Persistent Foothold in West Asia

The Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 provided Russia with an outpost in West Asia. It now enjoys permanent deployment at both Khmeimim airbase and Tartus naval base in Syria, giving Moscow a strategic outpost on the Southern flank of NATO. In spite of the immense strain of the war in Ukraine, Russia has not withdrawn from Syria, rather it has entrenched itself as an indispensable power in any political resolution of the Syrian crisis (Trenin).

Similarly, Russia has strengthened its ties with Iran, providing it with state-of-the-art drones and anti-aircraft weaponry while coordinating with it in the shadow war against the West. In addition, it has a multi-layered but functional partnership with Israel, coordinating deconfliction in Syria's airspace. As an OPEC+ country, Russia is a key ally of Gulf countries as well and participates in investments in their energy sector. The cooperation in oil price coordination between Russia and Saudi Arabia is a clear indication that energy geopolitics are no longer solely conducted through Washington. Russia is an effective balancing mechanism for Gulf Countries. It provides a more affordable and conditional free way for countries such as Egypt, Algeria, and Gulf countries to purchase weapons.

The existence of such an alternative undermines the notion that the Western security architecture is the only choice. It helps create a framework where countries like the UAE can house both the US Fifth Fleet and the Russians (via Wagner Group networks in the region, before its restructuring). Such flexibility was impossible during the peak of American unipolarity.

Emergence of Independent Spheres of Influence of Middle Powers

The move away from one superpower status can be evidenced by the rise of new middle powers like Turkey, India, and even European Union whose roles as independent security providers have been established.

Turkey, though a part of NATO, boasts the most daring military posture in the region. Turkey has created a system of military bases and cooperation agreements which comprise a permanent base in Qatar (Tariq bin Zayid), training facilities in Somalia, naval agreement with Libya which has redefined the maritime borders in the Mediterranean, as well as a large number of troops in Northern Iraq and Syria. The state-of-the-art Turkish unmanned aircraft systems provide an able and readily available alternative to American Predators and Reapers for countries in Western Asia, Europe, and North Africa. The acquisition of the Russian S-400 missiles which resulted in the exclusion of Turkey from American F-35 program has proven that Turkey would not limit itself to one alliance alone. Now Turkey stands at many tables and works together with America in NATO, with Russia on energy, with Ukraine on sale of drones and with China on infrastructure. This hedging power of Turkey and its growing military footprint in West Asia contributes to an environment where the United States is one node among several(Preble et al., 2023)

India is also becoming a net provider of security in the Western Indian Ocean. The increasing energy imports from the Gulf region and the competition with China have motivated New Delhi to increase its naval cooperation with UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. India regularly conducts joint military exercises and patrol operations in the Indian Ocean alongside these nations. The announcement of India Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the G20 summit in 2023 has been viewed as a geopolitical move by India, which will link India to Europe through Gulf ports and Israeli technology. India is not a military hegemon in any way, but it has helped make sure that the Gulf region does not remain dependent upon the U. S. Navy alone for security concerns in the area (Pant & Alhasan, 2023)

Strategic autonomy is yet another thing that the European Union is pursuing. It becomes obvious when taking into account the French military presence in Abu Dhabi, the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH), and the increasing tendency of European nations to speak against Israel's military activities in Gaza and Lebanon independently of the United States. In this respect, for local players, a divided West can serve as an advantage that allows getting concessions from all sides and not falling under the influence of just one patron.

The Iran-Israel/U.S. War as a Catalyst

The war between Iran, Israel, and US in 2026 speeded up the ongoing process of distribution of power which was taking place before. The war showed that even though United States possessed unmatched military might and technological edge, it could not influence political outcomes anymore.

West Asia situation turned into the crisis, when both Israel and United States undertook extensive military actions against Iranian nuclear, military and government facilities, in response to the breakdown of nuclear negotiations. In reply, Iran undertook extensive attacks by missiles and drones on Israel and US military facilities in West Asia and on allied targets across the Gulf. Simultaneously, Iran shut down the Strait of Hormuz which is one of the key energy chokepoints in the world. Such conflict involved United States in the biggest military operations in West Asia after Iraq War. United States had to dispatch extra naval forces, air defense and strike systems in Gulf and in the Eastern Mediterranean. Despite the fact that there was extensive destruction of Iranian military facilities, Iran had sufficient retaliatory capability to destabilize the region and cause considerable damage not only to Israel and United States but also to US allies in the region (Gordon, 2026).

The contradiction in this case is paradoxical because it has demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of the power of the USA. Despite the operational success of coordination of the regional missile defense systems, protection of key partners and freedom of action in several theaters of operation, the USA did not manage to accomplish any significant political goals. After several months of military operations against Iran, including elimination of its leaders, the political system of the country managed to survive and its networks stayed resilient. Finally, it was decided that there should be a ceasefire and negotiations on the issues of nuclear and regional security began between Washington and Tehran.

What should also be noted in this regard is the behavior of the traditional regional allies of the US. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman made sure that they do not become directly involved in any aggressive

actions against Iran. They kept on working together with the US security-wise but at the same time, maintained their diplomatic channels open with Iran and took an active part in the process of de-escalation. What mattered for them is not the victory of either Iran or the US but the prevention of a war that would destroy all their economic diversification efforts. In this context, what happened since the Saudi-Iran rapprochement of 2023 can also be clearly seen.

These tensions have increased the importance of diplomacy of Oman, China, Qatar, and others. U.S. may continue to be militarily relevant but its monopoly of diplomacy has become increasingly difficult. Russia and China seized this situation as an opportunity to bolster their ongoing rhetoric about the fact that regional security cannot be ensured through military structures dominated by the U.S. China, capitalizing on its diplomatic clout earned due to 2023 Saudi-Iran reconciliation, positioned itself as a nation which promotes dialogue and regional peace. Whether China or Russia has the capacity to substitute United States is beside the point. What matters here is the fact that region has started viewing its order as multipolar.

This conflict also highlighted the schisms within Western camp. While Western nations showed their commitment towards regional stability and maritime security, they were equally concerned about the magnitude and intent behind Israeli military operations. These divergent stances further solidified the perception that West is increasingly unable to be viewed as one united geopolitical player able to push forward a cohesive regional agenda in West Asia.

The other major issue that emerges from this war is the issue of deterrence and proliferation. Even after all the military operations against the military and nuclear infrastructure of Iran, the basic question of whether the nuclear weapons of Iran have been successfully neutralized or not remains unanswered. This issue will definitely raise questions amongst the regional countries about whether an external security guarantee, especially that of the United States, can protect them from future missile or nuclear threat. In such a scenario, it is quite obvious that the regional states will seek to develop their own defense capabilities.

The 2026 Iran-Israel-U.S. war has neither reversed the erosion of unipolarity of United States but actually hastened it. The 2026 war proves that the United States still enjoys pre-eminence in military terms in this region and that no other country comes close to its capabilities in this respect. But this war also proves that no amount of military supremacy can ensure the restoration of the political dominance which was enjoyed by the United States during the unipolar age.

Conclusion

The erosion of American supremacy in West Asia is more about reduced significance rather than about downfall of the United States. The United States is still the most dominant outside player in West Asia with various military bases, deployed fleets and other state-of-the-art mechanisms which none of the other rival countries could replicate yet. However, ability to project power is different from hegemonic influence. For hegemonic rule to be established in a region, it is necessary for a country to have legitimacy, centrality and the understanding among all the players that the interests of the hegemon will determine the future course of action in the region. All of which is now a thing of the past.

For the sake of security, the regional countries have started practicing the policy of balancing. They are developing relations with various countries so that they can save themselves from the threat of abandonment, excessive dependency or coercion. China has been using its economic strength to become a significant force in West Asia by brokering peace talks and selling weapons without any conditions. Turkey, India, and Europe are there to fill those gaps. All this has created a situation where USA has become one among many players. While the Iranian-Israeli conflict showed the capabilities of the US military, it also made evident the limitations of the US power and furthered the process.

The period of the unipolarity has ended in West Asia. USA is still dominant during a crisis but it is less able to set the terms of the game. The regional countries have understood that their survival and prosperity depend on a network of connections rather than one patron. Thus the new reality brings about the transition of West Asia to multi-polarity which becomes more independent. And here, in West Asia – the birthplace of empires - the demise of the last superpower can be clearly seen.

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