Predation and Predators in the Post-Alliance Era

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At the global level and in many individual regions, the last seven decades have been an uncharacteristically structured period of history. Underwritten by the United States, the international system was grounded in economically and politically liberal values. This era is now fading, while in parallel, other processes are unfolding and hastening the advent of a post-alliance era, which will be more brutal and trickier to navigate than the outgoing order. For Israel, there are at least two implications. First, Israel will have an interest in developing further its proven skills in terms of seizing strategic opportunities and hedging, which in turn means generating ever better horizon-scanning assets. Second, there will be value in placing added emphasis on proaction versus reaction.

There never was a global Leviathan, and ever since recorded history began in the Middle East, the world has more often than not been Hobbesian. Nevertheless, elements of order have figured more or less lastingly or successfully in the struggle of all against all. Regional or even global hegemony, transient coalitions, limited-purpose partnerships, alliances along with de facto or de jure rules concerning the waging of war or the use of the global (or non-global) commons are also as old as recorded history. Simply, some epochs and

regions have been more anarchic than others. The post-Ottoman Middle East is a prominent and longstanding example of such disorder.

At the global level and in many key individual regions, the last seven decades have been an uncharacteristically structured period of history. A combination of hegemony (American, Soviet), a dense network of global rules (from Bretton Woods to the law of the sea), and an array of American-centric non-transactional permanent defense alliances in war-riven Europe and Asia-Pacific has provided anchors to the international system and has enabled the transformative economic and social process known as globalization. Underwritten by the United States, this system was grounded at least in theory and quite often in practice in economically and politically liberal values, such as those enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

This era is now fading for well-known reasons, while in parallel, albeit at different rhythms, other processes are unfolding, the most prominent being the rise of China as an illiberal superpower; the questioning of liberal values and of globalization within democratic societies, most importantly in the US; and the unorthodox political and foreign policy practices of the leader of the world's key power.

These and other forces are hastening the advent of what I call a post-alliance era. This prospect is already deeply affecting the way Europeans and Asians are considering their future strategic, military, and diplomatic choices. Even if the early stages of the process are still halting and inconclusive, there is a broad understanding that this time, it is very different, and that the future may look more like the pre-1914 past than an extension of the post-1945 (or 1989) present. For countries operating in regions that are not structured by the alliance system underwritten by the US, the impact may not be so obvious: after all, in a perverse way, this is simply the world catching up with the Middle East's Hobbesian normal. That may be true, but as we shall see, this new reality also shakes up the Middle Eastern strategic sandbox.

I will define the post-alliance era briefly, then draw some implications in terms of its basic operating system, which I will call "predation," and in closing draw some consequences for MENA in general and Israel in particular.

The Post-Alliance World

Several distinguishing traits have already emerged from the interaction between the system-breaking forces referred to above. First, and this is hardly an original remark, this spells the end of the liberal rules-based order as the endpoint of history as imagined by the post-Hegelians of the early 1990s. However, it does not mean the end of liberal features in the new era, since liberalism remains an intellectually and politically coherent force contending with an inchoate mix of authoritarianism and sovereignism, and it will continue to have an important following.

Second, transactionalism, which was never entirely absent in the outgoing era, will become the default mode of international relations among former allies, as between others. Each transaction is made on an independent basis and must stand on its own feet (strategically, politically, or economically, as the case may be), with the need to generate a profit from day one. Short-termism and one-offs will be the rule. This deal-making in turn places a heavy emphasis on bilateralism, given its basic simplicity. Overall, this does not entirely preclude some forms of long term purpose-designed agreement, such as the 1979 Camp David accords. But anything heftier in terms of participants and time becomes an outcome that is close to impossible to achieve. The Treaties of Westphalia or the Vienna Congress are once a century (or two) exceptions in this regard.

Third, the new era will entrench itself, even after Donald Trump leaves the White House. Once dissipated, trust is always difficult to restore. Moreover, Trump's drive to end foreign wars, his attempts to reduce foreign

commitments, especially in bloody MENA, and his focus on China are widely shared, well beyond the confines of his own electorate. Indeed, much of this evolution began to happen under President Obama, leading from behind in Libya, not abiding by his own red lines in Syria, and pivoting to Asia. If anything, the ongoing Chinese priority in Washington will be sharpened and deepened.

Finally, the reversion to a norm works with the grain of history, unlike the uphill attempt to reestablish an exceptional situation. In historical terms, it is the seventy-year era of alliances that is the exception. This point is well made every time NATO prides itself on being without precedent: yes indeed, but that is not reassuring. The norm is what prevailed in previous centuries or millennia.

Predation and Predators: Take the Money and Run

Short-termism, transience, bilateralism, and the absence of incentives for long term ventures are not absolute. Planet threatening contingencies such as an acceleration of global warming or pandemics may yet provide some space for global action, although America's decision to leave the Paris Accords does not make that case. But day-to-day and on most issues, that is what the new era will look like.

For many countries and their leaders this is hardly a change, and some may even see it as welcome since it offers new opportunities, as Putin of Russia and Erdogan of Turkey have discovered. Indeed, in a world where there are fewer rules and no permanent alliances, not only does opportunity for predation increase, but opportunism becomes mandatory: take your chances now or else…

In the outgoing era, the US was a guarantor of relational permanence and long term stability, not only toward its direct allies, but more broadly, in setting bounds to the conduct or misconduct of others. In an alliance-free world, the US will find it difficult not to become a predator in its own right. Donald Trump's transactional approach to each and every security situation is the crude precursor of what will become habitual: the US is ready to send troops to Saudi Arabia (if KSA pays); the US will abide by NATO's Article V to defend Estonia (if it has paid its dues); the US withdraws its troops from Rojava because these 1200 soldiers and their Kurdish cohorts somehow cost too much; and so on. We should not assume that this is a passing phase, just because these mercenary quid pro quos come in the guise of the incumbent President's histrionics.

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This is a world in which three uber-predators will dominate the scene. A strategically still cautious China has shown at the micro-level—think Angola, Maldives, Montenegro, Malaysia—that it will eventually prove to be an exceptionally unsentimental and grasping predator going after much more consequential prey. Its "century of humiliation" at the hands of the imperialist powers from the First Opium War onwards provides it with a rich playbook to draw from.

Russia, a power that has clearly expressed its dissatisfaction with post-Cold War order inside and outside of Europe, is a skilled hand at predation and a master at seizing opportunities. Its newfound political and military agility helps compensate for its limited economic and demographic base, while its size, nuclear arsenal, and location help put it in the "top three" league of predators.

The US, much more experienced than China in orchestrating all forms of power, will prove to be an exceptionally able predator once it moves beyond the chaos of the current administration: what served for the good from

World War II onwards will simply be repurposed and redirected as a consequence. This will be done all the more readily given the new forms of predation that are joining those inherited from the pre-nuclear and pre-digital age.

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Cyberspace is one such area that began to feature as a major arena for all types of operations nearly fifteen years ago, with the first big DDOS attack against Estonia in 2007. Although much of its physical and human infrastructure is substandard, the United States's technological base is at least holding its own vis-à-vis China as a source of digital research and innovation.

Less obviously, interdependence itself, which is often viewed as a pacifying element in international relations, is increasingly weaponized, to use Henry Farrell's and Abraham Newman's formula. Because the global financial and trading system is dollar-centric, hardly any cross-border enterprise can escape America's reach, including in legal terms. It took the US decades to move from a piecemeal and case-by-case approach to a tightly-integrated inter-agency policy in using its power of seigniorage, broadly defined. The potential power of an integrated onslaught became apparent early in this decade with the deployment of the full suite of primary and secondary sanctions against Iran during the nuclear negotiations of 2015-2012. Since then, the toolbox has been improved further. Despite current Iranian complaints against a European Union that fails to circumvent current American sanctions, the fact is that few Chinese or Russian firms are ready to run the risk of being cut off not only from the US market but from the world market as a whole, and Iran knows it.

America's ability to weaponize interdependence relies heavily on its cyberspace capacity to scoop up intelligence on the contenders it monitors, and on the corresponding electronic trail of money and transactions. But what lends its unique weight is the dominant position of the dollar, which happens to be both a reserve and exchange currency, as well as the ultimate property of the US government. If you are caught using it in a manner that the US objects to, no amount of complaining about the extraterritorial reach of American law will help.

This weapon is also directed as a matter of course at US allies through secondary sanctions, but allies too can become primary targets. On the intelligence side, the US consistently keeps track of European companies and states, both directly and through third parties.

The weaponization of interdependence also leads to the spread of what used to be an unusual form of international conduct between industrial powers, in the form of "legal hostages." Is there a US problem with Huawei? You see to it that Canada arrests the chairman's daughter. You have a problem with a Franco-American merger? You have DoJ put a French executive in a high-security US jail. If you are Chinese and have an issue with securing the intellectual property rights of a foreign company, in the old days (5 years ago) you extracted all the information on the computer your moles had obtained. Now you just arrest some guy and wait for the exchange. Old fashioned hostage-taking and kidnapping as practiced by terrorist groups, criminal gangs, or rogue states now has a variant in the halls of political and corporate power of the industrialized word.

In this brave new world, the countries facing the challenge of the "three predators" most acutely are America's European and Asia-Pacific allies.

Europe's problem is both value-based and structural. The EU as a collective does not simply obey the rule of law and eschew the use of force: being a peace project governed by the rule of

law is its DNA. The EU is thus poorly equipped to deal with predators in a language they can understand. Structurally, the Europeans find it very difficult on the one hand to integrate the considerable powers of the Union, notably in trade and competition policy that even Google and Facebook have learned to fear, and on the other hand, tools of sovereignty in the hands of member states: defense, diplomacy, cross-border taxation. And although France, for instance, has substantial armed forces with serious projection capabilities and the political will to use them, they are those of a country of 67 million, not of a 500-million strong continental bloc. There is no European army.

Asia's problems are more basically strategic. If Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan do not have nuclear weapons and have Western-friendly policies, it is thanks to extended US deterrence. If that deterrence is seen as fading, these countries will consider (or as in the case of the latter three, re-consider) the nuclear option and engage in China-friendly hedging, at US expense.

Hobbes in MENA

MENA will not, and indeed does not, escape the consequences of the post-alliance order, as the events of October 2019 in Syria make clear. The US dropped one set of allies, the Kurds. Toward a NATO ally, Turkey, it managed to simultaneously display weakness, exhibit subservience, and proffer grave insults. Prompting a helter-skelter US military retreat, Trump cleared the ground for Syrian regime forces, the Russian military and PMCs, and ISIS 2.0. This is not exactly an improvement over the questionable US strategic performance in MENA under Bush the son and Obama.

It doesn't get any better. MENA is famously known as a region of "frenemies," but not all frenemies are equal and alike. For Israel in particular, since 1967 the relationship with the US has been much more deeply grounded than any other: it is an alliance. And some frenemies are longstanding enemies of Israel, such as Iran, which is viewed as the number one strategic threat since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. In the new world, in which the US is focused on China and is in no mood for MENA adventures, the "flavor" of frenemies may change more quickly than in the past. By the same token, the strategic positioning of frenemies vis-à-vis the Israeli interest will become more volatile. This evolution may be sharpened by the possible transformation of the US broad-spectrum, consensus support for Israel into a bone of partisan contention.

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This carries at least two implications. First, Israel will have an interest in developing further its proven skills in terms of seizing strategic opportunities and hedging, which in turn means generating ever better horizon-scanning assets.

Second, there will be value in placing added emphasis on proaction versus reaction. Developing relations with partners that may not be immediately useful may be a wise investment. Future relations with the EU and its member states should be viewed through that prism: cultivating links for the long run rather than simply pursuing the current grumpy and sterile exchange of mutual disagreeableness. And Europe means Europe rather than dialogue with the leader of Hungary. Why? Because relations with a revisionist and opportunistic Russia are a common factor between Europe and Israel, as is the transformation of America's positioning towards its allies, and China's growing penetration of MENA, including Israel, and Europe. These common concerns may at certain moments create common interests and lead to common actions, and if they don't, nobody will be worse off for trying.

The post-alliance world will be more brutal and trickier to navigate than the outgoing order.

Precisely because so much will have to be improvised on the spur of the moment (or as a result of a wild leader's intemperate Twitter feed), upstream investment in diplomacy and an even greater emphasis on understanding the evolution of one's frenemies will be of the essence. In effect, the premium will be on planning and preparing for the as-yet unknown and unpredicted.

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