



POINT OF VIEW

Thucydides meet Game of Thrones

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The recent assassination of general Soleimani, has to be viewed as the latest phase within the framework of the ongoing game that goes back to 2001, or 1979, or 1953 depending on your historical perspective.

As the war in Syria is coming to an end, it appears that the US have been attempting to rebalance the region and create a new equilibrium. The Trump Doctrine is being forged by a series of unorthodox unilateral actions, from the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel to unquestioned support of Saudi Arabia, regardless of the latter's actions. In addition, President Trump has supported the formation of an energy axis among Israel, Cyprus and Greece, effectively blocking Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean and has chastised Turkey's decisions and association with Russia, while he has allowed Turkey to invade, occupy and set a zone within Syria. Last but not least, the US administration has been trying to put Iran "back in the box", as Iran has benefited from US interference in the region since 2001, especially following the war against the Islamic state.

Iran is the most important country in the region due to its history, location, resources, size and population, and by far the state with the best potential to becoming a regional power. Furthermore, Iran is the "keystone state," which connects or obstructs in the region east to west and north to south, linking western Asia to Central Asia and blocking Russia from the Indian Ocean. It is also clear that both the Obama and Trump administration concur on the strategy on the importance of a friendly Iran, however, there seems to be disagreement as to the approach of achieving that goal. The rapprochement with Iran, attempted by President Obama, came at the heels of aggressive American foreign policy, which included the killing of Osama Bin Laden in May of 2011, to the vocal dismay of Pakistan at the time. The Obama administration proliferated the use of drone strikes and the indiscriminate killing of "enemy combatants from Yemen to Afghanistan. President Trump has continued the policy, but has drastically

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changed tactics, by utilizing his previously advertised personality of the boss with the fast trigger. "You're fired." Trump, having established the credentials of being unpredictable, and playing the "bad cop" to Obama's "good cop" makes him and the US to be a more dangerous adversary, as he constantly sets the boundaries for a game of chicken. He took the exact same approach with North Korea, only to vacillate to the point of meeting Kim Jong Un twice, once in North Korea. A game of chicken by the nature of the costs and the probability of an accident is extremely dangerous, but could be extremely rewarding. As the utility of Iran and general Soleimani has reached its limits in Syria and against ISIL, the US are attempting to limit the scope of Iran, before the new status quo with a friendlier Iran is established.

Although the drone strike against Soleimani might raise questions of ethics, morality, and legality, the US since 2001 have used any means necessary to respond within the framework of the "War on Terror." It appears that in 2020 game theory, the great chessboard of the 21st Century is a game of chess with UFC (Ultimate Fighting Champion) rules.

There are three axis that have formed over the last decade in the region that are being formalized. The formation of the axis and balancing powers places the region in a zero-sum game theoretical framework of a chessboard. For the first time in centuries in the area, there are multiple actors (state and non-state) that are jousting for position. Regional actors like Russia, Iran and Turkey are sensing an unprecedented environment as the Arab world is in disarray, with no clear leadership, a weakened US, an exiting UK, a disoriented EU and a newly arrived China. A number of non-state actors are appearing in the area centered around energy and trade interests. Finally, the importance of the region to neighboring areas is increasing, as Asia, Africa, and Europe are connected from Ukraine to Somalia.

The drone attack by the US in Baghdad on Thursday has brought attention to the ongoing re-balancing in the Eastern Mediterranean and the area, stretching East to Afghanistan and from Ukraine in the North to Yemen and Somalia to the South. President Trump, who is clearly using a different tactical approach, could either set the region on fire, or could be the next American President who visits Tehran, in either case he has certainly flipped the chessboard.