

SUMMARY REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE WITH SETA FOUNDATION

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NEW WORLD ORDER

The current international order is analogous to the one before the Second World War, which Antonio Gramsci, in 1929, described aptly in the following words: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” The international rules-based world order established after the Second World War is similarly struggling to survive, and the new order has yet to emerge.

Skepticism about NATO and US leadership is likely to significantly impact the emergence of the new order in the Middle East. There are signs that countries such as Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are looking for alternative alliances in Asia, such as BRICS and SCO, which still appear to be in their nascent phase. Syria will be a litmus test for Turkey in the region, but the situation in Syria, with the involvement of multiple regional and global actors and the multi-ethnic fabric of the country, does not bode well for the Syrian project post-Assad. The developments in Syria will play a significant role in determining the trajectory of the future Middle East order.

NATO IN THE MIDDLE EAST

After the end of the Cold War, NATO decided to enhance its relationship with countries in the Middle East and North Africa. It launched the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1994 as a forum for cooperation with these countries. Shortly after, in 1995, the European Union took this initiative to the next step and created the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, also known as the Barcelona Process, to develop its economic, political, and socio-cultural relationship with countries in the Middle East and North Africa. In 2004, NATO strengthened its regional engagement by launching the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which focuses primarily on the Middle East. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have joined the Initiative, while Oman and Saudi Arabia participate in selected activities. As part of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO established a regional center in Kuwait in 2017. More recently, in July 2024, NATO announced its plan to open its first liaison office in the Middle East in Jordan, an important ally of the United States in the region. On its 75th anniversary in Washington, DC, last year, NATO decided to increase its involvement in the Middle East.

As a multilateral alliance, NATO has been almost absent from the Middle East. Countries such as the United States, France, and Turkey have, for all practical purposes, acted unilaterally in Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan, with NATO being dragged only at a later stage, if at all.

TRUMP’S IMPACT ON NATO AND MIDDLE EAST ORDER

The Middle East has always been an area of interest for NATO and occasionally an area of operation. We should be wary of conflating individual NATO member nations’ actions and foreign policies with those of the NATO alliance – the two are distinct. Each country has its specific security threat that it tries to impose onto the NATO alliance – immigration for Spain, terrorism for Turkey, Russia for East European countries, and Africa for France. These distinct agendas of each member state compete for the limited resources available to NATO, and invariably, NATO needs to choose and prioritize. For the United States, the priority has recently moved to the Asia Pacific region, specifically China. Given the dominance of the United States within the NATO alliance, it can push the alliance to prioritize its security interests. Consequently, this region is now within the area of NATO interest. The top concern concerning the Middle East is the assurance of unhindered oil flow from the region. The second concern is radicalization in the region. Turkey’s membership in NATO keeps a check on NATO’s actions getting out of line, such as by getting too aggressive in the Middle East or allowing Israel to get membership in NATO.

Donald Trump and his team are predisposed to work unilaterally in the interest of the United States alone. Multilateralism is anathema to them, and they do not have any special liking for NATO. Consequently, NATO will either go along with the United States and sacrifice its interests to do Donald Trump's bidding, or it will have to proceed without the United States until Donald Trump is in office.

TURKEY'S GEOPOLITICAL CALCULUS

American leadership is pivotal for an effective NATO. The United States is experiencing an internal social, economic, and political crisis. The US' capacity to continue as a global hegemon has declined and this has negative repercussions for NATO. Its allies in NATO and elsewhere, including Turkey, are losing confidence in the US' will or ability to continue its leadership role. Ukraine is advancing NATO's security interests without being a part of the alliance, and it is advancing the global hegemonic project of the United States, which has been retrenching from the Middle East and continental Europe, especially since the time of Barack Obama's presidency. This is a significant development for Turkey, which has a stake in the security of both these regions. This retrenchment of the US is causing its allies to lose confidence in American leadership and making them skeptical about depending on this superpower to come to their rescue during a potential future crisis. This is forcing its traditional allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to adopt the position of a swing state. This concept of a swing state is in full accordance with the traditional foreign policy of Turkey since the Second World War, in which precedence is given to the country's national interests without fully siding with either NATO, the United States, China, or Russia.

Turkey has been facing many challenges as a NATO member. However, it is essential for Turkey to hold its ground and not relinquish its NATO membership, as this gives it a strategic advantage in the Middle East as well. Turkey needs to have a say in the future of Europe, and without EU membership, NATO membership is the only way Turkey can have such a say.

The normalization of Arab relations with Israel will be a priority for the Trump administration, and he will achieve this goal during the next four years. The Middle East order will pivot around Israel in the foreseeable future, and Iran and Turkey will find it very difficult to find a place in this new order. Israel will not allow Turkey a place in this new Middle East order, and the strained relationship between Turkey and Sunni Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and UAE, will make it all the more difficult for Turkey to overcome Israel's opposition. The economic trade corridor from India to Europe will pass through Israel and altogether bypass Turkey. Turkey is viewed as a former colonial power in Libya, making it difficult for Turkey to establish a foothold in this country. It is for this reason that Egypt and UAE have a more influential role in Libya, especially on the political side, while Turkey is relegated to the sidelines in the role of a peacemaker.

GEOPOLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS OF EVENTS IN SYRIA

Iran has left Syria and, arguably, even Lebanon. They will now turn to their proxies, either in Iraq or Yemen, to take on the mantle from the other fallen ones. The United States and NATO will have to confront this scenario. Russia emerged as another loser in Syria in the wake of Assad's toppling. Given the importance of its Tartus naval base for its interests in Africa, Russia is unlikely to abandon it. However, the Hmeimim airbase might prove financially unsustainable for Russia to continue holding. This Russian vestigial presence in Syria will be an issue for NATO to confront soon.