Apart from making a defense deal – which came as a potential snub to the US’ dillydallying on the sale of the F-35s to Abu Dhabi - with France to purchase 80 state-of-the-art Rafael jets, the UAE is cosying up to Iran and Turkey as a means to place itself as a key player in the region, one that is capable of resetting regional balance of power through its moves. The UAE’s moves towards Iran, for instance, have come at a time when the US-Iran talks are stalled for months and a meaningful process – and resolution of the issue - remains unlikely. The UAE’s move to place itself as a key interlocutor is not meant to please the US to get the F-35s; it is more of a move that would make it a new power broker in the region, especially between Israel and Iran. It is a move that is supposed to allow Abu Dhabi to play on both sides of the geo-political spectrum in the Middle East. In other words, the move is part of concerted efforts Abu Dhabi has been taking for quite some time to raise its regional and global profile - moves that are supposed to give Abu Dhabi a competitive advantage over both its allies and its rivals - especially Saudi Arabia, which is in the middle of a state sponsored rapid social and economic transformation to make Riyadh the centre of regional political and economic activity challenging - and potentially replacing – Dubai’s dominance.

The UAE’s multiple diplomatic and military/defense ventures come against the backdrop of the damages and loses it suffered as Riyadh’s partner in the latter’s invasion of Yemen. The shift away from concerted military interventions and regime change campaigns in Yemen and Libya to targeted diplomatic activity shows a major shift in the UAE’s
foreign policy from an emphasis on deploying hard power to multiplying its national power potential as a key regional player capable of providing workable solution to long-lasting issues. While this is not to suggest that Abu Dhabi will come to dominate the Middle East soon, the UAE does have an ambitions plan, which its recent moves reflect unambiguously.

In the first week of December, the UAE’s top officials, including its spy chief, were in Tehran to revisit the paradigm of rivalry that has been dominating their ties. While some western reports mentioned that the UAE was only acting as a “messenger”, there is no gainsaying that the visit is a culmination of ties that have improved considerably in the past few months. Trade figures speak for themselves:

As date released by the Iranian Customs Authority shows, the UAE is already the number one exporter to Iran. As the latest figures show, the UAE exports to Iran over the past six months stood at US$7 billion. This figure is three times more than the US$2.4 billion worth of goods the UAE exported to its second best exporting destination, Turkey. For the UAE, economic logic seems to have trumped the logic of sanctions, at least for now. As its top officials also reiterated, the UAE’s ties with regional powers cannot be held hostage to “external influences and meddling” and, taking a jab at Israel, the UAE officials emphasised that issues need to be settled through non-military means.

That the UAE’s moves are capable of reshaping geo-politics became evident when the visit to Tehran was quickly followed by the visit of Israeli officials led by the Prime Minister to the UAE. As some unnamed UAE officials spoke to media and said, the UAE is the best country is the region to help resolve the Israel-Iran issues effectively. To the extent that the UAE happens to be the only major regional player that now has official and direct ties with both Israel and Iran gives Abud Dhabi a unique geo-political advantage that many other regional and extra-regional players lack.

It is in the same light that the recent visit of the UAE Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Ankara must be seen and evaluated. The simultaneous normalisation with key regional rivals speaks volumes about the new, dominant mode of foreign policy that Abu Dhabi is following. After MBZ’s talks with Erdogan, the UAE announced a US$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey “to support the Turkish economy and boost bilateral cooperation between the two countries.” MBZ’s offer to help mediate between Ankara and Damascus also comes against the backdrop of the UAE’s own on-going rapprochement with Syria.

When the UAE officials met Syrian officials in early November, the meeting did send a very strong signal about the UAE’s growing appetite for applying a set of policies that would help it refurbish its regional conduct.

The UAE’s growing rapprochement with three key regional states evidences a new diplomatic ring it is creating that will anchor Abu Dhabi’s regional and global credentials unmistakably. Apart from redefining its own ties with erstwhile rival states, the UAE is mediating between Iran and Israel; it is mediating between Damascus and Ankara and there are reports that plans to arrange a meeting between Mohammad bin Salman and Erdogan are also being made in Abu Dhabi.

These moves most certainly aim to make Abu Dhabi a new regional balancer in the wake of fast eroding US engagement with the region.

Whether the UAE can really achieve its ambitious transition from a tiny Arab state to a regional balancer remains to be seen, especially as Saudi Arabia, its new rival, is also in the middle of an ambitious transformation that is supposed to help it set and project itself as a key challenger of Dubai. Abu Dhabi’s transformation is, thus, triggering new competition in the region that it will have to tackle – and manage – effectively, a task that depends not only upon how well or how bad the UAE performs, but also on how well and how bad its rivals perform in this competition.

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