KHORASAN: Where ISIS, Caspian Energy, and Great Power Politics Meet

The word on the street in Afghanistan is that the United States created ISIS to be a problem for Russia, China, and Iran. While it would not be the first time the US funded, trained, or invented militarized extremism in the name of great power politics, the whole truth of this statement is far-fetched.

What it suggests is that sometime prior to the US invasion of Iraq a few individuals planned a series of intricate political and geostrategic moves that would create conditions hospitable for a group that was brutal and effective, whose geographic ambitions were oriented toward challenging America on the world stage. While I reject this narrative there is a small nugget of truth in this conspiracy: ISIS is a bigger problem for Russia, China, and Iran and the US is strategically aware of it.

First, take US political will in the fight against ISIS. The US is politically exhausted after more than a decade of war. Domestically, we have rising racial tension, an uneasy economic outlook, and the coming marathon of an 18-month election campaign. Internationally, we face an irritated Russia, an ascendant China, and the ongoing drama of the Iranian nuclear deal. Without an attack on US soil, ISIS is quite frankly off the local ballot and a footnote on the US National Security Council’s agenda.

This perspective sheds light on many apparent political faux pas in recent months - namely the no complete strategy and public bewilderment of US Generals. In these moments where the veil seems to be pulled off, and a very human face is put on the most powerful military and intelligence community in the world, one is forced to surmise whether this is not some part of a deeper strategy within old-school great power politics. Instead of getting lost in the noise of poor US leadership, our attention should be focused on why the decisions are being made, because these decisions form the front lines of a new geopolitical battleground: Khorasan.

Khorasan is a region that encompasses much of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. To ISIS, Khorasan represents the first battleground of its end-of-days scenario. To regional powers, Khorasan represents the future of energy.

The recent history of the region has seen an increase in economic brinksmanship as energy sources, namely oil and natural gas, have been uncovered. Russia and Iran, due to their history of control and geographic proximity, have had relative carte blanche access, what with their largest competitors being each other. The past decade has seen this bipolarity shaken as Chinese, European, and American ambitions have sought to develop their own share of a quickly-increasing resource pie. While China has been able to develop their own transnational energy infrastructure with little regional backlash, Western development has come at both high fiscal and political costs. The conditions in recent months are a Europe that is still significantly dependent upon Russian energy, an Iranian economy that has basically withstood US sanctions, and a China that is growing more confident in its energy outlook. One way to counteract this reality is to flood the market with new energy resources. Another way is to destabilize the region.
To turn again to US strategy, I offer three thought experiments. First, under the auspices of a Russia that has shown increasing willingness to flex its military and subversive might in pursuit of its economic interests, the US faces two dialectical choices on the posture or submit scale. Either the US can try to constrain NATO expansion in order to give Russia space on its periphery and look to balance European trade and energy dependence between the two nations or the US can try to increase NATO presence through security commitments and public displays of force, seeking to undermine the Russian regional energy hegemony. We have already seen the public march of NATO throughout Europe. We are in the midst of developing a simultaneously overt and covert strategy of economic and energy subversion. It seems likely such a strategy would seek to align military and economic power rather than detach them.

Second, consider Iranian negotiations: Iran has largely been in the driving seat, particularly as sanctions have fallen far short of crippling its economy. The scales seemed to have shifted as the US has shown increasing willingness to walk away from negotiations in order to secure a better deal. While the recent agreement is far from complete, I argue its timing is more a product of Iran’s desire for expediency. Because as the threat of ISIS grows in the region, Iranian economic stability and its own national security will at least be perceived at the local level to decrease. Therefore Iran has much more to risk in continued negotiations. This concern is also evident in Iran’s continued support for the Assad regime. As ISIS celebrates its one-year anniversary, Iranian support for Assad is less about power projection and more about power protection.

Third, as China expands its strategic reach, it becomes increasingly aware of its future resource needs. In an act of foresight, and arguably to some extent anticipatory fear, China is developing resources around the world from food to metals to energy. A piece in their South-South development strategy is Caspian energy. In acts that can be described as a calculated risk, the Chinese have spent billions on developing energy infrastructure across what is increasingly becoming one of the most dangerous and unstable regions of the world. Whether this venture is designed to enhance China’s strategic depth or to be a bulwark against economic contraction, the US has a geopolitical interest in acting as at least a partial impediment.

War is not just politics but economics by another means. The Caspian region, or Khorasan, is now playing host to a Gordian knot of great power politics and economics. ISIS is a dialectical challenge for the United States, existing both as a US foreign policy failure in the present and presenting a unique strategic opportunity in the near future. While drone strikes will undoubtedly continue, the current strategic landscape will have to change for a serious Western-led intervention to occur. I expect that as ISIS looks to Khorasan the US will look the other way. Only time will tell whether this turn-the-other-geopolitical-cheek strategy ends up harmless or causing great harm.

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