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Countries sneaking in the political vacuum of the Middle East

Preface: US and Western Europe bring political vacuum of the Middle East

The influence of the United States and Western European countries on the Middle East is temporarily weakened. The United States will change its government in coming January. Its diplomatic policy for the Middle East has yet been decided. In European Union (EU), Brexit, the UK withdrawal from EU, is just around the corner. The economic and social turmoil caused by not only Brexit but also the coronavirus pandemic cannot be foreseeable. Neither the United States nor Western Europe can afford to be involved in the Middle East issue.

In case of the United States, it is inevitable that the Middle East policy of the president-elect Joe Biden of Democratic Party will significantly differ from that of the present Trump administration of Republican Party. Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal framework and strengthened economic sanctions on Iran. Instead Trump administration favored its stance toward Israel. They were the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, the consent to further settlement in the West Bank and the annexation of the Golan Heights. President-elect Biden said that he might rejoin to the Iran nuclear deal framework. He will also change the Trump administration's policy on the Israeli issue.

During the Trump administration Israel enjoyed its predominance, while Iran was exhausted in economy. Both countries are now waiting breathlessly for new Middle East policy of the Biden administration. Other Middle Eastern countries having considerable interests in the Middle East are also watching the US's new foreign policy carefully. They are also interested in what kind of Middle East diplomacy the Western European countries will apply, too. However, so far, neither the United States nor Western European countries are stalled. They cannot propose new and clear Middle East policies. Middle East is in political vacuum. It can be said that the countries having interests in Middle East are wondering looking for the room to step in.

Russia is steadily expanding its military presence from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and then to the Indian Ocean. Turkey, which had dreamed of joining the EU as a loyal member of NATO, has been blocked from Christian nations such as Greece and Eastern Europe. Turkey has awakened to Islam and now aims to become a Middle Eastern conqueror like the ex-Ottoman Empire. Israel, a Jewish state surrounded by Islamic states, regained diplomatic relations with the UAE and several Arab countries with the strong support of US President Donald Trump. Israel succeeded to divide the Arab nation. Israel's next target is Iran. Israel will do whatever it takes. Iran is extremely exhausted by US

sanctions, but has a strong willingness to fight. Iran is eager to strengthen its military power watching the foreign policy of US president-elect Biden. Military conflicts in the Middle East looks like never end.

Looking sideways at such military conflicts, China is enthusiastic about expanding its economic power across the Eurasian continent. Its slogan is the "One Belt, One Road". UAE and Qatar should not be forgotten in terms of economy and finance. Though they are small countries of GCC, they have plenty of oil (natural gas) money and afford to buy expensive weapons.

Each country is playing a power game. However, there are two countries that are likely to be left behind in the progress. They are Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Both countries are considered to be major powers in the Middle East. But Egypt's leadership in the Arab world is jeopardized by Israel's Arab split policy. Saudi Arabia is just wasting oil wealth and new nation-building strategy is going to be fruitless.

Ahead of starting US new administration, Brexit (BREXIT) and the possible end of the coronavirus pandemic in next year, the current Middle East can be said to be a time of political and economic blank. This paper is intended to give an overview of the countries that are sneaking in the absence of Western Europe and the United States.

1. Russia: Steadily expanding military bases

Russia's military base in the Middle East was the Tartus naval port in Syria only. Russia strongly supported the Assad government during the civil war. Russian made weapons were imported in the Tartus naval port and transported to the Latakia air force base. The IS (Islamic State) forces were destroyed by the Russian air-bombers. After the collapse of IS, Russia-Syria joint operation destroyed the anti-government forces which consisted of mixed units such as Kurdish forces, democratic forces, etc. Russia strengthened its alliance with the Assad government and established a solid military base in Syria.¹



Russia's Middle East expansion policy is remarkable nowadays. It provided Turkey with the surface-to-air missile system S-400. Turkey is a NATO member and has played the role of a bulwark against the former Soviet Union since World War II. But the present President Erdogan has launched a multi-lateral power diplomacy that weighed the two major powers of the United States and Russia. Therefore, the US

President Trump was reluctant to provide Turkey with stealth fighter F-35. He was afraid that Western military secrets would be leaked to Russia². Notwithstanding the Turkish President Erdogan conducted joint military exercises with Russia in the eastern Mediterranean³.

In Libya Russia has supported the rebel military organization of General Haftar based in Benghazi and aimed to expand its power in the Mediterranean. There was a civil war in Libya between the orthodox government in the capital Tripoli and the rebels in Benghazi. Turkey supported the government of Tripoli. Russia used its private military company, Wagner Group, to support rebels. Russia camouflaged national flag of military aircrafts to convey troops and weapons from the country⁴. The Haftar rebel corps almost approached to the capital, Tripoli. But Turkey sent militias from Syria to support the orthodox government. Currently, oil facilities in Libya are under the control of the orthodox government. Oil production is recovering rapidly⁵. Russia stumbled in Libya and was pushed back to the eastern Mediterranean.

Russia turned to Sudan facing the Red Sea and on the other side of Saudi Arabia. Russia aimed to developing a maritime route from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea. Russian state media Tass reported that Russia had a plan to open a military port in Port Sudan. By chance, the United States announced that Sudan would approve Israel following the UAE and Bahrain, therefore US would lift economic sanctions on the country in return⁶. Russia did not miss the chance. Russia approached Sudan and ask for naval base. Russia could get a sea lane from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. Russia's military ambition is endless.

2. Turkey: A dangerous tightrope diplomacy aiming the champion of the Middle East



Turkey would have been helped by the political vacuum of BREXIT and COVID19 in the Europe and the administrative change in the United States. During the Syrian Civil War, Turkey built a close military cooperation with Russia and introduced S-400 missile system. Turkey also tried to introduce the US stealth fighter F-35 as the forefront of NATO against Russia and Iran. Turkey intended to have both F-35 as a spear by the West and S-400 as a shield by the East at the same time. It is just a contradiction for the West⁷.

EU could not control Turkey on the issue of natural gas development in the eastern Mediterranean, too. Turkey ignored the opposition of Greece and Cyprus and forced an exploration operation of natural gas. In addition, it has signed an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) agreement with the central government of Libya to prevent Israel, Egypt and Lebanon from the pipeline project laying for Europe. In the Libyan civil war, Italy supports the government in Tripoli and France supports the rebels in Benghazi. EU is not in solid. Turkey makes light of EU⁸.

Turkey cleverly roams between the west and the east like the bats in Aesop's story. However, the

situation is constantly changing. In the conflict in Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Region in Azerbaijan, Turkey supported Azerbaijan and forced Armenian troop to withdraw. Western European countries have accused Turkey. They are pro–Armenia but anti–Islam⁹. On the other hand, Turkey has many domestic problems. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), President Erdogan’s party, weakened. The prime rate had to raise due to high inflation. The change of economic policy resulted in the resignation of finance minister who was the son–in–law of President Erdogan¹⁰. President was eager to gain popularity among Islamic conservatives by remodeling Sofia Palace in Istanbul into a mosque¹¹. It is the crucial time for him to keep a strong power like before.

3. Israel: Arabs have been successfully divided. Get rid of another foe!



It is true that Israel was the biggest winner in the Middle East by keeping the close relation with President Trump for the past four years. In addition to the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and enhancement of the settlement in the West Bank of the Jordan River. Israel opened diplomatic relations with

the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco assisted by US mediation. Israel, which had been isolated in the Middle East, succeeded in dividing the Arab countries and annulled the peaceful coexistence policy of Israel and Palestine which had been prevailing within the international community.

After January next year, however, the head wind will blow against Israel when the United States will change from the Trump Republican administration to the Biden Democratic administration. Let’s imagine that the relations between United States and Israel had been the worst in history when Biden was the Vice President in the Obama administration. That is why Israel is still stick to pile up accomplished facts during the Trump administration even though it was a lame duck. The UAE and several Arab countries are the ally of Israel now. Iran is the only one enemy left against Israel.

Religious Iran calls Israel as an enemy of Muslims. This gives Israel the big opportunity to ask joint operation against Iran with secular monarchy countries in the Gulf region. Israel is inferior to Egypt, Iraq, and even Saudi Arabia in terms of population, and inferior to oil–producing countries like UAE in terms of economic power. Intelligence is essential for Israel to survive. Israel has the world’s leading spy network Mossad.

Recently, a key person in Iran’s nuclear program was assassinated in Tehran¹². The method of assassination was extremely sophisticated. Nobody doubt that Israel was behind the scene. Immediately after opening diplomatic relations with the UAE, high–ranking Israeli officials landed on Dubai Airport one after another including the top of Israeli intelligence, Mossad. Dubai, the open–minded international city, is a heavn for active spies. In the past, a Hamas executive was assassinated in

Dubai¹³. This time Israeli intelligence officer(s) might enter to Dubai without any inquiries and he (or they) instructed the suspects in Tehran from there. Israel is confident that foes should be get rid of before President Trump lefts oval office in Washington.

4. China: Economy surpasses politics to complete ‘One Belt, One Road’



Today, China is the second largest military and economic power after the United States, but its political presence has traditionally been low in the Middle East. Economic presence, however, is remarkable. The Middle East is an important export destination for Chinese products. They are high-tech products like Huawei's 5G communication system as well as low-priced daily goods. Chinese high-tech products are now sweeping the market in the Middle East and caused the United States panic. For poor developing countries, China

offers low-interest and long-term loans to construct infrastructures such as ports, roads, and railroads.

On the other hand, China imports large amounts of crude oil from Middle East countries. According to BP statistics, China imports 507 million tons of crude oil last year. The largest exporter to China was Saudi Arabia. Iraq and Iran were also major sources.

China puts the priority on the economic matters and works hard to expand exports and imports. China is carefully away from political and military disputes in the region. It stopped oil development activity in Iran. Instead, China buys Iranian crude oil with careful manner. Iran has a difficulty to find its customers. China proposed Saudi Arabia to build a joint venture refinery in its big market. China also entered the development of oil fields in Abu Dhabi, and got a contract for 3-D seismic survey¹⁴.

China has financed a \$ 60 million solar project through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to Oman which keeps proper distance from Saudi Arabia and UAE¹⁵. AIIB is an international financial institution for development of infrastructure. It was established by China against to the Asian Development Bank led by Japan. China also provides bilateral loans to developing countries in Asia and Africa. But loans by China frequently resulted in a so-called "debt trap". When the borrower becomes difficult to repay, China, in return, borrows port or other facilities for a long time under favorable conditions. Thus Chinese "One Belt, One Road" is going to complete from China to Europe via the Middle East.

5. Qatar / UAE: Small but rich countries need no GCC



The power games not only by the United States, Russia and China outside the Middle East but also Turkey and Israel inside the Middle East, hide UAE and Qatar behind the scene. But they show their shape by making full use of abundant oil or natural gas revenues. Both countries are the member of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) together with Saudi Arabia. Due to their small economy and population, UAE and Qatar used to obey to Saudi

Arabia unconditionally. But after the "Arab Spring" in 2010 stormed across the Middle East, both countries became proactive and independent. It is oil or gas money that supports their prominent diplomatic attitude.

Qatari state-owned Al Jazeera TV is highly respected both in Arab and Western world. Al-Jazeera TV advocates freedom of the press. However, moderate Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt are hostile to Qatar. They cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar in 2017 together with the UAE and Bahrain because Qatar didn't sever ties with Muslim Brotherhood which they regard as Islamic extremists. Qatar strengthened the tie with Turkey which has suffered economic difficulties due to the sanction by the United States and the COVID-19. Qatar was not isolated within the GCC, but paved the way for independence from the GCC. Iran got profit from the GCC trouble. Qatar Airways now utilize Iran's airspace because it is prohibited to pass over the Arabian Peninsula. Iran earns transit fees which is a valuable income for dollar short Iran.

Unlike Qatar, the UAE is still in a honeymoon with Saudi Arabia. But close observation shows that UAE is one step or two ahead of Saudi Arabia. The restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel is one of examples. The independence of Palestinian national is an absolute precondition in the Arab world. UAE neglected such precondition. But there was no remarkable antipathy from other Arab countries. It was because the UAE was a small country with little political influence. In contrast with UAE, Saudi Arabia is unable to take the same action as UAE. Saudi Arabia claims to be the lord of Islam World. Saudi Arabia is bound by its own saying. UAE also took the same manner at civil war in Yemen. Yemeni government troops against the Iran-backed rebel Houthi are scratch team and internal conflicts took place constantly. The UAE, who had supported Southern Transitional Council (STC), withdrew its army with being out of patient. After all, Saudi Arabia is struggling alone to settle the dispute.

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By Areha Kazuya

E-mail: Arehakazuya1@gmail.com

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¹⁵ AIIB clears \$60mn loan for Oman solar project

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