

Russia replaces America as the power player in the Middle East



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The sorry position of the United States in the Middle East today ought to be sending President Trump a powerful message. The region bristles with American air and naval bases and major deployments in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, among others, manned by 55,000 troops and civilians, and rising contingents in the war zones of Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Despite all this military strength, the “go to” power in the region today is Russia.

Since Russian President Putin saved Syrian President Bashar Assad’s regime from collapse, he has established working relations with every major power in the Middle East, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and Turkey, though several of them fiercely oppose what he is doing in Syria. Moscow has worked successful deals with Saudi Arabia to prop up international oil prices. Its relations with Israel have never been closer, notwithstanding Russia’s having greatly strengthened Iran in Syria.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Putin have overcome the tension of fighting on opposite sides in Syria, and of Turkey’s NATO membership, to agree on Ankara’s purchase of Russian air defense missiles and a Russian nuclear reactor. Egyptian President Fattah Al Sisi, like Erdogan and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has made multiple pilgrimages to Moscow, and now Egypt and Russia have signed a draft agreement giving Moscow access to Egyptian airspace and possibly bases. Moscow has agreed to sell Egypt the same advanced missile system Turkey is buying and to build Egypt’s first nuclear reactor.

Except in Syria, all of this has been achieved through diplomacy. In the space of a few years, Putin has ended decades of Russian irrelevance in the Middle East and built a stronger position than the Soviet Union enjoyed 40 years ago. There is nothing mysterious about how he’s done it. Putin understands the power of diplomacy. You can bet there are no unfilled Russian ambassadorships in countries that matter to Moscow as there are today, almost unbelievably, vacant American posts in Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey and of

course, Iran, where we have no embassy.

Putin has been immeasurably helped by the conviction of American decline that prevails throughout the region. As much perception as it is reality, the belief took root in the early Obama years and has grown steadily since. What the president ought to notice is that no amount of military presence makes the slightest dent in it.

Yet, in order to make room for defense increases “like no one has ever seen,” Trump’s 2019 budget proposes that all nondefense discretionary spending, which is everything other than entitlements and interest on the national debt, should drop over 10 years to 1.3 percent of gross domestic product. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, that would be a third of the average level of the past half century and the lowest level since the Hoover administration.

The State Department and international assistance would be slashed. Adjusted for inflation, the cuts would also amount to a 42 percent plummet from today’s spending for education, science, health, housing, nutrition assistance, which is virtually all federal programs that provide opportunity, reduce inequality, strengthen human capital and stoke innovation. These are the sources of long-term growth and national cohesion, two of the three pillars of national greatness.

We have a military designed for a global power and it has funding shortfalls that need to be fixed. On the other hand, we’re not acting like a state with global responsibilities and interests. We also continue to allow ourselves the luxury of enormous waste in the Pentagon budget by building tanks we will never need, airplanes that cannot operate in modern combat airspace, and redundant nuclear systems beyond what’s needed for deterrence. With 21st century military needs, domestic requirements and those of international leadership, and with an exploding deficit, the waste is no longer affordable.

No great nation has ever been built on military strength. The Soviet Union tried and left its people standing in line for soap and matches. No democracy as unequal and divided as we are can allow the fissures to continue to widen without mortal risk. No country that has built its well-being on alliances, trade, and leadership of an international order based on the rule of law can afford to treat its commitments with contempt or to forget that diplomacy is the primary instrument for promoting national interests. Military power is only the fallback when

diplomacy fails.

Trump has plenty of company in confusing military spending with military strength and military strength with national greatness. The difference is that he wants to make the mistake on a larger scale than anyone else has imagined since at least 1945. A far lesser state, not a greater one, is at the end of the path he wants to head down.

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Source: <http://thehill.com/opinion/international/376929-russia-replaces-america-a-s-the-power-player-in-the-middle-east>

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