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**STRATEGIC SECURITY ANALYSIS**

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# The Tripwire Pivotal Corridor Conflicts

by Nayef Al-Rodhan

## The Tripwire Pivotal Corridor Conflicts

As 2015 has already shown, there are several ongoing conflicts within the geopolitical Tripwire Pivotal Corridor (TPC).

This framework builds upon ideas from Halford Mackinder's "Heartland" theory, which he used to refer to Eastern Europe and Central Russia. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski used the term "geopolitical pivots" to describe the importance of states based on their geographic location and proximity to strategic positions<sup>1</sup>. The TPC runs between the Arctic Circle and Antarctica, between 30 and 75 degrees east<sup>2</sup>.

I have selected examples of political instability from different "pivot" regions within the TPC that have become particularly relevant given today's geopolitical issues: Eastern Ukraine, the Middle East and East Central Africa.

Due to factors such as porous borders and weak, decentralised, unaccountable state apparatuses, each of these regional conflicts has the potential to provoke instability elsewhere. These TPC-based conflicts can also be ethnic and religious in nature, or erupt over access to scarce natural resources. The following examples show how even a conflict with a small-scale, localised origin can quickly spread and destabilise an entire region, underlining the TPC's crucial importance to global stability.

## KEY POINTS

- Within the Tripwire Pivotal Corridor (TPC) are several politically unstable regions: Eastern Ukraine, the Middle East, the Great Lakes region of East Central Africa and Afghanistan/Pakistan.
- The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has resulted in a geopolitical stand-off between Russia and Western actors such as the United States, the European Union and NATO. If left to escalate, this standoff could expand to countries on the EU's eastern border.
- The Middle East region can be broken down into different "pivotal" conflicts. This paper analyses the Syrian Civil War, the rise of ISIS, the collapse of the Yemeni government, and the ever-present Israeli-Palestinian conflict as geopolitically significant events.
- East Central Africa is another node of geostrategic interest, as several regional powers are looking to assert and protect their influence in the mineral rich region, where porous borders and weak central governments have made it easy for traffickers and armed groups to proliferate.
- Although NATO officially ended its combat mission in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, it is probable that the US will continue to provide substantial assistance and training to Afghan security forces.

<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, *Neo-statecraft and Meta-geopolitics: Reconciliation of Power, Interests and Justice in the 21st Century* (LIT), 2009, p 81.

## 1 Eastern Ukraine

The evolution of Russia's foreign policy in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict will have a significant impact on the foreign and defence policies of Europe. Increased spending on defence budgets, particularly in the case of the Baltic States or Poland, will be deemed necessary in the face of perceived hostility by Russia. Ukraine is neither a member state of the EU nor of NATO. Western leaders could therefore argue that supplying Kiev with direct military aid, while not obligatory, can be made at their discretion. However, the eastern-most members of the EU and NATO have repeatedly demanded assurances of unconditional support and will continue to put significant pressure on Brussels and Washington to adopt a tougher stance against Russia.

NATO has accused Russia of enabling the actions of East Ukrainian rebel groups through the direct supply of military equipment and personnel, charges the Kremlin has vehemently denied. From a military perspective, the rebels have been able to inflict significant damage upon Ukrainian governmental forces. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether Russia can sustain this strategy in the long-run, especially given the fact that Western economic sanctions, coupled with the precipitous drop in oil prices, have begun exacting a heavy toll on the Russian economy. Russia also finds itself isolated on the diplomatic level, as shown by their absence at the G8 summit in 2014. Other than Russia's ailing economy, there seem to be very few points of leverage Western countries can use against Russia, as several attempts at getting the warring parties to adhere to the Minsk agreements, and subsequent cease-fire proposals, have ended in failure. A credible ceasefire between the Ukrainian government and the rebels should remain a priority for Western and Russian leaders as the best way to bring quick relief to the populations affected by the fighting. In the long run, however, the Donbass may become yet another "frozen conflict" much like Northern Cyprus and the so-called "breakaway republics" in the Caucasus.

## 2 Syria

From a geostrategic perspective, global actors that have a stake in the TPC have been forced to adopt a new set of priorities in Syria. Previously, major political actors such as the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and regional Arab governments had focused on finding a long-term political solution to the conflict. The expansion of the threat posed by ISIS within Syria and beyond has forced these actors to shift their attention towards military action. Political consensus and support for an aerial campaign against ISIS militants was relatively easy to achieve, as several countries, including the Gulf States, have joined the anti-ISIS coalition. The deep advances by IS in Iraq resulted in unprecedented Sunni, Shia and Kurdish cooperation to check ISIS' progression. In the months-long battle of Kobane on the Turkish-Syrian border, elements of the Sunni-dominated Free Syrian Army assisted Kurdish self-defence militias from Syria and Iraq in defending the strategic town<sup>3</sup>. These examples illustrate how the threat of IS has created a regional consensus, regardless of ethnicity or religion, and has led to strengthening patterns of cooperation amongst erstwhile adversaries.

Developing a coherent strategy beyond the use of airstrikes will require even more considerable efforts at coordination amongst the coalition's participants, a goal which has thus far proved elusive. While coalition participants are in agreement over the use of air power in Syria, they disagree sharply on whether to take military action that would involve cooperation with forces loyal to the governing regime, like the establishment of a no-fly zone alongside the Turkish border.<sup>4</sup> To prevent the rise of any future ISIS-like organisations, geopolitical stakeholders must tackle the underlying issues that continue to fuel the Syrian conflict. This is an issue that the Turkish government has repeatedly brought up with its NATO counterparts, arguing that a military campaign against ISIS is futile unless the Syrian regime is targeted as well; a difference of opinion which has already antagonised Turkey's relationship with some of its NATO partners. The failure of the international community to halt the

3 "Kurdish fighters and Free Syrian Army clash with IS at strategic border town", *Reuters*, September 27 2014. <http://uk.reuters.com/video/2014/09/27/kurdish-fighters-and-free-syrian-army-cl?videoid=345217896&videoChannel=75>

4 Mark Urban "Islamic State: Is the US-led coalition working six months on?", *BBC News*, 6 February 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31146715>

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conflict may also lead to greater demands for change in the way international organisations respond politically to humanitarian crises, particularly the UN Security Council. Even France, a permanent member of the Security Council, has recently argued that the five permanent members should forgo their veto rights in cases involving mass human rights violations. Thus far, the system has been hamstrung when violations are meted out by geopolitical allies of any of the five, as is the case with Syria. The desire to preserve this geopolitical tool, however, will likely prevent the permanent members from supporting the suggested change.

## 3 Yemen

Yemen has already been destabilised by its own experience with an Arab Spring revolution, and the new power vacuum in the capital, Sanaa, adds further turmoil in the Persian Gulf region, from both a counterterrorism and a wider geopolitical perspective. The collapse of central authority will likely embolden what has been described as “the most dangerous offshoot of al-Qaeda, known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)”.<sup>5</sup> The government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi had been a key ally of the United States and has provided Washington with valuable intelligence regarding AQAP’s activities. This in turn has helped the US conduct its drone attacks on AQAP militants.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, many Sunnis have seen the Houthi takeover of Sanaa as a foreign invasion, which could serve as a recruitment boost for AQAP.<sup>7</sup> The instability in the country is now at levels where the splitting apart of the country itself is conceivable. This situation spurred Saudi Arabia and its ten-country coalition (which includes the US) to intervene militarily in an effort to both stabilise the government and push back the Houthi takeover. Unrest may not cease until a stable government is put in place. It should be noted, however, that despite the conflict’s overarching regional and geopolitical implications,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Chulov, Alan Yuhas and Spencer Ackerman “Regime collapse threatens Yemen’s key role in US counter-terrorism strategy”, *The Guardian*, 23 January 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/23/unrest-jeopardises-yemens-key-role-us-counterterrorism>

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group « Yemen Conflict Alert : Time for Compromise », 27 January 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/alerts/2015/yemen-conflict-alert-time-for-compromise.aspx>

sustainable peace within the country will need to come from a localised agreement by Yemeni actors themselves .

## 4 Palestine

The Arab-Israeli conflict remains one of the most persistent sources of instability in the Middle East. After decades of failed peace initiatives and diplomatic processes, the situation in Palestine continues to fuel deep resentment among the countries of the region, and has global implications. Currently, there are no realistic prospects of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In 2014 alone, Israel approved almost 14,000 new settlements on occupied Palestinian land. The rate of settlement approvals for East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank reached unprecedented levels, equivalent to around 50 new homes/day, and about 1,500/month.<sup>8</sup> The settlement freeze could have opened the way for new talks, but the opportunity was missed. The re-election of Netanyahu in early 2015 is doing little to solve this pressing conflict.

## 5 East Central Africa

In the larger TPC region, another key focal point lies in East Central Africa, where we can find some critical sources of geopolitical instability. Conflicts in the Great Lakes region have favoured the emergence of key geostrategic actors, actors upon which international stakeholders depend to bring stability to a turbulent region. Rwanda has involved itself militarily in this region as it seeks to eliminate the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a largely Hutu militia whose leaders are accused of participating in the 1994 genocide.

The Rwandan government has used the continued threat of the FDLR as an excuse to launch attacks across the border, ostensibly to capture militants seeking refuge in the

<sup>8</sup> “Israel ‘set settler record’ amid peace talks”, *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/04/israel-set-settler-record-amid-peace-talks-201442972319706947.html>, 22 June 2016.

Democratic Republic of the Congo. These actions have strained relations between Kinshasa and Kigali, as the former views repeated Rwandan interventions as an infringement upon its sovereignty, while the latter sees them as justifiable actions of self-defence.

Much of this is part of President Paul Kagame's strategy to steer Rwanda to greater regional power status by pursuing a more active foreign policy. For instance, by sending Rwandan troops to participate in various UN peacekeeping missions, Kagame has shored up Rwanda's reputation as a regional interlocutor. Increasingly, Western leaders and international organisations have depended on Kagame's Rwanda as a source of regional political and economic stability.

Uganda is another example of a growing power within the region. The country is a key ally of the US in the region, and has benefitted from US military support in the form of training and equipment. The strengthening of Uganda's military has allowed the country to become more of a geopolitical presence. The Ugandan army is currently one of the main actors involved in tracking down the remnants of the Lord's Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony.

Uganda has also intervened in neighbouring South Sudan's civil war, ostensibly to act as peacekeepers. Such actions reflect President Yoweri Museveni's aspirations to promote Uganda's reputation as a regional power broker and an indispensable pillar of stability in the region. These goals have met with some success, but not unequivocally. Although US foreign policy still leans on leaders like Museveni and Kagame for the promotion of regional stability, American diplomats have recently become more vocal in their criticism of Ugandan and Rwandan human rights violations.

Should the US distance itself from these regional actors, it could provide China with an opening as it attempts to become more politically involved in the region. China's case in this regard would be bolstered by their already considerable economic investment in the continent.

## 6 Afghanistan

Although NATO's official combat mission in Afghanistan ended in 2014, it will continue to train, advise and equip Afghan security forces. This will be a significant test to determine the efficiency of indirect or "soft" power. It remains to be seen whether this type of aid alone will prove sufficient in the Afghan government's attempt to contain the Taliban insurgency and to maintain a semblance of order throughout the country. As long as lawlessness prevails in the Afghan countryside, activities such as opium and heroin production will continue to thrive. These trades fuel both the homegrown insurgency and transnational criminal networks in their larger quest to undermine Central Asian stability - major trafficking routes out of Afghanistan run through countries such as Tajikistan and Iran. President Ashraf Ghani must make tackling endemic corruption, much of which aids and abets such trafficking, one of its highest priorities. Less corruption would also mean more foreign aid and private investment, all of which could help improve the country's desperately weak infrastructure.

Better cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan is also a key determinant to improving regional stability. There must be a concerted, bilateral effort to work together in improving their respective security sectors, with special attention paid to borders in tribal and mountainous areas. Communication between both border security forces will go a long way in strengthening their ability to stymie the movement of Taliban militants and disrupt Taliban supply and communication networks. Close cooperation between Kabul and Islamabad must also extend to the diplomatic arena, should negotiations with the Taliban become a viable option. The fostering of a strong diplomatic axis between the Afghan and Pakistani governments is an indispensable ingredient to regional stability - major international stakeholders such as the US State Department should therefore devote substantial resources towards this objective.

## 7 Conclusion

The aforementioned examples demonstrate the political volatility of the Tripwire Pivotal Corridor, and its importance in geopolitics. As I argued in my work *Neo-Statecraft and Meta-Geopolitics*<sup>9</sup>, the TPC's three major choke points, crucial shipping channels, and abundant national resources like oil, gas, and minerals, have left this space inclined to frequent contestation. These waters and resources remain key to continuing conflict near the Arabian Peninsula, Eastern Mediterranean, and Eastern Ukraine, among others. It is worth noting that localised conflicts often cease to remain local, and can have repercussions across the entire globe. Indeed, the influence of an organisation like ISIS can be felt as far afield as West Africa or Western Europe. In Nigeria, the terrorist group Boko Haram has pledged allegiance to ISIS, and Western Europe has proven to be fertile recruiting territory for the Islamic State. Yet despite the global implications of the conflicts within the TPC, solutions will need to come from localised agreements between conflicting parties, coupled with international mediation efforts that are credible and enforceable. This can only occur if all parties are accounted for amongst the various factions and only through an accountable and transparent process.

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9 Al-Rodhan, *Neo-statecraft and Meta-geopolitics*, 95-96.

## About the author

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