

DEBATE

Volker PERTHES

We have 13 and a half minutes to go, so I would invite you to raise your fingers, as you are already doing, and I will probably take three or four speakers in a row and then give a chance for a response. Assia, please, you have the first go.

Assia BENSALAH ALAOUI

Thank you very much for your thoughts, however I am so sorry that there is no one from North Africa because we also have some hard issues too. Let me just ask three or four very quick questions. First to the panel, I would like you please to clarify the respective role of your states, Turkey of course, GCC since you have the Gulf think tank in the first place, the regional powers. What is their involvement in North Africa, the Sahel and West Africa, especially in the insecurity continuum from Libya to the Sahel?

Second, I would like to move very quickly to China since you said to more global powers, since China is taking a more active role in security in Africa, which we know especially in larger frameworks. What is the price you would be ready to pay, since the US wants it at lowest cost, to see a more stable region, which would be very favourable for your trade? What type of development would you be respecting since Africa is now looking for a more inclusive, more self-reliant development? What would be the role of China in that respect?

I turn to you Volker, because I would like you to answer me on Europe's involvement beyond the role of France. What could Europe do just to contain the risk from enflaming North Africa and further destabilizing it and of course, to try to contain the increase of immigration flows? On a much wider scope I would like all of you to tell us what the game changer would be to go beyond and avoid organized crime taking root in the whole region, which is happening right now, and avoid more failing states in this region of Africa where states are sometimes much more fragile than the big organized crime?

Volker PERTHES

Thank you very much for these very precise questions.

Joseph MAÏLA

Thank you, Volker, and thank you for the panellists discussions and the panellists themselves. I have three quick questions on the very interesting debate you have triggered here. My first question would be about the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Shall I have to understand that the whole of question of Palestine and the Israeli-Arab conflict has become totally irrelevant when it comes to the Middle East? Where do you stand? Where do your countries stand regarding this question?

My second question is on the big change that has occurred in the Middle East, which is the role of Russia. We have not talked much about Russia, since Russia has this tremendous role it is playing today in Syria. Russia has not welcomed the incursion, as Volker said, of Turkey, but from now, today, under the Russian umbrella I think Russia would have to manage a relationship with the Turks and with the Iranians. What is the outcome, the perspective on that?

My third question is for the gentleman from Saudi Arabia and a very interesting thing. Do you think, sir, that when it comes to the Iranians and the tensions in the Gulf area that today, global diplomacy could solve the problem by

focusing on a single part of the problem, which is the nuclear issue? European diplomacy is very focused on this issue. Do you not think that Iran has been very successful in setting-up a linkage policy that in order to solve the problems would trigger or drive us to discuss at the same time the nuclear, Syrian, Afghanistan, Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah issues, since Iran has a very important role in linking all these issues together?

Volker PERTHES

Thank you, Joseph.

Dania KOLEILAT KHATIB

Good morning, everyone. The gentleman from China said that the different parties and the region are tired; I do not think so. If you go back to the history of Europe and the Thirty Years' War that shattered Europe, it was also driven by ethnicity and sectarianism. The war only stopped when the various countries no longer had any money or young people to fight and we are a long way from that. There is still money in the region and young men who are ready to fight. We also have this political competition from three blocks, Iran, Turkey and Qatar, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Unless we have some serious mediation, the bloodshed we see now could go on for another 20 years. We need to have a serious effort and an awareness from the regional actors, as well as the international community, to pressure everyone to enter into an agreement. Thank you.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you very much. Dorothee Schmid?

Dorothee SCHMID

Thank you to all the speakers. I am more interested in the current escalation in Syria. My first simple question is who could mediate in Syria? Who should we mediate between, like the Turks and Bashar al-Assad soon? Who will reap the benefits of the operation, which I personally think is extremely risky for the Turks? My third question is maybe for you Volker. What is your take on the future of NATO?

Volker PERTHES

We have 10 questions. I am not actually a panellist, but I will probably say a word in my closing remarks. Please do not try to answer all 10 questions. If each of you picked the three or so questions that seem most relevant. Let us start with you, Mohamed.

Mohamed Ibn CHAMBAS

What would be the game changer in the Sahel and West Africa and incidentally the issue that has been raised about transnational organized crime is real and serious. In the Guinea Bissau, Senegal area in the last few months alone the drug seizures have been phenomenal in terms of the quantities; we are talking about more than tonne in one case, 800 pounds in another. Huge quantities are coming through and there is good reason to believe that this is part of the network of terrorist financing, precisely because we know that the drug routes now go through territories that are controlled by terrorist groups. We need to take that seriously and therefore within the perspective of the UN this integrated approach first of all calls for a scaling-up of the security approach. We all know that MINUSMA was well-intended and we are doing our best to use that peacekeeping force in Mali, but legitimate questions are being posed by the Malian people and it is not making any of us look good. We need to have serious discussions about what type of force you deploy in an area where the adversaries are using what someone has called unconventional and asymmetric warfare, terrorist attacks, etc. Do we have the right match of force to the security threat? That is a legitimate issue to discuss and this cannot just be left to the French, as I think one of the contributors from the floor also said. France has deployed Barkhane and we know that others are coming on board, but in my view not with the sufficient, vigorous force that we need to deal with terrorism.

At the same time, we must address the root causes of poverty and allow this region to harness the tremendous resources that are available to grow their economies, tackle climate change and change the narrative of violence and extremism to one of creating growth and opportunity for the young people and women, who are very dynamic and ready to move their countries forward.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you very much, Mohamed. Memduh, you have quite a number of precise and short questions.

Memduh KARAKULLUKCU

Very difficult ones. On the Russian issue, I think the Russian reaction to Turkey's operation in Syria is very contained and subdued, which signals quite a bit. At the end of the day, they managed to put a wedge between the US and PYD and they managed to get the US mostly out of Northern Syria. They are probably okay with what is happening provided, they have been very clear about this, they do not want this operation to harm the constitutional process in Syria. They do not want this to harm the territorial integrity and unity of Syria, hence they do not want a permanent Turkish presence in Syria. I think that is very clear and it aligns with the current statements by the Turkish President Erdogan. We hope that this will work out and, in the end, as we were saying with Volker, the odds are that the Russians will try to nudge Turkey and Syria together for a rapprochement. That may well be the endgame if it happens, but I do not know whether or not it will happen. We will see. Iran is obviously watching very closely, and I think that Iran will be okay with that as well because at the end of the day both the Russians and the Iranians seem to be very intent on having Assad ruling an integrated, unified country. Events seem to be heading there.

In terms of who negotiates with whom and who mediates, it seems that the only external power that can really mediate at this point is the Russians, unless the Europeans are willing to start talking about the reconstruction effort, which will be a whole other thing. However, I do not think we are there yet, so I think the Russians will try to do something between us and the Syrians. I do not know if that will bear any fruit and if that works out and if we finally have the corridor free of terrorism, the Syrians gradually going back, the Turks will benefit from this and hopefully the Syrian people as well. However, I agree with you Dorothée, this will be a very difficult, complicated and risky process. There is a good scenario going through these very complex and dreadful possibilities, I am just hoping that that tenuous line is the one that will materialize in the end and hopefully, we will talk about it next year.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you, Memduh. Dong Manyuan, I think there were two questions you should answer. One on the price tag on your engagement and how well you are actually prepared, or you think China is prepared to involve in terms of resources. Maybe you should also take the question about who is going to or could mediate.

DONG Manyuan

Before that there are just three points. One, China attaches great importance to its relations with the MENA region and Africa because in the MENA region, except for Israel, all the countries on the African continent are developing countries and China is the largest developing country. Therefore, first we share the same historical experiences and second, we share the same tasks of how to develop our countries and improve people's living standards. We have 1,000 reasons to consolidate and upgrade our relations and friendships. Let me define the nature of the relations between China and MENA and African countries, which is that we are [inaudible]. This is my first response.

My second response is on the Palestinian issue, Palestinian [inaudible]. Since the founding of the new China 70 years ago and from the fifties of the last century up until now, China has strongly, persistently and continuously supported the Palestinian cause and Arabic alliance [inaudible]. The whole Arabic world, the whole Islamic world are showing what China is doing in terms of support for the Palestinian cause. I think that currently the whole Arabic world, the whole Islamic world faces a real challenge, which is how to deal with the so-called, 'deal of the century'. I believe even though there is an imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and the Arab, Islamic world, the fundamental interests of the Palestinians and the national dignity of the Arabs and Palestinians peoples, and Muslims, cannot be a trade-off or swap. China will continue to support the Palestinian cause and stand shoulder-to-

shoulder, hand-in-hand with Arab countries, Islamic countries, to stick to the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and to support the two-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative.

The third point on the question raised by that beautiful lady, because she does not believe that regional actors all get tired. I think they get tired and one of the more important reasons is that the main players in the Middle East, their top priority is how to rejuvenate their own countries. If you take Turkey as an example, under the leadership of Tayyip Erdogan Bey, Turkey formulated a strategic vision for 2023. I believe that Turkey's domestic and foreign policies serve this strategic vision and it is also the same story for Saudi Arabia, which under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has formulated a strategic vision for 2030 and that will lay the first solid foundation for the leadership of Saudi Arabia, the Arab world and Islamic world. Thank you.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you very much. We are already running behind our schedule, so a last remark from Abdulaziz.

Abdulaziz Othman bin SAGER

I would like to start by commenting a bit on the Chinese side, just very quickly. Until China liberating its economy post-1991, yes, we used to have a very firm position from the Chinese when it came to 1956, 1967, 1973, 1971. However, since that, lately unfortunately we have started to see much more interest from China in the economic side and economic relations, participation in the region. Today, China imports 1.550 million barrels a day from Saudi Arabia, and almost 17% of its imports come from Saudi Arabia, which is very important. Personally, I take a lot of pride that I was one of the very few Saudis to visit China in November 1980, when it was a different country. At the same time, what might concern me is that the Chinese have followed the Russians when it comes to the Syrian case. They have joined them in the veto on the Security Council without stating their clear position away from the Russians, following them on such a decision. Anyway, it is a very important relationship and we appreciate a lot of the Chinese positions there, but we do not like to see a buyer and seller relationship only with China. We would like a much more holistic and constructive approach from the Chinese.

I will quickly go through the questions from the floor. With regard to North Africa and Sahel, when it comes to a country like Libya, Saudi Arabia would like to see a unified Libya, constitutional, concentrating everybody. Some of the Gulf countries have taken the step of intervening there and I am not sure whether it is based on their own interests or other alliances they may have with other countries. I cannot speak on their behalf, but at the same time I can see that Egypt and the UAE is involved in Libya, along with Qatar and Turkey. I think it would be better if we leave the Libyan issue to the Libyans and try to help them to come up with a better solution.

In the Sahel we are a big supporter of counter-terrorism issues and Saudi has contributed to that and we understand the situation there quite well.

On the Palestinians, it will continue to be the key issue in the region and I do not think it is going down the list. It used to be the only case, the mother of all cases and the mother of all battles as they call it, but we now have many different cases at the same time. We have a lot of issues to deal with, otherwise when we had the Arab Summit in Dammam in Saudi Arabia, King Salman called it the [inaudible] Summit. Saudi continues to support the Palestinian government with no changes there. Are we in support of the 'deal of the century'? I was one of those who met with Kushner when he came to Saudi Arabia and when we talked to him. I do not think there is a really clear picture at this stage today, that it is possible to judge whether or not the 'deal of the century' has clarity or not.

The role of Russia, as I said, if it was not the US decline, then Russia would have its own difficulties. The Russian economy is almost the same size as Spain, can they really afford that expansionist policy? Their trade relations with the region are primarily military with some minerals, but it is not like the Chinese. For instance, you can compare Russian trade of 3 billion with the region, to almost 170 billion for China, which is a big difference.

Can we really solve the nuclear issue? There are two divisions, the strategic and the non-strategic issue. The non-strategic issues we are willing to continue with the Iranians, with diplomats establishing relations, organized crime, maritime issue, etc., are all issues where we differentiate. The key strategic issue for us where we will not compromise

is their interventionist, expansionist policy and the DCP, which includes the missile programme. The Iranians used to insist on linking them all together but today, according to the last statement from Minister Zarif, he is willing to separate and deal with both sides.

My last word is to thank the great Kingdom of Morocco for hosting us and we need to thank Thierry for providing the platform, and all his team for organising the World Policy Conference. We are very happy with that you see, and this is becoming the Davos of international affairs.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you for already saying the last words, which usually belong to the chairperson.

Adbulaziz Othman bin SAGER

It is not a hijack, do not worry!

Volker PERTHES

I am not going to answer the NATO question because that is not the panel. It would be great to have a panel on European engagement with this region. My very short reply is: Containment is not an answer, our strategy should be a mix of continuing transformative engagement plus empowerment of the states that work and function in the region, but that would need more time to elaborate.

Please join me in thanking these four gentlemen here for enlightening us about the situation in that region. Thank you.