What Effects Does the Ukrainian Conflict Have on Ties Between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Russia?

With Russia's war in Ukraine, the states of the 21st century realized how the international system ultra-complicated and insecure is. At this point, policymakers need to be more cautious in determining their interests, policies, fears, and needs for the sake of survivability. As a consequence of this destructive war in Eastern Europe, the globally affected economic and energy security created new political shifts in the international system's balance of power, making them ostentatious, which already existed. Within this period, the states' attitudes indicate their positions in a newly arranged balance of geopolitical power. With this position-denoting process, Saudi Arabia not only determines its own policies, but also influences the developments in the Middle East, just like it did occasionally with its relations with the USA.

With the start of the war, Biden needed to negotiate with Muhammad bin Salman to increase oil production, which would lower the gasoline price. In the situation of sanctions on energy trade with Russia, it would help to cut the Russian expenses on war and minimize its ability in the war arena. Otherwise, increasing gasoline prices would help to save the Russian economy in case of war. In despite of this demand, Muhammad bin Salman and UAE Sheikh preferred to act in accordance with OPEC+, the group whose one of the members is Russia. In the frame of OPEC+ agreements, U.S. partners in the Middle East cut their oil production to two million barrels per day. With this policy, the oil price increased dramatically, and Russia became the main oil exporter to China and India.[1]

On the other side, just two weeks after the start of the Russian invasion, according to both U.S. and Middle East officials, the Saudi Prince and UAE Sheikh declined the U.S. request for a phone call by U.S. President Biden.[2] In despite of this, on the same days, Saudi

Prince Muhammad bin Salman received telephone calls from Russian President Putin and discussed their bilateral relations and the means to develop their relations.[3]

Saudi Arabia's Response to Ukraine War

To define the current attitude of Saudi Arabia towards the Russia-Ukraine war, there is a need to find out the perception in the Gulf region of this significant development. According to Abdulaziz Sager, founder, and chair of the Gulf Research Center, the Ukraine war is perceived as a high-cost European crisis in Gulf.[4]

On one side, Arab statesmen do not believe their governments "should burn the bridges with Moscow because of this conflict".[5] According to Ibish, Saudi Arabia that in economic terms, is almost totally dependent on oil prices, any problem regarding oil pricing is the problem of the extremely required and ambitious development agenda of the Saudi government. So the economic relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia cannot be analyzed in the frame of the Ukraine war. The author states that Saudi Arabia acts in accordance with its interests, and Americans' anger at Saudi Arabia for not striking Russia to help the West is irrational and damaging.[6]

In addition to this, four Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, voted to pass a resolution denouncing the invasion and demanding the withdrawal of Russian military presence. On March 1st, support for international efforts to restore stability and maintain security in Ukraine was affirmed by Saudi Government. On March 3rd, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman presented Riyad's readiness to de-escalate the crisis in Ukraine by mediating with Russia.[7] In other words, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries maintained a "balanced" (not "neutral") position, which enables the resolution of conflict by diplomatic dimensions.

How the U.S. reacted to Saudi Arabia's Response?

Regarding responding to Saudi's balanced position on the Ukraine war, within the U.S. government Democrats are exclusively active. In the article by three authors, two of them are Democrats, the policy of Saudi Arabia is called as "unwise", "err", and "mistake". They are proposing "bicameral legislation in the Senate and House … that will immediately halt all U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia".[8] According to them, Saudi Arabia is more dependent on the U.S. in the military dimension than many realize. That's why they propose to ban the sales of weapons, to decrease the military partnership, including the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia in the frame GOP initiative.[9] While a Democrat Senator Bob Menendez called an immediate freeze in all aspects of cooperation between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, Dick Durban expressed his ideas about Saudi Arabia with harsher words: "…has never been a trustworthy ally of our nation. It's time for our foreign policy to imagine a world without their alliance."[10] [11]

Which Developments Created a Shift in Saudi Foreign Policy?

This kind of rapprochement between Russia and Saudi Arabia is quite interesting because of their long years of rivalry. In despite of that, U.S.-Saudi relations have 80 years of partnership[12]. Obviously, this shift in Saudi foreign policy is crucial for its own and the region. Although the major shift in U.S. foreign policy from the Middle East to the Far East is considered as the primary trigger of this rapprochement, it has more historical-strategic roots. In the unipolar international system led by the U.S., the Middle East was one of the most injured regions. In recent years, formulating a multipolar system is visible again, where different powers rise from different parts of the world, including the Middle East. According to Alizada, the real reason is country's policy to open up, to enhance multilateral relations, to find new and more appropriate partners in the frame of a development plan, in

other words, to find its way in a new, complicated and multipolar system.[13]

9/11 was the terrorist act that had a powerful impact on world affairs, especially the U.S.-Middle East relations as Ukraine War. After this unprecedented terrorist attack, Saudi Arabia came under pressure by both the U.S. public opinion and the U.S. official institutions. U.S. public consideration towards Saudi Arabia as a financial sponsor of Al-Qaeda created the first cracks between partner states for long years.[14] According to Koc, incoherent and unstable policies of U.S. foreign policy during Obama's presidency with the leading regional power – Saudi Arabia – deepened those cracks. These developments formulated a convenient ground for Russia – which enhanced its relations with regional powers, like Iran, and Türkiye for its interests – to be a growing, more substantial foreign power in the region.

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Additionally, another occurrence that deepened the current instability in the region was the Syrian war. The following cracks between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia came with U.S. uncertainty about intervening Syrian war.[15] Furthermore, the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was met by denouncing by the U.S. and condemning Saudi Arabia because of the lack of democratic rights.

After the Iran Revolution in the 1970s, Iran started rivaling Saudi Arabia in the Middle East as a leading-regional power. These two states struggle for leadership in the region as representatives of two main Islamic sects – Shia and Sunni. In other words, U.S.-Iran

relations are one of the primary triggers of U.S.-Saudi Arabia relations. The U.S. attempts to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran created discontent among the Saudi governors.[16] From the Saudi perspective, Iran is not only a regional rival, but also a supporter of instability in the region, as the supporter of Houthies, the militant group in Yemen.[17] In addition to these developments, the U.S. limited aid to Saudi Arabia to help the Yemen government, maintain peace in Yemen, and the refusal to add Houthies into the list of terrorist organizations cast a shadow on U.S.-Saudi relations.[18]

Another important reason for this shift in Saudi foreign policy is mistrust of the West. Understandably, the developments listed above are enough to find mistrust within Saudi governors. Additionally, as Libman states, the border where the West sanctions start is blurry for non-Westerns. According to the author, while China is not part of an active war, it is also the target of sanctions because of pressure on the ethnic minority – Uyghurs. So, if the breach of human rights is the reason of sanctions, what about the breached women's rights in the Middle East? According to him, autocratic leaders should be aware that the West can impose severe sanctions, essentially isolating a country if a non-Western state follows a policy the West does not like.[19]

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As Libman writes: "In the past, non-Western autocrats believed that the West would refrain from major economic sanctions against big countries. Now, non-Western autocrats know: the West will not hesitate to use its 'nuclear options' in economic relations to punish non-Western states." [20]

What Can Be the Next?

The changes in the international system are unavoidable and they are the only stable feature of world affairs for thousands of years, ironically. To give birth to these new changes, powerful and unprecedented developments, like World Wars, Revolutions, and nuclear race, are crucial. While some of them formulate a unipolar system from a bipolar one, the other can form a multipolar system from the unipolar one. It is self-evident that the multipolar system is considered as the most dangerous one. Despite this, cooperation and well-intentioned renegotiations can decrease the danger of this system.

In the context of the U.S. – Saudi Arabia – Russia relations triangle, it is highly understandable that for Riyadh, enhancing Saudi Arabia – Russia relations are transactional, just like Saudi Arabia – U.S. relations were once over. Riyadh can have different expectations from Moscow that Washington cannot provide.[21] For instance, in terms of the first significant threat to Saudi Arabia – to struggle with Iran – the House of Saud can get fruitful results with the common goals with Russia in Syria, which would minimize the power of Iran in the Syria case. Additionally, for years Saudi Arabia's Yemen policy has been frustrated by Moscow in blocking potential new United Nations Security Council resolutions that would limit the transfer of arms to the Houthis in Yemen. To find common ground with Russia would help to cope with the Yemen problem in the region. Then, the second significant problem is a food shortage in the region, and Russia dominates wheat market.[22]

In other words, Saudi Arabia can want to approach Russia to realize its aims – to develop and maximize its power as a leader of the Middle East. As Ibish states, the emergence of recriminations between the Saudi government and U.S. – especially Democrats – is highly damaging to 80 years long partnership. According to him, in the last 20 years, both sides

have been affected by their acts and feel betrayed; however, there is a need to be aware that it is not the first cracks of Saudi-U.S. partnership. U.S. support for Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war also created traces in collective memory and public opinion.[23]

To sum up, as always said, countries have interests, not friends. Occasionally, there can be some breaks or recriminations between the partner states. MBS can strive for complete independence from the U.S., and the U.S. can want to put its Western values at the center of U.S. foreign policy; however, the simple truth is that the relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia will not soon fracture. It is a partnership rather than an alliance that none of the sides would benefit from ending their relations.

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