

Turco-Iranian Alignment: Balancing or Bandwagoning with the US?

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Turkey and Iran has had a long history of rivalry and cooperation. However, the advent of the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict escorted unprecedented tensions between these two non-Arab states. Syria epitomizes the geopolitical tensions between Turkey and Iran amongst a host of regional issues, in which they are at loggerheads over regional influence at the expense of each other. At pernicious odds over Syria, Turco-Iranian relations seemed inexorably precarious going forth. That is until Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's January 29th, 2014 visit to Iran signaled a thawing and growing alignment toward Iran. The alignment behavior of Turkey and Iran presents something of a puzzle. This paper investigates the nature of the current Turco-Iranian alignment by adopting structural realist theory of alliance. The choice of grand strategy that the U.S. adopted and its actions in the Middle East resulted in Turkey and Iran bandwagoning with the U.S. instead of balancing against it, which in turn made Turkey and Iran cooperate. Even though Turkey is a NATO ally of the U.S., both Turkey and Iran had limited options due to the actions of the U.S.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Syrian conflict escorted unprecedented tensions between Turkey and Iran. Turkey incipiently hedged for Syria President Bashar al-Assad, but quickly repulsed and supported the armed rebellion. For Iran, Turkey's stance on Syria poses a fundamentally taxing problem, it undermines Iran's two factors that binds itself to Syria, viz., religion and strategy. Promulgating caustic censure toward each other, the relations between Turkey and Iran seemed inexorably precarious going forth. However, Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 2014 visit to Iran captures a growing alignment toward Tehran to improve ties after the split over Syria and the overall changes of Ankara's foreign policies in the Middle East.

With the long history of rivalry and coordination between Turkey and Iran, the puzzle today is the rapprochement process and alignment, even though both have been at pernicious odds over Syria and were competing for security throughout the Arab Spring. Prevailing arguments for Turco-Iranian relations are done through various hypotheses that do not utilize alliance theories from the field of international relations (IR). Perhaps scholars' reticence to apply major IR theories are due to the recent nature of such alignment and the non-existence of a formal alliance. Most literature on Turkey and Iran, even the prospects of future cooperation, deal with behaviors prior and during the Arab Spring before the recent alignment (Chappell, 2010; Jenkins, 2012; Mohammed, 2011). Safak Bas mentions the current Turco-Iranian alignment, in which he analyzed the deterioration of relations due to Syria and gives reasons for pragmatism to bring about stability, however Bas has not utilized any IR theory in his work (Bas, 2013). Reza Solat and Hooshang Azizi did apply neoclassical

realism and constructivism to identify and analyze Turco-Iranian relations at the national, regional and international levels and concluded that long-term goals won't be offset by short ones (Solat and Azizi, 2012). With the adjustment focused towards applying structural realist alliance theories to the recent Turco-Iranian alignment, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: 1. What is the nature of the Turco-Iranian relations?; 2. How did the U.S. impact Turco-Iranian alignment?; .3 More importantly, did Turkey and Iran align to balance the United States or did they bandwagon? This paper adopts balance-of-power theory and argues that the choice of grand strategy that the U.S. adopted and its actions in the Middle East resulted in Turkey and Iran bandwagoning with the U.S. instead of balancing against it, which in turn made Turkey and Iran cooperate. Even though Turkey is a NATO ally of the U.S., both Turkey and Iran had limited options due to the actions of the U.S. After the discussion on the literature review and U.S. grand strategy, the investigation of whether Turco-Iranian alignment is a result to balance or bandwagon with the U.S. is in order.

2. REALIST THEORY OF ALLIANCE

2.1 Alliance and Alignment

Although alliance and alignment are used interchangeably, there are subtle differences. Glenn Snyder has remarked that "alliances have no meaning apart from the adversary threat to which they are a response" (Snyder, 1997: 192). Further, 'alliances' are "formal associations of states for the use (or nonuse) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their membership" (Snyder, 1997: 4). 'Alignment,' on the other hand, are "expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions. Alignment includes alignment "against" as well as "with"; it identifies potential opponents as well as friends. Such expectations may arise from a variety of sources, but in general they stem from the perceived interests, capabilities, and observed behavior of other states, including their alliance pledges" (Snyder, 1997: 6). The dynamism of alignments is that they change according to "changing patterns of power, interests, and issue priorities" (Snyder, 1997: 7)

2.2 Unipolarity, Alliance, and Strategic Options

According to Stephen M. Walt, "A unipolar system is one in which a single state controls a disproportionate share of the politically relevant resources of the system. Unipolarity implies that the single superpower faces no ideological rival of equal status or influence; even if ideological alternatives do exist, they do not pose a threat to the unipolar power's role as a model for others" (Walt, 2009: 91-92). Kenneth Waltz believes that in the context of structural theory, unipolarity is the weakest or the least durable of international configurations and that it will be short-lived (Waltz, 2000: 27). He gives two reasons for such argument. The first argument is that dominant powers will go beyond their borders to manage various tasks that can weaken them in the long run, and the other reason is that weaker states will worry about the future behavior of the dominant power, even if the dominant power is a benign hegemon (Waltz, 2000: 28). Hence the unipole's freedom to roam is the impediment for most state capacity to act in autonomy.

In the theoretical literature on IR, the two most prevalent concepts are balancing and

bandwagoning when it comes to state strategies. Often the literature juxtaposes balancing and bandwagoning as polar opposite strategies that states can choose. Balancing can take two forms; internal balancing is the strategy states take to strengthen their own capabilities against a power or threat, while external balancing is the strategy where states look for an ally(s) in order to check the more powerful state or threat (Walt, 1987; Waltz, 2000). On the other hand, bandwagoning is by and large understood to be the decision that a state chooses to align with the source of threatening power in order to counteract the threat or to reap the spoils of victory (Schweller, 1994).

The unipole can make states vulnerable with uncertainty with its capacity to act which becomes an impediment for most state actions, which implies states will adopt different strategies to cope with an environment that has the unipole acting in a manner that can go against the autonomy of states. Choosing balancing or bandwagoning involves considerable serious commitments and states may want to choose options that are not obvious, which does not bring the unipole deciding their fates if they push the envelope. The case of Turkey and Iran's actions fits with bandwagoning with the unipole but mutually cooperating with each other due to facing many uncertainties and risks associated with their respective region and the unipole's actions. They want to have the flexible options to exercise their foreign policies. The Middle East has many weakened states and various actors are trying to take advantage of it. It is unclear to Turkey and Iran how the current threats and instabilities will end in whose favor as spillover from the Syrian civil war continues and the threat from the Islamic State or the (IS) brings unmitigated threats not only to the region but globally.

These concepts have been the accepted strategies that states are often faced with when exposed to complex regional threats and the actions of the unipole. Then scholars debated about the absence of balancing by states in the post-Cold War era against the United States and there were discussions about concepts like soft balancing and underbalancing as being the replacements to the balancing response (Pape, 2005; Paul 2005; Schweller, 2004). Soft balancing, according to Robert Pape is defined as "actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies" (Pape, 2005: 10). Underbalancing, according to Randall Schweller is defined as "when the state does not balance or does so inefficiently in response to a dangerous and unappeasable aggressor, and the state's efforts are essential to deter or defeat it" (Schweller, 2004: 168). However according to David Kang, concepts of soft balancing and underbalancing "make it virtually impossible to falsify the balancing proposition" and he further illustrates the problems of these concepts by adding that they "have limited analytic usefulness and stretch the definition of that concept to the point of irrelevance" (Kang, 2009: 6).

There is no universal consensus on how unipolarity will impact alliances. Waltz believe states will come together to counter America's primacy. Charles Krauthammer suggests that great powers line up behind American power, especially since the September 11th attacks (Krauthammer, 2002-3: 8). William C. Wohlforth suggests that bandwagoning will be the norm for second-tier states because they do not want to "take no action that could incur its focused enmity" (Wohlforth, 1999: 25). One must also differentiate the fact that the U.S. as the unipole and general unipoles will have distinct nuanced features. With regard to the U.S., even with liberal values and benign intent, just like any general unipole, it has less structural restrictions in comparison to other states due to the huge difference in capabilities, such that it has the freedom to roam and conduct various grand strategies. However, whether states balance or bandwagon is not structurally ordained by unipolarity. In the next section,

explanation of U.S. grand strategies from the post-9/11 era to the current will be featured.

3. U.S. GRAND STRATEGY

3.1 From Bush Doctrine to Asia Pivot

In order to understand what kinds of pressure and actions that the U.S. as the unipole can have on Turkey and Iran, we need to unpack the grand strategy of the U.S. from the post-9/11 world to the current Obama administration. A particular grand strategy vision allows U.S. to restructure the unipolar world to its liking. During the Bush administration we have witnessed America's unilateral approach to dealing with its threat perception without regard to international norms. However, the misadventures of Iraq and Afghanistan proved that the American unipole has limits to exert its will in the fashion that it wants to will.

The Bush administration were filled with neoconservatives that wanted to fashion the unipolar world by actions that are described as "unilateral and preemptive, even preventive, use of force, facilitated if possible by coalitions of the willing—but ultimately unconstrained by the rules and norms of the international community" (Ikenberry, 2005: 564). The Bush administration's grand strategy is also known as the 'Bush Doctrine,' in which America's sovereignty becomes more absolute and more conditional for nation-states that challenge America's primacy and character (Ikenberry, 2005: 564). This grand strategy has been launched due to the September 11th terrorist attacks and America's own recognition of it being a unipole (Ikenberry, 2005: 564). The Bush Doctrine was a strategy of offensive dominance, in which the U.S. toppled the government of Saddam Hussein, revised Iraq's international alignment, ended the weapons of mass destruction program, and installed a regime that would accommodate U.S. interests (Freedman, 2004).

The U.S. under the Obama administration had begun a grand strategy that primarily functioned as a clean-up crew of the dangerous misadventures of the Bush administration. Reflected in Barack Obama's first term campaign platform and his inaugural address, the grand strategy that Obama adopted described U.S. going for global leadership to build its reputation and to strengthen the domestic core. Anne-Marie Slaughter declares that the "need to rebuild at home means ending wars we have been in and keeping our troops out of new ones" (Slaughter, 2013). This implies that the U.S. government has undertaken a strategy where it will exhibit disengagement in conflicts that can hamper the U.S., just how Iraq and Afghanistan did, but it will engage in conflicts that are feasible, such as the Libyan intervention.

With U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan in decline, this brings about a juncture where the U.S. is at a 'pivot.' In Obama's first term, the U.S. looked toward the Asia-Pacific in which it needs to address its long term national interests. Former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton articulated that "we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values" (Clinton, 2011). In realist perspective, the actions of the U.S. pivoting towards Asia and winding down in the Middle East is to ensure that with the advent of China's rise, U.S. will make sure that China does not become a peer competitor.

3.2 Rebalancing to Asia and Strategic Vacuum in the Middle East

With the ongoing chaos in the Middle East, Obama's second term has not lived up to the potential. The grand strategy for the Middle East under the Obama administration was carefully crafted, however it had problems. The grand strategy of the U.S. in the Middle East was to lead from behind by working with moderate Islamist groups to help steer the Middle East towards democracy (Mead, 2013). The three reasons were: 1. narrow the gap between the 'moderate middle' of the Muslim world and the U.S.; 2. U.S. solidarity with the moderate Islamist groups can be a model of peace that can isolate radical groups; 3. finally the moderate Islamists can bring and spread democracy to the region to bring about upgraded social conditions and economic prosperity (Mead, 2013). However there were problems. Washington misjudged the capabilities and political maturity of the Islamist groups it supported; misunderstood Egypt's political situation; did not see how it would impact Israel and Saudi Arabia; failed to come to terms and foresee the dangers of new terrorist groups; and miscalculated the costs of not acting upon Syria early (Mead, 2013).

4. TURCO-IRANIAN ALIGNMENT: BALANCING THE U.S.

4.1 Strategic Chasm between Turkey and the U.S.

With a problematic U.S. grand strategy in the Middle East, how would Turkey and Iran respond to the unpredictable actions of the U.S.? As mentioned before, some scholars would argue that states would align to counter America's actions. States can either balance internally and/or externally against a threat. The sources of tension that Turkey and Iran face from America is explained and follows with the balancing proposition.

There are four key events that have triggered Turkey's frustration, but also exhibit the concerns of the U.S. The first event is the U.S. response to the domestic problems that Turkey faced, in which the U.S. made comments about Erdogan and the AKP's (Justice and Development Party) handling of the Taksim Square-Gezi Park protests. The second event is the ousting of Mohammad Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt by the Egyptian military. Third, the conflicting strategy regarding Syria between Turkey and the U.S. has brought the two as loggerheads. Finally, the issue regarding Turkey's attempt to purchase Chinese missile defense system brought about public dismay by U.S. and NATO.

Starting from May 28, 2013, Turkish civilian demonstrators held a four day sit-in at Gezi Park, to voice anger at the government's plans to redevelop that area of Taksim Square. Initially the Gezi Park demonstration started out as an environmental protest which shifted into an anti-government tone. Due to the increasing protests, the Turkish police handled the unrest by using tear gas and water cannon against protesters. Protesters and critics alike condemned Erdogan and the AKP's increasing authoritarianism; some complain that Erdogan is imposing Islamic values.

The U.S. made comments that would lead to Turkey being outraged. Secretary of State John Kerry made some statements in which he told the media that the U.S. was following closely to the turn of events and situation in Turkey and expressed that he was troubled by reports that the Turkish police were using excessive force and that Washington is "deeply concerned" (Fraser, 2013). Former Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was

apparently outraged, in a phone conversation with Kerry, told him that the demonstrations were comparable to the Occupy Wall Street protests and that they were not “extraordinary” (Taylor, 2013).

Turkey views Washington as unusually critical of the AKP. This reflects the unipole of thinking of itself as the peaceful world arbiter. However, the benign intentions from the U.S. is not taken seriously from Turkey, as clearly seen from the verbal jabs launched between U.S. and Turkish officials. Turkey can view such rhetoric as overstepping their boundaries and applying pressure. This is why the State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki tried to diffuse the tension by saying that Kerry and others at the State Department “don’t hold back when there are concerns” (Taylor, 2013).

When the Egyptian military ousted President Mohammed Morsi and his MB party, there were violent clashes between the military regime and with the pro-MB party protesters. However in the beginning stages of the evolving Egyptian crisis, the Obama administration did not give a response regarding the crisis and was muted (Ackerman, 2013). The Obama administration’s silence is due to U.S. interests in Egypt, where the U.S. sends annual aid of \$1.5 billion in order to be the “bulwark against violence and weapons shipments spreading northeast into Gaza and south into Sudan and eastern Africa” (Ackerman, 2013). Erdogan levied harsh rhetoric against the West by criticizing them for not calling the Egyptian military intervention as a military coup.

Washington’s actions are seen by Ankara as conflict of strategic interests, regarding the ousting of Morsi and the MB party. For Turkey, Morsi and the MB party represent a strategically minted ally amidst the chaos of the Arab Spring. Due to Turkey’s tensions with Iran over Syria, losing Morsi was a huge blow to Turkey. Turkey losing Morsi only brought about isolation in the Middle East with no viable nation-state ally. With no ally, this exacerbates their ability to augment their power, security, and influence. ‘Self-help’ becomes even more amplified for the Turks, since with no ally and conflict of interests with the U.S., they must go it alone and muddle through the harsh volatile environment of the post-Arab Spring.

4.2 The Impact of Syrian Quagmire

Due to the chemical weapons attack by Syria on August 2013, Obama has been put in a position to respond to a threat by Syria to U.S. national interests. However the disastrous results of the previous Bush administration with Iraq and Afghanistan only made the Obama administration skittish to commit towards a major military intervention. Obama during that time did not make a final decision about a military strike, but he was considering a limited action against Syria. In contrast, the strategic preference over Syria for Erdogan is to topple the Assad regime, he added that “A limited operation cannot be satisfactory for us . . . The goal should be to force the regime out” (Benari, 2013).

The clash of interests between the U.S. and Turkey even drove a deeper wedge when the U.S. agreed with Russia to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons (Idiz, 2013); this only made Erdogan’s Syrian quagmire even more frustrating as the spillover effects of Syria was ongoing (Idiz, 2013). Before the U.S.-Russian brokered deal, Erdogan declared that Turkey was eager to join any coalition that would topple Assad, but due to the legitimacy of the Assad regime from the brokered deal, there was little Turkey can do but to go on with engaging in diplomatic effort (Idiz, 2013).

About one month in from the start of the Gezi Park protests, Turkey was strongly

gravitating towards adopting a Chinese long-range anti-missile and air defense system, even though the possibility of integrating Chinese system with the existing NATO hardware would be impossible; the reason stems from China allowing technology transfer and price tag being cheaper than rival firms (Bekdil, 2013). It was only after the frustration with the Egypt fiasco and the U.S.-Russia brokered chemical weapons deal on Syria that Erdogan and Turkey's Defense Industry Executive Committee entered into contract negotiations for air-defense missile system with the Chinese state company, China Precision Machinery Export-Import Cooperation (CPMIEC), on September 26, 2013 (Gursel, 2013). Two days later, a State Department spokeswoman conveyed grave concerns by Washington that a U.S.-sanctioned firm such as CPMIEC was in discussion with NATO ally Turkey on contract negotiations (Gursel, 2013).

This defiant act by Turkey can be seen as both a form of internal balancing and external balancing with the Chinese, where the principal audience is the U.S. Before Turkey contemplated going with CPMIEC, Turkey's EU accession progress was lagging, and so Erdogan seriously considered seeking membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Erdogan stated at the time, "If we get into the SCO, we will say good-bye to the European Union. The Shanghai Five is better and more powerful, and we have common values with them" (Uslu, 2013). Even though Erdogan said Turkey is not going to give up on the E.U., this statement comes as a surprise. The solidarity of Turkey towards the SCO raises the prospects that Turkey is actively abandoning the west in order to fulfill its own national interests. The decision to attempt to procure a missile defense system from China is a political act, due to Turkey's frustration with the U.S. over Egypt and Syria.

4.3 Iran's Strategic Calculations

In terms of internal balancing efforts, Iran pursuing nuclear weapons is likely inspired in part by the longing aspiration to deter a U.S. attack or avert pressures (Walt, 2009: 101). Iranian reformist politician Mostafa Tajazadeh made a statement before the U.S. invasion of Iraq: "It is basically a matter of equilibrium. If I don't have a nuclear bomb, I don't have security" (Takeyh, 2003: 24). As for external efforts, Iran and Syria strengthened ties following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This is due in part to the result of the American installation of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq, the strengthening of ties between Iran and Syria is seen as an opportunity to take advantage of the regional shift of power from dominant Sunnis to Shiites (Slackman, 2006).

Waltz argues that it is "Israel's regional nuclear monopoly," not that of Iran's desire to have one, sparked and contributed to the instability and crisis in the Middle East; his argument is that there is no other region in the world where a "lone, unchecked nuclear state" exists and that power begs to be balanced (Waltz, 2012). Iran sees the U.S. and Israel as allies that are bent on managing the Middle East to their liking. With the U.S. wanting to maintain its 'unipolar moment' as long as possible, it will want to have the freedom of action to roam and keep its strategic interests intact and make sure no other powers rise in important regions that can become a peer competitor. Israel in all essence of U.S. grand strategy is an extension of the U.S. power-projecting ability of freedom to roam.

Yet even though the actions undertaken by Iran to supposedly acquire nuclear weapons and its tactical alignment with Syria to strengthen ties to enhance security can be seen as forms of balancing, it is "tentative and half-hearted," when one considers the actions taken by major great powers (Walt, 2009: 102). However there have been no attempt by any states

to form a formal alliance with the unequivocal purpose of countering the American unipole, such efforts of informal alignments do seem modest, and there have been little to no effort by states to form a coalition that can muster capabilities that can match up to that of the United States (Walt, 2009: 102-103; Lieber and Alexander, 2005).

Further, when considering the alignment between Turkey and Iran, the logic of balancing the U.S. becomes problematic. The key anomaly behind such concern is the fact that Turkey is a member state of NATO. Given that Turkey as of now is still part of NATO and specifically an ally of the United States, there is no reason to believe that Turkey will abandon its post to counter America; if anything being part of NATO and America's ally gives Turkey security and as well as being part of the Euro-Atlantic community. To further validate that Turkey is not in any way diametrically opposed or against the U.S., former Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu issued a statement on January 23, 2014, regarding Turkey's positive relations with America to silence the critics who say otherwise (Amanpour RSS, 2014).

With that in mind, Turkey and Iran's alignment cannot be considered a strategy of balancing against the U.S. when taking into account of Turkey's continuing NATO membership and Iran's "half-hearted" actions. Turco-Iranian alignment can in part be considered as a reaction to the November 25, 2013 interim nuclear deal that have been reached between the P5+1 (U.S., Great Britain, France, China, Russia, and Germany) and Iran in exchange for partial lifting of sanctions that Iran has been faced with. After the nuclear deal has been met in last November, Iranian Ambassador to Ankara Alireza Bikdeli proclaimed that "There are many areas between Turkey and Iran in which we can conduct trade. We have to revive those areas" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013). Before such nuclear deal was met, there was a thaw between the U.S. and Iran that brought about rapprochement between them. In 2015, the U.S. and Iran finally reached a nuclear agreement. U.S.-Iranian thaw happened because Iran's previous mismanaged foreign policy got itself further isolated from the global community and its economy was in shambles due to the crippling effects of the harsh 2012 sanctions that the U.S. and the E.U. imposed.

5. TURCO-IRANIAN ALIGNMENT: BANDWAGONING WITH THE U.S.

5.1 Obama's Middle East Policy and Emergence of Alignment

America's actions determined Turco-Iranian bandwagoning with the US, along with mutual hedging, even though both Turkey and Iran faced their own regional troubles; America's actions not to strike Syria over the use of chemical weapons and coercion of sanctions against Iran brought it to the negotiating table. These actions are seen as impediments for Turkey and Iran to pursue autonomous foreign policies, both are isolated due to the Arab Spring via Syria war, in which the existing threats and new ones that they face cannot be overcome independently from America's actions, and Iran temporarily bandwagoning with America due to America's actions brought Turkey and Iran to an alignment.

Even though America as the unipole is a liberal democracy, which tries to portray itself a benign hegemon that is shaping the international order with universal values, it nevertheless acts as a loose cannon. America being the strongest nation on earth can afford to make mistakes in its foreign policy, counterhegemonic alliance will be difficult and exhausting to

topple America off its lonely position as the unipole. Turkey and Iran however do not have the luxury to make mistakes in their foreign policies, because of relative power differential gap between them and the U.S., the need for smarter foreign policies by Turkey and Iran is paramount to navigate the region of Middle East, in which the region itself is nonautonomous. The smarter policies by from Turkey and Iran are due to the system that gets more competitive, such that states cannot ignore what goes on in the dangerous environment.

A crucial feature of unipolarity is that there will be the tendency for the U.S. to be distracted by a wide bevy of foreign policy problems (Walt, 2009: 99). This can be reflected in terms of Obama's pivot to Asia and reduction of troops in Iraq. The unipole chooses to build the system to its liking, the unipole will be entangled in so many issues and will have a difficult time to focus on any single issue (Walt, 2009: 99). In theory, therefore, a unipole could choose to refrain from direct efforts to manage or shape the system, because it was confident that it enjoyed a considerable margin of safety and was convinced that letting other states deal with emerging security threats would conserve its power and its unipolar status for as long as possible" (Walt, 2009: 99).

It is crucial to understand Obama's Middle East foreign policy to analyze the situation of Turco-Iranian alignment and bandwagoning with the US. When Obama campaigned for the U.S. presidency, he took an approach that resonated with the millions of war-weary Americans by promising to de-escalate American involvement in wars in the Middle East. His commitment was to fix the U.S. economy and to fix U.S. foreign policy that got America tangled into war blunders that George W. Bush waged against terror. Obama called for a "new era of responsibility" during his 2009 inauguration speech and was committed to taking an approach to the Muslim world by engaging with them (Phillips, 2009).

Obama's speech is in line with the line of reasoning that the unipole has the ability to thwart any opposition that emerges by "adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy: punishing states that join the opposition while rewarding those that remain aloof or support the unipole instead" (Walt, 2009: 96). Here Obama makes it clear to the revisionist states that America will lend help or reward their actions if they are willing to drop their harboring of hostile aggressions and bandwagon in the 'right side of history.' He makes it clear that the Iranian's effort of internally balancing by developing nuclear weapons will be met with "necessary" measures. As a unipole, America's grand strategy is to prevent other states from becoming a would-be peer competitor to rival that of America's status.

5.2 The Impact of Syrian Crisis

As the Syrian war was dragging on, Assad's government and the rebels have been clashing to the point that there seemed to be no solution at sight. On August 21, 2012, Obama declared that if the Syrian government used chemical weapons against the rebels that it would be crossing a "red line" (CNN, 2012). In an ironic twist of fate, in the one year anniversary of Obama's "red line" remarks, the Syrian government launched a chemical weapons attack that took place in the suburbs of Damascus; in a preliminary White House assessment via a large body of independent sources, more than 1,400 were killed that included 426 children. On September 1, 2013, it was announced that Obama sent a letter to the heads of the House and Senate to ask Congress for approval to undergo a military strike against Syria.

However, on Saturday 14, 2013, U.S. and Russia agreed upon a diplomatic plan to have the chemical weapons under international control within a framework to seize and destroy all

of Syria's chemical weapons, if Syria fails to comply there would be consequences of imposed sanctions backed by the U.N. Security Council. There are several reasons why Obama buck-passed a military strike to Congress and why the Obama administration ultimately shelved striking Syria and went along with the Russian proposal. According to political scientist Richard K. Betts, Obama buck-passed a military strike to Congress not because getting congressional approval was the lawful thing to do, it always has been, but Obama passed the buck in order to get out of a self-imposed dilemma over the 2012 "red line" remark (Betts, 2013).

But upon closer inspection there are fundamental realist reasons other than Obama's "red line" mistake that the U.S. made such a decision. For Iran, if the U.S. did strike Syria it will sabotage Hassan Rouhani's long-term Iranian plan of repairing Iran's crippling economy, to strike a nuclear deal, and to get out of isolation. Due to the hardliners still dominating parliament and the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, they can justify a posture of defiance if Rouhani's moderate approach fails internationally (Torbati, 2013). During the looming prospect of a U.S. military strike on Syria, Iran's tone has changed. Rouhani and his foreign policy team are trying to avoid using confrontational tone even though they support Syria, Rouhani made no mention of offering military support to Assad by saying, "If something happens to the Syrian people, the Islamic Republic of Iran will do its religious and humanitarian duties to send them food and medicine" (Rezaian, 2013). It was during that time that the shift in tone has become obvious, such that public comments by Iranian officials and contents from government-controlled newspapers suggested that Iran's support for Assad won't be entirely unconditional (Rezaian, 2013). According to Israeli TV, Obama's decision not to carry out military strikes in Syria was influenced by secret U.S. backchannel discussions in Oman, where unnamed Israeli intelligence claimed that Iran persuaded Assad to dismantle his chemical weapons in return for Obama not going with the military strike option (Klapper, Lee, and Pace, 2013).

5.3 The Impact of Iran Nuclear Rapprochement on the Alignment

The underlying cause for Rouhani administration's cautious approach and moderate tone towards dealing with the U.S. was due to the prospect of the nuclear deal. To Iran, they are faced with isolation and the Syrian war has further isolated them with amplifying threats from regional states. Further the Obama administration of imposing crippling sanctions along with signaling credible threats have brought Iran to the negotiating table. According to Gary Samore, former White House coordinator for arms control, has said that the reason Iran and P5+1 reached a temporary nuclear deal is because Iran seeks sanctions relief and that "sanctions have worked to pressure Iran to accept temporary limits on its nuclear program" (Shainin, 2013). According to Suzanne Maloney, the reason the Supreme Leader let Hassan Rouhani win is not due to avoiding a repeat of the 2009 protests against election fraud, but to use a pragmatist who can repair Iran's isolation and its dire economic situation (Maloney, 2013). Iran coming to the negotiating table for a temporary nuclear deal is in line with Iran bandwagoning with the unipole.

Due to the U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, Iran and Turkey have aligned. When taking one of Walt's threat variable of aggressive intentions in context, Iran has signaled to the world with sincere intentions that it wants to fix relations with the West. In his first press conference in Tehran, Rouhani said that "We have to enhance mutual trust between Iran and other countries . . . We have to build trust . . . The first step will be showing greater

transparency. We are ready to show greater transparency and make clear that the Islamic Republic of Iran's actions are totally within international frameworks" (Dehghan, 2013). When the possibility of a U.S. military strike was contemplated by the Obama administration, Turkey's Foreign Minister remarked that "Any intervention should be designed to clear the way for a solution" (Zalewski, 2013). When it did not happen Turkey's frustration had to be put aside due to the Assad regime gaining international legitimacy with the chemical weapons accord, if Turkey continued such policy it would have further isolated itself internationally and the region for not giving diplomacy a chance. However during the week of Obama and Rouhani's historic phone call in late September of 2013, former Turkey President Abdullah Gul signaled that the rapprochement of U.S. and Iran will benefit Turkey greatly, where he states:

"If the nuclear dispute were to be resolved we should be the one who is happiest. There are two alternatives; one is the desire to destroy Iran's nuclear capacity by war, the second one is Iran's surprise announcement that it made a nuclear weapon. We must be the one who will be most annoyed with these two conditions. But if a softening process starts, we would be the one who will be the happiest" (Hurriyet Daily News, September 30, 2013).

Gul's optimism towards the U.S.-Iran rapprochement is based upon partly from Rouhani's statements made regarding Syria. On September 17, 2013, Rouhani urged nations to take the opportunity to work out the problems of Syria and the nuclear program together by saying, "I announce my government's readiness to help facilitate dialogue between the Syrian government and the opposition . . . To move beyond impasses, whether in relation to Syria, my country's nuclear program or its relations with the United States, we need to aim higher. Rather than focusing on how to prevent things from getting worse, we need to think — and talk — about how to make things better" (Fisher, 2013). The perceived aggressive intentions have been replaced by the 'charm offensive' of Rouhani.

Even though US actions forced Turkey and Iran to align, another factor that contributed to such actions is due to the growing Salafism (eventually the emergence of the IS) that prompted Turkey and Iran to cooperate. For Iran, a Salafist group in Baluchistan, Iran took five Iranian soldiers hostage in February 8, 2014, which made Iran retaliate by executing sixteen imprisoned members of the group, such threats made the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issue a warning regarding the Salafists: "Who are those who want to destroy the nation's unity" (Khalaji, 2014). This reflects the meeting of both countries' leaders in which Turkey and Iran made in terms of combatting terrorism and to cooperate together against such threat. With the US-led coalition targeting IS, Iranian president Rouhani made it clear there should be joint effort in eradicating not only IS but terrorism as a whole, such that "A consolidation and expansion of ties between Tehran and Ankara is of paramount importance to us" (Middle East Eye, 2016). The US has shown publicly that it has been indirectly cooperating with Iran to tackle the IS, in which US airstrikes are juxtaposed with Iranian-backed ground assaults (Kelley, 2015).

With the growing sectarian violence rapidly spreading in the region due to the U.S. and the great powers not solving the Syrian issue, the advent of IS along with other dangerous non-state actors, and the U.S. pressure on Iran's nuclear program, the regionally isolated Turkey and Iran saw in each other as new allies that can cooperate toward regional stability. On November 24, 2013, Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it continues to support Iran's "right to peaceful use of nuclear energy emanating from the NPT under the

condition that the obligations provided therein are fulfilled” (Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Turkey’s isolation has prompted to make the above statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for if it doesn’t jump on the opportunity of a possible U.S.-Iran nuclear deal, politically Turkey will be sidelined in terms of influence. The shared concerns and opportunities have brought the Turco-Iranian alignment.

6. CONCLUSION

This article examined whether Turkey and Iran aligned in order to balance or bandwagon with the United States. The findings show that Turco-Iranian alignment is not based upon the sole purpose to form a counter-hegemonic coalition in order to balance the U.S., rather bandwagoning was found to be the prevailing feature of such alignment. Due to the U.S. choice of grand strategy, it impacted such alignment for Turkey and Iran to work cooperate without stepping on each others’ toes. The grand strategy that the US adopted towards the Middle East led Turkey and Iran to align and scramble to lessen the unpredictability of the U.S. and their problem of isolation.

However it is important to highlight that even though Turkey and Iran bandwagoned with the U.S. it does not necessarily mean that they will stay using that strategy. The particular nature of the U.S. presence in the region and the unique situation of Turkey and Iran with the chaotic Arab Spring brought about Turco-Iranian alignment. Usually the scarcity of hard balancing is consistent with the view that alliances are not formed in response to power alone, but with other factors (Walt, 2009: 103).

It is uncertain whether the current Turco-Iranian alignment will be ephemeral or solidify in the long-run. It is also uncertain how dangerous non-state actors’ actions will evolve and impact even if Turkey and Iran do their best to cooperate. What is also uncertain is the nuclear deal. Due to the nuclear deal, America’s relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia soured; this is to suggest that alliance structures inherited from the cold war are in constant alteration. With the passage of time it is also uncertain how other middle states will behave and what strategies they will adopt and utilize to deal with the American unipole. The distribution of capabilities of the American unipole does not dictate how middle power states and weaker states will behave. More research concerning these uncertain implications will be fruitful. Also if Turkey and Iran undermine each other in terms of gaining allies (weakened states, states, or non-states), then such alignment would become ephemeral due to the fact that autonomy and influence would be compromised at the expense of each other.

The U.S. must tread carefully and cooperate with Turkey and Iran to promote non-sectarian policies and measures. It is also important that the U.S. alleviates its strained relationship with Saudi Arabia and Israel in order to bring long-term stability. If the U.S. wants to continue on its ‘pivot to Asia’, a new balance of power in the Middle East is the requisite policy. This does not mean that the U.S. should totally disengage from the region; its commitment towards the Middle East is too vital. By elevating the relative importance of Turkey and Iran, the U.S. needs to reduce the elevated status of ‘special relationship’ with Saudi Arabia and Israel. To be sure, this must be done by, at the same, time reassuring Saudi Arabia and Israel of stability and benefits of being allies to the U.S.

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