

Worldview: Arab autumn emerges, with a new Mideast

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CAIRO, Egypt - This week, Arab League foreign ministers will meet in Cairo to decide whether to read Syria the riot act over its slaughter of civilians.

No one used to take the Arab League seriously until it took a tough stand on Moammar Gadhafi's murder of civilians in Libya. That gave NATO the cover to set up a no-fly zone, which led to the eventual ouster of the Libyan dictator. Now, the League has given Syrian President Bashar al-Assad an ultimatum: Agree to a ceasefire and to talks in Cairo with the Syrian opposition, or have your Arab League membership frozen. And there may be worse pressures to come.

No doubt Syria will try to bamboozle the League. But rumors are swirling that Gulf states are financing Syrian military deserters setting up a safe haven inside Turkey. For better or worse, Saudi Arabia, the small Gulf state of Qatar and Turkey have decided to champion fellow Sunni Muslims in Syria against Assad's Alawite (Shiite) regime.

I tell this story not because I know how far the Arab League, the Turks, and the Gulfis will go against Assad, but because their tough stand shows how dramatically the Middle East has changed.

Gone are the days when major Mideast developments were orchestrated by Western powers. The Arab Spring was a grassroots upheaval that the West neither planned nor predicted. The Arab autumn has taken on a life of its own in which the United States and the European Union are hardly felt.

The United States is pulling its troops out of Iraq by the end of 2011, and mostly out of Afghanistan by 2014. That vast sucking sound you hear is the evaporation of American influence in the region, hastened by the failure of the Bush and Obama administrations to secure a Palestinian state.

Preoccupied with its own financial problems, the European Union can't fill the vacuum. And China, the world's rising power, doesn't want to. All three superpowers are preoccupied with their own economic problems. This was glaringly evident at a conference I attended last week in Venice aimed at exploring whether China, Europe, and the United States could increase cooperation in economic and security matters.

The conference, sponsored by the Aspen Strategy Group and the Aspen Institute Italia, brought together prominent Americans and Europeans with members of the Central School of the Communist Party, a leadership training center headed by Xi Jinping, China's presidential heir apparent.

Such tripartite cooperation would be immensely beneficial in the Middle East, where Syria and Yemen are imploding, and Iran seems bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. Like the West, China gets much of its oil from the region; it has an interest in preventing chaos that emboldens radical Islamists, including in Damascus.

Had China joined the West in passing a tough U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria - rather than casting a veto - the Syrian leader might have taken notice. But the Aspen conference made clear that China has no interest in playing that kind of political role.

The Chinese mantra, repeated over and over: Beijing believes (rightly) that the Middle East is detaching itself from the U.S. orbit; the Chinese think U.S. influence in the region has been on the decline since 2003, the year Washington launched its disastrous Iraq invasion. China will oppose any outside use of force in the region - in Syria, Iran, Libya or elsewhere. Beijing does not see Iran as a threat and is not convinced that the Iranians want to get the bomb.

The Chinese will invest in the Middle East, including in Iran, but they won't help the West pressure Damascus or Tehran. Meantime, the Europeans - dealing with a series of financial crises - have no stomach to take on Iran, nor to repeat their Libyan adventure in Syria.

What the Europeans most want from the Chinese is for Beijing to bail out the euro, which it is in no hurry to do.

As for the debt-ridden U.S.A., Congress is offering only paltry resources to help Tunisia and Egypt through their terrifying transitions. These two countries are finally trying democracy, but the world's richest nation is basically a bystander.

Moreover, Washington has failed - through two administrations - to check the Iranian nuclear program. A U.S. attack on Iran would be foolish, but without Chinese (and Russian) cooperation, more sanctions on Tehran - or Damascus - are unlikely to work.

So, I returned from Venice to Cairo painfully aware that the West has no workable Middle East policy. And the Chinese won't help. Which brings us back to the Arab League meeting in Cairo. What we are witnessing is the Arab world writing off U.S. or European intervention, and striking out on its own.

This may lead to sectarian war, it may produce Islamist regimes. But the superpowers are no longer the puppet masters, and Mideast governments no longer dance to their manipulations. And no one is certain how it will all end.