

Opinion & Analysis

Trump's unsettling I.S.R.A.E.L. doctrine

The key points of U.S. President Donald Trump's thinking on U.S. involvement in the Middle East can be best described with the acronym I.S.R.A.E.L.

"I" is for "Iran" because Trump now confronts Tehran, while "S" is for Saudi Arabia as he seeks to strengthen ties with the kingdom. "R" is for "reversal" of the legacy of his predecessor, Barack Obama. "A" is for "arms" exports from the United States, which he wants to boost. "E" is for "engagement," which tends to

accommodating their demand with a view to letting them help his administration's security strategy for the region. In the meantime, Trump has gone along so much with Israel that he has stained the decades-old reputation of the United States as the only country that can be expected to resolve issues in the Middle East in a fair manner. He may have damaged the reputation to the extent that the United States has lost the privilege and universal capability with which it can rival a certain country whose name begins with "R." Of course, it is Russia that employs a policy of force in the Middle East. The country now boasts the highest level of geopolitical presence in the post-Cold War Middle East and positions itself as a power with a leading role to play in resolving the Syrian issue. This manifests the difference between Putin and Trump in terms of diplomatic experience and maneuvering ability.

Why doesn't the U.S. president have such a vision? Trump has been so careful to avoid clashes with Russia, the most powerful patron of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, that the White House's approach to Syria and its approach to Iran have been conspicuously inconsistent. Trump has been pursuing the annihilation of ISIL, a more easy-to-understand goal in the eyes of U.S. voters than an effort to oust the Assad regime. As such, there is a clear discrepancy between him and Bolton, who advocates the elimination of threats from both Iran and its ally, Assad.

'S' for Saudi Arabia

Since its severance of diplomatic ties with Iran in January 2016, Saudi Arabia, dominated by Sunnis, has become more confrontational than Israel in dealing with Tehran. Saudi Arabia and Israel reportedly urged then U.S. President George W. Bush to attack Iran instead of Iraq after 9/11. Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is little different from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in that the kingdom's strongman wants the United States to lead a military showdown with Iran, as in the case of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The crown prince has fully committed his country to unsparingly carrying out military intervention in Yemen, saying the rebellion of Shiite Houthi militia in the neighboring Sunni-majority republic poses a direct threat to the security and territorial integrity of the kingdom. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia does not seem to be strong enough to confront Iran, the Shiite-dominated power, on its own. At any rate, Trump will feel pleased if relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia get closer.

'R' for reversal

The third initial refers to the fact that Trump remains determined to perform in ways opposite to Obama. There is one point we should not overlook when we examine his method of dismissing Obama-era policies. What may appear to be a simple pattern of venting his frustration against his predecessor may be more strategic in geopolitical terms.

For example, during Obama's presidency, Washington's relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia became strained in the short run because of his refusal to comply with the demand from the two countries that the United States withdraw from JCPOA. In contrast, Trump did the opposite,

accommodating their demand with a view to letting them help his administration's security strategy for the region.

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'A' for arms, arrogance

"A" is for "arms" exports as well as "arrogance." As the head of the U.S. military-industrial complex, Trump cannot treat badly those Arab monarchies in the Gulf region that top the list of customers for state-of-the-art arms manufactured in the United States. In 2017, Saudi Arabia alone contracted to purchase more than \$100 billion worth of U.S. arms. The sheer quantity and advanced quality of armaments Saudi Arabia has been equipping itself with is thought to make the kingdom feel confident, though precariously, that it will be able to compete with Iran.

Trump's ignorance of more than 60 deaths resulting from demonstrations that took place at the Gaza border in protest of his decision to relocate the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem has to be regarded as an act of "arrogance."

'E' for engagement

Given that the America First president has often said he wants to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and threatens to cut off U.S. aid to Palestine, he seems to have nothing to do with this part of the I.S.R.A.E.L. formulation. However, as Trump has said he wants to realize an "ultimate deal" between Israel and Palestine in favor of the former, he is actually engaging in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle in a lopsided way.

Moreover, the Middle East is unlikely to become free from Trump-style troublesome regional engagement in the near future. This is because he has reimposed economic sanctions against Iran and made them tighter, while threat-

ening additional sanctions against European, Russian and Chinese businesses that deal with Iran, and even against Japan, which imports Iranian crude oil.

There is another word beginning with "E" we should not overlook. In this case, "E" is for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who last month was reelected by garnering more than 52 percent of the vote. After winning a new five-year term until 2023, he has not softened his firm stance to "strangle" Trump-backed Kurdish militias in northern Syria. This means, from the U.S. standpoint, that Turkey, even though it is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, might best be described as an "ally on paper" rather than an "ally in action." It also means that, confronting Israel in collaboration with Russia and Iran, Erdogan is expected to remain an increasingly undesirable factor for Trump in implementing his Middle East policies.

'L' for linchpin

The last initial, "L," reminds us of various profound scenes unique to the Middle East. Isn't it possible to refer to "L" for "lash" when thinking of Trump's harsh Middle East stances? Of course, Trump alone is not to blame for the ongoing chaos in the region. Even so, it is true that his decision to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem has caused unbearable humiliation and anguish to the Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims in the Islamic world.

I have to add that "L" is also for "loneliness." Israel faces a real threat from Iran and Tehran-backed Lebanese military group Hezbollah and continues to be apprehensive of a possible escalation from "psychological warfare" to "real war." Therefore, it is no surprise for Israel to stay in a state of diplomatic loneliness in the Middle East as a consequence of being true to logic and behavior of its own. Also, from the Israeli perspective, it is the fate of the Zionist nation, dating back 70 years to its foundation, to stand apart from others.

For his part, Trump should be cautious enough to avert an excess of "arrogance" and avoid any path leading to the state of "loneliness." Instead, "tolerance" and "cooperation" are the most important and suitable means the United States should pursue as the superpower that is credited with creating the norms of international liberalism — the source of power for the country. It seems what Trump has been doing amounts exactly to deviating from this source.

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INSIGHTS
into the
WORLD

By Masayuki Yamauchi

be reckless. Finally, "L" is for "linchpin" as Trump thinks no other power or entity but the United States should have final say about a variety of Middle Eastern issues.

The acronym was coined by an Arab political analyst, Marwan Bishara. The letters add up to the name of Israel and the descriptions accompanying each initial of the acronym largely summarize the way the United States and Israel have, rightly or wrongly, been going hand in hand in recent months.

Trump moved the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in May, breaking with decades of U.S. policy of acting as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Six days earlier, he unilaterally pulled the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), more commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal that restricts Iran's nuclear development program, while fully supporting Israel, which aims to have all threats from Iran removed.

There is no doubt that Trump's pro-Israel doctrine reflects both his belief based on what can be called "Zionist Protestantism" and the environment in which his daughter Ivanka and her husband Jared Kushner live as Orthodox Jews. In any case, the acronym I.S.R.A.E.L. is more than mere wordplay, as it gives us a well-thought-out keyword to look into the essence of Trumpism.

'I' for Iran

Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, championed the Iraq War. However, the U.S. offensive ended up leading to the reinforced presence of Iran-backed Shiite militias from Iraq to Syria and, in the medium term, the birth of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an ex-

Yamauchi is a professor at Musashino University and a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, where he previously headed the University of Tokyo Center for Middle Eastern Studies (UTCMES). He was a member of the government panel of experts tasked from October 2016 to April 2017 with discussing measures to reduce the Emperor's burden of official duties.