

Unintended Consequences: Did Trump Just Give the Middle East to China and Russia?

By [F. William Engdahl](#)

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By the series of actions in recent months in Iraq and across the Middle East, Washington has forced a strategic shift towards China and to an extent Russia and away from the United States. If events continue on the present trajectory it can well be that a main reason that Washington backed the destabilization of Assad in Syria, to block a planned Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline, will now happen, short of Washington initiating a full scorched earth politics in the region. This is what we can call unintended consequences.

If nature abhors a vacuum, so too does geopolitics. When President Trump months ago announced plans to pull US troops out of Syria and the Middle East generally, Russia and especially China began quietly to intensify contacts with key states in the region.

Chinese involvement with Iraqi oil development and other infrastructure projects, though large, was significantly disrupted by the ISIS occupation of some one third of Iraqi territory. In September, 2019 Washington demanded that Iraq pay for completion of key infrastructure projects destroyed by the ISIS war— a war where Washington as well as Ankara, Israel and Saudi Arabia played the key hidden role—by giving the US government 50% of Iraqi oil revenues, an outrageous demand to put it politely.

Iraq China Pivot

Iraq refused. Instead Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi went to Beijing as head of a 55-member delegation to discuss Chinese involvement in the rebuilding of Iraq. This visit did not go unnoticed in Washington. Even before that, Iraqi-China ties were significant. China was Iraq's number one trading partner and Iraq was China's third-leading source of oil after Saudi Arabia and Russia. In April 2019 in Baghdad, China's Deputy Minister of Foreign Relations Lee Joon said China was ready to contribute to Iraq's [reconstruction](#).

For Abdul-Mahdi the Beijing trip was a major success; he called it a “quantum jump” in relations. The visit saw the signing of eight wide-ranging memoranda of understanding (MoUs), a framework credit agreement, and the announcement of plans for Iraq to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It included Chinese involvement in rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure as well as developing Iraqi oilfields. For both countries an apparent “win-win” as the Chinese like to [say](#).

It was only a matter of days after the Beijing talks of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi that nationwide protests against Iraqi government corruption and economic policies broke out, led by opposition cries that Abdul-Mahdi resign. Reuters witnessed snipers carefully fanning the violent protest firing on the protesters giving the impression of government [repression](#) much as the CIA did in Maidan in Kiev in February 2014 or in Cairo in 2011.

There is now strong evidence that the China talks and the timing of the spontaneous October 2019 protests against the Abdul-Mahdi government were connected. The Trump Administration is the link. According to a report by Federico Pieraccini, “Abdul-Medhi made a speech to Parliament speaking about how the Americans had ruined the country and now refused to complete infrastructure and electricity grid projects unless they were promised 50% of oil revenues, which Abdul-Mehdi refused.” He then quotes sections of Abdul-Mahdi’s speech translated from Arabic: “This is why I visited China and signed an important agreement with them to undertake the construction instead. Upon my return, Trump called me to ask me to reject this agreement. When I refused, he threatened to unleash huge demonstrations against me that would end my premiership. Huge demonstrations against me duly materialized and Trump called again to threaten that if I did not comply with his demands, then he would have Marine snipers on tall buildings target protesters and security personnel alike in order to pressure me. I refused again and handed in my resignation. To this day the Americans insist on us rescinding our [deal](#) with the Chinese.”

Now the US assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani, just as he landed in Baghdad reportedly on a mediation mission with Saudi Arabia via Abdul-Mahdi, has thrown the entire region into political chaos amid talk of possible World War III. The soft Iranian “retaliation” missile firings on US bases in Iraq and the surprise admission by Teheran that they accidentally downed a Ukrainian commercial airline as if left Teheran, all amid reports that Trump and Rouhani were in back channel secret talks to calm things down, leave many scratching their heads as to what is really going on.

Quiet ‘silk’ inroads

One thing is clear. Beijing is looking at its prospects, along with Russia to replace the domination of Iraqi politics that Washington has held since its 2003 war of occupation. OilPrice.com reports that beginning October just after Abdul-Mahdi’s successful Beijing talks, Iraq started exporting 100,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil to China as part of the 20-year oil-for-infrastructure deal agreed between the two countries. According to Iraqi oil ministry sources, China will build its influence in Iraq by beginning with oil and gas investments and from there building infrastructure including factories and railways using Chinese companies and personnel along with Iraqi labor. The Chinese-built factories will use the same assembly lines and structure to be integrated with [similar factories](#) in China.

Iran’s Vice President, Eshaq Jahangiri has announced that Iran signed a contract with China to implement a project to electrify the main 900 kilometer railway connecting Tehran to the north-eastern city of Mashhad near the border to Turkmenistan and to Afghanistan. Jahangiri added that there are also plans to establish a Tehran-Qom-Isfahan high-speed train line and to extend this up to the north-west through Tabriz. OilPrice notes, “Tabriz, home to a number of key sites relating to oil, gas, and petrochemicals, and the starting point for the Tabriz-Ankara gas pipeline, will be a pivot point of the 2,300 kilometre New Silk Road that links Urumqi (the capital of China’s western Xinjiang Province) to Tehran, and connecting Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan along the way, and then via Turkey into Europe. Once the plans for this are making substantial progress then China will extend the [transport](#) links into Iraq to the West.”

Additionally, according to Iraq’s Electricity Minister Louay al-Khateeb, “China is our primary option as a strategic partner in the long run...We started with a US\$10 billion financial framework for a limited quantity of oil to finance some infrastructure projects...[but] Chinese

funding tends to increase with the growing Iraqi oil production.” That is, the more Iraqi oil China extracts the more Iraqi projects it can finance. Today Iraq is dependent on Iran for gas to serve its electric generators owing to lack of gas infrastructure. China [says](#) it will change that.

Further the oil industry source states that Russia and China are quietly preparing the ground to relaunch the Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline from Iran’s huge Persian Gulf South Pars gas field it shares with Qatar. A US-backed proxy war began against Syria’s Bashar al-Assad in 2011 just after he signed a deal with Iran and Iraq to build the pipeline, rejecting an earlier Qatar proposal for an alternative route. Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Qatar poured billions of covert funds to finance terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and later ISIS in a vain [effort](#) to topple Assad.

China is not alone in its efforts in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, as erratic and unpredictable US foreign policy drives former US allies away. Russia, which just brokered a ceasefire in Libya along with Turkey’s Erdogan, just offered to sell its advanced S-400 Triumph air defense system to Iraq, an offer that would have been unthinkable even weeks ago. With Iraqi parliamentarians voting to demand all foreign troops, including US and Iranian, leave Iraq in the wake of the brazen US assassination of Soleimani in Baghdad, it is conceivable Baghdad would accept the offer at this point, despite protest from Washington. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Algeria, Morocco and Egypt, have all be in discussions with Russia in recent months to buy the Russian defense system, said to be the world’s most effective. Turkey has already [purchased it](#).

Before the US assassination of Soleimani, there were numerous back-channel efforts for détente in the costly wars that have raged across the region since the US-instigated Arab Spring between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran and Iraq. Russia and China have both in different ways been playing a key role in changing the geopolitical tensions. At this juncture the credibility of Washington as any honest partner is effectively zero if not minus.

The temporary calm following Iran’s admission of shooting down the Ukraine airliner in no way suggests Washington will go quietly. Trump and his Defense Secretary Esper have defiantly rejected the call to pull US troops from Iraq. The US president just tweeted his support for renewed anti-government Iran protests, in Farsi. We are clearly in for some very nasty trouble in the Middle East as Washington tries to deal with the unintended consequences of its recent Middle East actions.

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F. William Engdahl is strategic risk consultant and lecturer, he holds a degree in politics from Princeton University and is a best-selling author on oil and geopolitics, exclusively for the online magazine “[New Eastern Outlook](#)” where [this article](#) was originally published. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization.

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