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In Valdai, confronting the “American problem” in West Asia

While Trump runs riot with his global land grab projects, multipolar visionaries in Valdai were mapping out the actual, tangible territorial routes that will define this century's geopolitics and geoeconomics.



Photo

Credit: The Cradle

MOSCOW – The 14th Middle East Conference of the Valdai Club in Moscow was hit by a geopolitical bunker buster bomb right in the middle of the proceedings: the announcement, by

US President Donald Trump himself, of some sort of future Trump Gaza Riviera Resort and Casino in Palestine.

Even before international outrage started to overspill, from the BRICS front to ASEAN to the Arab world (which sees it as Nakba 2.0), reaching even Trump-friendly Saudi Arabia and major US allies in Europe, perplexity set in at Valdai among most scholars and academics.

Two glaring exceptions were professor at the University of Tehran Mohammad Marandi and former British diplomat Alastair Crooke – always delicately nuanced analysts of West Asia. Both have long argued that as the US empire is being forced to retreat, it will become much more ruthless and take greater risks.

Marandi qualifies Trump as “a gift” to American global decline. Crooke, for his part, wonders whether Israel's far-right Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu really trapped Trump in a quagmire – when it may be the other way around. Trump now seems to have Netanyahu – which he basically despises – exactly where he wants him: owing favors.

Trump made a lot of bombastic promises, which Netanyahu can sell as a major success to the Tel Aviv warmongers who compose his government. So his coalition will hold – for now. Yet, in return, Israel will still have to follow the next steps of the despised ceasefire project. And that would lead, in theory, to the end of the war. Netanyahu wants an Infinite War, with unlimited Eretz Israel expansion and annexation. That is not a done deal – by far.

As it stands, at face value, in one fell swoop, Trump normalized genocide, ethnic cleansing, and the reduction of the Gaza tragedy to a tawdry real estate deal in a “phenomenal location.” The accumulated effect of “the US will take over the Gaza strip,” “we will own it,” and “... level the site” not only opens the US to a shockingly *illegal* foreign annexation, but it’s the embarrassingly passe “there are no Palestinians” trope on steroids.

But this is far from “sheer lunacy,” as defined by US think tanks everywhere. It’s a natural extension of trying to buy Greenland, trying to annex Canada (in both cases, an increase to the US resource base), grabbing the Panama Canal, and rechristening the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America.

It’s about changing the subject and the predominant narrative instead of addressing the real threat to the Empire: the Russia–China strategic partnership.

In this case, the new Gaza Riviera built on a pyramid of skulls is not only endorsed but already envisioned by the genocidals in Tel Aviv in tandem with Trump’s billionaire donors, a key part of Israel's lobby in the US.

Trump's vision, according to New York insiders, came from his son-in-law Jared Kushner, who less than a year ago was already talking about the real estate gold represented by the

Gaza seashore. Kushner is even more dangerous now that he's acting behind the curtains in Trump's second term: he's the main influencer on POTUS when it comes to a possible, future US-sanctioned occupation of Gaza.

For the moment, we have a Deporting-Building-Selling reality show ethos applied to the most insoluble problem in West Asia. Marandi calls it the "US-Israel problem." Taha Ozhan at the Ankara Institute qualifies it as "the Israeli-centered order" as well as "the American problem."

Living under a 'global regime change'

The discussions at Valdai, of course, extrapolated Trump's Gaza bombshell. Ozhan focused on the "immense stress test" on West Asia – from the genocide in Gaza to "Assad must go" metastasizing into Al-Qaeda in suits ruling Damascus. He warns that the current global chaos may spawn new wars: We are now in a process of "global regime change," where "sustainable instability is over."

The Palestinian presence, via PLO Minister of Social Development Ahmad Majdalani, was not exactly heartening. He drummed up the usual talking points, such as the problem of "normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel with the backdrop of annexation of the West Bank," while "other Muslim nations only watch from the sidelines."

Majdalani also wondered whether "BRICS will be able to work as an effective counter-balance" to the "American problem," as defined by Ozhan. But on the tortuous issue of Palestinian unity, he offered nothing new, and went on carping about the impossibility of "the Abraham Accords without the Palestinian people."

The eminent Vitaly Naumkin, President of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, published an excellent report on Syria, co-authored with Vasily Kuznetsov, also from the Institute of Oriental Studies.

While they stress that the fall of former longtime Syrian president Bashar al-Assad represents a "window of opportunity" for Israel, Turkiye, and the Gulf monarchies, they qualify the nuances.

What is Israel really up to? "Establishing direct control over certain (which exactly?) territories or creating a wide buffer zone?"

On Turkiye, "Ankara's interest in inflicting a strategic defeat on the Kurds and possibly creating a buffer zone along the Syrian-Turkish border is understandable." What is unclear is "the extent of the [American] commitment to investing in the Kurds" under Trump.

On the Gulf monarchies, “they will strengthen their position primarily using economic leverage.” Yet “the interests of various GCC countries vary, and their alignment is not always clear.”

As for Iran, Naumkin and Kuznetsov realistically point out that if the formerly extremist, new Syrian setup “fail[s] to consolidate society” – and that’s a very strong possibility – “Iran may have another shot at restoring its influence.”

For Naumkin, the Russian bases in Syria “should stay” – a topic that is, incidentally, a source of fierce debate in Moscow’s corridors of power. He argues this position mostly because Russia “could balance the expansionist designs of some Turkiye factions in northern Syria.”

Corridor-mania

Even though the [recently-signed Russia–Iran strategic partnership](#) was not specifically discussed at Valdai, Marandi noted that “Iran is moving very fast on what needs to be built, because that will draw India much closer economically.”

The heart of the matter of the Russia–Iran deal is not military: it’s geoeconomic, and centered on the International North–South Transportation Corridor (INSTC), a key Eurasia/BRICS integration connectivity project.

The INSTC is a de facto accelerator of trade between top BRICS members Russia, Iran, and India, bound to increase settlements in their own currencies: that’s exactly the kind of mechanism that led Trump – erroneously – to “accuse” BRICS of trying to come up with their own currency. Russia and Iran, both heavily sanctioned, already trade heavily in rubles and rials.

On the wider geoeconomic front, arguably the most stimulating contribution at Valdai was offered by Elchin Aghajanov, the director of the Baku International Policy and Security Network. A breath of fresh air from the South Caucasus stood in sharp contrast with the gloomy geopolitical hurricanes threatening West Asia.

Aghajanov emphasized Azeri sovereignty – against hegemony, all the while acknowledging the “geostrategic aspirations of the west.” He described Azerbaijan as a “crossroads of transportation corridors”; at least 13 corridors, which led him to coin this beauty: *Corridor-mania* (italics mine). Across history, the South Caucasus has always been a key geoeconomic hub of Eurasia.

Corridor-mania encompasses every project from TRACECA to the Chinese Middle Corridor, the Trans-Caspian, and the INSTC, not to mention the hyper-controversial [Zangezur corridor](#) – supported by the west – which should run across 40 km of Armenian territory, on

the border of Iran. Zangezur would be linked to branches of the New Silk Roads from Xinjiang and Central Asia to Turkiye and also connected to the Trans-Caspian.

Aghajanov was adamant that with Zangezur, Azerbaijan has no intention whatsoever to annex Armenian lands. Baku also wants its operation to go to Iran via an Iran–Armenia link. Tehran’s position is that as long as there’s no annexation – in this case, the better option would be underground – the corridor should go ahead. Aghajanov did refer to the Azerbaijan–Iran link across the Aras River: “The late [Iranian] president Ebrahim Raisi was a strong supporter.”

Aghajanov also emphasized that as much as Azerbaijan is “a natural ally of Turkiye and Pakistan,” the same should apply to Iran, where at least 13 million ethnic Azeris live.

He defines Russia as a “natural strategic partner.” He also praised a corridor way up north, the Northern Sea Route: “The shortest way from New York to China is via Murmansk. And the shortest way from Brazil to China is via St. Petersburg.”

As the dogs of war keep barking, Corridor-mania keeps on rolling. But first, West Asia really needs to bury the ridiculous Trumpian vision of a Gaza Riviera.

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