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GCC impasse is about the role Egypt plays in region

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GCC impasse is about the role Egypt plays in region

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The unprecedented withdrawal of their ambassadors to Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain – as well as Egypt – probably constitutes the most serious rift in the Gulf Cooperation Council since its foundation. But its deepest causes and implications reach far beyond the immediate Gulf region.

There is a complex regional and international context at work, and a wide range of grievances, mainly about Doha's regional sponsorship of Muslim Brotherhood parties. But if there is a paramount cause for both the timing and scale of this rebuke, its epicentre almost certainly lies in Cairo.

Ever since the downfall of former president Hosni Mubarak, Riyadh and Doha have been at odds over Egypt's political future. But the stakes are now much higher, particularly given the thaw between Washington and Tehran, and the concomitant anxieties about Gulf security this has provoked.

Much of the Arab world welcomed the military intervention in Egypt last year in response to overwhelming popular pressure to remove the out-of-control Muslim Brotherhood Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi.

Few were more enthusiastic than Saudi Arabia and its allies.

But this dispute is no longer just a matter of competing ideologies or rivalries between monarchies – let alone the foolish narratives about “counter-revolution” that have tended to dominate the conversation in Washington among credulous academics. Instead, it is about Egypt's role in the unfolding new Middle Eastern strategic landscape.

With US president Barack Obama making suggestive comments about Iran being “strategic”, “not impulsive” and responsive to “incentives” – and continued American talk about a “pivot to Asia” and, implicitly, away from the Middle East – alarm about where US policy may be headed and what to do about it has been growing. Riyadh has not been shy about both bluntly expressing its concerns in public and, at the same time, making calculated overtures aimed at communicating to the United States that it remains an indispensable partner.

As the Gulf states look across the waters at a looming, powerful and would-be hegemonic Iran – and the prospect, whether remote or imminent, of a fundamentally different American approach – this has prompted an urgent drive to shore up their strategic position. It's not just the possibility of a new, or simply reduced, American role in the region. Both Iraq and Syria are in chaos, and their central

governments are aligned with Tehran. Added up, all this explains the almost unprecedented feeling of vulnerability in some key Gulf states.

This is precisely where the new Egypt becomes a crucial player in the Arab world, and even for Gulf security. Egypt is by far the largest Arab state, with a probable population of more than 90 million people. It has considerable military resources, although its present ability to project armed force may be limited. But its potential hard-power might – and its existing cultural and political influence in much of the Arab world – cannot be underestimated.

Simply put, the GCC states that withdrew their ambassadors from Doha have every reason to believe they need a strong, stable and committed Egypt in order to acquire new strategic depth that is otherwise unavailable.

This probably best explains the timing and seriousness of the message of unmistakable anger over Qatar's ongoing support for what is perceived by those GCC states, and Cairo, as support for subversion in Egypt and beyond. Such subversion threatens to sabotage the creation of a Gulf-Egypt axis that could provide the Arab world with the beginnings of a substantial new strategic posture vis-à-vis Iran and, potentially, a changed American role in the region.

Yet all these sources of anxiety should be tempered with some sobering perspective.

First, the GCC states will probably again patch up their differences, as they always have in the past. Qatar will, over time, undoubtedly have to significantly amend its policies. But that's probably a matter for the future, the point having now been unmistakably made. In all likelihood, they will eventually do so voluntarily.

Second, the Gulf-Egypt axis is likely to develop apace and, unless circumstances change fairly radically, it will provide the fundamental basis for a regional Arab coalition that possesses much greater strategic heft and depth.

Third, hand-wringing over any radically altered American role is premature. The "pivot to Asia" remains theoretical. In reality, the US strategic presence in the Gulf region is not drawing down. If anything, it is building up, including \$72 billion (Dh265bn) in arms sales to, and the maintenance of major military bases in, Arab Gulf states. Fiscal-year plans for 2015 and the latest US quarterly defence reviews do not downgrade the American presence in the Gulf region at all, making it at least as significant a priority as Asia.

None of that guarantees there won't be some version of a feared historic change in American calculations. But Iran is still treated in every US strategic guidance document and review as the primary threat to American interests in the area, and changing that will require a dramatic reconceptualisation at every level.

Nonetheless, it's understandable that, under present circumstances, Gulf states would look for greater strategic depth. Egypt may be their only real option, and Cairo seems equally enthusiastic about the partnership. Therefore, Doha has been duly put on notice that it's not going to be allowed to get in the way of achieving such a new Arab axis.

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