

Tunisia at the Crossroads: What Role for the United States in a Multipolar World?

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The United States, in recognizing the limits of its traditional “bloc-building” approach, faces the imperative to adapt to a multipolar reality. Embracing multipolarity as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy could pave the way for more flexible and effective international engagements.

In today's global landscape, the clear-cut divisions of the Cold War era have given way to a complex web of challenges and a multipolar world marked by competitive dynamics. This shift demands a nuanced approach from the United States, a move away from seeking dominance through large-scale coalitions against adversaries like China, since such strategies risk escalating tensions in a world that lacks the bipolar stability of the past. In this global reconfiguration, the role of “swing countries” like Tunisia gains unprecedented importance.

In the midst of North Africa's political upheaval, countries like Tunisia stand at a critical crossroads, evaluating the merits of their longstanding alliances with Western nations against the enticing prospects of deepening relations with Eastern powers, particularly Russia and China.

Against this backdrop, the United States has yet to articulate a definitive stance on engaging with nations such as Tunisia, where authoritarian tendencies are on the rise and anti-Western sentiments increasingly pronounced. This ambiguity raises important questions about Washington's strategic approach in a region caught between historical affiliations and the lure of new partnerships.

Tunisia, a Swing Country

Tunisia, with its strategic geopolitical position, is emblematic of this transition. Its journey reflects a broader reassessment of global alliances due to a growing disillusionment with traditional engagements with Western countries alongside a mix of economic ambitions and security considerations.

Tunisia's relations with Europe are strained by ideological, economic, and structural rifts, exemplified by the comments of Tunisian foreign minister Nabil Amr, who [criticized \(https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/il-ministro-degli-esteri-della-tunisia-lue-soffre-di-senso-di-superiorita-ma-e-una-minoranza/\)](https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/il-ministro-degli-esteri-della-tunisia-lue-soffre-di-senso-di-superiorita-ma-e-una-minoranza/) the European Union for “a sense of superiority.”

The growing discontent in Tunisia towards European policies, further exacerbated by issues like the migration crisis, has escalated tensions and underscored the critical need to understand Tunisia's evolving foreign relations and its pursuit of varied alliances. The strain in these relations has resulted in a scenario where the EU's dependence on Tunisia for managing migration has provided its authoritarian leader with considerable bargaining power. This power implies that the European Union could be predisposed to overlook governance malpractices and ignore demands for economic reforms, in return for ongoing collaboration on migration issues.

This highlights the complex interplay between geopolitical necessities and the principles of democratic governance, underscoring that this is a critical moment for Tunisia and similar nations as they navigate the opportunities and challenges of a shifting global order.

If Tunisia, a significant non-NATO ally and security partner of the United States, were to shift its alliances, the global power landscape might not experience a seismic shift. However, this transition could notably enhance Russia's strategic posture in the Mediterranean. This potential pivot, whose feasibility and broader implications are being debated in Tunisia, is being propelled forward amidst the country's autocratic consolidation, which is effectively sidelining the dissent of Tunisian elites and any form of opposition.

Tunisia's near-total alignment with an emboldened Algeria, buoyed by the surge in hydrocarbon prices during the Ukraine conflict, highlights President Kais Saied's intention to govern unilaterally, without consultation. This shift was starkly evident when he broke Tunisian neutrality by extending a welcome fit for a state leader to Brahim Ghali, who leads the Polisario Front, Western Sahara's independence movement, which is in conflict with Morocco. This marks a profound departure from Tunisia's historical engagements and democratic values, hinting that the nation stands on the verge of a significant geopolitical realignment and is not merely a passive participant in the global order.

This nuanced situation in Tunisia reflects the broader complexities of current global politics, particularly the ongoing discourse about the U.S. role and the structure of the international system. Despite an apparent uptick in leverage for developing nations within the international arena, the concentration of military prowess and economic might remain predominantly with the traditional Western powers and China.

The war in Ukraine has not only made clear the challenges the United States faces in forming a unified global coalition but has also exemplified the cautious approach of "global south" countries, which are strategically balancing their alliances amidst shifting global geopolitics. This movement toward a multipolar world, where alliances are constantly reevaluated, sets the stage for Russia's deepening engagement in North Africa.

Beyond mere trade interests, Russia's ambitions to establish military bases in strategic locations across Libya, Egypt, Algeria, and potentially Tunisia emphasize its intent to expand its influence. Such developments could significantly bolster Russian power projection in the Mediterranean, transforming Tunisia's involvement with Russia into a pivotal factor that might reshape the region's geopolitical landscape.

The United States, in recognizing the limits of its traditional "bloc-building" approach, faces the imperative to adapt to this multipolar reality. Embracing multipolarity as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy could pave the way for more flexible and effective international engagements. This would entail forging a diverse array of bilateral and minilateral partnerships, establishing equitable trade agreements, and encouraging allies to assume a more substantial role in their defense. Such a strategy not only acknowledges the complexities of the current global system but also champions a more collaborative and decentralized approach to international relations, offering a path toward stability and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

In this context, U.S.-Tunisia security cooperation, emblematic of Tunisia's importance as a significant non-NATO ally and a contributor to regional security, merits prompt and comprehensive discussion. This alliance, crucial yet

complex due to U.S. reservations about President Saïed's administration, frames the broader analysis of Tunisia's geopolitical maneuvering and its implications, underscoring the need for a balanced perspective on Tunisia's strategic deliberations and their potential impact on the Mediterranean and beyond.

Tunisia's engagement with Eastern powers, including its overtures toward joining BRICS and fostering closer ties with Russia and China reflects its pursuit of diversified economic partnerships and enhanced policy autonomy. Viewing Tunisia's actions as evidence of a decisive break from Western alliances oversimplifies the country's nuanced approach to foreign relations. Tunisia's geopolitical strategies, set against the backdrop of the 2024 elections and the quest for economic and political stability, highlight the delicate balance it seeks to maintain between traditional alliances and new partnerships. However, the looming threat of economic collapse, compounded by the president's reluctance to agree to International Monetary Fund terms to avoid external mandates, might further incentivize Tunisia to distance itself from Western connections. In this situation, following his reelection, President Saïed might be driven to explore strategic offers, such as granting Russia a military base or providing China with access to a Tunisian port, serving as a financial safety net. This maneuver highlights the intricate motivations shaping Tunisia's approach to international relations and underscores its multifaceted strategy for global engagement. Today, the nation appears stranded in a quagmire of its own making, with a path to recovery seemingly out of reach without the aid of global partners. This not only emphasizes the importance of U.S. and EU cooperation in these trying times, but also highlights the urgent need for a concerted effort to safeguard Tunisia's industrial foundation in a socioeconomic environment that has become precarious and inflammable.

U.S.-Tunisia Dynamics: The Potential Deterioration of Bilateral Ties

The ascent of Kais Saïed to power in Tunisia marks a significant turn in the nation's trajectory following the 2011 revolution, highlighting a transition from what was once seen as an economy full of promise to one that now finds itself on the margins. Populism has emerged in response to a discredited system and the void created by the EU's lack of political will to engage with Tunisia.

Learning from past experiences, the international community, with the United States and its allies at the forefront, should engage Tunisia in a manner that champions both democratic values and sustainable development. Restoration of democracy in Tunisia is critically aligned with U.S. interests, especially as President Saïed's authoritarian drift poses challenges to reliable partnership with Washington.

As Saïed is an irrational and unpredictable dictator, the United States faces limitations in relying on his administration for consistent cooperation. Although Washington does have some leverage—though it is not clear for how long—the evolving political landscape under Saïed suggests an imminent risk of severed ties, underscoring the urgency of U.S. support for restoration of democracy. A democratic Tunisia would not only be a stable and predictable ally, but would also open avenues for economic engagement, counter the strategic encroachments of rivals like Russia and China, and align with the principled U.S. stance on democracy and human rights. The situation necessitates a proactive U.S. approach to bolster Tunisia's democratic institutions and civil society, ensuring that Tunisia remains anchored in the democratic camp and aligned with U.S. interests in the region.

However, the disillusionment among Tunisians with their country's democratic transition, perceived as chaotic and a significant waste of resources, cannot be overlooked. This sentiment underscores the challenge of promoting democracy where the immediate outcomes have not met the population's expectations for stability, prosperity, and the fight against corruption.

In light of this, the leverage of the United States indeed extends beyond traditional diplomatic engagement to include its soft power and the aspirational value of the American dream, particularly for entrepreneurs and young professionals. The appeal of the United States as a model of economic success and innovation can be a powerful tool in rekindling hope and interest in democratic values, provided it is paired with tangible opportunities for Tunisians to

engage economically and benefit from such a relationship.

In this context, the United States could offer, jointly with the EU, a comprehensive proposal aiming at creating a mutually beneficial relationship with Tunisia, leveraging economic incentives and mobility opportunities to encourage country's return to a democratic transition path. By providing tangible benefits tied directly to reform milestones, the initiative seeks to support the Tunisian people's aspirations for a prosperous, democratic society while aligning with the strategic interests of the United States and its allies in promoting stability and democracy in the region. This offer represents a balanced blend of support and conditionality, designed to facilitate Tunisia's journey towards economic stability and democratic governance.

By focusing on these aspects, the United States can leverage its soft power to not only support Tunisia's democratic transition but also address the disillusionment by showcasing the practical benefits of democracy and open markets. This approach could help bridge the gap between the ideals of democracy and the concrete economic aspirations of the Tunisian people, making the concept of democratic governance more appealing and relevant to their daily lives. ❖

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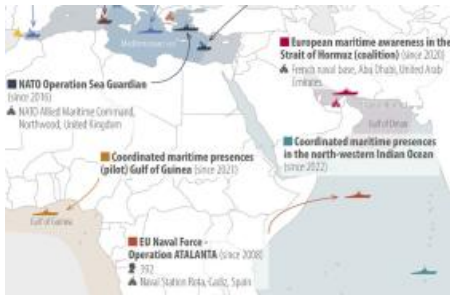


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