An Assessment of the Biden Administration’s Policy in the Middle East
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**INTRODUCTION**

In his first international address, in February 2021, newly elected US President Joe Biden declared that “America is back.” The slogan implied his administration would oversee a return to greater US involvement in world affairs but the fact is that he is proving even more isolationist than his immediate predecessors, Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

On the presidential campaign trail, Biden pledged to end America’s “forever wars” and pursue diplomacy relentlessly. However, it remains to be seen just how effective diplomacy can be in the absence of the threat of use of power.

**WITHDRAWAL FROM THE REGION SINCE OBAMA**

Trump's declared approach to the Middle East was to end America's engagement in endless conflicts in the region. While running for president in 2016, he claimed that the US had spent $6 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a figure he increased to $7 trillion in 2018.

America, he said, was protecting the people of the Middle East and he suggested that Arab countries should contribute financially to the cost of this US protection. He campaigned to bring “the boys back home” and, in December 2018, tweeted that it was time for others to fight. The US, he said, should not be the police force for a region in which the people did not appreciate its efforts.

But while Trump made the case for isolationism in particularly blunt terms, it was Obama who started the trend. Despite multilateral agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accords, the focus of the Obama administration was more domestic in nature than that of his predecessor, George W. Bush. For the average American, the only obvious consequence of Bush’s war on the “axis of evil,” and his administration’s doctrine of spreading democracy throughout the world, was two disastrous wars.

Obama adopted a more realistic approach to the region, which involved stepping back from attempts to reform it, accepting as it is and managing its problems. Regarding Iran, he succeeded in clinching a deal with Tehran where his predecessor had failed, simply because he had more modest aims and requests.

Obama campaigned on withdrawing from Iraq, in the process framing the new American isolationism. Although Trump’s campaign was based on undoing this isolationism, he nevertheless pursued the trend his predecessor started.

Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the Paris Climate Accords. He even threatened to withdraw America from NATO. In the Middle East, he initiated a withdrawal from Syria under the pretext that the mission to eradicate Daesh had been accomplished.

Similarly to Trump, Biden campaigned on dismantling his predecessor’s record, promising to reinstate the Iran nuclear deal and return to the Paris agreement. But when it came to the Middle East, he hastily withdrew US troops from Afghanistan on the pretext that he had to follow through on decisions taken by the Trump administration.

Hence, despite the fluctuations in foreign policy since Obama, and the declared intention of each of the past three presidents to undo the work of his predecessor, withdrawal from the region has not only been a constant element in the foreign policies of each administration but each successive president has accelerated the trend.

For his part, Biden seems to have been inspired by a 2020 report from international affairs think tank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, titled Making US Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class. It argues that it is better to have a “less ambitious” foreign policy that makes sure decisions mainly benefit middle-class Americans. Biden appointed Jake Sullivan, a co-author of the report, as his national security advisor.

Biden came across as a president who would value multilateralism, institutions and democracy, and there was widespread expectation of increased engagement by the

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US in its handling of foreign affairs. However, similarly to his predecessor, he is taking a more unilateral approach to foreign policy, as exemplified by the hasty withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, which caused surprise and concern among America’s European partners.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, indirectly criticized the withdrawal saying that “for those who believed in democracy and freedom, especially for women, these are bitter events.”

While the world scrambled to handle the repercussions of the withdrawal, the Biden administration insisted it was the correct course of action, it was behind them and it was now time to move on.

Proponents of the withdrawal said the US spent 20 years engaged in a failed nation-building attempt in Afghanistan and there was no strategic benefit to be gained from remaining there any longer.

However, pragmatists point to the true original objectives of the US, which were to put in place a pro-US regime and make sure Afghanistan did not become a breeding ground for terrorists. Those objectives were achieved at a relatively low cost. In the two years that preceded the withdrawal, there had been no casualties and the US had a light footprint in the country, with a resultant low and sustainable cost.

**IRAN-CENTRIC POLICY**

Biden’s Middle East policy, similarly to that of Trump, is Iran-centric, which is also in line with Obama’s regional doctrine. Trump decided to exert “maximum pressure” on Iran while paying special attention to the interests of Israel. With the Abraham Accords, a flagship policy of his presidency, Trump focused on pushing Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel without the latter offering any compensation or security guarantees to the approach of the Arab peace initiative.

The Biden administration, on the other hand, does not seek to increase the pressure on Iran, preferring instead to entice Tehran to revive the 2015 nuclear deal from which it withdrew in response to the American withdrawal under Trump, and began to enrich uranium. The Biden administration is now in a weak position. It has promised Americans a stronger and longer nuclear deal but is faced with a more rigid Iranian leadership that is demanding conditions that fall outside of the scope of the JCPOA, including the removal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from Washington’s terrorism blacklist.

The war in Ukraine has added another complication, as Russia is one of the signatories to the JCPOA and will doubtless use this to bring pressure to bear on the US. At the same time, Biden cannot offer Tehran any guarantee that the deal will not be revoked by a new president in three years. Meanwhile, even as they negotiate the Iranians are increasing their regional activities carried out through proxies. On Jan. 17 this year, three people were killed by a Houthi missile attack on Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE. Another two missiles fired at the country later that month by the Yemen-based militia were intercepted.

In the face of these pressures, the success of America’s declared intent to return to the JCPOA is far from guaranteed and there appears to be no alternative in place should the negotiations collapse. Meanwhile, the conflict in Ukraine is clearly a more immediate concern for the Biden administration than the situation in the Middle East.

**FROZEN CONFLICT**

Biden has also bowed back from Trump’s determination to apply maximum pressure on Syria, preferring a “frozen conflict” policy. Trump hoped the Syrian regime would crack under sustained pressure and agree to negotiate. That pressure was applied directly on Lebanon, which the US viewed as the lung for Bashar Al-Assad’s regime and imposed sanctions on its banking sector.

But while Trump’s goal was the collapse of the Syrian regime, Biden aims to maintain the status quo and prevent a collapse in an effort to avoid messy repercussions the administration would have to deal with.

**The new US policy of “frozen conflict” sends a bad message to America’s friends and enemies alike.**

**NEW ALLIANCES**

In Biden’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance report, published in March 2021, the entire Middle East was reduced to a single paragraph that spoke vaguely of America’s “ironclad commitment to Israel’s security,” working “to deter Iranian aggression,” and collaborating with regional partners to “disrupt Al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks.”

But, it adds, “we do not believe that military force is the answer to the region’s challenges.
and we will not give our partners in the Middle East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values.”

This last remark, which highlights the superior attitude of the Biden administration to leaderships in the Middle East, has caused a regional realignment. Trump sought to realign Arab countries with Israel but, as a result of Biden’s approach, old foes are getting together. This is partly because they no longer see the US as an ally they can rely upon and, feeling abandoned, they need to devise policies of their own and seek new alliances.

With Trump in the White House, regional leaders felt the US had their backs and that they could pursue more aggressive policies. Erdogan, the UAE’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman all had special relationships with Trump but lack this intimacy with Biden.

As a presidential candidate, Biden even labeled Saudi Arabia “a pariah” state, and the administration’s attempts to recalibrate the US relationship with the Kingdom is prompting former foes to coalesce; the Emirati crown prince has visited Turkey, for example, and Erdogan has visited both the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Driven partly by the Biden approach and partly by other factors, countries in the region are seeking security policies of their own. But the potential Saudi-Turkish rapprochement has come about mainly because both countries feel that they cannot rely on the US anymore and are facing similar threats. Turkey is cornered by Iran in Syria and in Iraq: Iranian militias protect the PKK in Iraq, while Tehran supports Assad in Syria.

Meanwhile, the main point of contention between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, is no longer a threat as it has lost its popular appeal.

**DISCUSSION**

The new US policy of “frozen conflict” sends a bad message to America’s friends and enemies alike. The discourse is that the center of world policies is no longer transatlantic, but focused on Chinese and Russian alliances.

This has great repercussions for the Middle East. Gulf countries that began to look to Russia and China as alternatives to the US a while ago now find themselves compelled to strengthen their relationships with America’s two main competitors. Russia and China are more relaxed when it comes to human rights issues and less particular than the US about the use of the weapons they sell.

However, they cannot compensate for the US for several reasons. The first is that both of them are close to Iran, which means that despite the apparent US disinterest in the Arabian Gulf, and Biden’s aloof attitude toward the region, the US is still of importance as long as the Gulf states have points of contention with the regime in Tehran.

While ideologically the Democratic Party remains focused on disengagement and on domestic affairs, this disengagement will affect the standing of the US around the world, along with the part of the prosperity enjoyed by America that stems from this standing. Why, for example, did the US historically win so many oil concessions?

It is difficult completely to separate foreign policy from domestic policy. The US enjoyed preferential treatment globally because
it had a supreme position and because its allies relied upon it. If the US relinquishes its leading role in the world, ultimately that will affect its economic prosperity.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates that the Gulf region is still of strategic importance. As the US and Europe moved to put pressure on Russia through sanctions, they have sought the cooperation of the Gulf states more than ever before. However, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been unwilling to take a side in this fight.

This differs markedly from the Cold War era, when Saudi Arabia’s fossil fuel policies rendered the price of Russian gas prohibitive, contributing to the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. Then, under the Carter doctrine, the US was committed to its Arab Gulf partners. This does not seem to be the case any longer, as the relationship has become more transactional.

Disengaging from the region will not shield the US from its problems. The resurgence of Daesh, as a result of the early US withdrawal from Iraq, took a toll on the West in the form of an increase in terrorist attacks.

While disengagement from the Middle East and keeping a distance from the nations there might lead to some rapprochement between Arab Gulf states and Turkey, in general it will also result in more chaos as countries will tend to craft policies of their own that might well clash.

Also, Russia will tend to fill the void left by the US. Iran, sensing more lax American attitudes, will only grow more bold, which in turn will erode US prestige worldwide.

The problem is that the current US policy is driven by ideology more than pragmatism. The fixation on disengaging from the region is precluding a careful, cost-benefit analysis of such action. Relentless diplomacy cannot work unless there is a force behind it, a political will, and a willingness to enforce it if necessary. This is not evident within the Biden administration.

The regional status quo is not sustainable. Postponing the taking of necessary decisions will only aggravate the problems and will not delay the eventual need to handle them.

The policy of procrastination, while paying minimal attention to foreign policy and to the region, will definitely be exploited by America’s rivals, who will seek to fill the void.


