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THE LIMITS OF AMERICAN POWER IN WEST ASIA

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‘The Gulf or the larger West Asia is no longer an exclusive American sphere of influence’ | Photo Credit: AFP

In 1980, faced with the prospect of the Soviet Union expanding its reach to the Gulf, the Carter administration in the United States came up with an aggressive approach. In the previous year, the U.S. had suffered twin setbacks in Asia — in February, the Shah’s regime in Iran, one of the pillars of America’s West Asia policy, collapsed; and in December, the Soviets sent the Red Army to Afghanistan. Outlining his policy, framed by Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter had said in his State of the Union address on January 23, 1980, that “any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the U.S., and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force”.

Editorial | **New reality: On Saudi Arabia-Iran reconciliation and China’s role**

The Carter doctrine would continue to guide the policy of successive administrations towards the Gulf and ensure that the region remained an exclusive American sphere of influence — until recently. Of late, there has been much talk about the shifting sands of Arabia. It was, however, on full display when Saudi Arabia and Iran reached an agreement earlier this month, in secret talks hosted by China, to normalise relations. Put it in context: the U.S. remained a spectator when its global rival (China) brought together one of its allies (Saudi Arabia) and a sworn enemy (Iran) to reach a potential game-changing pact in a region (Gulf) which it considered as an exclusive sphere of influence. It practically marked an end to the Carter Doctrine.

This did not happen overnight. Over the past 20 years, the U.S. has made a host of mistakes in West Asia, which has led to a decline in its overall influence and an associated policy recalibration by its allies. Take the cases of Iraq, Syria and Iran — one, a country the U.S. invaded, brought regime change and occupied; two, a country where it sought regime change without a full-scale invasion; and three, a country which it sought to both contain and engage.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq (ground), on March 20, 2003, it was at the peak of its power. America’s Arab allies lined up to support the war. But what they saw, from a security perspective, was the mindless destruction of the Iraqi state, which triggered sectarian bloodshed and led to the rise of radical Islamist outfits such as al Qaeda in Iraq, which later transformed into the Islamic State, further destabilising the region. From a geopolitical point of view, the Iraq invasion took down a buffer that the Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies had between themselves and a

Shia theocratic Iran, and offered post-Saddam Iraq on a platter to Shia parties that had had historical ties with Tehran.

When the Syrian civil war broke out, Arab monarchies found it an opportunity to push Iran back by taking out the regime in Damascus. The U.S. supported the regime change bloc, called for President Bashar al-Assad to go, offered aid to the rebels, and launched a secretive Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) programme. But, having burnt its fingers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, the U.S.'s appetite for another full-scale military intervention was already diminishing. When the U.S. stopped short of an intervention in Syria, Russia and Iran moved fast, turning around the civil war. America's allies, from Saudi Arabia to Jordan and Qatar to Turkey, who all had bet on anti-Assad forces, helplessly watched as the Syrian Army and Iran-trained militias, covered by Russian jets, destroyed the rebellion.

American President Barack Obama, who realised that the U.S.'s endless entanglements in the region were slowing down its attempts to address emerging conventional challenges, reached out to Iran and struck a multilateral deal on its nuclear programme. The Obama plan was to reach a détente with Iran and persuade America's Arab allies and Tehran to "share" the region. But the U.S. cutting a deal with Tehran at a time when the U.S.'s own actions had made Iran stronger angered both its Gulf allies and Israel. When U.S. President Donald Trump destroyed the nuclear deal, they welcomed it. But Mr. Trump did not have an alternative to check Iran's immediate conventional military power. When Tehran responded to Mr. Trump's "maximum pressure" with maximum resistance, particularly targeting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the U.S. looked away.

Today, the U.S. is aware of its limitations. It is also facing bigger conventional challenges elsewhere. So, to address this task of retaining America's influence in West Asia with reduced commitments, the U.S. came up with the proposal of collectivising its alliances — bringing Arab allies and Israel closer so that Israel can take a larger security role in a collective front against Iran.

But this approach has at least three problems. One, with its deprioritisation of West Asia, the U.S.'s leverage over its allies is slipping, which is emboldening the allies to take their own foreign decisions.

Second, Israel's continuing occupation of the Palestinian territories could play a spoiler in the bid to collectivise alliances. The UAE not only agreed to normalise ties with Israel through the Abraham Accords but also amended ties with Iran and warmed up to Syria and Turkey. Saudi Arabia, on the other side, resisted embracing Israel. Instead, the Kingdom, arguably the most powerful Arab country, saw an alternative for stability in the China-mediated peace plan with Iran. Third, Israel, the lynchpin of America's collectivisation strategy, itself is resisting American influence. Israel's new government is moving ahead with its judicial overhaul plan despite pressure from Washington. Israel also refused to join the western sanctions against Russia, and refused to send weapons to Ukraine.

As the U.S.'s deprioritisation of West Asia is leaving behind a vacuum, its allies are trying to establish more predictable ties with friends and foes, creating their own spheres of influence and emerging as the new pillars of the region. Israel wants to strengthen its ties with the Arab world to face down Iran without compromising on Palestine. Iran wants to break out of the economic chokehold of sanctions and realise its true potential. Turkey wants to swing back to a region which it once dominated, and Saudi Arabia wants to become the natural leader of the Arab world. And China, the new superpower on the block, wants to make sure that its economic interests are protected.

This does not mean that America is going to retreat from the region. The U.S. has several bases and tens of thousands of troops deployed across the region, and it will continue to play a major security role. But the Gulf or the larger West Asia is no longer an exclusive American sphere of influence, as Mr. Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski had imagined. It is too early to say whether the regional realignments, including the Saudi-Iran reconciliation, would survive the infamously fractious geopolitics of West Asia. But there are three constants in this whirlwind — America's declining ability to shape geopolitical outcomes in the region, China's continued rise and a growing appetite for the U.S.'s allies to make autonomous foreign policy choices. This is new terrain for America in West Asia.

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