

IN WEST ASIA, IT'S A BLEAK FUTURE AMID AMERICA FADING

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to the media upon arrival at Phoenix Sky Harbour International Airport in Phoenix, Arizona on October 19, 2020. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

When the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed normalisation agreements with Israel in September, under the mediation of the United States, American President Donald Trump hailed it as a “new dawn in the Middle East”. The so-called ‘[Abraham Accords](#)’, which saw the first normalisation between Israel and Arab countries in 26 years, was a rare diplomatic victory for Mr. Trump. It was rare because most of the President’s other big foreign policy bets were either disastrous or inconclusive. The U.S.-Taliban deal is largely seen as American capitulation to the Afghan insurgents; the outreach to North Korea failed to produce any result; the maximum pressure campaign on Iran seems to have backfired; the promise to fetch “the deal of the century” between the Israelis and the Palestinians was a non-starter; and the trade war with China failed to produce any structural shift in the way China does business while tensions between the two countries rocketed. Amid this policy chaos, Mr. Trump at least got something in the ‘Abraham Accords’ to present as a breakthrough. But does it bring peace to West Asia, as Mr. Trump has claimed?

It was evident during the Barack Obama years that the U.S. had overstretched itself in West Asia and North Africa, a region America has deeply engaged with since President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s time. The U.S. had been stuck in an unwinnable war in Iraq. In Syria, it was checkmated by the Russians. Its intervention in Libya turned out to be disastrous. Iran continued to be defiant despite threats and sanctions. Israel was uncontrollable. The Arab allies were upset. Mr. Obama realised the historical necessity of resizing the U.S. presence in the region and pivoting to East Asia where China was steadily on the rise. But the U.S. has both allies and rivals in the region. It cannot just pack up and exit.

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Mr. Obama, in his second term, adopted a realistic approach to address this problem. He made peace with Iran, accepted the Russian lead role in Syria, left Libya burning, ignored Saudi and Israeli sulking over Iran. But, to balance these, he overlooked Israel’s deepening occupation of Palestine and cooperated with the Saudi attack on Yemen. The plan was to let the regional players establish what he called a “cold peace” among themselves.

When Mr. Trump came to office, he wanted to undo Mr. Obama’s policy legacy. He demolished the Iran deal, brought Israel back to the centre of America’s policy towards the region and prompted the Arab and Jewish allies of the U.S. to join hands. The plan, as it emerges, was to remake the regional dynamics in favour of America’s allies and push rivals to a corner. Mr. Trump succeeded in bringing the Gulf Arab countries and Israel together, but he failed to escape the historical reality which Mr. Obama faced — America’s dwindling influence in shaping the present and future of West Asia. A policy in which the historical reality is not factored in may not produce the desired outcome.

Take, for example, the case of Iran. The acrimony towards Iran was one of the defining factors of Mr. Trump’s West Asia policy. While pulling the U.S. out of the nuclear deal unilaterally and reimposing sanctions on Iran, Mr. Trump thought the Iranians would flinch once again so that he

could extract more concessions from them and cut their regional wings. But the perils of that policy were the predictability of the policymaker's objectives, and the Iranians were determined to defy him at any cost. Iran responded with multiple cuts on the U.S. and allied interests in the region — from targeting Saudi oil facilities and cargo ships in the Strait of Hormuz to launching rocket attacks at American troops in Iraq. Mr. Trump's response was the typical American-style response of the good old days when it was in a position to shape the geopolitical outcome in West Asia. He had Qassem Soleimani, one of the top Iranian Generals, killed and declared that the U.S. had re-established deterrence *vis-à-vis* Iran. But the use of force did not reflect the ground realities. Less than a year after the assassination of Soleimani, the U.S., faced with continuing rocket attacks by Iran-backed Shia rebels in Iraq, is contemplating shutting down the American Embassy in Baghdad, besides withdrawing most troops from Iraq. Where is the deterrence?

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While in the case of Iran, misplaced adventurism sabotaged even the available policy options, the Trump administration's open embrace of Israel — the decision to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem, recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and the go-head to its annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank — sharpened the geopolitical contradictions in the region, instead of bringing peace. The normalisation agreements between Sunni Arab countries and Israel, partly driven by their shared concern of an aggressive Iran in a West Asia sans America, could strengthen the pro-American pillar in the region, but the withdrawal of Arab powers from the Palestinian question would not finish off the Palestinian question. It would rather leave a vacuum in regional politics which non-Arab Muslim countries would seek to fill. This offers new avenues to Turkey, which under President Recep Tayyip Erdoan, seeks to re-establish its influence in the region, and Iran, which uses the Palestinian cause to drive public opinion in the Muslim world across the Shia-Sunni divide. In other words, Mr. Trump brought together Gulf Arabs and the Jews, who had had backroom contacts for years, on a public platform. But he also opened the way for the agitated Persians and the ambitious Turks to enhance their weight in the troubled regional politics.

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Historically, the withdrawal of empires had seen new conflicts arising in their peripheries. In 1911, Italy invaded the Turkish province of Libya, triggering a dangerous competition with the Ottomans in their decline years. A year later, four Balkan states formed the Balkan League to take on the Ottomans in Europe. The collapse of the British empire left ethnic, religious, geopolitical wounds open across the former colonies. Some of the conflicts in the Caucasus, including the ongoing fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh, have their roots in the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Given these examples, it is worth asking if the U.S. is prepared to face the geopolitical consequences of the decline of its influence in West Asia. If the four years of the Trump presidency shows any indication, it is not. The new beginning Mr. Trump promised in the region could very well be that of a more troublesome future.

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END

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