US Actions in Iraq May Reshape the Region to its Disadvantage

Ever since Qasim Soleimani’s killing in a US drone strike in Iraq, a momentum for driving the US of the region seems to be building up. Iran, of course, is taking the lead, but the fact that other regional countries might also tap into this drive is what making it a potentially powerful geo-political whirlpool that might consume, partially even if not fully, the US military presence in the region. What is more likely to happen out of the two possibilities is that in the wake of a new security arrangement set up, the US presence and influence might shrink to even smaller Arab states. For Iran, driving the US out of the region primarily means driving it as far away as possible from Iraq, Syria and Lebanon—a belt of countries or the so-called ‘Shi’ite crescent’ that the US and its regional allies have always wanted to destroy and replace with a so-called ‘Sunni crescent.’

Indeed the idea for forcing external powers and “foreigners” out of the Middle East is not new. It was, as a matter of fact, Iran’s president Rouhani who, during his September 2019 speech at the UNGA annual session, argued for such a case, saying that Iran would “strengthen consolidation among all the nations with common interests in the Persian Gulf and the Hormuz region”. He invited “all the countries directly affected by the developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz to the Coalition for Hope meaning Hormuz Peace Endeavor,” stated President Rouhani. As such, while the idea was introduced then, it remained dormant until Soleimani’s killing.

While the US has already shifted its Middle East command centre from Qatar to South Carolina—and it does not necessarily indicate a US step away from guaranteeing the Arab states’ security—a rather detailed relocation might
become necessary in the wake of a growing realisation in the principal Gulf states about the fact that any military conflict with Iran would not remain confined to Iran only. No one, as it stands, would be more vulnerable to this conflict than the Arab states themselves. It was perhaps this very realisation that was at the heart of Muhammad bin Salman’s unusual emphasis on resorting to a political rather than a military solution of the crisis after a Yemeni strike on Saudi oil facilities. Of course, a core reason for this change of discourse was the increasing Saudi vulnerability and the very well exposed incapability to defend itself against such attacks even with US defence systems installed in the Kingdom.

Moreover, proposals for an alternative security arrangement in the Gulf have already been circulating for quite some time now. This Russian proposal for collective security in the Gulf, which has Chinese support, would potentially include the US as well. However, the presence of other countries, including Russia and China, would reduce the US hegemony significantly.

On July 23, 2019, the Russian Foreign ministry introduced this concept, stating in a letter to the UN that "Practical work on launching the process of creating a security system in the Persian Gulf may be started by holding bilateral and multilateral consultations between interested parties, including countries both within the region and outside of it" i.e., the US and Europe.

Responding to the Russian concept, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said that they would want to extend “cooperation, coordination and communication with all the concerned parties.”

Iran, on the other hand, has been working on its HOPE (Hormuz Peace Endeavour) program. With the Iranian foreign minister visiting Oman thrice in 2019 and with the joint Russia-China and Iran naval exercise, too, held in the Gulf of Oman, what becomes clear is how the three countries are moving towards an identical goal of projecting an alternative security arrangement in the region.

Again, in this context, the recently held first ever China-Russia-Iran naval exercise does reflect a step towards creating a joint security mechanism. This step, due to the presence of China and Russia, might attract the Gulf Arab states, many of whom have close and deep economic relations with China as well as Russia. While the casualty of this arrangement will certainly be the US influence, it will equally cater to the Arab states’ interests as far as the question of their security concerns with vis-à-vis the so-called ‘Iranian aggression’ are concerned.

While it is possible that the joint power projection in the region may work counter-productively in terms of forcing the Gulf Arab states to align with the US even more closely, the fact this is happening along side a strategic re-think in the Arab states tends to increase its chances of success in terms of both expansion of scope and countries.

Chinese and Russian increasing military presence in the region is, as it stands, too big a strategic development for the Arab states to ignore, or not use it to reduce their over- dependence on the US. If this collective arrangement forces a genuine re-think in the Arab states, this will, in the long run, allow for a US partial exit from the region.

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