The Biden Administration Rips US-Saudia Alliance Apart

While the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks has been marked by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the end of the US’ longest ever war is also seeing some significant changes in the US geo-politics. Specifically, the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House has set in motion forces that could dramatically redefine the nature of US ties with one of its closest allies in the ‘war on terror’ i.e., the Saudis. The state of US-Saudia ties today is a complete contrast to the warm reception that the Saudis extended to Donald Trump nearly five years ago. It was perhaps a Saudi way of honouring the newly elected president, reciprocating his decision to choose Saudi Arabia as the first county to visit as the US president. That enthusiasm has already faded. Reasons for this dramatic downslide include not only the US’ changing regional priorities and withdrawal from the Middle East/West Asia, but also a growing general realisation both in the US and the world that America is no longer capable of, or interested in, playing the global policeman.

A major manifestation of the changing US priorities and a shift away from the Saudis came recently when the US recently withdrawn a set of advance US missile defense systems from Prince Sultan air base, 70 miles south-east of Riyadh. These systems were sent and installed by the Trump administration in 2019 after Saudi Arabia was hit by missiles that flew from Yemen and targeted Saudi oil facilities. For the Saudis, the US withdrawal specifically means that Washington is backing out of its commitments with Riyadh to protect Saudi Arabia.
Pulling Patriot missiles from the kingdom is “not indicative of America’s declared intention to help Saudi Arabia defend itself against outside enemies,” said Prince Al-Faisal, Saudia’s former head of intelligence, in a recent interview with American media, adding that he hopes the US will give assurances of its commitment to deploy “whatever is needed” to help.

This withdrawal is part of a series of steps the Biden administration has taken in past few months that indicate a White House resolve to recast its ties completely with Saudia. Apart from releasing the report that claimed Muhammad bin Salman’s direct involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi consulate in Turkey, the Biden administration has also released the FBI investigation into the 9/11 attacks. Although the report does not claim a direct involvement of Saudi regime in the attacks, it does show that the Saudis were aware of the movements of al-Qaeda and that the jihadi outfit operated inside the US with the active support of the Saudi government.

The Saudi response to the Biden administration’s steps is far from passive. In the immediate aftermath of the US decision to withdraw air defense systems from Saudia, Riyad cancelled the visit of Lloyd Austin to Saudi Arabia. Lloyd Austin, who was on a tour to Gulf to thank US allies for their support in Afghanistan, was specifically asked by the Saudis not to visit Riyadh. While there is no confirmation that the Saudi change of heart was due to the US withdrawal, it remains that Saudia’s decision to cancel Austin’s visit shows how their bi-lateral ties have nose-dived recently.

While some former and current Saudi officials have criticised the US decision to withdraw, the Saudis have been actively seeking to cultivate their ties with other countries as a means to diversify their ties and reduce dependence on the US.

As irony would have it, Riyadh has taken concrete steps to diversify its military ties with Russia, one of the main countries in the world to rival the US unilateralism. On August 24, Saudi Arabia and Moscow signed agreements that will give a major boost to their defense ties. By choosing to cooperate with Moscow, Riyadh managed, at least symbolically, to rebut the US. The message, therefore, was clear: the signing of this Saudi-Russian agreement—whatever it contains—was in the wake of the downfall of the US-backed Afghan government and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan is a signal that Riyadh does not feel that it can fully rely on Washington and, so, is willing to hedge its bets by turning to Moscow.

So, while Riyadh may be using its ties with Moscow to force Washington to change its behaviour, it remains that the change in US position vis-à-vis Saudia is indicative of a broader shift the US is in the middle of introducing. For Washington, the locus of future rivalry is not going to be the Middle East, or even Europe. If China is the most important country that truly rivals Washington’s economic and military might, the locus of tussle is Southeast Asia/the Indo-pacific region, rather than the Middle East. Therefore, if the US is withdrawing from the Middle East, it is only responding to the changing global geo-political realities.

For the Saudis, too, the US’ changing priorities mean that the Kingdom needs to find allies and partners willing to set their foot in the Middle East. This includes both Russia and China.

For the Saudis, however, changing the US attitude remains imperative. Many in the Kingdom feel that Riyadh is hardwired to Washington, and that breaking this connection is not easy. For one thing, even if Washington is in the middle of a strategic shift to Southeast Asia, the military industrial complex in the US sees Riyadh as too important a market to be left to the Russians and the Chinese to dominate. For the Saudis, however, it is equally important to read the global geo-political changes and make the necessary readjustments, even if it includes buying Russia S-400. The imperative for buying this system has been provided by the failure of US systems to prevent Houthi missiles from entering the Saudi airspace and causing the damage.

Developing strategic ties with Moscow, therefore, has both military/security and diplomatic needs for the kingdom. Given the damage, even the US military industrial complex will find it very hard to revert the US-Saudi ties back to the stage that characterised them during most of the period of the ‘war on terror.’

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