Washington is Caught Up in the Middle East

Even though the US has been seeking to withdraw from the Middle East to relocate its sources to the Indo-Pacific region to tackle China’s growing influence in Southeast Asia, extricating itself from a region the US has been dominating since the end of the Second World War has proved to be a lot harder than the US policy makers might have expected when they decided to revive the “Asia Pivot 2.0” after Biden’s victory in 2020. While reducing the number of troops or withdrawing air missile defense systems is one thing, a relational extraction – in particular, at the level of deeply entrenched state-to-state ties – is completely another thing. Therefore, despite Biden’s vow to extricate the US from its ‘forever wars’, the US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, had to reassure the US’ traditional allies in the Middle East of Washington’s continuing support for the region. As Austin said during the recently held regional security meeting in Bahrain, “America’s commitment to security in the Middle East is strong and sure.”

A key reason for the US inability to abandon the Middle East is the very chaos it has itself helped created directly and indirectly in the Middle East over the last two few decades. Even in the current scenario, it is the very US withdrawal from the Iran-nuclear deal that has created a lot of tension in the region, which the Biden administration has so far failed to diffuse because of its insistence on negotiating a new pact than re-joining the JCPOA.

For many states in the Middle East – in particular, following the chaos that the US’ irresponsible withdrawal has created in Afghanistan – a US withdrawal from the Middle East, including Iraq, could create a similar situation i.e., the re-emergence of militant organistaions/groups seeking to dominate Iraq and willing to export their jihad beyond Iraq.

The prospects of a resurgence of religiously inspired terrorism has particular left Arab Kingdoms in trouble. The US
officials, therefore, have been busy ensuring the Middle Eastern states that the US would not repeat the mistakes it made in Afghanistan. As Austin further stressed in the same meeting, “We’ll work together to ensure that ISIS (banned in Russia) can’t reconstitute itself in Iraq and Syria.” Therefore, despite a strong incentive of withdrawal from the Middle East, the US is already in the middle of recalibrating its military policy. As Austin hinted, the US is already considering to operationalise an “over-the-horizon concept” of military support i.e., providing extensive air support to the groups/factions allied with Washington.

As irony would have it, the US is reassuring of its support to the countries it had itself invaded and against groups it has long been supporting directly and indirectly. The US position in the Middle East is, therefore, nothing short of a self-contradiction - a striking paradox that, while it might keep the US involved in the Middle East militarily, would also force the US to continue to devote considerable time and resources to the Middle East even if it does not want to.

While, for many policy makers in Washington, a focus on the Middle East could prevent the degree of time and resources the US wants to devote to the Indo-Pacific, the US failure in Afghanistan has led many in Washington to speculate that a similar scenario could take place in Iraq as well, which could further dent the US reputation as the most ‘powerful’ military power in the world. Speculations of an Afghanistan-like chaos are, therefore, ripe in Afghanistan.

Last month, the Pentagon’s Defense Department Inspector General Sean O’Donnell predicted in DOD’s latest report a similar collapse of the Iraqi military, arguing that the Iraqi army demonstrates, “poor operational security”, “a lack of reliable information on operations” against the Islamic States, and, among other deficiencies, “poor tactical control and coordination of strike assets.” This assessment, when seen in light of the collapse of the Afghan forces, does not augur well both for Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, especially when the US intelligence community is itself warning of the resurgence of the ISIS.

But, as mentioned above, the fear of the resurgence of terrorism after the collapse of the US-trained Iraqi forces is not the only factor making the Middle Eastern states uncomfortable. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA with Iran and the latter’s consequent shift towards increasing its production has left many states, including Israel, in trouble. This means that until its resolution – especially one that suits the US/Israeli interests – the US troubles in the Middle East would continue to grow. As it stands, it is the US withdrawal from this deal that exacerbated its ties with Tehran, which in turn had a considerable impact upon Iran’s subsequent geo-political expansion in Iraq and Syria as well. A further deterioration through a lack of resolution of the outstanding issues would further exacerbate the situation for the rest of the Middle East.

The US, therefore, cannot simply walk away from the Iranian questions, nor can it simply re-join the JCPOA because of deep Israeli opposition. As Brett McGurk, Biden’s coordinator for the Middle East said in a recent interview, “We are committed to ensuring Iran never gets a nuclear weapon” and that the US will remain committed to protecting its interests and those of its allies as well.

But the Biden administration has so far failed to develop an inter-state consensus on reviving the JCPOA, or making a new pact altogether. Even if the Biden administration can make a new deal, it is, given the Trump administration’s unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA, unlikely to leave an immediate transformatve effect. In any case, its ability to leave a strong impact on reducing tensions in the Middle East will remain subject to Biden’s ability to get the JCPOA, or a revised agreement, ratified by the US Congress. Unless Biden can ensure this, a revived or revised JCPOA would remain at the mercy of a US president – something that not only Iran but other signatories of the JCPOA, including China and Russia, are inclined to avoid in the future.

For the US, therefore, a simple withdrawal from the Middle East just because it wants to has become almost impossible, with the chaos it left in Afghanistan exacerbating its prospects even further.

Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.