The Middle East and the US ‘War of Sanctions’ on Russia

While the US has so far been able to cobble together the crumbling trans-Atlantic ‘unity’ by aggressively, provocatively and irresponsibly pushing for NATO’s expansion into Eastern Europe purportedly against Russia, the Middle East – which was once a completely US dominated geography – has refused to side with the US. Due to Washington's own poor relationships with the leading Middle Eastern players, the US does not have enough influence anymore to persuade those into putting pressure on Russia. As reports in the western media have unambiguously indicated, Riyadh has plainly refused the Biden administration’s insistence on increasing oil production by breaking the OPEC+Russia oil production deal.

When Joe Biden called King Salman in the third week of February to talk about a range of Middle East issues, including “ensuring the stability of global energy supplies,” he raised the question of breaking the OPEC Plus agreement. Shortly after the call, a statement from King Salman refused to abide by Biden and highlighted “the role of the historic OPEC+ agreement,” saying it was important to stick to the commitments that were taken. This is not just the King; Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) too stands behind it, thanks to the Biden administration's decision to implicate him in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, hoping that this controversy will help topple MBS eventually.
As Saudia’s press agency reported, in his call with President Putin, “HRH the Crown reiterated the Kingdom’s keenness to maintain the balance and stability of oil markets, highlighting the role of the OPEC+ agreement in this regard and the importance of maintaining it.” The Saudi decision is particularly alarming for the Biden administrations because, as some in Washington believe, Riyadh’s rebuff of US calls to increase oil production will increase oil prices, which the American public will directly blame on the Democratic Party which currently holds the White House and a majority in Congress. But the Middle Eastern states are sticking to their policy regardless of the cost the US might have to face.

Thus, President Putin also held a call with Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. The leaders are said to have discussed the OPEC+ deal and pledged to continue coordination on global energy markets, according to Russian and Emirati news agencies.

Accordingly, the OPEC plus meeting held on March 2 reaffirmed the above-mentioned position, as it concluded to not only maintain current levels of oil production but also asserted that current volatility in the market was not due to changes in the market dynamics but due to geo-political development i.e., the US politics of sanctioning Russia to hurt its economy.

This, in simple words, translates into a refusal to side with the US to hurt Russian economy. Had the OPEC countries decided to increase oil production, it would have brought currently rising oil prices down, and hurt the Russian economy which, during the crisis, will be relying more on increased oil prices to sustain its economic health against Western sanctions. That OPEC has refused to aid the Western efforts to hurt Russian economy means the global energy house is against the US.

At the recently held International Energy Forum in Saudia, according to a report of Wall Street Journal, the Saudi energy minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, rejected calls to pump more oil. Other OPEC delegates, according to the report, said that “The kingdom is not on the same page with the U.S. currently,” and that “We all know they are not ready to cooperate with the U.S. to calm the market.”

Nothing could have been more embarrassing for the US to see its erstwhile allies snubbing Washington’s pressure. While one may argue that the reason for major OPEC producers’ refusal to support the US may be a result of their bad terms, the fact that Israel, too, refused to support the US not only shows how support for the US politics of encircling Russia does not exist out of the trans-Atlantic alliance, but that this support is being curtailed globally.

As reports in the Israeli media have shown, Tel Aviv actually torpedoed the US plans to sell Iron Dome to Ukraine to boost its defense system against Russia. As reports show, Israel categorically rejected the US plan out of its policy of not destabilising its ties with Russia at the moment.

Israel decided to remain on the opposite side of the US when it refused to co-sponsor the US resolution in the Security Council regarding Ukraine against Russia. This policy is very much consistent with the way Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has avoided condemning Russia in line with the US or even mentioning the country by name even since the beginning of the crisis.

In line with Israel, other Middle Eastern states, too, have not criticised Russia. The UAE, which is chairing the UNSC as a non-permanent member in March, abstained from voting against Russia. Even though the UAE decision may seem like Abu Dhabi is balancing between two giants, its decision, when analysed against the backdrop of its tense ties with the US ever since it backed out of talks with Washington over the sale of F-35 jets, becomes a particularly poignant message for the US that Washington should not expect support if it cannot hold its end of the bargain.

The lack of support from the Middle East is a direct outcome of US departure from the region and its increasing focus on Southeast Asia to tackle China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific region. More and more Middle Eastern states are increasingly asserting their autonomous foreign policy choices, which means that Washington may have overestimated the support it thought it will be able to generate in favour of its politics of NATO expansion.

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