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## *Is the US Finally Losing Influence in the Middle East?*



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Fifty years ago, in the wake of the October War of 1973, the United States emerged as the principal outside actor in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger conducted the peace talks between Israel and Egypt as well as between Israel and Syria, and made sure that his counterpart—Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko—was excluded from the step-by-step process. Kissinger rightfully boasted about expelling the Soviet Union from the Middle East, where no European states were important and China played no role.

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Fast forward to the present, and it is the United States that is on the outside looking in. Russia was central to keeping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power, and China boldly orchestrated the restoration of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Arab states are reaching out to improve relations with both Russia and China, ignoring U.S. pressure to back away from Moscow and Beijing.

U.S. actions are partially responsible for the new diplomacy being practiced in the region. The Obama administration signaled its intention to reduce the U.S. presence in the region in 2015, when it closed our largest military base in Iraq, and announced a “pivot” from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific theatre to contain China. A decade later, President Biden conducted a long overdue withdrawal from Afghanistan, but the chaos of the withdrawal and the loss of life signaled to the Arab states that Washington was not seeking opportunities to expand its international presence, particularly in the Middle East. (The Soviet Union faced a similar situation in 1989, when it withdrew from Afghanistan, which led the East European members of the Warsaw Pact to seek distance from Moscow.)

Biden had to take on the military establishment, seasoned policymakers, and celebrity pundits in allowing the withdrawal from Afghanistan that Donald Trump had negotiated. Former secretary of defense Robert Gates once assured Afghan President Hamid Karzai that “we’re not ever leaving [Afghanistan].” Gates was speaking for a powerful constituency within the national security community that opposed the efforts of Obama and Donald Trump to end the military mission.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does international politics. In 2015, when Russian President Putin realized that President Obama had lost interest in Syria in the wake of the “red line” debacle, he introduced a modest military presence that saved al-Assad’s regime. Currently, the key players in the Middle East are welcoming Damascus back into the Arab community. Even the Saudis, who have restored relations with Iran and moved to end the war in Yemen, are soon to reestablish relations with Syria. Previously, the Saudis had taken the lead in providing arms to opposition groups trying to oust al-Assad. With the exception of Qatar, another long-time supporter of the opposition to al-Assad, the key nations in the region are opening doors to al-Assad and senior Syrian officials.

Last week, the Saudis organized discussions with numerous Arab foreign ministers to discuss Syria’s return to the Arab League. Al-Assad will soon be welcomed at the meetings of the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is orchestrating this campaign in order to reduce the in-fighting in

the Arab world. China has been far more supportive of this objective than the United States.

As a result of China's diplomacy and Saudi willingness to pursue a rapprochement with Syria, there is greater possibility for reducing conflict in Yemen and Syria in the near turn. Immediately after the restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a Saudi delegation arrived in Yemen's capital of Sanaa to end the fighting that has caused the deaths of more than 300,000 innocent civilians. Greater stability in Syria could allow some of the 13 million Syrian refugees to return to their homes.

Beijing realizes that Washington's one-sided support for Israel as well as its policy of non-recognition of Iran provided an opening to negotiate a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Beijing moved adroitly to act as an honest broker between Riyadh and Tehran, which should ensure China's continued access to the oil and gas resources in both Gulf countries. China's success should be a wake-up call to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the Department of State, but there is no sign of any U.S. movement to restore its influence in the region. (This should also be a wake-up call to Israel's national security decision makers, who can no longer assume Saudi support in a confrontation with Iran.)

The increased violence and political instability in Israel, moreover, is also problematic for U.S. interests because U.S. support for Israel contrasts with the increased international sympathy and support for Palestinian statehood. Israel has become a virtual pariah in the region, and the United States is ultimately tied to Israeli policies that could lead to involvement in a confrontation with Iran. The United States has various tools of leverage regarding Israel, particularly with regard to the military assistance it provides, but it is unlikely that a Biden administration—or any administration—would be willing to use it.

The United States may not want to renew its leadership role in the region, but at least it should try to take advantage of the opportunity to foster greater stability in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. It's time to restore relations with Iran and to find a way to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran nuclear accord that marked the success of John Kerry's activist Department of State in the Obama administration. Since Israel benefits from inter-Arab conflict, it views the ameliorative steps in the region as threatening. The United States should welcome any diplomatic steps that address the problem of violence.

Finally, the United States should not allow Israel to argue that its war with the Palestinians is really an extension of the American global war on terror. Washington needs to

recognize that Israeli occupation of the West Bank is a primary cause of instability in the region, not Arab terrorism.

*(A future column will deal with other aspects of the new Middle East, including the role of Turkey and the implications of the Russian-Iranian partnership.)*

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