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## *The United States and the Middle East: Hoist On Its Own Petard*



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“Who’s the fucking superpower around here?”

— President Bill Clinton after his first meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996.

“Don’t do stupid shit.”

— President Barack Obama commenting on the U.S. military intervention in Libya in 2011.

“We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran.”

— President Joe Biden defending his fist bump with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2021.

In 2011, the Obama-Biden administration announced that the United States would “pivot” from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region. This sent a signal to China that the United States would pursue a policy of “containment” against Beijing, not unlike the “containment” policy it pursued against the Soviet Union during the worst days of the Cold War. The fact that the United States was in no position—either economically or politically—to contain China was lost on one of the father’s of the policy—Kurt Campbell—who is waiting confirmation as the deputy secretary of state in the Biden administration.

The policy of the “pivot” was naive for another reason. The Middle East is Washington’s “briar patch,” and it has bedeviled U.S. policy for the past 40 years. The Reagan administration under the guidance of a flawed secretary of state, General Alexander Haig, and a mediocre secretary of defense, Casper Weinberger, authored a Memorandum of Understanding with the Israelis to forge “strategic cooperation” in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. The policy of “strategic cooperation” led Haig to give a “green light” to misbegotten Israeli plans to invade Lebanon in 1982, and then to deploy Marines to Beirut to pull Israeli chestnuts out of the fire Israel had created.

“Strategic cooperation” in the Persian Gulf led to U.S.-Israeli agreement on prepositioning U.S. military weaponry and medical gear in Israel; the U.S. Sixth Fleet’s use of Israeli ports; and the formation of a committee to arrange joint military exercises. The Reagan administration even resumed the delivery of cluster bombs to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); the Carter administration had stopped such deliveries because Israel was using these weapons illegally against civilians. The Reagan administration increased military assistance to Israel, and concluded a trade agreement with Israel that gave it preferential treatment.

Fast forward to the present, and we find the United States trying to pull Israeli chestnuts out of a genocidal fire that the IDF has set in Gaza. U.S. weapons are central to the bombing campaign against Gaza, which has killed more than 23,000 civilians, devastated the elementary infrastructure that exists there, and annihilated more than 200 aid workers and journalists, and in some case their entire families. It took the Israeli killing of three Israeli hostages to make the international community aware of Israel’s total disregard for human life. And now South Africa has taken the case of Israeli war crimes to the International Court of Justice at the Hague, which is one of the more incredible ironies of this miserable tragedy.

As a result, the Biden administration has been distracted from more important national security interests that deal with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's increased threat to Taiwan. Similar to the run-up to World War I, when no nation wanted or even expected war to break out, the conventional wisdom in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf is that no one wants a wider war. Meanwhile, Israel's northern border with Lebanon is getting more threatening; Israeli air raids in Syria are quickening; and the current gunboat diplomacy in the Red Sea finds the U.S. Navy poised to strike land targets in Yemen against the Houthis. Over the past several weeks, U.S. and Israeli missiles have assassinated Hamas and Hezbollah leaders in the capitals of Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

The U.S. operation in Baghdad, which was denounced by every key Iraqi official, was a violation of the executive order issued in February 1976 (the Ford administration) against political assassinations as well as the executive order issued in January 1978 (the Carter administration) to stop direct and even indirect U.S. participation in all assassinations. No one is discussing the efforts of the Ford administration and the Carter administration, respectively, to ban assassinations in the wake of the horrors of the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin entered intensive care at Walter Reed Hospital in the first week of the new year without informing either the White House or his own deputy! The U.S. attack in Baghdad, which killed an Iran-linked militia commander and risked accelerating the regional fallout from Gaza, took place while Austin was in Intensive care.

It is possible that "strategic cooperation" could find Israel's war dragging the United States into a regional war that will involve the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and even the Horn of Africa where Somalia has denounced Ethiopian efforts to pursue construction of a naval base in Somaliland. There is a history of warfare between Ethiopia and Somalia from the 1960s and 1970s. The Red Sea, the link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, carries more than 10% of all global commercial trade.

The ripple effects of these confrontations throughout the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and the Horn of Africa will surely dominate the political and diplomatic conversation in the year 2024. This year will find more than 4 billion people in sixty countries heading to the polls for elections that could change the political alignments in the United States and key European countries. A right-wing shift in these countries will make it more difficult to put pressure on Israel to stop its genocidal operations.

The horrific Hamas attack on October 7th in Israel exposed the underlying brutality of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. October 7th will have numerous

geopolitical consequences, affecting U.S. and Israeli differences over the “day after,” Israeli brutality on the West Bank as well as Gaza, and the roles for the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in the greater struggle over Palestinian statehood.

“Strategic cooperation” between the United States and Israel has forced the Biden administration to play a role in a long Middle East war and perhaps in a wider regional confrontation. The U.S. commitment to the Israeli goal of eradicating Hamas probably will go unfulfilled, and the U.S. effort to “pivot” will be lost to the U.S. briar patch in the Middle East.

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