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What's THAAD gonna do?

The US military has just deployed its THAAD anti-missile system in Israel, alongside nearly 100 US troops to babysit the hardware. This is the equivalent of bringing a slingshot to a hailstorm – zero strategy, all show.

As West Asia, once again, stares down the barrel of a widening regional war, Washington is responding in a most familiar manner: sending more advisers, forces, and weapons to the region.

This time, the Biden administration has decided to supplement the massive US naval and troop deployments across West Asia with an advanced Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) air defense battery in Israel, ostensibly to protect Tel Aviv from retaliatory Iranian strikes.

The US and Israel have been in talks for weeks over how Israel would respond to Iran's 1 October missile strikes, and Washington, on the surface, is reportedly hoping to temper Israel's appetite for wider conflagration by providing it with even more arms and support.

In effect, with two weeks left before a contentious US presidential election, President Joe Biden looks to be passing the buck to his successor. The increasingly untenable security situation from the Levant to the Persian Gulf is not something he has shown any inclination to contain. If anything, Biden is escalating on every front in support of Washington's indisposible Israeli ally, with US troops in the region becoming increasingly involved.

But this isn't just a simple miscalculation or error in judgment. It exposes, yet again, a key problem with how the United States makes decisions about war and peace that go to the heart

of the US constitutional system and Washington's modern political culture on foreign policy matters.

Does the US Constitution mean anything anymore?

According to the constitution, the US president must receive permission from Congress to go to war. This is a key legal doctrine on which many western constitutional traditions are based, going back to the Magna Carta. But the American hegemon has struggled to follow its foundational principles since World War II. The War Powers Act of 1973 represented a significant curtailing of presidential authority over warfare abroad without congressional support. But even this law has significant gaps, allowing the president to engage in some military action and ask for legislative approval later if conflict continues.

This is as much a legal problem as a political one. US political culture over-emphasizes the need for its commander-in-chief to retain full flexibility to react militarily to any sudden conflict or threat to 'US security interests' – a vague description of virtually anything a sitting president considers upsetting.

Most congressmen are former local and state officials who have spent their careers pontificating about abortion and taxes, not foreign policy. Before the events of 11 September 2001, it was common for congressional candidates to boast about not even having a passport. US courts – the Judicial Branch of government – have all but extricated themselves from all foreign policy and national security affairs, instead bestowing unprecedented and "extraordinary deference" to the Executive Branch.

Add to this problem the broad war powers provided to the president after 11 September, and the result is what many have referred to as "Kingly" presidential powers over foreign policy and warfare. Responding to former US president Donald Trump's decision to strike Syrian airbases without congressional approval, one member of Congress stated that the strikes were illegal, but he supported them anyway.

Few members of Congress have shown serious interest in reigning in presidential authority on war. On diplomacy, however, they insist on broad congressional overview. This makes going to war far easier than making peace.

Strategic insolvency

Aside from creating deep cracks in American-styled democracy, this also ensures that US national security decision-making is erratic. Any cursory look at the post-World War II history of US foreign policy reveals clear lines of continuity between administrations on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

The extent to which Trump and Biden’s foreign policies are similar is especially striking. The extraordinary power entrusted to a president and his select group of advisers ensures that US foreign policy retains an unusually impulsive character for a democracy. There is little need for doctrine or overarching strategy to shape a systematic and stable approach to international affairs, leaving the nation’s interests poorly defined. When trying to understand why the US administration supports Israeli atrocities blindly, in contravention of all international laws or norms, and focusing strategic attention so disproportionately on West Asia, one is likely to encounter vague notions such as “Israel has a right to defend itself,” rather than any kind of broader strategic logic.

Compare this to Washington’s main global and regional adversaries. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is the ultimate arbiter of national security decisions, but the Iranian foreign policy decision-making process involves a complex consultative process through organs like the Supreme National Security Council, which includes representatives from across the government. China also bestows extraordinary power on its president, but Beijing’s decision-making process is highly consultative and relies heavily on relatively unwavering doctrine.

Iran’s strikes and US miscalculations

It is in this context that Washington’s failings became most evident during the recent kinetic exchanges between Iran and Israel. Tehran demonstrated in its recent round of strikes that it possesses indigenous advanced precision missiles that can penetrate Israeli air defense systems. While Tel Aviv claims its missile defense systems are its own, these systems are, in reality, produced with US research funding and US technology from US arms manufacturers like Boeing and General Dynamics. So for Washington to be sending more US air-defense systems is not likely to be a silver bullet that can save Israel from further missile onslaughts.

The Iranian 1 October strikes took full advantage of its capabilities and showed that the previous strikes in April were, to a large extent, designed to be ineffective. They were essentially an intel-gathering operation on Israeli and allied air defenses – a gentle warning that Washington and Tel Aviv chose to ignore.

Laymen, and even seasoned foreign policy analysts, may have been ignorant to the meaning of those early strikes, but certainly military strategicians in Washington were not. There are more than enough US military analysts who have spent decades war-gaming Iran for Washington to be unaware of the true nature of Iranian capabilities.

An analysis from the US Army’s West Point Military Academy, after the recent strikes, provided several recommendations to the Israelis on how to deal with Iranian missiles. One of the recommendations went straight to the point: build more bomb shelters.

Using air defenses against Iranian missiles is, to some extent, a pointless activity. If placed in the hands of more savvy, less impetuous decision-makers, it is a conundrum that would almost certainly trigger a strong pivot to diplomatic settlements rather than provoking further military confrontation. For one, past a certain point of technological advancement in missile technology, air defenses are a costly and unreliable tool.

Each THAAD battery, for example, consists of six truck-mounted launchers, 48 interceptors, radio and radar equipment, requires 95 soldiers to operate, and costs between \$1 billion and \$1.8 billion, with each missile costing around \$13 million. This amounts to \$625 million for all 48 missiles.

Furthermore, deploying the battery in Israel is placing US troops in harm's way and making them legitimate targets in a regional war that does not yet directly involve US forces.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi warned last week that Washington had effectively put the lives of US troops "at risk by deploying them to operate US missile systems in Israel." Another impediment to this US-Israeli air defense plan is that there is no dependable countermeasure against missile systems that travel through the exoatmosphere. While various technological advances have been made in recent years, that problem still remains [comparable](#) to "intercepting a bullet with another bullet." Generational efforts by the US military to develop ballistic missile defense systems to guard against Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) have been mocked for decades as a "[Maginot line in the sky](#)." Simply put, there are limits to how well missile defense can work, considering the basic laws of physics.

The most advanced missile system the US has for countering such threats is the new Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) system, which has the ability to hit missiles in their exoatmospheric stage. But the US launched these weapons against Iran's Fattah medium-range missiles with what could, at best, be considered mixed results. It is also important to note that the US military has [struggled](#) to produce these missiles at scale, and desperately needs to stockpile them in the event of a missile confrontation with China over a conflict with Taiwan.

Pivoting in place

This highlights the extent to which US foreign policy decisions are continuously hijacked by Washington's Sisyphean efforts at power projection in West Asia. It is a dynamic that has notably plagued at least three consecutive administrations and likely more. American foreign policy elites have been wildly distracted by significant ideological interests and a multi-generational fixation on the region, even though West Asia is becoming less relevant to US interests by the year.

The Obama administration formally recognized the need for the US to focus its military power in the Far East and move away from West Asia with its 2009 “Pivot to Asia” policy. But as senior Obama administration officials revealed, even after the doctrine’s introduction, 85 percent of National Security Council meetings were still about West Asia.

The Trump administration authored the “Great Power Competition” doctrine that called on the US to shift resources to near-peer competition against Russia and China. That also never materialized. The Biden administration came to power insisting that West Asia would be severely downgraded in US strategic considerations. Instead, US attention is clearly fixed more firmly on the region than on any other place, with the possible exception of Ukraine.

The US has increased its military presence in the Far East to some extent, but it’s clear that the fait accompli that three administrations have promised – the eastern pivot away from West Asia – is not really taking place. The lack of a consultative and doctrine-driven foreign policy decision-making process is clearly a significant part of why successive US administrations from both parties fail to address strategic needs and instead become consumed with ideological projects.

Ultimately, the lack of appreciation for the capacity and willingness of Iran to retaliate directly was a significant strategic failure by Washington, which has now placed the US in a quandary. The current state of regionwide military escalation could have been entirely avoided with a proper understanding of the balance of power and strategic foresight – capacities that obviously exist in Washington.

Instead, the actual decision-makers in the White House and National Security Council, who are less issue experts and more political operatives, have executed a series of misjudgments that have brought us to the precipice of a great West Asian war.

This is an ominous sign of things to come because it is precisely these kinds of political miscalculations that have been historically deemed the most common cause of warfare. Having seasoned strategic experts – and Pentagon war-gaming reports – so routinely overruled by the kind of political gadflies that populate key nodes of US decision-making, such as Bret McGurk, Amos Hochstein, and Jake Sullivan is dangerous for both the United States and the world.

Deploy that THAAD system in Israel and see if it makes a whit of difference. It won’t, because there’s no strategy behind it, just whimsy and posturing.

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