



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Afghanistan Has Lessons for the Gulf

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,156, September 20, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Gulf states will closely monitor the way Russia and China handle the perceived security vacuum in the wake of the US withdrawal and abandonment, for all practical purposes, of Central Asia. They wish to determine to what degree those countries might be viable alternatives for a no longer reliable US security umbrella in the Middle East. They are also likely to push to strengthen regional alliances, especially with Israel.

The Gulf states appear to be stuck, for the time being, with a less committed US. That reality will push them to compensate for uncertainty over the US with greater self-reliance and a strengthening of formal and informal regional alliances, particularly with Israel.

Russia, the world's second-largest exporter of arms, and China will both be happy to sell weapons and exploit cracks in the Gulf's relationship with the US. But they have neither the wherewithal nor the capacity to replace the US as the Middle East's security guarantor.

That didn't stop Russia from quickly signing defense cooperation agreements with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. With no details disclosed, the agreements seemed a Saudi and Egyptian effort to wave a warning finger at the US while Moscow grabbed the opportunity to poke Washington in the eye.

"Given Saudi Arabia's strategic ties to the United States, it is unlikely that Riyadh is going to cooperate militarily with Moscow to a degree comparable with the Americans any time soon," said Russian Middle East scholar Alexey Khlebnikov.

“Moscow has neither the desire nor the capacity to replace Washington as the main ally of Cairo and Riyadh. It will try to exploit the situation in order to increase its arms deals in the region, which will give it more hard currency inflow,” he added.

In the same vein, Arab states would be wise to recognize that the Middle East is not Central Asia, the near abroad for China and Russia, which long dominated the region under the umbrella of the Soviet Union. Threats regarding migration, political violence, and drugs in Central Asia are on Russia’s and China’s doorsteps, not in distant lands.

The ways in which Russia and China handle those threats will be a litmus test to which Gulf leaders will likely pay close attention.

“Moscow will be prepared to absorb a few spillover cases of extremism... Russian leaders will [face a much stickier challenge](#) if the self-proclaimed Islamic State or other organized extremist groups begin once again to target Central Asia or Russia itself from Afghanistan. This is precisely the scenario that Russian policymakers have worried about,” said Carnegie Endowment Russia scholar Paul Stronski.

Russia has sought in recent weeks to highlight its capabilities and commitment to Central Asian security in exercises with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian-led military alliance of former Soviet states.

However, Gulf states should take note: Stronski suggests that Russia’s reliability record is not much better than that of the US. Russia failed to come to the aid of CSTO member Armenia in its war last year against Azerbaijan. It also did not step in to end days of inter-communal violence in 2020 along the border between CSTO members Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan even though Sergey Shoygu, the Russian defense minister, was meeting his alliance counterparts in Dushanbe at that very moment.

The Taliban victory in Afghanistan has brought the parameters of the Gulf’s options into sharp relief as Washington debates US foreign policy, including the scope and utility of the US military presence in the Middle East.

“On one side of the debate, some are pushing for the continuation or expansion of the current posture. The other extreme demands the elimination of all or nearly all fixed US military facilities in the region. Both constituencies are loud and passionate, but a strong new consensus falling between these two positions is nonetheless emerging,” said analyst Hussein Ibish.

The room for compromise is created by the fact that President Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, adopted the same foreign policy driver even if they label it differently. Trump employed the principle of “America First,” [a phrase first employed as a World War II-era antisemitic rallying cry](#).

Biden emphasizes a narrowly defined national interest. Both embrace some notion of isolationism, albeit framed differently in scope, as do right-wing nationalists, libertarians, and left-wing progressives engaged in the debate.

Ibish suggested that the consensus involved US troops remaining in the Middle East for the long term but that the deployment of troops and military assets should be smaller, leaner, and more flexible.

“Given technological and strategic developments in recent years, and lessons learned from the post-9/11 era, the United States should now certainly be able to do more – or at least enough – with less,” Ibish said.

Ibish’s perceived consensus coincides with elements of a military strategy Biden laid out in a speech defending his handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal. Biden insisted that the US would now shun ground wars requiring large troop deployments.

Instead, the US would focus on economics and cybersecurity in its competition with Russia and China. It would counter extremists with military technology that allowed for strikes against specific targets rather than wars like Afghanistan.

Mina al-Oraibi, editor-in-chief of *The National*, one of the Middle East’s prime English-language newspapers, published in the UAE, put her finger on the gap between the Gulf’s expectations and the reality as portrayed by Biden.

“Among policymakers in the Middle East, there is now an understanding [the United States is no longer invested in maintaining stability abroad](#)—unless its narrowly defined national interests are directly impacted,” said al-Oraibi.

In an article entitled “[America Isn’t Exceptional Anymore](#),” she wrote that Biden’s definition of the US mission in Afghanistan as “preventing a terrorist attack on [the] American homeland” and “narrowly focused on counterterrorism, not counterinsurgency or nation-building” had been heard loud and clear in the Middle East.

“In countries like Libya and Yemen, where conflicts continue and nation-building is crucial, Washington has been disengaged for a number of years. However, that disengagement is now official policy,” al-Oraibi said.

“From the threat of terrorist groups like the Islamic State to emboldened militias like Hezbollah, US allies can no longer rely on Washington. As US officials question some countries’ choices—like Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia increasing ties with China—they must understand Beijing comes across as a more reliable partner in the same way Russia proved a more reliable partner to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, ensuring his survival,” she added.

Survival is the key word. Al-Oraibi clearly defined the perhaps most fundamental consequence of the US withdrawal—one that plays into the hands of autocrats even if Russia and China are unlikely to support them in the ways the US has done for decades.

“With a disengaged United States and a lack of European consensus on filling that void, the establishment of systems of government in the shape of Western liberal democracies no longer makes sense. After two decades of promoting democracy as the leading system of government, the view from the Middle East is the United States has abdicated that rhetorical position. And that may not be a bad thing. Effective government should be the goal rather than governments formed simply through the ballot box that don’t deliver for their people,” al-Oraibi wrote.

Ms. al-Oraibi’s hard-hitting analysis suggests that US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had his work cut out for him when he [traveled to the Gulf](#) to thank countries like the UAE and Qatar for their help in the evacuation from Afghanistan.

The risk for the US is that China may prove more adept at Biden’s game, particularly if relations between Beijing and Washington deteriorate further. China could, for example, try to exploit regional doubts by nudging the Gulf, home to the world’s oil and gas reserves, to price their energy in Chinese renminbi instead of US dollars – a move that, if successful, would undermine a pillar of US global power.

A possible litmus test for China’s engagement in Afghanistan will be whether a Taliban-dominated government extradites Uighurs. China has successfully demanded the extradition of its Turkish Muslim citizens from countries like Egypt, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Chinese FM Wang Ji [hinted at possible extradition requests](#) in talks in July in China with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban. Wang demanded that the Taliban break relations with all militant groups and take resolute action against the Uighur Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP).

The Taliban have so far refused, irrespective of cost pressure, to crack down on militants who have helped them in their wars over the past 25 years.

Haneef Atamar, FM in the US-backed Afghan government of former president Ashraf Ghani, asserted that [Uighurs, including one-time fighters in Syria, had contributed significantly to recent Taliban battlefield successes](#) in northern Afghanistan.

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