

Biden Administration: Framing Policies for Security in the Gulf

Jubaida Auhana Faruque

Synopsis:

Over the years, through continued series of conflicts and back and forth development in relationships depending on political interest, US has played significant roles in the Persian Gulf in regards to interacting with different states. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has maintained close proximity with it and both in-sighting Iran as an opponent, has been devising their policies to ascertain their means. Nevertheless, with continuous fluctuation of interest and interference from outsiders, this dynamic has altered from time to time. President Joe Biden has come to the office with a promising foreign policy designed to ensure peace at home and democracy all over. Only calculated footsteps are the ways that will lead him to his aim regarding the policies for security in the Gulf.

Commentary:

In spite of USA considering themselves as the protector of the Gulf region and consecutively imposing threats of maintaining its interest in oil business at any cost, the fluctuating relation with the countries and external parties have quite made their position difficult now. The GCC states are also emphasizing on their own interest, which might lead them to slightly loose side with US and attract other regional entities, which in case can disrupt the influence grabbed by US in this region. Alongside confrontation with Iran, the countries are also facing policy differentiation with each other leading to the discomfort that the US might not back them up in the near future. The whole dynamic includes Israel's stake with its history affiliated with the Arab states and possible threat from Iran to procure its nuclear program. So US has to not only maintain its policy stakes with the Arab states but also has to ensure that the security dilemma with Iran can be brought down to minimum level and at the same time keep the allies, whose interest are deeply related to this region, under check. Along with all these, one of the main

targets of US is to keep under thorough balance the oil flow from the Gulf at affordable price to balance the economy. About 25% of world's total oil production and two-thirds of global oil reserves are located in this region (Indyk, 2021). However, because of US starting to become self-sufficient in extraction of oil from own territory and extensive business opportunities with Latin countries and Canada, dependence on Gulf States for oil is on the deplete making it just a factor to balance the economy. This is subsequently abating one main issue for which US was depended on them and thus leaves the prime issues to be regional security; mainly focused on Iran, maintenance of allies in this zone to exert regional power and the threat of nuclear procurement.

The top five sources of U.S. total petroleum (including crude oil) imports by share of total petroleum imports in 2019 were



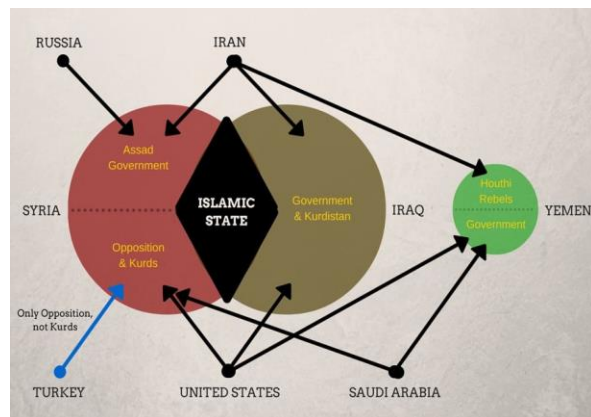
The top five sources of U.S. crude oil imports by share of total crude oil imports in 2019 were



History of Iran and USA goes back to years of antithesis and continuous political antagonism. Iran's development of nuclear base has been a long-lasting threat towards US and that pavement was tried to smoothen by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between Iran and P5+1 to ensure Iran's compliance to the nuclear related provisions. However, egression from the deal by former President Donald Trump has led to reprise of tension among the actors. Accession of Biden to the office is showing the possibilities of re-engagement into the deal and so bringing the countries to the same table of negotiation. Biden might face some adversities this time because of Iran receding its belief since US has once disrupted its commitment once. Though Iran is interested to come to an understanding because of Rouhani's inclination to balance with Western world, definite schemes of negotiation must be enumerated. Both Biden and Rouhani realizes their benefits in this scene, one getting the chance to be present in Joint Commission meetings and having direct power over controlling Iran's nuclear program and thus regulating sanctions in case of violations. On the other hand, this deal leads Iran's path to

sanction less and more free trade and business which by de facto increases the popularity of the government among the public, as visual by the widespread celebration and rising acceptance by the Iranians after signing the deal. Re-entering into the deal might also work as the regulator to the expression of public in the 2021 election that the current party will not want to lose. Pressure from US allies like Israel regarding not hastening the decision to rejoin the deal or renegotiate the whole deal and possibilities of Biden facing heavy opposition from the Congress on the initiative to lift designations on individuals and entities sanctioned under executive orders designed to prevent terrorism might decelerate the process. Israel has been against the deal from long since and they are still menacing their plans of attack if Iran tries to extend their nuclear activities. Withdrawal from the deal also pushed Iran towards further development of nuclear program which has resulted in enrichment of uranium-235 to 3.67%, which also needs management to decrease in case the deal rejuvenates (Davenport, 2020). All these together put Biden in a difficult situation to manage Iran, a dangerous threshold country, with uncertainty of uncompromising conditions and threatening nuclear development.

Iran has already started to increase its vicinity towards China with a deal of \$400 billion to be invested by China, including sectors like infrastructure development and military cooperation over a 25 years period with commitment of steady oil supply from Iran. This measure, no doubt has been the outcome of US's withdrawal from the deal and pushing Iran towards an economic upheaval. One conflation by US has allowed China to enter the region and put its first step to unfold its power in the Middle East. Biden cannot take this risk of China's presence in this region and thus increase already an existing entangle by availing Iran a way out with the restrictions. If Biden actually wants China to sideline here, a permanent and swift decision on the deal is an ardent need. Otherwise, an inveterate military support from China would not only help Iran to raise among the Gulf nations, but would pose a protracted threat towards US by increasing the intensity of the proxy wars. Involvement of Iran in the proxy wars all over the region, starting from Syria to Yemen, is fueling the continuity of these wars and threat of terrorism is now higher than ever for US. With the threat of retaliating the assassination of



the region, starting from Syria to Yemen, is fueling the continuity of these wars and threat of terrorism is now higher than ever for US. With the threat of retaliating the assassination of

General Soleimani, US personnel present at different bases all over the world are in threat of attack and the fear get nurtured due to the presence of at least one Iran-backed militia group in any on-going war. Presence of US base in next to border country, Iraq is continuously enraging the on-ground attack on each other making Iraq an indefinite victim of wars. With this wide extended captivity of states with influence in proxy wars, US is always in fear of Iran, which Biden needs to minimize. US had been providing backup to Saudi in regard of supporting its coalition in Yemen which was a concern for Iran for creating a tougher situation to accommodate the Houthis to victory. Recent announcement of Biden to stop providing this assistance might give contentment to Iran but also create abatement for Saudi due to losing such a strong backup in this war.

On the other hand, a six days blockage at the Suez Canal has shown the world how much these trade routes value. This predicts, what a halt at the Strait of Hormuz, surrounded by UAE, Oman



and Iran; and carrying about 3 billion liters of oils daily that is almost 20% ¹of global trade, mainly towards the West, can cause. Aggressive behavior of Iran in the sense that they can control and close the strait whenever there is a glitch with US policy, might not be a big deal in today's time. Though Iran can easily

close their route by bringing down ships with small range missiles, technological development has now created huge ships with ultra-modern safety. Nevertheless, these threats work as reactors for the global economy and politics and US cannot afford such precariousness with Iran. With recent allegation from Netanyahu on Iran stating that they have destroyed their cargo ship at the Gulf of Oman and their consecutive airstrike in Syrian targeting Iranian presence², has already exemplified the range of terror that might outburst. So right after easing up the relation through JCPOA, Biden needs to come up with a viable solution in coordination with other powers and in presence of International Maritime Organization. Both Iran and the buyer states

¹ Lahabi, O. (2019). Strait of Hormuz: Why does Iran threaten to close it?. Euronews. Retrieved 1 April 2021, from <https://www.euronews.com/2019/06/28/strait-of-hormuz-why-does-iran-threaten-to-close-it>.

² *Netanyahu Accuses Iran Of Attack On Cargo Ship As Targets Are Hit In Syria*. Iran International. (2021). Retrieved 5 April 2021, from <https://iranintl.com/en/world/netanyahu-accuses-iran-attack-cargo-ship-targets-are-hit-syria>.

need to stabilize this situation by enacting certain regulations regarding the use of the strait and the contribution of Iran to allow the use of its maritime border without disruption.

However, Biden should finally come up with a better-formed policy towards the Gulf where less attention is provided to Iran and comparatively more to other countries. In spite of no solution for the Palestinians by Israel, four Arab states, UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco has put their recognition towards Israel, mediated by USA and thus opening their corridor to mutual alignment. Though this deal was brokered by Trump with promises of providing advanced weapons or diplomatic assistance from US, its effects will obviously fall upon Biden resulting in developed coordination in maintaining the Gulf region and facing lesser adversities from Israel and vis-à-vis. Nevertheless, Biden should also consider that increased friendship of any country with Israel would serve more of Israel's purpose than that of US and fear prevails that interference regarding regulation of US relation with GCC might now be influenced by Israel. US should not encourage a regional state to enhance their power, even as its ally, because this might lead to another US-Russia or US-China regional dominance crisis. Besides, additional provisions promised to these states might also put Biden in a position where he will have to decide to which extent he will go to serve them. Though Saudi Arab has not yet joined the troop, the young Prince Mohammad Bin Salman is becoming the Trojan horse for US whom it will need to expand its power in the Middle East. The Biden administration itself came up with the assailing report stating the involvement of the prince in the 'Khashoggi Murder' (Fields, 2021). Still it did not come up with any harsh punishment or censorship against the "highest leadership of countries"³, but some individualistic travel bans in the fear that it might lose it against Iran and also in threat of losing such an important ally. US has its history of maintaining its blind-sight to serious human rights violations and even Biden has not yet shown any manifest protest against the oppressions going on in many states. Most of these 'non-actions' are propagated from sense of protecting own interest of economy and security and in this case, Saudi Arab being its second largest trade and business partner, one of the prime weapon buyer, major source of petroleum and powerful shield against Iran, US is scarcely expected to put a foot in here. Besides, the prince, the most certain heir of the kingdom, seems very much inclined towards turning Saudi into Western attire with newly introduced moderate reformations amidst an extremely

³ Stewart, P. (2021). U.S. imposes sanctions, visa bans on Saudis for journalist Khashoggi's killing. *Reuters*. Retrieved 5 April 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-khashoggi-sanctions-idUSKBN2AQ2QI>.

conservative and repressive society. This friendship will profit Biden and US in future, which is keeping Saudi under the umbrella until something nocuous comes up. Biden's influence in bringing Saudi and Qatar under the same shade after 3 years of rigorous tension between the states already exhibits the diplomatic efficiency of Biden for considering his own advantage from this reunification of adversaries.

With the Syrian civil war stepping into its 10 years, the triangle among US, Gulf States and Syria continues to play with Biden's "retaliatory air strike" on Syria under the caption "proportionate military response"⁴ just after residing in office. Though officials said this was conducted to punish the militia and not increase problems with Iran, the Pentagon has made it clear that though US is ready for a peace talk, any attack on America or a single American in any place, will be handled with strong a hand. Anyways, Biden should be careful that in the name of saving US nationals, violent steps should not be accommodated which blazes up animosity with Iraq and pushes it towards Iran. Since the personnel were killed in US base in Iraq and Iraq's rising tendency to pressurize US to withdraw troops from its land following the assassination of General Soleimani, threats might increase for US if Iran can capture the innate support from Iraq and the range of proxy wars expand. During this imbalanced situation of US regarding Syria, other Gulf nations are tending to change their faction presuming the mere possibility of the Assad government to fall down and realizing their benefits in reconstruction plans in the war struck Syria. GCC states like UAE and Bahrain have already convened their ties with Syrian government and others are either maintaining a non-interference policy or not participating actively. This can be beneficial for US in a sense that, no matter what the stances are, all states of GCC are opposing the active involvement of Iran and Turkey in this war and want to ensure their exclusion. But US should also keep in check that, either this war ends or not, anomaly among the Gulf states regarding position against the common enemy of US can change the path of notion in future and the coherence that serves US to hold these states together and not have to stress over handling them individually, might not be easier.

With the Gulf region being confusing as ever and entanglement of which nation is actually substantiating which party, the policy formation regarding security has always been a puzzle. With the states being more conscious about their individualistic interest and Iran being

⁴ BBC. (2021). Biden takes first military action with Syria strike on Iran-backed militias.

intractable like always, Biden needs to calculate each step for maintaining his security and power dominance in this region. Formation of ally is always beneficiary but that should not make way for further conundrum and at the same time, uncompromising ideologies should not provoke Biden to scrap plans that might allow oppositions to take advantage. The Gulf region plays an indomitable role in world economy and politics and that is far away from altering in near the future. Thus any policy Biden might frame and adopt, from withdrawing troops to signing an agreement paper with any state, will essentially navigate the future of the Gulf security.

Reference:

1. Indyk, M. (2021). US Policy Priorities in the Gulf: Challenges and Choices. In *International Interests in the Gulf Region*. Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR).
2. Davenport, K. (2020). *Biden Victory May Save Iran Nuclear Deal*. Armscontrol.org. Retrieved 25 March 2021, from <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-12/news/biden-victory-may-save-iran-nuclear-deal>.
3. Fields, J. (2021). *Why repressive Saudi Arabia remains a US ally*. The Conversation. Retrieved 3 April 2021, from <https://theconversation.com/why-repressive-saudi-arabia-remains-a-us-ally-156281>.

Jubaida Auhana Faruque is a Research Intern at BIPSS. She is currently a final-year student majoring in Peace and Conflict Studies from University of Dhaka. Her main areas of interest are USA security policy, Conflict Resolution, Middle-East Security and Climate Diplomacy.