

The Message for Biden— West Asia has moved on

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The U.S. President's visit could serve his domestic interests to some extent, but it has made no difference to the region.

After proclaiming over 16 months the disengagement of the United States from West Asia, U.S. President Joe Biden made his first trip to the region on July 13-16 since taking office. The tour covered Israel, a quick encounter with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and then a halt in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for a bilateral engagement with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and a joint meeting with the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and those from Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

Since the visit involved the high-profile rehabilitation of the Saudi crown prince whom Mr. Biden had reviled earlier, in a recent OpEd, Mr. Biden addressed his critics: he asserted that his intention during the visit to Saudi Arabia was to “reorient — but not rupture — relations” with the country. He noted in this context the kingdom’s role in promoting GCC unity, peace in Yemen, and stability in the oil markets. Mr. Biden also spoke of the need for the U.S. to “counter Russia’s aggression” and “outcompete China” — and recognised Saudi Arabia’s central contribution in achieving these goals.

Not surprisingly, his critics were not mollified. A recent editorial in the U.S. media described the visit as a “low point” for the President and “one he won’t soon live down”. Shadi Hamid of Brookings called the visit a “major setback for American interests”.

The Biden agenda

Mr. Biden’s immediate concern during the visit was to encourage Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners to significantly increase oil production and, in the process, break their affiliation with “OPEC +” where they partner Russia in managing the group’s production.

The U.S. view is that increased oil production would help bring down oil prices — a much-needed respite for the U.S. President at a time when the U.S.-initiated embargo on Russian energy supplies has thrown global oil markets into disarray and boosted prices. This has meant that the cost of petrol at American petrol stations has crossed \$5 a gallon. U.S. consumers are thus saddled with inflation just a few months before the November mid-term elections where a Democratic defeat could turn Mr. Biden into a lame duck president and open the doors for a Republican victory in the next presidential elections.

But, not wanting to be seen as sacrificing moral principle for energy benefits, Mr. Biden had clarified that, in Jeddah, he would be attending a larger meeting of Arab leaders and that “it has to do with national security for them — for Israelis”. His officials also hinted to mediapersons that the President would promote the normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia. They even spoke of a possible regional security alignment, with Israel partnering the neighbouring Arab states in a robust coalition against Iran.

Some commentators asserted that the visit would be “resurrecting US leadership in the Middle East”— the solid alliance that the U.S. had put together in Europe against Russia would be replicated in West Asia, directed against both Russia and China. Mr. Biden affirmed this vision in his first remarks in Jeddah when he said the U.S. “will not walk away” from the region and “leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran”; he promised, instead, “active, principled, American leadership”.

In West Asia

Mr. Biden’s foray in Israel was a ‘love fest’. He signed the ‘Jerusalem Declaration’ that essentially reaffirmed all earlier U.S. commitments to Israel’s security. It included the American pledge “never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon” and “to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome”. However, much to Israel’s chagrin, Mr. Biden insisted that he would pursue diplomacy in addressing the nuclear issue with Iran and refused to set a deadline for the finalisation of the nuclear agreement.

The interaction with Mahmoud Abbas was largely cosmetic. While vaguely referring to the “two-state solution”, Mr. Biden distanced himself from promoting negotiations on substantial issues, nor did he attempt to overturn former U.S. President Donald Trump’s recognition of Israel’s authority over Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank. He also failed to push the Israelis to inquire into the killing of the Palestinian journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh, most probably by an Israeli sniper.

The sojourn in Jeddah provided a reality check. In a remarkable display of unity, the nine Arab leaders refused to back the U.S. in its confrontation with Russia and impose sanctions. The GCC oil producers made no promise to increase oil production, or attempt to break-up the “OPEC +” coalition. Above all, they rejected Mr. Biden’s efforts to play down Palestinian aspirations: according to Egyptian media, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi emphasised the central importance of addressing this issue for regional peace and security.

Again, Saudi Arabia made no move to normalise ties with Israel; it only agreed to overflights of Israeli civilian aircraft over its airspace. The GCC states also rejected the blandishment of a regional security grouping that would bring Israel as their partner against Iran. A day after Mr. Biden’s departure, the Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubair, said ties with Israel would be normalised only after the two-state solution between Israel and Palestine.

The outlook

Mr. Biden unwittingly had walked into a region that has changed significantly. As the U.S. was losing its credibility as a regional security-provider and Mr. Biden affirmed his country’s disengagement from West Asia, the principal regional states have been pursuing several diplomatic interactions

with their neighbours, without any U.S. involvement: Saudi Arabia has already had five rounds of discussions with Iran in Baghdad, and is preparing for the next round; Iran is no longer viewed as the outlier nation that threatens the region: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has announced dispatching its ambassador to Tehran, while Saudi Arabia has accepted the need for improved ties with the Islamic Republic.

Again, Turkey has reached out enthusiastically to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while Iraq, Jordan and Egypt have announced a regional economic and political alignment. The Arab states have accepted Israel as an integral part of Middle East geopolitics, but have made further normalisation of ties conditional on genuine progress on matters relating to Palestinian aspirations. And, finally, all the regional states have built close and substantial political and economic ties with Russia and China.

Thus, West Asia reflects the same multipolarity that is emerging at the global level. Though the region still buys U.S. weaponry and hosts American military bases, it no longer sees the U.S. as central to the region's security interests; nor does it share its hostility to Russia and China.

Mr. Biden's vision of a West Asia beholden to the U.S. for its security is obsolete. His visit could serve his domestic interests to some extent, but it has made no difference to the region. West Asia has moved on.

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Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

- Q. Consider the following statements in the context of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC):-**
1. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a political, economic, social and regional organization, established in 1981.
 2. Its secretariat is located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- Which of the above statements is/are correct?
- (a) 1 only
 - (b) 2 only
 - (c) Both 1 and 2
 - (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Ans. (c)

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

- Q. While discussing the hidden motives behind America's move towards West Asia, comment on the importance of West Asia for India. (250 Words)**

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.