

INDIA AND THE GREAT POWER CONTEST IN WEST ASIA

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September 23, 2023 12:16 am | Updated 08:14 am IST

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At the G-20 | Photo Credit: ANI

At the G-20 summit in New Delhi earlier this month, United States President Joe Biden and others unveiled a U.S.-backed infrastructure project to connect India, West Asia and Europe with shipping lanes, rail networks, pipelines and data cables. A week earlier, a high-level U.S. delegation had visited Saudi Arabia, chasing a normalisation agreement between the Sunni kingdom and the Jewish state of Israel, two of America's allies in the region. These seemingly unrelated but geopolitically contiguous developments offer a broad framework of Mr. Biden's approach towards West Asia, a geostrategically important region where the U.S. had a domineering presence for decades, but which is now being challenged by multiple factors.

Mr. Biden's West Asia strategy has two parts. One is the continuation of the Trump-era policy of bringing America's two pillars in the region — the Gulf Arabs and Israel — closer to meet their common geopolitical challenges such as Iran's rise. The Abraham Accords reached under Mr. Trump's tutelage set the stage for the transformation of Israel's ties with the United Arab Emirates. But the true potential of this policy would not be reached unless there is a deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia, arguably the most influential Arab country today. Mr. Biden, who as a candidate had vowed to make Saudi Arabia "the ***** that they are", has come a long way as President in reaching out to the Kingdom. The administration believes that a Saudi-Israel deal would transform Arab-Israel ties, strengthening the U.S.'s position in the region without further military commitments.

The second part of Mr. Biden's approach is to reassure America's friends and allies that the U.S. is not exiting West Asia. In 2012, leaders of India, Israel, the U.S. and the UAE held a virtual summit of what is now called the I2U2 minilateral. The idea behind I2U2 is to create a new platform that could expedite economic integration between West Asia and South Asia and offer economic and technological solutions to the problems faced by the Global South.

India's presence in a grouping of the Abraham Accords countries was seen as a legitimate recognition of India's presence in the region. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, announced at the G-20 summit (referred to in the first paragraph), enhances New Delhi's standing. It seeks to build an economic corridor from India's western coast, through the Gulf (the UAE and Saudi Arabia), Jordan and Israel, to the Mediterranean, bringing India and Europe closer. If this project takes off, the U.S. hopes that it could retain its channels of influence in West Asia, control the

major shipping lanes and reassure its allies of its staying capacity.

The U.S. may not want to exit West Asia, but it has deprioritised the region in terms of its security commitments as its focus has shifted back to Eastern Europe and East Asia. But the U.S.'s deprioritisation of the region does not diminish the strategic value or potential of West Asia. As the U.S. is pivoting to East Asia, China, which is dependent on imports for over 70% of its oil requirements, is enhancing its focus on West Asia. China has not only emerged as the biggest trading partner of America's Gulf Arab allies and a major investor in the region but has also shown a willingness to play a bigger role as peacemaker, which was evident in the Iran-Saudi reconciliation agreement.

This poses a dilemma to the U.S. deprioritisation of the region is a strategic reality for Washington as it is now facing far bigger conventional challenges in Russia and China. But it cannot just exit West Asia because China would try to fill the vacuum. America's answer to this challenge is to forge closer ties between its allies in the region and strengthen the U.S. security architecture, and bring India in as a bigger, stable partner to write the new rules of economic engagement and integration, competing with China. India seems willing to take this bet.

But it is to be seen how far the Biden plan would help the U.S. retain or extend its influence in the region at a time when China is trying to do the same thing. Primarily, the Biden plan is dependent on a potential Saudi-Israeli deal. But let us say such a deal is not improbable — Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in an interview recently that both sides are getting closer to each other every day. Even if a deal is materialised in the near future, there are other challenges.

The U.S. deprioritisation of the region has loosened its grip on its allies and left a security vacuum which have collectively prompted regional powers to autonomise their foreign policies and take steps toward a more predictable engagement with both friends and foes. This was evident in the Saudi-UAE détente with Iran, the decision to end the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar and the Arab reconciliation with Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also trying to formulate policies independent of U.S. goals and strengthening ties with rising powers. Their decision to join the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) is a case in point. So, they might welcome America's diplomatic push or economic integration plan, but they may not remain client states, like they were during the Cold War and the unipolar world, any more.

Second, the Biden administration, despite its limited engagement, continues to see Iran as a hostile power. Also, the rivalry between Iran and Israel would remain the central geopolitical contradiction of West Asia. By reaching a détente with Iran, Gulf Arabs have made it clear that they would not like to get stuck in the Iran-Israel rivalry, which has the potential to spill over into a conflict. Such an outcome would destabilise the region again, derailing America's plan to stay as a benevolent great power.

For India, the U.S.-China competition in West Asia opens new avenues of engagement. The U.S. sees India, with its size, the size of its economy and the legacy of its historical engagement and cultural connect with the region, as an important partner in its bid to continue to shape West's Asia's geopolitics. India should welcome the moment but should not look at it through the prism of another Cold War — or it should not put all its eggs in one basket as it did in Afghanistan. It is already part of the near-functional International North-South Transport Corridor that connects India to Russia through Iran and Central Asia. The 'Middle East Corridor' would open another economic channel. India's overall policy towards the region should stay anchored in this idea of multi-engagement — not in appeasing or containing any great power. With or without the U.S., or irrespective of China's presence in the region, India should strive to play a

major geopolitical role in West Asia, its extended neighbourhood, without upsetting its traditional balance.

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