

US Foreign Policy in Middle East: Problems and Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author examines what role the Middle East region plays in the foreign strategy of the United States of America and the main approaches of the US administrations to the region. It also provides recommendations on the future behavioral role of the United States in the Middle East.

KEYWORDS: *Middle East, system of foreign policy interests, regional interests, strategic priorities*

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INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, Middle East is a critically important region in the system of foreign policy interests of the United States. The region occupies a strategically important place in the political thoughts of the United States because of its role as an oil exporter, aggravation in political and security issues. In addition, enormous challenges facing Middle East currently emphasize dramatically increased role on the world stage. It is useful to briefly consider the various Middle Eastern problems that are at the center of the attention of the United States. US interests in the Middle East are advancing in two directions: practical and idealistic. The first direction, as mentioned above, strongly depends on global energy pricing. The second direction is the belief that democracy can be established in the Middle East from outside and, with the right approach, it can be expected to spread in the region.

Taking into account these two factors, one of which is a necessity and the other is transformative, it can be argued that there are at least five main problems in Middle East that occupy decision makers in the United States and formulate a national security strategy. These are instability of the state apparatus of

Middle Eastern countries, proliferation of weapons, active international terrorism, unstable pricing of Middle Eastern oil and Israeli-Palestinian issue.

US regional interests in general

In general, United States has a wide range of interests in the Middle East. To a large extent, the above-mentioned five problems facing the United States in the region are interrelated. For example, Iraq, Syria, Yemen are clear examples of instability in the management plan, they are also oil-producing countries. Iraq is currently also a major hotbed of terrorism, embodiment of which is Islamic State, which appeared in Iraq, and many other terrorist organizations. Islamist terrorism, in turn, threatens other oil-producing countries, such as Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, in this case nuclear, is on the agenda of Iranian politics. This Iranian step, in turn, may lead to the rapid proliferation of weapons programs among a number of states in the region, which will exacerbate general instability and jeopardize the fragile stability in the region.

Threats to stability, as we have already noted earlier, can easily lead to disruptions in oil supplies or, at least, to a sharp increase in oil prices on the international market. Thus, although we can single out five separate issues in the focus of US policy, in fact, these problems are largely interrelated, which complicates the search for adequate political solutions. However, the political difficulties for the United States are compounded by religious problems. The United States has a long and continuous history as a secular democratic republic, most of its citizens, as well as its values, are rooted in Christian traditions.

Another simple historical fact is that the Middle East is the core of the Islamic world, in which, with the exception of modern Turkey and Israel, there are no secular democratic traditions. Indeed, the separation of church and state is a concept alien to Islam. Islam, the traditions of the Koran and Sharia law are aspects of everyday life in the Middle East. In addition, centuries of violent conflicts between Islamic world and the West are not so remote or inappropriate for many residents of the Middle East. This confrontational worldview, in turn, is viewed by many Americans as paranoid, exclusive and intolerant. This wide gap in basic thinking and perception between the two traditions is a factor complicating the ability of the United States to successfully pursue perceived national interests in the Middle East.

Any political activity of the United States in relation to the Middle East, which once became known, automatically arouses suspicion of a significant part of the population of the region. The governments of the Middle East, even those that are generally friendly to the US position or even benefit from it, often publicly condone anti-American “Arab street” while offering private guarantees to US officials. All these factors clearly complicate the diplomatic practice of the United States. The situation is unlikely to change soon. Despite these difficulties inherent in US policy in the Middle East, the United States cannot simply withdraw from this region and, accordingly, they need to promote their national political interests as much as possible.

As long as access to Middle Eastern oil remains an important and, in fact, an indispensable condition for the economic well-being of the United States, active participation in the Middle East will continue. As long as international terrorism is active and motivated by terrorist-islamist ideology, US activity, including preventive anti-terrorist actions, will continue.

Assessment of US role in region

Today, future of Middle East is determined by external influences, at least to the same extent as they

are determined by internal events. In the US strategy, the Middle East has become the object of a comprehensive restructuring of the region using democratic templates. The success of economic and political reforms in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s followed by integration of former Soviet allies into NATO, gave rise to a new school of strategic thinking in the United States of America. Supporters of thinking argued that the United States had enough determination, foresight and strength to transform an entire region through diplomacy and military force. In fact, these two sets of tools were considered by the first Bush administration as parts of the same continuum [1].

However, this American attempt to reform the Middle East did not give the expected results. The events of the “Arab Spring” and subsequent instability in the region can serve as examples of this statement. The essence of the US approach is based on Alexander Wendt’s theory of constructivism[2]. According to this theory, the developed templates are applied to other regions and countries. Based on this, developed templates for “democratization” of Middle East were rejected by the political elites in most countries of the region. These actions have caused discontent among American allies (such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey), destabilized “problem states” (for example, Iraq and Lebanon), and turned outspoken critics into open enemies (such as Iran, Syria). Even some leading Israeli politicians hint that US policy in the Middle East is being developed without special consideration for interests of Israel as America’s main ally in the region.

The current situation shows that strategy of democratization of the Middle East as a whole, was the main foreign policy project of the Bush administration, has failed. The consequence of these failures is the growing anti-American and Islamist sentiments in the political elite of the countries of the region. The official Review of Russia’s Foreign Policy, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2007, states that “Modern Islamic radicalism is, in fact, a tense and dangerous, but predictable reaction to the unilateral approach of the United States in a post-bipolar unbalanced international system, where American power is no longer restrained by a global rival”.

The Obama and Trump administrations had two diametrically opposed solutions to the problem of relations with Middle East. Obama has pursued a policy of appeasing Iran, a revolutionary and expansionist regime since 1979 revolution. Thus, after the conclusion of nuclear arms agreements in

2015, the United States postponed Iran's progress in acquiring nuclear weapons.

Thanks to the Abraham Agreement, the Trump administration forced four Arab states – Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates - to normalize relations with Israel, while Saudi Arabia remains a hidden partner. This is an important milestone when former enemies agree to cooperate with each other by creating an anti-Iranian coalition in the Middle East [3]. This was part of the Trump administration's strategy to maintain peace in the region through a combination of tough sanctions against Iran and encouraging new agreements between Arab states and Israel.

The Biden administration is determined to negotiate a return to 2015 deal with Iran, or at least a revised version of it, in which Iran would promise to end its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions and possibly additional financial incentives. The proof to this thesis is the lifting of sanctions against the Houthis, the restart of financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA), which the Trump administration stopped, linking it with the support of terrorism by PA.

The Biden administration has outlined a new US foreign policy, according to which economic engagement, diplomacy and countering authoritarianism will replace Trump's controversial style. But for now, the new administration is offering a mixed approach to the Middle East. Regarding the Biden administration's approach, Nesrin Rudan, an employee of the Arab Regional Forum IBA writes the following: "It definitely differs in tone and style. In general, Biden's policy in the region is largely a return and continuation of the policy of former US President Obama"

American "leadership and exceptionalism" cannot fix the situation in the Middle East or play an important role in building it for a better future. The US still has interests that need to be protected, but America needs to be realistic, prudent and disciplined in how it protects them.

The previous two administrations were afraid to make commitments in the Middle East, so at the moment Washington should have a cautious position on the issue of intervention during the Covid era. Domestic priorities will and should prevail over any Middle Eastern adventures that may take up large resources or the time of the US president. The new administration will face the greatest challenge of national reconstruction since the 1940s and it will not have a world war that fueled U.S. economy and left America the dominant power abroad. It is important

to note that adding to this crisis internal unrest caused by serious polarization along class, racial and political lines, as well as a loss of confidence and trust in the governing institutions. Pressure from rising debt and deficits will impose severe fiscal constraints on the pursuit of vital American interests abroad.

Today, we may be forced to mix the strategic priorities of the United States with the Middle East: the coronavirus pandemic is damaging the lives and livelihoods of Americans, as well as authority around the world; extreme weather events wildfires in California, Hurricane Laura, which hit the Gulf coast and the growing rivalry between the United States and China for military, economic and technological superiority.

During the Cold War, the desire of the United States to dominate the Middle East was mainly due to the need to ensure a continuous flow of energy resources to America and its allies. For most of this period, the Persian Gulf accounted for a disproportionately large share of the world's oil reserves and U.S. oil imports. Even today, oil production in the Persian Gulf accounts for about 20 percent of global oil production, and about a third of all offshore oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, maintaining stable world oil prices still partly depends on preventing significant disruptions in oil exports from the Persian Gulf countries, which can cause a sudden and sharp jump in oil prices. Simply put, the United States now has the ability to respond quickly to price fluctuations using market mechanisms; Middle East crises do not affect oil prices, as is commonly believed; and all oil-producing states, including Iran, are interested in bringing their products to market.

"The fundamental interests of the United States in the region have not changed simply because of the new president" says Aron Lund, a Middle East specialist at Swedish Defense Research Agency. "They were basically the same under Trump, Obama and so on. However, Trump was generally less inclined to listen to government strategists and policy makers. He had his own way of conducting politics and his own understanding of America's real interests. Biden is a much more traditional leader"[2].

In February 2021, influential American think tank RAND Corporation published a report stating that US policy in the Middle East is "outdated" due to excessive dependence on aid packages, arms sales and "disproportionate attention to the Iranian threat, which cannot move forward" [4]. The analytical center proposed an alternative strategy, according to which the United States should move from military means to the priorities of economic investment, governance, and diplomacy. These recommendations

have already been made by Biden's team during the election campaign. So far, the White House has made significant changes regarding specific issues, such as Iran, Palestine and Yemen. There have been some changes in countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, while hot spots such as Iraq, Libya and Syria are waiting for their solutions.

The United States is facing a dilemma in the Middle East: it is trapped in a region that it cannot transform or leave, because it has interests, allies and opponents there. The key to survival and success is not only understanding the limits of American influence, but also distinguishing between vital and secondary interests. We believe that vital interests are those that directly affect the security, prosperity and lifestyle of the people of the United States.

All these do not mean that Washington should ignore the countless problems facing the region, especially the humanitarian crises in Syria and Yemen. But the US cannot and should not invest heavily in issues that are not directly related to America's vital interests, or to problems where local players are not ready to do most of the hard work on their own, especially given the other crises that America is facing.

In our opinion, the United States has three really vital interests in the region:

1. delineation of terrorism,
2. protection of oil flows,
3. preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Before the Trump administration pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, the US did a good job of protecting them.

The Middle East will remain chaotic for years to come. Of course, this is an unpredictable region that can cause crises when America least expects it. But the United States does not need to set itself up for failure by pursuing unrealistic ambitions, acting thoughtlessly and looking at the region as they want it to be, and not as it really is. Biden administration's main strategy over region is that this is a no-man's-land region. And no power inside or outside the region can dominate it as a consequence of this, the United States is no longer a leader in the Middle East region.

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