

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-crisis-in-u-s-arab-relations-russia-china-uae-defense-iran-oil-drone-attacks-response-11647893535>

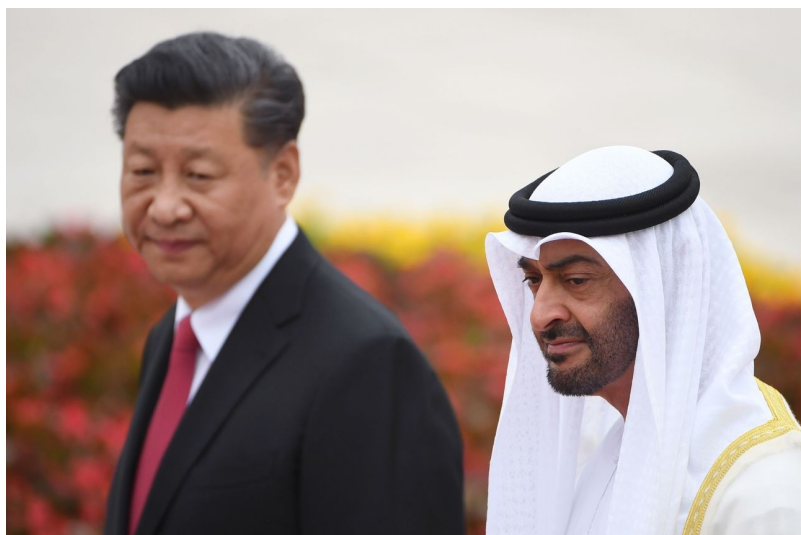
OPINION | COMMENTARY

A Crisis in U.S.-Middle East Relations

Neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis will take Biden's calls. The U.S. needs to recommit to the region.

By Firas Maksad

March 21, 2022 6:19 pm ET



Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed walks with Chinese President Xi Jinping during a welcoming ceremony in Beijing, July 22.

PHOTO: GREG BAKER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

When the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates decline phone calls from the president of the United States, rebuff his requests to help lower oil prices, and shy away from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and when the U.A.E. hosts Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in Abu Dhabi, there is no doubt that a major crisis in U.S.-Arab Gulf relations is under way.

This will be exacerbated in the weeks ahead if the U.S. nears an agreement with Iran over its nuclear program, lifting many sanctions in the process. How Washington handles this unfolding predicament will shape the region's future, and America's place in it, for decades.

To some in the West, the behavior of some of America's Arab Gulf partners

 OPINION: POTOMAC WATCH


Joe Biden Sends a Message to China on Ukraine



00:00

1x


SUBSCRIBE

typifies the sort of erratic decisions made by strongmen such as Russia's Vladimir Putin. But does that explain why most of America's other Middle Eastern allies—Israel, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt—also are expanding ties to Russia and China at America's expense? Are all these countries led by irrational strongmen?

No, America's Middle Eastern partners have rationally concluded that they need to diversify their foreign-policy options

given Washington's reluctance to uphold its defense commitments. Dramatic scenes of the disorderly U.S. exit from Afghanistan confirmed that America is in retreat. For Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. in particular, the lack of a meaningful American response to Iran-sponsored drone attacks on airports and oil facilities in 2019 and 2022 was the straw that broke the camel's back.

After the last major attack this January, the U.A.E. didn't hear from U.S. senior administration officials, and when Gen. Frank McKenzie, America's top commander in charge of the region, paid a visit over three weeks later, Mohamed bin Zayed, the country's de facto leader, refused to meet with him. Concerns about America's commitment had morphed into feelings of abandonment and anger. Then when Mr. Biden wanted to call to ask for help lowering oil prices weeks later, his U.A.E. counterpart was unavailable to take the call.

The Biden administration's behavior toward the Gulf Arab states contradicts its National Security Strategy, which emphasizes revitalizing America's alliances and partnerships. Team Biden has two mistaken assumptions: that the rise of China and return of Russia as great-power rivals necessitates a recalibration from the Middle East to Southeast Asia and now to Eastern Europe, and that achieving detente with Iran, beginning with a nuclear deal, would make the region more stable.

To U.S. officials, these assumptions are complementary and mutually reinforcing: An American retreat from the Middle East should make Iran less aggressive. In

turn, a U.S.-Iran detente would allow Washington more time to focus on emerging threats elsewhere. On the surface this appears to be a win-win arrangement, since Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Israel in theory stand to benefit from an Iranian commitment to de-escalation.

But this strategy is built on faulty foundations. In reality, the Middle East is “the Wild West of great power competition” according to Gen. McKenzie. It sits at the crossroads of three continents and includes three of the world’s most important maritime choke points, vital for global trade and commerce. It also accounts for about half of global oil reserves and more than a third of oil production.

The U.S. can’t engage effectively in a great-power competition while relinquishing its dominant position in such a strategic part of the world. When the void left by the U.S. is being filled by Russian military encroachment in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea corridor, and as China has displaced the U.S. as the lead trading partner for most of the Middle East, allies and partners will need to adjust accordingly.

There is also no guarantee that an American-Iranian detente would lead to a more stable Middle East. Once most Western sanctions are lifted, and American deterrence across the region wanes, Iran’s appetite for expansionism will likely increase. This could feed further conflict, stiffen Saudi determination to match Iran by also becoming a threshold nuclear state, and suck the U.S. into future military entanglements.

Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have deepened cooperation with both Russia and China out of necessity, not preference. Should the Biden administration renew its commitment to regional defense by publicly affirming a strategic alliance, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will revert to more-cooperative ties with Washington, including on oil prices, at the expense of Moscow and Beijing.

It isn’t too late. The U.S. can signal its renewed commitment to the region by designating a special envoy assigned to restore trust and elevate the relationship, particularly since there hasn’t been a U.S. ambassador in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi for years. The U.S. can also expand Arab Gulf air defenses by meeting requests for deploying more anti-missile defense systems, stepping up intelligence cooperation, and providing early warning against incoming attacks.

All these measures are purely defensive, and none are likely to draw the U.S. into new conflicts. To the contrary, they would deter unanticipated escalation and provide billions in revenue to the U.S. economy through new defense sales. More importantly, they would help assure that a strategic part of the world remains within America's orbit, that policies of key partners remain in sync with U.S. interests, and that phone calls from the president don't go unanswered.

Mr. Maksad is an adjunct professor at George Washington University's Elliott School for International Affairs and a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.

Appeared in the March 22, 2022, print edition as 'A Crisis in U.S.-Arab Relations.'

Copyright © 2022 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.