

US Middle East policy: from hero to zero?

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In the end of this summer the world shockingly witnessed reports from Kabul on desperate crowds of Afghani people trying to escape on the last flights from the war battered country and the rapidly recurrent Taliban rule before the last US troops left Afghanistan. In the last two decades Afghanistan and Iraq have become the main stages of the United States' presence in the broader Middle East but its boots continue to be on the ground in several other countries in the region as well. The calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan by the US does not only mean the long-awaited end of a "forever war" but also the end of Pax Americana, where the US is not going to be a that dominant player in the Middle East than it was before. This retreat will certainly realign the regional balance of power and leave a vacuum which is expected to be filled in soon by other great powers who have long been the challengers of the American hegemony. But why is the US ending these "forever wars" now? How could the dynamics of the region be changed by that? What could be the US' new posture in the region?

The US' active foreign policy towards the Middle-East is dated back to the Cold War era. Back then the intention of this superpower was to limit the Soviet Union's influence in the region by aiding anti-communist regimes and backing militias formed against the USSR while supporting Israel against the Soviet-sponsored Arab countries. But in the aftermath of 9/11 the former, "controlling from the background" – except for the Persian Gulf War in 1990 - foreign policy of the US seemed to be changed forever, as an expanding military presence became permanent in the Middle East in the name of the "war on terror". After 2001 and 2003 Afghanistan and Iraq became the main stages of the US military deployments in the broader region. The number of US troops in Afghanistan – of a twenty-year long campaign, known as the longest war of the US – peaked approximately at 100 000 in 2011¹ while in Iraq the highest number of US troops

deployed was around 158 000 in 2008.² Since 2001, between 1.9 and 3 million military personnel have served in these two countries, over half of them have been deployed more than once according to the Watson Institute.³

Why the US ended forever wars

Eroding public support

Iraq

The pulling back from the Middle East did not begin this year when President Joe Biden announced and urgently implemented the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan. However, the public demand and accordingly the political will of extracting US troops from the region have been continuously increasing since almost right after the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq occurred and as they realised that the process of regime change, counter-insurgency and nation building would last longer than expected. The decreasing public support and the negative public opinion - not just in the US but in all nations that engaged in these wars - were among the first causes that shaped the political will to at least reduce the number of troops in these countries.

This eroding public support was most obvious in the case of Iraq for several reasons such as the lack of clear UN authorisation, insufficient “casus belli” and lack of justification (absence of Weapon of Mass Destruction)⁴, high-rate civil casualties⁵ and human rights violations committed by the international coalition forces⁶. The American public opinion suddenly (in one year) flipped to negative regarding sending troops in Iraq (see chart below) but international sentiments were about the same. In 2003, the largest international anti-war protest took place in 650 cities around the world with a number of participants between 6 to 11 million (1 million just in Rome)⁷

Mainly as the consequence of the negative public sentiment, after having won the elections President Obama to fulfil his campaign promises announced plans to remove combat forces from Iraq by August 2010. However, it was not a complete withdrawal, leaving some transitional forces, about 50 000 troops in the country, this was still seen as the beginning of the end of the war.⁸ That is why the American retreat from the region could have been expected from the first Obama administration. Finally, on 18 December 2011 the last American troops left Iraq, and the US ended its controversial nine-year war in the country with a cost of USD 800 billion from the US Treasury. About

4 500 Americans and well over 100 000 Iraqis were killed while only limited and ambiguous political and military successes were achieved.⁹

Looking back, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Iraq?

National adults

■ Yes, mistake (%) ■ No, not a mistake (%)



Note: Wording from 2003-2010: "In view of the developments since we first we sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?"

GALLUP

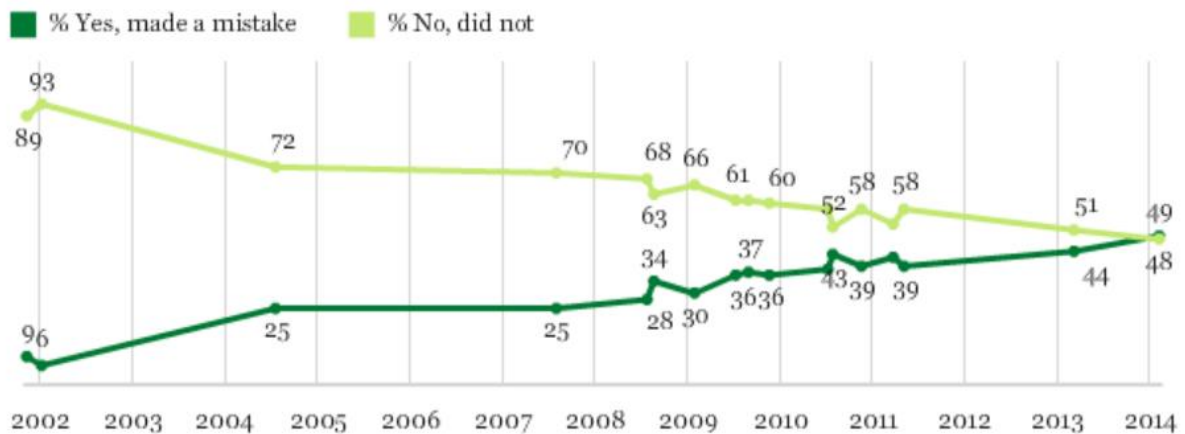
Public opinion on the Iraq war year-by-year

Source: GALLUP¹⁰

Afghanistan

In 2009, the decision on the Iraqi drawdown did not affect Afghanistan, in fact it seemed that a part of the withdrawn forces from Iraq was regrouped in Afghanistan as the number of boots on the ground increased from 33 000 to 96 000 from January 2009 to September 2010.¹¹ But based on the public support approach to the Afghanistan war, we can find an explanation for that too. As we can see in the chart below, the positive, supportive public opinion on the “forever war” in Afghanistan lasted longer. The reason for that could have been the more direct link between 9/11 and Taliban’s Afghanistan which provided bases for al-Qaida and a hiding place for Osama bin Laden. Reducing the size of US troops begun after the al-Qaeda leader had been eliminated in Pakistan in 2011. Duties related to security were promised to be handed over to the Afghans by 2014, which also indicates that the intention to reduce US (military) presence in the country already appeared during the Obama administration.

Looking back, do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Afghanistan in 2001?



2001-2011 question wording: Thinking now about U.S. military action in Afghanistan that began in October 2001, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending military forces to Afghanistan, or not?

GALLUP

Public support of the Afghanistan war year-by-year

Source: GALLUP¹²

Public attitude towards a military campaign cannot be underestimated by the political and military leadership of a country. Public attitude and public support indicate what a society would like to give authorisation for by its vote in the next elections. That is why Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden – on the demand of the vast majority of the US society - all included the reduction and withdrawal of US troops from the region in their respective campaigns. And that is why eroding public support for US wars in the Middle East can be seen as an initial, however domestic cause of the US’ retreat from the region; which on the other hand, also reflects other reasons (costs of war, limited success) for the US to leave.

The cost of war and limited successes

Eroding public support for the longest war of the US is not a surprising phenomenon if we look at the costs of the war. (See Iraq above) According to the Watson Institute, the more than twenty years of war and counterinsurgency costed USD 2.313 trillion, the death of more than 2 300 US troops and more than 46 000 of total casualties.¹³ Overall the cost of post-9/11 wars including Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and others totals at about USD 8 trillion. In these wars about 7 050 US soldiers died and 387 000 civilians

were killed by all parties of these conflicts. This does not include the casualties suffered by the US' contractors which is estimated to 8 000. It also needs to be mentioned that 38 million people have been displaced as a result of the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and the Philippines.¹⁴

Public disenchantment from foreign wars can be explained by these devastating numbers only, and the limited political and military victory (eliminating Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Osama bin-Laden or ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and crush their terror organisations) could not balance the costs of these wars. Though Al-Qaida and ISIS were defeated, these terror groups could not be entirely eradicated despite the intentions of the US and its allies.

Why has the “Afghanistan project” failed?

After 2014 the Pentagon and US' political leadership concluded that the war in Afghanistan cannot be won by military force but by a negotiated settlement of the conflict and gradual withdrawal. Rebuilding a failed state, long battered by wars since the 1980's has proven to be just as impossible as the establishment and maintenance of a Western-style democracy with a centralised government. This of course is not surprising in a country that has no western-style democratic heritage nor has it a centralised administrative system. In a country where tribal leaders and warlords have always been in power and exercised sovereignty over the territory, it would be extremely hard (or impossible) to expect amenability from the society or the military to a central government established in Kabul which anyway had little insight on what was going on in the countryside, not to mention corruption as a result of which hundreds of millions of dollars of reconstruction money was stolen or misappropriated.¹⁵

Starting negotiations and signing an agreement with the Taliban on power transition by Donal Trump (without any mechanisms to enforce their commitments) showed that after twenty years of counterinsurgency and nation building the Taliban is still an inevitable actor in Afghanistan. Despite two decades of US training projects and money *“military and police units in Afghanistan have been hollowed out by desertions, low recruitment rates, poor morale and the theft of pay and equipment by commanders.”*¹⁶ While the US was organising its withdrawal from the country, the Taliban rapidly seized more and more provincial capitals and territory, and in most of them the trained Afghan forces laid down their arms without fight. The Afghani government led by President

Ashraf Ghani collapsed and its members left the country 15 August 2021. The Taliban, the toppling of which was the primary reason behind the US intervention twenty years ago, came into power again.

The fate of Afghanistan under the Taliban rule is still questionable. It remains to be seen whether the country will become a relatively functional religious state or a failed one, safe haven for terrorist groups having its territory partitioned by regional and great powers. The Taliban is currently about to obtain the consensus, - or at least win over the majority -, of the international community on its legitimisation a prerequisite to be able to receive international aid and support for its battered economy in order to avoid deep humanitarian crisis. For that the Taliban needs to present itself as a responsible actor capable and willing to defend its citizens and ensure that Afghanistan will not become a base for jihadi groups and militias and illegal activities – which is certainly not an easy task.¹⁷

A not so lucrative business

“... a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money — and, most importantly, lives — trying to rebuild countries in our own image instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations.”¹⁸

This quote from the former US President Donald Trump, criticising his predecessors, sums up his foreign policy approach not just to Afghanistan but to all countries the US made intervention to in the Middle East. This way, reasons for US backdown from the region can be grasped from another perspective.

According to Donald Trump’s “America first” policy, the United States puts its own interests even more in the foreground in the Middle East as well. Trump intended to reinterpret the role of the United States in the liberal international system which the superpower itself created a long time ago. The former President expressed several times that he intended to conduct his country’s international relations and foreign policy actions more in line with its interests, thus restoring the position of the United States as a world leading power. In the spirit of this, several international treaties and conventions have been renegotiated or denounced, that were considered by the President as “bad business” for the United States. This, often-called isolationist and

nationalist shift in the American foreign policy also presented itself in the case of the Middle East and it meant reversing several policies of Trump's predecessors.¹⁹

Though, this approach meant some more steps back from the role of a stabilising actor in the region, it still resulted in an active foreign policy with such key objectives as fighting against terrorism (mainly ISIS), confronting Iran and the redefinition of the Palestinian-Israeli-Arab relationship. It was not characterised by haste: if we just think of the fact that Trump had increased the number of troops in Afghanistan, despite that both Obama and Trump envisaged continuous decrease. Trump highlighted that "conditions on the ground" would determine troop levels and strategy instead of prior plans and promises.²⁰

Change of interests

Supporting regional cooperation

Back then of course, the US' backstepping from the Middle Eastern stage did not seem to mean that it is completely abandoning its interests in the region, nor that it is turning away from its former allies. Moreover, the Trump administration in order to achieve its interests – with less investment - intended to give a greater role to its regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel or the Kurds as we have seen in the case of Syria. Yet Washington also engaged in normalising relations between Israel and two Arab states, namely the United Arab Emirates and Bahrein, in the framework of the Abraham Accords that was achieved under the tutelage of Trump (which was depicted by some experts as an anti-Iranian axis²¹). The Abraham Accords or the idea of the "Arab NATO" - can be interpreted as a preparation of US allies for the superpower's leave from the region by supporting regional, pro-US political and security cooperation.²²

Trump's other active step in the Middle East was the fight against ISIS. By 2017, as a result of the international joint military operation against ISIS launched in 2014, the terror organisation almost completely lost its previously held territories. Under the "maximum pressure" policy, Donald Trump took a number of steps against Iran's expansion and its pursuit of nuclear weapons, such as leaving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).²³ Trump also attempted to settle the Palestinian-Israeli relations through the peace plan ("ultimate deal") of his own administration and made some historical gestures towards Israel as well, such as

moving the American embassy to Jerusalem and recognising Israel's sovereignty over Golan)

Problems far-far away

It has to be admitted that neither radical Islamic terrorism (ISIS, al-Qaeda) nor Iran - the most frequently mentioned problems in the US strategy in the region - posed a direct threat to American homeland, they are much more regional threats.²⁴ We have seen stronger actions against these two threats, but neither of them requires maintaining a larger US military presence, nor do they justify ceasing further troop withdrawals from the region. When talking about Iraq and Afghanistan, the President has often expressed his aversion on the least effective but the most expensive regime changes and democracy building ever pursued by the United States.

According to Sean Yom, a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, we are witnessing the strategic retreat of the United States from the Middle East, but interestingly not due to the depletion of financial or military resources. It is rather due to the realisation of the fact that protecting major American interests such as security, economic prosperity and maintaining the "American way of life" does not require maintaining the hegemonic role in the Middle East on the same level as before.²⁵

Trump's Middle East strategy meant a new shift in the retreat from the region (though it was still an active foreign policy), however from today's perspective it seems more reasonable and not as hurried as President Joe Biden's strategy, mostly known for the calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan.²⁶ (However, it needs to be told, that on 29 February 2020 it was Trump who negotiated and signed the controversial agreement with the Taliban on the withdrawal of US troops by 1 May 2021, in exchange for stopping attacks against US forces and cutting ties with al-Qaeda. It was in this framework that Biden continued and implemented more than ambiguously the withdrawal from Afghanistan.) By 30 August, all US troops left Afghanistan leaving behind thousands of desperate people and a country with uncertain future.²⁷

Beyond forever wars

Afghanistan and Iraq became the main stages of active US foreign policy in the region, these are the countries where the highest number of troops and personnel were

deployed for the longest time, but there are several more countries where the US carried out operations, deployed troops and built military bases (see below).



Major military bases in the Middle-East used by the US

Source: Al Jazeera²⁸

For example, Libya that was led by a dictator, Muammar Gaddafi with whom, the Bush Administration reached a historic agreement on 19 December 2003. Gaddafi had agreed to abandon and to destroy his WMD programmes and stop supporting terrorism, and the United States ended all sanctions on Libya and welcomed it back into the “community of nations” in exchange.²⁹ Years later, as an answer to Gaddafi’s violent refusal of democratic changes demanded during the “Arab Spring” air operations were carried out with the lead of France and the United Kingdom in 2011. In spite of the fact that Obama was reluctant to get involved in another war in the Middle East – mostly because of the public rejection on such interventions – air support was provided by the US as well. This was the moment where the US used the “leading from

behind” strategy for the first time in the region also signalling the changing approach of the superpower.

The “Arab Spring” spread out in the Middle East and reached Syria in March 2011. As President Assad refused to step down, a continuously deepening civil war broke out. In 2013 the Syrian President used chemical weapons against his people, which Obama considered to be a “red line” and envisaged military intervention. Months later the regime used chemical weapons again, but the US did nothing which made clear that the Obama Administration would not intervene in Syria.³⁰ Instead, the United States let Russia negotiate with Assad in the matter of WMD, which also indicated that the vacuum created by the US could be rapidly filled by another great power.

As the Islamic State acquired more and more territory in Iraq and Syria, brutally terrorised the population and with its global reach carried out a growing number of terror attacks worldwide, the US decided to intervene and started an international joint military operation against ISIS in 2014. Besides destroying ISIS, the US’ main objective was to support the anti-Assad forces including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Kurdish allies. By 2017 the US deliberately and openly attacked Syrian government forces. By that time there were about 2 000 US boots on the ground in Syria.³¹ The US still has some hundred troops in the country and carries out air strikes against different targets related to terror organisations. Syria is expected to be the next country from where the US will withdraw all of its troops, the number of which is about 2 500, as the country does not pose a threat to the vital interests of the US any more, since the ISIS has been defeated.³²

In Yemen, the United States supports Saud-Arabia’s proxy war against Iranian backed Houthi rebels with arms sales, technical assistance and sharing intelligence. But chances are very low that the US will increase its already controversial support for Saud Arabia, by deploying US troops to Yemen.³³

What can we expect?

Changing US strategy

Even if each President had its own strategy or foreign policy doctrine regarding the region, US interests in the Greater Middle East had three settled cornerstones in the past decades.³⁴

1. Ensuring free access to fossil fuels, secure their safe and continuous shipment.
2. Fostering regional stability and security. This point includes rooting out those terrorist groups that mean a threat to the US, its allies and interests as well; just as the prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
3. Supporting balance of power and protecting US allies, especially Israel, which *“has been a consistent feature of US foreign policy in the Middle East for more than 40 years.”*³⁵

Of course, these three main objectives cannot be seen as a rigid, “must to do” list but a flexible framework where one objective can be more emphasised than another for a while. Every administration had its own visions depending on their preferences and the region’s political, economic and security stance at the time. For example, for the Bush administration, the war on terror and preventing WMD proliferation was more articulated while the Trump administration, due to its actions, was considered as one of the most Israel-friendly US presidency.

But now, after the disastrous and hurried withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan the US’ reliability is gravely questioned by its regional allies and the three pillars of US strategy for the region – that seemed to be unchanged for forty years – is about to collapse. Let us take a look at its reasons.

In 2005, when the US was the most active and present in the Middle East the country’s energy import also peaked: 30% of US’ total consumption was covered by import from the region. Thanks to the development of the fracking process, gas- and oil-extraction capacity could considerably expand and the United States’ energy dependency significantly decreased in the last decade. By 2019 the US became a net energy exporter. However, it still imports crude oil, the country’s import share from OPEC has fallen from 85% to 14%. It all indicates that the US is quite not that much dependent on the Middle Eastern energy sources than before, the safe and free access of these resources is not such a priority which would require the presence of thousands of troops there. But it also assumes that *“whatever leverage oil-producing Arab countries could once exert on America is weakening.”*³⁶

If nothing else written above at least the latest episode of the “US leaving the Middle East”, namely the total and also disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan perfectly

showed that America is no longer interested in the stability and security of the region, - or at least not in the way and for the price as before. War on terror cannot be a reason for keeping and risking thousands of US soldiers in a very far land, as the percentage of terror attacks on American soil is small anyway. According to Jordan's former foreign minister Marwan Muasher: *"The Pax Americana has not worked. America has tired of enforcing it, and Arab countries are tired of having it imposed on them to their detriment."*³⁷

The third pillar, the support of regional balance of power and especially relations with Israel is also about to change. US-Israeli relations have seen a flourishing development under the last administration, thanks to the good relation between Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu. The support of Israel which previously was based on a bipartisan agreement now seems to be the issue of the conservatives and we are witnessing the ongoing polarisation of Americans' views on Israel. Public support for the Palestinian state and public sympathy towards the Palestine Arabs are slowly but continuously increasing.³⁸

The delayed call – it took one month - of the newly inaugurated Joe Biden to speak to the then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was seen by some as a sign that the new administration put Israel on low priority, while others considered it was more intended to be a message for Netanyahu himself.³⁹ Anyway, the relations between the new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and the Biden administration are also not expected to be seamless as we witness ever more disagreements to arise between them.⁴⁰ It is also worth noticing that Biden restored more than USD 250 million assistance to the Palestinians, previously frozen by the Trump administration.⁴¹

Now it is hard to see what the Biden administration will replace the old strategic framework with and what approach exactly it will use towards the Middle East, but the declining influence of the United States and the arrival of new players to the areas left blank will probably not increase security and stability in the region.

Seeking a new balance

Leaving Afghanistan in such a way seems to have gravely undermined the US' reliability in the region among its allies and America is not seen in the role of security provider any more. This perception could bring the realignment of relations between

countries in the Persian Gulf, furthermore the bipolar confrontations of the two already established regional alliances – one is led by Iran while the other by Saudi Arabia - might dissolve and new alliances may be built. But great powers such as Russia and China are also likely to volunteer for the role of a stabilising actor in the region while the US is seeking a new balance and the deluded regional US allies will experience the era of neglect from the White House.

Filling the vacuum

And the change in foreign focus as a result of this kind of a delusion would not be unprecedented. Turkey's disappointment in the US arose years ago. The most problematic part in Ankara's perspective is the American support for the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds - which could easily give the Kurds the impression that the US supports the "Kurdish issue" to Turkey's Kurdish minority, which seeks autonomy as well. But other criticisms were also articulated by Ankara, such as the lack of US help given to Turkish President Erdogan in the time of the massive Syrian refugee influx to Turkey or in the 2016 coup.⁴² In the milieu of distrust in its NATO ally Turkey turned to Russia for making arms deal (S-400 air-defence systems) and agreed with Moscow to build nuclear power plants in Turkey.⁴³

This scenario is more than conceivable as China and Russia have been challenging US hegemony in the region for a long time and Gulf countries are also likely to seek a more reliable and present power to provide security and ensure stability. China is intended to expand its economic and trade influence in the Middle East while building and taking over left behind military bases. Russia is less likely to deploy hundreds of troops but it is likely to look for new markets for its goods, especially for its military technology. But regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran or Turkey could also have the intention to fill the vacuum left by the US.⁴⁴

Regional dynamics

On the other hand, new regional alliances could be built and old matters of confrontations could be buried between such regional rivals as Iran and Saudi Arabia - according to Amin Saikal, professor at the Centre for Muslim States and Societies.⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia and UAE could reassess and refurbish their ties with Turkey, Iran and Qatar. Backchannel talks are going on since April between Tehran and Riyadh which

could be interpreted as the first steps towards rapprochement since 2016, when Saudi Arabia broke relations with Iran. Iranian president-elect Ebrahim Raisi stated at his first press conference that there are no obstacles to mutually reopen embassies and to normalise relations with its (predominantly) Sunni neighbour.⁴⁶ Reconciliation between the two regional rivals could change the region's dynamics, diplomacy and stability to the core. A Turkey–UAE rapprochement and UAE–Qatar full normalisation of ties is also on the horizon.

Even if these events carry the possibility for regional stability in the long run too, it also means a huge concern for Israel. The Abraham Accords mitigates Israel's isolation in the region as the country normalised ties with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrein and Morocco. Optimists also expected Saud Arabia to do so, which is seemingly still on the table. Although it is a whole other direction but maybe a more likely scenario that Riyadh will go for Teheran's throat as Iran and its affiliated groups are still considered the most subversive force for regional stability.⁴⁷ But what is certain is, that if Biden gives low priority to Israel – which now seems to be the case - it could shrink the Jewish state's leverage in negotiating peace, and alter the Arab countries' perception of Israel being the gate to the White House in the Middle East.

Adjusting US' posture

Of course, the US will never leave the Middle East completely and will remain to be a main player in the region with a limited presence. Looking at its military bases it also has the most extensive infrastructure to do so (see the map of major US military bases above). But US foreign policy in the region will surely take a different approach.

“Diplomacy is back” - stated Joe Biden in his first speech in the State Department on 4 February 2021.⁴⁸ What we can expect from the Biden administration is to put diplomacy, soft and smart power in the foreground when it comes to the Middle East which has already happened on some occasions. To promote human security the US provided more than 3 million vaccine doses to nations in the region against COVID-19 which brought hard times for the Middle East as well. Biden also set up or restarted economic and aid programmes for the Palestine Arabs or for countries such as Lebanon or Yemen. Human rights and climate change are being addressed too; the latter has a serious impact on the region heating up gravely. In the spirit of conflict resolution through diplomacy, Biden also appointed special envoys to Yemen, Libya

and to the Horn of Africa.⁴⁹ Reviving the JCPOA, the agreement on Iran's nuclear capacity also seems to be a priority of the administration, however negotiations are in a stalemate now. These measures indicate the ways how the US would like to exert influence in the region instead of using hard military power. Stepping back from the region and seeking new balance would save costs, energy and American lives and it allows Biden to focus more on domestic issues such as COVID-19 and the activity of extremist groups and on such global challengers as the assertive China⁵⁰

Conclusion

Ending "forever wars" was a long-awaited moment by Americans after that the promised to be fast and efficient "war on terror" became a protracted counter-insurgency and nation building process. The two decades of post-9/11 wars costed trillions of dollars, thousands of lives while only limited successes were delivered and at the end it turned out to be a complete failure and resulted in a loss of prestige as the world witnessed the US' calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan in the end of this summer. Ending the longest war of the US was not shockingly surprising at all – only the way the withdrawal was carried out – as since Obama all US presidents made promises to go through with it.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan also meant the end of the Pax Americana in the region. In the last decade we have been witnessing the gradual retreat of the US from the greater Middle East and the change of its – believed to have been unchangeable - strategy for the region. The fact that the United States does not intend to remain such a dominant player and security provider in the region as it was before is going to recreate the regional balance of power. The perception of abandonment could force US allies such as Saud Arabia or the UAE to strengthen regional cooperation and even to seek other great power's favour for the sake of their security. And these powers such as China and Russia would enter the vacuum left behind by the US without reluctance and reassure those countries that question the US' reliability, currently being busy with domestic issues and with the rebalancing of its foreign policy to fend off China.

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