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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 05/09/2016 - 05:58

Paper No. 6112

Dated 09-May-2016

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The Middle East sands in 2016 seem to shifting at great speed buffeted by strong and unpredictable winds both regionally and globally generating strategic uncertainties and challenges for the United States.

The Middle East as a vital region is more disturbed by intra-regional political dynamics and a building-up of domestic public political discontent against authoritarian regimes, and only a notional support of democratic aspirations of the Arab street by the United States as the main supporter of these authoritarian regimes forced to look away due to strategic compulsions and political expediency. It was for this reason mainly that the United States never genuinely supported the Ara Spring democracy uprisings some years back.

The United States -crafted strategic landscape in existence ever since the Second World War is undergoing rapid changes, at times, much to the strategic discomfiture of the United States. However, what needs to be noted is that the United States cannot be stated to be out of control of the unfolding events in the Middle East.

Middle East oil essentially, and natural gas thereafter, determined the United States strategic stakes and the shaping of the United States strategic environment in consonance with United States strategic stakes. However, with the United States having reduced its oil dependency on the Middle East as per some reports from about 43% to 18% currently, drastically reduces United States oil-driven strategic stakes in the region.

Notwithstanding the above, the United States does have vital geopolitical stakes in the Middle East related to the paramountcy of the United States as the sole global Superpower. The former Soviet Union was an appreciable challenger of the United States but Russia as a

successor State has influence only over the Northern Tier comprising Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon predominantly Shia-dominated entities. With Iraq and Syria in turmoil due to ISIS inroads, Russia emerges as a factor to reckon with for the United States in taming the turbulence in this part of the Middle East.

China has been trying to make inroads into the Middle East commencing with the introduction of IRBMs to Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s and later weaponry to Iran. But China is noticeably not yet in any position to challenge US predominance in the Middle East, or likely to do so at least for another decade or two.

The United States mainstay of power and influence rested on its strong military linkages with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and the United Arab Republic. Egypt is no longer the pivotal US ally in the Middle East and has sunk into virtual irrelevance because of strong political divisiveness.

Saudi Arabia perceptively has strayed away from its US military linkages and as part of its new overall hedging strategy against the United States has made political outreaches to Russia and China. Noticeably, Russia and China seem more committed to Iran than Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia however cannot survive any unfolding domestic discontent or ride-out regional power rivalries without the American shoulder to sustain it.

Turkey is not only a member of the European NATO military alliance but played a pivotal role for the United States in the Cold War against the Former Soviet Union. Turkish Armed Forces were a strong pillar of NATO and as strongly committed to the secularism of modern Turkey's founder Ataturk kept Turkey away from fundamentalist winds that were enveloping the Middle East. Turkey today however presents a different picture due to turbulent domestic politics of the last decade under the present President.

Turkey under its present political dispensation commenced political outreaches to Russia, China and Iran as some sort of political signalling to the United States, but these seem to have petered out. Turkey would ultimately have no strategic choice but to continue as a Westernised moderate Muslim State with democratic trappings, moored to NATO and to its traditional military linkages with the United States.

The United States under President Obama made the historic leap in terms of normalisation of relations with Iran, the naturally predominant Middle East regional power more strategically placed than any other Middle East power. Argued for over a decade in my strategic essays was the reality that the United States recently recognised that if the United States was to remain embedded strategically in the Middle East it could not do so spiting Iran.

However, the United States political outreach to Iran after decades has generated visible resentment amongst the other regional power contenders. The United States can be expected to ride-out this in the pursuance of its global strategic interests and the fickle political signalling of its traditional military allies.

Lastly, any discussion on the role and policies of the United States would be incomplete without examination of the “Israel Factor” which dominates US Middle East policies and enjoys strong bipartisan support across the American political spectrum. Israel and its security will always be a strong determinant for US policies in this vital region. However, at times differences do rise up in US-Israel relations due to change in nuances in US policies. Currently, Israel is concerned with US outreach to Iran.

In conclusion it needs to be highlighted that unlike the Indo Pacific, the United States has at its elbows the strategic weight and ballast of Western Europe whose stability and security depends on how and which way the Middle East sands shift, even if there are marginal challenges posed by Russian and Chinese intrusive presence in the region.

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