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By Dr Subhash Kapila

Middle East 2019 geopolitical landscape presents unprecedented dilemmas challenging the very fundamentals of US policy formulations. United States can ill-afford to ignore the predominance of non-Arab regional powers and prop alternative regional powers devoid of critically significant basic attributes of power.

The Middle East has only two powerful Regional Powers with all major significant attributes of power---Turkey and Iran. Both are non-Arab powerful States well-endowed with geostrategic locations and both Turkey and Iran having a historical lineage of establishing flourishing Empires in past centuries. Saudi Arabia emerged as a nation-state in the aftermath of the First World War.

The United States is in an adversarial and confrontationist mode with Iran. With Turkey, a long standing NATO Ally, the United States relations in the past two decades have been riven with friction and irritants.

Saudi Arabia may be a powerful oil-rich Arab monarchy with financial resources to bankroll billions of arms and weaponry purchases from the United States but is woefully short of the natural attributes of power. Most significantly its population base, industrialisation and skilled technical manpower are minimal.

The United States has traditionally tilted towards Saudi Arabia in its geopolitical preferences and attaching strategic significance. The United States after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 has lavished geopolitical largesse on Saudi Arabia and attempted to build Saudi Arabia into a Middle East Regional Power.

The moot question that arises contextually is whether Saudi Arabia in its own right and strength can emerge as the challenger Regional Power in the Middle East powerful enough to challenge Turkey or Iran's regional predominance without United States geopolitical and strategic ballast?

This is highly unlikely without the political stability and a sizeable population base to add muscle to its regional power ambitions. The United States attempts to build up Saudi Arabia artificially as a regional power in the Middle East can be compared to United States similar unsuccessful attempts in the past to build up Pakistan as a regional power in South Asia to balance India.

While discussing Saudi Arabia as the cynosure of American policy focus in the Middle East one cannot wish away that as per media reports that US military interventions in two Gulf Wars, Syrian Civil War and the US involvement in the Yemen Civil War have taken place at the instance of Saudi Arabia and United States outrightly obliging.

In its fixated obsession with Saudi Arabia, the United States has ended up with distorted policy perspectives on the Middle East regional power-play. Turkey as Middle East's most Westernised nation, highly industrialised, self-reliant indigenous defence production base, and moreover a staunch NATO Ally of the Western Alliance with the largest troops contribution to NATO in 2019 has virtually landed on the fringe of United States Middle East policy formulations. There are more divergences than convergences today between United States and Turkey.

Iran ever since the Islamic Revolution 1979 overthrowing the US protégé Shah of Iran has been in United States strategic crosshairs, constant demonization and subjected to economic sanctions by the United States. A dispassionate reality check would show that Iran over decades is still economically alive, has a strong and sizeable military machine. In fact Iran's military power including a missiles arsenal and potential or nuclear weapons has taken place in decades of US-imposed sanctions.

Crucially, here too the fundamentals of US Middle East policy formulations come under questioning. Can United States strategic embedment in Middle East be enduring despite Iran? Moreover, when Iran exercises strong influence in the Northern tiers or the Northern Crescent of the Middle East? Further, it cannot be overlooked that residing in the Gulf Kingdoms based on whom the United States has built-up its Middle East security architecture, are sizeable Shia majorities on whom Iran exercises strong spiritual influence.

The basic fundamentals of US Middle East policy formulations under question in 2019 are as follows (1) Has United States traditional fixation of favouring the Arab monarchies of the Southern Segment of the Middle East paid any geopolitical /strategic dividends to the United States? (2) Is the United States positioning itself evenly balanced on the Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East (3) Can Saudi Arabia even when provided strategic ballast by United States unquestionably further US national security interests?

Objectively, the United States priority of favouring Arab monarchies in the Middle East has not provided any rich dividends for the United States. Non-monarchical Arab States like Iraq and Syria with socialist moorings were functional states, no more dictatorial than Arab monarchies, until destroyed by US military interventions as they were anathema to monarchical states.

In terms of the Sunni-Shia divide in the Islamic Middle East as a whole the United States is not evenly poised. The United States is heavily tilted towards the Sunni monarchical kingdoms even though these states have large Shia majorities. In the Northern Crescent of the Middle East, the Shias predominate. The United States has not made any moves to win over the Shia majorities headed by Iran.

Saudi Arabia in its own right and on a self-reliant mode is ill-equipped in power attributes to emerge as an independent Regional Power of the Middle East, even with US massive strategic ballast. Saudi Arabia has been ambivalent in its approaches towards the United States in the past. In Gulf War II, Saudi Arabia declined to host US military presence and the United States had to divert to Qatar. Saudi Arabia initiated the long range missiles race in the Middle East when it installed Chinese CSS2 missiles in its territory. Following 9/11 outrage, Saudi Arabia indulged in political signalling against United States by weapons purchases from Russia.

The United States cannot discount the above background of Saudi Arabia from its policy calculations. It has only two viable options in terms of its Middle East policy formulations. The United States can realistically recast its Middle East policy formulations by resurrecting the old flavour of its strong ties with Turkey. Also, the United States has to recast its Iran policy resting on 1979 fixations and turn over a new leaf. If North Korea can be engaged in dialogue by the United States, equally strong imperatives exist for United States to engage Iran.

Alternatively, if the United States for whatever reasons is not inclined to take the above mentioned initiatives discussed above, it would be well advised to disengage itself from the Middle East and let the natural balance of power prevail after the three Major States, namely, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged themselves in intra-regional power-play.

Before concluding, two other factors weighing heavily on US Middle East policy formulations are the Israel Factor and the Russia Factor. Israel's security is of paramount importance for United States and regional security. Rather than involving Israel in Byzantine political power-play in the region, all that the United States has to make is a forceful declaration that 'Israel's security and stability is of overriding national security priority of the United States. The United States will forcefully repel any threats to Israel security, if need be with even nuclear weapons'.

As far as Russia is concerned, in recent years Russia has been able to muscle into the Middle East as a countervailing force against the United States, and that too with staunch US Allies in the Middle East, this is entirely due to acts of commission and omission of United States Middle East policies.

Concluding, it needs to be stressed emphatically that in the evolving global geopolitical landscape the United States is at critical crossroads. The United States vital national security interests lie in Indo Pacific and the China Threat evolving to challenge its primacy. The United States should logically focus its geopolitical and strategic focus on Indo Pacific and disengage from the Middle East to let the natural balance of power evolve. It is with that evolved balance of power that the United States should align its future Middle East policy formulations.

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