**[Shifting sands in the Middle East](https://nation.com.pk/05-Dec-2020/shifting-sands-in-the-middle-east%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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During his stint in power, the outgoing Republican POTUS Trump remained fixated on disengagement from all endless wars and to bring the soldiers home to save precious lives and money; with some degree of success despite resistance from the US administration. However, heavy men, material and economic losses and eroding NATO allies’ cooperation had already earned Democratic President Obama and VP Joe Biden blame for leading from the rear. The main arena of American disengagement that raised concerns in Pentagon and Langley in particular were the Middle East and Afghanistan, while NATO/EU felt uneasy on reducing the US footprint in Germany with pressure from Trump to share more economic burden by NATO allies. Nevertheless, what began as Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” renamed later as “Asia Rebalancing Policy” got final traction and got rebranded as “Indo-Pacific Rebalancing Policy” during Trump’s presidency giving birth to mini-NATO in the region as four countries—the Quad Group (USA, Japan, India and Australia), prone to grow in size with some other regional countries and at least 2 to 3 NATO members like UK, France and may be Germany or even Canada. That obviously points toward the near future Indo-Pacific region as a new arena for the Great Game among the USA, China and Russia with other regional and extra-regional countries adjusting their national political, economic and security policies. If we keep the last phase of the cold war in mind, the Indo-Pacific region is prone to see heightened economic competitions and even a range of military contests; thus the need to buckle up.

Outgoing president Trump has favoured Israel in an unprecedented way to solidify her illegal territorial gains on Palestinian lands, accepted Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and even moved the US Embassy there.

There has also been a buzz of invisible pressure on Pakistan to follow suit in a lot of haste before Trump’s exit from the White House; such enforced diplomacy has created political turmoil and public resentment in the concerned Muslim countries for the fear of greater Israel becoming a reality. The real concern is that the progress achieved by Trump to make Israel a well-recognized country with the establishment of bilateral relations with wealthy Muslim countries in the Middle East will almost be impossible to reverse with devastating impact on the Palestine cause.

According to senior Western analysts, the record of American failure in the Middle East over the last two decades is too stretched and disappointing. The most obvious disaster was the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Across the political spectrum, officials and analysts came to believe that Middle Eastern societies needed Washington’s help and that the United States could use its power in helpful ways in the region. What followed was an unproductive pursuit to convert Arab societies, resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stamp out jihadism, and end Iran’s development of nuclear technology. The fact that five Arab countries are now in various stages of absolutely crumbling, contributes to an overall sense within Washington that the U.S. approach requires a drastic revamp. A new general consent seems to have taken roots in the State Department that it is time to give the lead to regional pampered players in collaboration with Israel to take care of reduced American interests in the region and retrench instead in the new arena with focus on contesting and containing Chinese rise and re-emerging Russia along with fresh formation of allied blocs.

The opposing thinking however says that leaving the Middle East by the US is not a sound policy. Therefore, a hybrid solution may emerge where smart US military presence with more reliance on comparatively much smaller, specialised hi-tech forces are kept at strategically critical bases in order to support the regional partners and to take care of specific missions. Throughout the Cold War and through the first decade of this century, ensuring cheap gasoline for US consumers, supporting Israeli security, fighting terrorists, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction were all goals that Americans and their leaders demonstrated a willingness to spend resources on and even sacrifice lives for. All four remain important, but they have become less critical in recent years. The boom in hydraulic fracturing has allowed the United States to become nearly energy independent. This has raised questions among political leaders and analysts about whether protecting the free flow of fossil fuels from the Middle East is worth the investment to the United States. In any case, Indo-Pacific rebalancing will continue to take care of the most important strategic rationale for US presence in the region—and the justification for spending billions of dollars over decades to ensure US military dominance in the area i.e. the need to preserve the free flow of energy resources out of the Persian Gulf and free trade through secure Sea Lines of Communication. Moreover, with per capita GDP on par with France and the United Kingdom, Israel’s strategic position has never been better. Iran remains a challenge, but the Israel Defence Forces are considered capable enough to deter Tehran and its allies. Therefore, experts in the US believe that after recent developments between Israel and a few important Arab countries, and with an even better grip on the West Bank, Israel is no longer a beleaguered partner.

Pakistan looks strategically well placed and more aligned with China, Russia, Turkey and Malaysia while trying to keep good balanced relations with all regional states like Iran, Central Asian Republics and other extra regional countries; while still staying relevant to the US’ orbit. The biggest foreign policy challenge for Pakistan remains the resolution of IIOJ&K as per UNSC resolutions and peaceful co-existence with arch-foe India in the East and a peaceful Afghanistan free from hostile proxies in the West. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a supporting declaration on IIOJ&K in the post meeting OIC declaration notwithstanding, the absence of IIOJ&K from the agenda points of 47th OIC meeting on November 27-28, 2020 in Niger was a point of grave concern for Pakistan. It demanded a more forceful but delicate diplomatic manoeuvre with regards to old and time-tested Middle Eastern countries who are rightly or wrongly projected to be more tilted towards Israel and India, less for their love for both but more for grudge against Iran perhaps.

It goes without saying that the foreign policy of any country not only should be emanating from but should also be complementing the internal policies of a country; both pursuing national interests aimed at security and well-being of the nation. A fine point that our very expensive parliamentarians and policymakers have to understand and work headlong to make and execute national policies is based on self-reliance. To take the first step in that right direction, our parliamentarians have to shed away the habit of petty brawls and verbal assaults inside or outside of both Houses of the parliament and work hard to legislate to justify their very existence. Without a house in order and economic independence, no amount of sophisticated diplomatic parlance can fetch us any fruitful results. The undue over-reliance on the Army to run the state affairs and respond to every challenge not only over-stretches the armed forces but also undermines the required growth of other national institutions who continue to relax and enjoy without any performance.