A year after Joe Biden’s inauguration, expectations for a shift in America’s Middle East policy have not materialized. Gulf monarchies are wary looking on as Washington continues to debate the U.S. role in the region.

The Biden team spent a great deal of effort in 2021 working to differentiate itself from the administration of Donald Trump, including a strong focus on re-establishing cordial dialogue with U.S. allies around the globe. Yet domestic concerns such as the COVID pandemic and the country’s battered economy have dominated the presidential agenda, leaving residual diplomatic capital and resources for issues abroad. Within the foreign policy sphere, President Biden has prioritized confronting a constantly expanding China and an increasingly revanchist Russia. In consequence, apart from the chaotic American withdrawal (https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/2021/09/07/why-biden-cant-turn-back-the-clock-on-the-iran-nuclear), which left China (https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3154940/why-us-losing-china-battle-southeast-asia), In the Internation Security Strategic Guidance statement that President Biden released in March 2021, America’s number-one enemy is identified as “antagonistic authoritarian powers” (https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NCS-1v2.pdf), those nations eager to undermine the democratic values underpinning the foundations of the liberal order as forged by the United States and its allies during the post-Cold War era.

Yet the matters of U.S. foreign policy remain a lairiant, while the White House, despite its primary role, represents only one of many centers of power capable of influencing its course. While it takes time for an incoming president to orient the country’s diplomatic apparatuses towards the same goal, the Biden administration faces a possible change in the political dynamics of the country with the November midterm elections (https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/29/biden-foreign-policy-congress-midterm-elections/), heightening urgency around this matter.

Tough Acts to Follow: The Foreign Policy of Trump and Obama

President Biden inherited a complex legacy concerning the U.S. posture in the Middle East from his two predecessors; the Obama administration repositioned the country away from the Bush era’s “War on Terror,” issuing a 2012 Defence Strategic Guidance (https://ssp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R42146.pdf) that committed the military to curbing expenditures and gradually disengaging from Middle Eastern conflicts. The 2015 JCPOA furthered this approach, but the strategy ultimately turned out to be wishful thinking (https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/10/15/448925947/pledging-to-end-two-wars-obama-finds-himself-engangled-in-three) in terms of reducing conflict in the region. Not only did U.S. partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) disagree (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/14/why-saudi-arabia-and-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal) with Washington breaking bread with Tehran, but the concordant U.S. troop withdrawal allowed a vacuum of power from which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria-idUSKCN0X1L0E) emerged.


After two drastically different approaches to the region, its players have signaled to the Biden presidency that they have a vested interest in switching from the confrontation-based
foreign policy that underpinned the Trump administration to one that is more informed by diplomacy. The Arab Gulf monarchies in particular made it clear when they closed ranks (https://agisw.org/what-the-al-ul-a-gcc-summit-has-and-has-not-accomplished/) at the al-Ula meeting in early 2020 that for the time being, they want to avoid head-on disputes. This signals a trend of deep-seated transformations (https://agisw.org/uae-our-use-iran-cracks-open-the-do-door-to-dialogue/) that began after September 2019, when President Trump refused to retaliate (https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/the-real-reason-trump-wont-attack-iran-saudi/) against Iran after drone attacks (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refinersies-drone-attack.html) – attributed to Iran—with targeted Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais.

Efforts to thaw regional relations have also included a Saudi and Emirati rapprochement with both Iran and Turkey—mending fences (https://arabcenterde.org/resource/turkey-and-the-gulf-states-a-new-era-of-detente/) with the countries’ regional rivals.

It’s Hard to Say Goodbye: The Perils of Troop Extraction

However, Gulf states are also wary of the domestic shift within the United States away from military involvement in the region, even in particular made it clear when they closed ranks (https://agisw.org/what-the-al-ul-a-gcc-summit-has-and-has-not-accomplished/) at the al-Ula meeting in early 2020 that for the time being, they want to avoid head-on disputes. This signals a trend of deep-seated transformations (https://agisw.org/uae-our-use-iran-cracks-open-the-do-door-to-dialogue/) that began after September 2019, when President Trump refused to retaliate (https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/the-real-reason-trump-wont-attack-iran-saudi/) against Iran after drone attacks (https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refinersies-drone-attack.html) – attributed to Iran—with targeted Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais.

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Engagement through Involvement: A Path to Better Partnerships

On the other hand, if President Biden does decide to proceed with reshaping the American military presence in the region, the administration will need to convince regional partners to take on more responsibility for the security of the Middle East. In the second year of his term, the administration’s foreign policy goals should be to persuade allies to pledge commitment to the multilateral order and to halt free-riding practices. This would free up American resources so that they might be deployed to more sensitive areas.

Qatar exemplifies this model: the Gulf state successfully provided diplomatic support (https://agisw.org/qatar-the-taliban-and-the-gulf-schism/) in brokering the 2020 Doha agreement with the Taliban and provided significant logistical assistance (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/uae/qatar-emerges-as-key-player-in-
For its part, the Biden administration can learn valuable lessons from the failures of the Obama administration when regional players felt excluded from the process of negotiating the JCPOA. As Biden revisits negotiations with Iran, he must give these partners and allies credible reassurances (https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/reassuring-gulf-partners-while-recalibrating-u.s.-security-policy-pub-84520) about the future of American commitments to regional security. With more than 300 Houthi drone and missile attacks targeting (https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/12/09/2622705/yemeni-forces-shoot-down-saudi-spy-combat-drone-spokesman), Saudi Arabia in 2021 and the rebel group’s recent attack on civilian targets in the UAE, preventing air strikes has become a matter of high-level security concern for both countries.

The Biden administration continues to support regional militaries, as the UAE rallying for solidarity from the international community (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/biden-doctrine-exists-already-heres-an-inside-preview) in February 2021, the Biden administration has taken no major steps to undermine the Saudi-led coalition’s military operations in war-torn Yemen. The United States should likewise remain vigilant and condemn ambivalent attitudes from its partners that directly threaten American strategic interests. The Biden administration showed such strength when Beijing allegedly attempted to build a military facility (https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224) in the UAE and tried to assist (https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/23/politics/saudi-ballistic-missiles-china/index.html), Saudi Arabia with its ballistic missiles production.

It is too early to judge President Biden’s foreign policy, but his statements and policies during this first year allow us to sketch the parameters of a so-called “Biden Doctrine” (https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/20/the-biden-doctrine-exists-already-heres-an-inside-preview/). Though the administration uses a milder tone and more diplomacy than Trump, its policies still fit under the “America first” label. The aim seems to be to restore confidence in the United States, gain strength on the global stage, and achieve its goals through negotiation rather than unilateral action. The Biden presidency is not immune to ruthless pragmatism (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/us-saudi-relations-after-khashoggi-realism) or “pragmatic thinking” (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-09/biden-realist), or “ruthless pragmatism (https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/07/biden-middle-east-saudi-arabia-syria-yemen-strategy/)” as Steven A. Cook dubbed the administration’s approach. However, as exemplified by its arms sales, U.S. policy continues to look the other way on human rights violations when America’s strategic interests are at stake.

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With the UN Security Council condemning (https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14771.doc.htm), the Houthis attacks on the Emirati capital, the Arab League council denounced (https://dailynewsug.com/2022/01/23/29624-dubai-lashed-out-towards-2021-houthi-terrorism/) the drone strikes at a meeting in Cairo last Sunday, and the UAE rallying for solidarity from the international community (https://twitter.com/UAEmbassyUS/status/1484538336799724107w20) calls have heightened for Washington to reinstate the Houthis (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-17/uae-to-ask-us-to-restore-houthi-terrorism-label-after-attack) terrorist designation. For the moment, the Biden administration is buying time by dispatching the U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking (https://www.state.gov/u-s-special-envoy-for-yemen-lenderking-travel-to-gulf-capitals-and-london/) to the Gulf to hold talks with its regional partners. As the Emirati air defense system intercepted new ballistic missile attacks fired by the Houthis on Abu Dhabi in the early hours of Monday January 24, tensions are bound to increase. Whether President Biden will prioritize humanitarian concerns (https://www.bhrw.org/news/2020/12/10/yemen-houthi-terrorism-designation-threatens-aid) for civilians in Houthi-controlled areas or make a significant U-turn (https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-united-nations-houthi-yemen-middle-east-9e41877a0f20481b85104a8eea18ce20) remains an open question.
Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region
Feb 9, 2022
Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil
(policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)

The Middle East at the Olympics: Six Countries Compete While Great Power Politics on Display
Feb 9, 2022
Carol Silber
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