

Book Review

The Decline of American Influence in the Middle East

Hirak Jyoti Das

Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East,
by Steven Simon, Penguin Press, New York, 2023.
Pp. 496. ISBN: 9780735224247

Grand Delusion by Steven Simon interrogates the Middle East policy of US presidencies from Jimmy Carter to Joe Biden, calling it “a tale of gross misunderstandings, appalling errors, and death and destruction on an epochal scale.” Steven Simon, a career diplomat who held the position of Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African affairs in National Security Council, has written the book in parts as a memoir, while tactfully hiding the narrator from view for most of it. The book, in eight fact-filled and closely analysed chapters, dissects the presidencies of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, William J. Clinton, George W. Bush Jr, Barack H. Obama, Donald Trump and Joseph Biden to evaluate the reasons for the rise and fall of US influence in the region from 1979 until the present. The author, while being aware of the ‘artificial’ nature of the 1979 to 2022 timeframe, argues that this period signifies a new era of intervention which has both qualitative and quantitative differences from the pre-1979 phase. The post-1979 period is marked by intense militarisation of US’ Middle East policy. The book pinpoints the role of key policymakers who, while taking ‘pride’ in their intentions, overlooked the disastrous consequences of their actions.

Hirak Jyoti Das is a Senior Research Associate at the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) and a doctoral candidate at the Centre for West Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His research interests cover India’s Relations with the Gulf states, Domestic Politics & Foreign Policies of these states, and Islamic movements in West Asia and North Africa.

National Security Vol. 6, No. 2, 2023
(April - June 2023) Page 193-207, ISSN 25-81-9658 (0)
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The author during the introductory remark briefly elucidates the US' early interactions with the region, such as the maritime campaigns under John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison presidencies; sale of ships, weapons, military expertise; entry of Christian missionaries, etc. The initial interactions shaped the way the US saw its global role, while its attitude towards Muslim states was underpinned by notions of Oriental despotism, belief in 'American exceptionalism' and the superiority of democracy as a political system.

The US involvement in the region grew after World War I and its interests were entangled with those of its wartime allies Britain and France, to thwart the growing Soviet influence and the possibility of Germany's economic and strategic recovery. In the post-World War II period, oil emerged as the critical component in the US' strategic calculation though complicated by the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union. Saudi Arabia essentially emerged as an informal protectorate. The US military presence in the Middle East, however, remained small until the Nixon administration. The security and policing responsibilities in the Gulf were delegated to Saudi Arabia and Iran by providing arms, guidance and training.

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From Jimmy Carter to Joe Biden the US witnessed some of the most dramatic events in the Middle East, starting from the fall of Shah in Iran in 1979 and ending with the collapse of US dominance, "or illusions about it." The loss of influence can be seen in the open contempt of the Gulf states and Israel; failed attempts to arm and train Syrian rebels; disastrous intervention in Libya; stalled attempts to facilitate democratic transitions during the 2011 Arab Spring; rise of the Islamic State (IS); failure to build a durable constituency for a nuclear deal with Iran and the bitter end to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

In view of the candid exposition by an ex-official of successive presidencies on the American responsibility for militarising the Middle East, launching a series of disastrous wars, destroying states and backing autocracies, and in the end failing to resolve conflict and build a stable peace, it is useful to briefly summarise the narrative of the author here. It is done as the author has—by presidencies.

Jimmy Carter

The prominence of the region in US strategic outlook surged significantly during the Jimmy Carter presidency between 1977 and 1981. Jimmy Carter's firm commitment to civil rights and advocacy of human rights was deeply rooted in the "American self-conception as a city on a hill." Carter's advocacy of human rights was opposed by the foreign policy establishment because of US support for several repressive regimes and brutal autocrats. The foreign policy establishment feared that over-emphasis on the human rights agenda would only weaken the reliability of the US as an ally, directly benefitting the Soviet Union.

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The Carter administration's motivation to achieve a peace deal between Israel and Egypt signed on 26th March 1979 was driven by the fear of more open wars triggering another round of Arab oil embargo. The peace deal transformed Egypt with the largest Arab military as a crucial strategic asset. Jimmy Carter, however, failed to anticipate the Islamic Revolution in Iran that toppled Shah Reza Pahlavi in Iran, due to intelligence failure and tactical weakness, including the absence of Farsi speakers in the embassy and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stations, and reliance on Iranian intelligence. The book elucidates the acute diplomatic problems that emerged after the hostage crisis in which 52 American citizens were captured by Iranian radicals. The hostage crisis directly affected Jimmy Carter's domestic popularity, which was further dented by the botched rescue mission, namely Operation Eagle Claw, carried out on 24-25 April 1980.

Ronald Reagan

The Reagan presidency moved away from the policy of cautious restraint practised by the previous administrations by plunging the US into a series of regional conflicts — in Lebanon, Iran and Libya. Simon shows how Reagan "set a new pattern of large investments of prestige and resources for puny or negative returns." Reagan exaggerated the US' stakes in the region while overestimating US capacity to secure "occasionally absurd inflated interests." Reagan also underestimated the local and regional players that defied or manipulated the administration to safeguard their interests. Moreover, the State Department and National Security Council under Reagan were inclined to

apply military solutions to what were fundamentally political and diplomatic problems. The US policy did not bring any favourable returns since Lebanon never came under its sphere of influence; Libya took a more radical turn, the number of terrorist incidents went up, and the US lost all capacity to affect Iraqi or Iranian interests.

In the case of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the US hedged on both sides but preference shifted towards Iraq and the Reagan administration gathered and supplied missiles from all over the world to secure Iraqi victory. The Reagan Administration was instrumental in weaponising the Saddam Hussein regime, which affected the balance of power and led to further militarisation of the region. At the same time, the US and Israel through the course of the Iran-Iraq war continued to hope for a reconciliation with the Islamic Republic. The US covert arms transfer to the Islamic Republic in 1985-1987 was backed by fear of a potential alliance between Moscow and Tehran, which was not substantiated by any evidence. The author posits that the “evidence in the US policymaking process is often superfluous in a system where preconceived notions and conceptual frameworks derived from ideological conviction are what really matter. Confirmation bias, a preference for data that can be seen as supporting one’s pre-existing perceptions and a disregard for information that does not, can propel policy in bizarre directions.” The intelligence reporting pattern was based on opportunity analysis, i.e. deciding the relevance of information on the basis of what the President wants to hear. The intelligence community was often used as cover to execute actions or to place blame in case of failure. These tendencies can be seen in the US foreign policymaking process in succeeding presidencies.

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Reagan administration’s involvement in the region was rooted in two policy priorities — the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia. In the case of Israel, the driving force for the US was domestic politics and rivalry with the Soviet Union, and in the case of Saudi Arabia, access to oil was the strategic and economic priority. The Reagan administration, during its tenure, increased strategic cooperation with Israel that allowed Tel Aviv to preposition US equipment on its soil, extract ‘rents’ in the form of lucrative technical concessions and leverage its status as a major non-NATO ally. The US

miscalculation in linking the Reagan plan — the proposed confederation of Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza—with the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon provided an excuse for Tel Aviv not to withdraw and avoid any negotiations on Palestinian territories. Reagan shifted the basis of US-Israel engagement from shared values of liberal peace-seeking democracies to strategic justification, propelling Israeli shift to the right, especially on the Palestine issue.

The US-Saudi Arabia dynamics during Ronald Reagan presidency went through two phases. The first phase was marked by joint efforts to support Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war and military and financial aid to Mujahideens to fight against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. The Saudi monetary contributions were channelled by Pakistan's Inter State Intelligence, in keeping with its duplicitous role in the Afghan war, to support anti-American Pashtun warlords that sheltered Al Qaeda operatives. As mentioned earlier, the US while posing itself as a security guarantor for Saudi Arabia, supplied weapons to Riyadh's primary opponent, Iran. In the second phase, Saudi Arabia was apprehensive due to the US' duplicity as well as Israel's growing involvement that Riyadh feared could sabotage its security.

George H. W. Bush

The George H. W. Bush presidency between 1989 and 1993 continued with Reagan's policy of interventionism and placing US into a posture of imperial overreach that trapped succeeding administrations into deeper military commitments to the region. The wars against Iraq by Republican Presidents George H. W. Bush and his son George W. Bush were responsible for killing between 687,000 and 878,000 Iraqi children under the age of five alone and even larger numbers of other Iraqis. More than 4,000 American military personnel also perished while conducting this war.

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The primary motivation for America's involvement in the 1990-1991 Gulf war was the threat to its interests by a hostile power, Iraq acquiring a very large share of regional oil production in Kuwait leading to Operation Desert Storm in January-February

1991. George H. W. Bush in order to gain consensus for his war preparation efforts popularised the phrase, the New World Order with holistic goals such as terror-free world, pursuit of justice, recognition of shared responsibility for freedom, etc. The 'New World Order' underlined the triumphalism of America's unipolar moment after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The US foreign policy during the war planning faced the dilemma about the regional military balance. The book observes that "Privately, the objective of fatally weakening Saddam continued to drive strategy. But there was yet another conflicting driver, which was to preserve Iraq as an effective foe of Iran. The administration never truly reconciled these incompatible objectives." Therefore, the trick was to damage Saddam Hussein regime's offensive capability without disrupting the balance between Iraq and Iran. The US, while encouraging revolts within Iraq, was unsure about the loyalty of these rebel groups. It was worried that many Shiite groups were close to Iran. The US, in fact, preferred a military coup. The author notes that, "This was wishful thinking at its worst." The concerns over the break-down of the Iraqi state; growth of sectarian militias; Iran's strategic inroads, in fact, came true after the 2003 Iraq war initiated by George H. W. Bush's son, George W. Bush.

The author opines that one of the unexpected consequences of President George H. W. Bush's Operation Desert Storm was to "inspire Osama Bin Laden to attack the US." Laden repeatedly mentioned the US intrusions in the region and the Islamic holy land were aimed at subjugating the Muslim world. President Bush viewed the US war effort as having universal significance. He was, however incapable of perceiving the lethal responses that were taking shape. The author notes that "Bin Laden, as it turned out, had a different new world order in mind."

Bill Clinton

The Democratic Party candidate Bill Clinton after taking over presidency between 1993 and 2001 flirted with a number of fault lines in the region. The Clinton presidency emphasised 'dual containment' of both Iraq and Iran in a departure from the balancing strategy of Reagan and Bush Sr. The dual containment strategy led to Iraq's destruction but an assertive Iran. The administration propagated the notion of American exceptionalism. The US as the sole superpower took it as its special responsibility to neutralise, contain and, through selective pressure, transform 'backlash' states such as

Iraq and Iran into constructive members of the international community. The Clinton presidency continued to view Iraq and its military assets as a major threat and took drastic measures such as the December 1998 Operation Desert Fox to destroy its infrastructure of what it called 'weapons of mass destruction' (WMD). In October 1998, under the Iraq Liberation Act, he sanctioned USD 97 million to fund anti-regime broadcasting, military training, non-lethal assistance, humanitarian aid, etc., to remove Saddam Hussein and promote the emergence of a democratic government. The CIA coup plot to overthrow the Iraqi leader, however, failed due to weak understanding of Saddam Hussein's regime and its multi-layered security apparatus.

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Iran was the other component of the dual containment policy. The Jewish lobby played a critical role in imposing Iran and Libya Sanctions Act signed in August 1996, damaging the remaining shreds of engagement with the Islamic Republic and creating rifts with European states that propagated the idea of 'critical dialogue' for moderating Tehran's behaviour. The Clinton administration carried out the maximum pressure policy with limited success and overlooked the conciliatory signals from Iran.

The third component of Bill Clinton's Middle East policy was the Israel-Palestine peace process, including the backdoor diplomacy since the 1991 Madrid peace conference culminating in the September 1993 Oslo Peace Accords and the October 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. In the post-Oslo period, the Clinton administration in order to preserve the fragile peace deal failed to rein in on Palestinian incitement and violence or stall Israel's settlement and expansion efforts; delays in withdrawal, etc. The US weak posture in implementing the agreement encouraged further disregard by Israelis and Palestinians. Clinton's efforts to move forward on the Palestinian track in Camp David failed miserably.

George W. Bush

George W. Bush presidency between 2001 and 2009 witnessed the dominance of neo-conservatives marked by intense militarisation of US Middle East policy. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the strategic circle tried to link Iraq using "mass of

tenuously connected facts and guesswork.” The US framed the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a preventive war. In the US National Security Strategy, the preventive option was labelled as pre-emption to suggest the criticality of the situation. The Bush administration, while believing in Saddam Hussein’s resolve to use terror to fulfill his objective, did not have any evidence directly connecting his regime with Al Qaeda. Vice President Dick Cheney suggested even if there is one percent chance of terrorists getting hold of any WMD, the US should act as if it were a certainty. The US should therefore violently respond even, and especially, in the absence of proof. This would be a more potent deterrent to challenges from other quarters. The US propaganda against Iraq was broadcast uncritically by leading newspapers such as *The New York Times*. In order to co-opt American public opinion, the newly formed White House Iraq Group dispensed incorrect information that Iraq was on the verge of nuclear weapons capability and was prepared to use it in collaboration with the Al Qaeda. Dick Cheney kept pushing the narrative that Saddam was linked to the 9/11 attacks, was preparing WMD for use against the US and Iraqi people, and would welcome US troops as liberators. The US intelligence analysis had no proof of Saddam’s nuclear weapons capability and WMD programme.

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The US invasion led to the sudden decapitation of the Iraqi government creating a vacuum in the administrative sphere. The occupying US military did not have the ability or resources to replace it leading to state anarchy. The US appointed Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) committed three fundamental mistakes — introducing sectarian apportionment system by dividing ministerial portfolios along ethnic and sectarian lines. It also allowed warlords to politically and militarily organise on sectarian lines. The second mistake was to de-Baathify or exclude individuals and army officials loyal to the Baath Party in the new political structure. Thirdly, Bremer disbanded the Iraqi army, which led many soldiers to return home with service weapons. The foreign policy makers were deeply confused about the exit strategy significantly complicated by the rising number of civilian deaths in attacks by US troops.

The Bush administration's Middle Policy was preoccupied by the so-called Freedom Agenda and the Middle East Peace Process. In the absence of proof of Saddam Hussein's WMD programme, the freedom agenda and the promotion of democracy were justified as reasonable excuses for the war in Iraq. The author points to the close US ties at that time with autocracies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The author has dismissed the notion that Muslims are incompatible to democracy by emphasising on high voter turnout in free elections and general admiration of American democratic political institutions in the region. The US despite using the rhetoric of democracy promotion in fact preferred autocracies in the region which were easier to manage. Nevertheless, the narrative of democracy promotion dominated the Bush presidency.

In the case of Israel's war against Hezbollah in 2005, George W. Bush rather than restraining Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert egged him to continue to undermine UN efforts to mediate a ceasefire. Moreover, the victory of Hamas in Gaza upended the US strategy of democracy promotion. The US also failed to provide innovative solutions required for mediating the differences between Israel and the Arab states in the November 2007 Annapolis Conference.

Barack Obama

The Middle East policy of Barack Obama presidency between 2009 and 2017 focussed on the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, a shift in approach towards the region by diluting the project of regime change as modus operandi, restarting Israel-Palestinian negotiations and blocking Iran's nuclear ambitions. Barack Obama took a tough stand on settlements and indicated his support for Palestine's right to exist. Obama's efforts to bring Israel to the negotiating table suffered due to unfavourable personal equations with Prime Minister Netanyahu. The US-Israel relationship, meanwhile, transformed as a result of the open alliance between the Benjamin Netanyahu government and the Republican Party.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, counter-terrorism cooperation replaced the Cold War alliance structure. In the post 9/11 worldview and George W. Bush's 'with us or against us' options, many authoritarian states were happy to consent and benefit from western funding, intelligence, equipment and political support. The poor socio-economic conditions since early 2000s eventually led to the Arab Spring protests in Egypt. Obama administration faced a political dilemma between protecting a crucial

ally in Hosni Mubarak or supporting the popular call for freedom and justice. Obama nudged towards Mubarak's resignation. The book has opined that Obama's recommendation for orderly transition was irrelevant because the military elites saw Mubarak as a burden that was endangering their own interests—huge business firms, political positions, etc. Therefore, the author argues, the military would have removed him anyway. Obama's decision to discard an 'inconvenient dictator' raised worry among other US allies such as Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Israel was worried that democratisation in Egypt could bring the Islamists to power. Prior to the entry of the Muslim Brotherhood to political office, White House and senior Egyptian military leaders reached a consensus to preserve the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, access to the Suez Canal during wartime and a cooperative framework for counter-terrorism operations. Interestingly, there was no discussion on political reforms. Obama administration was divided between businesses as usual and the new democratic order. The US relationship with Egypt's military led regime under Abdel Fatah Al Sisi who removed Mohammad Morsi's democratically elected government remained intact.

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Obama administration was involved in regime change in Libya and intervention in Syria to bring about regime change. His actions led to Russian involvement in Syria to bolster the regime. In Libya, Obama administration adopted the responsibility to protect or R2P as legal justification for use of force and remove Muammar Gaddafi. The US during war planning discussed the post-Gaddafi political scenario but it was unwilling to take any responsibility for Libya's stabilisation. The author questions the rationale for decapitating a leadership that had signed valuable agreements, including confronting radicals, abandoning its nuclear aspirations, accepting responsibility for the 21 December 1988 Pan Am 103 attack and compensating the victims. The US was aware of the anarchy that would follow after Gaddafi's ouster. The destabilisation and the ensuing civil war that followed have continued until today. In the case of Syria, the Obama administration initiated sanctions, applied diplomatic isolation, funded external backed opposition political leadership, etc. Obama, after some initial hesitation, carried out arms training programmes for opposition groups to weaken the Assad regime. The arms programme empowered the Islamists and initiated a bloody internationalised

war with the entry of Iran and Russia in the Syrian battleground. Thousands died, cities and economy was destroyed, and thousands more flooded into Europe as refugees.

The rapid spread of Islamic State (IS) under Barack Obama's watch in Iraq was blamed on intelligence failure that underestimated the group while overestimating the Iraqi army. The book mentions the split between the intelligence agencies and the Obama administration. The CIA provided 'gloomy' assessments about the frustration within the Sunni community leading to the growing foothold of the IS in border regions between Iraq and Syria. The Obama administration, however, tilted towards the Defence Department's mistaken assessments depicting favourable conditions owing to the claimed effectiveness of combat operations.

For the Obama administration, the Iranian nuclear programme emerged as a major strategic challenge. Israel continued to remain opposed to any negotiated deal between the US and Iran and indulged in spying for information that would be leaked to Republican Party members in the US Congress. The Democratic Party managed to block the Republican resolution for disapproval after the signing of the nuclear deal on 14th July 2015. With regard to the US' regional allies, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu collaborated with his allies in the Republican Party to humiliate Obama in Congress. The Gulf States also considered Obama as unreliable since he compromised with their worst enemies, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Iran. Obama faced criticism from Israel for spelling out that Jewish settlements in West Bank were obstacles to peace, border demarcation based on the 1967 armistice line and adjustment through land swaps, sharing Persian Gulf with Iran, his selective tilt towards negotiation rather than escalation, and rebalancing diplomatic and military commitments due to shift towards Indo-Pacific region.

Donald Trump

Donald Trump, according to the author, has "conceived the world as populated by winners and losers, comen and suckers, and interactions as zero-sum games." Trump is described as being "comprehensively ignorant" of the conduct of foreign policy. The Trump presidency, between 2017 and 2021, frequently changed the upper ranks of the administration and the National Security Council (NSC) staff, indicating disconnect between the West Wing and the rest of the government. The politicised atmosphere in key agencies isolated appointed officials from career professionals and disrupted the

framing and implementation of workable policies. He also included his family members in government functioning and entangled personal interest in policy outcomes. Trump blurred the differences between his private business interests with his responsibility for foreign and defence policy. He used his political role to gather Arab funding to sustain declining real estate investments. The author claims that the records introduced in the two impeachments, the report of the Justice Department, intelligence assessments, etc., indicate Trump's close ties with Moscow and it allowed Russia to pursue its objectives.

In terms of Trump's foreign policy pattern in the region, he largely continued with Barack Obama's second-term Middle East policy. Both presidents rejected the "endless war" paradigm. Both leaders shared similar views about the Arab-Israeli peace process considering it as a dead end. Trump administration suggested the idea of an economic peace between Israel and Palestinians. Trump proceeded to further shut down military bases in Iraq. He did not want to entangle itself in the Syrian civil war and began the process of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The book notes that both Obama and Trump "shared a declining sense of the utility, purpose, and effectiveness of American engagement, and especially of military intervention, in the Middle East." Both leaders did not intend to compete with Russia, Iran and Turkey for control over territory since it was of little relevance to critical US interests.

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On the nuclear issue, however, Trump was determined to force Iran to renegotiate to remove the 'defects' in the agreement. He also wanted to include the subject of Iran's regional activities and ballistic missile programme in the new deal. The White House begrudgingly continued to confirm Iran's compliance with its obligations every 90 days. In April 2017, the US withdrew from the nuclear deal and re-imposed economic sanctions complaining that Iran is not living up to the 'spirit' of the nuclear deal. Trump administration's disavowal of the nuclear agreement with Iran for being a political agreement that is binding only on the signatory administration weakened the rules-based international order, creating difficulty for succeeding presidencies to negotiate arms control or non-proliferation agreements. Trump also weakened the trans-Atlantic alliance against the backdrop of a resurgent Russia and provoked Iran to escalate its

regional activities through proxy groups and increased uranium enrichment levels. Trump's unilateral sanctions including extra-territorialised measures, such as secondary sanctions on any state that deals with Iran, have led to the weakening of the dollar as a reserve currency. The US credibility as a reliable partner that would respect agreements has also been diluted for its European and other allies and partners.

Simon asserts that the killing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) top commander Qassem Soleimani was a deliberate act of provocation by the Trump administration that risked regional instability. The killing was also utilised by Trump to distract the domestic audience from widespread coverage of the impeachment procedures. It was intended to boost his Republican Party support base that admires 'toughness' and divide the Democratic Party on a foreign policy issue. With regard to Iraq, bilateral relations have suffered following the killing of Qassem Soleimani and prominent Iraqi politician and militia leader, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis. It has compromised the huge American investments and military initiatives and contributed to making the US even more unpopular. In Syria, Trump had to tussle with Turkey to protect the Syrian Kurds that were instrumental in defeating the IS. The US, in order to protect the oil fields in Kurdish areas, decided to re-deploy troops and preserve the revenue flow.

The Abraham Accords leading to Israel's normalisation with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan is one of the major foreign policy successes of the Trump presidency. Trump in order to implement the accords deviated from traditional foreign policy line by providing F-35s to the UAE though it meant diluting Israel's qualitative military edge, changed its position on Western Sahara by siding with Morocco's position, and lifted Sudan from the state sponsor of terrorism list. The regional intervention by the US subsided during Barack Obama's second term and Donald Trump's tenure.

Joe Biden

The Joe Biden administration's foreign policy agenda has been dominated by China's growing role, the Taiwan issue, and the February 2022 Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Middle East, barring Iran, does not pose any plausible serious challenge to US interests. On Iraq, Biden presidency adopted a more nuanced posture as compared to Trump and avoided measures to weaken Baghdad government's credibility or infringe upon its sovereignty. In the case of Iran, Biden focussed on restoring the pre-Trump status quo. The prospect of revival of the nuclear deal, however, is stalled due to lack

of confidence within Iran in Biden's ability to ensure commitment by succeeding administrations. Biden's Middle East policy is aimed at prolonging the talks to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, thwart nuclear proliferation and reduce the risk of regional war. Biden, however, lacks the strategic incentive and domestic political support to 'dislodge' Iran from its multiple regional footholds. On the Israel-Palestine issue, Biden's advisors do not see any benefit in reviving the peace process. The author bluntly states that, "US reengagement would be ineffectual, producing the worst of all worlds for the administration, where it would look powerless in the face of Israeli opposition while paying a high domestic political price for its ineffectual efforts."

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The Missing Ingredients

This is a valuable work. It has capably identified the delusions of successive American administrations, and grand failures in US foreign policy-making towards the Middle East. The author has provided intricate details to support his arguments in a systematic and informative manner. While US perfidy is well documented in the book, it misses the role of George W. Bush administration in intensifying Islamic radicalisation in Iraq that led to the rise of the Islamic State (IS) movement. It completely overlooks how de-Baathifying the Iraqi military, use of mass torture and inhuman imprisonment, and civilian deaths created the fertile ground for the rise of the IS. The section on the IS operations is remarkably brief and only limited to Barack Obama's policy to neutralise the group. The author has added a number of counter-factual scenarios, however they are not greatly helpful in understanding the developments and it has led to over-explaining specific events. Among the Middle Eastern states, the broader emphasis has been largely devoted to the major states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Israel and Egypt. The US policies towards smaller states as well as Turkey, a key NATO player are mentioned in passing. The chapterisation process in the book has been done on the basis of presidencies from Jimmy Carter to Joe Biden. However a thematic chapterisation process on the basis of regional issues and subsequent evaluation of policies by US Presidents could have offered better clarity.

Armed with years of experience in foreign policy-making circles, the author has tactfully addressed the problem areas under each presidency. The US misadventures have led to the deaths of thousands of American citizens, hundreds of thousands of

Arabs, destruction of well-functioning and prosperous states, and drained both the American and the regional economies of trillions of dollars. The book offers a rare glimpse into the dilemmas of foreign policy-making and the internal contestations within the US diplomatic, security and intelligence institutions. The book is a must read for scholars and policymakers who are interested in the US foreign policy-making process, Great Power politics and their terrible consequences for the Middle East region.