

Focus: Transition of the US Administration and International Relations in the Middle East (Summary)

Essay: The Difficulty of Slipping Away Without Leaving a “Dustbin” Behind

Keiko Sakai (Professor, Center for Relational Studies on Global Crises, Chiba University)

With discord having marked their relations with the United States during the Obama years, Israel and Saudi Arabia welcomed the Trump presidency as an administration more amenable to their wishes. The eagerness of some regimes in the Middle East for US intervention can be traced back to the Gulf Crisis/War, but the Iraq War brought about an opposite outcome for the advocates of US intervention as it led to a substantial expansion of Iran’s regional hegemony. As a result, the Gulf Arab countries close to the US sought greater “self-reliance” in terms of security, and weapons purchases by Gulf states, in particular from the United States, increased significantly. On the other hand, the United States keenly felt the limitations of remaining directly involved in the Middle East to satisfy those in the interventionist camp, giving rise to the policy shared by the Obama administration and its successors of the US giving up the role of the world’s policeman. Nevertheless, the fact that the US has been groping in the dark non-stop since 1979 without any idea of how to tamp down its relations with Iran has caused setbacks in its Middle East policy.

1 Heightened Israeli-Palestinian Confrontation: The Many Facets of Conflict Revealed by Large-scale Clashes

Ryoji Tateyama (Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Department of International Relations, National Defence Academy)

The violent military clashes between Israel and the Gaza Strip in mid-May 2021 had some features never seen before. The forced evictions of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and the postponement of Palestinian parliamentary elections intensified the siege mentality among Palestinians and set the stage for military conflict. The confrontation spread into Israel, where Jewish and Palestinian groups clashed in many places, fatally in some instances. While the Biden administration expressed support for Israel, several Democratic lawmakers were critical of Israeli military attacks and called for the protection of Palestinian human rights. As in the past, humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Gaza is being discussed after the ceasefire. However, the current mechanism for rebuilding Gaza has little connection with reality and essentially endorses the Israeli blockade. Today, with the two-state solution completely stalled, the Palestinians’ feeling of being trapped is growing ever more intense, and a similar situation will certainly recur sometime in the near future.

2 The Road to Al-Ula: The Resolution Process of the Qatar Blockade and Challenges to Regional Stability

Koji Horinuki (Senior Researcher, JIME Center, The Institute of Energy Economics, Japan)

The Qatar diplomatic crisis that began in June 2017 finally came to an end three and a half years later in January 2021. The crisis was triggered when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt (known as the Quartet) tried to isolate Qatar by breaking off diplomatic relations with the country and closing their borders, all the while condemning Qatar for interfering in their internal affairs and supporting terrorism. Qatar refuted the Quartet’s claims and called for a peaceful solution to the

problem through dialogue mediated by Kuwait and the United States. Despite the support of intermediary countries, diplomatic relations with Qatar remained severed for a long time, making it extremely difficult to bring the crisis to an end. However, after the death of Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah, who had been leading the mediation efforts, and the defeat of President Donald Trump in the presidential election, the negotiations progressed rapidly. At the 41st GCC summit, the participating countries adopted the "Al-Ula Declaration" aiming towards regional unification and stability, and brought the severance of their diplomatic relations to an end. Nevertheless, there is still some friction among neighboring countries over Qatar that has the potential to spill over into a regional conflict again, so the GCC needs to put in place an effective dispute settlement mechanism.

3 Transitions in Turkish Foreign Policy and the Current Situation of Turkish-American Relations

Kohei Imai (Research Fellow, Institute of Development Economies, JETRO)

Turkish foreign policy from the 2010s to 2021, particularly toward the Middle East, can be broadly divided into a period of zero-problem diplomacy led by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a period of Erdoğan-led diplomacy, and a period of seeking cooperation with Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to break Turkey's isolation within the region. This paper examines the details of Erdoğan's diplomatic initiatives and his quest for cooperation in 2021. The switch in Turkish diplomacy from a zero-problem foreign policy to an Erdoğan-led foreign policy can be mainly attributed to the Syrian civil war, while the changeover from the more isolated foreign policy resulting from Erdoğan-led diplomacy to cooperation with regional powers in the Middle East in 2021 was prompted primarily by the inauguration of the Biden administration in the United States. This paper explains the latter shift, with a particular focus on Turkey-US relations, using the concepts of "soft balancing" and "hedging".

4 Iran and the Biden Administration in the Post-Rouhani Era: The Future of Iran Sanctions and the Iran Nuclear Deal

Yasuyuki Matsunaga (Professor, Institute of Global Studies, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies)

Since the inauguration of the Biden administration in early 2021, European-Union-mediated indirect negotiations between the signatories of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), including Iran, and the United States have been held in Vienna, over the return of the United States to the JCPOA and the accompanying lifting of the Iran-related sanctions. Both the United States and Iran have expressed their intention to return to their respective obligations under the 2015 agreement. However, negotiations have bogged down over the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration against Iran's development of ballistic missiles, as well as over the advanced centrifuges introduced by Iran. This is due, in part, to the fact that the Biden administration, much the same way as the Trump administration did, seeks to expand the scope of a deal with Iran. In Iran, the Rouhani administration is finishing its two four-year terms, and a hardline conservative government is expected to be inaugurated as its successor. Taken together, these two factors make it unlikely that the United States and Iran will reach an agreement anytime soon on some broad lifting of Iran sanctions and the return by each to its obligations under the original nuclear agreement..

Independent Articles:

1 China's Covid-19 "Vaccine Diplomacy": The Future of the US-China Struggle for Supremacy

Haruka Matsumoto (Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Developing Economies, JETRO)

Despite being the "ground zero" for the Covid-19 pandemic, China has been one of the first countries in the world to successfully contain the novel coronavirus and it has taken the lead in providing international emergency medical assistance. Recently, China is actively deploying its "vaccine diplomacy". When international community is increasingly polarized by the "haves and have-nots" vaccine gap, and it is true that many countries need Chinese vaccines. On the other hand, China can also be seen pursuing "vaccine diplomacy" as a geopolitical strategy to expand its influence in the international community, through the provision of vaccines. Since the change of government in the US, the Biden administration has indicated its intention to expand its international assistance while trying to rebuild the country by accelerating vaccination, drawing growing attention to the future of the US-China struggle for leadership over "vaccine diplomacy".

2 China's Middle East Policy

Emi Mifune (Professor, Faculty of Law, Komazawa University)

China's increasing presence in the Middle East is not just about pursuing energy resources. China's policy toward the Arab world is based on the "1+2+3 Cooperation Framework" proposed by Xi Jinping in which energy cooperation is the mainstay, infrastructure development and trade and investment facilitation serve as wings, and the three high-tech fields of nuclear power, space/satellites, and new energy are breakthroughs. In addition, the concept of a "community of common destiny" between China and the Arab world is being promoted under China's overall national security concept. As part of network-centric warfare (NCW), China is jointly building a dual-use "digital silk road" with countries in the Middle East in an effort to break free of systems dependent on the United States. China is also working to take its relations with Iran to a new stage by, for example, pursuing a "maritime community of common destiny" initiative and linking up Chabahar with the CPEC. China has been also stepping up its approaches to form a network of joint front with Middle Eastern countries in response to the "politicization of human rights issues" by the United States and Europe.