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# BIDEN'S MIDDLE EAST TRIP: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHAT'S NEXT

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The main objective of President Joe Biden's trip to the Middle East last week was to signal to both partners and adversaries that the United States was serious about restoring its strategic position in the region, which has taken considerable hits in recent years. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the visit was not meant to secure immediate agreements from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on increased oil production, as invaluable as this outcome or others related to strategic competition with China and Russia would have been for U.S. interests.

Give Biden some credit. Even though he knew that meeting with the Saudi leadership would cost him politically at home and possibly upset several senior members of his own administration, he nevertheless went to Jeddah because he rightly put the trip in its proper strategic context. This was not about the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Israelis, or anybody else. It was first and foremost about America and its standing in a region that has proven yet again its strategic importance to world security and commerce and specifically to U.S. long-term interests across the globe.

The question is whether Biden has said or done enough during and after the trip to convince skeptical partners that America is not leaving the region. The administration's strategic messaging preceding the visit certainly did not help. It was subpar, if not confusing. Biden did publish an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* to explain his reasons for his trip to the region, but it lacked both clarity and coherence.

That is unfortunate because this chaos in strategic communications does not reflect the situation on the ground in terms of U.S.-Arab military-to-military relations. Operational ties are developing quite nicely with an eye toward realizing the goals set out by this administration and ones before it, all centering on the creation of more effective forms of U.S.-Arab-Israeli security cooperation.

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The head of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Gen. Erik Kurilla, has been instructed by civilian leadership to work toward military integration between the United States and its regional partners as well as among those partners themselves. Few missions in military affairs are more challenging. First, the United States has never done this before with any of its Arab partners (although it has done it on some level with Israel). Second, all the political, procedural, technical, bureaucratic, and financial stars must align for this to work. Third, this will not happen in a matter of months — it will take many years.



Photo above: U.S. President Joe Biden and regional leaders from Oman, the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, and Iraq pose together for the family photo during the Jeddah Security and Development Summit (GCC+3) in Saudi Arabia on July 16, 2022. [Photo by MANDEL NGAN/POOL/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

Nonetheless, CENTCOM is patiently and methodically laying the groundwork. Crucially, there are also the Abraham Accords and the official inclusion of Israel into CENTCOM — strategic developments that can have some very positive effects on this mission of integration. The Israelis have excelled at integration for years and possess cutting-edge technology that could be useful to the Arab partners. In short, Israel can be one of the catalysts for success.

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But we are the ones who must lead and play the role of enabler and facilitator. We are the indispensable hub. Strategically, we will remain focused on deterring Iran,

countering violent extremist organizations, and pursuing strategic competition with China and Russia, partly by revitalizing and sustaining our regional partnerships. Functionally, our priorities are to pursue integrated air and missile defense and counter unmanned aerial systems.

Gone is the obtuse concept of a Middle East Strategic Alliance, or MESA, as coined by the Trump administration, which was unlikely to see the light of day primarily because of the lack of trust and different threat perceptions among regional players. A more serious, realistic, and gradual framework is now in place, called the Regional Security Construct, or RSC. Its pillars are integrated air and missile defense, maritime security, crisis response, special operations forces, and theater sustainment and fires.

Each pillar has a procedural, technical, and integration phase. The procedural part, which is immediate, ensures that all participants have a clear understanding of the threat environment. The technical part, which is medium term, is

necessary to achieve and maintain interoperability. The long-term integration part is critical to establish interconnected systems across domains as well as secure communications. All of these phases will require an enormous amount of work and cooperation through training, exercises, equipment, authorities, and doctrine. It truly is a heavy lift, but it is precisely what is needed to reach at least a measure of military integration with at least some key regional partners.

Consistent engagement with regional leaderships to assess, monitor, and evaluate all these activities that make up the RSC will be crucial, which is why, in addition to regular bilateral meetings, CENTCOM has come up with two regional conferences — one at the two-star level, happening every three months, and another at the four-star level, to be held every six months with the chiefs of defense in the Gulf Cooperation Council plus Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq (GCC+3).

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Among the most difficult tasks for Gen. Kurilla will be to transparently describe to all regional partners the challenges of attaining any level of military integration, be it bilateral or multilateral. It took NATO, the most powerful alliance on the planet, decades before it achieved it, and there is still room for improvement. Reaching this objective is difficult not only because it demands an immense amount of practical work, skill, persistence, and discipline but also because it requires a new way of thinking and behaving on the part of regional partners who historically have had a hard time working together and accepting the concept of interconnectedness. Defense reforms and a commitment to institutional capacity building are prerequisites to effective integration. Partners do not just integrate hardware, they must also integrate concepts, processes, institutions, and governmental and military cultures, all of which are deficient in the Arab world to begin with.

We’ve made terrible mistakes ourselves in the Middle East when it comes to security cooperation, and consistently so. We’ve focused almost exclusively on trucks and guns as well as access and basing. We paid lip service to real partnership. But, perhaps worst of all, we’ve been strategically inconsistent. Middle Eastern leaders have come to expect that U.S. commitment to their region will constantly waver, wax, and wane, thereby creating an impression that we seek strategic consistency from them in ways we are unwilling to demonstrate ourselves. We are beginning to change our attitude and approach toward the region, but it will take some time to align our enormous national security bureaucracy with our new vision.

Yet no matter how successful we are on the ground, none of this is going to work without clarity and consistency in U.S. policy and strategy nor absent robust U.S. leadership to support and enable these invaluable military initiatives. That is why Biden’s trip to the region was important — it was a first step in what will be a journey meant to persuade our regional partners that we remain the leader of choice and global partner in the Middle East and elsewhere. It might well be Biden’s first and last step if he is not reelected. But what matters most is that this new strategic approach to the region survives political change in Washington, which, if history is any guide, is easier said than done.

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