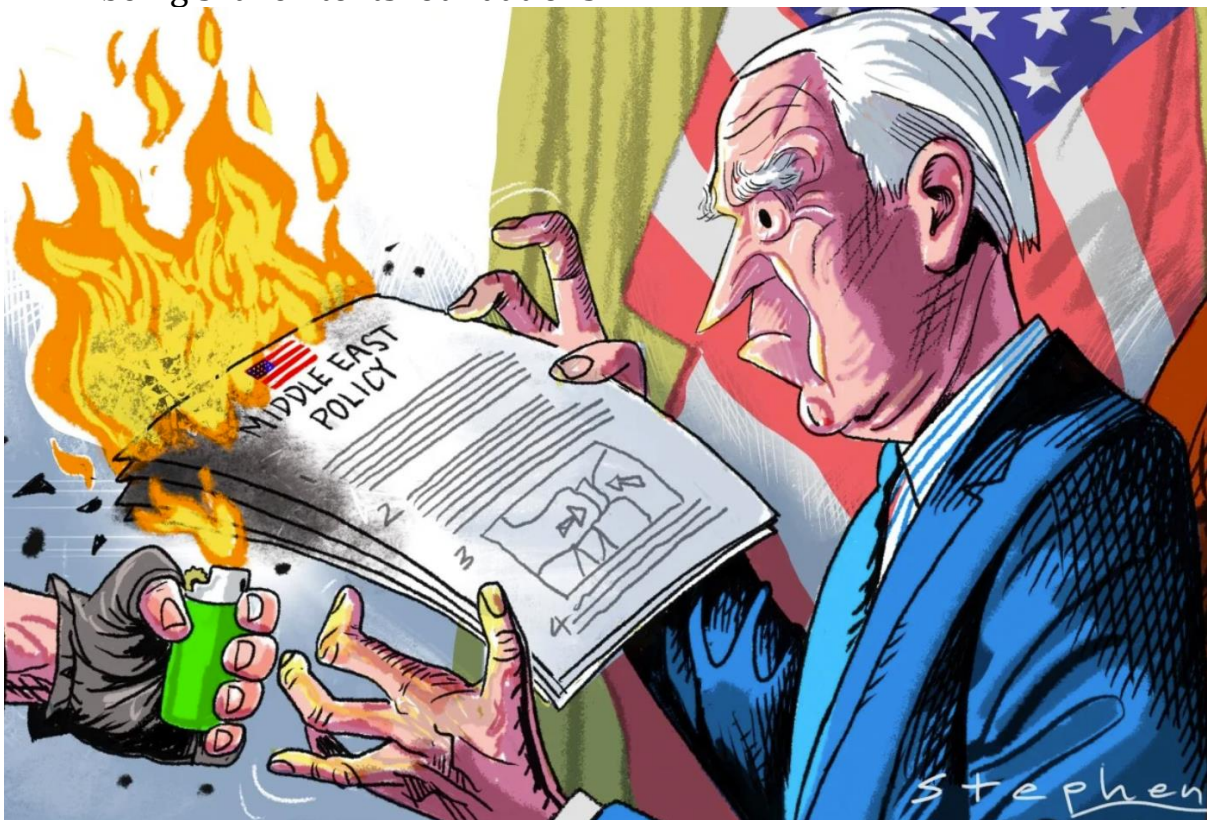


Terry Su

With Israel-Gaza war, America's Middle East policy has gone up in flames

- The US' miscalculation was to seek to normalise relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel to counter Beijing's geopolitical moves in the region. But this forced Hamas into desperate action
- As global concerns spread and domestic opposition grows, the US is being shaken to its foundations



<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3238133/israel-gaza-war-americas-middle-east-policy-has-gone-flames>

It's been more than a week since Hamas launched its surprise attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip, which were as successful militarily as they were harrowing in humanitarian terms.

Few had expected this, including US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. Eight days before the attack, Sullivan had listed the positive developments in the Middle East that were allowing America to focus on other regions, declaring: "The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades."

Hamas' onslaughts shattered the rosy picture. Paradoxically, it was largely Washington's doing that the "quieter" Middle East suddenly turned into a hellish war zone. America's latest

initiative to broker the normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia spurred Hamas into desperate action for fear that Palestinians' interests would again be sacrificed, perhaps forever.

Back in September 2020, the Trump administration brokered the Abraham Accords, with the United Arab Emirates – together with Bahrain and Morocco – normalising its relations with Israel. The deal was preceded by Egypt and Jordan's recognition of Israel in 1979 and 1994 respectively.

Any such move by Saudi Arabia would be a lot more significant given its population size, land mass and oil wealth, let alone the prestige it enjoys as the leader of Sunni Muslims. Washington's calculation was that the ultimate detente between Riyadh and Tel Aviv would counter Beijing's geopolitical manoeuvres in the region.

Yet America's Saudi-Israeli normalisation scheme has come disastrously unstuck.

Since Beijing pulled a diplomatic stunt in the Middle East by way of sponsoring the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement in March, Washington has been anxious about China's substantive inroads into the region, traditionally seen as its backyard; hence the need to roll back.

If, the logic goes, Washington pulled off something big in the Middle East, it would kill several birds with one stone.

First, it would serve to cement a relationship with Riyadh that has cracked in recent years, and secure its commitment to raise oil production to help alleviate America's domestic inflation problem, thereby propping up Washington's strategy to strengthen its economy while engaged in its "de-risking" tug of war with Beijing.

Second, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor initiative signed in New Delhi during the G20 summit would be further solidified as an answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative, a global connectivity vision that has long unsettled Washington and its allies.

Last but not the least, the grand rapprochement between Riyadh and Tel Aviv would so substantially and symbolically improve Israel's security standing that President Joe Biden would certainly look to benefit by gaining more support for his re-election campaign from the Israel lobby.

All that is now irrelevant with Hamas' Operation Al Aqsa Flood and its unfolding aftermath, in the face of Israel's humiliation, a Saudi Arabia reportedly backtracking from its engagement with Israel for normalisation talks and reiterating its championing of Palestinian rights, while in the US and allied countries, landmarks in New York, Berlin and Paris lit up in blue and white in support of Israel.

Now that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has put together a three-member emergency war cabinet and sworn that "every Hamas member is a dead man" – and with two US aircraft carriers dispatched to the shores of the Levant, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken shuttled into the Middle East, vowing to help defend Israel "as long as America exists" – it seems inevitable that Hamas will be hit devastatingly on the ground, if not wiped out, when full-scale Israeli actions are launched.

The question, however, is whether this is really what Washington would like to see happen in the Middle East – where the Palestinian issue remains as daunting as ever, irrespective of the fate of Hamas – when its avowed contest with China shows no sign of going its way and its de facto military wrestling with Russia in Ukraine drags on.

Sullivan appeared confident in a White House press briefing last week, saying: “The United States is capable of supporting Ukraine in Europe, of supporting our allies in the Indo-Pacific, and of supporting our close ally, Israel, in its hour of need. And we believe we have the resources, tools and capacities to be able to effectively do that.”

That Sullivan’s words need be taken with a pinch of salt seems obvious. For one, South Korea is reportedly concerned about North Korea launching Hamas-style attacks. That prospect may be difficult to imagine – but so were Hamas’ murderous forays.

The seriousness of the issue does not stop here. For years, Washington has been accused of allowing the Blob – its foreign policy establishment – and the Israel lobby to hijack policy by relentlessly leaning on Moscow and unreservedly supporting Tel Aviv. Voices of dissent sounded like outcries from the periphery of the country’s politics.

But last week, anti-Israeli statements were made on behalf of around 30 Harvard student groups, an unprecedented development that prompted the university’s former president, Lawrence Summers, to tweet: “In nearly 50 years of Harvard affiliation, I have never been as disillusioned and alienated as I am today.” A new dimension is emerging that may add to the spreading worries in America that this nation is being shaken to its foundations.

Terry Su is president of Lulu Derivation Data Ltd, a Hong Kong-based online publishing house and think tank specialising in geopolitics