Biden in West Asia

Why in news?

In his first visit to West Asia the US President, sought to strengthen America's traditional partnerships in the region, involving Israel and Sunni Arab countries.

What has been the US President's agenda in West Asia?

- In **Israel**, he promised that the U.S. would do everything it could to stop Iran from getting a nuclear bomb.
- In his brief visit to the Palestinian West Bank, he was careful not to criticize the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.
- He promised aid, but said the ground situation was not ready for reviving the peace process.
- In **Saudi Arabia**, Mr. Biden met Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince who, according to the CIA, ordered the 2018 killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi.
- The administration also announced that it was ending America's support for Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen.
- Speculation was rife that the U.S.-Saudi strategic alliance that goes back to the 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Saudi King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud was in peril.
- The visit practically brought to an end Washington's early attempts to punish and isolate Prince Mohammed.
- In a **summit with Arab leaders** in Jeddah, he said the U.S. would not walk away from West Asia, leaving a vacuum which China, Russia or Iran would try to fill.
- President Biden may have said that **human rights will be the center of our foreign policy**, but in West Asia, neither Israel's violent occupation of Palestinian territories nor the abysmal rights records of the Sunni Arab dictators and monarchs stopped the American President from pursuing his administration's foreign policy objectives.
- The U.S. has negotiated a deal between **Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel** that would see Egypt transferring the **sovereignty of two Red Sea islands — Tiran and Sanafir — to Saudi Arabia**.

- Owing to the Ukraine war, the U.S. has banned Russian oil.
- The EU is phasing out 90% of Russian oil imports and is planning to impose an insurance ban on tankers carrying Russian fuel.
- Crude prices in the international market are already hovering around $100 a barrel.
- Once the insurance ban kicks in, prices could jump further.
- It would make the inflation crisis in the West – in the U.S. it has hit a 41-year high at 9.1%--worse.
- As the Biden administration seeks to **punish Russia's Vladimir Putin** for his Ukraine invasion, it needs **Saudi Arabia to pump more oil** into the international market, disrupted by the western oil sanctions on Russia.

How past decisions of the US Presidents impact Biden's current decisions?

- Gone are the days when the Israel-Palestine issue dominated an American President's foreign policy agenda towards West Asia.
- **Barack Obama**, after his initial peace plan failed, focused his energy on the **Iran nuclear talks**.
- Mr. Trump, unanimously pulled the U.S. out of the nuclear deal and promoted stronger ties between Israel and Sunni Arabs.
- As the Iran nuclear talks have hit an impasse, Mr. Biden seeks to accelerate cooperation between Israel and Sunni Arabs, the pillars of America's West Asia policy.
- Mr. Biden took a mixed approach of trying to revive the nuclear deal, while further strengthening the Israel-Arab partnership.
- But the Iran deal remained elusive.
- During the Obama era, Iran had a moderate President who was ready to cut a deal.
- Now, all branches of the Iranian state are controlled by hardliners.
- **Iran** has also entered into a **25-year economic cooperation agreement with China**, and it is soon expected to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
- Mr. Biden finds an emboldened Iran in talks, which refused to make any more concession than the 2015 deal sought for.
- On the other side, Iran wants the U.S. to remove the terrorist designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a Trump decision.
- Mr. Biden, who is facing collective strong opposition from Israel and Sunni Arabs against making any more concession to Iran, refused to remove the terrorist tag, which brought the nuclear talks to a halt, for now.

- **Donald Trump's** proposal ignored the Palestinians and his focus was on the **Abraham Accords,** which saw the normalization of ties between Israel and Sunni Arabs.
- The Abraham Accords, the set of agreements that saw Israel and four Arab countries (the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan) normalize ties under the aegis of the Trump administration, brought in structural changes in the geopolitical alignment of West Asia.
- Israel and Arab countries had backroom contacts for decades.
- But with the Abraham Accords, these two sides, the two pillars of America's West Asia policy, have taken formal steps to build a new political, economic and security partnership, seeking to counter Iran.
- So, if the U.S. is seeking to further strengthen the growing Arab-Israel partnership, the logical next step is to get Saudi Arabia to normalize ties with Israel.
- Even though, Mr. Trump launched this policy through the Abraham Accords, Mr. Biden has wholeheartedly embraced it and he did not even touch upon the Palestine question.
- He has two clear objectives, regional balance and energy security.

What is the way forward?

- Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries that have excess capacity to ramp up production and the other two countries others are Venezuela and Iran, both under American sanctions.
- However, Saudi Arabia, with its warm ties with Russia, has spare capacity, but it is not clear whether a Saudi production rise alone would stabilize the energy market if Russia prolonged the war.
- Building bloc against Iran would not resolve the Iran problem and it would only worsen the security competition in West Asia.
- Meaningful solutions to Mr. Biden's problems lie in ending the war in Ukraine and reviving the Iran nuclear deal, forcing the Islamic Republic and its rivals into a cold peace.

Reference

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