United States Strategic Blunders in Southwest Asia

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“Order is preferable to disorder. Just consider what happened to Iraq after we toppled Saddam Hussein. The United States should not want Iraq’s immediate past to be a foretaste of the region’s future”---Robert Kaplan

Introductory Observations

South West Asia has been a region of critical strategic significance for the United States comprising regions of the Middle East, the Gulf Region, Iran and Afghanistan

Its geostrategic significance for United States security interests can best be gauged from the fact that the United States undertook military interventions twice in Iraq and its on-going military embedment in Afghanistan.

The United States also has been locked in a seemingly unending adversarial and conflictual confrontation with Iran for the last three decades or so.

United States strategic policy formulations in South West Asia have in essence been Israel-centric focused on ensuring the security of the Jewish State surrounded by Islamic nations opposed to its state survival.
United States strategic formulations are also markedly pro-Arab monarchical regimes sitting on and controlling world’s largest energy reserves.

The United States in both cases has all along been in a state of severe disconnect with the political dynamics in South West Asia and impulsively being led to resort to military solutions rather than pushing political processes that could somehow mark the first small steps towards peace and stability in the region.

The United States in South West Asia suffers from an overall trust-deficit in the perceptions of the countries of the region. This impedes initiatives for conflict resolution and headway in peace processes.

When historians fifty years hence begin objectively analysing United States involvement in South West Asia the conclusions likely to be drawn would be one of major strategic blunders despite having at its disposal some of the richest resources and assets for prudent policy formulations.

**United States: The Strategic Disconnect with South West Asia’s Regional Powers**

The four regional powers in South West Asia of notable consequence in strategic terms relative to United States security interests are Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Iraq too was a regional power of consequence but lies prostrate due to the US military intervention of 2003.

Turkey was and is a major member of the US-led NATO military alliance and was viewed as the eastern bastion of NATO.

Turkey in recent years has seemingly moved out of the US-orbit and carving its own independent strategic profile in South West Asian political dynamics. Its close ties with Israel stand ended much to the discomfiture of the United States.

Saudi Arabia was the lynch-pin of US security architecture till about 2003. In deference to Islamic sentiments on the Arab street Saudi Arabia refused to host any US military presence for its Gulf War II against Iraq. In recent years post-9/11 it has struck independent foreign policy linkages with Russia and China.

Egypt was the United States second-most favoured military ally and recipient of massive US military and economic aid. The ‘Arab Spring’ has unmoored Egypt away from its pronounced US linkages and like Turkey away from Israel.

Iran as the leading regional power in South West Asia having been so built up by the United States till the Islamic Revolution. Iran has been demonised and viewed in hostile terms by the United States for more than three decades. United States adversarial postures against Iran
have robbed the United States of a lot of its strategic flexibility in policy formulations in South West Asia.

In sum, the United States because of its flawed strategic perspectives today cannot boast of even one steadfast US ally from amongst the regional powers of South West Asia.

**United States Blundering Policies on Iran: A Major Strategic Blunder**

Strategically, it is unimaginable as to how the United States policy establishment has gone astray for three decades from arriving at the correct perspectives on Iran’s significance in the United States strategic calculus.

Strategically, the United States cannot expect to sustain a long-term and effective presence in South West Asia by a constant and vicious demonization of Iran.

Iran with its religious predominance in the Shia world commands the Shia Crescent extending from Lebanon, through Syria and to the borders of Afghanistan.

The current destabilisation of Syria through a US-Saudi Arabia contrived civil war is more targeted at Iran than Syria.

United States unremitting hostility against Iran has prompted Russia and China to provide it with countervailing power. As far as nuclear weaponisation of Iran is concerned the United States itself has to shoulder the blame. It was the United States which laid the foundation of Iran’s nuclear programme and its unremitting hostility against Iran presumably and logically pushing Iran towards acquiring a deterrent capability.

The United States would be committing its gravest strategic blunder in South West Asia should it be goaded into military strikes against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. This is something which even two generations of Israeli apex intelligence and military leadership has advised against.

**Afghanistan: United States Mid-Course Strategic Deviations Militarily Outrageous**

The United States military intervention in Afghanistan post-9/11 was well justified but what were not justified were the mid-course strategic deviations from the original military aims. These strategic deviations were out and out political decisions and no US General would have recommended them.
The original military aim was to effect a regime change in Kabul by dislodging the Taliban, liquidating the Al Qaeda and demolishing the Islamic Jihadi terrorism factories set up by Pakistan Army in Afghanistan.

The US victory ride into Kabul was spearheaded by the Northern Alliance massively aiding the US Special Forces and heavy aerial bombardment. But for the Northern Alliance’s military assistance, the United States could not have displaced the Taliban regime in Kabul. The Afghan Taliban leadership, Osama bin Laden and thousands of Pakistan Army military advisers with the Taliban regime had to flee from Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden and the Taliban were accorded safe havens within Pakistan by the Pakistan Army.

This victory was not followed to its logical conclusion for two reasons both being in essence political decisions of the United States and both decisions being strategic blunders.

The first one was the US undertaking military intervention in Iraq before consolidating its military gains in Afghanistan. The military surge that should have taken place in 2002 did not take place as that entire military effort was diverted to Iraq.

The second strategic blunder again, a political decision, was to co-opt the Pakistan Army as the original offender culpable for 9/11 attacks on Homeland USA, to assist in the prosecution of the scaled-down US military operations in Afghanistan.

The perfidy of the Pakistan Army in undermining US military effort in Afghanistan is too well known and recent to be recounted here.

The Cold War gladiators in Washington politically fouled up both US military interventions in South West Asia.

**Iraq: The Needless Destruction of a Balancing Regional Power**

Iraq was a strong regional power which was favoured by the United States too during the long Iran-Iraq War as regional balancing power. The United States military intervention in 2003 during Gulf War II was again a political decision heavily built on specious grounds that Iraq was headed towards acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The United States even after a decade of military occupation of Iraq was unable to prove accusations of Iraq’s nuclear weaponisation.

The United States military misadventure in Iraq was a grave political blunder in that it not only led to the needless destruction of a stable, secular Arab state but also led to a fierce sectarian war in Iraq and needless loss of thousands of US soldiers lives.
The two concurrent US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq bled the US defence budget to a point where serious deficits in defence spending stare the US Armed Forces in the face. This would seriously affect its global military postures and presence.

**Concluding Observations**

The United States strategic blunders in South West Asia at the turn of the 21st Century have not led to any strategic gains to reinforce the United States image and standing in South West Asia.

The United States can be said to have lost heavily in strategic terms when viewed against the fact that its military distractions in Afghanistan and Iraq led it to be militarily oblivious to the security of the Asia Pacific and East Asia in particular. The strategic vacuum caused by US inattentiveness led China to exploit this vacuum by an unrestrained and fast-track military rise for over a decade.

The recent United States strategic pivot to Asia Pacific is a belated effort to reverse the above trend and win back South East Asian nations unnerved by China’s aggression in the South China Sea and East China Sea areas.

On balance it can be stated that the United States strategic blunders in South West Asia have cost it heavily not only in South West Asia but also in Asia Pacific. In strategic terms it will take years for the United States to regain its strategic balance in both these regions.

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