Commentary
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Biden's Middle East Trap

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

A new round of escalation spiral is beginning to spin in the Middle East, in which the United States and Iran are already directly involved. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep the process under control, even though both the American and Iranian leadership are not interested in a major war.

Contents

1 Republicans demand toughness
2 The Middle East in a chain of proxy confrontation
3 What is desired and what is feasible

On 28 January, the news feeds of leading global media outlets were filled with breaking reports about the death of three US military personnel as a result of a drone attack on an American military base in northeast Jordan, on the border with Syria and Iraq. At least 34 more people were injured.

American bases in the region have come under regular attack since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas. Thus, according to the Pentagon, over the past three months there have been 165 attacks on US military objects in Syria and Iraq. Yemen's Houthis also carry out routine shelling of ships, including American ones, in the Red Sea. For example, on 29 January, they launched a missile at a US Navy ship in the Gulf of Aden. However, the strike on the base in Jordan resulted in the first casualties among American troops as a result of a targeted attack since the destabilization of the region in October 2023.

Republicans demand toughness

The Biden administration immediately said that Iranian-backed paramilitaries were behind the attack. Later, the Islamic Resistance of Iraq took responsibility for the incident. It is one of the armed groups in the region that is supported by Tehran. At the same time, the Iranian authorities quickly issued a denial of their involvement. An

official representative of the country's Foreign Ministry said that "regional resistance" groups act autonomously and are not subordinate to Iran. He also stressed that Tehran does not want an escalation of tensions or another war in the Middle East.

It is noteworthy that the top US military leadership is also convinced that Iran has no interest in provoking a major war with Washington. However, this assessment by US intelligence agencies and the Pentagon stands in stark contrast to the political and media discourse in the US, which is dominated by calls for the Biden administration to respond to the attacks militarily. As expected, Republican legislators began to demand the most severe reaction, including direct strikes on Iranian territory.

Biden immediately stated that there would definitely be a reaction: *"[H]ave no doubt – we will hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner of our choosing."* At the same time, Washington also emphasizes that it is not looking for an escalation of the conflict in the Middle East and, in particular, would like to avoid a war with Iran.

Thus, the US administration is faced with an understandable but extremely difficult dilemma. #

> How to respond to what happened so that domestic political opponents do not accuse Biden, who is seeking another presidential term, of weakness, and also to prevent new similar attacks on American military targets, but at the same time not provoke an expansion of the conflict?

One can agree with the opinion of commentators who call this situation an actual trap for the current head of the White House.

Nobody wants escalation, but...

In Washington all the pros and cons of possible response scenarios are being analysed at various levels. There is no optimal option. Any options are associated with many security risks and costs in the growing electoral battle between Biden and Trump. That is, the stakes are very high. Especially given the overwhelming uncertainty in international affairs and the extremely low approval ratings of the current US president.

By the way, it is interesting that in this situation some parallels arise with the mini-crisis in relations with Iran, which President Trump faced in January 2019. At that time, tensions between Washington and Tehran sharply escalated due to the downing of an expensive American reconnaissance drone by Iranian air defence systems. Iran claimed the drone flew into its airspace, while the US insisted it was in neutral international space. As a result, Trump first ordered an attack on three Iranian military targets, and

then at the last moment reversed his decision, citing a desire to avoid large casualties. At the same time, Trump did not hesitate to repeat that if one more such action occurs on the part of Tehran, Iran will face such devastating consequences "that it has never seen before".

The political resonance and significance of that crisis were obviously less, since it did not involve the death of American citizens. And the international context of the 2019 crisis was very different from the situation today, both in the Middle East and in international relations in general. However, there is no doubt that Trump and his team will make full use of this plot against Biden. Moreover, it is really easy to turn it in any direction favourable to the Republicans. One can speak generally about Trump's hard line towards Iran, contrasting it with numerous attempts by Democrats (including during Biden's vice presidency) to conclude an agreement with Tehran. Or you can focus on Trump's wise decision, which allowed him to avoid unnecessary escalation.

Given all this, it will be particularly interesting to see what decisions the Biden administration ultimately makes and how those decisions are presented to various target audiences inside and outside the US. According to Politico, the Pentagon is offering options for attacks on Iran's naval infrastructure in the Persian Gulf or the Iranian military in Syria and Iraq. The question, of course, is not only the goals, but also the method of carrying out the attack, as well as non-public communication through closed channels (or lack thereof) with the Iranians.

Everything can be arranged in such a way that the US response looks significant in the eyes of at least some American voters and elites here and now, but at the same time does not cross Tehran's "red lines" and, accordingly, does not provoke a further rapid unwinding of the escalation spiral.

> Judging by some direct and indirect signs, all these months the confidential channels of communication between Washington and Tehran worked quite effectively and allowed them to remain within the mutually acceptable framework of public confrontation.

In an ideal situation, neither one nor the other would really want the Middle East instability to escalate into a major war with their direct participation. Such an escalation would entail, at a minimum, enormous destruction, loss of life and global economic upheaval. But this is in an ideal scenario, which in reality is increasingly difficult to achieve. *Firstly*, due to the complex web of geopolitical and electoral factors outlined above on the American side. *Secondly*, due to the rapidly declining ability of great powers and regional leaders to keep escalatory risks under control.

The Middle East in a chain of proxy confrontation

Especially since the regional escalation in the Middle East is a fact materializing before our eyes, which is felt not only within the region but also beyond it, not just through media reports. The recent series of US and British strikes on Yemen in response to the actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea, which are causing significant damage to maritime logistics on a global scale, is the most resonant, but hardly the last development.

All this is a regional reflection of a larger process of transition of the system of international relations to a new quality. The process is accompanied by an almost universal exacerbation of pre-existing conflicts and the emergence of new points of military-political confrontation. Moreover, both old and new regional conflicts, in addition to their own specificity, inevitably acquire a proxy dimension. In most conflicts, major third-party states begin to see not only the direct participants and their contradictions but also the interests of other major states, their geopolitical competitors. And they seek to exploit these conflicts to inflict damage on them.

> Therefore, in a period of increased uncertainty about the future of the international system, more and more regional or local conflicts are becoming proxy arenas for confrontation between large states.

Even if just a few years ago these states did not pay attention to such conflicts or even cooperated with each other to resolve them jointly.

These processes are not limited to the Middle East today; they are relevant to the entire planet. Various conflicts are beginning to become increasingly intertwined, forming a kind of global chain of proxy confrontation. For example, it is not difficult to see multiple connections between Middle Eastern dynamics and the war in Ukraine. These growing connections make it increasingly difficult to resolve any individual conflict.

This brings us back to the question of how long the US and Iran can keep escalatory risks under control. The logic of proxy confrontation imposes its own scenarios, even if they contradict the interests of the main actors (in particular, the interest of Washington and Tehran to prevent further escalation). In all this proxy confusion, there are too many actors – regional and extra-regional, state and non-state – who enthusiastically exploit the possibilities of escalation to their advantage. Their actions can greatly distort the intentions of the main actors and break their original scenarios.

What is desired and what is feasible

To summarize, let's return to the American discussions after the drone attack on the base in Jordan. For obvious reasons, the media is dominated by supporters of a hard-line approach. They boil down the geopolitical dilemma facing Washington to two simple options. The first is to respond firmly and decisively, despite significant risks of escalation, to clearly demonstrate who the master of the house is. The second is to make minimizing the risks of escalation a priority, while demonstrating weakness and thereby only encouraging provocative behaviour by adversaries in the future.

Perhaps, ten or even five years ago such a simplified formulation of the dilemma would really correspond to the real state of affairs. However, today, when the "unipolar moment" is becoming a thing of history and more and more people want to question the material capabilities of the United States, the situation looks different.

> Therefore, attempts to show that you are the master of the house, although in reality you no longer are one, are fraught with even greater risks and dangers.

This is indeed the most fateful dilemma that President Biden faces at such an unfortunate moment.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations