

## PRESIDENT BIDEN'S RECALIBRATION TOWARDS THE GULF

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### Introduction



In July, 2022, President Biden attended the GCC+3 Summit in Jeddah. GCC+ 3 is made up of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - an alliance of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman – along with Egypt, Iraq and Jordan. This was Biden's first Middle East trip as President and came 11 months after the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

During the summit, he outlined a five-part "new framework for the Middle East" that included supporting economic development, military security and democratic freedoms. He concluded his remarks by saying "The United States is invested in building a positive future in the region in partnership with all of you, and the United States is not going anywhere." He also announced \$1 billion in US funding to alleviate hunger in the region and also revealed that Gulf Arab leaders are pledging more than \$3 billion over the next two years in projects that align with global infrastructure and investment. He spoke of the importance of protecting the "freedom of navigation" through waterways in the Middle East, which allows for the free flow of commerce and resources throughout the region. President Biden also highlighted how the US has established a new naval task force to work in partnership with Middle Eastern countries to help secure the Red Sea and pledged that Washington would work towards reducing tensions and de-escalating conflicts. Concurrently, he also vowed to never let Iran acquire a nuclear weapon.

Since taking office, Mr Biden's foreign policy has largely focused on countering China's growing geopolitical influence and Russia's war in Ukraine. Naturally, this has raised questions about the extent of his commitment to engagement in the Middle East. Hence, the prime objective of Mr Biden's Middle East trip was to recalibrate the narrative around the perceived US rebalancing away from the region to better compete with China and assure Gulf leaders that the US still sees the region as crucial to its foreign policy goals. Other objectives of the trip included encouraging the Gulf countries- particularly Saudi Arabia- to pump more oil into the world market and bring Arab states closer to Israel.

### ***Mission Black Gold***

Energy security is a global challenge and reality that has led many within the US administration to realize that it is not immune to changes in the global energy markets.

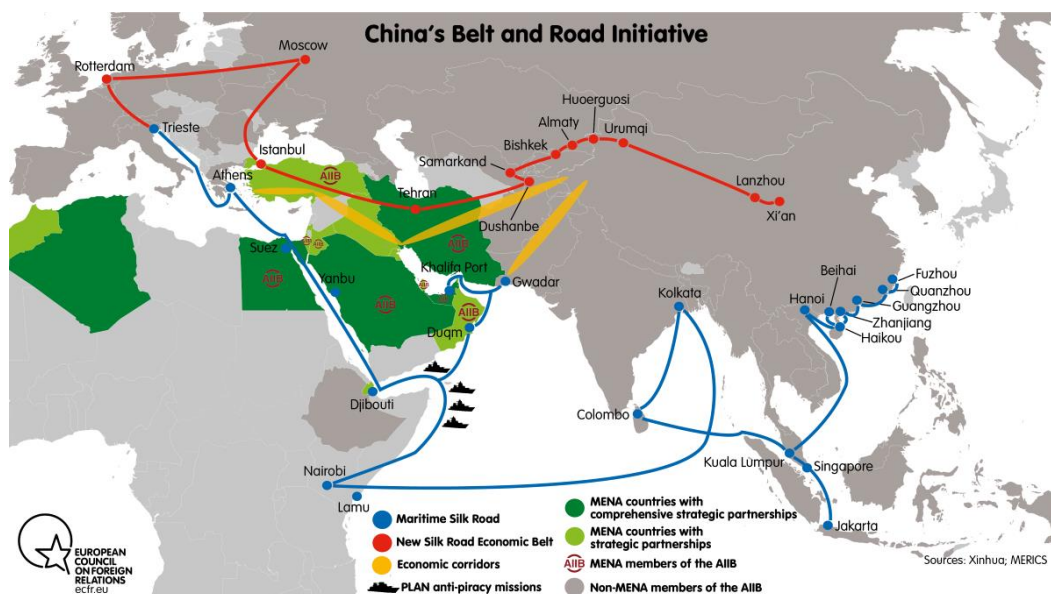
Although the US is the world's biggest oil and natural gas producer, it accounts for only about 12 percent of the global petroleum supply.

Hence, President Biden came to Jeddah seeking solutions to one of his top political problems domestically -high oil and gas prices. Positive diplomacy with the Gulf countries, in particular with Saudi Arabia, was seen as one of the few routes he could take to bring down by reaching a deal on oil production. This would help drive down gasoline prices which is a major priority for President Biden and the Democrats, especially ahead of the pivotal midterm elections in November 2022.

However, neither Saudi Arabia nor other Gulf nations pledged to immediately increase their output and President Biden returned home empty-handed. Nevertheless, the US still hopes that the OPEC+ group, comprising Saudi Arabia, Russia and other producers, will boost production at a meeting on August 3.

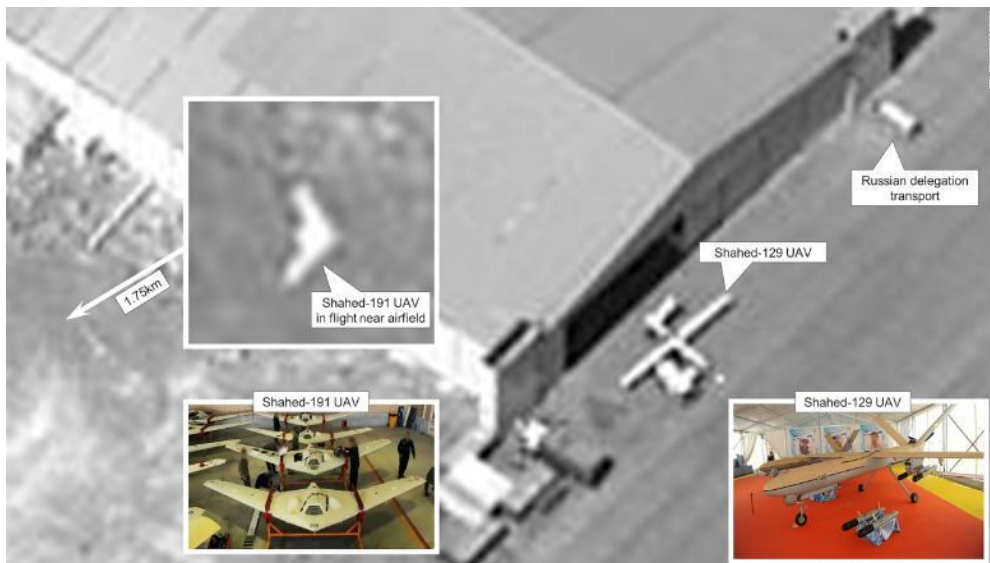
### ***Attempting to Curb Russian, Iranian & Chinese Footprint***

Presently, no relationship is more consequential for the future of world politics as that between the US and China. In recent years, the growing distrust between the two countries has shifted towards the Middle East region and any political visit to the Middle East is, as much as anything, about US competition with China. Over the past few years, China has substantially increased its economic and diplomatic dialogue with countries in the Middle East. In large part, Chinese investment in the Middle East particularly focuses on energy, infrastructure, construction, agriculture and finance. Both sides have mutual interests in integrating the BRI into national regeneration schemes, such as Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Vision 2021, Jordan 2025, Turkey's Middle Corridor and Kuwait's Vision 2035. Moreover, China appears willing to provide Saudi Arabia with missile and nuclear technologies that the US is much more hesitant to do. China is also the biggest buyer of Saudi oil.



During the course of the summit, the US administration also released satellite imagery which showcased that Russian officials visited Iran in June and July to see potential weapons-capable drones. It appeared to be a means of luring Arab nations against Russia with regards to its invasion of Ukraine, highlighting a connection between the war in Europe and Arab leaders' concerns about

Iran. However, so far none of the countries represented at the summit have moved in lockstep with the US to sanction Russia.



Hence, President Biden's trip was also to help strengthen US ties with the Gulf to help alleviate concerns about China monopolizing relationships in the future, this was reflected in his remarks, where he opined that ,stated "We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran, We will seek to build on this moment with active, principled, American leadership."

### **Conclusion**

President Biden's trip to the Middle East comes at a critical juncture, where on the one hand, tensions between Iran and Israel as well as with a number of Arab Gulf countries are on the rise, with little possibility of the revival of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Simultaneously, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has driven up energy prices globally. Even though there has been a boom to energy exporters in the Gulf, however, it has put an enormous strain on energy importers across the MENA region. It is important to note here that all this comes after more than two years of a pandemic that has increased prospects of slowing global economic growth and the risk of recession.

This trip was an opportunity for President Biden to mend ties with Saudi Arabia, especially Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, in the backdrop of severe criticism from his administration following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. While President Biden's meetings with leaders of other GCC+3 members such those of Egypt and UAE reiterated were productive, the meeting between President Biden and MBS and the press statement afterwards, showed that irritants in the US- Saudi relationship still exist despite being strategic partners. Moreover, President Biden shot the

opportunity by stating prior to his trip that his objective was to cement alliances with those nations which are in a position to counter Russian aggression as well as help the US 'outcompete' China.

President Biden's recent trip has showcased the limits of US influence in the Middle East as regional governments prefer to protect their economic interests and diversify their alliances. The broader global energy and economic picture remains as uncertain as ever and a more pragmatic approach by the US is required on all fronts, be it political, security or economic. President Biden's trip to Saudi Arabia may be seen by some as a desperate attempt to extend a hand of friendship in a globally challenging environment, with the energy crisis as the most prominent challenge.