

Israel-Palestine conflicts distract US from retreat

By Ding Long

Washington is facing a tough choice now. This past week has seen the worst violence in Gaza and Israel since 2014. US President Joe Biden has made diplomatic phone calls to both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. A US envoy has arrived in Tel Aviv for de-escalation talks.

The Biden administration is trying to strike a delicate balance between engagement and intervention. It wants to reshape US influence across the world including the Middle East. But it does not want this process to be impaired by hot potato regional issues such as long-standing Middle East conflicts.

Substantial pressure is being piled on Biden to act by both political parties in the US. Within the US, supporting Israel is the mainstream. Israel is the US' most important ally in the Middle East. This is something that both the Democrats and Republicans unanimously agree about.

In the latest conflicts, the Biden administration has acted slowly, because it actually supported Israel by leaving it enough time to strike Hamas. During three emergency sessions on May 10, 12 and 16, United Nations Security Council members failed to agree on a unified position, as the US blocked a joint statement. This stance is not different from Biden's predecessors. But although Biden reiterated America's backing for a two-state

solution between both sides, he does not want to invest in the conflict anymore. He knows that the issue cannot be solved easily.

Biden's present focus in the Middle East is to resume the Iran nuclear deal. Nothing else. Iran is a strong backer of Hamas. Israel's attack on Hamas is actually another attack on Iran. At the same time, Israel is showing its dissatisfaction with the US. This is creating obstacles for Washington and Tehran to negotiate the nuclear issue. If the Iran nuclear deal resumes, this will mean an improvement of US-Iran ties.

Last month, Israel allegedly attacked Iran's nuclear facilities. It also expanded air strikes against Iranian forces in Syria. These moves are aimed at intensifying

tensions with Iran in a bid to slow down US' negotiations with Iran.

Former US president Barack Obama had started to retreat from the Middle East, but this did not materialize as regional conflicts kept cropping up. Now, it has been more than a decade since Obama's decision to pull the US out from the region. For the US, the importance of the Middle East has now declined significantly. In terms of energy, the US does not need Middle East's oil as much as it used to. In terms of geopolitics, the global center stage has already shifted to Asia. The rise of Asia took place when the US was mired in the Middle East.

Washington is clear about this.

Now, Biden is determined to leave the Middle East.

Conflicts there

have cost the US enormous diplomatic resources. But it has not helped the US much in terms of its cherished global leadership.

Coming out of the Iraq War (which many US strategists believe is a failure), the US has realized that getting involved too much will only hurt itself – miring itself and being held hostage by regional conflicts. This also gives its "opponents" a chance to develop more.

For a long time, the US has been supporting Israel. But now, Israel has triggered conflicts with Palestine, jeopardizing the US' global strategic plans. As Washington devises a military pullout from Afghanistan and eagerly promotes the resumption of the Iran nuclear deal, it is eyeing on China and Russia. But Israel is trying to prevent the US from leaving.

Yet departing from the Middle East is the US' strategic priority. This is in line with the strategies of both Obama and Trump administrations. But Biden is trying to play in a balanced way by resuming the Iran nuclear deal and correcting the partiality of Trump in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The US disengagement in the Middle East will be a long process. It is too early to tell how long this process might take. US plans will be derailed by regional issues. At the same time, this may distract US attention from other regions.

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Illustration: Xia Qing/CT

Will Japan fumble policy to behave like Australia in confronting China?

By Wang Guangtao

In another anti-China move, Tokyo has recently officially identified China as responsible for cyberattacks on the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and other Japanese companies and research institutions in 2016 and 2017, according to Nikkei.

It is rare move for Tokyo to go on the offensive to name Beijing as a culprit – despite the fact that it has made several provocations against China in the past few months.

In April, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and US President Joe Biden issued a joint statement that includes China as the main subject. The statement accused China of conducting "economic and other forms of coercion" in the Indo-Pacific region, even mentioning the Taiwan question. This is the first time since 1969 when American and Japanese top leaders did so in their joint statement.

This year's Diplomatic Blue Book released by Japan's For-

eign Ministry in late April used its harshest wording yet on China, labeling the country a "strong security concern" for the region and the world. Japan also threw itself in the mud by talking tough on China's internal affairs, including Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

All these remind people of what Canberra under Prime Minister Scott Morrison has done to China, prompting the question: Will Japan behave like Australia when it comes to dealing with China?

From banning Huawei to calling for an international probe into the origin of COVID-19, to the recent hype for war with China, Canberra has been the most active agitator to confront China on behalf of Washington. This has been done with the excuse of a values-based alliance with the US – and the unwarranted national security threat they claim that is posed by China.

China's countermeasures include indefinitely suspending a key economic dialogue with Australia. This is not only

aimed at warning Australia, but is also an alarm bell to Western cliques, including Tokyo.

Japan is hedging its bets with China relations. In terms of values and security, Japan stands close with Western allies, but it needs China for trade and regional cooperation. Even political relations between China and Japan have cooled down, negotiations over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership that include both China and Japan went smoothly. From this perspective, there is little possibility that economic and trade ties between China and Japan will become as cool as their political ties – as we have observed with recent rocky China-Australia relations.

China and Japan are neighbors, and the world's No.2 and No.3 economies with a high degree of interdependence and people-to-people exchanges. Compared with trade between China and Australia, economic exchanges between China and Japan are far more diverse.

Japan and Australia are both traditional US allies. But

Japan is unlikely to become a vassal state of the US. Japan's China policy is largely decided by domestic groups. These include pro-China, anti-China, and right-wing forces. The US factor is just one variable in Japan's policymaking.

Due to the rivalry among the various forces within Japan, Tokyo's China policy has shown some wiggle room. Suga said a stable relationship with China is important right after he became Japan's prime minister in September 2020. But his policy actually suggests otherwise.

This general course of action has Japan's domestic politics to blame. Suga and his government are battling against the ravaging COVID-19 situation. He also saw lawmakers of his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) resign due to bribery scandals. Public anger with vote-buying and bribery scandals, as well as the government's handling of the pandemic, and a tortuously slow vaccine rollout eventually led to a stunning setback for the LDP in three by-elections held in

late April. Thus, Suga has to act tough on China to win support.

Now, political ties are at low ebb, while economic exchanges continue to flow between China and Japan. But bilateral relations are not as strained as those between Beijing and Canberra. The future of China-Japan relations is not optimistic. Still, the degree to which Tokyo might take to confront Beijing depends on the trajectory of China-US relations and US-Japan relations – as well as Japan's domestic politics.

The Japanese House of Representatives and the LDP elections are a few months away. China is likely to become a hot agenda in public discourse in Japan during this period of time.

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