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Turkey-Iran Tensions over Iraq

Differences between Iran and Turkey over the Kurdistan region of Iraq have come to the fore in the wake of Turkey's latest military operation against Kurdish militants in Sinjar province of northern Iraq. On 19 February, Turkey undertook a military operation to free 13 nationals who were being held captive by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the Garo mountains of northern Iraq. The operation did not, however succeed. While Turkey claims that the PKK killed the captives, the PKK asserts that they were killed when Turkey fortuitously bombed where they were being held.

Turkey has long viewed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist group and has repeatedly affirmed its determination to take military action to eliminate the threat posed by PKK to its national security. Indeed, Turkish forces have regularly conducted aerial and ground strikes against PKK targets inside Iraq for years now. The background for Turkey's latest military action is dissatisfaction with the outcome of the October 2020 Sinjar agreement between Iraq's federal government and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government to remove the PKK from Iraqi Kurdistan. Not only did the PKK not leave the region but, according to Turkey, it has merged with local militias. Turkey also claims that it is from Sinjar that the PKK is sending supplies to its Syrian affiliates which are part of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces.



Source: USAID via BBC

Iran is, however, opposed to any military operation in the Sinjar region and has called for the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Iraqi territory. In its view, Iraq's security must be maintained by Iraqi security forces and Kurdistan region forces in their areas. Tehran is particularly concerned about Turkish military presence and political leverage in northern Iraq because Iran-backed militias are also active in that region. Indeed, Iran-backed militias have repositioning themselves in the wake of Turkey's latest military operation. The Popular Mobilization Forces, also known as *Hashd Al Shabi*,

has deployed three brigades to Sinjar along the Syrian border to counter Turkish moves in the region. *Harakat Hezbollah Al Nujaba*, another Iran-backed paramilitary group, has threatened to attack the Turkish military if it continues to carry out counterterrorism operations in northern Iraq.

Undeterred, Turkey is continuing its air strikes to eliminate the senior leadership of the PKK. Ankara has also conveyed to the Iranian ambassador its expectation of Iranian support in its "fight against terrorism". Iran and Turkey's differing

perspectives are a manifestation of their broader regional rivalry. Turkish military operations in Iraq represent a challenge to Iran's aspiration to dominate Iraq. The two countries also have differing perspectives on the situation in northern Syria.

Japan-UK 2+2 Meeting

On 3 February, Japan and the United Kingdom held their fourth 2+2 meeting of their defence and foreign ministers in virtual mode. During the meeting, the two countries, which are global strategic partners, agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation for realising the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.



Source: MOFA, Japan

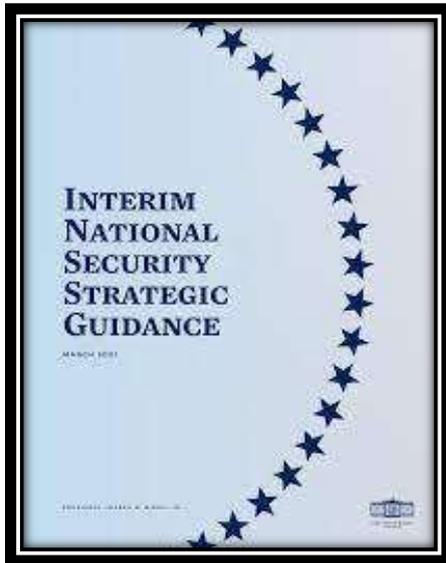
Expressing opposition to some countries in the region practising coercion including economic coercion, the ministers confirmed their commitment to maintaining regional security and upholding the rules-based international order. They also expressed strong opposition to unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas, and emphasised the importance of peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with the precepts of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In this connection,

the ministers discussed China's new Coast Guard Law. They also affirmed their support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Turning to regional issues, the Japanese and UK defence and foreign ministers shared their concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, developments in Hong Kong, and the situation in Myanmar.

Japan is stepping up maritime cooperation with key European partners that are indicating greater commitment to the Indo-Pacific including the UK, France and Germany. With the UK, Japan had recently signed The Maritime Security Arrangement to deep security cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Royal Navy. The two navies are expected to conduct joint exercises during this year's deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth and her Carrier Strike Group to the region. Japan and UK are also keen on maritime capacity-building for developing countries. In addition, Japan and UK are engaged in a dialogue on the Future Combat Air System with a view to understanding mutual requirements of technology and enhancing cost effectiveness. They are also co-developing the Joint New Air-to-Air Missile (JNAAM). The 2+2 meeting also discussed cyber security cooperation and building an open, secure and interoperable 5G network.

Interim US National Security Strategic Guidance

The Biden administration released an interim National Security Strategic Guidance on 3 March. Reinforcing the president’s message, the document affirms that: “America is back. Diplomacy is back. Alliances are back.”



Compared to the previous National Security Strategy of 2017 (NSS 2017) issued during the first year of the Trump presidency, Biden’s interim national security strategic guidance appears more philosophical. While retaining the ‘key strategic drivers’ identified in NSS 2017, Biden’s guidance keeps the actionable components suitably vague. For instance, the chapter on ‘Global Security Landscape’ states that “the world cannot simply be restored to the way it was 75, 30, or even four years ago”, and suggests ‘charting a new course’ under the rubric of ‘collective action’, an oft-repeated phrase that is never expanded.

Whereas NSS 2017 was replete with terms such as ‘great power competition’, ‘rogue states’ etc., the 2021 interim guidance is mellower but also less clear. However, it does acknowledge China’s greater assertiveness and singles out that country as the ‘only competitor’ capable of mounting a sustained challenge to the open international system. Russia is seen as China’s collaborator in checking US interests worldwide, while Iran and North Korea have been marked out for challenging regional stability.

The 2021 interim guidance retains much of NSS 2017’s affirmations on establishing and deepening partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, signalling a bipartisan consensus on this issue. It also affirms the intention to invest energies into modernising NATO as well as the alliances with Australia, Japan and South Korea – all of which are termed as core alliances. In addition, the guidance talks about deepening partnerships with nations in the Indo-Pacific including India, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The ‘ironclad commitment’ to Israel’s security is a continuation, while lukewarm assurances about de-escalating regional tensions in the Middle East, notwithstanding promising to deter Iranian aggression, signal a departure from the Trump administration’s policy towards the region. The interim guidance, however, clearly expounds the intent of disengaging from ‘forever wars’, like in Afghanistan, and rightsizing the military presence in Middle East while developing a more ‘robust’ presence in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

The Biden administration’s agenda thus appears to be to strengthen America’s enduring advantages and prevail in the ‘strategic competition’ with China, which, it asserts, is possible by investing in the American people, economy and democracy as well as by supporting China’s neighbours to make choices free from coercion.