

Iraq and the US-Iran tug of war



Ameem Lufti

For The Straits Times

In the space of a few days this week, the United States changed course away from Europe for the Middle East – twice. First, the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group was diverted from its journey to Croatia and dispatched to the Strait of Hormuz. Just days later, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blew off a scheduled meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and landed instead in Iraq.

Both moves were portrayed by many media outlets as signs that the drums of war were being beaten louder. The reality is much less ominous, though no less fraught.

To understand why, a return to the country that is central to the recent lexicon of the US military and foreign policy establishment – Iraq – is necessary. The bellicose rhetoric around American moves in the Middle East this week may spark alarm, but they are only the latest moves in the US' campaign to tighten its stranglehold on Iran, and Iraq has become the central focus of that effort.

Since 1991, Iraq has been stumbling from one conflict to another: The first Gulf War, which was followed by years of intermittent skirmishes with the international community – a period which introduced the term “no-fly zone” to a global audience –

the 2003 American invasion and subsequent toppling of Saddam Hussein and descent into lawlessness, the Shi'ite-Sunni civil war, the Sunni Awakening, and, finally, the rise and fall of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

With ISIS' territorial gains rolled back, the shrinking of the American military presence, relative calm on the sectarian front and oil production peaking, Iraq finally appears on the cusp of standing on its own two feet and is re-emerging as a vital player in the region. But because it is newly relevant, Iraq is now the centrepiece in a tug of war between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies, led by Saudi Arabia, and Iran in the proxy war for regional hegemony.

Over the last few years, as it struggled to emerge from the wilderness, Iraq has managed to keep one foot on each side of the fence. Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi visited both Riyadh and Teheran in a span of 10 days earlier this year. He also tried his luck at playing the peacemaker by inviting officials from both countries to share a table at the Baghdad summit last month, though little came out of it apart from polite murmurings.

Now, however, the US and its allies have decided that the time has come for Iraq to get off the fence, and choose a side. Carrots have been dangled. A US\$53 billion (S\$72.2 billion) oil deal with ExxonMobil and PetroChina is

expected to be signed any day now.

Reports this week suggest Saudi Arabia is preparing to re-open the land crossing between both countries – which has been all but sealed for years – to trade later this year. This will give Iraq an alternative source for imports, reducing its reliance on Iran – which has been supplying it with everything from cement to tomatoes in recent years – and thus severing another link with the Islamic Republic. The Saudis have also talked about infrastructure and other investments in the country.

Shi'ite political elites have also taken the lead in mending bridges with Saudi Arabia. Firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was, in fact, one of the first to walk that path when he paid an eyebrow-raising visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2017.

These steps to put some space between themselves and their fellow Shi'ites to the east was a reaction to Iran's rapidly growing influence on internal matters following the withdrawal of the bulk of American troops in 2011.

Having failed at stabilising the Iraqi state and making its economy strong enough for the country to become self-reliant, America looked the other way as Iran moved in to pick up the pieces after its departure.

The US allowed Iranian support for Shi'ite militias which were battling ISIS under the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) banner to continue unfettered. It also lifted the threat of sanctions in allowing

Iraq to buy electricity and natural gas from Iran.

The time to collect on that debt, however, has arrived. With ISIS taken care of and a compromise made on leaving Syria to Russia, America is returning to Iraq with businessmen in suits, rather than soldiers in uniforms.

The exceptions given to Iraq to allow it to deal with Iran are now being taken away.

Having signed a US\$15 billion deal with Siemens to rebuild its electricity infrastructure, the country will soon have no need to buy energy from its eastern neighbour. That imminent deal with ExxonMobil and PetroChina to increase oil production in Iraq will provide the country with much needed capital as well wean it off its economic dependence on Iran.

On his visit to Baghdad, much was made of Mr Pompeo's talks with Iraqi leaders about so-called dangers to American forces from Iranian forces and allies.

Lost in all the talk about the growing threat of hostilities was another issue he raised: Iraq's energy requirements.

“We want them to have the opportunity to have multiple sources and a diverse energy base,” Mr Pompeo was reported as saying. “We think that's better for an independent, sovereign Iraq.”

There is little doubt about who he was taking aim at.

What about the USS Abraham Lincoln, then?

Iran is surely aware that the chokehold being applied by the Americans and Saudis is tightening. It is increasingly being backed into a corner, and is fast running out of options.

The Islamic Republic is realistic, and knows it cannot get into a shooting war with the US. But it has some other pain-inflicting options.

Many of the PMF militias have been absorbed into the Iraqi security structure, and now report to the Iraqi Prime Minister. Fighters are even being paid salaries, and most carry out local enforcement duties – by all accounts, they are happy to be absorbed back into society and to be earning living wages.

Not all have voluntarily given up arms, however. The “new” threat alluded to by the US this week relates to the fear that Teheran could conceivably use them to inflict damage on American personnel and investments.

The designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist group was the first step in preventing PMF militants from sliding back into the arms of Iran. The deployment of the USS Abraham Lincoln was step two. There is nothing like the presence of a US carrier strike group off your shores to force you to confront a new reality in the clear light of day.

All-out war between the two sides is thus unlikely. Those concerned about the long-term stability of the region though should shift their focus away from military manoeuvrings along the Iranian coastline and pay closer attention to the deals being made in Baghdad instead.

stopinion@sph.com.sg.

• The writer is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, the National University of Singapore.