



## **U.S. Strategy and Presence in the Middle East Amid Great Power Competition**

*Paul Miller*

A conservative internationalist approach ranks the relative importance of different geopolitical regions of the world by looking at their comparative levels of wealth, power, freedom, and danger. By those criteria, Europe and East Asia still rank as the preeminent geopolitical theaters in the world and demand the highest level of American engagement and investment. By those same measures, the importance of the Middle East has long been exaggerated and should occupy less American time, attention, and resources—though complete withdrawal would be dangerous and unrealistic—while South Asia has long been neglected and should command more.

### **The Middle East**

The Middle East has taken place among the first rank of geopolitical regions because of its influence in the world oil market. The region produces a smaller proportion of world GDP than either Latin America or South Asia, constitutes less than 5 percent of U.S. trade, and has a smaller proportion of global power than Africa. Much of the political violence in the region—including the recent flare-up between Israel and Hamas—is irrelevant to the United States and matters only insofar as it might threaten global oil supplies or empower Iran. The Middle East is mostly populated by poor, small, corrupt, incompetent autocracies unimportant to U.S. national security and unable (and unwilling) to contribute meaningfully to the liberal order.

The United States' long-term strategic goals for the region include helping bolster Israel's security, containing the influence of a nuclear

Iran, and supporting local allies' efforts to defeat ISIS and other jihadist groups. It can pursue most of these goals through relatively low-cost means. Between the Iron Dome and its nuclear deterrent, Israel's security is essentially assured and requires little ongoing American engagement aside from continued weapons sales. While the spread of democracy to the region would be an ideal long-term solution to some of the region's perennial problems, there is no prospect for such an outcome in the foreseeable future. The declining importance of the Middle Eastern oil market also means the United States does not need to sustain its commitment to the defense of its autocratic allies in the region for much longer, the usefulness of whom to U.S. national security is increasingly questionable.

In most respects, the United States can afford to view engagement in the Middle East as a secondary priority. That said, we should also recognize that since the withdrawals from Iraq and Syria, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East is at or near the lowest level it has been in 30 years. Further military withdrawal introduces much higher risk with little discernible benefit, while some small increase in forces could substantially improve the United States' ability to influence events.

### *Iran, Syria, and ISIS*

The rise of a hostile government in Iran since 1979, its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and its support for jihadist terrorism are significant, but not existential, security challenges to the United States. Iran is a lesser threat than Russia or China, which are global powers, and even less than North Korea. North Korea inhabits an economically important neighborhood, has a close relationship with China, and is near several democratic U.S. allies. North Korea is poorer and weaker than Iran, but it can threaten more things the United States cares about.

The U.S. goal is not to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, which is probably impossible; Iran is already a "near-nuclear" power. Its acquisition of nuclear weapons is virtually assured, and crossing the threshold will not change the regional security dynamic, which has already adjusted to treat Iran as a nuclear power. The 2015 nuclear deal left key nuclear facilities in place, conceded crucial details of the inspections and enforcement regime to Iranian preferences, expired after a decade, and did not cover delivery systems or Iran's support for terrorism. It was essentially the formal codification of Iran's nuclear breakout capability and regional hegemony. The deal was deeply flawed, but President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the deal and reimposition of sanctions did not give the United States enough leverage for the Biden administration to compel Iran

to agree to a better one. Iran, meanwhile, is unfettered to pursue a nuclear capability.

In any other region, the U.S. strategy would be straightforward: Ally with regional democratic partners to contain the influence of a rival nuclear autocracy. The situation in the Middle East is more complicated because, besides Israel, there are no stable democracies. Several neighboring states are failed or failing, there are ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq, the region is haven for several terrorist groups, and Russia is increasing its influence in Iran and Syria. The United States cannot solve all these problems, but their presence makes the containment of Iran much more difficult.

The obvious candidate for a counterweight to Iran is Iraq, which is the role it played during its 1980–88 war with Iran. But consumed with its own descent into state failure, recovering from its life-or-death struggle with ISIS, and increasingly drawn into Iran's orbit because of its sectarian and autocratic Shi'a-led government, Iraq is unable to act as an effective counterweight to Iran. Alternatively, Israel is a rich, powerful, liberal, democratic ally in the Middle East, widely believed to have nuclear weapons, and implacably opposed to Iran. However, the U.S.–Israeli alliance has less regional influence because of Israel's poor relations with the Arab world. In addition, despite Israel's technological superiority, it may be simply too small to contribute meaningfully to a major war with Iran.

The United States has no good options to tackle these interweaved problems. Some policymakers called for the United States to intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war. Although it was probably right not to intervene, the United States made that decision for the wrong reasons. The United States appears unable or unwilling to devote the energy and resources required for successful stabilization and reconstruction operations. President Trump explicitly disavowed nation building, tried repeatedly to withdraw entirely from the region, and abandoned the United States' Kurdish allies in Syria. The Biden administration has shown no greater appetite for messy engagements in failed states. Intervening halfway is worse than not intervening at all and would likely empower Iran, not contain it. By staying relatively aloof in Syria, the United States at least avoided that outcome.

A mildly better option would be to encourage a Saudi-led coalition to fight both ISIS and Iranian proxies, as it did in Yemen, and act as the regional counterweight to Iran. But the kingdom is an unreliable long-term partner because its refusal to liberalize at home risks political instability, while its inability to diversify its economy guarantees its eventual economic stagnation. Saudi Arabia purports

to combat jihadists while simultaneously exporting many of the ideological resources that inspire them. Regional hegemony by Saudi Arabia would extinguish the last sparks of liberalism in the Arab world. Worse, it might risk sparking a Saudi–Iranian war with U.S. and Russian sponsorship on opposite sides. These drawbacks lead to an obvious, if controversial, conclusion: If the United States can construct a viable containment strategy against Iran without Saudi help, it should repudiate the Saudi alliance.

The best option for a containment strategy against Iran is likely a mutual defense treaty with Israel, extending the United States’ nuclear umbrella over the region’s only democracy (obviating the need for Israel to go public with its arsenal), while seeking to use the momentum of the Abraham Accords to broaden the Israel–Arab rapprochement and build a coalition against Iran. In addition, the United States should probably maintain or even increase a small number of ground forces to Iraq and Syria to resume training and combat support with the Iraqi army and Kurdish forces. But any such mission would be far smaller and have humbler aspirations than before: U.S. forces cannot occupy, administer, or democratize Iraq or Syria. They can seek to consolidate gains against ISIS, train local security forces, provide a minimal level of ballast against Iranian influence, and gradually return the region to a basic level of stability. In turn, a more stable environment might open doors a decade or more from now for further diplomatic and economic engagement to broaden the anti-Iran coalition with more reliable, stable, prosperous, and responsible partners. But any such investment today is likely to be wasted.

## **South Asia**

In contrast to the Middle East, South Asia is home to two nuclear-weapons states, a third of the planet’s population, the densest network of jihadist groups, the epicenter of global terrorism, the world’s largest democracy, and one of the rising economic superpowers of the century. It accounts for a greater share of global GDP, national military capabilities, and overall global power than the Middle East. If the United States trims its commitments in the Middle East and bides its time, South Asia should command an increasing share of American time, attention, and resources. American engagement should take two forms: courting India and recommitting to Afghanistan.

### *India*

The most obvious opportunity for the United States is India, whose value to the United States far outstrips that of Israel or Saudi Arabia.

The United States and India share common concerns over China and Islamist terrorism. Thanks to its economic liberalization since 1991, India is one of the two great rising economic superpowers of the 21st century and, with a large talent pool of educated, English-speaking youth, a valuable U.S. trading partner. And, of course, India is the great democratic miracle of the world.

India receives very little economic aid from the United States, but its economic liberalization means it is capable of making efficient use of economic assistance. The U.S.'s Millennium Challenge Corporation, for example, should become, essentially, the India Investment Corporation. The Indian military is an obvious candidate for strategic investment, including counterterrorism training, joint naval exercises, and weapons sales. The U.S. military's hard-won experience in counterinsurgency operations might be welcomed by Indian forces still grappling with several Maoist and separatist movements. The Indian market for weapons by itself could become a major component of the U.S.–India trade relationship, and the U.S. should also explore a deeper and broader intelligence liaison relationship with India.

### *Afghanistan*

U.S.–Indian ties will be more difficult to cultivate if the United States withdraws from Afghanistan and leaves behind a weak and fragile Afghan state susceptible to Pakistani dominance, a resurgent Taliban, and renewed safe haven for jihadist terrorists. For that and other reasons, Afghanistan remains important to American security.

The war in Afghanistan has neither completely failed nor yet achieved sustainable success. Al-Qaeda has not launched another 9/11-scale attack. The Taliban fell from power and, while they control large swaths of the countryside, have yet to regain formal power in Kabul. The government in Kabul and its army is allied to the international community in its fight against terrorism. The Afghan economy is better than it used to be (a low bar) and most indicators of human development show progress. Most importantly: An Afghan army and police force exist and, despite corruption and illiteracy, are leading the fight against the Taliban and its allies.

The war has lasted so long because the United States long ago gave up on any effort to stabilize or rebuild the country and stayed only to play whack-a-mole with terrorist groups. Endless war was a feature, not a bug, of U.S. strategy there. The answer is not to leave, but to stay and change strategy. Reconstruction and stabilization in Afghanistan are vital to American security if we want to achieve lasting peace. Because the Taliban gives active safe haven and support to al-Qaeda,

the United States has to defeat the Taliban to defeat al-Qaeda. In turn, defeating the Taliban *and preventing their return* requires empowering the Afghan government and army.

The agreement that the Trump administration and the Taliban signed last year, and that the Biden administration is inexplicably executing, is unlikely to achieve the United States' single most important goal—the denial of safe havens for terrorist groups—because the agreement is lopsided. The obligations on the United States are clear, specific, and measurable: Remove all U.S. troops and vacate all military bases. The Taliban's obligations are, by contrast, vague and unspecified. The Taliban promises not to let any group use Afghanistan to threaten the United States, not to cooperate with or host any such group, and to “send a clear message” that such groups “have no place in Afghanistan.” The agreement contains no details and no means of enforcement or verification for the Taliban's commitments.

If the Biden administration goes through with the withdrawal agreement, it will have withdrawn all assets and all forces that provide the best intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance against the most dangerous terrorist targets in the world and left our security in the hands of the very Taliban who harbored them in the first place. Few believe the withdrawal will end the war or even end the terrorist threat to U.S. national security. In light of these realities, there is no persuasive reason to withdraw the few troops remaining from Afghanistan. U.S. troops prevent the Taliban from overrunning the country and giving safe haven to al-Qaeda. They help train the Afghan army and keep them in the fight against our common enemies. Only 66 U.S. troops have been killed in action over the past six-and-a-half years—fewer than one per month. There is no large-scale antiwar movement and no domestic political pressure to end the U.S. military deployment there. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is indefinitely sustainable and strategically vital, and there is no compelling reason to end it.

Withdrawal temporarily endangers U.S. interests while removing U.S. influence, and ensuing events are likely to draw the United States back in, as happened in Iraq, but only after the situation deteriorates and makes reengagement harder and costlier. Ending wars requires long-term commitment, deep engagement, and American leadership, not withdrawal and restraint. It will be time for the United States to withdraw when al-Qaeda and its affiliates have been definitively defeated or when the United States has enabled its Afghan allies to successfully deny safe haven to them in South Asia.

In lieu of that, there are few plausible policy options for what to

do the day after withdrawal. Leaving will almost certainly mean a humanitarian crisis, a new wave of Afghan refugees, one of the most significant reversals for women's rights in the developing world in two decades—and possibly the collapse of the Afghan state, the fragmentation of the Afghan army, and the ascendancy of the Taliban and their ideological allies. It will encourage and empower jihadists across the world, damage the United States' standing with other allies, and give momentum to Chinese and Russian efforts to portray the United States as weak, feckless, and dangerous. Drawing down to zero gets the United States almost no further gain but carries enormous risk of collapse, defeat, and irreversible failure that will reverberate across South Asia, the Middle East, and the world.