



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

A Response from Elbridge Colby

The United States must limit much more substantially its strategic engagement in the Middle East. This is both necessary and feasible.

It is necessary because America needs to prioritize the much greater threat posed by China in Asia and the Western Pacific. The United States must direct the overwhelming weight of its strategic effort to ensuring that China—by far America’s most serious military and economic rival—does not dominate that region, the world’s largest market area. Achieving this difficult goal requires a more disciplined focus by the United States, including via substantial reduction in the attention and resources that we allocate to other regions, particularly the Middle East.

Such a reduction is feasible because U.S. interests in the Middle East are narrower in scope than has often been expressed. Boiled down to their essence, these interests are to

- prevent the domination of the oil-rich Gulf states by a potentially hostile power;
- protect Americans from the threat of transnational terrorism; and
- ensure the security of the state of Israel.

These interests can be served through a far more scoped and modest approach than the United States has pursued over the last generation—most notably through the “freedom agenda” but also through its efforts to broadly stabilize the Middle East. The United States should therefore reduce its military engagement and presence in the region, shifting burdens as much as possible to other, primarily

regional, actors. This last goal can best be pursued by supporting and bolstering the capabilities of Israel and regional states like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, whose interests on key issues broadly align with the United States.¹

Let us address in sequence how the United States can optimally pursue these three core interests in the Middle East.

America's fundamental geopolitical interest is in ensuring no state can dominate one of the key regions of the world, which are defined as those regions with the greatest concentration of economic and thus military power. The Middle East, as a whole, is relatively unimportant; its proportion of global GDP is significantly less than 10 percent. Direct U.S. geopolitical interests are more narrowly clustered in the Gulf states due to the enormous concentration of hydrocarbons there; this area represents approximately 5 percent of global GDP. If a state could dominate that area, it could deploy the leverage such control would provide for coercive purposes, as happened in the oil crises of the 1970s. This is true despite America's newfound (and welcome) energy independence because such leverage would still affect the price of oil. This interest is secondary because it most directly affects U.S. allies rather than the United States itself, but it is still significant.

That said, there is no real threat of a state being able to achieve this goal of hegemony over the Gulf in the face of a reasonably anticipatable degree of regional resistance and a modest level of backing from the United States. During the Cold War, the mighty Soviet Union presented a real prospect of dominating the Gulf, but the relatively diminished contemporary Russia lacks the strength to pretend to such a goal. Iran, meanwhile, is too weak, comprising less than a fifth of the region's economic strength. While Tehran uses robust asymmetric capabilities to back sympathetic (usually Shi'a) populations, it lacks meaningful conventional military power projection to defeat, let alone conquer, states that do not want to fall under its sway—namely, the Gulf states. Accordingly, Iran can be checked from any plausibility of dominating the Gulf states by supporting their and Israel's efforts to check Tehran's ambitions. China, meanwhile, will not be able to securely (and thus militarily) dominate the Gulf without first dominating the regions between, including India. Thus, if America can prevent China from dominating Asia, it will, by definition, ensure Beijing cannot dominate the Gulf.

¹ For a useful frame in which to approach this effort, see A. Wess Mitchell, "The Middle East in an Era of Great Power Competition," *The Caravan*, The Hoover Institution, December 12, 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/research/middle-east-era-great-power-competition>.

Considering these factors, retaining the large legacy U.S. force posture and habits of employment in the region, much of which is oriented toward (putatively) “deterring” Iran and defending the Gulf states, is both unnecessary and dangerous. It is unnecessary because it is beyond what is needed to achieve these strategic goals. The United States can pursue these goals more efficiently by bolstering the military capabilities of its partners in the region. And, if need be, it can always flow forces in to assist such defenses and eject any invading Iranian forces, should the need arise. Because of Iran’s weakness, Washington does not need to worry about the fait accompli in the way it does with respect to China in Asia and Russia in Europe.² Washington should also, where possible, encourage and promote the ability of European states with the interest and capacity to act in the Middle East (such as France, the UK, and Italy) to backfill U.S. forces, reducing the risks.

Retaining the legacy approach is dangerous because it perilously saps attention, capability, and resources from the priority focus on China in Asia. Accordingly, the U.S. military focus on Iran should be dramatically reduced, and requests for additional U.S. forces to “deter” Iran should generally be rejected. The smaller force that remains should be focused on strictly counterterrorism missions and enabling partner efforts to assume the burden of deterring Iran. Meanwhile, forces freed up by this narrowing should be redirected elsewhere, primarily toward China, or retired promptly if unsuited for such redirection.

The second core American interest in the Middle East is in preventing transnational terrorist attacks, particularly against Americans. As is evidenced by the experience of recent decades, large ground interventions do not help resolve this issue and almost certainly exacerbate the problem.

Instead, the United States is better off focusing on maintaining and improving the very sophisticated counterterrorism apparatus it has developed over this period. This apparatus is composed of an architecture of intelligence, diplomacy, security assistance, logistics enablers, and military forces such as special operators; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and strike platforms. The United States should keep investing in this architecture with the aim of continuously degrading, deterring, and, as necessary, destroying threatening terrorist elements. The emphases should be on enabling and incentivizing local partners to carry the brunt of the frontline activity and on developing less expensive and sapping military ways

² Evan Braden Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment: U.S. Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (2020): 769-796, doi:10.1080/09636412.2020.1811463.

of doing this (e.g., relying on non-stealthy, unmanned aerial vehicles rather than F-35s).

This counterterrorism effort will not be cheap. It is reasonable to assume that this effort will continue to constitute between about 10 to 15 percent of the U.S. defense budget as well as substantial intelligence and law-enforcement funding. But Americans should be prepared to continue paying this expense for the foreseeable future, given the ongoing risks of terrorism.

Third, the United States should continue to promote a secure Israel by ensuring its qualitative military edge, supporting its efforts to defend itself, and enabling its collaboration with Middle Eastern states that are increasingly willing to partner with it. In this last respect, the United States should build on the strong example and basis of the Abraham Accords.

Considering these factors, the United States was right to withdraw from Afghanistan and should markedly decrease its remaining forces in Syria and Iraq. Going forward, the United States should avoid any military operations in the Middle East that are not clearly and narrowly connected to one of the three interests specified above. Any efforts it does undertake should be as narrow, limited, and “offshore” as possible. More ambitious or ill-defined efforts—as have been all too common in recent decades—are very unlikely to be worth the effort. In any case, we generally do not have the combination of will and capability to successfully pursue such pacification efforts. Moreover, they imprudently draw away critical resources, including leadership attention and popular support, from far more important defense objectives, namely, ensuring a favorable and stable balance of power in Asia.

More fundamentally, the painful and frustrating American experience in the Middle East in recent decades sharply illuminates a reality that conservative foreign policy should acknowledge and proceed from. It is this: The purpose of American foreign policy should be to serve Americans’ interests—their enlightened conception of their interests, to be sure, that often align with the interests of others—but always coming back ultimately in some direct, concrete, and proportionate way to the welfare of the American citizenry, namely, their security, freedom, or prosperity. That is, after all, the core purpose of the Republic that the Constitution gives us. It is also the conservative way: first looking after one’s primary responsibilities and always carefully weighing the costs, benefits, risks, and anticipatable consequences of one’s actions and how they might impinge on those primary responsibilities.

Therefore, the actual goals of American foreign policy cannot reasonably be to end tyranny, ensure the triumph of democracy in the world, spread a Pax Americana, or the like. Certainly those cannot be the aims for a truly conservative foreign policy. American interests, of course, generally benefit from a less tyrannous, more democratic, and more peaceful world, but that is not at all the same as saying it must be America's goal to end tyranny, ensure the triumph of democracy, or spread the Pax Americana.

America's foreign policy should first and foremost be about promoting and protecting the security, freedom, and prosperity of Americans in ways that proportion the risks and costs incurred with the benefits to be gained. Opposing tyranny, promoting democracy, and securing peace will often be consistent with those goals, and whenever this is the case, the United States should actively do so. But they will not always be aligned with those core purposes and, indeed, sometimes may directly contradict them. When that happens, American foreign policy must prioritize Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity.