

Hanna readings

# **The Enduring American Presence in the Middle East**

The U.S. Military Footprint Has Hardly Changed Under Trump

By [Daniel Benaim](#) & [Michael Wahid Hanna](#)  
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Judging by the headlines, the last two years of U.S. Middle East policy seem to be marked by a whiplash-inducing series of radical shifts. U.S. President Donald Trump ran on opposition to a foreign policy of “intervention and chaos,” then ramped up U.S. airstrikes from Somalia to Syria. He announced a complete pullout of U.S. troops from eastern Syria in December, declaring, “They’re all coming back and they’re coming back now,” only to reverse himself and then trumpet additional military deployments to the region to counter Iran six months later. He has simultaneously decried his predecessor’s overinvestment in the Middle East and his weakness there.

These conflicting signals have allowed wildly different interpretations of the Trump administration’s posture in the Middle East. Focusing on one announcement leads to warnings of a new war; focusing on others allows for proclamations of a [“post-American era”](#) in the Middle East. Yet most Middle East watchers seem to agree that something

fundamental about America's presence in the region is changing.

Under Trump, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East has not changed much at all. Hundreds of U.S. forces remain in Syria [with an open-ended mandate](#) (one that goes beyond the initial rationale for deployment, which was focused squarely on fighting the Islamic State, also known as ISIS). Concern about the threat from Iran has brought about some changes in military presence, but so far they add up to a far smaller uptick than has been hyped. Even the most noteworthy among them—the [return of several hundred U.S. troops](#) to Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia—demonstrates that recent alterations to force posture in the region have been smaller and more incremental than the public debates around them might suggest.

For all the headlines, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East is fairly consistent. Despite the administration's intention, laid out in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, to refocus the U.S. military on great-power competition, the U.S. footprint in the Middle East remains relatively constant, and seemingly permanent. Instead, what has changed is the scale of civilian effort that, in most previous administrations, would have accompanied such a military presence. The Trump administration has left numerous vacancies for key civilian positions unfilled for long stretches, slashed aid programs, and focused on high-level personal relations at the expense of broader ties. Altogether, its approach has not been typified by either retrenchment or interventionism but by what Barry Posen, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, has called "illiberal hegemony"—military superiority shorn of diplomatic stewardship.

## PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Although some longtime U.S. partners in the region have sought to portray the United States as “getting out” of the Middle East in order to elicit additional assurances, this evergreen narrative obscures elements of the U.S. defense footprint that remain unchanged. Some mobile, high-value assets have indeed been rotated out of the Middle East—only to be rotated back in. For instance, gaps in what used to be the United States’ continuous aircraft-carrier presence in Gulf waters that persisted over several months were filled by the rotational return of a carrier strike group to the area in May.

Ever since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, U.S. presidents have called for reconsidering the United States’ commitment to the Middle East. Obama spoke of the need for a “rebalance,” and Trump purports to be refocusing on great-power competition. Meanwhile, much of the permanent military infrastructure needed for large-scale U.S. deployments has remained in place. The United States maintains tens of thousands of troops spread across 14 countries in the region, including bases in Turkey, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. It also runs ongoing training and counterterrorism missions in Iraq and Syria.

In some countries, the U.S. military presence is expanding—as in [Jordan](#), where the planned withdrawal from Syria and other uncertainties in the region have driven a quiet but significant expansion of Jordanian facilities used by the U.S. military. Even amid the ongoing rift between Qatar and its Arab Gulf neighbors, the Department of Defense signed an agreement in January 2019 to further build out Al Udeid Air

Base, the U.S. Central Command's forward headquarters in the region. As one former senior Pentagon official recently told one of the authors, regional partners "are always trying to get us to pour more concrete." Certain aspects of the bulked-up U.S. regional posture were an outgrowth of the Obama administration's effort to ensure a credible military deterrent against Iran during negotiations for the Iran nuclear deal. Now the breakdown of that same agreement has led military officials to advocate further increases.

Alongside the discourse of abandonment, the reality of an enduring U.S. military presence persists. The military often looks at the Middle East in terms of contingency planning: it needs access to diverse, redundant bases across an unstable region where potential future crises range from Sunni terrorist insurgencies to Iranian attacks on U.S. forces to Houthis launching missiles at ships and threatening key shipping lanes. Foremost among these contingencies is a war with Iran. Although the National Defense Strategy includes repeated mentions of the "[calculated risk taking](#)" required to reorient U.S. priorities away from regional contingencies to focus on great-power competition, there remain tens of thousands of U.S. troops in Kuwait as a rapid-response backstop against regional war; continued air operations into Afghanistan and against ISIS out of Qatar and the UAE; and the U.S. Navy's fifth fleet in Bahrain to keep the Strait of Hormuz open. [Even independent-minded Oman](#) allows 5,000 overflights and 600 landings by U.S. military aircraft and hosts 80 port calls by U.S. naval vessels per year.

The current tensions surrounding Iranian behavior and heightened dangers to international shipping in the Gulf, however, also give further evidence of a shift toward illiberal hegemony. Although the United States is now seeking to

assemble [a maritime coalition force](#) to protect commercial ships transiting through the Strait of Hormuz, the first impulses of the Trump administration reflected a tilt toward unvarnished unilateralism and away from collective security. In that vein, U.S. [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) [suggested](#) initially that the United Kingdom was chiefly responsible for its own commercial ships in the region.

To be sure, some aspects of the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East have changed. As the U.S. campaign against ISIS has slowed, so has the air campaign that peaked during the height of the battles for Mosul and Raqqa. There has also been a move away from continuous [carrier presence](#) toward rotations, each of which spikes and contracts U.S. troop numbers in the region. Last year [Patriot missile batteries](#) were rotated out of Jordan, Kuwait, and Bahrain and [are now reportedly being deployed](#), along with 500 U.S. troops, inside Saudi Arabia after a fifteen-year absence. But, as recent moves demonstrate, even with a more flexible footprint in the region based on more frequent scheduled rotations, mobile assets can be redeployed at short notice.

#### DIPLOMATIC DECLINE

On the civilian side, the decline of the State Department over the past two and a half years has been rightly lamented. The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs has fared less badly than its peers in some respects, but its descent has still been steep. Consider, for instance, the vacant ambassadorial posts in the region. The Trump administration has only recently filled a few posts, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. But that came only after leaving them open for 25 months, 16 months, 27 months, and 18 months, respectively. Jordan, Qatar, and Morocco remain unfilled. By

comparison, in the first term of the Obama administration, only the Morocco post sat open for longer than a year.

Similarly, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs was without a presidentially appointed, confirmed leader from January 2017 until David Schenker was confirmed as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs in June 2019. Obama filled this position in the first eight months of his presidency. The problem is not limited to ambassadorial ranks: an internal watchdog report [found](#) that 18 percent of overseas Foreign Service positions in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs remained unfilled as of March 2018, the highest level of vacancies of any region.

What has this meant in practice? When Trump joined a host of regional and world leaders in Riyadh in May 2017, he had appointed no ambassadors to key countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. Following the gathering—which has come to be remembered for the photograph of Trump, King Salman of Saudi Arabia, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi gathered around a glowing orb—Saudi Arabia launched a series of domestic crackdowns and, along with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, which hosts U.S. Central Command, and halted land, air, and sea travel to and from the country.

Sixteen months later, when the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside Turkey erupted into a diplomatic crisis, there was no Senate-confirmed U.S. ambassador in either Turkey or Saudi Arabia to provide local insight or help manage relations on behalf of the U.S. president with the leaders of those countries. As a result—and potentially by design—the administration found itself working directly

through Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to implement its policy response. The Trump administration is not the first to seek to circumvent established channels or to narrow policy deliberations on sensitive issues. But the degree to which it has personalized and centralized power while marginalizing bureaucracy represents something new in recent decades of U.S. foreign policy.

Less remarked upon than personnel vacancies but no less damaging has been the dismantling of other tools of U.S. civilian power. In the summer of 2018, Trump pulled the plug on stabilization funds inside Syria, civilian money that had assisted local governance councils and other measures to prevent the return of ISIS to liberated areas. Now U.S. troops remain deployed, but civilian stabilization aid remains frozen.

In Iraq, the Trump administration has invested in stabilization for religious minorities, but forsworn reconstruction and done little to help Iraq address its governance challenges—despite [the United States' still-strong diplomatic influence](#) there. Escalating tensions with Iran led to security threats and ultimately to the closure, in September 2018, of the U.S. consulate in southern Iraq—a region at the heart of the country's governance crisis and crucial to the survival of its current government. Then, in May, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ordered nonessential civilian presence out of the entire country and [reportedly sought to make the downgrade permanent](#). Troops stayed behind, raising questions about the United States' intentions and commitment.

In Egypt, the tilt toward military-focused relations has happened over a longer period but been no less pronounced. Amid an unprecedented military-backed authoritarian

resurgence, U.S. [security assistance](#) to Egypt has remained unchanged for decades at \$1.3 billion. Economic support, meanwhile, declined over the past 20 years from \$800 million to \$120 million. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, security aid to Egypt was an average of three times larger than economic aid; today, it is 11 times larger.

Perhaps most dramatic of all have been changes to civilian cooperation with Palestinians. The Trump administration shuttered the U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem and has all but eliminated U.S. assistance. USAID's mission to the Palestinian people let go of approximately 85 percent of its staff—ending [virtually all ground activities](#), including support for hospitals in East Jerusalem as well as for Palestinian refugees in the region. These steps are punitive in nature and harmful to both sides.

#### RETHINKING THE STATUS QUO

Altogether, the Trump administration's approach to the Middle East combines a largely stable U.S. military footprint with hyperpersonalized and militarized diplomatic engagement. Such an approach can yield warm relations and tactical gains for a time. But it risks creating a worst-of-both-worlds equilibrium, in which Washington pays tens of billions of dollars each year to station U.S. forces across the region, while forfeiting far cheaper investments in diplomacy that would help minimize the odds that those forces ever need to be used. Under this vision, a narrow subset of Americans deal with an equally narrow subset of regional rulers, ruling families, and security officials while societies are entirely marginalized. That may seem like hard-headed realism, but it will likely prove short-sighted.

This approach also exacerbates the long-standing problem of overreliance on the military as the central tool of U.S. Middle East policy. Even on a diplomat's best days, regional leaders are well aware of the "consul effect"—the contrast between well-resourced American military commanders and their relatively impoverished diplomatic colleagues. Further marginalizing diplomats costs them influence, access, and bargaining power, while positioning the military and intelligence communities as the only effective U.S. institutional actors in the region.

Then there is the question of the day after Trump. His administration's approach has already deepened the politicization and personalization of many key partnerships, [transforming what were once enduring bipartisan relationships](#) into appendages of the most polarizing American presidency in recent memory. This has planted the seeds for a near-inevitable reckoning with these partners over their behavior on his watch. A silver lining is that, by surfacing the most troubling assumptions underpinning the United States' regional partnerships, Trump may provide a much-needed opportunity to reexamine their terms. Ultimately, Trump's approach may bring about a real change in the U.S. military footprint in the region—by making it more likely that his successor will take on the task.

## Getting Over Egypt

### Time to Rethink Relations

By Michael Wahid Hanna

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For decades, the partnership between Egypt and the United States was a linchpin of the American role in the Middle East. Today, it is a mere vestige of a bygone era. There are no longer any compelling reasons for Washington to sustain especially close ties with Cairo. What was once a powerfully symbolic alliance with clear advantages for both sides has become a nakedly transactional relationship—and one that benefits the Egyptians more than the Americans. The time has come for both sides to recognize that reality and for the United States to fundamentally alter its approach to Egypt: downgrading the priority it places on the relationship, reducing the level of economic and military support it offers Cairo, and more closely tying the aid it does deliver to political, military, and economic reforms that would make Egypt a more credible partner.

The contemporary U.S.-Egyptian relationship began in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and was shaped by the logic of the Cold War, with Egypt switching from the Soviet to the American camp in return for various kinds of support. During the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, other factors, such as cooperation in the Middle East peace process and the struggle against jihadist terrorism, provided new rationales for continuing the partnership. But at this point, after a popular uprising followed by an authoritarian relapse in Cairo, and with the peace process moribund and

jihadism now a chronic condition, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship has become an anachronism that distorts American policy in the region.

This is not to say that the United States gets nothing out of the relationship. U.S. naval ships enjoy fast-track access to the Suez Canal (albeit with the payment of a hefty premium), and Egypt allows American military aircraft to fly over Egyptian airspace, both of which help Washington project power in the Middle East and manage its military deployments. Egypt also provides some diplomatic support for American regional policies and remains a potentially valuable partner in the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS), to which militants in neighboring Libya and in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula have pledged allegiance. But such benefits do not justify the attention and resources that Washington lavishes on Egypt, which is scheduled to receive \$1.3 billion in military aid and up to \$150 million in economic assistance from the United States this year, making Egypt the second-largest recipient of American largess. And even if Washington cut back its aid, Cairo would have plenty of reasons to continue its cooperation.

To be sure, the United States would profit greatly from close ties with a strong, prosperous Egypt that had a representative government and a capable military—a country that could act as an anchor for regional security and counterterrorist efforts, help contain Iran, and live up to its historical role as a leader of and model for the Arab world. But such an Egypt does not exist today and seems unlikely to emerge anytime soon. In the two years since leading a military coup, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has given little reason to hope that he can sustainably grow the country's economy or improve basic services and security. Meanwhile, he has cracked down on

almost all forms of dissent and opposition. The Sisi regime has simply not provided a credible road map for Egypt's future.

When Sisi removed Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, from office in July 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama refused to label the act a military coup, in part because that would have required, under U.S. law, immediately cutting off aid to Cairo. Still, in an interview with CNN the following month, Obama conceded that the relationship could not "return to business as usual." But for the most part, it has. Although Obama has ended Egypt's ability to obtain military hardware on credit and has placed new limits on how Egypt can spend the U.S. aid it receives, the United States will continue to supply Egypt with \$1.3 billion every year for the foreseeable future, with very few strings attached. Last August, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Cairo to take part in the first "strategic dialogue" that American officials have held with their Egyptian counterparts since 2009, announcing that the United States would soon resume joint military exercises with Egypt, which Obama suspended in 2013. As Kerry arrived, the U.S. embassy in Cairo publicly hailed the delivery of eight American-made F-16s to Egypt's air force.

This tacit resumption of the pre-coup relationship has done little to enhance regional security, give the United States additional leverage, or curb Sisi's autocratic tendencies. Meanwhile, it has implicated the United States in Egypt's repression of Islamists, secular activists, and journalists who have dared to challenge or even merely criticize Sisi. And Washington has seen its relative influence in Cairo diminish even further, as wealthy Gulf states have flooded Egypt with

an estimated \$30 billion in various forms of economic assistance since Sisi took power.

The United States must sometimes make bargains with authoritarian regimes. And as extremist forces foment disorder and chaos in the Middle East, it might seem reasonable to mend fences with traditional allies in the region. However, for such compromises to be worth it, the strategic benefits must outweigh the costs, and Washington's resumed embrace of Cairo does not pass that test. Continuing with the current policy would be a triumph of hope over experience. The United States should instead change course, scaling back the scope of its relationship with Egypt and reducing the exaggerated attention the country receives while placing stricter conditions on U.S. aid. Washington hardly needs to cut Cairo loose, but the United States should stop coddling it.

## THE THRILL IS GONE

The 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the Arab oil embargo of Israel's supporters that followed marked the beginning of a historic realignment of both the state system in the Middle East and Arab relations with the United States. That realignment was completed with the signing of the Camp David accords <sup>[SEP]</sup>in 1978 and a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel the following year. U.S. President Jimmy Carter's pledges of sustained American economic and military aid to Egypt were a key factor in persuading Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat to make peace with Israel. The deal was a diplomatic masterstroke. It pulled Egypt into the U.S. orbit, eliminated the possibility of another large-scale conventional Arab-Israeli war (and thus the risk of great-power conflict in the region),

and created a more stable and sustainable backdrop for international oil markets—and, by extension, the global economy.

For the duration of the Cold War and during its immediate aftermath, U.S.-Egyptian security cooperation and coordination flourished, reaching a peak when Egypt participated in the multinational effort to liberate Kuwait after Iraq invaded in 1990. And with the advent of renewed Arab-Israeli peace efforts in the early 1990s, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship became even more valuable to Washington, as Egypt emerged as the Arab state most fully engaged in the process.

Meanwhile, at home, the authoritarian regime led by Sadat and then, after Sadat's 1981 assassination, his successor, Hosni Mubarak, entrenched itself. Over time, human rights advocates and Egyptian dissidents called for Washington to use its leverage to press Mubarak for reforms. But as the threat of jihadist terrorism grew, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials decided not to push too hard, which could risk diminishing Egypt's cooperation on counterterrorism.

Then came the Arab uprisings, during which Mubarak was ousted in the wake of a broad-based popular mobilization. In 2012, a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood came to power through democratic elections, only to catastrophically overreach. That government, led by Morsi, ultimately fell to a putsch mounted by the military and the country's still powerful authoritarian security establishment—a coup that was supported by mass demonstrations against Morsi's rule and aided in no small part by the Muslim

Brotherhood's intransigence in the face of public opposition to its agenda.

The result of all the turmoil, both in Egypt and the region at large, has been a far more organic alignment of Egyptian and Israeli interests than anything American diplomatic bribery could achieve. Indeed, some Egyptian and Israeli leaders boast that their relations with each other are now stronger than their ties to the United States. That might be hyperbole, but it is clear that U.S. aid is no longer the glue that binds the Egyptian-Israeli relationship, and it pales beside the amounts given to Cairo by the worried monarchies of the Gulf.

Egypt has an interest in pursuing counterterrorism for its own reasons, moreover, not simply out of a desire to curry favor with the United States, and its military is no longer a major factor in security issues beyond its borders. In short, the regional landscape has been transformed, and Egypt has been left behind. Despite its large population and historical importance, Egypt is no longer an influential regional player. Instead, it is a problem to be managed.

## STICKS AND STONES

Even in the heyday of U.S.-Egyptian cooperation, the two countries did not see eye to eye on many issues. But the current gap between their worldviews and priorities is larger than at any time in the past.

Perhaps the most visceral expression of this phenomenon is the way in which anti-Americanism—always latent in Egyptian society, media, and politics—has exploded beyond its traditional boundaries to become a core feature of political discourse and official propaganda in Egypt. Throughout the

Mubarak years, anti-Americanism was a common staple of regime-affiliated media. Such official and officially encouraged rhetoric served to inoculate the regime against a broad array of criticisms of its close relations with the Americans, particularly during the Bush-era “war on terror,” when the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the CIA’s use of torture, Washington’s indefinite detention of terrorist suspects in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the United States’ unwavering support for Israel deepened public antipathy to the United States. Criticism of the United States was pointed but stayed within clear boundaries.

During Sisi’s time in power, however, a categorically different kind of anti-Americanism—vitriolic, paranoid, and warped by conspiracy theories—has come to dominate Egyptian media. State-backed media outlets have published scurrilous, bizarre stories alleging extensive U.S. financial and diplomatic support for Sisi’s Islamist opponents—not only the Muslim Brotherhood but even ISIS.

Not only does Sisi’s regime tolerate such conspiracy theories, but elements of the security establishment even promote them as part of an attempt to sell Egypt as a regional bulwark against Washington’s supposed goal of dividing and dominating the Arab world. Earlier this year, Vice Admiral Mohab Mamish, the former commander of the Egyptian navy and the current head of the Suez Canal Authority, told the Egyptian newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm that during the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak, the Egyptian military thwarted a potential U.S. military intervention. Two U.S. frigates “were besieged by the navy and were forced to withdraw from [Egypt’s] territorial waters,” Mamish claimed. “It was important to show the Americans that the Egyptian

military was highly diligent and prepared to deter any intervention,” he explained.

Incendiary rhetoric such as this is particularly rankling given that many Egyptian military leaders, including Sisi himself, have received training at U.S. military institutions as participants in a program designed to increase the professionalism of the armed forces of American allies and partners. Yet this extensive, decades-long effort has not produced the hoped-for doctrinal or structural shifts within the Egyptian armed forces nor increased the competence of Egypt’s military leadership. As a result, there is not much close cooperation, confidence, or trust between the two militaries. This gap is so large now that the United States has made no effort to include Egypt in an operational role in the U.S.-led anti-ISIS military campaign, despite the obvious need for Arab military partners.

Indeed, when it comes to fighting Islamist extremists, even some members of the U.S. defense establishment have come to see Egypt’s repressive tactics as counterproductive, since they tend to further radicalize militants and undermine international efforts to curb militancy in the region. The United States remains concerned about the real and serious terrorist threats Egypt faces, including the risk that formerly non-violent Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which renounced its historical use of violence decades ago, could reverse course or splinter, with breakaway factions turning to terrorism and antistate violence. But the Sisi regime has demonstrated a dangerous inability or unwillingness to differentiate between Islamist actors, lumping together the hitherto generally nonviolent members of the Muslim Brotherhood with the brutal extremists of ISIS. The mainstreaming of regressive and sectarian ideologies

such as the Brotherhood's would hardly serve U.S. interests. But the United States rightly sees Sisi's forceful repression of all opposition as a destabilizing factor for the region and a boost to the radicalizing efforts of militants.

## MANAGEABLE RISKS

Although the acrimony and strains in the U.S.-Egyptian relationship are on full display, U.S. officials are understandably wary of making dramatic changes to long-standing U.S. policies in the Arab world, particularly at a moment of regional disorder and instability. Many in Washington share well-founded concerns about the potential destabilizing effect of political violence in Egypt; some even worry about the more remote possibility of state failure. But such fears are built on overestimations of Washington's impact on Egyptian politics. Egyptian leaders have consistently rejected U.S. advice throughout the post-Mubarak period, and a restructuring of bilateral ties is unlikely to have a significant effect on Egypt's internal stability.

Some proponents of maintaining the status quo argue that a U.S. shift away from Egypt would further alienate influential American allies in the Arab world, many of which are dispirited by Washington's limited engagement in the Syrian civil war and troubled by the Obama administration's push for the Iranian nuclear deal. This is a legitimate concern, but the fallout could be contained in much the same way that the United States assuaged Arab allies uneasy about the nuclear deal with Iran: by increasing direct U.S. security cooperation with Arab states.

Other advocates for continuing on the present path claim that Sisi is a different kind of Egyptian leader, more willing to confront the problem of Islamist extremism and more focused on the need for real economic reform. They point to his calls for a “religious revolution” to combat extremism within Islam and were encouraged when Sisi remarked that it is “inconceivable that the thought that [Egyptians] hold most sacred should cause the entire nation to be a source of anxiety, danger, killing, and destruction for the rest of the world.” Those words were notable, but they served mostly to highlight Egypt’s tragedy: the country and the region as a whole are in desperate need of alternatives to the regressive and sectarian vision of most of the Arab world’s Islamists. But by yoking the call for reform to repression, authoritarianism, and hypernationalism, Sisi is merely repeating the mistakes of his predecessors, stoking the very radicalism he seeks to eliminate. As for the economy, the highest priority for the regime, Sisi lacks credible plans for development that would create equitable growth.

The most powerful arguments against restructuring the relationship are based on the fear that a spurned Egypt would stop cooperating with the U.S. military and thus stymie Washington’s ability to project power in the region. According to multiple U.S. officials, in recent years, when Cairo has sought to express its displeasure with Washington, it has delayed granting permission for U.S. aircraft to fly over Egyptian airspace, temporarily complicating American military planning and logistics. In light of the ongoing and open-ended U.S. campaign against ISIS, such delays have panicked Pentagon planners, who are accustomed to preferential treatment. But although Sisi’s regime might be willing to occasionally push back against U.S. demands for

access, Egypt can't afford to be too aggressive, since doing so angers not just the Americans but also the Gulf states that have become Egypt's main patrons—and that are counting on U.S. military power to not only protect the region from ISIS but also serve as their overall security guarantor. The governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will not sit idly by if Egypt drags its feet on U.S. requests for logistical support and endangers the mechanisms that ensure Gulf security, and Sisi cannot afford to unduly antagonize them; as Sisi himself has stated, the security of the Gulf states is an “integral part of Egyptian national security.”

## TIME FOR A CHANGE

For the United States, military aid to Egypt has long been understood as the central pillar of a broad and close relationship with the Arab world's most populous nation—a means of leverage and a source of influence over not only the Egyptian military but also the broader contours of Egyptian political life. But in reality, U.S. aid has not been successful in producing a professionalized and effective Egyptian military. Nor has it encouraged Egyptian leaders to share Washington's worldview or strategic priorities. And it certainly has not had a particularly positive effect on the country's political trajectory: foreign military funding has proved wholly ineffective in pushing Egypt toward democratic reform.

In the future, therefore, American aid should be tightly focused on assisting the modernization and professionalization of the Egyptian military and should be made wholly contingent on evidence that Egypt takes those matters seriously. In March, the Obama administration announced that Egypt's future purchases of U.S. military hardware must be specifically tied to counterterrorism,

protecting Egypt's borders, combating militants in the Sinai, or maritime security. But it remains unclear how the United States will determine whether any prospective purchase meets the new criteria.

Washington should make it perfectly clear that its military aid is not connected to a push for Egypt to embrace political reforms, much less democratize. Targeting the aid more narrowly and focusing it on clear and relatively modest goals will allow Washington to significantly reduce the overall amount of military financing it provides to Cairo. The level of aid should accurately reflect the current importance of the bilateral relationship, which now ranks far below U.S. relations with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Lowering the total annual amount from \$1.3 billion to around \$500 million would express U.S. displeasure with the status quo while adequately serving the near-term security needs of the United States, continuing to signal an American commitment to Egypt, and conferring a certain level of political status on the Egyptian government and military.

Such a reduction would not threaten the training and technology transfers the Egyptian military values, nor would it harm intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries, which would continue on the basis of mutual necessity. To cushion the blow to U.S. arms manufacturers that such a change would entail, the United States should consider diverting future military assistance to more reliable allies, such as Jordan; or to partners that need help far more urgently than Egypt, such as Iraq; or to states in the region that are transitioning to democracy more successfully, such as Tunisia.

But the United States should leave open the possibility that aid to Egypt could be restored to previous levels if Egypt undertakes serious political liberalization, begins credible efforts at inclusive and sustainable economic change, and initiates a program of genuine military modernization. Such reforms would justify a strategic U.S.-Egyptian relationship and enhance regional security and could serve as the foundation for a stable, democratic, pluralistic, and prosperous Egypt that would provide the Arab world with a much-needed alternative to its failed political models.

It is hard to imagine Egypt taking any of those steps in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, if Washington decides to proceed with an outdated approach to Cairo, the result will be constant tension, friction, and frustration, as both sides' expectations go unfulfilled. "Business as usual" will do nothing to alter Egypt's negative trajectory and will further bind the United States to an unreliable partner.

## My Account

### America's Middle East Purgatory

#### The Case for Doing Less

By Mara Karlin & Tamara Cofman Wittes

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When U.S. President Donald Trump talks about the Middle East, he typically pairs bellicose threats against Iran and the Islamic State (or ISIS) with fulsome pledges of support for the United States' regional partners, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. But the tough talk is misleading: there is little reason to think that Trump actually wants the United States to get more involved in the region.

He pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal but has shown no eagerness for a conflict with the Islamic Republic. He has continued U.S. President Barack Obama's support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen but resisted calls for deeper military engagement there. Despite his promise of a "deal of the century," a U.S. proposal on Arab-Israeli peace remains on the shelf. His support for an "Arab NATO," a security alliance among Egypt, Jordan, and six Gulf states, has been stymied by deepening rifts among the Gulf countries. His vacillating approach toward Syria has led to confusion over the U.S. military's mission there. The Defense Department has scaled back U.S. military capabilities in the Middle East in order to redirect resources to the increasing threats posed by

China and Russia, leaving partners in the region wondering about Washington's commitment to their security. For all the aggressive rhetoric, Trump's Middle East policies have proved remarkably reserved.

In that regard, Trump is strikingly like his predecessor. Trump may talk about the Middle East differently than Obama did. But the two seem to share the view that the United States is too involved in the region and should devote fewer resources and less time to it. And there is every reason to believe that the next president will agree. The reduced appetite for U.S. engagement in the region reflects not an ideological predilection or an idiosyncrasy of these two presidents but a deeper change in both regional dynamics and broader U.S. interests. Although the Middle East still matters to the United States, it matters markedly less than it used to.

U.S. strategy toward the Middle East, however, has yet to catch up with these changes. The United States thus exists in a kind of Middle Eastern purgatory—too distracted by regional crises to pivot to other global priorities but not invested enough to move the region in a better direction. This worst-of-both-worlds approach exacts a heavy price. It sows uncertainty among Washington's Middle Eastern partners, which encourages them to act in risky and aggressive ways. (Just look at Saudi Arabia's brazen assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi or its bloody campaign in Yemen.) It deepens the American public's frustration with the region's endless turmoil, as well as with U.S. efforts to address it. It diverts resources that could otherwise be devoted to confronting a rising China and a revanchist Russia. And all the while, by remaining unclear about the limits of its commitments, the United States risks getting dragged into yet another Middle Eastern conflict.

To say that the Middle East matters less to the United States does not mean that decreased U.S. involvement will necessarily be good for the region. The Middle East is in the midst of its greatest upheaval in half a century, generating an all-out battle for power among its major players. The region's governments, worried about what Washington's growing disregard for the Middle East means for their own stability, are working hard to draw the hegemon back in. But it is time for Washington to put an end to wishful thinking about its ability to establish order on its own terms or to transform self-interested and shortsighted regional partners into reliable allies—at least without incurring enormous costs and long-term commitments. That means making some ugly choices to craft a strategy that will protect the most important U.S. interests in the region, without sending the United States back into purgatory.

## A LESS RELEVANT REGION

In response to the Iraq war, the United States has aimed to reduce its role in the Middle East. Three factors have made that course both more alluring and more possible. First, interstate conflicts that directly threatened U.S. interests in the past have largely been replaced by substate security threats. Second, other rising regions, especially Asia, have taken on more importance to U.S. global strategy. And third, the diversification of global energy markets has weakened oil as a driver of U.S. policy.

During the Cold War, traditional state-based threats pushed the United States to play a major role in the Middle East. That role involved not only ensuring the stable supply of energy to Western markets but also working to prevent the spread of communist influence and tamping down the Arab-Israeli

conflict so as to help stabilize friendly states. These efforts were largely successful. Beginning in the 1970s, the United States nudged Egypt out of the pro-Soviet camp, oversaw the first Arab-Israeli peace treaty, and solidified its hegemony in the region. Despite challenges from Iran after its 1979 revolution and from Saddam Hussein's Iraq throughout the 1990s, U.S. dominance was never seriously in question. The United States contained the Arab-Israeli conflict, countered Saddam's bid to gain territory through force in the 1990–91 Gulf War, and built a seemingly permanent military presence in the Gulf that deterred Iran and muffled disputes among the Gulf Arab states. Thanks to all these efforts, the chances of deliberate interstate war in the Middle East are perhaps lower now than at any time in the past 50 years.

But today, the chief threat in the Middle East is not a state-on-state conflict but the growing substate violence spilling across borders—a challenge that is harder to solve from the outside. The terrorism and civil war plaguing the Middle East have spread easily in a permissive environment of state weakness. This environment was fostered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and then, more generally, by the dysfunctional governance that led to the Arab uprisings of 2010–12 and the subsequent repressive responses. The region's most violent hot spots are those where dictators met demands from their citizens with force and drove them to take up arms. The United States cannot fundamentally alter this permissive environment for terrorism and chaos without investing in state building at a level far beyond what either the American public or broader foreign policy considerations would allow. And so it simply cannot hope to do much to counter the Middle East's violence or instability.

Some of the chaos directly threatens U.S. partners. Jordan's vulnerability skyrocketed in 2014 as hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fled there (which is the reason the United States ramped up its aid to the country). Saudi Arabia's critical infrastructure has proved dangerously exposed (which is why the United States deepened its support there, as well). But today, the primary threats to these partners are internal. In Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, dysfunctional state-led economic systems and unaccountable governments are failing to meet the needs or aspirations of a large, young, reasonably healthy, and globally connected generation. Change will have to come from the Arab states themselves, and although the United States can support reformers within Arab societies, it cannot drive this kind of transformation from the outside.

Some argue that these problems still matter a lot to the United States and that there is still much it could do to solve them if it were willing to go all in. Proponents of this maximalist approach believe that with sufficient resources, the United States could decisively defeat ISIS and other extremists, stabilize and reconstruct liberated communities, and lay the foundations for a lasting peace by pushing states to overhaul the social contract between rulers and ruled. This outcome is not impossible to imagine. But the experience of the United States in Iraq, Libya, and Syria suggests that this path would be rockier than it might first appear and that it would be extremely challenging to sustain domestic political support for the large, long-term investments that these goals would require.

Even as the Middle East's problems have become less susceptible to constructive outside influence, the United States' global interests have also changed—most of all when it

comes to Asia. For decades, U.S. policymakers debated whether China could rise peacefully, but the country's destabilizing behavior, especially its insistence that its neighbors accept its territorial claims in the South China Sea and over Taiwan, have led many to worry that it will not. Both Obama and Trump recognized that Asia has become more important to U.S. grand strategy. As the former put it when announcing what became known as the "rebalance" to Asia, "After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region." Russia, meanwhile, has generated growing concern ever since its invasion of Crimea in 2014, and fears about European security and stability have pushed the Middle East even further down the list of U.S. priorities.

Then there is oil—the fuel that first drew the United States into the Middle East after World War II. Middle Eastern oil remains an important commodity in the global economy, but it is weakening as a driver of U.S. policy. One reason is the more abundant global supply, including new domestic sources aided by technologies such as fracking. Another is a widely anticipated stall in global demand, as technological advances and concerns about greenhouse gas emissions cause countries to shift away from fossil fuels. The result is a Middle East that is less central to global energy markets and less able to control pricing—and a United States that can afford to worry less about protecting the flow of oil from the region.

Many of the things that mattered to the United States when it first became involved in the Middle East still matter today. The United States should still care about protecting freedom of navigation in the region's major maritime passages, preventing oil producers or troublemakers from suddenly

turning off the flow, and containing would-be regional hegemons and other actors hostile to Washington. The question is how crucial these priorities are relative to other ones, and how much the United States should invest in them. The answer is that the United States should probably be less involved in shaping the trajectory of the region than it is.

## LOST ILLUSIONS

For a long time, policymakers have been tempted by the notion that there is some kind of golden mean for U.S. engagement in the Middle East. Somehow, the argument runs, the United States can develop a strategy that keeps it involved in the most critical issues but avoids allowing it to be drawn into the region's more internecine battles. In this scenario, the United States could reduce its military presence while retaining a "surge" capacity, relying more on local partners to deter threats and using aid and trade incentives to build coalitions among local actors to advance stabilizing policies, such as conflict resolution.

But this Goldilocks approach rests on the false assumption that there is such a thing as a purely operational U.S. military presence in the Middle East. In reality, U.S. military bases across the Gulf countries have strategic implications because they create a moral hazard: they encourage the region's leaders to act in ways they otherwise might not, safe in the knowledge that the United States is invested in the stability of their regimes. In 2011, for example, the Bahrainis and the Saudis clearly understood the message of support sent by the U.S. naval base in Bahrain when they ignored Obama's disapproval and crushed Shiite protests there. In Yemen, U.S. support for the Emirati and Saudi military campaign shows how offering help can put the United States in profound

dilemmas: the United States is implicated in air strikes that kill civilians, but any proposal to halt its supplies of its precision-guided missiles is met with the charge that denying Saudi Arabia smarter munitions might only increase collateral civilian casualties. U.S. efforts to train, equip, and advise the Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against ISIS are yet another reminder that none of Washington's partnerships has purely operational consequences: U.S. support of the SDF, seen by Ankara as a sister to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, has made the United States' relationship with Turkey knottier than ever.

Supporters of the Goldilocks approach also suggest that the United States can substitute military engagement with vigorous diplomacy. But U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's experience with the negotiations over the Syrian civil war, where his efforts were undercut by Obama's reluctance to involve the United States, demonstrated that diplomacy without teeth doesn't get you very far. Goldilocks proponents imagine that the United States can somehow escape the push-pull dynamic of Middle Eastern involvement, but all this approach ends up accomplishing is prolonging the time in purgatory. Yet it is not enough to simply propose that the United States do less in the region without explaining what that would look like in practice. It is clear that Washington should reduce its role in the Middle East; how it scales back and to what end are the critical questions.

A new approach to the region should begin with accepting a painful tradeoff: that what is good for the United States may not be good for the Middle East. U.S. policymakers and the public already seem surprisingly comfortable watching repressive Arab rulers consolidate power in some countries, while brutal insurgents displace civilians and destroy cities in

others. But a superpower must make tough choices, prioritizing the conflicts and issues that matter most for its global strategy. During the Cold War, for example, the United States took a relatively hands-off approach to most of Africa, backing anticommunist strongmen and proxies in a few places even at the cost of long-term stability. This had terrible consequences for the people of, say, Angola or what was then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), but it was a tolerable decision for U.S. interests. The same is likely to be true in the Middle East today.

It is not enough to just set limits on its commitments; the United States must also clearly communicate those limits to other countries. At a summit at Camp David in 2015, Obama alarmed Gulf partners when he told them that the United States would protect them from external threats but pointedly declined to mention internecine ones. Obama was right to put the onus on Gulf states to address their own internal challenges and to make clear that the United States had no dog in most of their regional fights. Today, likewise, the United States should put its regional partners on notice that it will not back some of their pet political projects, such as the United Arab Emirates' attempt to resuscitate the Palestinian politician Mohammad Dahlan in the Gaza Strip or its effort, along with Egypt, to back the military commander Khalifa Haftar in Libya. Washington must also set clear guidelines about when it will and won't use force. It should clarify, for example, that it will target terrorists who threaten the United States or its partners but will not intervene militarily in civil wars except to contain them (as opposed to resolving them through force).

Since a less engaged United States will have to leave more of the business of Middle Eastern security to partners in the

region, it must rethink how it works with them. For example, the U.S. military is fond of talking about a “by, with, and through” approach to working with local partners—meaning military “operations are led by our partners, state or nonstate, with enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and through U.S. authorities and partner agreements,” as General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, explained in an article in *Joint Force Quarterly* in 2018. But that model works only if the partners on the ground share Washington’s priorities. Consider the Defense Department’s doomed program to train and equip rebels in Syria. Rightly mistrustful of those partners, fearing they might drag the United States into a war with Bashar al-Assad, Washington was unwilling to provide sophisticated support. And although the fighters were instructed to prioritize attacking ISIS over regime forces that were shelling their hometowns, they changed course when Turkey invaded Afrin and began fighting the Turks instead, stalling the campaign against ISIS elsewhere. The United States has worked well with Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS in northeastern Syria—but as soon as Trump expressed his desire to pull U.S. forces out, the rebels began to explore cutting a deal with Damascus.

It is also crucial that the United States accept the limitations of its partners and see them for what they truly are, warts and all. Sometimes, these partners won’t be able to confront security challenges without direct help from the United States. In these cases, U.S. policy-makers will have to accept that if the effort is imperative for U.S. national security interests, Washington will have to do the work itself. For example, the United States has spent decades trying to build a security alliance among Gulf states. Even before the current Gulf rift

began, this effort had started going off the rails, with many countries allowing mutual hatreds to get in the way of a cooperative effort against Iran. Now that Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are blockading Qatar, this alliance is looking even more like a pipe dream.

A clear-eyed approach also requires accepting that China or Russia (or both) will likely gain more of a footing in the Middle East as the United States pulls back. The good news is that neither power is likely to make a real bid for regional hegemony. So far, China has established itself in the region by gingerly stepping around multiple conflicts, seeking friendships and trade relationships while carefully avoiding taking sides in any rivalries. The crass views of power and money evident in Russia's involvement in Syria, where Kremlin-linked mercenary firms have fought for Assad and gained lucrative oil profits, suggest that regional governments will face a strict quid pro quo from Moscow, not the kind of reliable partnerships the United States has traditionally provided. Setting Syria aside, Russia's role in the region has been similar to China's: free-riding on U.S. security guarantees while using diplomacy and commercial ties to make friends as widely as possible without offering unique guarantees to any one party. Given the relatively limited ambitions of China and Russia, and how well the United States has demonstrated the immense price of being the regional security manager, Washington should be able to retain the preponderance of power in the Middle East even after pulling back. Yet if one of its core partners or interests is threatened, it will need to be prepared to change course.

## WHAT STILL MATTERS

These recommendations all involve accepting what doesn't matter to U.S. interests. But there are issues in the Middle East that still greatly concern the United States. Those who prefer that Washington withdraw from the region entirely underestimate how dangerous the resulting power vacuum could be. The United States does have important interests in the region to protect.

One of them is sustaining freedom of navigation for the U.S. Navy and for global commercial traffic through the Middle East's major maritime passages—the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el Mandeb Strait, and the Suez Canal. Fortunately, this is a global priority. Outside the Persian Gulf itself, the littoral states and other concerned parties across Asia and Europe share Washington's objective. Chinese naval forces have participated in antipiracy efforts in the Horn of Africa, and the Chinese navy recently built its first overseas base to support that mission, in Djibouti. The United States could encourage China to participate in the 33-member Combined Maritime Forces and Combined Task Force 151, which fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the eastern coast of Somalia, to ensure that China's activities are focused on shared maritime security. This would allow the United States to rely more on other concerned parties to address the piracy challenge. Still, doing so would come with its own costs—particularly as China has sought to rewrite the rules on freedom of navigation in its own region.

Fighting terrorism also remains a priority. To secure the American people, including U.S. forces stationed abroad, and the most important U.S. partners, the United States will have to prevent new threats from emerging in the Middle East. Like the Obama administration, the Trump administration has emphasized the need to lower the level of U.S. involvement in

counterterrorism efforts. But this approach has its limits. Washington should recognize that its partners will inevitably permit or even encourage the activities of terrorist groups if doing so aligns with their short-term interests. Qatar, for example, has proved willing to work with extremist groups that, at a minimum, give aid to terrorist groups with international ambitions. The United States should recognize that it cannot control everything its partners do and focus its efforts on discouraging their relationships with terrorist groups that might pursue operations beyond their immediate neighborhood or acquire game-changing capabilities.

Finally, the United States still has an interest in seeing its main partners—however imperfect they are—stable and secure, and it should weigh its investments in security cooperation and economic aid accordingly. Washington also needs to ensure that problems in the Middle East don't spill over into neighboring regions (a lesson from the Bosnian war in the 1990s that policymakers forgot when confronted with the Syrian war). Preventing conflicts from spreading does not mean launching all-out military interventions. But it will sometimes require the United States to actively contain the fighting and engage in coercive diplomacy designed to bring civil wars to a swifter end.

## THE DEVIL WE DON'T KNOW

Ultimately, lasting stability and security for the Middle East will come only if the relationship between rulers and the ruled changes. That will require more transparent, responsive, accountable, and participatory governments that give citizens a reason to buy into the system, instead of encouraging them

to work around it through corruption, leave it behind through emigration, or try to tear it down through violence.

But that change cannot be driven by the United States without far more carrots and sticks than Washington is prepared to deploy. U.S. policymakers should instead support those who are proposing constructive solutions and work to shape the environment in which local actors will make their own choices about reordering the region. That work could involve others with a stake in Middle Eastern stability—Europe, for example. But for the foreseeable future, policymakers must accept that the Middle East will likely remain mired in dysfunction and that U.S. partners there will bow less and less to Washington’s preferences. The United States will also have to abandon the fairy-dusted prospect of a negotiated agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and settle for constraining the worst impulses of both sides as they reckon with recalcitrant domestic politics. The Iran nuclear deal did not put an end to Iran’s destabilizing behavior or permanently box in its nuclear ambitions. But it did—and does—offer meaningful, verifiable constraints on Iranian nuclear activity for a significant period of time, better than can be expected from U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s list of demands backed by “maximum pressure.” The United States should return to the agreement and continue efforts to roll back Iran’s bad behavior both alone and with partners.

Heavy U.S. involvement in the Middle East over the past two decades has been painful and ugly for the United States and for the region. But it is the devil we know, and so U.S. policymakers have grown accustomed to the costs associated with it. Pulling back, however, is the devil we don’t know, and so everyone instinctively resists this position. It, too, will be painful and ugly for the Middle East, but compared with

staying the course, it will be less so for the United States. It's time for the United States to begin the difficult work of getting out of purgatory.

# **Toward A Smaller, Smarter Force Posture in the Middle East**

**BY MELISSA G. DALTON & MARA E. KARLIN**

**DEFENSE ONE**

**AUGUST 26, 2018**

**The National Defense Strategy's turn toward Russia and China requires the U.S. military to alter its Gulf assets.**

**A meaningful review of U.S. force posture in the Middle East is long overdue.**

**We explored why in the first article in our series for Defense One, noting challenges with Iran, competition with Russia and China, counterterrorism imperatives, and domestic political and budgetary realities. This assessment has only been reinforced by the subsequent release of the Trump Administration's National Defense Strategy, or NDS, with its focus on strategic competition with China and Russia, as well as the administration's hard-line approach to Iran.**

**In our second article, we examined a range of Middle East scenarios and identified four factors to consider when reshaping regional force posture. Now, we offer some recommendations about gradually changing that posture to reflect evolving priorities and challenges.**

**To be clear, the U.S. military will never leave the Middle East. We are not advocating that it do so. However, if Defense Secretary Mattis wants to fulfill the NDS mandate to focus on China and Russia, the U.S. military's posture in the Middle East must get smaller and smarter.**

## **Part 1: It's Long Past Time to Rethink US Military Posture in the Gulf**

## **Part 2: How Should the Pentagon Reshape Its Mideast Posture? Four Indicators to Watch**

**First, the United States must increase the emphasis of non-military tools, which will be vital to enabling regional partners to address long-term challenges of governance, fraying of social contracts, and consolidating counter terrorism and territorial gains into stabilization. Such initiatives will require sustained and accountable funding from both the Department of State and USAID, whose budgets have been slashed in the first two years of the Trump Administration. In addition, the United States has yet to appoint as many as half of its ambassadors to the region. While career foreign, civil, and military service officers can carry forward initiatives quite capably, the absence of the President's representatives in key partner countries limits the political effectiveness of the United States at a time when geopolitical competitors such as Russia and China are deepening their relationships in the region – and ability to broker the posture adjustments we recommend in this article. To this point, the administration must look beyond one commonly used tool – U.S. arms sales – to compete with growing Russian influence in the Middle East; it must strengthen other U.S. diplomatic, economic, intelligence and strategic communication tools that will be critical to enabling a competitive strategy in the region.**

**Second, the United States should gradually reshape its “furniture” in the region – that is, its military bases, assets, and military personnel in the Middle East. This may involve reductions but with an emphasis on smart investments. The goal should be to leave enough for ongoing operations and**

likely potential contingencies, yet assume some risk in less likely scenarios as prescribed by the NDS, which calls for “calculated risk-taking” five times in its unclassified summary. For example, CENTCOM could relax its requirements for a continuously present carrier strike group. Ground forces and strike assets could also be drawn down somewhat. Finally, the proliferation and growth of service and unified command headquarters in the Gulf region should be rolled back through delayering and reducing staff numbers. This last issue will also strengthen U.S. civilian actors in the region by minimizing the viceroy dynamic that has gained steam over the last two decades.

What U.S. forces should remain to deter Iran, counter terrorism, secure access to strategic waterways, and support allies and partners? Important elements include:

- Ballistic missile defense.
- Adaptable naval and marine configurations that provide littoral, amphibious, lift, strike, maritime domain awareness, and maritime security capabilities.
- Special operations and counter terrorism capabilities.
- Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities.
- Logistics and enablers required to perform these functions.

Third, the United States should streamline its military bases in the region. Research by the RAND Corporation has upended a core assumption of the role of bases in securing access for contingencies; a 2014 study found that “the

presence of large permanent bases does not increase the likelihood of securing contingency access.” The array of U.S. bases, primarily situated in the Gulf, that have been sustained and built upon since the 1991 Gulf War, were critical to conducting successive wars in Iraq and remain so for operations in Afghanistan and efforts to fight terrorism and deter Iran. While the latter three missions will remain key features of the U.S. regional approach across a range of possible scenarios, conducting these operations and preparing for the possible crises and contingencies that may emanate from future conflicts do not necessitate keeping all of its current bases “hot” in the region. “Hot” bases are continuously manned, operated, and maintained by the primary force user – in this case the United States – and the host nation. Instead, the United States could shift some of its bases from “hot” to “warm,” primarily operated and maintained by the host country under an agreement that permits U.S. forces to surge there when needed.

The criteria for determining which bases should be hot and warm could be based upon the type of capabilities needed in certain parts of the region, where strong security-cooperation relationships already exist to burden-share capabilities, and calculations of where the United States could assume some risk. One example to consider is Kuwait, where the U.S. military’s long and deep relationship could allow for a transition to warm bases and where a heavy ground-based posture is less relevant for the region’s challenges. Such transitions could be offset by further security cooperation investments to assure critical Gulf partners of U.S. commitment.

Fourth, the United States will need to design a series of mitigation measures to absorb any risks of adjusting its

current force posture. These steps should include increasing prepositioned equipment stocks in the region and deepening security partnerships through tailored and targeted advising, institution building, training, exercises, exchanges, and equipping to enable partners to address common security objectives. Exercises with a number of regional militaries, for example, are useful both strategically—detering Iran, reassuring Gulf partners, and facilitating cooperation among them given frayed political relationships—and operationally in ensuring the U.S. military maintains readiness for future Middle East conflicts, particularly as it focuses increasingly on other regions. Working with allies such as the United Kingdom and France to pool resources, basing, and synchronizing carrier deployments as allied capabilities and regional bases come on line would also help offset changes in U.S. posture. Harnessing opportunities to share resources across U.S. combatant commands also provides efficiencies; CENTCOM already shares ISR resources with AFRICOM. Future sharing with EUCOM, AFRICOM, and INDOPACOM could include maritime and strike capabilities. And while we have focused on posture adjustments, undoubtedly there are changes that could be made in force development, too, such as investments in security force assistance brigades and light attack aircraft.

We do not recommend these adjustments lightly, as threats and challenges persist in the Middle East region. The administration's decision to withdraw the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to curb Iran's nuclear program and seek a more assertive approach to address Iran's destabilizing behavior may trigger escalations that the United States will need to be prepared to address—in close coordination with allies and partners. However, changing

realities of the security environment and U.S. political and budgetary dynamics have prompted deep introspection in the Defense Department. It's time to make gradual adjustments in the CENTCOM theater to reflect it.

Congress should task the Pentagon to consider how to reshape its posture, reporting back through both classified and unclassified, publicly available assessments. These assessments should include an explanation of how DoD plans to apply its global operating model and dynamic force employment concepts outlined in the NDS in the Middle East context and how war plans will necessarily also change with posture adjustments. The region will continue to pose considerable and evolving challenges to U.S. national security. U.S. policymakers should aim to shape U.S. posture to be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to meet requirements in the CENTCOM theater but also in the context of global priorities.

# **It's Long Past Time to Rethink US Military Posture in the Gulf**

**BY MARA E. KARLIN & MELISSA G. DALTON**

**DEFENSE ONE**

**AUGUST 2, 2017**

**The rift between Qatar and other Gulf nations should prompt a long-overdue review of what the Pentagon keeps in the region, and where.**

**A number of U.S. officials, including President Trump and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Florida, have recently suggested that the U.S. military should consider eliminating its military presence in Qatar. Doing so precipitously would be a mistake, and given the strategic, operational, and financial stakes, rather unlikely. But there are other reasons to rethink U.S. military posture in the Middle East for the demands and limitations of the 21st century. Challenges with Iran, competition with Russia and China, counterterrorism imperatives, and domestic political and budgetary realities make a meaningful review long overdue.**

**The crisis between Doha and its Gulf partners, fueled by long-simmering tensions over regional competition, is unlikely to abate any time soon. Gulf disunity is unhelpful for several reasons, including impeding efforts to counter ISIS and Iran. U.S. Central Command has indicated that the political crisis is undermining its ability to conduct long-term planning. At a very practical level, the U.S. military may find its robust presence in Qatar narrowed, which would call into question the parameters of U.S. force posture across the Middle East.**

This presence is centered on al Udeid air base, the U.S. military's largest base in the region. Built in the 1990s with \$1 billion from Qatar — and expanded and improved with \$450 million in U.S. military construction funds since 2003 — al Udeid is home to nearly 10,000 U.S. military personnel and the longest runway in the Gulf. The base supports U.S. Central Command's forward headquarters, the Combined Air and Space Operations Center with representatives from 20 or so nations, and the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing. Qatar also hosts Camp As Sayliyah, where the U.S. Army keeps enough armor for a brigade-sized force in the event of contingencies or crises.

Moving the forces at al Udeid to a new regional home or homes would be difficult for political, operational, and financial reasons. At the political level, limiting the base's operations or moving it would disrupt relations with the Qataris on other regional security priorities and would send a strong signal to other regional allies. As well, in a political environment where the United States may be asking allies and partners to pay more for a strategic relationship, Qatar appears already to be paying its share.

Operationally, losing access at al Udeid would severely impede the command, control, and coordination of air operations against ISIS, as well as U.S. military assistance to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Yemen conflict. And at a purely financial level, finding the money to replace this infrastructure would require significant tradeoffs in an already crowded U.S. defense budget.

The benefits of the current distributed military posture are clear. At the political level, it lowers the U.S. dependency on any one country, since political tensions can affect military

relationships—as the Qatar row illustrates. (Recall as well why U.S. military shifted its major base of operations to Qatar in the first place: domestic political concerns in Saudi Arabia had made it untenable for the Kingdom to continue hosting U.S. forces.) The U.S. military’s dispersal across at least seven countries in the Middle East and over 10 bases in Asia, for example, show countries like Iran and China that in a conflict, they are severely outnumbered by U.S. allies and partners, enhancing deterrence and reassurance. Disaggregated posture allows for operational resiliency, particularly in theaters where adversaries have plenty of missiles that could impede operations at any particular base.

Yet there are also costs to this posture. To date, even substantial U.S. domestic pressures have had a limited effect in forcing the U.S. military to reconsider its presence in a country. Bahrain is the latest example, where the government’s virulent crackdown on its Shi’a population prompted real concerns by some members of the State Department and Congress over both the optics of the U.S. base in Manama and the potential risks to it. Nevertheless, these concerns were overridden by security imperatives, maintaining the political relationship with Saudi Arabia (the dominant power in Bahrain), and operational priorities for counterterrorism and Iran deterrence missions.

To be sure, no U.S. base is irreplaceable, as the U.S. military found in 1992 when Subic Bay and Clark Air Field were closed, the latter by a volcano and the former by the Philippine government’s infighting. And at a minimum, paying for most of this posture out of Overseas Contingency Operating funds is problematic—indeed, the latest budget request estimates that it will cost about \$30 billion annually to maintain forward presence and readiness in the broader

Middle East. But it is also too easy for dependency on access to become inextricably tied to political expectations and commitments to allies and partners.

Beyond the current political crisis in the Gulf, it's far past time to acknowledge that U.S. military posture in the Middle East requires a serious and meaningful review. Realistically, this is mostly likely through Congressional legislation requiring the Defense Department to explore different approaches. Pentagon leadership should welcome this, and proceed with careful considerations for current operations, deterrence, and surge capacity. The result should be options for moving beyond today's ad hoc posture to one that can better secure the interests of the nation

## The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony

### Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy

By Barry R. Posen

Foreign Affairs - March/April 2018

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump vowed to put an end to nation building abroad and mocked U.S. allies as free riders. “America first’ will be the major and overriding theme of my administration,” he declared in a foreign policy speech in April 2016, echoing the language of pre–World War II isolationists. “The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves,” he said—an apparent reference to his earlier suggestion that U.S. allies without nuclear weapons be allowed to acquire them.

Such statements, coupled with his mistrust of free trade and the treaties and institutions that facilitate it, prompted worries from across the political spectrum that under Trump, the United States would turn inward and abandon the leadership role it has played since the end of World War II. “The US is, for now, out of the world order business,” the columnist Robert Kagan wrote days after the election. Since Trump took office, his critics have appeared to feel vindicated. They have seized on his continued complaints about allies and skepticism of unfettered trade to claim that the administration has effectively withdrawn from the world and even adopted a grand strategy of restraint. Some have gone so far as to apply to Trump the most feared epithet in the U.S. foreign policy establishment: “isolationist.”

In fact, Trump is anything but. Although he has indeed laced his speeches with skepticism about Washington's global role, worries that Trump is an isolationist are out of place against the backdrop of the administration's accelerating drumbeat for war with North Korea, its growing confrontation with Iran, and its uptick in combat operations worldwide. Indeed, across the portfolio of hard power, the Trump administration's policies seem, if anything, more ambitious than those of Barack Obama.

Yet Trump has deviated from traditional U.S. grand strategy in one important respect. Since at least the end of the Cold War, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have pursued a grand strategy that scholars have called "liberal hegemony." It was hegemonic in that the United States aimed to be the most powerful state in the world by a wide margin, and it was liberal in that the United States sought to transform the international system into a rules-based order regulated by multilateral institutions and transform other states into market-oriented democracies freely trading with one another. Breaking with his predecessors, Trump has taken much of the "liberal" out of "liberal hegemony." He still seeks to retain the United States' superior economic and military capability and role as security arbiter for most regions of the world, but he has chosen to forgo the export of democracy and abstain from many multilateral trade agreements. In other words, Trump has ushered in an entirely new U.S. grand strategy: illiberal hegemony.

## NO DOVE

Grand strategy is a slippery concept, and for those attempting to divine the Trump administration's, its National Security Strategy—a word salad of a document—yields little insight.

The better way to understand Trump's approach to the world is to look at a year's worth of actual policies. For all the talk of avoiding foreign adventurism and entanglements, in practice, his administration has remained committed to geopolitical competition with the world's greatest military powers and to the formal and informal alliances it inherited. It has threatened new wars to hinder the emergence of new nuclear weapons states, as did its predecessors; it has pursued ongoing wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic State (or ISIS) in Iraq and Syria with more resources and more violence than its predecessors. It has also announced plans to invest even more money in the Department of Defense, the budget of which still outstrips that of all of the United States' competitors' militaries combined.

When it comes to alliances, it may at first glance seem as if Trump has deviated from tradition. As a candidate, he regularly complained about the failure of U.S. allies, especially those in NATO, to share the burden of collective defense. However uninformed these objections were, they were entirely fair; for two decades, the defense contributions of the European states in NATO have fallen short of the alliance's own guidelines. Alliance partisans on both sides of the Atlantic find complaints about burden sharing irksome not only because they ring true but also because they secretly find them unimportant. The actual production of combat power pales in comparison to the political goal of gluing the United States to Europe, no matter what. Thus the handwringing when Trump attended the May 2017 NATO summit and pointedly failed to mention Article 5, the treaty's mutual-defense provision, an omission that suggested that the United

States might not remain the final arbiter of all strategic disputes across Europe.

But Trump backtracked within weeks, and all the while, the United States has continued to go about its ally-reassurance business as if nothing has changed. Few Americans have heard of the European Reassurance Initiative. One would be forgiven for thinking that the nearly 100,000 U.S. troops that remained deployed in Europe after the end of the Cold War would have provided enough reassurance, but after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the allies clamored for still more reassurance, and so was born this new initiative. The ERI is funded not in the regular U.S. defense budget but in the Overseas Contingency Operations appropriation—the “spend whatever it takes without much oversight” fund originally approved by Congress for the global war on terrorism. The ERI has paid for increased U.S. military exercises in eastern Europe, improved military infrastructure across that region, outright gifts of equipment to Ukraine, and new stockpiles of U.S. equipment in Europe adequate to equip a U.S. armored division in case of emergency. At the end of 2017, Washington announced that for the first time, it would sell particularly lethal antitank guided missiles to Ukraine. So far, the U.S. government has spent or planned to spend \$10 billion on the ERI, and in its budget for the 2018 fiscal year, the Trump administration increased the funding by nearly \$1.5 billion. Meanwhile, all the planned new exercises and deployments in eastern Europe are proceeding apace. The U.S. military commitment to NATO remains strong, and the allies are adding just enough new money to their own defense plans to placate the president. In other words, it’s business as usual.

In Asia, the United States appears, if anything, to be more militarily active than it was during the Obama administration, which announced a “pivot” to the region. Trump’s main preoccupation is with the maturation of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program—a focus at odds with his campaign musings about independent nuclear forces for Japan and South Korea. In an effort to freeze and ultimately reverse North Korea’s program, he has threatened the use of military force, saying last September, for example, “The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.” Although it is difficult to tell if Pyongyang takes such threats seriously, Washington’s foreign policy elite certainly does, and many fear that war by accident or design is now much more likely. The Pentagon has backed up these threats with more frequent military maneuvers, including sending long-range strategic bombers on sorties over the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, the administration has tried to put economic pressure on North Korea, attempting to convince China to cut off the flow of critical materials to the country, especially oil.

Across the Pacific, the U.S. Navy continues to sustain a frenetic pace of operations—about 160 bilateral and multilateral exercises per year. In July, the United States conducted the annual Malabar exercise with India and Japan, bringing together aircraft carriers from all three countries for the first time. In November, it assembled an unusual flotilla of three aircraft carriers off the Korean Peninsula during Trump’s visit to Asia. Beginning in May 2017, the navy increased the frequency of its freedom-of-navigation operations, or FONOPs, in which its ships patrol parts of the

South China Sea claimed by China. So busy is the U.S. Navy, in fact, that in 2017 alone, its Seventh Fleet, based in Japan, experienced an unprecedented four ship collisions, one grounding, and one airplane crash.

During his trip to Asia in November, Trump dutifully renewed U.S. security commitments, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan seems to have decided to allow no daylight between him and the president, including on North Korea. Given Trump's litany of complaints about the unfairness of U.S. trade relationships in Asia and his effective ceding of the economic ground rules to China, one might be surprised that U.S. allies in the region are hugging this president so closely. But free security provided by a military superpower is a difficult thing to replace, and managing relations with one that sees the world in more zero-sum economic terms than usual is a small price to pay.

The Trump administration has increased its military activities across the Middle East, too, in ways that should please the critics who lambasted Obama for his arm's-length approach to the region. Trump wasted no time demonstrating his intent to reverse the mistakes of the past. In April 2017, in response to evidence that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, the U.S. Navy launched 59 cruise missiles at the air base where the attack originated. Ironically, Trump was punishing Syria for violating a redline that Obama had drawn and a chemical weapons disarmament agreement that Obama had struck with Syria, both of which Trump pilloried his predecessor for having done. Nevertheless, the point was made: there's a new sheriff in town.

The Trump administration has also accelerated the war against ISIS. This Pentagon does not like to share information

about its activities, but according to its own figures, it appears that the United States sent more troops into Iraq and Syria, and dropped more bombs on those countries, in 2017 than in 2016. In Afghanistan, Trump, despite having mused about the mistakes of nation building during the campaign, has indulged the inexplicable compulsion of U.S. military leaders (“my generals,” in his words) to not only remain in the country but also escalate the war. Thousands of additional U.S. troops have been sent to the country, and U.S. air strikes there have increased to a level not seen since 2012.

Finally, the administration has signaled that it plans to confront Iran more aggressively across the Middle East. Trump himself opposed the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, and his advisers appear eager to push back against the country, as well. In December, for example, Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, stood in front of debris from what she claimed was an Iranian missile and alleged that Tehran was arming rebels in Yemen, where Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a proxy war. Behind the scenes, the Trump administration seems to have been at least as supportive of the Saudi intervention in Yemen as was its predecessor. The Obama administration lent its support to the Saudis in order to buy their cooperation on the Iran deal, and given that Trump despises that agreement, his backing of the Saudis can be understood only as an anti-Iran effort. Barring a war with North Korea—and the vortex of policy attention and military resources that conflict would create—it seems likely that more confrontation with Iran is in the United States’ future.

The Trump administration’s defense budget also suggests a continued commitment to the idea of the United States as the world’s policeman. Trump ran for office on the proposition that, as he put it on Twitter, “I will make our Military so big,

powerful & strong that no one will mess with us.” Once in office, he rolled out a defense budget that comes in at roughly 20 percent more than the 2017 one; about half the increase was requested by the administration, and the other half was added by Congress. (The fate of this budget is unclear: under the Budget Control Act, these increases require the support of the Democrats, which the Republicans will need to buy with increased spending on domestic programs.) To take but one small example of its appetite for new spending, the administration has ramped up the acquisition of precision-guided munitions by more than 40 percent from 2016, a move that is consistent with the president’s oft-stated intention to wage current military campaigns more intensively (as well as with an expectation of imminent future wars).

Trump also remains committed to the trillion-dollar nuclear modernization program begun by the Obama administration. This program renews every leg of the nuclear triad—missiles, bombers, and submarines. It is based on the Cold War—era assumption that in order to credibly deter attacks against allies, U.S. nuclear forces must have the ability to limit the damage of a full-scale nuclear attack, meaning the United States needs to be able to shoot first and destroy an adversary’s entire nuclear arsenal before its missiles launch. Although efforts at damage limitation are seductive, against peer nuclear powers, they are futile, since only a few of an enemy’s nuclear weapons need to survive in order to do egregious damage to the United States in retaliation. In the best case, the modernization program is merely a waste of money, since all it does is compel U.S. competitors to modernize their own forces to ensure their ability to retaliate; in the worst case, it causes adversaries to develop itchy trigger fingers themselves, raising the risk that a crisis will escalate to

nuclear war. If Trump were truly committed to America first, he would think a bit harder about the costs and risks of this strategy.

## PRIMACY WITHOUT A PURPOSE

Hegemony is always difficult to achieve, because most states jealously guard their sovereignty and resist being told what to do. But since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. foreign policy elite has reached the consensus that liberal hegemony is different. This type of dominance, they argue, is, with the right combination of hard and soft power, both achievable and sustainable. International security and economic institutions, free trade, human rights, and the spread of democracy are not only values in their own right, the logic goes; they also serve to lure others to the cause. If realized, these goals would do more than legitimate the project of a U.S.-led liberal world order; they would produce a world so consonant with U.S. values and interests that the United States would not even need to work that hard to ensure its security.

Trump has abandoned this well-worn path. He has denigrated international economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, which make nice scapegoats for the disruptive economic changes that have energized his political base. He has abandoned the Paris climate agreement, partly because he says it disadvantages the United States economically. Not confident that Washington can sufficiently dominate international institutions to ensure its interests, the president has withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, launched a combative renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and let the Transatlantic Trade and Investment

Partnership wither on the vine. In lieu of such agreements, Trump has declared a preference for bilateral trade arrangements, which he contends are easier to audit and enforce.

Pointing out that recent U.S. efforts to build democracy abroad have been costly and unsuccessful, Trump has also jettisoned democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal, aside from some stray tweets in support of anti-regime protesters in Iran. So far as one can tell, he cares not one whit about the liberal transformation of other societies. In Afghanistan, for example, his strategy counts not on perfecting the Afghan government but on bludgeoning the Taliban into negotiating (leaving vague what exactly the Taliban would negotiate). More generally, Trump has often praised foreign dictators, from Vladimir Putin of Russia to Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. His plans for more restrictive immigration and refugee policies, motivated in part by fears about terrorism, have skated uncomfortably close to outright bigotry. His grand strategy is primacy without a purpose.

Such lack of concern for the kinder, gentler part of the American hegemonic project infuriates its latter-day defenders. Commenting on the absence of liberal elements in Trump's National Security Strategy, Susan Rice, who was national security adviser in the Obama administration, wrote in December, "These omissions undercut global perceptions of American leadership; worse, they hinder our ability to rally the world to our cause when we blithely dismiss the aspirations of others."

But whether that view is correct or not should be a matter of debate, not a matter of faith. States have long sought to legitimate their foreign policies, because even grudging

cooperation from others is less costly than mild resistance. But in the case of the United States, the liberal gloss does not appear to have made hegemony all that easy to achieve or sustain. For nearly 30 years, the United States tested the hypothesis that the liberal character of its hegemonic project made it uniquely achievable. The results suggest that the experiment failed.

Neither China nor Russia has become a democracy, nor do they show any sign of moving in that direction. Both are building the military power necessary to compete with the United States, and both have neglected to sign up for the U.S.-led liberal world order. At great cost, Washington has failed to build stable democratic governments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Within NATO, a supposed guardian of democracy, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey are turning increasingly authoritarian. The European Union, the principal liberal institutional progeny of the U.S. victory in the Cold War, has suffered the loss of the United Kingdom, and other member states flaunt its rules, as Poland has done regarding its standards on the independence of the judiciary. A new wave of identity politics—nationalist, sectarian, racist, or otherwise—has swept not only the developing world but also the developed world, including the United States. Internationally and domestically, liberal hegemony has failed to deliver.

## WHAT RESTRAINT LOOKS LIKE

None of this should be taken as an endorsement of Trump's national security policy. The administration is overcommitted militarily; it is cavalier about the threat of force; it has no strategic priorities whatsoever; it has no actual plan to ensure more equitable burden sharing among U.S. allies; under the guise of counterterrorism, it intends to remain deeply

involved militarily in the internal affairs of other countries; and it is dropping too many bombs, in too many places, on too many people. These errors will likely produce the same pattern of poor results at home and abroad that the United States has experienced since the end of the Cold War.

If Trump really wanted to follow through on some of his campaign musings, he would pursue a much more focused engagement with the world's security problems. A grand strategy of restraint, as I and other scholars have called this approach, starts from the premise that the United States is a very secure country and asks what few things could jeopardize that security. It then recommends narrow policies to address those potential threats.

In practice, restraint would mean pursuing a cautious balance-of-power strategy in Asia to ensure that China does not find a way to dominate the region—retaining command of the sea to keep China from coercing its neighbors or preventing Washington from reinforcing them, while acknowledging China's fears and, instead of surrounding it with U.S. forces, getting U.S. allies to do more for their own defense. It would mean sharing best practices with other nuclear powers across the globe to prevent their nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of nonstate actors. And it would mean cooperating with other countries, especially in the intelligence realm, to limit the ability of nihilistic terrorists to carry out spectacular acts of destruction. The United States still faces all these threats, only with the added complication of doing so in a world in which its relative power position has slipped. Thus, it is essential that U.S. allies, especially rich ones such as those in Europe, share more of the burden, so that the United States can focus its own power on the main threats. For example, the Europeans should build most of the

military power to deter Russia, so that the United States can better concentrate its resources to sustain command of the global commons—the sea, the air, and space.

Those who subscribe to restraint also believe that military power is expensive to maintain, more expensive to use, and generally delivers only crude results; thus, it should be used sparingly. They tend to favor free trade but reject the notion that U.S. trade would suffer mightily if the U.S. military were less active. They take seriously the problem of identity politics, especially nationalism, and therefore do not expect other peoples to welcome U.S. efforts to transform their societies, especially at gunpoint. Thus, other than those activities that aim to preserve the United States' command of the sea, restraint's advocates find little merit in Trump's foreign policy; it is decidedly unrestrained.

During the campaign, Trump tore into the United States' post-Cold War grand strategy. "As time went on, our foreign policy began to make less and less sense," he said. "Logic was replaced with foolishness and arrogance, which led to one foreign policy disaster after another." Many thought such criticisms might herald a new period of retrenchment. Although the Trump administration has pared or abandoned many of the pillars of liberal internationalism, its security policy has remained consistently hegemonic. Whether illiberal hegemony will prove any more or any less sustainable than its liberal cousin remains an open question. The foreign policy establishment continues to avoid the main question: Is U.S. hegemony of any kind sustainable, and if not, what policy should replace it? Trump turns out to be as good at avoiding that question as those he has condemned.