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The Politics of Restraint in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT: Domestic constraints make it difficult for the United States to pursue a coherent program of restraint in the Middle East. As events in Gaza revive debates about the appropriate size and scope of the military footprint in the region, this article shows the importance of grounding any revised posture on a firm domestic foundation. Going beyond accounts that blame the obstructionism of a foreign policy establishment, it explores barriers to strategic adjustment and supports its claims through a case study of the Obama administration's record, drawn from relevant literature, data on the distribution of military capabilities, and interviews with senior officials.

Keywords: Middle East, restraint, public opinion, domestic politics, polarization, civil-military relations

The Israel-Hamas War of 2023 has reignited a debate over the appropriate size and scope of US commitment to the Middle East. Until recently, the notion that blood and treasure have been invested disproportionately in a region of declining strategic importance had been emerging as the new conventional wisdom. For some, the events in Gaza offer definitive proof that it is an “illusion” or “myth” to suggest the United States can pull back without leaving chaos in its wake.¹ Others fear the Biden-Harris administration's response to the current crisis could herald a return to the “bad habits” of past policies and bloated force postures that increase the chances of the United States entering costly regional conflicts where it has few interests at stake.² Few, however, would contest that existing policies toward the region (and the assumptions underlying their development) are ripe for reassessment.

This important debate rests on a shaky assumption. In prosecuting the case for change, few commentators have seriously considered whether any administration *could* embark on a more fundamental course correction than we have seen to date, even if it wanted to. Without fully understanding the constraints on strategic adjustment, realistic assessments of the prospects for change will remain mired in what one scholar has called “a somewhat

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confused mixture of normative recommendations and questionable empirical assertions.”³

Successive administrations have found it difficult to do less in the Middle East because of a series of powerful domestic checks on a program of restraint. Going beyond accounts that ignore the role of domestic determinants of grand strategy or attribute the challenges narrowly to the obstructionism of a foreign policy establishment, and drawing on insights from political-science studies, this article sheds light on the broader and more nuanced ways public opinion, electoral pressures, and civil-military relations constrain attempts to right-size strategy.⁴ Illustrated by evidence from the Obama administration, this argument responds to and amplifies recent calls for grand-strategy scholars to take the role of variables below the level of relative power and national resources more seriously.⁵

This argument will begin with a brief survey of the case for doing less in the Middle East, followed by an assessment of the degree to which the Obama administration embraced the logic of restraint, an outline of three pathways through which domestic pressures constrain strategic adjustment, and a discussion of the policy implications of these findings.

The Case for “Doing Less”

The past three American presidential administrations have sought to divert resources and attention away from the Middle East and toward other geopolitical priorities, notably those in Asia. For the purposes of this study, I define the Middle East broadly to comprise those states within the area of responsibility (AOR) of US Central Command (CENTCOM). This exercise in strategic adjustment aligns with the assessment of a growing number of scholars and policymakers that Washington’s commitment to the region is lopsided relative to the range and significance of US interests at stake.⁶ Historically, these interests have been anchored in three core tasks—ensuring the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf; guaranteeing the security of Israel; and preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon. Over time, additional interests have been added to this list, such as promoting democracy, tackling Islamist extremism, and limiting nuclear proliferation.

Advocates of a more restrained grand strategy are among the most committed proponents of the case for doing less in the region.⁷ For them, recent US involvement in the Middle East serves as a case study of the ills of a strategic approach they refer to as *liberal hegemony* or *primacy*.

Through that lens, efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and other liberal values in Iraq and Syria (and Libya) are judged as ineffective and counterproductive attempts to remake other societies in the image of the United States. Elsewhere, the seemingly unconditional support granted to countries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel undermines the ability of the United States to mediate regional disputes effectively and apply meaningful leverage in the conflict behavior of allies. While terrorism and proliferation remain real problems, restrainers believe there are limits to how much the United States can do to address them using military instruments; instead, restrainers prefer pursuing diplomatic and other nonmilitary solutions.

Restrainers are not isolationists. They generally concede that the United States should maintain a favorable balance of power in the Persian Gulf. Still, they are skeptical of the utility of force postures in which that balance is preserved through the forward deployment of significant numbers of troops. Instead, they point to the historical record of successful retrenchment attempts, which generally involve reducing the scope of overseas commitments.⁸ Most favor some form of offshore balancing, whereby local allies shoulder a greater proportion of the burden to ensure no single power dominates the region. Implicit in this prescription, too, is an assessment of the strategic threat posed by Iran as relatively modest. While Tehran has undoubtedly engaged in destabilizing activities across the region, its principal threat to the United States manifests in its capacity to disrupt the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. In turn, the enhanced resilience of the hydrocarbon market, coupled with increased domestic production through fracking practices, has insulated the United States from price fluctuations that might result. Many analysts suggest the risks to energy supply routes can be managed through an over-the-horizon posture that relies on intelligence and patrols by local forces and unmanned systems or, at most, a skeleton deployment of logistics and tactical airpower units.⁹

Prescriptions for a *sufficiently* restrained commitment vary. Some call for a complete withdrawal and abandonment of the region. Others recommend maintaining a residual forward presence, albeit downsized and consolidated across fewer bases and installations. It suffices here to recognize that a consensus exists on the primary direction of this debate: a more restrained strategy does less with less. In other words, advocates of restraint favor curtailing the ends, ways, and means of America's commitments in the Middle East. We can usefully think about the degree to which a given administration embraced the logic of restraint in terms of the extent to which it (1) redefined

a more limited range of core interests, (2) reduced its reliance on military intervention when addressing threats to those interests, and (3) retrenched the overall military presence in the region.

The Obama Administration's Attempt to Rebalance

Barack Obama came into office intending to embark on at least some degree of strategic adjustment. His opposition to the “dumb war” in Iraq contributed to his emergence as a national political figure and subsequent electoral victory when he made clear his intention to focus on “nation-building at home” after years of overextension in the Middle East. Scholars have complained, however, that Obama’s policies represented more continuity than change, while restrainers argued that his record was one of “judicious trimming, not retrenchment.”¹⁰ To what extent does the historical record reflect these assessments?

Redefining Interests

A retrospective look at Obama’s actual Middle East policy statements reveals that his objectives hardly lacked ambition. In a 2009 Cairo speech, Obama reaffirmed the US commitment to fight violent extremism, foster peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict, counter nuclear proliferation and promote democracy, religious freedom, and women’s rights across the region. His administration formally embedded these interests in the 2010 *National Security Strategy*.¹¹ As the Arab Spring swept across the region, Obama used a May 2011 speech to clarify US support for political and economic reform in the region “is not a secondary interest” before indicating support for regime change in Syria.¹²

While Obama would subsequently receive criticism for his limited belief in the ability of US power to bring about these changes, it is important to note that the loftiness of his administration’s goals was not the principal source of frustration for those charged with turning them into action on the ground. As David Petraeus, who served as CENTCOM commander during this period, told me, “the administration repeatedly fell into the trap of very expansive rhetoric in speeches, but then hesitated to actually take the actions that the rhetoric led folks to believe would logically follow.”¹³ The ends of policy therefore remained expansive.

Reducing Military Interventionism

On the one hand, it seems axiomatic that Obama favored a less militarized role for the United States in the Middle East. He did, after all, order an end to the combat phase of the Iraq War and invested considerable energy in fostering diplomatic solutions to problems such as nuclear proliferation, yielding the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. His preference for “light footprint” approaches to countering terrorism may also be indicative of a desire to reduce the traditional US reliance on military instruments, as part of a perception that “the strategy that was crafted in Washington didn’t always match up with the actual threats that were out there.”¹⁴

On the other hand, the vast expansion in the scope of military activities and frequency with which force was used mitigated any judgment that Obama had fully embraced the logic of restraint. Reasonable observers can and do disagree on the wisdom of Obama’s response to the Middle East’s complex international, regional, and local politics that consumed 80 percent of National Security Council meeting time by 2015.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the administration’s record of military intervention was more substantial than anticipated. Between his “surge” in Afghanistan, support for regime change in Syria (and Libya), a campaign of airstrikes and support for proxies in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and continued arms sales that effectively underwrote Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, the Obama administration actively participated in these developments. In Obama’s final year in office, the United States dropped at least 24,287 bombs on two countries alone.¹⁶ As one observer wryly said, “None of this has the smell of a country that is looking to leave the Middle East.”¹⁷

Retrenching Military Presence

Finally, available data on the distribution of troop numbers indicates the extent to which Obama aligned the means of US policy with the logic of restraint.¹⁸ Figure 1 illustrates the number of active-duty personnel deployed to countries in the CENTCOM AOR in which at least 1,000 troops were stationed. When measured in these terms, Obama oversaw a significant reduction of the US military footprint. In 2009, Obama’s first year in office, 167,000 troops were stationed across these ten countries. By Obama’s final year in office in 2016, this figure totaled 32,000—a more than 80 percent reduction.

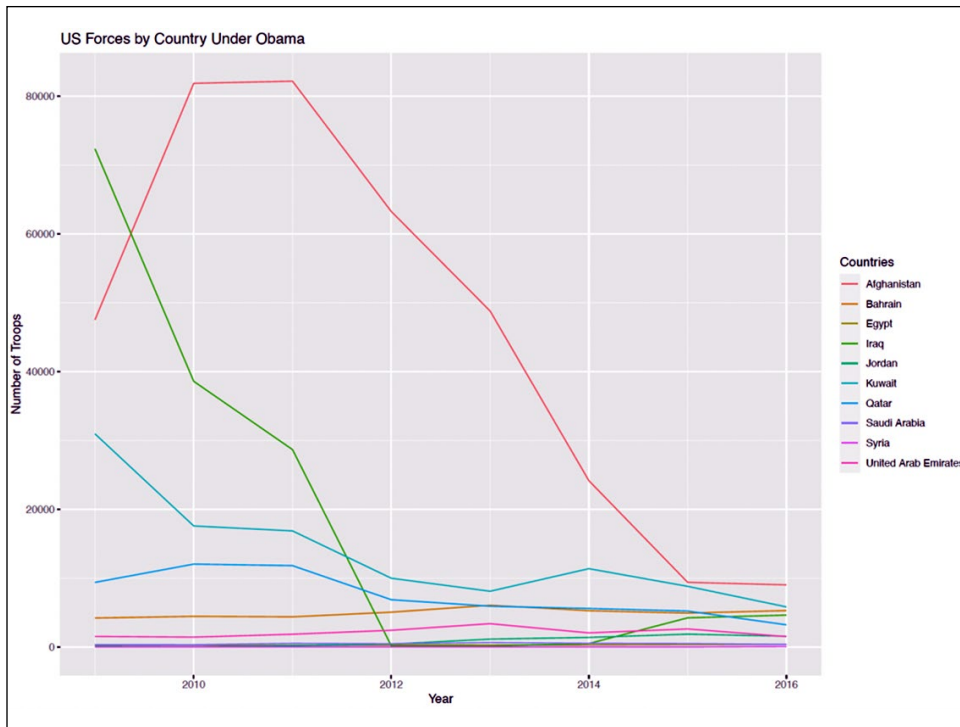


Figure 1. Total US force levels in CENTCOM AOR, 2009–16

(Source: Michael A. Allen, Michael E. Flynn, and Carla Martinez Machain, “Global U.S. Military Deployment Data: 1950–2020,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 3 (July 2021): 351–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07388942211030885>.)

Even this significantly reduced overseas presence dwarfs that of the pre-9/11 era. Figure 2, depicting troop levels in the same countries between 1980–2020, shows Obama’s retrenchment from a historical perspective. With the brief exception of Operation Desert Shield, US force levels never approached the Obama-era presence in the two decades prior to 2000 and have held steady. This data is also likely an *underestimation* since it does not include National Guard and National Reserve deployments, which comprised a significant portion of the overall force composition during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Department of Defense data shows overall personnel levels increase by 36 percent from 2009–16 when these deployments are added alongside civilian personnel stationed in the region.¹⁹

Depicted this way, the effect of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is clear. To be sure, deployments elsewhere in the region were often inextricably linked to changing support requirements, pre-positioning, and redeployment patterns in those conflict theaters. A more granular single-country focus thus sheds further light on the scale of the permanent overseas presence the Obama administration left in place, even as it sought to wind

down those principal combat operations. In Obama's final year in office—five years after the end of the Iraq War and two years after the combat mission in Afghanistan finished—there were still more than 20,000 troops stationed across Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, the three states hosting the forward service headquarters.²⁰

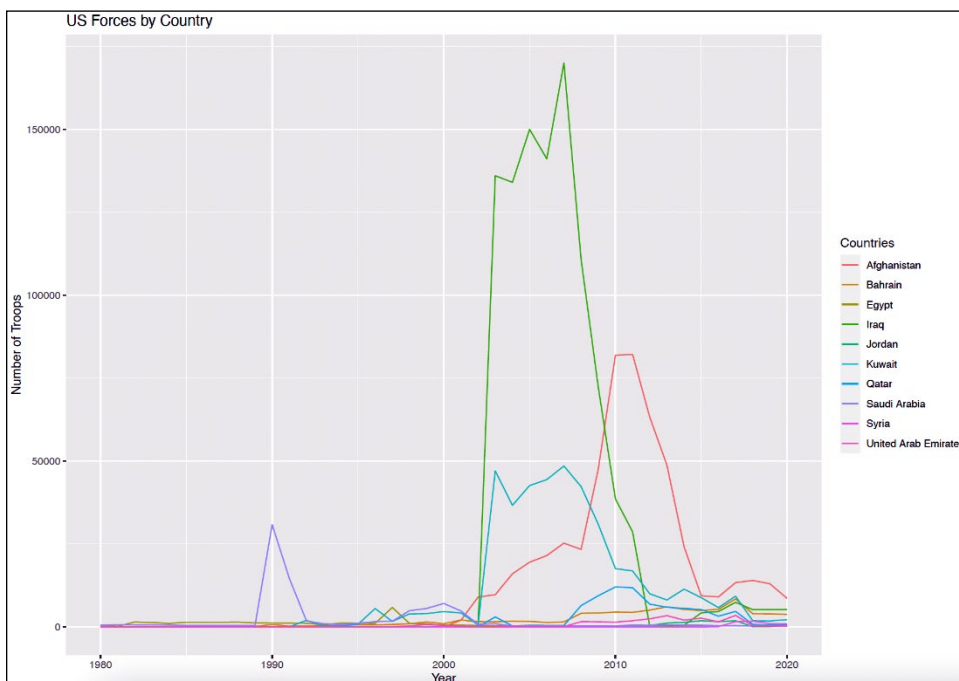


Figure 2. Total US force levels in CENTCOM AOR, 1980–2020
(Source: Allen, Flynn, and Machain, “Deployment Data.”)

To sustain its forward presence, the United States maintains or has access to a sprawling network of bases and military facilities across the region. While well-documented diplomatic and legal agreements cover the largest and oldest bases, the United States has also repurposed preexisting facilities and established temporary structures to support ongoing combat missions without formally disclosing locations. Ambiguity as to what constitutes a “US” facility further muddies the water, since US forces often use many ports, airfields, and other structures that retain civilian and commercial capacities. Nevertheless, the information released by the Department of Defense tells the story: one of a significant physical infrastructure that expanded to meet the needs of the war on terror and has since proven remarkably sticky.²¹

A Mixed Record

Taken together, Obama's Middle East policies resemble a middle ground between his overstretched inheritance and the prescriptions of restraint scholars. Exemplified in the president's unofficial doctrine—"don't do stupid [expletive deleted]"—his strategy has been described as selective engagement or liberal internationalism lite.²² In other words, Obama reduced the costs of the means of the existing strategy but failed to alter the ends fundamentally. In doing so, he left the underlying overseas presence that made it easy to fall back on militarized responses when regional events invited further US intervention. It is, therefore, difficult to categorize Obama's record as a victory for the supporters of restraint in the Middle East. "Adjustments might be in the offing," recalled Andrew Bacevich, "but the United States military was not coming home."²³

Domestic Constraints on Restraint

This section draws on studies of public opinion, foreign policy decision making, and civil-military relations to illustrate how domestic constraints can explain the partial nature of Obama's embrace of restraint. It makes the three following key claims.

1. Public opinion is permissive of expansive strategic commitments.

The first domestic hurdle operates at the level of mass public opinion, where polls reveal a degree of dissonance between the public's growing disillusionment with military primacy and its residual preoccupation with a range of threats emanating from the Middle East.

On the one hand, opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to widespread skepticism of the utility of large-scale military interventions and strong support for global diplomatic engagement. Recent polls show that most voters do not support an increase in defense spending and would prefer to decrease the number of troops stationed across the world.²⁴ On the other hand, the public also routinely expresses concern about a wide variety of security challenges in the region, often conveying substantial—if declining—support for the use of force to address them. Taken together, these dynamics reduce the political space available for elected officials to embrace a fuller measure of proposals for retrenchment prescribed by advocates of restraint.

Polls conducted during the Obama administration illustrate the residual comfort with the expansive nature of strategic priorities in the Middle East that many Americans feel. A survey conducted in 2012—*after* the withdrawal

from Iraq and *before* the emergence of the Islamic State—revealed that 73 percent of respondents considered the region to represent the most significant source of future threats to US security. International terrorism topped the list of concerns, with majorities in favor of the use of military tools to address this threat. Fifty-three percent supported the use of troops to ensure the oil supply.²⁵ Under Obama, Iran topped Gallup's list of countries Americans considered to be the greatest enemy of the United States more times than any other state.²⁶ Solid majorities favored increasing or maintaining economic aid to Israel, with a poll taken shortly after Obama left office finding as many as 73 percent supported US military backing of Israel.²⁷ More generally, 42 percent of respondents in 2012 thought maintaining US military superiority was very effective in achieving US foreign-policy goals—more than double the proportion who felt similarly about nonmilitary instruments. About 61 percent favored maintaining or increasing the number of US-operated bases overseas.²⁸ In short, voters might not favor “endless war,” but they still have a long “to-do” list—one that would require elected officials to maintain a considerable investment of military resources in the region.

Some of the dissonance described above may be explained by the limitations of aggregated polling data. Surveys capture only a snapshot of public sentiment. Moreover, the conventional wisdom that voters tend to know little—and care less—about foreign policy contains a kernel of truth. The preferences expressed above may therefore be weak or latent, revealed to pollsters only when prompted, and otherwise not of daily concern. Experimental work consistently demonstrates, however, that public opinion is not as irrational and incoherent as was once assumed. Experts now generally agree that citizens rely on cues from political elites and social peers when forming judgments about a given foreign-policy issue.²⁹ Public attitudes, as expressed in polls, must therefore be understood in the context of the partisan identities and broader foreign-policy dispositions from which they spring.

A closer inspection of the data reveals sharp partisan divides in public attitudes. During the Obama administration, Republicans were more supportive than Democrats of keeping troops in Afghanistan, addressing terrorist threats with military tools, and intervening militarily in Syria and even Iran.³⁰ In theory, this divide might have provided the president an opportunity to reduce the military footprint further. Since liberal-minded citizens tend to be more concerned about casualties than conservatives, a Democratic president might be able to rely on sympathetic co-partisans for political insulation when pursuing extraction from conflicts overseas.³¹ As the association between restraint and the Republican party during the Trump administration has demonstrated, however, the apparent ownership

of a particular foreign-policy posture by one side of the political aisle may be a double-edged sword.³² Precisely because voters tend to support their own party's policies and instinctively oppose those of the other party, it is difficult for any president to embark on a major strategic overhaul that can survive the next electoral cycle. The partisan roots of public attitudes may therefore make the pursuit of more restrained policies more difficult over the longer term.

We also know there is a "hawk's advantage" at the ballot box, whereby voters favor candidates who espouse policies that cultivate an image of strong leadership, *even if* those policies are more hawkish than what voters want.³³ This explains why candidates who appear likely to increase defense spending enjoy an electoral advantage, despite most voters not actually supporting the raising of defense expenditures.³⁴

Studies also show that while the average voter may generally pay little attention to far-off events in distant lands, preferring to delegate foreign policy to elites, this "rational ignorance" can be interrupted by events that "activate" public attention.³⁵ Shocking acts that are perceived to threaten cherished values or spark moral outrage are particularly significant means of awakening voters to foreign policy issues. The severity and frequency of these traumatic events in the Middle East have, in turn, generated and sustained a strategic narrative in which elected officials must appear to "do something" to avoid suffering a domestic political penalty for appearing "weak."³⁶

In this context Obama's counterterrorism policies centering on drone warfare and targeted assassination can be best understood. Although Obama doubted the utility of military force in addressing the root causes of terrorism, he routinely signed off on security agencies' "kill lists," attuned to advisers' warnings that a "new, liberal president couldn't afford to look soft on terrorism."³⁷ When Islamic State forces murdered journalists in 2014, Obama again found himself out of step with the public mood and adjusted accordingly. Although he privately bemoaned the inflation of the terrorist threat, citing the higher probability of being injured by slipping in a bathtub, Obama felt the pressure of what one adviser called "the Fox News bullhorn, which depicted the world as a raging inferno that demanded more bombs and tough talk."³⁸ The president's subsequent use of airpower, special operations forces, and local proxies scratched the interventionist itch of an otherwise war-weary public. As Obama left office, a massive 82 percent of Americans supported continued US involvement in the counter-ISIS campaign, despite just 26 percent believing the United States and its allies were winning.³⁹

It is not all bad news for restrainers. Public opinion is malleable, with citizens relying at least in part on cues from the elite when coming to judgments. Advocates of restraint can, therefore, try to lead the public toward such an agenda.⁴⁰ Battle in the court of public opinion will be difficult; under Obama, a bipartisan consensus in favor of liberal internationalism among foreign-policy opinion leaders persisted.⁴¹ The polling data above might be interpreted as a sign of their rhetorical success. Still, others have noted the considerable restraint constituency to which pro-restraint voices might appeal, and the electoral salience of the “endless war” label in recent years indicates that central elements of that agenda can attract mass support.⁴² The challenge here is that it is easier to mobilize public opposition to protracted and costly conflicts in which the concept of victory is elusive than to educate voters about the benefits of alternative force postures—issues familiar to defense intellectuals and military practitioners but not well known to the wider public.

2. For elected officials, the status quo offers the path of least political risk.

Although foreign policy rarely decides electoral outcomes, some research indicates that decisions involving the commitment of military force are important exceptions to this conventional wisdom—especially during ongoing wars.⁴³ Public perceptions of presidential policies can meaningfully shape voting patterns and turnout.⁴⁴ Elected officials’ decision making about military and diplomatic strategy must, therefore, balance the national interest with their own political interest. Not all presidents weigh these competing preferences equally, but as professional politicians, they understand that failure to manage the political risks of foreign-policy commitments can weaken their ability to pursue their preferred policies. Lyndon Johnson captured this dynamic perfectly in a comment to an adviser in 1963. “I’d hate like hell,” he said, “to be such a statesman that I didn’t get elected.”⁴⁵ This dilemma has several implications for the prospects of pursuing more restrained policies in the Middle East.

First, at the presidential level, political constraints encourage commanders in chief to perpetuate US involvement in wars as an exercise in blame avoidance. While leaders who inherit wars may be less “culpable” for their outcomes than their predecessors, they may still be vulnerable to partisan charges of “bungling” the conflict or “selling out” to reach a suboptimal outcome.⁴⁶ As a result, even those firmly convinced victory is unattainable may end up prolonging or escalating a conflict to mitigate the domestic political consequences of admitting defeat.

This quandary could explain Obama's slower-than-expected drawdown in Iraq, whereby the administration left tens of thousands of troops stationed in theater for more than a year beyond the end of the combat phase in mid-2010. Former US Ambassador James Jeffrey, who played a key role in subsequent negotiations to keep troops on even longer, told me Obama's appetite for a prolonged commitment represented "an insurance policy against a return to chaos." With his reelection bid on the horizon, Obama wished to avoid the fate of predecessors (whose presidencies were blown up by foreign policy crises) and believed a residual troop presence "might be able to fix something that starts going wrong."⁴⁷

Second, elected decisionmakers face incentives to embrace military strategies and tools that enable them to satisfy the public's demand to do something about threats without incurring the political costs associated with large commitments of boots on the ground. By relying on technology over manpower, presidents can redistribute the costs of using force away from the average voter, thereby mitigating domestic constraints.⁴⁸ At some level, this "light footprint" approach might be considered consistent with a broader strategy of restraint since it requires a reduced investment of military resources. In practice, however, few of these capabilities negate the forward deployment of at least some supporting capabilities. More importantly, policymakers may feel more tempted to use force if the available tools are cheaper and less politically controversial—a dynamic that cuts against the basic thrust of a more restrained approach.

Obama's embrace of drone warfare and doctrinal pivot from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism to wage the broader war on terrorism is paradigmatic of these dynamics. John Brennan explains, "By definition counterterrorism involves less commitment of resources, personnel on the ground, a real presence, than a counterinsurgency," adding that this situation "was in keeping with what President Obama campaigned for, in terms of reducing our engagement in these foreign wars and trying to extricate ourselves."⁴⁹ Not everyone agrees. Petraeus, Brennan's predecessor as CIA director, told me the idea that counterterrorism operations are less dependent on ground forces "by definition" amounts to "an exercise in redefining doctrinal definitions so that they fit the desired amount of commitment."⁵⁰ Even Brennan concedes that some in the administration "had an inflated view about the ability to replace an on the ground presence with a more technical capability, such as drones." As he told me, "It's not just a drone in a box . . . there is a tremendous, *tremendous* upstream capability you need." Additionally, since local forces in places like Iraq could not carry

out these operations, “an American presence on the ground was critically important in order to be able to have the infrastructure, the hardware, and the capabilities that are necessary.”⁵¹ Beyond Iraq, Obama’s vast expansion of the use of armed drones for counterterrorism missions in non-battlefield settings—a policy explicitly described to the American people as a means of addressing the threat in a relatively precise and less costly manner—now stands as a legacy of military interventionism that is central to the restraint school’s critique of US policy in the Middle East.

Third, in a polarized environment, legislative-branch representatives have weak incentives to assist any sustained process of strategic adjustment. Members of both parties have moved toward ideological extremes and increasingly distrust the other side. As a result, from a political perspective, it pays to criticize the other side’s initiatives. It is easy to exaggerate the extent to which foreign policy founders on the rocks of political discord. Democrats and Republicans have always proven capable of coming together to support some policies despite irreconcilable differences elsewhere. Partisan bickering is thus a feature of the US political system, not a bug.⁵² Unlike grudging cooperation on specific issues, however, obtaining alignment long enough to redirect and sustain a national effort is very difficult. As others have emphasized, the political system offers a weak foundation upon which *new or prolonged* international commitments are difficult to build and sustain. So, too, does the absence of a bipartisan compact inhibit attempts to do less. For strategic adjustment, the perils of polarization run both ways.

During the Obama administration, majority leader Mitch McConnell said the quiet part out loud when he declared that “the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.”⁵³ More interested in political tribalism and point-scoring than the exercise of meaningful oversight, Obama’s critics used “apology tour” and “Benghazi” as bywords for the supposed incompetence of the administration’s Middle East policies in a manner almost entirely disconnected from those policies’ substance. These dynamics also help explain the legislative branch’s lack of appetite to claw back its traditional war powers by challenging the president’s reliance on the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. Obama’s decision to put intervention in Syria to a congressional vote in 2013 was the exception to the rule of Congress lacking interest in exercising meaningful oversight of the executive branch’s frequent resort to military force in the Middle East.⁵⁴ When the administration sought to negotiate a diplomatic route out of cyclical hostility with Iran, legislators’ reluctance to cross the political

aisle led the president to pursue an executive agreement—rather than a legally binding treaty—making it relatively easy for Donald Trump to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal later.⁵⁵

3. Senior military officers can be powerful bureaucratic roadblocks to retrenchment.

The military should not constrain a president's decision to do less in the Middle East. Under the constitutional principle of civilian control, commanders in chief should be able to order the military to carry out any lawful policy they choose, irrespective of its strategic merits. They have the "right to be wrong."⁵⁶

In reality, however, senior officers operate as an important group of foreign-policy elites with whom the president must bargain to manage the politics of national security.⁵⁷ This group can evade civilian authority and increase the amount of political capital required for the president to be able to pursue the administration's preferred policies. They may achieve these goals by issuing direct public appeals challenging the wisdom of a policy with which they disagree. They can mobilize public opposition indirectly, relying on allies in Congress or retired military elites to exact a political price for proceeding with a course of action they deem unwise.⁵⁸ They can also register their objections through bureaucratic means by framing courses of action and obstructing the implementation of orders to force the president to adopt the military's preferred option.

While a president can punish any behavior that amounts to shirking, overruling recalcitrant generals carries potentially grave political risks. Societal attitudes toward the military are such that the revelation of any significant disagreement may trigger a backlash, even when the military remains apolitical and works. This dynamic is rooted in the extraordinary level of public confidence in the military, which sees senior officers as more credible cue-givers on the wisdom of a policy than civilian leaders.⁵⁹ Recent surveys confirm that the public wants elected officials to defer to the military's judgment of the military in a manner that is inimical to civilian control.⁶⁰ As former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Cartwright put it, "The country spends all this time saying how wonderful the military is, so politically it's very difficult to criticize them."⁶¹

While there is no reason to believe the military is automatically opposed to restraint, the sheer size of CENTCOM and its responsibilities

for advising on force posture in the region ensure that senior officers engaging in these debates carry immense bureaucratic heft. Under Obama, these dynamics can be observed most clearly in the interactions between the White House and the four-star generals in charge of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who repeatedly pressed the administration to maintain or increase its commitment to those theaters. The civil-military drama of the Afghan “surge” has been well documented, with White House sources complaining that the president had been “boxed in” by a slew of senior generals’ on-the-record comments in the press advocating for more troops. Obama later wrote of his concern that “an entire agency under my charge was working its own agenda” through seemingly routine leaks. The episode illustrated to the president “just how accustomed the military had become to getting whatever it wanted” thanks in part to the fact that the public “saw the military as more competent and trustworthy than the civilians who were supposed to make policy.”⁶² Similar dynamics operated in the debate over the pace and finality of a drawdown in Iraq.⁶³

Conclusion

The Obama administration fell short of fundamentally altering the military foundations of US commitment to the Middle East. While the president and his critics in the restraint school may agree that the foreign-policy establishment’s status quo bias influenced this outcome, the argument presented here demonstrates that the pathways through which domestic political pressures make it difficult to do less are deeper and broader than this narrative implies. Dynamics associated with public opinion electoral pressures, and civil-military relations coalesce to narrow the political space available for a more comprehensive strategic adjustment of the ends, ways, and means of policy.

This argument carries significant scholarly and policy implications. At a general level, as decisionmakers return to the questions of *whether* and *how* the United States should scale back its commitment to the Middle East, this study indicates that the success of any revised posture depends on the strengths of its domestic foundations. When choosing among the myriad paths available, this example serves as a cautionary tale of how domestic constraints can limit the appetite and capacity of elected officials to carry through a coherent program of strategic adjustment.

More specifically, advocates of restraint should engage more closely with political-science studies to identify more concrete steps toward greater realization of their preferred policies. Those tasks might involve crafting a rhetorically appealing framework for the public to understand the full implications of a restraint program, going beyond the highly salient but prescriptively thin “endless war” slogan that addresses the interventionism but not the underlying infrastructure of the United States’ commitment to the region. Alternatively, greater effort might be invested in building bipartisan coalitions behind the scenes on elements of the restraint agenda that do not cut through with the public at large, capitalizing on the common desire among progressives and libertarians to reduce the costs of overseas commitments. Either way, a greater appreciation of the political constraints on elected officials’ decision making and a wariness about allying too closely with any partisan side is vital to sustain momentum for a set of policies that can endure beyond the next electoral cycle.

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