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The Dynamics of US Retrenchment in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that conditions favor American retrenchment from the Middle East because the United States can shift burdens to capable states in the region, there are few areas where US commitments are interdependent, and the local conquest calculus favors defense. Forward military deployments do not positively influence potential threats in the Middle East, and maintaining deployments there will detract from meeting challenges from China. Through comparisons to prior cases of great-power ordinal decline, this article puts America’s modest decline in historical perspective and finds that retrenchment policies will likely have positive consequences.

Keywords: retrenchment, decline, Middle East, grand strategy, US foreign policy

The United States, at the height of the war on terrorism, had more than 250,000 troops deployed across the Middle East. Today, it maintains a tenth of that number. This instance of retrenchment, or the purposeful reduction of foreign policy costs, is even more dramatic than the American drawdown of forces in post–Cold War Europe, when those numbers fell to a quarter of their Cold War peak. What impact will this retrenchment have on America’s position in the world? Risks loom on either side: excessive retreat from the Middle East could damage US interests in the region and threaten American credibility globally, while inadequate retreat could exacerbate ongoing regional problems and endanger greater American interests and credibility elsewhere.

History offers a helpful guide. Many states have retrenched from regions around the world and have done so after military defeats, with varying levels of success. For the most part, grand strategy literature has not systematized American retrenchment in historical or regional contexts. Deep engagement proponents argue that the United States benefits from forward deployments of military power, while advocates of restraint contend that the United States can secure its interests at a much lower cost by pulling back from foreign

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commitments in the Middle East and elsewhere (though other regions invoked in these debates are often relegated to the background).²

In this article, we draw on existing retrenchment theories to assess whether the contemporary Middle East represents a favorable or unfavorable geopolitical environment for that strategy.³ Our core argument is that conditions broadly favor retrenchment, though with limitations. Because the rate of American decline is comparatively modest and because the United States is declining from the highest position in the geopolitical system and a dominant position within the region, we expect retrenchment to be gradual.

At the same time, specific regional conditions in the Middle East favor readjustment. American interests there are discrete and relatively independent from America's global commitments, capable states in the region can help buttress US interests, and the conquest calculus favors the defense, which limits adversaries’ abilities to exploit regional power vacuums. Compelling domestic factors aid these international ones: the American public has a decreasing appetite for involvement in the Middle East, and there is an emerging bipartisan consensus on the need to confront China. Of course, unexpected events, such as a further escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip, could modify these calculations. It is critical to know which conditions to focus on to react prudently.

The following section outlines key lines of argument regarding America's defense posture in the Middle East. The subsequent section surveys the specific regional factors that would incline the United States toward or against retrenchment. We conclude with thoughts about how much further the United States might be willing to go in terms of retrenchment in the region and speculate about what events might reverse current trends and compel the United States to reengage.

**Contending Interpretations of America's Role in the Middle East**

The literature on American grand strategy often uses the Middle East to differentiate competing claims for the wisdom of each grand strategy.⁴ For example, deep engagement advocates highlight the positive impact of American involvement in the region. They point to how American naval power helped preserve the relatively free flow of affordable oil from the Middle East, thus fueling growth in the global economy. Advocates of deep engagement also emphasize the critical role American diplomacy has played—for example, through the Camp David Accords—in managing disputes between countries in the region. The same advocates believe that America's disengagement with the region might undermine its ability to cooperate with others in counterterrorism or incentivize regional actors
to pursue nuclear weapons programs or lash out aggressively against their neighbors.

In contrast, proponents of restraint use the Middle East as a poster child of all that can go wrong. From their perspective, American involvement in the Middle East conforms to the classic dynamics of overstretch, wherein a great power becomes excessively involved in peripheral places. Advocates of restraint criticize how the United States has favored military instruments, especially in cases of foreign-imposed regime changes, which have a losing track record. They condemn the American tendency to prioritize ambitious ideological goals, such as democracy promotion and regime change, which can spark anti-Americanism, incur staggering costs, and lead to failure.5

The assumptions scholars make about the tools of statecraft drive part of this debate. Proponents of deep engagement assume that US military assets preserve a delicate regional balance of power. Proponents of restraint counter that military assets are redundant or harmful and point to the positive record of multilateral diplomacy as a more effective and affordable alternative.6

Scholars' assumptions about the relationship between regions drive another part of this debate. For deep engagers, the United States needs large forward deployments because withdrawal sends a poisonous signal to states judging US credibility. Deep engagers also worry that instability in the Middle East will spill into other regions or entice Russia or China to exploit the power vacuum left in America's wake. Conversely, restrainers argue that America's post-9/11 obsession with the Middle East has diverted time, resources, and attention from more pressing issues elsewhere. Part of the Obama administration's logic to “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which would have required a diminished presence in the Middle East, was that it would address this purported misallocation of resources.

Notably, neither the literature on deep engagement nor restraint possesses developed theories of regional politics. With few exceptions, most advocates of either strategy think all good things go together for their preferred strategy. If the United States plays a stabilizing role in Europe or Asia, it should also do so in the Middle East. Regions provide useful theaters for grand strategic debates, but generally, the show is not tailored to the theater, as though regional dynamics are marginal matters.

Retrenchment and Regional Conditions

Despite these theoretical assumptions, great powers frequently draw distinctions between regions when debating whether and how to retrench.
They modify their global postures to track shifting geopolitical rivalries, withdrawing from regions of less geopolitical importance to focus on those with greater salience. They tailor their tools to regional conditions, availing themselves of whatever geographic and technological advantages they have. Declining powers can shift from a posture that relies on brittle forward defenses to one that relies on flexibility, strategic depth, reserve forces, and key strongholds. They can consider regional balances of power and delegate responsibility for regional stability to friendly successor states.

Although not necessarily focused on the Middle East, previous work has identified four structural conditions that might encourage or discourage a declining great power to adopt a retrenchment strategy:

- Ally availability – Where local powers are willing and able to contain rising regional powers, great powers are better positioned to shed burdens and draw down forces.\(^7\)

- Commitment independence – Where commitments are independent rather than interdependent, great powers can retrench without fear of a negative domino effect.\(^8\)

- Conquest calculus – When defense predominates, great powers can retrench with confidence, knowing it will be more difficult for rising rivals to use military instruments to exploit power vacuums.\(^9\)

- Relative rank – Low-ranked great powers have stronger incentives to react quickly and decisively to signs of their decline, lest they fall from the great-power ranks.\(^10\)

Individually, these conditions are poor predictors of retrenchment, but collectively, they have solid explanatory power. Great powers with zero to two favorable conditions retrenched in 44–67 percent of historical cases, while those with three to four favorable conditions retrenched in 100 percent of historical cases.\(^11\) While these findings relate to retrenchment at the global level, they have yet to be applied to regional politics. In what follows, we adapt these conditions to the contemporary Middle East, describing how their assessment would affect the prospects for retrenchment. The result of this analysis is that three of the four conditions appear to favor the prospects for retrenchment in the
Middle East—though, as always, domestic political dynamics, international shocks, and unexpected events can complicate assessments.

**Ally Availability**

Local allies are clearly favorable to American retrenchment in the Middle East. Several Middle Eastern states are capable of containing one another and have some history of aligning with the United States. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye head the list. If one widens the circle to smaller states that have shown willingness to cooperate with the United States, that list includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Because many of these countries depend on energy exports for state revenues, they support the maintenance of the free flow of oil from the region. Similarly, although some of these countries have previously espoused extreme ideologies and supported violent non-state proxies in local conflicts, they broadly oppose jihadist groups (such as al-Qaeda and ISIS) and could be useful partners in US counterterrorism intelligence sharing and operations. There are ample opportunities for the United States to work with regional allies and partners to advance American interests and maintain regional stability.

Still, the capability, stability, or unity of America’s friends should not be overstated. Most of America’s partners in the Middle East have militaries designed for homeland security and regime security—not for protecting distant sea lanes or conducting complex expeditionary operations. To the extent that these countries exercise military power beyond their borders, it is often by supporting non-state proxies, which comes with limitations and liabilities.

Few of these countries are models of stability. Israel, one of the more stable countries in the region, was rocked by widespread protests last year, and Israeli protests show no sign of abating. In 2020, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman detained senior members of the royal family to quash potential threats to his rule—three years after locking up hundreds of wealthy Saudis and royal relatives in a hotel for similar reasons. In 2022, Jordan’s King Abdullah II wrestled with an alleged coup by former Crown Prince Hamzah bin Hussein, his half brother.

Moreover, America’s allies and partners are often at odds with one another in ways that blunt American policy and security. America’s support of Israel creates friction with Arab allies, who have long-standing commitments to Palestinian nationalism, and with recent Israeli-Palestinian violence flaring up, the US State Department has issued an advisory for all Americans to exercise increased caution when traveling abroad. In turn, US arms sales to the Gulf countries prompt Israeli concerns that those weapons will be turned against
In addition, the Gulf countries often clash, as seen in the 2017–21 Qatar blockade and Qatar’s backing of rival proxy groups in Syria and Libya.

Nor should the risks or costs associated with outsourcing America’s security to others be underestimated. America’s partners are sometimes tempted to pursue destabilizing policies. For example, even before American retrenchment, Israel repeatedly threatened to use force against Iran to slow its nuclear program. During US retrenchment, Saudi Arabia intervened ill-advisedly in the civil war in Yemen, which provoked a humanitarian catastrophe. The United States can try to limit the ways its support can be abused—by refusing to sell certain kinds of military hardware or by attaching conditions to foreign assistance—however, American partners might evade these constraints, perhaps even dragging the United States into an unwanted regional conflict.

Even if allies largely align their actions with US interests, there can be material and moral costs to backing regional partners. Support for regional allies is not cheap. The United States provided roughly $7.6 billion in assistance to Middle Eastern and North African countries in fiscal year 2023, a number that will likely rise, given the war in Gaza. The United States often sells arms to regional allies at a discount, and such sales risk the diffusion of sensitive technologies and fearsome weapons. Moreover, American support for some governments opens it to accusations of hypocrisy, such as when the United States mutes its criticism of Israeli settlement expansion or Saudi human rights abuses.

American allies and partners can counterbalance these risks by promoting energy security, pursuing counterterrorism, and maintaining a stable regional balance of power. Absent these countries’ varied contributions, the United States might be reluctant to retrench from the Middle East, but with them, it can feel more comfortable doing so.

**Commitment Independence**

Similarly, the largely independent and disconnected character of America’s commitments in the Middle East favors retrenchment. The prospect of an American drawdown in the region prompting a series of falling dominoes is relatively remote. For example, a resurgent ISIS following American retrenchment would not necessarily endanger other US interests in the Middle East, such as preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Nor would a more uncertain or unstable Middle East necessarily jeopardize American interests elsewhere. Although some cases (such as transnational terrorist groups and refugee flow) of Middle East instability can spill into neighboring regions, these spillovers are uncommon and better managed through policy initiatives in Europe and elsewhere.
Some observers worry that American commitments in the Middle East are tightly coupled and contagious. Their central concern seems to be that a regional rival could exploit a power vacuum created by a drawdown of American presence. An ascendant Iran, so the argument goes, could imperil oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz, fuel terrorism through its support of violent non-state proxies (such as Hezbollah), upend regional nonproliferation efforts by sprinting to acquire the bomb, and thus come to dominate the region.

We will later discuss the claim that Iran would be a credible regional rival to the United States, but first we want to stress that the underlying premise of this view—that events in the Middle East are tightly interconnected—is easily exaggerated.

Take, for example, concerns about how regional instability might imperil energy supplies. Such an argument assumes that emboldened regional actors would likely disrupt export routes and snarl markets. Research suggests that blockading the Strait of Hormuz would be a demanding operation that few Middle Eastern states could sustain. Moreover, temporary disruptions could be offset through alternate routes and suppliers. Global energy markets are resilient, as evidenced by the market’s rapid rebound in the wake of Iran’s drone attacks on Saudi oil installations in 2019.

Another concern is that terrorist organizations could exploit shifts in the regional balance of power. This concern assumes that violent non-state actors are creatures of regional backers, but that idea is easily exaggerated. Most terrorist organizations rise or fall based on local circumstances—the ability to exploit local grievances, attract local recruits, and target local governments. There are exceptions; Hezbollah famously benefits from Iranian support. Even the exception supports the rule: Hezbollah’s activity substantially depends on Shia support in southern Lebanon. The Taliban leverages Pakistan’s resources and safe havens but is also firmly entrenched in rural social networks in southern Afghanistan. Every state in the region resents extreme jihadist groups like ISIS, though they disagree about how to counter them. Overall, violent non-state actors are only somewhat connected to the Middle Eastern balance of power.

American interests in the region are broadly independent from one another, and events in the Middle East tend to be relatively contained from global power shifts. For example, it is hard to see how Russia could leverage its ties to regional actors, such as Syria or Iran, to overturn the balance of power. Russian meddling in the Middle East has proven to be increasingly affordable and has elicited pushback from regional powers such as Türkiye, which suggests that intervention, far from being an asset, is a liability. For the Russia–Ukraine War, Iran has provided drones to Russia, but these have made little difference
in Russia’s performance. Ultimately, events in the Middle East only tangentially impact America’s ability to achieve its interests in Europe or Asia.

Spillover effects are gravely concerning. Ties between violent non-state groups such as ISIS and terrorist cells in Europe highlight the global and transnational character of jihadist groups. Civil wars in Syria and Libya have also generated refugee flows, and states sometimes weaponize these flows for foreign policy advantages. Although most refugees remain in the region, some also reach Europe, generating xenophobic backlash and controversial debates about European asylum and resettlement policies. It is unclear whether large forward deployments of US troops are the best way to manage these regional spillovers.

Military assets can intimidate violent non-state groups and thus disrupt potential terrorist attacks, but recent plots in Europe were directed by homegrown actors. This problem suggests a greater role for domestic policy: better intelligence sharing, improved deradicalization programs, and broader efforts to address the social roots of extremism. Along the same lines, American military action has not stemmed the flow of refugees fleeing violent conflict. NATO intervention set the conditions for recent outflows from Libya. At the same time, America’s bombing campaign against ISIS in eastern Syria did little to help civilians fleeing government violence around Damascus or in the Idlib province.

Conquest Calculus

Another condition that inclines the United States toward more retrenchment in the region is the conquest calculus, or the relative utility of military power. International borders have rarely been so stable, especially in the Middle East. The last coerced cession there was in 1922, and the region has averaged one minor land grab per decade over the past 50 years. Most of the major conflicts in the Middle East—the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1980 Iran–Iraq War, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—did not reward attempts to change borders. The time since the last major invasion (30 years) suggests sturdy defensive dominance.

The conquest calculus is constantly in flux, but we think it is unlikely to swing dramatically in a different direction. Most armies in the Middle East lack the capabilities to engage in effective offensive operations, either because these capabilities are difficult to develop or because they are more oriented toward internal regime security than external conquest. Most regional navies focus on defensive and disruptive operations, such as mine laying, rather than offensive or expeditionary missions. Although several Middle Eastern states have stockpiled ballistic missiles for their accuracy and reliability, these weapons are more useful for deterrence than coercion. The relatively
circumscribed nature of opportunities for aggression affords the United States greater latitude when deciding whether and how to retrench.

Defensive dominance applies to the Chinese, too. China has formed strategic partnerships with key Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. It has also prioritized outreach to countries in Central Asia and the Middle East as part of its One Belt, One Road economic program. China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, and the People’s Liberation Army Navy has participated in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. None of this activity has significantly altered regional dynamics, however. As Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader argue, China is more of a “reluctant dragon” in the Middle East, conservative in its diplomatic engagement, and generally reluctant to take on a greater role.\textsuperscript{22}

China’s primary interest in the Middle East—preserving the flow of affordable oil—overlaps with that of the United States, making unclear whether escalating superpower competition would help Beijing. Conversely, it is unclear whether staying in the Middle East gives the United States significant leverage over China. China has diversified its energy suppliers, refining capability, and transportation routes, in part to blunt the potential impact of a possible US-orchestrated oil embargo.\textsuperscript{23} A defense-oriented conquest calculus does not mean peace will always prevail, only that any conflict will be largely self-limiting and unlikely to upend the regional balance of power.

If the Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian civil wars are an indication, the conquest calculus also favors defense in internal conflicts. Violent non-state actors can exploit the opportunities afforded by guerilla tactics to harry or harass government forces. These activities, however, do not necessarily translate into a capacity to hold territory or govern populations. Even when non-state actors develop or engage in rebel governance, as ISIS did in eastern Syria, local opposition to rebel rule, combined with ethnic and sectarian differences, often provides a check on how far and how fast these groups can expand their influence. Limited resources, internal divisions, and military counterpressure from states, who are reluctant to cede control to non-state rivals, also hinder rebel groups from engaging in offensive land grabs.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, while non-state actors can carve out territorial enclaves, as Hezbollah has in southern Lebanon or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has in southeastern Yemen, these bases do not necessarily provide them with further capacity to expand.

While the conventional balance appears to favor the defense, there are also nuclear proliferation concerns to consider. If a state such as Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, it could employ its conventional capabilities more aggressively.
Iran could harass shipping in the Persian Gulf and escalate support for proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere, knowing that Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United States would be reluctant to retaliate for fear of escalation.

While these concerns are valid, we think the likelihood of nuclear proliferation in the region and the assessment of the destabilizing consequences that would follow an attack have been overstated. In terms of the likelihood that regional actors will acquire nuclear weapons, observers have been warning that the Middle East is ripe for proliferation for some time—however, there are inherent limitations to potential proliferators: nuclear programs are expensive, difficult to develop, and hard to hide. Acquiring nuclear material does not mean a potential proliferator can solve the technical challenges of building and testing a device, let alone develop and deploy a sizable, credible, and secure arsenal. Nuclear programs also inevitably draw scrutiny and backlash from regional neighbors and the broader international community.25

Iran provides a helpful illustration of these nuclear impediments. Tehran could not maintain a clandestine program, and its facilities at Natanz and Fordow were disclosed to the international community. Iran also struggled to maintain its older centrifuges and deploy newer ones, slowing uranium enrichment. Some describe Iran’s program as a case of “nuclear hedging,” in which a state acquires nuclear capabilities for diplomatic rather than military influence.26 These hurdles are not unique to Iran; similar political, economic, and technical challenges impeded incipient nuclear programs in Algeria, Iraq, and Syria.

Even if a state such as Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon, it is unclear whether its nuclear capability would significantly alter the conquest calculus. As political scientists have long stressed, nuclear weapons are primarily for homeland defense, and states have struggled to use them to compel others. In Iran’s case, nuclear weapons would be a guarantor of regime survival. Given the relatively small size of Iran’s arsenal, however, weapons would be vulnerable to Israeli or American strikes. Thus, Iran would probably proceed cautiously. Iran might exploit the stability-instability paradox, taking advantage of nuclear deterrence to engage in provocativ behavior at the conventional level. Barriers to using conventional capabilities would remain. If the much better-armed United States could achieve so little when occupying Iraq, Iran should not expect to do better.

Iran would still find it challenging to block the Strait of Hormuz or make political inroads in other countries. Should Iran feel more comfortable unleashing its proxies if it possessed the bomb, Iranian nuclear weapons would not imbue these proxies with greater legitimacy or enhanced capabilities. The Hezbollah military threat along Israel’s northern border would be the same regardless
of Iran’s nuclear status, and threats by Tehran to retaliate against Israel should it strike Hezbollah would face the credibility challenges that always bedevil extended deterrence.

Most importantly, regardless of how destabilizing an Iranian bomb could be, forward deployments may help bring it about. Intelligence assessments suggest Iran was most interested in acquiring nuclear weapons in the early 2000s, at the height of American military operations in the region. Conversely, the negotiations that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the most successful multilateral effort to limit Iran’s nuclear program, took place in the mid-2010s when the United States was drawing down its presence in the region. In short, the best way to prevent nuclear weapons from upending the conquest calculus in the Middle East is through diplomacy, not sizable deployments.

Relative Rank

The only condition pushing against retrenchment is relative rank. In global terms, the United States is slowly declining from first to second place in the system relative to China, though whether it already has done so or when it might do so depends on the measure used. Despite Russia’s long-standing military ties to Syria or the Chinese military’s acquisition of a base in Djibouti, the United States still retains a commanding position in the Middle East. Although China brokered a diplomatic agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, American regional influence remains significant. Consequently, the United States might be tempted to drag its feet in the Middle East because it has larger reserves of power than other potential great-power competitors.

We think three factors make foot-dragging less likely. The first is that US involvement in the Middle East over the past few decades has come with a high price in blood and treasure. A 2014 congressional report estimated that Congress had appropriated more than $1.6 trillion to support the first 13 years of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Factoring in the budgetary burden of the wars across the entire federal government and operations beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, this number could be as high as $6.4 trillion. Moreover, nearly 7,000 American servicemembers lost their lives in these wars, and an additional 53,000 were wounded, costing roughly $1 million per year for each soldier deployed to Afghanistan. On the other side of the ledger, US stabilization efforts in the region have been a conspicuous failure. In Afghanistan, they were even less effective than Soviet efforts in the 1980s.

The second factor is that America’s changing interests in the Middle East complicate the case for maintaining a large residual force. This complexity is most notable in the case of two common justifications for maintaining
a forward-deployed American presence—energy politics and counterterrorism. Regarding the flow of oil, scholars have long questioned whether a robust American military presence is necessary to maintain a stable global energy market, given the resilience of supply networks, large stockpiles, and alternative suppliers.\(^2\) The advent of fracking, which made the United States a net-energy exporter, has further reduced the importance of Middle Eastern exports for sustaining global prices and has afforded the United States something close to energy independence.

When it comes to counterterrorism, the environment has shifted in similar ways.\(^3\) Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS have endured military pressure from the United States and other regional states, which has weakened their core organizations, deprived them of territorial safe havens, and impeded recruitment, organization, and planning operations. More active combatants increasingly divert such groups in the Middle East. Israeli actions in Gaza are a lightning rod, and ISIS recently ravaged Russia’s Crocus City concert hall, killing at least 130 people because of Russia’s military intervention in Syria. Moreover, America’s counterterrorism capabilities—which include more stringent border regulation, more active intelligence operations to identify and disrupt plots, and greater intelligence sharing among different agencies, allies, and partners—have reduced the vulnerabilities terrorist organizations exploited in the past. The rise of domestic terrorism threats has also siphoned off the stress formerly placed on foreign terrorism.

The third factor is the growing bipartisan recognition among politicians in Congress and the public in general that America’s core interests lie in the Indo-Pacific. The partisan debates regarding US commitments in the region (for example, in 2007 when President George W. Bush ordered the “surge” in Iraq or 2009 when Obama adopted a similar policy in Afghanistan) have lost steam. President Donald Trump’s decision to negotiate an agreement with the Taliban and announce a timeline for the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan received little pushback from both sides of the aisle. The public has likewise soured toward deployments in the Middle East. Seven in 10 Americans believe the Afghanistan War mostly failed to achieve its goals, and a majority supported the withdrawal of US forces.\(^3\)

The emerging consensus on the need for retrenchment in the Middle East is matched by a parallel agreement surrounding the need for more engagement elsewhere. Congress passed a bipartisan bill designed to bolster US competitiveness vis-à-vis China, and the Biden-Harris administration’s calls to reallocate US defense spending toward weapons systems designed for “great power competition” have been met with
widespread support. Meanwhile, the importance of managing a rising China has emerged as one of the few areas where the attitudes of different parts of the American public align. Two-thirds of Americans have a negative opinion of China, and nearly half say China is America’s greatest threat—almost double what they consider to be the next most threatening state, Russia. American leaders, therefore, have a fairly free hand to face greater dangers.\textsuperscript{32}

**Conclusion**

China’s rise has come chiefly at the expense of Europe’s share of relative power, but the United States cannot continue as if nothing has changed. The cockpit of great-power politics has shifted to the Asia-Pacific, and the United States now faces a near peer in the region. This gravitational pull was bound to affect other regions, and American forces’ massive footprint in the Middle East predisposed the region to major US retrenchment. Over the past few years, retrenchment is largely what has happened. Despite alarmist calls to the contrary, leaving Afghanistan was a timely and rational response to geopolitical conditions, and the United States has paid a small price for paring back.

This article argues that current US force levels in the Middle East are prudent. The warnings from deep engagers that pulling back would compromise US security have not been borne out, and we fall more on the restraint side of the spectrum. Defense is the best defense for a heavily indebted heavyweight with domestic disunity. At the same time, we would not fully endorse restraint either. While the United States has dramatically cut back its presence in the Middle East and could eliminate it, we think that would be unwise. Maintaining military facilities in Bahrain and Qatar allows the United States to respond quickly to unexpected events and can bolster deterrence during unanticipated crises. The recent deployment of two carrier strike groups to the region to “serve as a deterrent signal to Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and any other proxy across the region” in the wake of Hamas’s attack illustrates the wisdom of maintaining the capacity to surge military assets to the region when events warrant it.\textsuperscript{33}

Ultimately, it is up to American voters to decide what is worth its blood and treasure in the region. We will close by outlining two possible courses of events that might reverse current trends and compel the United States to reengage in the region. The first potential scenario is if local efforts to contain a hegemonic bid were to fail and a regional aggressor such as Iran were to make a bid for hegemony. If the conquest calculus shifted to favor offense, available allies collapsed, and commitments grew suddenly interdependent, the United States
would have a strong incentive to ramp up its military footprint and help stymie such an attempt at regional dominance.

The second possible scenario is if regional calamities in the Middle East begin to threaten global stability again. Overwhelming refugee flows, humanitarian disasters, financial contagion, and nuclear exchanges could all necessitate a strong or swift American response, which would rest on long-standing relationships, forethinking strategies, and prepositioned resources. If the current Israeli-Palestinian violence escalates further, drawing in other armed actors such as Hezbollah or other states such as Iran, it could become more difficult for the United States to maintain a more restrained posture in the region. The causes of the current crisis reside more in Palestinian and Israeli politics than in the degree of American military deployments across the region. Indeed, the most recent round of conflict erupted despite the attacker’s massive military inferiority. Many problems do not have a military solution.

Retrenchment from the Middle East is neither inevitable nor an end in itself. Its main benefits are that it can provide the United States with greater flexibility and strategic solvency. Washington faces an exceedingly complicated global security environment: a rising near-peer challenger in China, an aggressive nuclear-armed spoiler in Russia, and now an unexpected war in Israel and Palestine. Managing these collective challenges will require setting clear priorities, accurately assessing threats, closely monitoring conditions, and judiciously allocating resources. Since the US military is not bogged down in multiple Middle Eastern quagmires, these tasks will be easier, though the road ahead remains hard.

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Endnotes


