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America's Role in a Post-American Middle East

After decades of wars in the Middle East, growing great power competition, and changing priorities at home, there is much uncertainty about America's place in the world today. Russia's brazen invasion of Ukraine has further shaken up debates over America's global priorities and purpose, including in the Middle East. On one hand, a consensus has emerged across the American political spectrum that after costly investments with little discernable payoff, the United States should do less in the Middle East and more to confront a rising China. President Obama aspired to "pivot to Asia" but new terrorism threats like the Islamic State sidetracked him along the way. Now, by some accounts, Biden is finally completing the pivot, even if the Ukraine war is shifting US attention back to Europe and Russia. On the other hand, tens of thousands of US forces remain in the Middle East, increasingly vulnerable to attacks by Iran and Iranian-aligned nonstate actors. All the while, American military strikes against Iranian-aligned groups and major US arms sales to regional partners continue apace.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 added to this policy confusion. Was Afghanistan the opening salvo foreshadowing a reduced American presence in the Middle East, to be followed by more withdrawals as advocated by a "restraint" camp in Washington? Or was it a unique set of circumstances, linked to Biden's previous convictions and assessments of the

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Is the United States really leaving the Middle East?

conflict, that do not necessarily presage more to come? Is the United States really leaving the Middle East, as many in the region seem to believe? And what does “leaving” mean if the US force posture does not drastically shift? Is it that regional partners no longer believe the United States can be relied on to defend them? Is it that the United States can be expected to cede the region to China?

The difficulty is that the “staying or going” debate is increasingly divorced from realities on the ground. The reality is that the United States is *both* engaged in the region *and* seeking to reduce its direct commitments. Even if the United States intends to “leave” the Middle East, there will ultimately be lag time as the United States adjusts to changing regional and global conditions, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine war. Continued crises, often related to Iran, and longstanding commitments to regional partners—combined with bureaucratic inertia and the interests of major defense contractors—could keep the United States tethered to the region for the foreseeable future, even if a growing number of policymakers in Washington would no longer like to be there.¹

Furthermore, decreased American dependence on Middle East oil does not yet free the United States from shocks in global oil markets that can directly impact the American economy. The spike in gas prices in the early weeks of the Ukraine war and the reluctance of American partners like Saudi Arabia to increase oil output to stabilize prices is a stark reminder of the continued linkages between Middle East energy markets and the American economy.² Terrorism emanating from the region will also not always be easy to contain within it. A political and strategic commitment to Israel remains deeply rooted across the US foreign policy establishment. In other words, the United States cannot and will not exit neatly “out” of the region as long as it remains a global power, and instability in the region has the potential to directly harm Americans.

Yet at the same time, it is the case that American predominance in the region is over. Russia’s military assertiveness has been on display in Syria since its 2015 intervention, and China’s steady and rising economic development and technology investments across the region have changed the landscape. The United States is no longer the only global player in town, and regional states are increasingly balancing their relationships among the United States, Russia, and China. Regional states have also increased their own diplomatic and military activism to fill the perceived absence of an assertive US role.³

A post-American Middle East, however, is not a Middle East without America. The critical question is *how* the United States engages with and in

the region in an era when it is no longer the predominant power. In other words, *what is the American role in a post-American Middle East?*

To answer this question, I first outline the contours of the post-American Middle East. I argue that no one power, or alliance of powers, is likely to dominate the region in the coming years. Instead, hedging and shifting alignments are likely to prevail for the foreseeable future, creating a complex regional environment without a clear organizing principle. I then explore options for how the United States might navigate this type of post-American landscape, examining in particular two commonly discussed approaches based on models from the past—approaches that did not work before and are not likely to adapt well to current regional conditions. I conclude by proposing instead an alternative US role that accepts a normalized but still pivotal regional position. This approach would balance the heavy US reliance on military engagement with other types of investments focused on the wellbeing of the region's people and cooperation with other global powers.⁴ This proposed role looks to the future, not the past.

A post-American Middle East

The era that we think of as the “American Middle East” began in 1990. After decades of competition with the Soviet Union, following its demise the United States emerged as the dominant power in the region. The American-led effort to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's invasion in August of 1990, followed by intensive diplomacy to convene an international Arab-Israeli peace conference in Madrid in 1991, showcased unparalleled American influence. Shifting from an offshore balancing posture that had held for much of the Cold War, the United States increased its direct force presence, though the American regional presence remained smaller throughout the 1990s than its other global commitments. But after the September 11th attacks and the US shift to a counterterrorism footing, direct US military engagement reached unprecedented levels.

America's increased military investment did not necessarily translate into increased regional influence, particularly as the United States became bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq and new extremist groups, including the Islamic State, emerged from the wreckage of American interventions. The heavy American military footprint and billions of dollars invested in Afghan and Iraqi security forces guaranteed neither pliant partners nor, in the case of Afghanistan, a partner capable of surviving without a US military presence. Successive US administrations—from Obama to Trump to Biden—sought to focus more attention on a rising China as fatigue with America's

blunders in the Middle East grew amongst American policymakers and the public alike.

Washington's waning interest has not gone unnoticed in the region. Regional states have long been diversifying their global partnerships, particularly following the chaotic aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war and rising concerns about Iran's growing influence.⁵ The Arab spring beginning in late 2010 created further incentives for counterrevolutionary states like the UAE to increase their activism across the region.⁶ After infamously "leading from behind" in Libya, the United States largely avoided a direct role in civil wars like Syria as it focused on the narrow mission of defeating the Islamic State. Meanwhile, China's expanding engagements largely focused on economic and technological investments, while Russia increased its military engagement with its intervention in Syria in support of the ruling Assad regime. Such positions fueled perceptions that the United States was in the process of retrenching from the region, with other global and regional players filling the vacuum.

The experience on the ground has been somewhat different. Despite the highly visible US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the American military posture in the Middle East itself has not dramatically altered (Afghanistan, in South

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Asia, was always a separate decision). The Biden administration's global posture review did not live up to expectations that a pivot to Asia would translate into a considerable increase in its military presence in the Indo-Pacific and a reduced presence in the Middle East.⁷ The review deferred decisions on downsizing the American footprint in the region, directing the Department of Defense to "conduct additional analysis on enduring

posture requirements in the Middle East."⁸ While defense experts—some of whom now serve in senior positions in the Defense Department—argued that a reduction of US military presence in the Middle East would better align force posture with changing strategic priorities, these recommendations have not to date translated into official policy.⁹

Some in the region argue that even if the American presence has not changed, there is a growing sense that US commitments are unreliable—that regional states cannot count on the United States to protect them against increased missile and drone attacks by Iranian-backed forces. In this view, the lack of a US response to attacks on Saudi oil facilities and oil and military targets in the UAE by Iranian-aligned groups in recent years demonstrates the reduced American commitment to the region.

Such arguments focus on US inaction while overlooking continued American military activity in the region. President Trump ordered the killing of Iran's top general, Qassem Suleimani, in January 2020, one of the most provocative direct American actions against Iran in decades. The first military action in the Biden administration involved airstrikes against Iranian-backed military groups in eastern Syria in February 2021 after a series of rocket attacks on US forces in Iraq. Biden ordered more airstrikes against facilities used by Iranian-backed militias to target American personnel on the Syria-Iraqi border in late June 2021.¹⁰ Ramped up US military support for the UAE ensued in the aftermath of Houthi drone and missile attacks on Abu Dhabi in late January 2022.¹¹ US special operations forces launched an attack in northwestern Syria in early February 2022 that killed the head of the Islamic State.

To be sure, we will not likely see American commitments on the level of the late 1980s Tanker war, the 1991 Gulf war, or the unprecedented post-9/11 US interventionist policies in the region. We are now undoubtedly in a different era, one in which the US plays a very different and less dominant role in the region. But we should not confuse rebalancing direct US engagement with a retreat from the region.

A Rising China Facing Limits

Discussion of a post-American Middle East inevitably turns to concerns about a Chinese-dominated Middle East. These fears are understandable given China's rising global power and increased activity in the region. Unlike the United States, China is still reliant on the Middle East for energy, importing nearly half of its oil from the region.¹² The Middle East also provides critical sea and land links for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indeed, China's economic expansion extends well beyond its energy needs, with growth sectors in the Arab Gulf encompassing tourism, telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and other technology-related industries. China replaced the European Union in 2020 as the largest trading partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹³ It also became the largest source of foreign investment in the region in 2016, and Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei is building 5G networks with several countries in the Middle East who are considered close American partners (including Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), raising surveillance concerns for the United States.¹⁴ A Chinese operated port in Haifa, Israel opened in the fall of 2021, expanding Israel's role as a regional trading hub.¹⁵

But despite this growing Chinese engagement, China is not likely to want to dominate the Middle East, even were it capable of doing so. It no doubt sees benefits in reduced American influence. But it has also benefited from the US-dominated security architecture—and American military entanglements—that

China is not likely to want to dominate the Middle East, even were it capable of doing so

have enabled its principally economic expansion.¹⁶ And China's expanding influence is not without limits.

Just like the United States, China must balance competing partners and interests, particularly its relations with Iran, Israel, and Arab Gulf states.¹⁷ While China has expanded its partnership with Iran in recent years, a Chinese-Iranian axis (or a Russia-China-Iran axis) is unlikely to emerge.¹⁸ China's largest oil suppliers are key US partners, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Indeed, China's political, economic, and military ties with Iran's

Arab neighbors are much stronger than with Iran.¹⁹ As one analyst explains, "Chinese firms and investors are likely to continue prioritizing economic relations with Gulf Arab actors over the riskier relations with Iranian counterparts."²⁰

China's ties with Israel have also grown in a variety of sectors, including infrastructure development, trade, tourism, and technology.²¹ But because Israel and many Arab states seek to maintain close relations with Washington, the Chinese will inevitably face constraints in enlarging cooperation. For example, Israel reportedly turned down a Chinese bid to develop light rail lines in Tel Aviv due to pressure from Biden administration officials to limit Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects.²² The Israeli government is now more sensitive to growing American concerns over the security implications of China's investments in Israeli technology and infrastructure, including the risks of cyber espionage and leaks of sensitive technology.²³ Economic analysts have also noted the advantages of the Western development model over China, where partners gain access to international capital, institutions, and job creation rather than just enriching state entities without creating local growth or employment.²⁴

Finally, the United States outpaces China as a military partner and arms exporter. China's one logistical base in Djibouti pales in comparison to the massive American security architecture in the Persian Gulf. Chinese arms sales to the region remain minimal and lag well behind the United States. For example, less than 1 percent of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE from 2000-2019 came from China, compared to the over half exported from the United States.²⁵ Still, regional interest in Chinese military technology is evident. Saudi Arabia, for example, has purchased Chinese ballistic missiles and is developing its own capabilities using Chinese technology. Chinese drone sales to the Middle East have increased significantly, with some of the largest purchasers coming from the region including Saudi Arabia and the UAE.²⁶ But US security cooperation with partners globally, especially when combined with Europe, still dwarfs Russian and Chinese programs. American equipment and training is still viewed as superior, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.²⁷

Regional Hedging as the New Normal

After a decade of devastating post-Arab spring conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen—wars that the United States was either unwilling or unable to resolve—regional states are once again realigning. Regional powers Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey began looking for off ramps to their extensive involvement in regional proxy wars as they sought to de-escalate conflict both with each other and with neighboring Iran throughout 2021 and early into 2022. Amid the pandemic and economic downturns, these wars were becoming unsustainable. Arab states began normalizing relations with Syria, with the UAE even hosting Bashar al-Assad for an official visit in March 2022. Turkey and the UAE, once archrivals in the Libya conflict, began mending relations.²⁸ Even if such de-escalation trends are temporary, and may not mark a significant shift in the foreign policies of states like the UAE, they do demonstrate the emergence of a more fluid security environment than traditional models based on static alliances might suggest.²⁹

At the same time, Israel's ties in the Abraham accords to the Arab Gulf states—the UAE and Bahrain—appear to be deepening, expanding to include not only economic relations but also military cooperation. Israel and Bahrain signed a security memorandum of understanding during a February 2022 official visit by Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to Bahrain, where Gantz touted the “moderate” camp of Western-aligned Arab states in common cause with Israel as a safeguard against threats like Iran.³⁰ Israel's hosting of a summit in the Negev in March 2022 with the foreign ministers of the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Morocco, joined by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, reflected in part shared concerns about Iran as negotiations in Vienna to renew the nuclear deal were nearing a conclusion.

Some analysts argue that a new strategic alliance, backed by the United States, is developing between Israel and the Arab Gulf states to counter Iran, a vision that sees Bahrain and the UAE as “turning into Israel's gate to enter the Gulf: a door placed just in front of Iran.”³¹ American policymakers have at times attempted to translate increased regional concern over Iran's influence into a pro-American, anti-Iranian axis through increased security cooperation with Arab states in the Gulf and status quo powers like Egypt and Jordan, even attempting to form “a NATO of the Middle East” during the Trump presidency.³² US military officials see the Israel-Gulf normalization agreements, combined with Israel's incorporation into the Central Command's area of responsibility, as facilitating joint Arab-Israeli security cooperation against Iran, and float the possibility of integrating their air and missile defense systems.³³ Interest in Israel's air defense systems and other military capabilities are only likely to grow amidst continued Houthi drone and missile threats against the UAE and Saudi Arabia as the Yemen war persists.

US partners have nonetheless kept the door open to Iran. Qatar, which hosts the largest American airbase in the region and shares the world's largest gas field with Iran, maintains closer ties with Iran than other Gulf states. Oman and Kuwait also remain more neutral. Even the staunchest US partners in the anti-Iran camp, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, opened talks with Iran once they became the target of Iran's retaliation for the Trump administration's maximum pressure policies in 2019, and they increased diplomatic engagement with Iran in the first year of the Biden administration.³⁴ Iraq, always straddling between the pro-Iran and pro-America camps, mediated between Iran and

No single global or regional power or set of alliances are likely to dominate the region

Arab rivals at the Baghdad summit in August 2021 to calm regional tensions. While Gulf states will continue to see the United States as a critical external security partner, Iran is their neighbor. No number of American guarantees is likely to replace their inclination to hedge their bets with a bordering state.

Consequently, no single global or regional power or set of alliances are likely to dominate the regional landscape. The growth of non-

state militias only further muddles an already complex regional order. In such an unsettled environment, regional states are likely to continue hedging their relationships with both global and regional powers. In short, no clear regional organizing principle is emerging in the post-American Middle East.

Navigating a Complex Region

The approach favored by Biden's Middle East team to adapt to current regional conditions is what White House coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk calls "back to basics."³⁵ The idea is to scale back from what the administration sees as American overstretch in the past two decades to pursue more modest and achievable goals, underpinned by an investment in regional military partnerships. As McGurk put it, "If you look back over the last 20 years ... the George W Bush administration had an agenda of 'regional transformation', and the invasion of Iraq was part of that, democratisation and nation-building, massive investments, and I saw a lot of that up close and the costs are extremely high." Such "maximalist" goals continued through the Obama and Trump administrations, in McGurk's view, in contrast to the Biden administration's focus on "the basics of building, maintaining and strengthening ... partnerships and alliances [including] strengthening the defensive capabilities of partners."³⁶

“Back to Basics”

“Back to basics” is reminiscent of the US “twin pillar” strategy of the 1970s. This strategy, designed to protect American interests in the Persian Gulf during the Cold War, relied on building up the defense capabilities of two major regional powers—Iran and Saudi Arabia—rather than relying on direct military engagement. The United States sold billions of dollars of advanced weaponry to both countries, turning a blind eye to domestic repression in the process. The pillar strategy collapsed amidst the Iranian revolution, laying bare the dangers of supporting autocratic rulers who lack domestic legitimacy. As in the past, a back-to-basics strategy is anchored on defense relationships with largely autocratic leaders, relying on Arab partners like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt to advance American interests. According to this logic, if US partners can do more on their own militarily, the United States itself can do less, and therefore more easily extricate itself from the region as or when desired.³⁷

The advantage of this strategy is that it presents more achievable goals—support for partners regardless of their domestic actions—while acknowledging the limitations of external attempts to orchestrate regime change or bring democracy to the region. Some analysts argue that this “ruthless pragmatism” simply recognizes the reality that countries like Saudi Arabia matter too much to alienate, particularly because the United States needs them to keep pumping out gas in order to keep inflation down at home.³⁸

The problem is that American military support does not always translate into actions that align with US interests, as the Saudi resistance to increasing oil output during the Ukraine war demonstrated. This is particularly the case when partners like Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not believe US military commitments are reliable. It is also shortsighted to maintain largely militaristic relationships with regional partners and to underinvest in the key issues that many of these leaders are themselves grappling with: youth unemployment, diversifying economies in preparation for a post-oil future, and mitigating climate-induced crises, among others. While some defense assistance remains imperative, it does not make sense to approve massive arms sales of advanced fighter aircraft every time a partner is anxious about Iran or the American commitment. Such assistance will not help our partners with the actual threats they face.

Another challenge with the back-to-basics approach is that it assumes that goals beyond a narrow focus on military investments in partners will translate into extensive transformation goals, like trying to change the political systems of partners into democracies. But this is a specious argument. There are many other practical ways, which I elaborate on in the final section below, in which the United States can draw on nonmilitary engagement to improve the lives of people in the region. These strategies would support more stable governance and reliable partners in the future without requiring ambitious democracy

goals. That said, a back-to-basics focus on partnerships with authoritarian rulers appears at odds with the Biden administration's broader strategy to manage great power competition by strengthening democratic alliances against autocracies. The West's confrontation with Russia in Ukraine is only likely to raise questions about America's continued support for Middle Eastern autocracies reluctant to stand up to Russia.

Finally, the back-to-basics approach assumes that the United States still has a measure of control over partners and how they might utilize American military assistance. It assumes that the United States can gain greater leverage through military assistance and an ability to coax partners into de-escalation of conflicts when necessary. But as we have seen from past examples, such as President Obama's military support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, this has not always been the case. In fact, relying on military tools is more likely to keep drawing the United States (and our partners) back into escalation cycles, including into wars like that in Yemen, which the Biden administration had sought to disassociate from when assuming office. For example, in response to air attacks from the Houthis targeting the UAE, the United States not only promised more advanced fighter jets and missile systems to the Emirates, but American forces based at Al-Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi also returned fire with their own Patriot missiles, the first time the United States has fired Patriots in combat

since the 2003 Iraq war.³⁹ This incident is a reminder that the United States cannot simply subcontract defense to regional partners without also putting American personnel at risk.

A return to such traditional policies, which remained the norm even when previous administrations were pursuing more ambitious goals, will keep the United States engaged in the region in all the wrong ways by helping

to fuel civil conflicts instead of de-escalate them, increasing risks of military escalation with Iran, keeping US forces vulnerable to attack, and contributing to instability that can increase terrorism and proliferation risks which ultimately might harm Americans at home.

A “back-to-basics” approach will keep the US engaged in the region in all the wrong ways

Competing with China

Another option being discussed for defining a role for the United States in an altered region also favors continued military investments in regional partnerships, but less to enable American disengagement and more to confront Chinese influence. This approach is essentially a return to great power

competition as undertaken during the Cold War as the *raison d'être* for US engagement—this time confronting China rather than the Soviets. And rather than relying primarily on US partners, the great power competition framework favors a return to a more assertive and direct American role. While Washington generally accepts competition with great powers globally as a key organizing principle, it has only more recently been applied to the Middle East to justify continued US engagement. Opinion pieces and political speeches are increasingly warning that a US retrenchment in the Middle East could leave China to “fill the gap” and become a regional power player.⁴⁰ According to this framing, all American engagement in the region should be structured with an eye to China and preventing its ability to increase its political, economic, and military leverage in the region.⁴¹

The advantage of a competition with China strategy as a means of orienting US policy is that it stands the best chance of attracting bipartisan support. Confronting China is among the few areas of consensus in an otherwise divided Washington. Successive US national security doctrines have pointed to a rising China as among the top threats to US interests. Confronting the expansion of Chinese investments can also counter dangerous activities undertaken through apparently benevolent infrastructure projects, such as the insertion of surveillance technology in smart cities (though the more autocratic American regional partners also welcome such technologies to keep track of domestic opposition). Curbing Chinese influence can also complicate Beijing's ability to form authoritarian alliances with regional powers.

But the danger of waging a new Cold War with China in the Middle East is that it is only likely to fuel military escalation and arms races in a region already facing an unprecedented arms proliferation challenge, particularly with increasingly advanced missile systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that are reaching less accountable non-state militias as well as many regional states.⁴² It may also be a poor use of resources; as previously mentioned, it is not even clear whether China intends to expand its military presence in the region as it focuses on confronting US military power in other theaters closer to home. An overt anti-China stance in the Middle East could prove counterproductive by increasing China's impetus to expand its military presence rather than preventing it.

And most critically, it is simply not realistic at this stage to oust China from the region and restore an illusory American predominance. Unlike the Cold War confrontation with the Soviets, American partners are far too linked to China economically to be entirely hostile to them, and as discussed earlier, Cold War-like regional blocs are unlikely to emerge.⁴³ Regional states will continue to hedge and seek to maintain good relations with both the United States and its global competitors China and Russia, even if they submit to US pressure

on occasion. The hesitance of close American partners to side with the United States against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, including the decision by the UAE to abstain from supporting a resolution in the UN Security Council condemning the invasion, illustrates the strong hedging preferences in a region no longer perceived as US-dominated.⁴⁴

There is no returning to a region neatly divided between a pro-American camp and a pro-Soviet (now pro-China or pro-Russia) camp. Regional dynamics are simply not conducive to such a zero-sum Cold War game. But a more effective way to counter China may be focusing less on the unrealistic and costly goal of replacing them, and more on how to better compete with them at their own game. And that is a lesson we might glean from the Cold War—namely to better leverage all aspects of power, including nonmilitary means.

Another Way Forward

The current predominant options on the table to chart a new American role in a post-American Middle East are far too reliant on past models. These options have not increased genuine regional stability by encouraging accountable governance that speaks to people's needs, not just to the ability of leaders to stay in power. Returning to a rehashed version of a regional pillars strategy that relies on military investments with authoritarian partners is likely to eventually backfire, just as it has in the past. And reframing the imperative of US engagement in the region through the prism of confronting China in a Cold War-like competition is also bound to disappoint, given the enduring motivations for regional states to hedge their relationships with all global powers. This engagement strategy is also not an efficient use of scarce resources at a time when US domestic pressures for retrenchment are mounting.

To be sure, not all regional ills can be pinned on shortsighted American policies. The region has its own agency, and there have been some American successes, such as helping to facilitate Arab-Israeli peace treaties (although as ever, the core Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains). There are also regional bright spots, highlighted by a generation less wedded to ideology and more focused on practical issues affecting their future, including the rising cost of living, unemployment, access to quality education, government corruption, health, and climate change.⁴⁵ But on balance, past American approaches have likely exacerbated negative trends while underleveraging positive ones.

To break this cycle, US strategy should be focused on the future and consider an alternative role, neither as a predominant nor an absent player. This first requires a genuine shift from military to nonmilitary investments, particularly investments toward economic development, youth advancement, and climate-

related impacts. Clearly this cannot happen overnight, and some US military aid, even direct US military engagement, will be necessary at times, particularly when new extremist groups emerge. But to fight threats like terrorism more effectively, the United States will need to move beyond a military campaign addressing symptoms to deal with the underlying conditions conducive to extremism, including poor governance and lack of domestic accountability.

This does not mean that the United States must engage in expansive “nation-building” or “democracy promotion” campaigns—such efforts have also long been discredited, particularly following the 2003 Iraq war. But the United States can still play a constructive role as a “convener of resources”—not just to fight groups like the Islamic State militarily, but to lead a postwar campaign to rebuild destroyed cities and help restore the rule of law, including the handling of detainees in countries like Iraq.⁴⁶ The United States can make modest investments that can prove pivotal in initiatives like Syrian-led justice efforts, and support human rights-friendly civil society initiatives already underway across the region. High-level visits by US officials can make a point to engage with non-governmental groups and activists to balance engagement with regional officials.

The United States can also increase diplomatic initiatives in the region, including arms control and regional security arrangements with global partners.⁴⁷ Concepts for a Helsinki-like regional process in the Middle East are gaining attention as it becomes evident that the absence of any standing multilateral forum to discuss issues that cut across national boundaries is a serious gap in the region's architecture. Transnational challenges such as arms proliferation, maritime security, climate impacts, pandemics, and migration are among the most serious threats to the region's stability and the wellbeing of its people. The United States can work with other likeminded global and regional powers with a stake in these issues to help convene informal preparatory meetings to design and facilitate a feasible regional process in the future.

A sustainable regional security process is no panacea for resolving conflicts or successfully addressing transnational threats and will not replace the formation of competitive regional security alliances. Yet such platforms have proven useful historically, at the very least in building confidence and increasing communication to prevent and mitigate conflict, as the Helsinki process demonstrated. An inclusive regional process can thus serve as a forum to de-escalate regional tensions among adversaries, providing an opportunity for US-Iranian engagement within a multilateral setting, given that bilateral dialogues have proven

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investments**

so difficult. This will become particularly important in the absence of a working nuclear deal with Iran, but even with one, Iran is too linked to a host of regional challenges to be sidelined. While many Cold War dynamics do not apply to the Middle East, the demonstration that it is possible to contain adversaries while talking to them at the same time is a valuable lesson.

It is possible to contain adversaries while talking to them at the same time

And finally, an alternative future-oriented set of policies for the region will need to accept that the United States is no longer the dominant global power and find areas where it might work with global competitors like China on areas of common interest. A stabilizing cooperative regional security process may be one of those areas, as all powers have a stake in reduced conflict and the ability to

safely trade and export energy resources from the region. Cooperation in areas like terrorism would prove more difficult with powers like China given its repression of its own Uyghur population. But all global powers have historically had an interest in nuclear nonproliferation, as Chinese and Russian support for the original Iran nuclear agreement demonstrated. The Ukraine war has complicated efforts to revive the JCPOA, with Russia's sudden insistence on assurances for its own protection from sanctions forcing the talks to pause just as they were nearing completion.⁴⁸ But Russia's short-term motivations to keep oil prices high and deprive the West of a foreign policy win are not likely to shift its longer-term strategic interest, or China's, in preventing nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East. Indeed, Russia's quick capitulation over its concerns on sanctions in March 2022 demonstrated its continued support for finalizing an updated nuclear agreement with Iran.⁴⁹

Such an approach toward the future of a post-American Middle East would not require unrealistic US goals or resources. In fact, it would better leverage American diplomatic and economic strengths that were used so effectively during the Cold War to contribute to stability and prosperity in Europe. Naturally, some military components of American engagement will remain, but they need to be adjusted to match current regional needs, not just regional wish lists. And they must be balanced with increased support for diplomacy and development programs that support people in the region, including their struggle against corruption and inept governance. US policymakers can build on work that is already underway but is insufficiently resourced and showcased. Such policies will require political will and a shift in mindset in Washington. But it is exactly during moments of fundamental reflection about the future American role in the world when such a reset might be possible, thereby setting US policies in the Middle East on a course where they might do more good than harm.

Notes

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