U.S. Policy in the Middle East Amid Great Power Competition

Mike Singh

If there are two points of broad foreign policy consensus among Republicans and Democrats today, they are these: The United States should not fight any more wars like Iraq, and the United States must shift to a strategy of great power competition in light of China's rise and Russia's rising aggression. Both points seem to forebode a diminished U.S. commitment to or even withdrawal from the Middle East.

Yet a longer view presents a different picture. The United States was deeply engaged in the Middle East long before the Iraq War, the Freedom Agenda, and the Global War on Terror. This engagement came not despite but because of the need to counter our great power competitor, the Soviet Union. Just as the British had sought to maintain control of the Suez Canal and the oil fields of the Persian Gulf—deemed vital to any war—the United States ramped up its diplomatic and military engagement in the region during the Cold War largely due to worries about Soviet dominance of the region's strategic assets. After the end of the Cold War, the Middle East was regarded as one of the world's last remaining sources of dangerous instability.

"The relative importance of the region has also arguably declined, not because it is any less threatening, but because policymakers have belatedly realized that the rest of the world is not as pacific as once thought."

That of course was then, and this is now. The absolute importance of the Middle East to American interests has irrefutably declined as the United States has gradually ended its dependence on the region's oil and ramped up its own hydrocarbons production. The relative importance of the region has also arguably declined, not because it is any less threatening, but because policymakers have belatedly realized that the rest of the world is not as pacific as once thought.
So, in the final analysis, should the Middle East be considered a distraction from great power competition, or—as it has been so many times throughout history—a theater for it? Russia and China have made their position on the matter clear. Russia has engaged in its most muscular intervention in the region in decades, swooping in to save the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a move designed to thwart U.S. aims, prove Russia's value to client states, and demonstrate the efficacy of Russian military hardware to would-be customers. In a strategic sense, Moscow seems determined to ensure that there will be no reestablishment of the Northern Tier. It is courting Turkey, Iran, and even ramping up its engagement in Afghanistan.

China, meanwhile, has made the Middle East the centerpiece of Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative," a marketing slogan for the westward expansion of Chinese economic, political, and military power. Chinese investments in the Middle East—especially in Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt—have increased disproportionately in the last several years. China has also ramped up its diplomatic engagement in the region, appointing special envoys for issues such as the Syrian war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, dispatching senior officials for regional tours, and convening regional parties in Beijing in attempts at mediation. While Beijing has few diplomatic successes to show for these efforts, Chinese policy has shifted in pragmatic directions. For example, it has largely dropped its alignment with the Palestinians from the Non-Aligned Movement era in favor of a deepening relationship with Israel, and it has become somewhat more assertive in the UN Security Council on matters outside its traditional purview, exercising its veto power numerous times on Middle East issues.

Perhaps most ominously, China has ramped up its military engagement in the Middle East, whether out of a desire to protect its interests and citizens, project power, or both. China's first expeditionary naval operation was mounted in Libya in 2011 to evacuate tens of thousands of Chinese nationals amid the revolt against Muammar Qaddafi. Its first overseas naval base is located in Djibouti, just down the road from the United States' own military facilities. Chinese vessels and fighter aircraft have made stops in the region, and Lebanon's People's Liberation Army has reportedly

cooperated with Syrian military intelligence to counter Chinese foreign fighters. The scale of Chinese military engagement remains modest, especially compared with the United States' own, but the trend is clear.

In echoes of the Cold War, U.S. allies are responding to the mounting interest from Russia and China by hedging their bets. This appears to derive from three motivations: first, a desire to maintain good relations with Russia and China; second, a genuine concern regarding U.S. diffidence; and third, a desire to play great powers off one another to maximize benefits. U.S. policymakers tend to ascribe to allies whichever motivation best suits the American domestic debate of the moment. But in reality, all three can operate in parallel. In any event, the phenomenon is endemic. Israel has coordinated effectively with Russia in Syria and cultivated close relations with Beijing, the UAE and others have purchased armed Chinese drones, Turkey is on the verge of purchasing Russian air defense systems, and Egypt has cultivated its closest ties with Russia since the Nasser era, welcoming massive Chinese investment to boot.

U.S. policymakers increasingly have taken the view that the massive investment of American blood and treasure over the past two decades has yielded minimal return. They may be tempted to cede this boggy strategic ground to U.S. rivals. One prominent line of argument in the Syria policy debate, for example, is that the country will become Russia's Iraq; that is, Syria will prove a quagmire for Moscow, fruitlessly exhausting its attention and resources. Policymakers could also be excused for frustration that China—America's chief and richest competitor—continues to benefit from a free ride on the United States' provision of security in areas like the Persian Gulf. This is especially true because it is increasingly China, more than the United States, whose energy security is these days tied so intimately to stability in the region. The appeal of forcing China to shoulder these burdens itself is clear.

Despite its superficial charms, however, a policy of withdrawal would run counter to self-interest. Despite the United States' increasing self-sufficiency with regard to energy supply, vital U.S. interests remain at stake in the region. Foremost among these remains the flow of energy. This may no longer be crucial to the United States' war-fighting ability, but it remains vital to U.S. allies, especially those in the Indo-Pacific. These allies' dependence on just a few sources of oil has in fact increased as a result of U.S. policy toward Iran, in turn more deeply commingling their security with that of U.S. partners in the Gulf.

It is not just energy that flows through the Middle East, however.

A significant portion of global commerce passes through the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Arabian Sea. The region remains a major source of nuclear proliferation threats and threats from other weapons of mass destruction. And when it comes to terrorism—the national security issue that American citizens continue to care most about, even if U.S. strategists would prefer to move on from it—the Middle East remains central. While the United States' chief terrorist threat—both purportedly Islamic and otherwise—is domestic, Middle East-based groups continue to plot attacks on the United States and inspire or guide domestic actors to do the same.

At the broader strategic level, forcing Russia and China to take on greater roles in the Middle East would also backfire in the long run. Russia has demonstrated a desire not to control the Middle East, but to use the region to enhance other threats to the West. For example, its intervention in Syria drove millions of refugees into the arms of Europe, roiling politics there. And its courting of Turkey is likely aimed less at enhancing its regional influence than in splintering NATO and ensuring its mastery of the Black Sea and Caucasus. As for China, the capabilities it would have to improve in order to control Middle Eastern shipping lanes are largely the same that it would use to confront the United States—an effective blue-water navy with the logistical support one necessitates, long-range airlift, overseas bases, and the associated diplomatic assets. In addition, China's control of the region's maritime choke points would be a trump card in any conflict with American allies in Asia.

The Way Forward

The United States needs a strategy for securing its interests in the Middle East that both accords with its broader strategy of great power competition and seeks to accomplish what is needed at a lower, sustainable level of resources. Such a policy should feature a greater reliance on diplomacy and deterrence and a greater reliance on partners when conflict becomes inevitable. While some reallocation of military resources from the Middle East to other regions is inevitable, the United States should not withdraw them from the region entirely, as reinserting them when the need arises may prove difficult. However, we can and should refocus our own exertions where we add the greatest value and leave other tasks to partners. It is important that the United States not look at the Middle East as a series of problems that demand American solutions. Often a dollar invested in maintaining stability and security where they exist will yield a greater return for U.S. interests than one invested in seeking to resolve a conflict.

Viewing regional issues through a lens of great power competition

will necessitate painful trade-offs, of which policymakers must be explicitly cognizant. Difficult partners such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which have relevance not just in the regional but in the broader geopolitical context, will become more important. These and other partners in turn may seek to capitalize on this to extract from us maximum benefits. Pushing back will require the United States to take a tougher stance with allies and court more short-term risk to alliances than may come naturally to internationalists.

Looking at the Middle East through the lens of great power competition should not mean ignoring the threats posed by nonstate actors; indeed, these are arguably just as often wielded as tools by states as they are the result of "failed states." This may increasingly be the case as great powers seek to confront one another without risking direct conflict.

A U.S. regional policy along the above lines should include the following elements:

- *Strengthen capacity and security of allies.* The past two administrations have sought alternately to distance the United States from allies and to uncritically embrace them. But the ultimate objective has been roughly the same: to shift the burden of regional problems on to partners. Yet neither approach has enjoyed great success. U.S. partners have demonstrated a greater willingness to act independently of the United States but continue to suffer from significant deficits with respect to planning and operations, despite the United States having provided partners in the region with tens of billions of dollars of military aid and extensive training and education. These problems, combined with egregious human rights violations, have made the United States—and Congress, in particular—impatient with allies, especially Saudi Arabia. The right approach, however, is not to walk away from them, which would leave the United States with poorer strategic options in the region, but to engage critically and intensively with them.

  Washington's first step in doing so should be to reconsider its approach to security sector assistance and reform. The United States should shift its emphasis away from the sale of major weapons systems and efforts aimed at molding allies' armed forces in the American image. These strategies are better suited for Europe and Asia, where the United States spends a fraction of what it does in the Middle East on such activities. Instead, U.S. security sector assistance should focus on capabilities that correspond to the actual threats faced by our partners—

counterterrorism, border and maritime security, cybersecurity, and competent law enforcement. In doing so, the United States should seek to build upon the preexisting strengths of partner forces, while deepening our involvement in noncombat matters such as partner forces' organization and procedures, since corruption and cronyism are often just as great a hindrance to their performance as poor training.

Because U.S. global and regional adversaries are apt to seek opportunity in tumult or domestic division, the United States should also push allies to adopt a broader conception of security and defense, one that encompasses economic reform and political inclusion. While these issues have largely fallen out of favor in U.S. regional policy, they remain vital for the long-term stability of American regional partners. While such initiatives should be pursued gradually and in cooperation with allies, the United States should be explicit that we are no longer willing to help those states that refuse to help themselves via sensible economic and political reform. In addition, the United States should hold its partners to international norms regarding human rights; our criticism will have greater impact, however, if it is clearly issued from within a firm partnership.

• *Strengthen links between allies.* In addition to strengthening the individual capacity and resilience of our regional partners, the United States should seek to strengthen the links between them. The Middle East has a less integrated regional economy, and more poorly developed regional security and political institutions, than nearly any other region of the world. This is a legacy, in part, of recent history. The driver of the region's economy has been oil exported to the outside world, and political and security coordination has relied on the United States to act as a hub while our allies acted as spokes.

While U.S. partners have in recent years sought increasingly to act in concert with one another, these efforts have been stymied both by political divisions within the region—primarily the Saudi and Emirati split with Qatar and the Arab estrangement from Israel, which is fading—as well as issues of capability. The United States should seek to help our partners overcome both obstacles by mediating regional disputes to the extent possible and by coordinating efforts to improve regional cooperation. We will enjoy greater success, however, if our efforts are incremental and modest. We should not, for example, seek to build a grand military alliance of our partners, but should instead start with initial steps such as encouraging joint procurement planning, theater missile defense, and intelligence

sharing. Nor should we limit our efforts to the military sphere. Our allies' struggles in that arena underscore the need for greater regional economic and political cooperation to prevent conflict in the first place.

Finally, the United States should press allies to strengthen their commitment to international norms, such as respect for national sovereignty. This would stand in stark contrast to the methods of actors such as Iran, which aim to subvert those norms by creating or supporting transnational actors that answer to no local government, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah or the Shia militias of Iraq.

• *Improve policy design.* Whatever initiatives the United States may adopt, it is likely that American policy in the region will necessarily remain reactive, as events over which the United States has little control unfold in ways that threaten American interests. In such situations, it is vital that the United States learn from past mistakes if it is to avoid overcommitment.

The foremost of these errors is that of mismatched ends and means. The United States often articulates policy objectives that cannot be met without an investment of resources that Washington is simply not prepared to make and would not be wise to make in light of competing priorities. This was certainly the case in Iraq in 2003, as well as in Syria during this decade. Since increasing the resources we devote to the region is not tenable strategically or politically, policymakers must instead dial back expectations for what U.S. policy can achieve. With respect to Iran, for example, the United States has during recent administrations fallen prey to the notion that we can transform Iran, whether through diplomacy or sanctions. While well-intentioned, these attempts have led to a greater emphasis on Iran in U.S. international diplomacy than the issue merits. A better approach would be to focus on the long-term containment and deterrence of Iran and wait for internal forces to produce change.

Better matching of ends and means will also require a greater willingness by policymakers to use the full suite of policy tools available—coercion and diplomacy—rather than privileging one over another for reasons of ideology.

• *Improve strategic planning.* When interventions are necessary, the United States should look to work through local partners to the extent possible, as it did in both Yemen and Syria. We also should amplify partner efforts with higher-end capabilities

that the United States uniquely possesses—such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance abilities, special forces, and air power—as well as assistance with coordinating nonmilitary activities like stabilization or rule of law, which are areas in which our partners have invested less than in military capabilities. This does not mean that the United States can or should try to avoid long-term deployments to the region; some of these, as in the case of Iraq and Syria, can likely be done with a relatively small footprint that nevertheless delivers significant dividends. In other cases, once U.S. forces withdraw, the region's politics and gambits by rival powers might make it difficult for them to return. While there thus may be room to scale back the U.S. force posture in the region, it would be a mistake to adopt an "over-the-horizon" posture.

Finally, given that many of the region's conflicts are ultimately foreseeable, the United States should engage in more intensive strategic planning with allies. This should take place between periods of conflict, but even more critically should precede any commitment of U.S. aid during a conflict. Better advance planning, for example, might have yielded more realistic Gulf Cooperation Council goals and a timeline for achieving them in Yemen; instead, the United States is left with an open-ended commitment to a conflict over which it has little influence. The United States already engages in this sort of planning with Israel and should replicate it with other allies.

• *Prevent extremism.* Realistically, terrorism will remain a key national security policy priority for the United States, regardless of the strategic preferences of policymakers. It is difficult, if not unrealistic, to ignore the rise of groups like the Islamic State. Yet campaigns against such groups can prove a costly diversion from other priorities. Therefore, the United States should place a greater emphasis on the prevention of extremism in the first place, alongside kinetic counterterrorism operations. For all of the United States' success in counterterrorism operations, violent extremism has in fact spread significantly across the Middle East since 9/11.

The factors that underlie the emergence of extremism have been extensively researched, providing ample analysis on which to base a policy of prevention. The real challenge lies in the policy trade-offs involved. Two of the major factors motivating individuals to join extremist groups are political exclusion and abuse by security forces. However, it is often U.S. security partners, and sometimes security forces directly funded by the United States, who are responsible for these problems.

To address this, it is vital that the U.S. government come to a clearer shared understanding within the national security bureaucracy of the causes of extremism, and that steps be taken to ensure that these factors are weighed as U.S. policy in the region is formulated. This requires the integration of development tools with traditional national security tools, a challenge that has thus far proven difficult for the U.S. government but is nevertheless vital. In addition, where partners at the local or national level are willing to fight extremism but lack the capacity to do so, the United States should step in to provide funding and organize other Western allies to do the same. Such investments in prevention are undoubtedly far cheaper than the cost of eventual intervention. See the United States Institute of Peace for greater detail on preventing extremism.

The place of the Middle East in a strategy of great power competition has yet to be defined. It is naïve to think that the United States will simply be able to move on from the region, yet it is clear that the level of investment of the past two decades yielded poor returns and could not be maintained even were it desirable to do so. Nor should it be discounted that the Middle East could offer opportunities for cooperation among great powers. The United States, Russia, and China have already cooperated to a limited extent on issues such as counterpiracy and nuclear nonproliferation in the region. Whether such cooperation proves possible or not, it appears clear that it is neither in the U.S. interest nor a wise use of resources to adopt the zero-sum approach of the Cold War, seeking to exclude the influence of other great powers wherever it may crop up. Success instead will manifest itself by increasingly capable allies who can act autonomously but in close coordination with the United States, and who see advantage in aligning with a U.S.-led global order.