

Managing Middle East Defense Partnerships Amid Great Power Competition

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Brief Analysis

The U.S. government can counter the narrative of withdrawal by disassociating its regional commitment from the number of “boots on the ground,” building longer-term security cooperation plans, and clarifying its CAATSA sanctions policy.

As the Biden administration reviews America’s global military posture, the common assessment is that its footprint in the Middle East will shrink. In March, the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance [noted \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf) the need to “right-size” this footprint “to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.” When viewed against a background of reengaging Iran diplomatically and withdrawing forces from Afghanistan, a reduction in America’s military presence in the Middle East will be seen by some local partners as tantamount to abandoning the region.

Fortunately, the U.S. government has ample means to counter this narrative. A decrease in troop presence does not have to mean a decrease in influence or effectiveness, and the fact remains that no other competitor can match Washington’s robust network of defense relationships in the region. Yet if the administration hopes to dispel talk of

American retreat, secure U.S. interests, and prevent adverse gains by great-power competitors, it will need to increase its diplomatic efforts on various fronts, clarify its messaging, and make a lasting commitment to addressing partner needs.

Flip the Script

Focusing on the number of troops in any given theater can be misleading. In the Middle East, a reduction in overall force size tells only part of the story. In January, for instance, Gen. Kenneth McKenzie noted (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-forces-expand-reach-in-saudi-arabia-11611611393>) that U.S. Central Command is exploring alternate basing options in the region, in part to reduce the risk Iran's cruise and ballistic missiles pose to U.S. bases. Many of these facilities are concentrated in Gulf countries—a byproduct of the U.S. containment policy in the 1990s and the invasion of Iraq in 2003—and are thus within striking distance of Iran. Even with ballistic missile defense assets, these facilities remain at risk. Shifting U.S. forces to other bases reduces the overall risk and increases Washington's flexibility to respond to threats in various locations.

Moreover, after the January 2020 Iranian ballistic missile attack on al-Assad Air Base, the United States consolidated its forces in Iraq to enhance force protection, maximize air defense coverage, and increase the resiliency of the U.S. presence. Even if the overall level of troops drops, such efforts demonstrate a commitment to hardening defenses in order to maximize U.S. longevity in the region, and Washington should message its partners and adversaries accordingly.

Other, more high-profile features of U.S. defense planning can likewise reassure partners. As shown by various foreign military training programs (<https://www.dsca.mil/international-military-education-training-imet>) in the United States, continued joint counterterrorism efforts (<https://www.state.gov/the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis/>), and regional military exercises (e.g., Eager Lion (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1179543/eager-lion-exercise-a-keystone-event-in-us-jordan-partnership-integration/>) in Jordan, Eager Defender (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2673194/kuwait-and-us-naval-forces-complete-exercise-eager-defender-21/>) in Kuwait, Bright Star (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1616863/us-participates-in-exercise-bright-star-in-egypt/>) in Egypt), advancing initiatives that demonstrate lasting commitment does not require a large footprint. For instance, the Bahrain-based U.S. Fifth Fleet continues to shepherd the eight-member International Maritime Security Construct (<https://www.imscsentinel.com/>) as it protects the free flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz. In addition to conducting regular freedom of navigation exercises with partners, the Fifth Fleet recently confiscated a shipload of small arms likely bound for Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Elsewhere in the region, the Pentagon has transferred (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moving-israel-centcom-another-step-light>) Israel from European Command's area of responsibility to CENTCOM's. The move will give Israel further opportunities to integrate its security efforts with Arab partners. Moreover, U.S. defense planning for Israel will likely still include assets from EUCOM, which has a long history of providing logistics and support for Israeli forces.

Build Longer-Term Security Cooperation Plans

Fairly or not, Middle East defense partners often regard security cooperation as a referendum on how the United States views its overall relationship with them. In the past, alternating levels of arms sales between administrations and the layering of conditions on deliveries sometimes stoked tensions with Washington. Today, such practices incur the additional risk of partners potentially turning to Russia and China for procurement.

For example, China's exports of armed drones to the Middle East have ballooned in recent years, per the latest data

<https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>) provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. The Biden administration may decide to taper arms sales to select partners—a reasonable conclusion given the negative consequences that have sometimes emerged from selling American weapons to the region—but making too abrupt a change could jeopardize U.S. bilateral relationships and global priorities alike.

To avoid such turbulence, Washington should normalize what it views as the baseline level of materiel support across future administrations, and communicate this baseline to partners. For countries that rely on Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and Title 10 support, this should include close consultation with Congress to anticipate future funding levels. For countries that have the requisite funds to purchase through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program, the United States should urge them to focus on requests that are unlikely to provoke pushback from Congress, such as systems intended for ballistic missile defense, border security, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Some countries that rely on FMF (e.g., Jordan) already have multiyear planning mechanisms in which U.S. officials consult with them on how to balance acquisition priorities against anticipated future funding. Washington should consider expanding this model to other FMS countries. A longer planning timeline could reassure partners that even if U.S. security cooperation ebbs and flows slightly as administrations change, it will not dissipate overnight.

Communicate Risks More Clearly

Two factors have increasingly complicated U.S. defense partnerships in recent years. The first is the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which [requires](https://www.state.gov/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/sections-231-and-235/) [\(https://www.state.gov/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/sections-231-and-235/\)](https://www.state.gov/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/sections-231-and-235/) the U.S. government to impose at least five out of twelve possible sanctions against any country that makes military purchases from Russia, among other provisions. To date, Washington has applied CAATSA sanctions to China (for purchasing Russia's Su-35 fighter jet and S-400 air defense system) and Turkey (for purchasing and accepting S-400s). The second factor is the increased presence of Russian and Chinese military materiel in U.S. partner countries, which raises the risk of intelligence collection against U.S. platforms. This is further complicated by increased Chinese commercial investment in the region and the growing concern that these deals often include intelligence assets.

A year after passing CAATSA, Congress enacted additional legislation allowing the president to issue waivers in cases where U.S. national security interests supersede the purpose of the sanctions. A prime candidate for such waivers is India, which has a longstanding defense relationship with Russia but is important to U.S. competition against China. Although New Delhi has diversified its acquisition spending and bought more American materiel in recent years, it also purchased S-400s from Moscow in 2016 and is expected to take delivery of them this year. The Biden administration will likely wait until that point to decide whether to issue a waiver.

In contrast, Turkey is a NATO ally and took delivery of the S-400 despite multiple U.S. warnings, thus triggering CAATSA sanctions and expulsion from the F-35 program. The difference between a country with a legacy connection to Russia (India) and a NATO ally that proceeded with a sale despite warnings (Turkey) is clear. Yet the delay in responding to India and other partners who have procured Russian materiel (e.g., Egypt purchased the Su-35) has left many governments wondering what Washington's CAATSA policy is exactly.

As for the increased presence of adversary assets near U.S. assets, the Turkish S-400/F-35 case is the most prominent Russian example, but several Chinese examples bear mentioning as well. Beijing chose Djibouti as the location for its [first foreign base](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-kingdom-meets-middle-east) [\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-kingdom-meets-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-kingdom-meets-middle-east), eventually settling just kilometers from the U.S. base at Camp Lemonnier. According to an April 2021 report by the U.S. Naval Institute, American military officials assess that China has now expanded its capabilities

there to be able to repair aircraft carriers. And on the commercial front, certain Chinese investments—such as the deal to manage Israel’s Haifa port (which is sometimes used by the U.S. Sixth Fleet) and plans to construct a 5G network in the United Arab Emirates (which is in the procurement process for the F-35)—could potentially jeopardize the security of U.S. assets in the region and complicate U.S. relations with these countries.

Every year, the Defense Department holds multiple military dialogues with its regional partners, some multilaterally, some one-on-one. These dialogues should be used as a forum to address CAATSA policy, including what Washington views as the triggers for both sanctions and waivers. This forum also provides a useful opportunity to establish parameters for what level and type of Chinese investment might spur Washington to limit its security cooperation with a given partner.

Conclusion

In June, the USS *Ronald Reagan* aircraft carrier redeployed from the Indo-Pacific theater to the Middle East to support the Afghanistan withdrawal. Once the *Reagan* returns to the Indo-Pacific, U.S. competitors will have a convenient talking point to highlight the perceived American retreat from the region. To counter this narrative, fend off great-power competitors in the Middle East, and refocus resources elsewhere in a more effective and sustainable manner, the Biden administration will need to take several steps sooner rather than later. In particular, it should shift the focus away from just “boots on the ground,” clarify its CAATSA policy, and enhance security cooperation with key regional partners.

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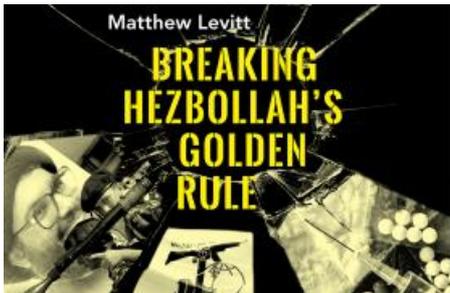
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