

U.S. Encouragement of Regional Military Cooperation: An Ongoing Process

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Brief Analysis

Although the United States has firmly committed to shifting its focus eastward, it is making clear efforts to build up regional alternatives to protect its interests.

On November 10, the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) launched joint military exercises in the Persian Gulf with the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Bahrain. This five-day training exercise was aimed at enhancing the interoperability between the participants and their naval forces and came after recent Iranian attempts to impose hegemony over the waterways. Furthermore, soon after those maneuvers, the U.S. “Spartan” force along with Royal Saudi Land Forces, Kuwaiti Land Forces launched the eighth day “Gulf Shooting 2021” exercise at Al-Udaya’a Complex in Kuwait. This further points to the persistent American engagement in raising its partners’ deterrence.

The broader regional dynamics undergirding this joint effort and the causal triggers that led to its timing both cast light on U.S. strategy in the Middle East and its renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific, even as Iranian hostility is increasing. The recent naval exercises between the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Bahrain specifically focused on hybrid naval warfare-style response, and were explicit in their message.

The American Pivot to East Asia

Although the Biden administration has updated the “National Security Strategy” (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>) issued under President Trump, the critical features of that strategy remained largely unchanged. The focus remained centered on countering the threats posed by China and Russia and reducing U.S. involvement in small wars, as has been the case since 9/11.

Yet Iranian hostility has driven cooperation between the United States and its partners, made easier by the recent Abraham Accords. These new alliances are likely to continue to shape regional cooperation against the dual backdrops of continued Iranian threats, and a refocused United States.

And despite the lack of appetite in both the Middle East and in Washington for a heavy U.S. military footprint in the region, short-term crises and long-term interests alike still make it impossible for the United States to withdraw from the Middle East altogether. Recent Iranian attacks on KSA energy facilities, the Gaza crisis last May, and the [ongoing migrant crisis in Belarus](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kurds-are-fleeing-iraq-face-uncertainty) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kurds-are-fleeing-iraq-face-uncertainty>) exemplify how occurrences taking place in the Middle East have a global impact, and will therefore continue to pull U.S. attention back towards the region. China’s recently signed 25-year, \$400-billion [agreement](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/25-year-agreement-between-china-and-iran-continuation-previous-policy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/25-year-agreement-between-china-and-iran-continuation-previous-policy>) with Iran validates President Biden’s view that China is a significant challenge to U.S. interests across the globe, and demonstrates further that the United States will remain engaged in the Middle East for years to come.

Notably, even as the United States has shifted its focus to the Indo-Pacific region, it has simultaneously maintained its anti-Iranian actions, albeit with a limited footprint. This strategy has succeeded in large part due to U.S. partnerships with its Gulf allies and Israel. With the Abraham Accords, this is further facilitated by increasing ties between Israel and the Gulf partners themselves.

New Regional Partnerships

In recent years, U.S. military and diplomatic strategies have deployed extensive efforts to establish alliance and cooperation between the various parties in the Middle East and Gulf region. The most recent was Trump’s [MESA project](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-withdrawal-arab-nato-and-how-america-can-be-force-good) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-withdrawal-arab-nato-and-how-america-can-be-force-good>), an attempt to form a pan-Arab military alliances which has had little success in creating mechanisms for long-term, sustainable coordination.

Likewise, since 2017, the United States and Israel have made significant progress in subverting Iranian hostilities. Both countries managed to direct significant blows against vital Iranian assets to deter and deprive Iran of the advantages of its blackmail tactics. Through secret and overt military and cyber operations conducted by the United States and Israeli forces against Iran, its proxies, and its militias inside Iran, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, or the seas at large, they have successfully prevented Iran from formulating a comprehensive retaliation so far. Iran’s response to these attacks can likewise be described as symbolic, or even weak, whether in response to the killing of high profile targets [Qasem Soleimani](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/killing-gassem-soleimani-what-does-it-mean-iraq) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/killing-gassem-soleimani-what-does-it-mean-iraq>) or Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, or the assassinations of lesser-known leaders as well as more critical strategic targets.

The developments over the past year have opened the door to new horizons on this front. The historic Abraham Accords, facilitated by the previous U.S. administration, between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, and later Morocco and Sudan, provided new opportunities for joint strategic action in risk prevention, and aversion. The deterrence of Iran’s threat capabilities is certainly a key factor behind these efforts.

Official U.S. and Israeli statements regarding the November 10 military exercises give credence to this trend. In a press conference, an Israeli naval officer said that the United States was leading military cooperation as a means of thwarting recent Iranian attempts to impose regional hegemony over the waterways. The Israeli officer cited the July attack on a Liberian-flagged Mercer Street oil tanker, which killed two people. At the time of the attack, Secretary of State Antony [Blinken](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/blinken-says-us-confident-that-iran-behind-attack-on-israeli-linked-ship/) (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/blinken-says-us-confident-that-iran-behind-attack-on-israeli-linked-ship/) issued a statement expressing his confidence that Iran carried out the attack, and promised a collective response.

Despite its new strategic focus, the United States utilized its regional partners to maintain a tangible strategic impact in the Middle East to protect and secure its vital interests. Given

the current regional situation and its many uncertainties, we should expect to see the United States further investing in confidence-boosting measures and encouraging cooperation with partner nations. Such a new approach to security and stability in the region seems to be taking root, albeit gradually.

Looking Ahead

For its part, Iran continues its destabilization of the region using hybrid warfare, on both land and sea, in an attempt, to spread its activities from the Strait of Hormuz to Bab al-Mandab and even further afield into the Mediterranean Sea.

The logic of Iran's destabilizing effort in the region is based on several elements. The most important of them is the ability of Iran to deny its actions, while raising the tension and the immediate threat of escalation to a full-fledged regional war. The Iranian calculation was always that their adversaries will choose to refrain from action or retaliation, which will allow Iran to advance their aims on the ground.

While Israel and the United States deter Iran on the ground, the Abraham Accords allowed for a cultural, political, and strategic shift that weakened Iran's ideological capabilities and dealt a shocking blow to its ongoing propaganda against Israel. Both phenomena paved the way for this latest step toward successful cooperation, as made manifest by this five-day maritime exercise. The entry of the United States into the **post-Afghan war era** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-public-opinion-american-dream-after-afghanistan>) marks a decisive turning point in U.S. foreign policy. While emphasizing its tendency toward disengaging from involvement in regional conflicts on the one hand, the United States should remain committed to building regional alliances based on shared burdens and interests to maintain a limited yet impactful footprint, and to further its broader goal of countering China.

The Middle East is once again returning, as it has been throughout the 20th century, an open arena for conflict and big-power rebalancing game. Recent **developments** (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjK_Zu_85j0AhUkl2oFHfL1DRsQFnoECAcQAw&url=https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/biden-says-us-has-tools-respond-opeac-withholding-oil-supply-2021-11-06/&usg=AOvVaw0p-811b_UArmIM44im7MDR) in oil prices have demonstrated the centrality of energy economies and the centrality of the Gulf region in the balance of the global economy. And as the United States continues to focus on empowering its capabilities and human power on the Indo-Pacific region, it appears to have managed, with a minimum increase in its own footprint, to provide a competent deterrent to the destabilizing Iranian activities using limited powers and in partnership with friendly regional countries, which has likely created a foundation on which to build in the future. ❖

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