

The Pentagon's New Defense Strategic Guidance: Pivoting to Asia, But Still Stuck in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

Despite Washington's desire to focus on the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East regrettably holds much unfinished business for the United States and its military.

The Pentagon's new Defense Strategic Guidance is a thoughtful and necessary attempt to adjust to new geopolitical and fiscal realities. As with all plans, however, adversaries (and friends) have a vote. Time and again, vital U.S. interests (namely oil) and the politics of the Middle East have frustrated the designs of presidents who sought better opportunities elsewhere. For Nixon, it was the 1973 war and oil embargo; for Carter, the Iranian revolution and embassy hostage crisis; for Reagan, the Beirut fiasco, Lebanon hostages, and Iran-Contra; for Bush, the 1991 Gulf War; for Clinton, the Arab-Israeli peace process; and for the last administration, the second intifada, 9/11, and Iraq. So what surprises could the Middle East spring to upend the Pentagon's pivot from Europe toward the Asia-Pacific region?

- What if Iran were to launch a covert campaign to harass international shipping in the Gulf instead of closing the Strait of Hormuz? Would the United States be willing to organize protective convoys, as it did toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War? If so, how long might such efforts last? Remember, the no-fly zones over Iraq were "temporary" expedients that wound up lasting more than a decade, creating tensions with allies and providing pretexts to jihadist enemies. What would be the political, military, and economic costs of open-ended convoy operations?
- What if Hizballah were to harass gas exploration vessels and production platforms off the coast of Israel, leading to tensions or even outright confrontation? And what if Turkey were to back Hizballah for opportunistic reasons (e.g., to score points with the Arabs and needle Israel and Cyprus)?
- What if Israel were to launch a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and Tehran responded by launching missiles against Israel and encouraging its proxies to attack U.S. personnel and interests in Iraq,

Afghanistan, and the Gulf?

These scenarios do not even begin to exhaust the gloomy possibilities, which include intensification of civil violence in Syria, escalation of sectarian violence in Iraq, resumption of political unrest in Egypt or Bahrain, or the spread of such troubles to Jordan -- not to mention the implications of the Saleh government's demise in Yemen. In one or more of these cases, the U.S. military could find itself engaged in noncombatant evacuation, humanitarian relief, or even targeted counterterrorist operations, which it is already conducting in Yemen.

The new Strategic Guidance also (understandably) dances around some of the more significant challenges the United States may face in accomplishing one of its core missions: deterring and defeating aggression. Washington currently operates in the region under a credibility deficit. As a result of the perceived U.S. abandonment of longstanding allies (particularly Hosni Mubarak in Egypt), many of America's friends in the region no longer trust it, and some of its enemies no longer fear it. Reestablishing U.S. credibility is perhaps Washington's most important challenge. This can only be done through sustained presidential engagement, rebuilding personal relationships with both Arab and Israeli leaders. But it is not clear that the White House recognizes the problem or is inclined to devote the time and energy required to address it.

Finally, a decade of fighting counterinsurgents and terrorists and the passing of two decades since the end of the Cold War has dulled the U.S. aptitude for deterrence and brinkmanship. Thus, while the Strategic Guidance gives equal weight to deterrence by denial (frustrating adversary objectives) and deterrence by punishment (imposing unacceptable costs), Washington has, in practice, evinced a strong aversion to the latter. Hence its reliance on arms transfers to Gulf Arab allies as a means of convincing Tehran that the nuclear program will not enhance Iran's security. Washington may soon discover, however, that exclusive reliance on deterrence by denial may not be sufficient to keep the peace, and may in fact help bring about the very outcome it is trying to avoid.

In the Asia-Pacific, the opportunity to build a stable and prosperous regional order beckons. But in the Middle East there remains, regrettably, much unfinished business for the United States and its military.

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