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Desert Shield of the Republic?

The Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East

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Abstract*

Political realists disagree on what America should "do" and "be" in the Middle East. All are skeptical towards extravagant geopolitical projects to transform the region. Yet they dispute whether hegemony in the region is worth it. Hegemonic "primacy realism" finds the commitment effective and affordable, and that Washington should stay to stabilize the region to ensure a favorable concentration of power. There is an alternative "shield of the republic" realism, however, which views the region as an unruly place that entangles and corrupts, involving interests that are either manageable from a remove or only generated by being there in the first place. The Gulf is increasingly peripheral to national interests while imposing high costs. The region is losing its salience grand strategically, entanglement has damaged republican liberties, and the calculus of whether continued hegemony is "worth it" has shifted decisively towards the downside. The time for abandonment has come.

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Desert Shield of the Republic? The Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East

Who's the fucking superpower here?

President William J. Clinton, 1996¹

The Greater Middle East consumes a large share of Washington's time and resources. Especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States has invested more blood and treasure in the "Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) region, broadly defined, than any other.² By 2015, "about 80% of the main meetings of the National Security Council focused on the Middle East."³ Is it worth it? The value of America's engagement in this theater is again debated in public, given persistent policy failures, the behavior of partners, and unanticipated costs in the wake of wars or "regime-change" in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, frustrated efforts to shape the war in Syria and the wider process of revolution and war in the 'Arab Spring', fears of Russia's growing influence and outcry of America's abandonment of the Kurds. Recent events, too, resurface the question, such as Saudi Arabia's murder of U.S.-employed journalist Jamal Khashoggi; the congressional resolution against U.S. support for the Saudi-Emirati military campaign and blockade of Yemen; tightening U.S. ties with illiberal regimes from Egypt to Qatar; President Donald Trump's proposed Middle East 'peace plan' and closeness to an increasingly nationalist Israel; and America's ongoing brinksmanship with Iran. In public debate, at least, the issue is back on the table.⁴ Even some supporters of U.S. primacy now argue that America should narrow or relinquish its ambitions in the MENA theater.⁵

¹ Cited in Anshel Pfeffer, *Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.240.

² We define the region broadly, in line with the salient political and economic dynamics rather than narrowing the scope by diplomatic nicety (e.g. Israel and Turkey are rarely part of intergovernmental organizations' definitions of MENA, because of their aspirations to Europeanized identity/status, but in reality both are located in – and central to the geopolitics of – the Middle East): "MENA Region Countries List 2018," *IstiZada.com*, <http://istizada.com/mena-region/>.

³ "A Dangerous Modesty", *The Economist* 6 June 2015.

⁴ Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman, "America's Middle East Purgatory", *Foreign Affairs* 98:1 (2019), pp.88-100; F. Gregory Gause III, "Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East," *Survival* 61:5 (2019), pp.7-24; Emma Ashford, "Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12:1 (2018), pp.127-148.

⁵ Martin Indyk, "The Middle East Isn't Worth It Any More" *Wall Street Journal* 18 January 2020; Thomas Wright, "The Folly of Retrenchment" *Foreign Affairs* 99:2 (2020), pp.10-18, pp.17-18.

Yet America's presence is likely to endure without fundamental reassessment within government. Despite excitable claims that a 'post-American' Middle East is emerging, the superpower – with its arms sales, military deployments, increased propensity for bombing, and its coercion of Iran – shows little sign of disengaging.⁶ Despite the discontent that accompanies America's embroilment, there has been little appraisal in government about the baseline assumption that the United States has interests in the region compelling enough to warrant a commitment, whether as a ground presence or offshore.⁷ While debate abounds about *how* to maintain hegemony there and *how much* to invest, there is little scrutiny about *whether* to.⁸ The consensus in Washington is to interpret policy failure as evidence of the need for more or better American ordering power, not less.⁹ No U.S. president has fundamentally reviewed the region's status in their grand strategic calculations, other than to elevate it after 9/11.

What should realists make of this enduring commitment? By "realism", we mean a pessimistic intellectual tradition that views international life as dangerously anarchic, that emphasizes the pursuit of security in a world defined by the possibility of war and the need for self-help, that views cooperation as always impermanent and fragile, and which prizes material power as the *ultima ratio* that protects vital interests when all else fails. We include realists both inside and outside government. We work on the assumption that we can develop prescriptive as well as descriptive realist theory.¹⁰ *Realism* prescribes *realpolitik*; the recognition that to defend a desired political system at home, we must do what is necessary to shield it from the dangerous system of international politics.¹¹ Is there an optimal realist position on America's commitment to the Middle East? How far does this volatile neighborhood actually matter? Does it give enough of a geopolitical return on investment? Or is it a net liability?

American realists are torn over the Middle East. If realists agree that the U.S. is better off not attempting to transform the region, they disagree on how important U.S. interests are in the region, and how to secure them. While realists are a heterogeneous lot, we can speak – in strategy

⁶ Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Trump Didn't Shrink U.S. Military Commitments Abroad: He Expanded Them", *Foreign Affairs* 3 December 2019.

⁷ See Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, "Why Washington Doesn't Debate Grand Strategy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 10:4 (2016), pp.14–45, pp.14–17.

⁸ As Micah Zenko observes, *US Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal* (London: Chatham House Research Paper, 2018), p.3.

⁹ See Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42:4 (2018), pp.9-46.

¹⁰ See Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies* 6:1 (1996), pp.7-53.

¹¹ John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.8-12.

and policy terms – of “primacy” and “restraint” realists. “Primacy realists” advocate the continued pursuit of American global supremacy and the sustainment of current core commitments in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East as the best path to security. They argue that the U.S. should continue to exercise hegemony in all three regions, MENA included, lest Washington lose influence and permit a regional deterioration that will have pernicious consequences. By contrast, “restraint” realists advocate reduction and rebalancing of commitments, on the basis that the pursuit of supremacy overextends American power and makes it less secure. They fear over-entanglement in a volatile region that brings heavy costs for limited gains, and therefore recommend retrenchment.

In this article, we argue that the United States should abandon the Middle East.¹² The attempt to maintain armed supremacy in the region is both depleting and corrupting. As a sinkhole for American power, it depletes resources that would be better deployed elsewhere – including at home, as the COVID-19 crisis highlights. For its increasingly unaffordable investments, Washington obtains little of the stabilizing influence that it hopes for, in a region that is losing its international salience. The interests that the U.S. *does* have in the region are either generated and worsened by being there in the first place (e.g. terrorism) or better managed from a remove (e.g. oil and nuclear proliferation). And by engaging Washington in continuous war, it thereby corrupts the very domestic constitution and public sphere that grand strategy exists to protect. In making this case, we revive a strain of realism that has been neglected, a “shield of the republic” realism that worries about the interaction of insolvent foreign policy abroad and civil turmoil at home.

We develop our argument in five parts. In Part I, we define realists’ common ground. Realists share a dissatisfaction with the perverse results of the *status quo* in the region. They agree that involvement this century has not achieved sufficient gains for acceptable costs. They agree that these failures are attributable to hubristic ambitions, and an exaggeration of American power and knowledge. And they reason that a revision is therefore due. In Part II, we demonstrate how realists then diverge. Two broad streams are identified: “primacy” realism and “restraint” realism. Primacy realists distinguish hegemony from “transformation”, arguing that the U.S. can exercise a modified form of hegemony without falling prey to excessive ambitions to remake the region in America’s image. Our target is primacy realism specifically, rather than engagement approaches in general, because the former makes the most coherent possible case for the latter. In critiquing the

¹² Our argument also applies to other Western powers with substantial MENA entanglements – but our focus here is the United States, due to its systemic significance.

primacy realists' case for continuing Middle Eastern commitment, we also reject the less coherent neoconservative and liberal-interventionist "rationales" for MENA entanglement. Indeed, we outline the strongest case against pulling back, and for enduring – albeit modified – hegemony in the Middle East, which is the primacy realist one. In Part III, we then critique that case, showing that of all America's grand-strategic theaters of commitment, that neighborhood is peculiarly unworthwhile. Regardless of tactical adjustments, continued embroilment achieves gains that are modest at best, for steep costs, in a region of declining importance. In Part IV, we appeal to an American republican tradition of realism. That tradition turns attention to an issue that primacy realists and other advocates of hegemony strangely neglect, namely the domestic, constitutional, and civic costs of hegemony. Power projection abroad – and especially in the Middle East – can institutionalize permanent war, thereby damaging American institutions and jeopardizing constitutional government. To be clear, we do not argue that abandoning the Middle East will restore America's republican health by itself – but it would be an important step, alongside other domestically-focused measures. In Part V, we explain why our case for abandonment is bounded to the Middle East *specifically*, rather than the more "general" case for restraint that is already well-established.

I After Iraq: Common Ground

Few American observers – including primacy realists – are content with the *status quo*. Presidents are typically torn between frustration at the complexity of the region and fear of letting go. Ever since the Carter Doctrine of 1980, denying control of the region to the Soviet Union after British withdrawal, most presidents attempted to impose order while limiting America's liability. Ronald Reagan, who believed no region "presents America with more difficult, more frustrating or more convoluted problems,"¹³ nevertheless continued as the guarantor of Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, oversaw the creation of a Middle East-focused U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and intervened in the Iran-Iraq War. Even the Beirut barracks bombing of 1983 led to a tactical shift offshore, not the abandonment of the theater. His successor, George H.W. Bush, forcibly expelled Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, increased America's ground presence to preserve the West's oil windpipe and the Gulf balance, and tried to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while shaping a "new world order." President Bill Clinton felt the limits of U.S. authority after meeting Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet he maintained a UN blockade and 'no-fly' zone over Iraq, and a policy of "dual containment." George W. Bush ran for

¹³ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p.407; Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: America in the Middle East* (London: Portobello Books, 2009), p.282-3.

office promising humility abroad, yet the “Global War on Terror” (GWO’T), centered on the Arab-Islamic world, was the consuming priority of his presidency.

Even reluctant presidents, like Barack Obama and Donald Trump, feel a “pull” to remain engaged. Both voiced frustration: after the Libya “shitshow”, Obama complained of the “Washington playbook”¹⁴ as he attempted a grand strategic ‘pivot’ towards Asia, while Trump vowed to leave the “bloodstained sand” of the Middle East.¹⁵ Yet both continued the effort to maintain U.S. hegemony. Obama conducted an expanded targeted assassination program, helped overthrow Libya’s Gaddafi regime, degraded the Islamic State (ISIL) with airstrikes and support for proxies, used sanctions to coerce the Islamic Republic of Iran into rolling back its nuclear program, and invested a billion dollars a year in sponsoring the Syrian revolt. His drawdown from Iraq marked a return to overall troop levels in the region below the largest spike during the occupation of Iraq, but well above the pre-“GWO’T” norm.¹⁶ In the final years of his presidency, the U.S. maintained bases in every MENA country except Yemen and Iran. In one year when critics accused Obama of “retreat”,¹⁷ the United States implemented a nuclear agreement with Iran, took part in the Syrian Geneva peace talks, laid out an Israeli-Palestine peace plan, and dropped 26,171 bombs on six Middle Eastern countries.¹⁸ President Donald Trump enlarged America’s footprint further. He increased civilian and military personnel there by 33%¹⁹ and Pentagon contractors by 15%,²⁰ escalated a confrontation with Iran, reinforced ties with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Israel, and bombed Syria to punish the use of chemical weapons. Arms sales to the region rose by 108% over the period 2013-2017.²¹ Such troop withdrawals that occur – in Afghanistan and Syria – mostly involve redeployment to larger bases elsewhere in the region. The overall trend is increased presence.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic* April 2015; Derek Chollet, “One President’s Stand Against the Washington Herd”, *The Atlantic* 10 March 2016.

¹⁵ Anne Gearan, “Trump Tries to Rebrand Syria withdrawal as a Political Promise Kept”, *Washington Post* 24 October 2019.

¹⁶ Tim Kane, *The Decline in American Engagement: Patterns in U.S. Troop Deployments* (Economics Working Paper 16101) Hoover Institution, 11 January 2016, p.5.

¹⁷ Robert J. Lieber, *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

¹⁸ See Micah Zenko and Jennifer Wilson, “How Many Bombs Did the United States Drop in 2016?” *Council on Foreign Relations* 5 January 2017, at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-many-bombs-did-united-states-drop-2016>.

¹⁹ “Bush-era Officials Reshape Trump Administration; U.S. Troops in the Middle East Reportedly Rise 33%” *Haaretz and the Associated Press* 20 November 2017.

²⁰ “Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the U.S. CENTCOM Area of Responsibility” January 2019, at https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/ps/.CENTCOM_reports.html/5A_January_2019_Final.pdf.

²¹ Yahel Arnon and Yoel Guzansky, “A Conventional Arms Race” *INSS Insight* 1074 11 July 2018.

Realists agree that a prudent statecraft should avoid over-ambitious projects to transform the region along democratic and capitalist lines. This is true both of “primacy” and “restraint” realists. They agree that the past two decades have wasted too much blood and treasure, and created cures worse than the disease. Their stance contrasts with neoconservatives and liberal internationalists, whose majority response to failure in the Middle East is not to infer that the U.S. should keep its distance. To the contrary, such anti-realist “deep engagers” call for improved engagement. Kenneth Pollack, for instance, argues that the “way out” is to transform the region first, through cultural exchange, commerce, and diplomacy.²² For realists, be they restrainers *or* primacists, that “path” is impossible and never-ending.

Realists agree that the imprudent invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted from non-realist ideological excess.²³ As well as a preventive war to destroy an enemy regime while re-establishing general deterrence after 9/11, it was a missionary war to transform the Arab-Islamic world, followed by further harmful experiments in regime change. An invasion that was supposed to swiftly disarm and liberate a state, free-up a region, exhibit American power, bring adversaries into line, and reverse WMD proliferation and state-terrorist collaboration had perverse results: hundreds of thousands dead, at the cost of \$5.6 trillion, along with looting, criminality, sectarian strife, civil war, mass flight, the empowerment of Iran, the opening of a new front for Islamist terror networks, added incentives for nuclear proliferation and counter-balancing by adversaries. Even after the “Surge” – Washington’s 2007-9 injection of personnel and money to stem Iraq’s spiraling civil wars – Iraq devolved into a sectarian, Shia-dominated ascendancy with ties to Iran, provoking the rise of the Islamic State, against whom a U.S.-funded and -trained Army collapsed. The “GWO’T” also led to rendition, torture, and the growth of unaccountable executive power, inflicting physical, moral, and constitutional harm.

The war got the backing of an influential coalition of neoconservatives and liberal hawks.²⁴ Like the “Bush Doctrine”, they stood in the Wilsonian tradition, assuming America’s security depends upon the quality of other states’ regimes, and that only the political and economic

²² Kenneth Pollack, *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East* (Random House, 2008).

²³ On the war’s ideological roots and realist dissent, see ‘War with Iraq is not in America’s National Interest’, *The New York Times*, 26 September 2002; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, ‘An Unnecessary War’, *Foreign Policy* 134 (2003), pp.50–9; Paul Starobin, ‘The Realists’, *National Journal* 39:37 (2006), pp.24–31; Patrick Porter, ‘Iraq: A Liberal War After All: A Critique of Deudney and Ikenberry’, *International Politics* 55:2 (2018), pp 334–348; Michael MacDonald, *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp.7–99; Benjamin Miller, “Explaining Changes in U.S. Grand Strategy: 9/11, the Rise of Offensive Liberalism, and the War in Iraq,” *Security Studies*, 19: 1 (2010), pp.26–65.

²⁴ As Michael J. Mazarr demonstrates: *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence and America’s Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), pp.316-318.

convergence of the world can make it safe for democracy.²⁵ Intellectual advocates of the war contrasted themselves against “unrealistic” realists.²⁶ President Bush II, influenced by hawkish intellectuals, voiced ambitions for the transformation of the region beyond counterproliferation, hoping that a corrective intervention in Baghdad would drive a benign domino wave throughout the region.²⁷ Even when the war met with disaster, to most of the pro-war coalition, their regional ambitions dictated staying beyond the first wave, despite domestic opposition and unexpected costs.

There were realists who supported a war for hegemonic purposes, such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.²⁸ But the war that unfolded was not the one they envisaged. Even the most offensively-minded maximal “realist” war would limit its goals to the creation of a favorable balance of power. It would be skeptical of the need for, or value of, occupying a state to democratize it and trigger a revolutionary wave. This war, by contrast, was more ambitious. It sought to exert a greater institutional impact on the host population, to alter the country’s and region’s political character, with the fall of Baghdad catalyzing a benign democratic domino wave. American regent Paul Bremer III instituted a thorough-going effort to purge the civil service, army, and broader state of anyone who may have held loyalties to the prior regime, as well as to overhaul the Iraqi economy with deregulation and privatization by *fiat*. Tellingly, both Rice and Rumsfeld opposed the subsequent “Surge” as disorder and casualties rose, concluding that the crisis was an Iraqi problem that did not merit continued occupation.²⁹ The congressionally-mandated *Iraq Study Group Report*, published in December 2006 and co-chaired by two senior primacy realists, James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, recommended a gradual pullback from Iraq – though not the region – alongside diplomatic initiatives to broker a settlement. Underpinning their report was an assumption that the region matters, and that Washington must stay to keep order.³⁰ Stability, not transformation or

²⁵ See Robert Jervis, ‘Understanding the Bush Doctrine’, *Political Science Quarterly* 118:3 (2003), pp.365–88, p.367; Andrew Flibbert, ‘The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and intellectuals in explanations of the Iraq war’, *Security Studies* 15:2 (2006), pp.310–52.

²⁶ Robert J. Lieber, ‘Foreign Policy Realists are Unrealistic on Iraq’, *The Chronicle Review* 18 October 2002; Robert Lieber, ‘The Folly of Containment’, *Commentary* 7 March 2003, pp.15-21.

²⁷ Bob Woodward, *State of Denial* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), pp.83–5; Wolfowitz on ‘stagnation’ in *The Jerusalem Post* (2003) cited in T. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p.30.

²⁸ On Rumsfeld’s shifting stances, see Tom McCarthy, ‘Donald Rumsfeld Denies He Thought Democracy in Iraq a Realistic Goal’, *The Guardian*, 9 June 2015.

²⁹ Stephen Dyson, *Leaders in Conflict: Bush and Rumsfeld in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.105; Fred Kaplan, ‘Beware Rumsfeld’s Snow Job: The former defense secretary’s revisionist op-ed’, *Slate* 25 November 2008; on Rice, see Michael R. Gordon, ‘The Secret Surge Debate’ *Foreign Policy* 18 March 2013.

³⁰ James A. Baker, III and Lee H. Hamilton, Co-Chairs, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward- A New Approach* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp.ix-x,1-2.

revision, was the overriding value.³¹ It is this point – about the region’s wider importance and the value of a continued commitment – that divides realists, and to which we now turn.

II Divergence: The Clash of Realisms

Beyond regret over Iraq, what broader conclusions should the United States draw from its chastening experience? Do the disappointments of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, chaos in Libya, the absence of an Arab-Israeli settlement, the destructive Syrian civil war, the U.S.-backed Saudi onslaught on Yemen, the growing Cold War between Iran and the Saudi bloc, or the persistence of *jihadi* terrorist militancy emanating from the region hold out any general lesson for America’s posture? Are these failures the results of errors in execution that can be remedied? Are they tolerable costs that represent a “lesser evil” compared to the likely consequences of retrenchment? Or do they represent burdens that are inherent in regional hegemony, and which are not worth it?

For “primacy realists”, despite the mixed record of presence in the region, there is no sensible alternative to staying. U.S. power “went ashore” geopolitically in the Middle East for sound *Realpolitik* reasons – to resist a potential downward thrust of Soviet imperialism – and it stays to “hold the ring”.³² That does not mean these realists are content with everything that has happened there; far from it. Rather, they argue that Washington should remain present in a more disciplined posture, changing what it can while managing what it cannot.

Primacy realists argue that the U.S. has perennial, important interests in the Middle East. Traditionally, the U.S. has calculated that three non-American regions contain concentrations of latent power, and are therefore of first-order significance: Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf.³³ The Middle East is a power center because of its oil deposits and the wealth it provides (which could be used by either local or external powers for the procurement of coercive capabilities), because it is the source and access chokepoint for a non-substitutable industrial input, and because it is a potential source of terrorist threat. To prevent the United States becoming a threatened, garrison state in a hostile world, America should strive to be the unrivaled hegemon and counterhegemonic stabilizer, to keep that world open and unthreatening, by ensuring that no hostile actors seize command of that vital ground. Primacy realism draws on hegemonic stability

³¹ “Robert Gates on Middle East: We Don’t Have a Strategy at All” *CBS DC* 19 May 2015; Jeffrey Goldberg, “Breaking Ranks: What Turned Brent Scowcroft against the Bush Administration?” *The New Yorker* 31 October 2005.

³² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp.7,23,29.

³³ Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp.45-46.

theory,³⁴ whereby one dominant state exercises a preponderance of power that lessens the insecurities that lead to arms races and spirals of alarm, enabling other states to ease their security competitions with neighbors and rivals, relax their arms programs, and focus on economic growth. It assumes that the U.S. cannot tolerate disorder, especially in such an important region. It holds that withdrawal would likely lead to some combination of severe outcomes, either violent chaos or hostile hegemony; that the risks of abandonment and inaction outweigh those of action and leadership; and that retrenchment is a dangerous experiment against an existing framework that works well enough. To primacy realists, the first results of a “post-American” Middle East demonstrate the perils involved.

As primacy realists argue,³⁵ the U.S. should stay to prevent adversaries dominating the region, to maintain access to the region’s oil and waterways, to reduce proliferation risks, and support Israel and other friendly states to bolster regional security. General geopolitical stability, or the limitation on instability, has an economic payoff, by keeping oil prices stable. After 9/11, the region’s importance rose further, making it necessary to prevent it becoming the sanctuary and platform for mass-casualty terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland and beyond.

In pursuit of these goals, it is argued, presence affords the U.S. a number of advantages. Allies and bases facilitate and enlarge its striking power. It confers a diplomatic “Camp David” effect – a reference to the 1978 accords that ended Israeli-Egyptian hostilities – enabling Washington to play peace broker. Security relationships facilitate regional peace. Washington can use the dependency of regional parties to generate incentives for conflict resolution. Democracy promotion and nation-building may be beyond America’s capabilities, but U.S. engagement is central to stability and preventing or terminating major interstate wars. The U.S. cannot prevent all conflict, but can limit and shape it. Thanks to America’s reassurances, there is decreased demand for nuclear weapons and more stability than there would be otherwise. Now, the U.S. must stay to

³⁴ See Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World’s Government in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), pp.34–35; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), pp.30–57.

³⁵ Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.118-121; Colin Dueck, *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.171-172; Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, “A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States”, *Perspectives on Politics* 9:4 (2011), pp.803-819, p.807; Peter Feaver and Hal Brands, “Should America Retrench? The Battle over Offshore Balancing”, *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016), pp.164-169; Hal Brands, “How to Make the Middle East Even Worse? A U.S. Withdrawal,” *Bloomberg* 9 October 2018; Doug Stokes and Kit Waterman, “Beyond Balancing? Intrastate Conflict and US Grand Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41:6 (2017), pp.824-849; even the seminal article by Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, arguing for a general pullback from overseas commitments, exempted the Middle East due to the importance of oil price stability: “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp.5–48, pp.25-29.

contain Iranian expansion, and to prevent encroachment by hostile external powers, principally Russia but perhaps also China. If the U.S. should avoid the excess of the GWoT, it should still perform the function that it performs in Asia, to be the “cork in the bottle.” While these commitments create difficulties, letting go of power is more dangerous, creating a spiral of security alarm that will be hard to control.

Primacy realists warn that a withdrawal would trigger a range of unwelcome scenarios. These range from an Iranian bid for hegemony to an intensifying competition between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and their groupings. This would damage global oil supplies and destabilize prices.³⁶ Resulting conflicts would probably target war-supporting productive assets, such as pipelines, oil infrastructure, and pumping stations. Even a war in Iraq that does not spread could cut Iraqi output to 2006 levels, lowering U.S. GDP by ~0.4%. A region-wide war (e.g. a long civil war in Iraq and Syria) that cut oil production by 50% across the GCC would remove 15% of worldwide production, exceeding the 1973-74 OPEC embargo by a factor of nearly four, doubling oil prices and cutting U.S. GDP by 3-5% in lost economic output. Other negative possibilities could be a resurgence of Islamist terrorism, rising threats to Israel, nuclear proliferation, or the encroachment of external powers, tipping the balance of power away from the U.S.

These prophecies are mixed, and sometimes contradictory, on whether there would be an overall “bandwagoning” or “balancing” to America’s disadvantage. U.S. abandonment cannot simultaneously drive states to bandwagon with the strongest power to create a new oil-rich hegemony while *also* making them pursue new alliances, rearmament, and nuclear proliferation to check one another. And a Middle East ripe for Iranian conquest, turning petro-wealth into military power, is not consistent with the scenario of Russia or Chinese domination. But as Hal Brands notes in another context, “even if these scenarios are considered mutually exclusive, from a U.S. perspective either one would be quite damaging.”³⁷

There is an alternative realist account of the Middle East, namely a “light footprint” version.³⁸ From this perspective, a heavy footprint incurs too many hazards and costs, and is

³⁶ Kenneth R. Vincent, “The Economic Costs of Persian Gulf Oil Supply Disruptions”, in Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary Kelanic (eds) *Crude Calculus: Re-examining the Energy Logic of the US Military Commitment to the Persian Gulf* (Stanford University Press, 2016), pp.79-112.

³⁷ Hal Brands, “Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing”, *The Washington Quarterly* 38:2 (2015), pp.7-28, p.27, Fn.50.

³⁸ Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil”, *Security Studies* 23:3 (2014), pp.548–581.

unnecessary. American interests are real, though limited, especially in the Gulf. They can be adequately secured from a more remote posture comparable to the historic British model, that is either over-the-horizon or through limited onshore garrisoning.

In principle, other advocates of a more remote posture – “offshore balancing” – agree that the U.S. has interests that are serious enough to warrant intervention *in extremis*, with the U.S. acting as balancer of last resort. In spirit, however, their emphasis is more on the “offshore” than the “balancing.”³⁹ Disenchantment with the experience of hegemony in the Gulf has tipped some realists who are otherwise generally in favor of maintaining primacy in Asia and Europe against enduring on-the-ground hegemony in the Middle East.⁴⁰ “Offshore balancing” realists are part of a broader realist reaction to U.S. policy between the Gulf wars, who doubted the value of a deep regional commitment to begin with.⁴¹

Building on and synthesizing the skepticism of realist critics, we will now suggest a realist case for general withdrawal from the region. This is not as a prelude to global isolationist pullback, but as a necessary step in bolstering U.S. power elsewhere and restoring the security of the American way of life.

III Not Worth the Candle? Taking Stock of the U.S. Middle Eastern Commitment

A revision is due of U.S. grand strategy, and where its Middle Eastern commitments fit. Here we critique realist rationales for primacy in the Middle East, and make the case for abandonment. We first summarize the core argument – which rests on three steps – before debunking the notion of “vital” Middle Eastern interests.

³⁹ Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp.178-181; Paul Pillar, “The forgotten benefits of offshore balancing,” *The National Interest*, 27 January, 2016; Barry Posen, “Pull back,” *Foreign Affairs* 92:1 (2013), pp.116-128; Robert Pape and James Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 95:4 (2016), pp.70-83.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Richard K. Betts, “American Strategy: Grand versus Grandiose”, in *America’s Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration* (CNAS 2012), p.37.

⁴¹ Christopher Layne, “Why the Gulf War Was Not in the National Interest,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 268, Number 1(1991), pp.54–81; Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, “A New Grand Strategy” *Atlantic Monthly* 289:1 (2002), pp.36-42; Jon Basil Utley, “How the Gulf War Gave Us the Antiwar Right” *The American Conservative* 21 December 2018; Robert H. Johnson, “The Persian Gulf in U.S. Strategy: A Skeptical View,” *International Security* 14:1 (1989), pp.122-160; Doug Bandow, *Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire* (Xulon Press, 2006).

First, the United States is overstretched and needs to cut back. Great powers can sustain themselves, or adjust better to a shifting environment, by rebalancing means and ends.⁴² Washington faces a deteriorating fiscal position, and an altered position of relative power. Its position as “global leader” is premised on a set of impermanent and atypical conditions from an earlier postwar era. Measured on Purchasing Power Parity, the contemporary U.S. produces 15-24% of global GDP, compared to the relative share of wealth it enjoyed in 1960 (~40%).⁴³ This trend-line is reversible to a degree – a Chinese contraction or Indian crash is also possible, and the U.S. could recover ground – but the overall balance has passed an inflection point. The U.S. remains the largest power on many metrics, but it also shoulders the most commitments, and must split its resources and energy among more theaters than its rivals. The days of incontestable unipolarity are over, and cannot be wished back.⁴⁴

The United States is accumulating record deficits and growing, unsustainable debts. Current debt levels exceed the size of the U.S. economy. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), federal debt will reach 150 percent of GDP by 2047.⁴⁵ America’s deficit had grown to \$895 billion a year as of mid-2019, as extravagant tax cuts, interest on debt, defense build-ups, and rising domestic costs outstrip economic growth. The CBO warns that debts that get harder to service threaten solvency, that “the prospect of large and growing debt poses substantial risks for the nation.”⁴⁶ Heavy fiscal burdens beyond a certain proportion of debt-to-GDP tend to choke economic growth, while a growing debt load directly impedes the country’s ability to sustain its way of life alongside its extensive international commitments. Historically, military-security build-ups trigger boom-busts in the business cycle.⁴⁷ This leaves open the possibility of another fiscal

⁴² Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, “Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment,” *International Security* 35:4 (Spring 2011), pp.7–44.

⁴³ Mike Patton, “U.S. Role in Global Economy Declines Nearly 50%” *Forbes* 29 February 2016; Robbie Gramer, “Infographic: Here’s How the Global GDP is Divvied Up” 24 February 2017; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270267/united-states-share-of-global-gross-domestic-product-gdp/>.

⁴⁴ None of this is to dispute that power must be understood in net terms, and that major emerging economies such as China themselves face onerous demands on their still-limited wealth: Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p.2. Nor does it deny that the U.S. military’s lead is unprecedentedly commanding, and that a mixture of U.S. proficiency, innovation, and force complexity will make Chinese efforts to become a true military peer of America a daunting, potentially insurmountable task. However, in terms of China’s post-1978 productivity catch-up, its effects on Beijing’s pool of available resources, and the new denial capabilities to complicate and constrain U.S. freedom of action procured using those resources, the unipolarity-eroding horse has already bolted.

⁴⁵ Congressional Budget Office, *The 2017 Long-Term Budget Outlook* (March 2017), p.39, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/52480>; Joseph Lawler, “Budget Office: Debt on Track to Double in Next 30 Years, Substantial Risks for the Nation” *Washington Examiner* 26 June 2018; Doug Bandow, “The One Reason America Can’t Police the World Anymore: Washington is Broke” *The National Interest* 26 December 2018.

⁴⁶ Congressional Budget Office, *The 2018 Long-Term Budget Outlook*, p.1.

⁴⁷ Thomas Oatley, *A Political Economy of American Hegemony: Buildups, Booms, and Busts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

crisis, but without the reserves this time to combat it. The CBO describes the scenarios that rising deficits could lead to: “Higher interest rates would increase concerns over repayment, which would continue to raise interest rates even further. Even in the absence of a full-blown crisis, such risks would lead to higher rates and borrowing costs for the U.S. government and private sector.” This would likely result in a political crisis. Confronted with foreign investors’ doubts about the U.S.’ capacity to repay its debts and hold down inflation, or even doubts over the dollar as reserve currency – after all, sterling was a comparably exceptional reserve currency until the UK economic base was no longer sufficient to assure its stored value – Washington would be pressured to raise taxes, hike interest rates, and cut spending.⁴⁸ That would induce a battle over resources, and a collision between defense and welfare expenditure, that would exceed the polarization of recent time (and thereby further impede U.S. productivity).⁴⁹ Of course, there is always the argument that deficits do not matter, that the U.S. enjoys exceptional trust in international investment markets which will not take fright, and can therefore sustain its deficit-financed model. While that could be true, it would be imprudent to run the experiment, especially as 2020’s COVID-19 situation promises an economic contraction to dwarf the 2008-9 financial crisis.

While the material base of its relative power erodes, Washington faces a more hostile external environment, one of competitive multipolarity. Anti-access/area-denial military technologies are making it easier for determined weaker sides to inflict prohibitive costs on great powers. Even in its pomp, before weaker states had their hands on long-range precision munitions and high-capability sensors, the United States was not able to defeat a number of weaker challengers, from China in the Korean War to communists in Vietnam to Islamist insurgents in Afghanistan. The question is how well the United States can adjust to competitive multipolarity, in order to remain solvent.

Even as resources become scarcer and economic dangers mount, America is expanding its commitments in the Middle East to remain preponderant. Means and ends are increasingly misaligned. The United States is in mounting danger of what Walter Lippmann called “insolvency”, where its commitments exceed its power, to the point of exhaustion and domestic political discord.⁵⁰ Overextension abroad, exhaustion and fiscal strain at home, and political disorder feed

⁴⁸ See Jonathan Kirshner, “Dollar Primacy and American Power: What’s at Stake?” *Review of International Political Economy* 15:3 (2008), pp.418-438; Christopher Layne, “This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*”, *International Studies Quarterly* 56:1 (2012), pp.203-213.

⁴⁹ Mark Zachary Taylor, *The Politics of Innovation: Why Some Countries are Better than Others at Science and Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵⁰ Walter Lippmann, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Little, Brown: Boston, 1943), pp. 69-70.

off one another in a downward spiral, cumulatively threatening the survival of the republic. It has too many commitments, for resources that are increasingly scarce, and cannot proceed on its present course without the imbalance getting worse. As the sudden, massive fiscal demands of the COVID-19 crisis are making painfully clear, even the world's largest economy can find itself woefully short of state capacity when it insists on squandering its tax base beyond its borders. While forward garrisoning is not in itself especially expensive compared to repatriated forces, commitments in the Gulf drive up demands on the size of the defense budget, to maintain capabilities to operate in the region. Estimates vary on the annual savings, ranging from \$75 billion to \$121 billion.⁵¹ Drawing down in the Middle East would be one step on the road to redressing the fiscal imbalance.

Secondly, this is a problem not only because of the balance sheet of material power. It also threatens the republic's way of life. The purpose of American statecraft should be to "preserve the U.S. as a free nation with our fundamental institutions and values intact."⁵² Primacy realism pays much attention to the question of economic prosperity but less attention to this ultimate objective, which is to ensure the health of America's domestic order: its institutions, its constitution, and its liberties. This issue will be addressed below.

Thirdly, given the need to cut back, the United States should revise the value of its commitments in the Middle East. America's most near-term security interest in the region – counter-terrorism – is largely generated by being there in the first place. Involvement in the Middle East played a central part in bringing on the 9/11 attacks, the "GWOI" and America's most disastrous military expedition since Vietnam. It embroils America in a set of geopolitical storms – namely the civil wars within the Arab-Islamic world – that it does not have the power to extinguish, as well as more localized conflicts that deliver a bad bargain of complicity with little influence. Salafist-jihadist terrorism is energized by U.S. presence and patronage, even as that same U.S. presence and patronage secures Saudi Arabia – itself a funder of Salafist extremism.

⁵¹ Barry Posen estimates between 15-20 percent of annual U.S. military spending is allocated "to the maintenance of forces for military action" in the Middle East alone, not including costs of particular wars (fiscal year 2016, between \$90 and \$121 billion): *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), p.108; more recently, Glaser and Kelanic contend that if the United States "moved to a one-war requirement, it would save roughly \$75 billion a year, or about 15 percent of the U.S. defense budget. The savings would be achieved by moving toward a smaller force, down by two aircraft carrier strike groups, two army divisions, and a few hundred air force fighter jets and bombers." Charles Glaser and Rosemary Kelanic, "Is Gulf Oil Worth Fighting For?" *Foreign Affairs* 96:1 (2017), pp.122-131, p.128.

⁵² Graham Allison, "What Should Be The Purpose of American Power?", *The National Interest* 19 August 2015.

The region is also losing its grand-strategic salience as a power center. It boasts only 6% of global GDP, and only 5% of the world's population. Its oil output remains important but is decreasingly so, given the oil and gas revolutions taking place elsewhere – and humanity's reliance on burning hydrocarbons will itself dwindle in the coming half-century. This region is also increasingly unrewarding. Compared to America's other two major theaters of commitment, Asia and Europe, the Middle East is especially unworthwhile for the trouble. A set of interlocking historical forces and prior choices made the region a wildly complex one to manage as an external power.⁵³ This is not due to any primordial "essence." Rather, it lies in the interactions of other historical, path-dependent contingencies. These include imperial settlements, indigenous divide-and-rule politics, authoritarian regimes' strategies of deflection, using Islamist movements to fragment opposition and channel demands for change, the "resource curse" of petro-politics and resulting economic stagnation ('Dutch Disease' and its corollaries), an explosion of sectarian identity linked to the rival power bids of Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the additional pressures created by the application of U.S. power, not only in the Iraq misadventure or in support for Israel, but in a long-standing collaboration with the very Islamist forces against which it does battle. As a result, the region America waded into is one of seething populations and a choice of bad allies.

The region, moreover, is not amenable to the kind of hegemonic influence that "primacy realists" assume it wields. Not only does Washington repeatedly fail to get its way; its clients and allies behave, persistently, in ways that infringe its interests. Even worse, the anxiety to maintain alliances, bases, and a structure of hegemonic power creates "reverse leverage", whereby the Gulf monarchies in particular exploit American anxiety about losing its position. U.S. patronage emboldened Riyadh to prosecute its blowback-provoking, atrocity-riddled war in Yemen (among other running regional sores). The main economic and geopolitical interest that America does have in the region – the stability of the oil market and the threat of a hostile hegemon – can be secured and hedged against enough from a remove, while garrisoning the region does little to shore-up this interest. And the reaction to violent Middle Eastern disorder has induced a state of near-permanent war that damages the republic, creates unchecked executive and state power, makes foreign policy ever more militarized and praetorian, damages Congress's constitutional authority, polarizes politics, increases risks of boom/bust cycles, and widens inequality at home. The net result? For considerable investment of treasure and blood, the status quo binds the U.S. to a region in ways

⁵³ See Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.130-133, 161; Nadar Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds.) *Sectarianisation: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London, 2017).

that divert resources, foster corruption, and leave it open to manipulation and at greater menace of terrorist blowback.

Terrorism and the War on Terror

Being in the Middle East as the “anchor of stability” attracted the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent ‘Global War on Terror’. The United States has an interest in countering terrorism that flows from the Middle East, but that interest is largely endogenous to being there in the first place. Its presence plays a large role in generating it. While the waves of *jihad* are unlikely to be spent in the medium term, the menace is mostly second-order, and can be contained with a mix of international counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, espionage, domestic resilience/hardening, and occasional targeted airstrikes. It would be simplistic to dismiss the entire war effort as futile, given that it has suppressed threats by destroying talented cadres, disrupting resource flows, and making havens unsafe. The better critique is that disruption and containment could be achieved over the long haul at a lower price tag with patient police work and more selective violent suppression, without creating a furnace of radicalization and *jibadi* training under live fire.

The causes of international terrorism are manifold. It remains the case, though, that the United States’ presence in the Middle East is a central generating cause of violent hostility directed against it. This is a causal claim, not a moral one. As scholarship on terrorism demonstrates, the attacks of 9/11 flowed primarily from America’s embroilment in the politics of the Middle East, and in what had become a civil war within the Arab-Islamic world, centered on the Gulf.⁵⁴ The United States stepped into a region afflicted by an interlocking set of governance problems: a growing Islamist movement, regimes that sponsored – or at least tacitly approved of – such movements, and a set of conflicts that galvanized resentment (the sanctions placed on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and growing resentment of oppressive Gulf monarchies).

Contrary to a widespread received wisdom, the 9/11 attacks were not primarily the result of an absence of American power from Afghanistan. The deeper driver was American presence in Saudi Arabia, a legacy from the Gulf War of 1990. Indeed, pre-1990, al-Qaeda’s progenitors were quite happy to form tacit alliance with Washington when that served the end of evicting a previous

⁵⁴ Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al Qaeda* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2011), pp.18–21; Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.45; Max Abrahms, “Al-Qaeda’s Scorecard: A Progress Report on al-Qaeda’s Objectives,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29:4 (2006), pp.509–529.

foreign occupier of the Islamic world, the USSR in Afghanistan – so such jihadists’ campaign against America is neither timeless nor necessary. While international Salafist-jihadi ideology can never be reduced to one thing, and is adept at finding grievances, its heartland of concern is the Middle East, and a violent nostalgia for a lost empire, or caliphate. Al Qaeda and its affiliates associate the plight of their sacred lands to rule by corrupt apostate regimes, who are the clients of the “far enemy”, the United States. Most of its potential recruits are galvanized primarily by grievances specifically related to the Middle East or localized conflicts – a fusion of struggles from Palestine and Iraq to the Balkans and Kashmir – rather than more distant cultural grievances about western liberal society, from unveiled women to consumerist profanity. As just one of many cases, Osama Bin Laden trafficked on rage at the brutality of international sanctions against Iraq, a centerpiece of containment of a “rogue state”, and what he, the B’ath Party, peace activists, and even Secretary of State Madeleine Albright agreed was infanticide. Even though this charge was overblown, it made for effective propaganda.⁵⁵

Primacy realists will respond that 9/11 was avoidable and, in any case, unrelated to America’s geopolitical position in the region. This is implausible. As Richard Betts warned, “It is hardly likely that Middle Eastern radicals would be hatching schemes like the destruction of the World Trade Center if the United States had not been identified for so long as the mainstay of Israel, the shah of Iran, and conservative Arab regimes and the source of a cultural assault on Islam.”⁵⁶ The claim is not that, absent a Middle Eastern commitment, jihadis would necessarily leave America alone. Rather, it elevated the United States to the top of the hierarchy of enmity. And while a more efficient homeland security system and a more attentive White House might have prevented the 9/11 attackers slipping through the net, being implicated in the politics of the Gulf is a major reason why the United States needs a strong counter-terrorist net to begin with. Even before the U.S. embarked on the GWOt, its patronage carried with it an inherent danger, that resulted in the worst act of urban terrorism in its history. And it resulted in the shadow of further terrorism, and the far-reaching consequences of those fears.

Primacy realists will deny that primacy necessarily entails foolish adventures like the war in Iraq. This may be true logically, but it builds in the temptation. Primacy realism promotes the

⁵⁵ See Michael Spagat, ‘The Iraq Sanctions Myth’, *Pacific Standard*, 26 April 2013, at <https://psmag.com/the-iraq-sanctions-myth-5b05f6712df5#.i9oh5prjx>; ‘Truth and Death in Iraq Under Sanctions’, *Significance* 7:3 (2010), pp.116–20; World Health Organization, Iraq Family Health Survey 2006–7 (2008), p.63, Table 25, at http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2008/pr02/2008_iraq_family_health_survey_report.pdf.

⁵⁶ Richard K Betts, “The new threat of mass destruction,” *Foreign Affairs* 77:1 (1998), pp.26-41.

onshore capability and hegemonic ambition that can easily lead to dangerous escalation and overreach. If not “the” Iraq War, “an” Iraq war could have flowed from the priorities they support, like counter-proliferation, counter-terrorism, restoring generalized deterrence and credibility, and shoring-up U.S. hegemony. Even if they regard mass land invasions with utopian goals as imprudent, their grand strategy provides the geographic springboard for such missions, and therefore must accept the risk of them. The pursuit of unrivaled unipolar dominance makes the unipole war-prone.⁵⁷ The first two decades of the post-Cold War era generated one quarter of America’s time at war, and the lion’s share of those campaigns were in the Middle East. Even today, the ongoing escalation of confrontation with Tehran and demands for Iranian regime change are further proof that a hegemonic presence in this turbulent region lends itself to “transformational” ambitions and belligerent efforts at reordering, beyond status quo stability.

It could be argued, alternatively, that violent hostility and its management is a necessary cost of projecting power, and that even the risk of mass casualty terrorist attacks is an acceptable downside of the net benefit of hegemony. In which case, a net assessment of the other costs and benefits of the Middle East is warranted.

The Mirage of Influence

Primacy realists presume that U.S. commitments generate influence, at least sufficiently to make the investment worth it.⁵⁸ Yet in the Middle East, the United States’ presence largely does not give it the leverage to restrain partners.

To show commitment is not to demonstrate influence. Time and again, despite actively exerting pressure, the superpower has not gotten its way. Short of all-out brute force to topple regimes, hegemony with its many parts of close diplomatic relations, arms sales, and security commitments does not translate into enough diplomatic weight to prevent “provocative” behavior, or worse, behavior that injures U.S. interests. If anything, the overall pattern of regional states has been to resist or limit the demands and impositions of external actors.⁵⁹ This result is not coincidental, moreover; one consequence of expansive U.S. commitment is to diminish its

⁵⁷ Nuno P. Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful,” *International Security* 36:3 (2011/2012), pp.9–40; Bruce Porter, “The Warfare State,” *American Heritage* 45:4 (1994), pp.56–69.

⁵⁸ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, 37:3 (2012/2013), pp.7–51, p.34.

⁵⁹ As Efraim Karsh argues, *The Tail Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.2.

regional allies' fears of survival-threatening defeat in any conflict they may start, thereby emboldening their belligerence (a variety of stability/instability paradoxical logic).

A long series of failed summits testify to the limits of American power, from Madrid to Oslo, from Annapolis to Warsaw. External powers could not prevent the fall of the pro-Western Iraqi Hashemite dynasty in 1958. U.S. hegemony failed to forestall the fall of one of its major allies, the Shah of Iran in 1979. It could not prevent Israel's anticipatory war in June 1967. Neither could Washington prevent Israel acquiring nuclear weapons, despite an ultimatum from President John F. Kennedy and follow-up demands by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.⁶⁰ President Ronald Reagan's demands for Israel to cease its assault on Beirut in the summer of 1982 came to naught. A series of Israeli Prime Ministers have ignored U.S. calls for settlement freezes or to restrain military operations in Gaza or the West Bank.

Decades of being the armorer and backer of the Saudi regime have not led it to cease its support for Wahhabist and jihadist preaching, nor its indoctrination of children in violent anti-Semitism. The U.S. demanded in April 2018 that the Saudi-led quartet end its blockade of Qatar (which it blockaded despite Qatar being a fellow U.S. ally with a major air base, the largest U.S. facility in the Middle East) – ongoing as of early 2020 – while Riyadh also actively campaigned against the then-U.S.-backed JCPoA agreement with Iran. During the Arab Spring uprisings, Washington's appeals failed to stop Saudi and Emirati forces violently suppressing protest by the Shia majority population in Bahrain. Consider also the recent revelation that Saudi Arabia and the UAE transferred U.S. military equipment, including armored vehicles, to Al Qaeda-linked (hardline Salafi) militias to buy their loyalty in the Yemen war⁶¹, in violation of agreements with Washington.⁶²

⁶⁰ Gerald Steinberg, "When Ben-Gurion said No to JFK", *The Jerusalem Post*, 28 March 2010.

⁶¹ CNN, "Sold to An Ally, Lost to an Enemy" Exclusive Report, February 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>

⁶² "US-made weapons were used in a series of deadly Saudi coalition attacks that killed dozens of civilians, many of them children" and "also made their way into the hands of Iranian-backed rebels battling the coalition for control of the country, exposing some of America's sensitive military technology to Tehran and potentially endangering the lives of U.S. troops in other conflict zones." "Amid the chaos of the broader war, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) made its way to the frontlines in Taiz in 2015, forging advantageous alliances with the pro-Saudi militias they fought alongside. One of those militias linked to AQAP, the Abu Abbas brigade, now possesses U.S.-made Oshkosh armored vehicles, paraded in a 2015 show of force through the city. Abu Abbas, the founder, was declared a terrorist by the U.S. in 2017, but the group still enjoys support from the Saudi coalition and was absorbed into the coalition-supported 35th Brigade of the Yemeni army."

Even in Baghdad during the “Surge” of 2006-8, with 150,000 troops stationed in Iraq, Washington only had limited influence. The newcomers were consistently outflanked by Iran, which had the advantages of being permanently next door and preferences closely aligned with central forces in Iraqi politics. General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker could not curb the sectarian governance that then led to the rise of the Islamic State. The Iraqi army that the U.S. funded and trained then collapsed in the face of ISIL’s offensive. Today, the Turkish assault on anti-ISIL Kurds in northern Syria has already produced further bloodshed and could yet lead to worse atrocities. That restages the problem. Turkey is both a NATO ally and the host of U.S. bases; two factors that are supposed to inhibit misbehavior.

To be sure, limited influence is not the same as “zero.” The question is how much influence, on who, relative to the costs. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth select a case where the U.S. successfully exerted a stabilizing influence, namely efforts to terminate conflicts involving Israel and the U.S./Israel/Egypt Camp David accords of 1978. As an aside, note that this was before America had forward operating bases in the region, therefore is not evidence of the influencing power of garrisons. This is also an “easy” test of their argument, where U.S. preferences coincided with the prior preferences of the actors involved, who independently wanted the settlement, as opposed to cases where the U.S. persuaded actors to behave in ways that they otherwise might not. So this is a case of modest influence from a distance, not major influence exercised with a foothold ashore.

A problem for U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East is “perilous partners”,⁶³ and the lack of political actors whose interests consistently align with the superpower; actors who are also domestically powerful enough to seize power. With the lack of that “vital center”, too often the choice of partners is a poor one, between unreliable client regimes and chaos, between Islamist movements who have grown increasingly hostile to American paramountcy, and authoritarian regimes whose bad governance creates destabilizing economic and political failures in the first place. These rulers both incite and repress Islamist movements, as well as themselves being prepared to disregard Western entreaties when it suits them. At the same time, they present themselves as the only conceivable bulwarks against greater chaos. This difficulty arose during the Syrian civil war, when the U.S. attempted to shape the opposition with targeted funding and weapons, amounting to 1/15th of the CIA’s annual budget, yet due to the fragmented quality of

⁶³ Ted Galen Carpenter, *Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America’s Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes* (New York: Trade Select, 2015).

the opposition and its Gulf partners aiding Islamist militias, was unable to strengthen the moderate rebels sufficiently, while inadvertently empowering Islamist groups.

This points to a wider issue, the general assumption that military presence backed with guarantees stabilizes the region, or at least reduces its instability. Take one regular measure assumed to be benign: military training. According to a recent study of military training programs from 1970 to 2009, countries receiving such training were twice as likely to experience a military-backed coup attempt as countries with no comparable training.⁶⁴ Well-intentioned efforts at improving allies' capacity to govern does not reliably realign their interests with the United States.

Not only does the U.S. struggle to obtain enough leverage, there is also an unfortunate pattern – resurfaced particularly during the Arab Spring revolutions and counter-revolutions – whereby the U.S. failed to exercise much restraining influence because it dared not try. This is the case across countries from Turkey and Saudi Arabia to Pakistan and Egypt, where the anxiety to retain basing access and a cooperative host hinders Washington's willingness to criticize or coerce governments.⁶⁵ In the Bahrain case, the U.S. refrained from stronger action over violent crackdowns against protest for fear of straining relations with Saudi Arabia.⁶⁶ Recent revelations from U.S. officials and a UN investigation⁶⁷ reveal that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have ignored American efforts to refine its bombing campaign in northern Yemen against Houthi rebels and minimize harm to civilians – whitewashing investigations of errant air strikes, ignoring a no-strike list – despite high dependency on American support, from weapons sales to technical maintenance of aircraft and software, air-to-air refueling, tactical and intelligence advice, and training of pilots. Striking at targets they were asked not to, “they were just not willing to listen,” said former Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski. Fearful of Saudi opposition to the Iran nuclear settlement, Obama muted criticism from the White House, while Trump's drive for increased arms sales overshadowed concern for Yemeni civilian casualties. Likewise, in Egypt, Washington initially tried to constrain military strongman General el-Sisi, whose coup it assisted, by withholding arms deliveries. But it then relented, yielding to Egyptian complaints. The \$1.3 billion annual military assistance budget is supposed to generate leverage, but the belief endures

⁶⁴ Jesse Dillon Savage and Jonathan D. Caverley, “When Human Capital Threatens the Capitol: Foreign Aid in the Form of Military Training and Coups”, *Journal of Peace Research* 54:4 (2017), Zenko, p.28.

⁶⁵ As argue Robert Malley and Jon Finer, “The Long Shadow of 9/11: How Counterterrorism Warps U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs* 97:4 (2018), pp.58-69.

⁶⁶ Joby Warrick and Michael Birnbaum, “As Bahrain Stifles Protest Movement, U.S.'s muted objections draw criticism.” *Washington Post* 15 April 2011.

⁶⁷ Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, “Arms Sales to Saudis Leave American Fingerprints on Yemen's Carnage”, *New York Times*, 25 December 2018.

that Cairo is too important to coerce.⁶⁸ In practice, the partnership works not as a basis for leverage but as a precious asset that the patron fears losing.

This manifests a deeper problem, the tensions within the U.S. motivations for having partners and allies. America has these for the most basic purpose of augmenting its power and reach. Its alliances have another rationale, though, that cuts against that simple objective, which is also to contain its partners and allies. By providing security, Washington in theory removes their incentives to reassert themselves as challengers. This imperative, to restrain others' strategic autonomy, requires in turn that Washington establish a reputation for being a reliable security provider. Failure to maintain that baseline of confidence could lead the client to pursue belligerent self-help, or even other allies. Establishing a reputation for reliable security provision creates a moral hazard, however. Allies' confidence in American backing can embolden them to behave in ways that Washington dislikes. Conversely, the dependency Washington forms on the alliance, as an indispensable platform for its power projection, creates reverse leverage, making Washington reluctant to impose itself with threats of abandonment or even public criticism.⁶⁹ Rather than achieving influence through complicity, the U.S. achieves complicity without influence.

Primacy realists do not deny the misbehavior of client states. They attribute it, however, almost exclusively to the absence or insufficiency of U.S. hegemony, and the rumor of U.S. withdrawal. If only the U.S. would fortify rather than revise its commitments, they assume, there is enough leverage to be had that is worth the cost of preserving. Consider Hal Brands' argument for staying, even though – as he admits – Saudi behavior “is reckless in the extreme”:

Much of Saudi Arabia's recent behavior has been linked to the rise of MBS [Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Saudi crown prince], who seems driven by a combination of ambition, arrogance and recklessness. Yet it is not a coincidence that Saudi misdeeds have accumulated at a time when the U.S. is *widely seen to be drawing down* in the Middle East.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ As the former Director for Egypt and Israeli Military Issues at the National Security Council from 2014–2017 recalls the common argument within government: “Egypt is ultimately too important to U.S. interests to antagonize by withholding military aid, coupled with skepticism regarding the U.S. ability to pressure Egypt. If Egypt is critical to the United States and coercion is unlikely to change those Egyptian policies with which Washington disagrees, the thinking goes, the only logical policy is to provide Egypt with unquestioning support. This means that any deviation from the \$1.3 billion in annual military assistance the United States has provided Egypt since 1987 entails an unnecessary and unacceptable risk to U.S. interests.” Andrew Miller, “Commentary: Five Myths About U.S. Aid to Egypt”, *Reuters* 13 August 2018.

⁶⁹ Jeremy Shapiro and Richard Sokolsky, “How America Enables its allies' bad behavior”, *Brookings Institute* 4 May 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/05/04/how-america-enables-its-allies-bad-behavior/>.

⁷⁰ Hal Brands, “How to Make the Middle East Even Worse? A U.S. Withdrawal,” *Bloomberg* 9 October 2018; emphasis added.

The U.S. is not drawing down from the region, as we have seen. So it cannot be the case that a withdrawal is causing Saudi Arabia's recklessness. If Saudi Arabia nevertheless does fear U.S. withdrawal, despite America pouring resources into the region and coercing its main adversary, then this is demonstrably one more reason why it is too difficult to stabilize the region at acceptable cost. To be forever suspected of imminent abandonment, even while raising commitment, with the result that client states persistently violate U.S. interests, means that the bargain is ever more dysfunctional. An alternative explanation is that Saudi Arabia and its partners are behaving as they do because Washington has not conformed with their wishes, for instance after America's abandonment of Egypt's Mubarak regime. If so, the implication is that Washington can only reassure partners by consistently adhering to their wishes, effectively subordinating itself and exercising little influence at all. America's resulting anxiety to placate these partners has, if anything, now emboldened them, as Yemen demonstrates.

It could be objected that the failure to translate hegemony into enough influence is attributable to incompetence, the inefficient exercise of coercive leverage. It is hard to accept, though, that forty years of disappointment is reducible to poor execution. The superpower has attempted a wide range of postures and approaches. With expert advisors, policymakers have lent the area their sustained attention, time, and resources. The consistently disappointing results suggest that the level of strategic skill required to exercise "enough" influence in this unruly region must be stupendous. The complexity of the region is such that even a standing committee of Machiavelli, Metternich, and Kissinger would struggle to succeed.

Oil and the Balance of Power

What about oil? And in relation to the oil question, what about the prospect of an altered (and worse) balance of power in the event of a U.S. departure?

The U.S. still has an interest in Gulf oil, though that resource and the interest are gradually declining. Direct reliance on Middle Eastern oil imports is falling. Moreover, the linkage between military presence and the interest in oil price is not obvious. Oil is a fungible commodity, not a resource to be "controlled." Access to oil, then, is not determined by being the dominant power in the Middle East.⁷¹ Rather, the argument is about indirect effects. America, its allies in other parts

⁷¹ For a demythologizing account of the relationship between oil and power-projection, see Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Folkways of Imperialism and Anti-imperialism in the Twenty First Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

of the world, and its broader economic order remain subject to changes in price that result from any alteration in global supply and demand, and which in theory could be effected by a hostile hegemon manipulating supply.

There are more efficient and cost-effective ways to secure those interests than alliances and military presence.⁷² The most efficient way to source oil is simply to buy it from whoever (a) has it to sell and (b) needs the revenue, be they Saudi, Iranian, or indeed Texan. Yes, supply shocks can inflate prices – a conflict between major vendors, such as a Saudi-Iranian war, would certainly do so – but not obviously by enough to justify a limitless military commitment to its attempted prevention (given the huge opportunity-costs and uncertain benefits of such an effort).

The hydrocarbon market itself is changing and becoming more resilient, meanwhile.⁷³ Western economic exposure to Gulf oil shocks is reducing, thanks to increases in efficiency. These increases come from several factors, including the development of North American shale, other stocks becoming increasingly accessible through improving extraction technologies, better managed shipping routes/fleets, and the capacity to call on public/private inventories and the redistributing function of the International Energy Agency. Spare capacity and strategic petroleum reserves are also now better used to moderate supply shocks. The U.S. already has adaptive mechanisms, apart from security guarantees and bases, that it can use to mitigate disruptions. Indeed, in every oil shock since 1973, these mechanisms have been used, increasing production from other sources.⁷⁴ Further developments also create increased resilience, such as the development of spot and futures markets that enable consumers to hedge risks, as opposed to the reliance on long-term contracts. Even the severe 1973 oil embargo crisis was created not primarily by the drop in production, which only fell by 2-4%, but by the Nixon administration's imposition of price controls. Even large-scale disruptions to oil markets – for instance, the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s – historically led to rapid adaptation by third parties.⁷⁵ And with electric vehicle sales projected to surpass oil-powered vehicles within the next two decades, the value of the resource

⁷² For realist critiques, see Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, "Protecting 'The Prize': Oil and the U.S. National Interest," *Security Studies* 19:3 (2010), pp.453–85; Justin Logan, "Why the Middle East Still Doesn't Matter", *Politico* 9 October 2014; Joshua R. Iskowitz Shiffrinson and Miranda Priebe, "A Crude Threat: The Limits of an Iranian Missile Campaign Against Saudi Arabian Oil" *International Security* 36:1 (2011), pp.167-201.

⁷³ See Olivier J. Blanchard and Jordi Gali, "The Macroeconomic Effects of Oil Shocks: Why are the 2000s So Different from the 1970s?" NBER Working Paper No. 13368, 2007.

⁷⁴ John Glaser, *Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward Deployed Military Posture is Unnecessary, Outdated and Dangerous* (Cato Policy Analysis 816, 2017), pp.15-16.

⁷⁵ See Daryl Press and Eugene Gholz, "The Effects of Wars on Neutral Countries: Why It Doesn't Pay to Preserve the Peace," *Security Studies* 10 (2002), pp.1-57.

itself is set to wane.⁷⁶ Even the drone/missile strike on Saudi Arabian oil facilities in September 2019, said by some to illustrate the vulnerability of oil targets and America's vital interests in staying, actually demonstrates the resilience of that market. Saudi Arabia quickly repaired the damage, bringing most of its production capacity back online within a month.⁷⁷ It is also worth noting that the increasingly unstable Saudi-Iran competition is occurring under U.S. hegemony, demonstrating the limits of America's stabilizing power. And due to the mechanisms identified above, international markets could adapt rapidly and effectively to more devastating disruption of oil supplies.

One point of division between primacy and restraint realists is the estimate of the severity of disruption. Primacy realists tend to accept *a priori* the assumption that the world is so interdependent that the U.S. is dangerously vulnerable, to the extent that the burden of proof lies firmly on the argument for retrenchment. Restraint realists, by contrast, argue that primacists overstate such vulnerabilities in a world of multiple competing suppliers, creative policy responses, and adaptable consumers.

From the other side of the equation, while Washington has some influence, U.S. presence has demonstrably often not resulted in the levels of price stability that Washington desires. There is a history of Riyadh rebuffing U.S. preferences on price.⁷⁸ To return to a theme, Saudi Arabia and OPEC members have consistently disobeyed U.S. and OPEC demands – and OPEC's own targets – on oil production. They have cheated on their production targets 96% of the time, according to one study.⁷⁹ OPEC, despite claims otherwise, exerts little constraint as a “cartel” on its members' actual production. The main drivers of oil price lie elsewhere. “Most of the credit or blame for rising oil prices in recent years rests with Asian customers.”⁸⁰ Saudi Arabia individually does have capacity to influence supply levels. Yet despite increased security ties with the United States, the Kingdom has explicitly threatened to punish its patron with decreased production and increased rises, in retaliation to U.S. sanctions over the Khashoggi disappearance.⁸¹ This open threat, alongside the many other Saudi activities that violate U.S. interests, demonstrates the limits

⁷⁶ Jeff Desjardins, “Infographic: Visualizing the Rise of the Electric Vehicle,” *Visual Capitalist* 27 September 2018, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/rise-electric-vehicle/>.

⁷⁷ “Saudi Arabia partially restores production at damaged oil plant,” *Straits Times* 18 September 2019.

⁷⁸ See e.g. “Saudis rebuff Bush's request to pump more oil,” *CNN* 16 May 2008.

⁷⁹ Jeff D. Colgan, “The Emperor Has No Clothes: The Limits of OPEC in the Global Oil Market,” *International Organization* 68 (2014), pp.599-632.

⁸⁰ Jeff D. Colgan, “OPEC, the Phantom Menace,” *The Washington Post* 16 June 2014.

⁸¹ “Saudi Arabia threatens to retaliate against any sanctions over Jamal Khashoggi's disappearance,” *ABC News* 15 October, 2018; Natasha Turak, “Expect a “Saudi First” policy on oil production cuts, regardless of Trump's Demands,” *CNBC* 28 November 2018.

on the U.S. coercive leverage that military presence supposedly buys. It is unclear how military presence on the ground prevents oil disruption. And to persist with this set of arrangements invites humiliation, not to mention further gainless costs. Is it worth it?

The proposition of an Iranian hegemony, where an ascendant Iran seizes control of major oil terminals or even seizes whole state territories, is wildly exaggerated. Iran simply lacks the economic/military capacity to dominate its region. Its GDP is U.S.\$439.51 billion, compared to the combined \$1.505 trillion GDP of its GCC enemies. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it devotes just “three percent of its GDP [to] its military, less than the proportions spent by Saudi Arabia (ten percent), Israel (six percent), Iraq (five percent), and Jordan (four percent), putting Iran in eighth place in the Middle East in terms of defense spending as a percentage of GDP. Iran’s spending also lags in absolute terms. In 2016, for example, Saudi Arabia spent \$63.7 billion on defense, five times Iran’s \$12.7 billion.”⁸² As Anthony Cordesman notes, “Most trends sharply favor Arab states even if U.S. and European spending on power projection is ignored.”⁸³ Israel, too, is more than capable of deterring any Iranian aggression, with an adequately secure second-strike nuclear capability, advanced conventional forces, and a demonstrated capacity to align and bargain with Arab states. As things stand, Iran’s efforts to extend its presence and influence have already provoked counter-balancing by an informal – but potent – GCC-Israeli coalition. There is no realistic possibility in the decades ahead of a successful Iranian bid for hegemony. And Iran is also, incidentally, a major oil producer desperate for export opportunities but currently stymied by U.S. sanctions. As such, if Washington achieved a more disinterested relationship with the region, there is no reason in principle why a major additional source of price-stabilizing supply could not be reintegrated into global markets. Fundamentally, the best way to “secure” oil is to buy it from whoever has it to sell.

The many obstacles to hegemony would not necessarily stop Tehran trying, of course, and withdrawal could result in even more intensified interstate competition than is already happening under the current dispensation. In an emergency, though, U.S. military presence on the ground could increase rather than negate oil-related instability. It would not necessarily be a stabilizing move to station troops in the land of Mecca, *in extremis*, in the event of a war or civil uprising. Short of fears of Iranian conquest, the kinds of nightmare scenarios that primacy rationales

⁸² Vali Nasr, “Iran Among the Ruins,” *Foreign Affairs* 97:2 (2019), pp.108-118, pp.110-111.

⁸³ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance in the Gulf* (Working Draft, 12 December 2018) p.41, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181212_Iran_GCC_Balance.Report.pdf.

envisage, such as a blockade of the Straits of Hormuz or the seizure of oil facilities, can be readily reversed with the swift application of seaborne airpower. Indeed, a key perk of the command of the global maritime “commons” that Washington spends so much to preserve is that it permits reliance on the world’s nautical arteries for the containment and coercion of adversaries without requirement for a heavy footprint ashore, especially against minor powers with only local and limited sea denial capabilities, such as we find in the Gulf.⁸⁴

Should an external power make a bid for hegemony in the region, meanwhile, the long and difficult U.S. experience after experiments with a number of different methods suggests that the new interloper would be taking on a world of trouble that would divert resources and distract its attention, attract increased hostility, and entangle it in the intrigues of the region, to the extent that the United States’ relative position elsewhere would be bolstered. And Russia, the feared alternative extra-regional meddler, is itself a major oil producer. So not only would it suit the West very well to see Moscow sinking blood and treasure into the Middle East rather than against NATO Europe, but also, in the event of some curtailment to Gulf oil exports, Russia would face strong incentives to expand production to benefit from elevated prices, given its own asymmetric dependence on the hydrocarbon trade.

Nuclear Proliferation

A further rationale for staying is the fear that withdrawal would lead to a reactive nuclear proliferation cascade, involving at a minimum both Saudi Arabia and Iran. This argument draws on the logic that U.S. security guarantees – and the threat of withdrawal – dampen down fears and thus inhibit allies from pursuing the bomb, while its forward presence enables it to suppress proliferation efforts. This possibility cannot be dismissed. Allies and adversaries may be motivated to seek the ultimate self-help in the event that the hegemon retires.

Two major aberrations confront this argument. First, U.S. commitment does not necessarily preclude proliferation. Israel disobeyed U.S. demands that it refrain from crossing the threshold, and helped South Africa proliferate against Washington’s will. Secondly, U.S.-led hostility is a major driver of Iran’s nuclear program and calculus. Sanctions, threats, and negotiations made possible the JCPoA with Iran, but as with terrorism, this was action to reverse a threat that forward presence helped create. If anything, arguments for proliferation in Tehran are now stronger rather

⁸⁴ Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28:1 (2003), pp.5-46; Caitlin Talmadge, “Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz,” *International Security* 33:1 (2008), pp.82-117.

than weaker, given the U.S. abrogation of the JCPOA, an agreement that was coerced out of Iran at significant cost in concessions. America's willingness to topple regimes that have either disarmed or not acquired a nuclear weapon (Iraq, Libya) – along with the dumping of this nuclear agreement and mounting hostility towards the Islamic Republic – will tilt Iranian debate at least towards latent if not actual proliferation. If so, it is not hard to imagine Saudi Arabia doubting U.S. guarantees and seeking insurance in its own nuclear deterrent. Indeed, there is every possibility of proliferation *under* U.S. hegemony, a phenomenon we have seen before, as opposed to proliferation as a consequence of withdrawal.

Furthermore, recent scholarship suggests that U.S. security guarantees are not enough in themselves to prevent proliferation.⁸⁵ That existing commitments are not enough is demonstrated by the fact that Saudi Arabia – even before Trump – began accelerating its civilian nuclear development as a hedge to possible Iranian nuclearization.⁸⁶ Riyadh may also already have access to Pakistani military nuclear technology, as the reported *quid pro quo* for its financial support of Islamabad's atomic arsenal.⁸⁷ For commitments to prevent proliferation, the weaker ally must be confident enough in its senior ally's guarantees and impressed enough by the senior ally's credible threats of abandonment. The kind of commitment needed to reassure and/or intimidate Riyadh enough to prevent it proliferating would need to be stronger and even more permissive than Washington's traditional relationship, to the point of tolerating other pernicious behaviors. This is not the equivalent of iron-clad commitments to more stable, responsible allies like West Germany or Japan. It is rather an iron-clad commitment to a regime whose interests – as it defines them – are sharply at odds with America's.

After withdrawing, the U.S. would retain access to a range of tools to inhibit proliferation, with sanctions, economic carrots and sticks, and threats of force. Furthermore, a common objection to abandonment would be increased Russian or Chinese encroachment. Yet if they did indeed attempt to fill the regional lacuna vacated by the United States, they would themselves become similarly entangled in the region's proliferation-motivating enmities. As such, the 'cure' of putting up with all else in order to constrain proliferation may be worse than the disease.

⁸⁵ See Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Primacy and Proliferation: Why Security Commitments Don't Prevent the Spread of Nuclear Weapons", in A. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin H. Friedman, *US Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp.42-58, pp.51-54; Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation," *International Security* 39:2 (2014), pp.7-51.

⁸⁶ See Noel Guzansky, "The Saudi Nuclear Genie is Out," *Washington Quarterly* 38:1 (2015), pp.93-106.

⁸⁷ Mark Urban, "Saudi nuclear weapons 'on order' from Pakistan," *BBC News* 6 November 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24823846>.

We concede that abandonment would raise the odds of increased interstate competition, thereby raising the odds of reactive proliferation attempts, even while abandonment and counter-proliferation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. If so, the question is whether staying put in order to lower the probability of proliferation further is worth the considerable costs that the United States pays, up front and in the course of staying. The verdict here is negative. If it comes down to it, a more nuclearized Middle East would be a reality Washington and probably the regional states could learn to live with, as with South Asia, another region whose nuclearization American hegemony failed to avert.

The United States has overwhelming capabilities for the deterrence of nuclear aggression. Such capabilities also provide a potent deterrent against state transfer of a nuclear weapon to an anti-American terrorist group – not that states would be likely to cede control of such costly and valuable munitions in any case – given prospects for forensic attribution of the radioactive material and subsequent retaliation against the supplier. And the dividend for relying on such deterrence while accepting some risk of proliferation would be a step toward strategic solvency and enhanced ability to preserve the republic, to which we now turn.

IV “Shield of the Republic” Realism

Beyond their general assertion that primacy advances American interests and prosperity in a globalized world, primacists lose sight of the main purpose of U.S. statecraft – to be the shield not just of physical life but of the *republic*: that is, a polity based on political liberty, popular sovereignty, and limited government. In this tradition, the task of statecraft is to protect the polity from violent threats both in the form of external predators and, domestically, a hierarchical political order.⁸⁸ War – and the failure to limit war – takes a central place in this worldview. Republican traditions of realism fear that striving through continuous war to spread liberal values abroad will not succeed, but could destroy them at home. Though primacists sometimes suggest that restraint arguments flow from alien European traditions, there is a strand of American “righteous realism” from George Washington’s Farewell Address to James Madison’s warning that “No nation...could

⁸⁸ Daniel Deudney defines republican traditions thus, and distinguishes them from realism as it has become, in his view, narrowly concerned with the problem of anarchy: *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). We suggest, though, that classical realism was indeed concerned with the political condition of the state, both as the primary reason sound statecraft is needed, and as the supreme consideration in determining what that statecraft ought to be.

preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”⁸⁹ From early twentieth-century debates about extra-regional commitments onwards,⁹⁰ realists—from Walter Lippmann to George Kennan, from Hans Morgenthau to Robert Gilpin, from Kenneth Waltz to Jonathan Kirshner to John Mearsheimer – worry about the domestic consequences of an over-militarized and expansive foreign policy.⁹¹ The promised land, in other words, might destroy its promise by becoming a crusader state.⁹² This carries on an ancient concern. As Thucydides explained of the Peloponnesian War, destructive political struggle and the loosening of restraint in Athens set the scene for the disastrous Sicilian expedition.

Embroidment in the Middle East damages America’s republic – its institutions and the wider health of its civic life. More than Europe or Asia, hegemony in the Middle East in its current condition, which shows no sign of easing, damages democracy at home. Not only is the region volatile, violently contested, and too hard to stabilize. It is also where the interests of the superpower and its clients are most misaligned.

America’s wars in the Middle East contribute to the coarsening and corruption of its public life and politics. While division and disagreement are inherent to democracy, some forms of polarization threaten a republic’s survival, if political actors reject mutual tolerance and their opponents’ legitimacy. Two decades of conflict in the name of combating global terrorism and defeating alien enemies accentuated the rise of an unhealthy, xenophobic, and paranoid populism. By ‘populism’, we mean specifically a politics that is not only critical of elites, but a politics that is an anti-pluralist, authoritarian form of identitarian division, pitting a virtuous people against illegitimate ‘non-people’, outsiders and elites, propagating a violent intolerance.⁹³

In particular, embroilment in disappointing wars in the Middle East contributed to the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Active-duty personnel were twice as likely to choose Trump over Hillary Clinton. And as a recent study found, based on regression that controlled for

⁸⁹ James Madison, “Political Observations,” 20 April 1795, in: *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, vol. 4, p.491 (1865).

⁹⁰ Stephen Kinzer, *True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain and the Birth of American Empire* (New York: Griffin, 2018).

⁹¹ Richard J. Barnett, “A Balance Sheet: Lippmann, Kennan and the Cold War,” in *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 113–26; Lorenzo Zambenedi, “The impotence of power: Morgenthau’s Critique of American Intervention in Vietnam”, *Review of International Studies* 37:3 (2011), pp.1335-1356, p.1340; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.166-167.

⁹² Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁹³ See Jan-Werner Muller, *What is Populism?* (New York: Penguin, 2017), pp.2-3.

alternative explanatory variables, there is “a significant and meaningful relationship between a community’s rate of military sacrifice and its support for Trump...if three states key to Trump’s victory – Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin – had suffered even a modestly lower casualty rate, all three could have flipped from red to blue and sent Hillary Clinton to the White House.”⁹⁴ Other studies, likewise, suggest a causal linkage between rates of military sacrifice and voting behavior.⁹⁵ Military communities represent important votes in the electoral college, in sunbelt states like South Carolina and Florida, and “rust belt” states suffering deindustrialization like Ohio and Pennsylvania. An aggrieved constituency of military veterans and their families and friends has formed, after bearing the brunt of America’s wars. Two-thirds of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans now say that the wars were not worth fighting.⁹⁶ Military suicides average twenty per day, higher than the rate of the general population.⁹⁷ The linkage is further suggested by the migration of significant amounts of military donations to Senator Bernie Sanders’ election campaigns, Sanders having denounced Trump for breaking his word about ending perpetual wars.⁹⁸ There remains a constituency open to the appeal of candidates denouncing the failure of U.S. hegemony and its wars in the Middle East, a constituency which could again support Trumpian-style populism, or perhaps something more destructive.

Most realists look on this with regret. For realists concerned that continuous war threatens the republic, Trump’s rise is a bad thing, because he is *authoritarian*,⁹⁹ and thus inimical to republican traditions which look to prevent excessive concentrations of power, and because he (and his administration) is *corrupt*. According to Transparency International’s 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index, the U.S. under Trump’s presidency fell six places from 2017, reflecting the “erosion of ethical norms at the highest levels of power.”¹⁰⁰ The Trump administration’s corrupt practices include the selling of diplomatic posts, attacks on the freedom of the press (for instance, revoking

⁹⁴ Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, “Battlefield Casualties and Ballot Box Defeat: Did the Bush-Obama Wars Cost Clinton the White House?” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53:2 (2020), pp.248-252.

⁹⁵ David Karol and Edward Miguel, “Iraq War Casualties and the 2004 US Presidential Election”, *Journal of Politics* 69:3 (2020), pp.633–48; Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, “All Politics Are Still Local: The Iraq War and the 2006 Midterm Elections”, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41:1 (2008), pp.95–100.

⁹⁶ Ruth Igielnik and Kim Parker, “Majorities of U.S. veterans, public say Iraq and Afghanistan were not worth fighting”, *Pew Research Centre* 10 July 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting/>.

⁹⁷ Nikki Wentling, “VA Reveals Its Veteran Suicide Statistic Included Active-Duty Troops”, *Stars and Stripes* 20 June 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/va-reveals-its-veteran-suicide-statistic-included-active-duty-troops-1.533992>.

⁹⁸ “Top contributors, federal election data for Bernie Sanders, 2020 cycle”, *OpenSecrets.org* 23 March 2020, <https://www.opensecrets.org/2020-presidential-race/contributors?id=N00000528>.

⁹⁹ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ “How Corruption Weakens Democracy”, *Transparency International* 29 January 2019, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/cpi_2018_global_analysis.

the press credentials of inquisitive reporters), family profiteering on the state, and coercing Ukraine to investigate domestic political opponents by withholding military aid.

Some caveats are in order. First, the wars since 2001 and Trump's opposition to liberal hegemony were not the only cause of his political ascent. Nonetheless, registered Trump voters ranked foreign policy high among their priorities, suggesting his broader message – of putting America first, ending others countries' free-riding at its expense, and that a self-serving establishment had failed the country by getting it into endless war – resonated.¹⁰¹ Neither did the problem begin with him and his "America First" movement. Trump is a symptom and a result of an increasingly damaged public life, while also embodying and exploiting a political revolt against it. And regular military campaigns are not a *necessary* condition for these problems: states can fall prey to harmful populism without continuous war, just as someone can catch lung cancer without regularly smoking. But just as smoking's correlation with lung cancer reflects a demonstrated causal relationship, so too is there a causal link between continuous war and a state's political condition. It would be naïve, of course, to argue that simply abandoning one region would swiftly cure all ills of Western domestic politics. But it would be a valuable exorcism of one of the most corrupting influences.

Primacy realists, like liberal hawks, are strangely inattentive to the domestic, constitutional, and civic impact of hegemony on American life. Primacists who advocate more primacy, with increased defense spending purchased through reductions in collective provision (like welfare entitlements and social security), betray a perverse attitude to means and ends. U.S. hegemony and power-projection becomes the *end* rather than the *means* to protecting U.S. security interests and safeguarding a healthy civic life. The consensus among security experts in Washington is to assume that only a state of preponderance over all rivals will suffice.¹⁰² They assume that the problem lies in Washington's failure to apply enough power efficiently enough. The 2018 *National Defense Strategy Commission* report, produced by a congressionally-appointed bipartisan committee of national security experts, is a case in point. It takes dominance as America's obvious national interest. It complains that as rivals challenge American power, U.S. military superiority and its capacity to wage concurrent wars has eroded because of reduced defense expenditure, and advises

¹⁰¹ Pew Research Centre, *2016 Campaign: Strong Interest, Widespread Dissatisfaction* (7 July 2016), p.32.

¹⁰² On such absence of meaningful intra-elite contestation, see: David Blagden, "Do Democracies Possess the Wisdom of Crowds? Decision Group Size, Regime Type, and Strategic Effectiveness", *International Studies Quarterly* 63:4 (2019), pp.1192-95.

that Washington spend yet more on military forces while further cutting entitlements.¹⁰³ On this logic, a defense budget that is already ten times the size of Russia's and four times the size of China's cannot be enough, for U.S. grand strategy must go beyond defense and deterrence to the achievement of unchallengeable strength. That the pursuit of dominance could be the source of the problem, not the answer, is under-considered.

America's recent and current posture towards the region, and its particular mode of war-making, has led to deficit-financed, capital-intensive, and protracted wars. In turn, this results in concentrations of power at odds with the founding principles of the Constitution. It damages the authority of Congress, which has helped to marginalize itself in foreign policymaking and in checking the exertions of the executive branch. A state of near-permanent war became institutionalized. The Patriot Act wrought an era of secret sites, extraordinary rendition and torture, extrajudicial assassinations on an industrial scale, and involvement in the aggression of client states, without the influence such involvement was supposed to generate. The apparatus of unaccountable, secretive powers stretched also to "national security letters", exorbitant instruments of state power whereby the federal authorities can audit and investigate an individual while prohibiting them from seeking counsel or informing anyone.

This era of institutionalized war, with military activity of varying intensity across 80 countries, has also exacerbated inequality and social strain.¹⁰⁴ The wars since 2001 were "credit card" wars, financed by borrowing rather than taxes, and fought by a volunteer military. This financing helped to secure political acquiescence by shifting immediate burdens away from most citizens.¹⁰⁵ Consequences for the population still flowed. Wealthy people and institutions were able to enrich themselves by purchasing bonds, while all others must take on the fiscal burden of repaying the (increasingly unmanageable) debt. Indirect taxes also are regressive, as increased sales, value-added, excise and customs taxes fall more on low and middle-income households, for whom spending is a larger share of disposable income. The wars of the "market state", that deploy grandiose rhetoric but impose burdens so inequitably, helped to entrench the oligarchic concentrations of wealth from which American civic life now suffers.

¹⁰³ National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (2018), pp.vi,6,25.

¹⁰⁴ Rosella Capella Zielinski, "U.S. Wars Abroad Increase Inequality at Home" *Foreign Affairs* 5 October 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan D. Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

In addition, continuous campaigns in the Middle East have furthered a tendency Lippmann warned of during the Korean War, namely the “praetorian” effect, whereby the state of emergency both inflates the authority of the executive branch at the expense of Congress, and makes the professional military over-dominant in policymaking. Trump accentuated this trend, appointing serving and former officers (“my generals”) to senior roles in the White House, the National Security Council and the Pentagon, even giving unilateral authority to the DoD to set troop levels in Afghanistan. The prominence and power given to military elites itself narrows debate and perpetuates commitments in the Middle East that deserve closer scrutiny. As Micah Zenko finds, retired officers who are hired by regimes or security firms linked to the Gulf “further intensify the widely-accepted norm within the Pentagon – as well as on Capitol Hill – that U.S. military personnel *must* remain deployed in large numbers in the Middle East. Furthermore, U.S. military presence in the Middle East can only continue with predictable access to the region, which is enhanced by maintaining personal and professional relationships with host-nation governments and government officials. This revolving door is both an enabler and manifestation of U.S. military policy in the region.”¹⁰⁶ To be clear, this is *not* an argument that advocates of Middle East commitments are driven by ulterior motives. Rather, a thick web of connection between the professional military, the arms trade, and client states makes grand strategic commitments seem self-evidently right and necessary.

Furthermore, there has been a militarization of a wide field of policy agendas from global health to border policy to development aid.¹⁰⁷ Militarization has come to the home front, meanwhile, in the shape of heightened domestic surveillance and militarized policing.¹⁰⁸ This does not yet approach the feared “garrison state.” Still, the dramatic growth in executive power departs alarmingly from the sustainment of a constitutional republic. The lack of political or geographical limitation in the “GWO’T” extended the state of emergency indefinitely. Even if the state possessing such capabilities is benign in their intent today, their intentions could change tomorrow.

More diffusely, deepening engagement in the Middle East has coarsened domestic politics, feeding fiscal imbalances and accentuating social divisions that increasingly polarize politics. In the GWO’T, the re-orientation of national security discourse around dangerous fanatical foreigners inadvertently heightened xenophobia. It increased toxic and potentially violent identity politics and

¹⁰⁶ Zenko, *US Military Policy*, p.26.

¹⁰⁷ Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

¹⁰⁸ Christopher J. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall, *Tyranny Comes Home: The Domestic Fate of U.S. Militarism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

racial divides. The architects of the GWoT did not intend it to promote bigotry. Central to their narrative was the distinction between “true” peaceful Islam and perversions of the faith. Such distinctions, though, are hard to sustain in a state of continuous conflict. Increased prejudice is a feature of war, of course. But this war is different, because it is effectively permanent. It culminated in authoritarian form with the election of Trump, who deliberately conflated terrorism, immigration, and Islam.¹⁰⁹

V Negligible Upsides, Massive Downsides: Why *only* Abandon the Middle East?

Finally, we turn to an important qualification of our argument. Prominent scholars have already made the case for U.S. grand strategies of restraint, disengagement, and offshore balancing – and all of these positions involve American withdrawal from the Middle East, as we advocate here.¹¹⁰ Crucially, however, those proposals *also* entail U.S. military disengagement from one or both of the two *other* principal non-American centers of global power potential, Western Europe and East Asia. And given the latent power of key U.S. allies in these regions, such as Japan, Germany, Britain, France, and South Korea – all of which are wealthy, militarily proficient, and technologically advanced, with two also already possessing their own nuclear arsenals – there is a case to suggest that such states are actually in *less* need of protection than relatively feeble U.S. allies in and around the Gulf.¹¹¹ These realists argue that a post-American Asia or Europe would pose little threat, because local states would balance against rather than bandwagon with the rising power, because nuclear deterrence would make expansion unlikely in the first place, and that in any case, America would remain secure with its oceanic moats, formidable material resources, and its own nuclear deterrent. As such, why does this article advocate abandonment of the Middle East *specifically*, rather than a broader U.S. withdrawal from Europe and Asia?

The answer is that America’s Middle Eastern commitment offers the smallest benefits for the largest costs. Complicity with the autocrats and Islamists of MENA is both especially unnecessary and uniquely damaging to U.S. republican constitutionalism. The “forever war” that attempts pacification of the Middle East drains U.S. resources against lesser threats in a way that relatively peaceful Western Europe and East Asia do not, while provoking intractable terrorist blowback that then necessitates ever-more-illiberal U.S. counterterrorism.

¹⁰⁹ Peter R. Neumann, *Bluster: Donald Trump’s War on Terror* (London: Hurst, 2019).

¹¹⁰ Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs* 95:4 (2016), pp.70-83.

¹¹¹ Indeed, other U.S. restrainers advocate withdrawal from Europe and Asia but *not* the Gulf: Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, “Come Home, America,” p.9.

Of course, those regions also contain their own risks of war, which could sharply increase the costs of the American commitment. And they are not themselves of equal contemporary strategic importance, given that East Asia contains the most economically potent competitor that the U.S. has faced since its own emergence as a great power while Europe merely contains the USSR's residual rump facing a gaggle of affluent American allies, meaning that the former will inevitably be Washington's principal concern. But crucially, *both* regions contain other major powers with the potential to bring about a systemic conflagration. Neither China nor Russia are currently true peers of American power. But they *do* possess enough latent potential and/or extant capability, plus sufficiently uncertain intentions, to threaten America's core security interests, and while Russia carries far less weight economically than China, a Moscow-Beijing axis remains a possibility in the right conditions. To preserve its way of life, America's overriding interest is the need to prevent one hostile power acquiring hegemony over Europe or Asia. A state/bloc that obtained regional hegemony over Europe or Asia *would* be a peer to U.S. latent power. This is a remote but real possibility. The main "threat picture" is not that one power would "run the table" by sheer conquest. Rather, smaller states, if not coordinated and if offered the right mix of carrots/sticks, just might bandwagon, submitting or "Finlandizing" themselves under a rival hegemon's authority. It would thus be imprudent to "bet the farm" on the assurance that balancing would prevail and nuclear deterrence would hold. While both balancing and deterrence are likely, they are far from certain, and realism prudentially counsels against exaggerated certainty. Sometimes empires and agglomerations of power form. The competitive dynamics of power transition do not always hold.¹¹² China's strong growth, if it continues, could prove attractive enough to bring Asian states under its sway. Indeed, we are already seeing much hedging behavior by U.S. allies in the region. While such an outcome may not presently be likely, there are regional actors with both reason to find it tempting and sufficient capability to at least contemplate region-wide coercion in pursuit of dominance.¹¹³

A hostile hegemony in Eurasia would be dangerous not primarily because it could lead to a direct assault on the United States, although checking others' coercive power remains an important U.S. interest and major-power conflict on the way to such hegemony could jeopardize

¹¹² See David Kang, "Power Transitions: Thucydides Didn't Live in East Asia," *The Washington Quarterly*, 41:1 (2018) pp.137-154.

¹¹³ China's GDP is already bigger vis-à-vis America's than the USSR's ever was, for example – so in terms of latent potential, it is already a "pole" – while Russia, for all its internal weaknesses, still has a nuclear arsenal capable of menacing any actor on the planet, a PPP GDP approximately equal to that of Germany, and a demonstrated willingness to use all levers of national power (even at risk of escalation) while bearing domestic privations to defend threatened interests.

the whole world (especially if it involved nuclear-armed states). Rather, even if a systemic conflagration was avoided, it would still endanger America's *republican* political life, by frightening the United States to turn itself into Sparta on a large scale. While America would remain a difficult target for conquest or strangulation and could well physically survive such a state of permanent emergency, it would be tempted to militarize and regiment its society, weaken civil society, waste resources, and empower the state and a military elite to such an extent that it would suffocate its constitutional liberties. Second, the excessive pursuit of power abroad also could destroy the republic, by turning it into a militarized, overextended empire in a permanent state of alarm. Both scenarios have driven the agonies of U.S. debate about world affairs, especially once America became a "national security state" during and after World War Two.¹¹⁴ It is certainly possible to achieve a state of over-militarization by pursuing hegemony everywhere, as this article's preceding discussion of the Middle East's singularly corrupting character demonstrates. Conversely, accepting the eruption of great-power conflict and hegemony-seeking in Europe or Asia – where there actually *are* U.S.-rivaling concentrations of latent power – risks generating even-more-severe domestic militarization in future. For this reason, MENA should be disaggregated from Europe and the Asia-Pacific; while over-entanglement in the former is *already* harming the U.S. republic, total *dis*entanglement from the latter two could do the same – but on an even worse scale – down the road.

Even if other regional powers' balancing may well render such Eurasian hegemony unobtainable anyway, therefore, America can continue to tip the scale in its favor, preventing a rival hegemony at affordable relative cost by remaining present either to accommodate or contain rivals. In the Middle East, by contrast, even if anybody wanted regional hegemony, such hegemony would bring precious little additional capacity to threaten America or the core U.S.-dominated order anyway. Middle Eastern countries ultimately lack the latent power to embroil Western states in a systemic major-power war unless Western powers go there and initiate/join one. Unfortunately, the same is not true in Europe and Asia.

In addition to such obvious great-power adversaries as China and Russia, meanwhile, Washington has displayed a longstanding preference for preventing even its major allies in Europe

¹¹⁴ On the two traditions, see Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State 1945-1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.463-465; Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy and the American Way of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.3-43.

and Asia from exercising true strategic autonomy,¹¹⁵ given the broader political dynamics that such a shift could bring about. It may be true, for example, that Germany or Japan possess the latent economic wherewithal to balance Russia or China in their respective regions. But the dramatic rearmament programs that such balancing would require without U.S. involvement, and the subsequent emergence of multipolarity in regions containing concentrations of industrial power that rival or exceed America's, would risk security dilemmas and confrontations capable of generating great-power escalation that even U.S. power could not subsequently contain. Of course, in encouraging more defense spending from major allies as a prop to enduring U.S. commitments in Europe and Asia, Washington may well have to accept that its partners will acquire more autonomous capacity – but it would still be preferable, from an American perspective, to have such states broadly aligned with a U.S.-led order. Again, realists cannot simultaneously preach the uncertainty of the international system while also asserting that such dramatic shifts in relative capability would certainly remain benign. As U.S. allies, such major Western economies provide crucial financial, diplomatic, and some military support to the broader edifice of American-led Western order, even conceding that Washington would like to see less free-riding defense under-spending among them. Preventing such dynamics, in short, brings substantial benefits to America for presently-tolerable relative costs. The Middle Eastern commitment, by contrast, purchases few desirable goods for a bloated price-tag.¹¹⁶

There is a relational point here, too. Not only does America's Middle Eastern commitment bring fewer benefits for a higher price than Western Europe and East Asia, but it also carries heavy opportunity costs, to the detriment of those more important and favorable theaters. Primacists maintain that to unwind an alliance anywhere threatens U.S. alliances everywhere, lest other allies interpret the abandonment of one actor as evidence of a lack of credibility in Washington's other commitments. But this is backward reasoning. The credibility of states' commitments is mainly a function of their levels of interest and power, which between them determine willingness and ability to bear costs.¹¹⁷ As such, the credibility of any U.S. alliance commitment is primarily a function of the interest that Washington has in that country coupled to the level of relative power

¹¹⁵ With marked differences *between* allies, to be sure – witness differing U.S. tolerance levels towards nuclear proliferation between Britain and Germany, for example: Gene Gerzhoy, “Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions,” *International Security* 39:4 (2015), pp.91-129.

¹¹⁶ As Stephen Van Evera argued immediately after the Cold War, certain regions of commercial importance to America and with the continuing potential to backslide into great-power conflict merit a continuing U.S. commitment while regions below these criteria – among which the Middle East counts, on our analysis – do not: “Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn't: American Grand Strategy After the Cold War,” *Survival* 13:2 (1990), pp.1-51, pp.8-12.

¹¹⁷ Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

that it has available for that country's protection, which may be unmoved – or even increased – by the divestment of other high-cost, low-benefit commitments. Since South Koreans (for example) are as well-equipped as Americans to infer that East Asia will be the principal theater for U.S. interests through the twenty-first century, there is no reason for them to conclude that American abandonment of Saudi Arabia – a much less valuable U.S. “ally” in a region of much lower strategic significance – entails a diminishing commitment to the Pacific Rim. On the contrary, the freeing-up of military forces, diplomatic/intelligence attention, and economic resources that would follow America's MENA abandonment would actually enhance Washington's ability to defend its Asian and European commitments, thereby *increasing* their credibility (understood as interest-plus-capability). Not only would abandonment of the GCC free-up precious resources and time, moreover, it could also send a salutary message to other third parties that American alliances are not a blank check and that U.S. guarantees are conditional on prudent behavior.

Conclusion

Whether or not to stay in the Middle East is not a choice between a sound, safe *status quo* and an “experiment” with alternatives. Rather, it is a choice about the costly and unsustainable experiment currently being run, which offers not the *status quo* but a deteriorating version of it. As with most issues, there are tradeoffs involved in the question of U.S. engagement. The best realist case for withdrawal would not deny that abandonment would increase disorder and forego some benefits. That would include the possible loss of some influence (though U.S. influence is hardly decisive anyway), some bases that afford striking power, some resurgence of Islamist activity, and domestically, an increase in domestic strife over foreign policy that most breaks from the *status quo* entail.

Nevertheless, it is a question of net assessment, linked to America's wider grand strategy. Increasing disorder is already a feature of the region's condition. It is already a source of violent blowback, happening under America's aegis. Attempts to reimpose order have had poor results, including spiraling debt, a shortage of resources for domestic welfare concerns, wasteful and disappointing military campaigns, and the coarsening of politics and public life. The question is whether the U.S. could better secure its way of life by tolerating the risks of withdrawal. The analysis here suggests that it can, and in order to bolster itself elsewhere, it should.

The strength of the realist tradition is its consciousness of limits that cannot be wished away, limits on both power and knowledge. Contrary to Madeleine Albright's hubris, the U.S. is not endowed with clairvoyant capacity to "see further than other countries into the future" to direct the destiny of an unruly region. Neither is it true that disorder anywhere is intolerable. Indeed, the determination to stamp out disorder often worsens it, dissipating resources that are better devoted elsewhere and increasing strife at home. Even in a supposedly globalized world, America can secure itself by tolerating a level of disorder and keeping its distance economically and militarily from a region declining in salience. The task is to moderate power projection with self-restraint in order to preserve a constitutional republic. George Kennan's suggestion that it would be smarter to liquidate than maintain "unsound positions,"¹¹⁸ proffered while the Vietnam war bled American resources and polarized its society, can also apply to wider theaters. Today, it applies to U.S. embroilment in the Middle East.

¹¹⁸ *Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Hearings. Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966 – Vietnam* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1966), pp.335–36.