

US Middle East Strategy under President Trump's Isolationist Foreign Policy

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As with all incoming US Presidents' foreign policy, analysts and scholars are already in search of evidence to identify the existence of a "Trump doctrine." In his inaugural address, President Trump made very few references that could be used to outline a foreign policy framework. However, it seems likely that he will attempt to decrease US international commitments, in the context of an isolationist foreign policy characterized by the slogan "America First." Specifically, he expressed his disappointment for the fact that:

for many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; we've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay [...]. From this moment on, it's going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families. We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.¹

In another point he made an interesting reference that highlights his disagreement with Wilsonian Idealism that governed the doctrines of all the post-Cold War presidents:

We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow.²

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¹ "Inaugural address: Trump's full speech," *CNN*, 21 January 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/trump-inaugural-address/>.

² *Ibid.*

Having these in mind, President Trump seems decided to abandon the post-World War II foreign policy model that pursued the serving of US national interests (both of security and economic nature) at a global scale, either through enhancing friendly governments or regimes, as the Truman and Eisenhower doctrines provided, or even by intervening in third states' domestic affairs when this was deemed necessary, according to the Johnson and G. W. Bush doctrines.³

The only reference to a specific aspect of US foreign policy, with particular focus on security-related affairs, is one (albeit too short) about what the President calls "Islamic terrorism:" "We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones – and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth."⁴ Contrary to other major foreign policy issues, this reference indicates a predisposition to maintain his predecessor's priorities (although with a more Trump-like style) in relation with terrorism, especially over the situation in the broader Middle East. In any case though, fighting jihadi terrorism and, especially, eradicating it "from the face of the Earth," calls for both diplomatic and military initiatives in the Middle East, which contradict with Mr. Trump's isolationist foreign policy orientation. At the same time, this need outlines the limitations that Washington will face when it will have to decide on whether global leadership is still part of the US foreign affairs agenda or not.

As the history of US involvement in the Middle East indicates, apart from the dominant perceptions in Washington, systemic factors are at least equally decisive in defining US foreign policy outcomes in relation with offshore commitments. A glance at the evolutionary nature of US Middle East strategy will shed light to President Trump's potential options and limitations in relation with this turbulent region.

US involvement in the Middle East: from indirect to direct engagement

At the beginning of the Cold War, energy and security considerations drew the United States into the Middle East balancing game, with some particularly successful results. For example, through the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of the Iranian Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadeq in 1953, which rendered the pro-Western Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi the master of the game in Tehran, Washington achieved a major shift, in the regional balance of power, in favor of American interests. Another example of a US-guided success in the Middle East is the 1978 breakthrough that brought about the first Arab-Israeli peace agreement through the Camp David Accords, which was made possible, to a large degree, due to US mediation. At the time, both friends and foes had recognized that an American diplomatic initiative was absolutely necessary to manage the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁵

Of course there were failures as well, such as the 1973-1974 oil embargo imposed by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on the countries that supported Israel, that tremendously raised oil prices and convulsed Western economies.⁶ Or the Islamic revolution in Iran, in 1978-79, which totally reversed the gains of Mossadeq's overthrow and transformed the US

³ For an extensive analysis of US foreign policy doctrines see Robert P. Watson, Charles Gleek, Michael Grillo (ed.), *Presidential Doctrines: National Security from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2003).

⁴ "Inaugural address."

⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), 180.

⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 27-28.

strategic priorities in the region. In any case though, throughout the Cold War the United States – as the most powerful state in the world, both in hard power and soft power terms⁷ – contributed to the preservation of a manageable regional balance of power in the Middle East. From a strategic point of view, this was made possible because Washington avoided direct military intervention and preferred an offshore balancing strategy that was designed to support regional allies against Soviet expansionism, or hostile aspiring regional hegemons. The United States would deploy its power abroad only when direct threats to vital US interests emerged and local allies failed to control them.⁸

In terms of serving Washington's main strategic objectives in the region, US involvement in the greater Middle East during the Cold War era was successful. For example, Soviet expansionism was effectively contained (even in times of escalation, like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979). Furthermore, US involvement (or perceptions of it) defined the regional relations and alignments. It can be said that, during the Cold War era (especially in the 1970s and 1980s), the Middle East was a regional system characterized by a fragile balance of power and that the US involvement was among the definitive balancing factors. This is indicated in several cases, such as the US involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as the support of Iraq during the Iraq-Iran War or the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Eventually though, US meddling in the greater Middle East took a different form: that of direct interventionism. The offshore balancing strategy was reversed in favor of strategic options that urged for more physical presence of the United States in the region. The turning point was the Persian Gulf War in 1991.⁹ Interventionism grew after the 9/11 attacks, with the initiation of the long-lasting war in Afghanistan and, especially, the shift toward unilateralism through the 2003 illegitimate invasion of Iraq that “reinforced global concerns about the unchecked nature of US power.”¹⁰ Therefore, it can be said that US engagement in the Middle East escalated from an indirect form to a direct one. Walt thoroughly ascribes the third (and most detrimental) level of this escalation to false strategic estimations made in Washington, in the context of an attempt to revise the strategic framework of US global engagement, from one of selective engagement (since the early 1990s) to one of global hegemony, under G. W. Bush's doctrine of preventive war and the grande objective of regional transformation in the greater Middle East.¹¹

At the systemic level of analysis, this shift from indirect to direct engagement could be also seen as a bi-product of the global shift of power distribution, that took place after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In a unipolar global system, deciding to “go it alone” was much easier, for the remaining Superpower, than under the Cold War security dilemmas. However,

⁷ Joseph S. Nye Jr, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4-12.

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, “The Case of Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 95 (2016), 70-83. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>. Accessed on 2 July 2016; Stephen M. Walt, “U.S. Middle East Strategy: Back to Balancing,” *Foreign Policy*, 21 November 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/21/usmiddleeaststrategybacktobalancing/>.

⁹ Walt, “U.S. Middle East Strategy.”

¹⁰ Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005), 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 219-222.

such decisions tend to expose great powers to the danger of overextension that weakens national power on the longer term.¹²

... and back again: US strategic retreat and its consequences

There were vital reasons for the United States to retain its role in the Middle East after the end of the Cold War: the main, long-term, American interests in the region were to secure the flow of oil and gas to the western markets, to deal with the emerging threat of Islamic terrorism, as well as to inhibit the spread of weapons of mass destruction.¹³ Furthermore, retaining influence in regions with high geostrategic value, such as the Middle East, serves the goal of safeguarding the US-led global order, a long-term strategic interest with both security and economic parameters.

However, the overstretch of US capabilities proved to be disastrous: the decision to start two costly and long-lasting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were made in the broader context of a hegemonic strategy, became the turning-point of a two-decade course of strategic expansion. Keeping a fragile offshore balance in a region that is prone to violence and power competitions, can only be achieved through prudent management of military options and moderate diplomacy. And despite the fact that the United States was the most powerful player in the region, with a decades-long record of military presence and penetrating regional influence, it had always, to a large degree, relied on others to safeguard its interests. Stephen Walt had prophetically underlined in 2005, that the shift toward unilateral and hegemonic strategic options (evident during G. W. Bush' presidency) would jeopardize US international position and prestige in the long term.¹⁴

Apparently, US Middle East strategy changed during Barack Obama's presidency. By shifting toward less "hawkish" policies, Washington made clear that it had realized the need to reverse the unfavorable results of the preceding hubris.¹⁵ The direct outcome of this change was the full withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq, as well as the partial withdrawal from Afghanistan. These developments signified a broader strategic retreat, as it soon became obvious that the strategic option of direct engagement was abandoned. The attempt to impose a hegemonic pattern of relations in the greater Middle East came to an inglorious end, as Washington was not willing, any more, to pay the price of regional dominance. As a result, less effort and resources were to be devoted to this turbulent region. But, since its long-term interests remained unchanged, the United States could not abandon the region; therefore, the choice for the day-after was not full retreat from US commitments, but the return to a more prudent strategic approach of indirect engagement.

Soon a new wave of US interventionism in the greater Middle East emerged, with NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011 and the launch of combat air operations by a US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2014 (both under a UN mandate). However, this did not reverse the course of indirect engagement: in Libya, Washington's

¹² Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, 25 (2000), 5-41 (13); see also Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage, 1987).

¹³ Walt, "US Middle East Strategy."

¹⁴ Walt, *Taming American Power*, 118.

¹⁵ Henry A. Kissinger, "A Path out of the Middle East Collapse," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/apathoutofthemiddleeastcollapse1445037513>; Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs*, 94:6 (2015), 2-10.

participation was described as a “leading from behind” intervention.¹⁶ In Syria and Iraq – apart from the air operations – small training groups are cooperating with friendly armies and local forces while the US government is committed to a limited (and careful) engagement. American military interventionism under Barack Obama, unlike his predecessor’s unilateralism, has been strictly multilateral and without “boots on the ground.”¹⁷ By all odds, this renewed wave of US interventionism in the Middle East is characterized by low intensity.

However, this change in US strategic priorities in the Middle East brought about several complications at the regional level. The strategic retreat of the United States (especially the scope of US military withdrawal from Iraq) suggested a major regional redistribution of power. By itself, US disengagement created perceptions of a power vacuum in the greater region. Real or imagined, the power vacuum triggered some notable regional developments. Clearly, some actors came to the conclusion that they could afford defying the United States. For example, Iran and Turkey shifted toward policies aiming to achieve increased influence, if not regional hegemony. Iran’s hegemonism was expressed through the fostering of Shia proxy groups in the on-going conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, as well as in the Gulf States during the initial stages of the “Arab Spring” convulsion.¹⁸ In the case of Turkey, the country’s partial disengagement from its commitments toward its Western allies and its quest for an independent (Neo-Ottoman style) foreign policy agenda, was mirrored on several Turkish foreign policy breakthroughs in the last few years, such as disturbed relations with Israel¹⁹ and strategic flirt with Moscow and Beijing,²⁰ as well as on Ankara’s military engagement in Syria and Iraq in ways that do not necessarily converge with the US strategy for the region.²¹

Furthermore, the increase of Russian influence and interventionism in the region also seems to be related with the US strategic retreat, which was perceived by Moscow as a “carte blanche” for proceeding with deeper involvement in the Middle East. This tendency became visible after President Mohamed Morsi’s overthrow and General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi’s takeover in Egypt. As the Obama administration failed to come into terms with the new order of things in Cairo, Sisi turned to Moscow to replace Washington as Egypt’s new privileged partner.²² Moreover, Moscow’s recent

¹⁶ Ryan Lizza, “Leading from behind,” *The New Yorker*, April 26, 2011. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/leading-from-behind>.

¹⁷ Robin Simcox, “ISIS Worst Nightmare: Why the Group is not Trying to Provoke a US Attack,” *Foreign Affairs*, 15 September 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2014-09-15/isis-worst-nightmare>; Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

¹⁸ Reva Bhalla, “The US-Saudi Dilemma: Iran’s Reshaping of Persian Gulf Politics,” *Stratfor*, 19 July 19 2011, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110718-us-saudi-dilemma-irans-reshaping-persian-gulf-politics>; Jonathan Spyer, “Is it Iran’s Middle East Now?” *Fathom*, Autumn 2015, <http://fathomjournal.org/is-it-irans-middle-east-now/>.

¹⁹ Seth Cropsey, “US Policy and the Strategic Relationship of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel: Power Shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean,” *Hudson Institute*, 2015, 4-6. http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1459/2015_03_us_policyandthe_strategic_relationshipof_greece_cyprusand_israel_power_shiftsinthe_eastern_mediterranean.pdf.

²⁰ Begdil, “Turkey: What Ally?”

²¹ Jonathan Spyer, “Behind the lines: Iran and Turkey jostling for power in Iraq,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 November 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Behind-the-lines-Jostling-for-power-471654>; “Turkey v Syria’s Kurds v Islamic State,” BBC News, 23 August 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>.

²² Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neria, “Egypt’s Turn to Russia,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 30 October 2013, <http://jcpa.org/egypts-turn-to-russia/>; Vitaly Naumkin, “Russia and Egypt’s ‘new partnership’,” *Al Monitor*, 11 February 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/moscow-cairo-relations-sisi-putin-egypt-visit.html>.

moves in the East Mediterranean shaped a new regional naval equilibrium.²³ Finally, Russia's new role in the region was sealed by Moscow's military intervention in the Syrian crisis, in support of President Bashar al Assad.²⁴ Moscow came to believe that a military engagement in Syria became a rational choice due to the initial US disorientation regarding the civil war in Syria, and Washington's final decision not to proceed with a military strike against the Assad regime in September 2014, despite the prior use of chemical weapons by the regime which was considered as a "red line" by President Obama.²⁵

Even the emergence of ISIS could be partially attributed to the US partial disengagement from the Middle East: although it is not clear whether the United States could have done something to deter ISIS from taking over the vast landmass it controlled by 2015, the timing of the jihadi organization's emergence is not irrelevant to the US strategic retreat. Actually the beginning of ISIS expansion coincided with the US military withdrawal from Iraq, and many analysts believe that a different decision, than complete withdrawal, may have prevented the jihadists from expanding and seizing parts of Iraqi and Syrian territory.²⁶

Indirect engagement is the only rational option

Most likely, US return to an indirect-engagement approach in the Middle East, which was evident under President Obama, will continue under President Trump as well. Both the analysis of the new President's foreign policy priorities, as well as the related systemic factors, converge toward this conclusion and towards considering either a potential return to direct engagement, or full disengagement, as less likely scenarios: on the one hand, Mr. Trump is expected to try to combine his broader isolationist philosophy with his anti-terrorism priorities. This will probably materialize through a moderate interventionary approach. After all, during his pre-election campaign, he criticized both G. W. Bush for invading Iraq, for nation-building purposes, as well as B. Obama for his decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Iraq.²⁷ On the other hand, the latest developments in the region, especially the ongoing instability in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and the unfolding competition for regional influence, create new dynamics that cannot be defied by Washington. Additionally, two more systemic factors that may amplify Washington's need to keep up with indirect engagement is Mr. Trump's renewed commitment to enhance relations with Israel (that were disrupted under his predecessor), as well as his concerns over Iran and the recently achieved agreement on Tehran's nuclear program.

²³ Captain (ret.) Thomas R. Fedyszyn "The Russian Navy 'Rebalances' to the Mediterranean," *U.S. Naval Institute*, 139 (2013), <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2013-12/russian-navy-rebalances-mediterranean>.

²⁴ Evan Barrett, "Letting Putin Get Away with it," *Foreign Policy*, 19 January 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/19/syria-kurds-russia-sunni-arab/>; Kissinger, "A path out of the Middle East collapse."

²⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

²⁶ James F. Jeffrey, "Behind the US Withdrawal from Iraq," *The Washington Institute*, 2 November 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/behind-the-u.s.-withdrawal-from-iraq>; Rowan Scarborough, "US troop withdrawal let Islamic State enter Iraq, military leaders say," *The Washington Times*, 26 July 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jul/26/us-troop-withdrawal-let-islamic-state-enter-iraq-m/>.

²⁷ John Hannah, "Will Trump Stay or Go in Iraq?" *Foreign Policy*, 9 December 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/09/will-trump-stay-or-go-in-iraq/>.

A counter-tendency that complicates US options is the new Russian role in the region and the need to cope with Moscow: will Mr. Trump's expressed will to work jointly with Moscow, in order to fight ISIS, become the main driver? Or will the two great powers' traditionally conflicting strategic interests (especially in relation with Iran and the control of energy resources) neutralize it? But even in that case, indirect engagement offers flexibility, in relation with the depth of US involvement, as well as with the regional actors that can be utilized for the promotion of US strategic objectives. Unless some tremendously irrational views prevail over the post-G. W. Bush prudence (which cannot be ruled out if we take the President's unpredictability into account), Mr. Trump needs to change little in the US Middle East strategy in order to keep up with his broader foreign policy perceptions.



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