



Washington Rebalancing Away from the Middle East: Realities and Difficulties

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In a [speech](#) to the Australian parliament in November 2011, President Barack Obama declared that the Asia-Pacific region had become a “top priority” in US security policy and pledged attention, resources, and commitment to it. However, his administration’s [2012 Defense Strategic Guidance](#) document emphasized continued obligation to the military security of American partners and allies in the Middle East, thus putting the United States in the uncomfortable position of simultaneously pledging limited resources to the two theaters. As a new administration begins work on strategic issues come January 20, the US foreign policy establishment may find itself grappling with the extent to which a rebalance, or pivot, is still possible given the realities of the Middle East and the difficulties of East Asia.

After the Middle East proved the acute challenge of quickly implementing such a rebalance, conditions there and in East Asia, as well as the murkiness of the American political scene, have added layers of opacity and confusion. As American forces continue to deploy in the Arabian Gulf, participate in the training of Iraqi and other forces in Iraq and Syria, conduct asymmetric military operations, and wage an aerial campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), it is hard to see how they can be decamped away from what Washington considers a vital strategic landscape. Similarly, as the United States bolsters its security and military cooperation with myriad countries in East Asia, watches China annex the South China Sea, and worries about a nuclear-armed North Korea, the Trump Administration may be hard pressed to change what the Obama Administration has pledged to do.

But denying Russian malfeasance in Syria and the Middle East, acceding to demands by a right-wing Israeli government, or tearing up a painstaking nuclear accord with Iran do not constitute a sure way of dealing with Middle East challenges. Neither do threatening China with a trade war and tweeting denials of potential intimidation from a nuclear North Korea make meaningful policy. Indeed, as the Obama Administration departs and leaves the rebalance in the hands of an unprepared Trump Administration, it is likely that the original pledge will linger—considering hard realities and difficulties and the questionable ability to execute flexible, studied, and long-term policy options to safeguard against unforeseen, undesirable, and obviously unwelcome repercussions.

Middle Eastern Realities

The American commitment to the Middle East is likely to continue despite the desire and intent on the part of the outgoing and incoming administrations to let the parties of the region address their own concerns. Notwithstanding the lessened interest in Iraqi affairs and the major drawdown in the number of personnel deployed in Iraq, currently at about 5,000, the Obama Administration has continued to consider itself responsible for training and equipping the Iraqi army and conducting special forces operations against ISIL. It also trains Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Further, American trainers operate in Syria in the ground offensive against ISIL and US airborne assets have been busy over positions in Iraq and Syria since 2014.

Additionally, thousands of US troops are stationed in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and many naval assets traverse the waters of the Gulf, participate in anti-piracy operations there and along the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian and Red Seas, and maintain maritime navigation from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. The United States has also deployed its asymmetric assets in Yemen to a long fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and provides logistical assistance to the Saudi Arabian-led coalition in the country. Washington has committed itself to supply the latest defensive weapons systems to GCC states and conducts yearly exercises with their forces, in addition to maintaining bases in Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Finally, what is American policy in the Middle East without US commitment to the security of Israel and the tens of billions in allocated and promised funding for its military superiority and dominance?

Indeed, the only indication that the United States was interested in a pivot away from the Middle East was President Obama's preference for diminishing American participation in decision-making in Middle East matters—from the Gulf to North Africa—and deference to area leaders. As a departure from decades of policy and practice, this added to Arab leaders' fears of US abandonment of old ironclad guarantees amidst trepidation about the unleashed chaos of the "Arab Spring" and the clear and present dangers of Iranian interference in the Arab world. No summit meetings with President Obama at Camp David or in Riyadh or visits by US political and military officials could shake that feeling or attenuate the sense that the Arab world was left to fend for itself as four of its countries continued to experience the throes of instability and conflict.

Today, and while many in the Arab world and especially the GCC hope to receive more attention from President Donald Trump when he enters the White House, conditions point in the direction of a mere reconfiguration of American relations with the region and not a pivot away from it. This stems from the institutional underpinnings of American-Arab relations that US policy centers have established with Arab and Middle Eastern countries over decades, a situation that will not be easily undone by a Trump Administration. Instead, what is likely to emerge—as gleaned from President-elect Trump's enunciations about burning Middle Eastern issues since the start of his presidential

campaign—are a nonchalant attitude to what happens in Iraq, an appreciation of Russia’s role in Syria and against ISIL, an unwavering and blind support of Israel, and a renewed commitment to facing up to Iran’s behavior across the region.

In fact, the only significant change in America’s relations with the Middle East is likely to originate in a more assertive Russian role in Syria—bolstered by a more institutional arrangement regarding bases and military presence—and a sharper focus on Iran but without the suspension of the nuclear agreement. Both changes will not necessarily or directly affect American strategic interests, since the United States never looked at Syria as a potential ally or partner and has failed to forge relations with the leaders of the Islamic Republic. What in both situations will figure prominently is their impact on Israel and America’s traditional allies in the Gulf. As for Syria, a more active Russian presence may actually limit Iran’s writ, while a firmer hand with the latter may ameliorate the trepidation sown by the Obama Administration’s overtures, which led to the nuclear accord but freed Tehran’s hand in the Middle East.

The Uncertainties of East Asia

The United States has been—and continues to be—a hegemon in the Asia-Pacific region since the end of the Second World War. President Obama’s call for a rebalance was, however, a logical reminder of American foreign policy essentials in response to an active Chinese regional policy and an unhinged North Korean leadership. Since 2011, China has [accelerated](#) its advances in the East China, South China, and Yellow Seas, built artificial islands on which it deployed military assets, challenged Japanese, Vietnamese, and Philippine sovereignty, and impeded freedom of navigation, all while attempting to carve out a hegemonic economic role vis-à-vis the smaller states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. For its part, North Korea [continued](#) to develop its nuclear arsenal and delivery systems, attacked South Korean naval vessels, and threatened to cross the demilitarized zone and to attack the Japanese mainland with missiles. Only the United States was, and is, able to assert the status quo. Indeed, the Obama Administration had no choice but to engage.

But President Obama’s wish to strengthen ties to the Pacific beyond the current status quo may not easily come true. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte did an about-face in October 2016 when he visited China and [announced](#) a strategic re-alignment away from the United States; this came shortly after his country [won](#) a Permanent Court of Arbitration case against China in the dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Although his move was merely a response to justified American criticism of his government’s human rights abuses and extra-judicial killings, it is doubtful that he can implement such a policy given the depth of American-Philippine relations. Nevertheless, it has highlighted the potential difficulties the United States might have with an old partner. Other important concerns include China’s economic role as an attractive investor in less

affluent economies, such as those of the Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia; Australia's openness to Chinese overtures [despite mutual distrust](#); the seeming but logical unpreparedness of Japan and South Korea to mount a challenge to Beijing's designs; and the current turmoil in Seoul following the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye.

Indeed, the United States was damned if it had escalated hostility against China and damned if it had attempted to accommodate its strategic ambitions, and recent American-Chinese interactions have borne a mixed picture. What has transpired regarding the openness toward the Asian giant since 2009—when the Obama Administration saw fit basically to recognize Beijing's "core interests" in the region—has been a Chinese exploitation of that strategic mistake, which will affect regional politics for a long time to come. As for North Korea, and short of an outright strategic bombing of its nuclear facilities, the United States finds itself needing China's assistance both to convey messages to Pyongyang and to apply economic pressure on the outside chance that its young and unpredictable president, Kim Jong-un, might avoid the confrontation.

Finally, it is hard to see how threats by President-elect Trump to wage a trade war on China can budge it from its ambitious regional march or strengthen America's hand in the region. What a Trump Administration may find possible is keeping the current strategic status quo unchanged while simultaneously facing China off as events develop. This situation would be reminiscent of former President Bill Clinton's sending an aircraft carrier group in 1996 up the Taiwan Strait following mainland provocations, and of President Obama's dispatching ships to the South China Sea and a B-52 strategic bomber over it in 2015 to challenge China's claims of sovereignty there. Short of an outright military confrontation with China, US policy in the Asia-Pacific is unlikely to witness major changes but will certainly exercise both needed and constant vigilance and restraint. One thing is clear, however: the United States always has the option of exercising economic warfare against Chinese malevolent behavior by controlling Middle East energy flows on which much of China's economic wellbeing relies.

Important Signposts Ahead

Over the last few decades, American foreign policy has seen notable instances of radical departure from established norms and traditions, such as the 1980s activism in Grenada and Panama and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But US relations with the Middle East and the Arab world have always followed the mantra of continuity because of strategic, political, military, institutional, economic, and other considerations. If the Obama Administration sought to lessen its direct involvement in detailed policy making to encourage, indeed coax, self-reliance, it did not intend to fully pivot away from the area or de-emphasize its importance. Developments since the announcement of the rebalance to Asia have borne this out, from Iraq to Syria, including the fight against ISIL, military

security for the Gulf, and countless other policy choices. Neither is the worry about the Asia-Pacific region tantamount to the necessity of abandoning a decades-long relationship.

The new administration would do well to re-examine the roots and principles of US-Arab and US-GCC relations. This examination of the past is likely to mark important milestones ahead. First, Arab and GCC leaders want to be considered equal partners in a mutually beneficial relationship. Second, despite trepidations about Iranian behavior, GCC leaders are not interested in abandoning the nuclear accord with the Islamic Republic since it alone can be a good check on Iranian nuclear ambitions. Third, as Russia claims the leading role in the ongoing Syrian tragedy, it should not be allowed to expand its reach into other parts of the Arab world nor to supplant American influence there. Fourth, the United States should spare no effort to help stabilize the Arab state system as it simultaneously encourages good governance and institutionalization in the service of peace and prosperity in the region.