

The Past and Future of the American “Pivot to Asia”

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Reducing US commitments in the Middle East and focusing strategic attention on Asia has been an attractive but elusive goal of successive US administrations for more than two decades. Former President Barack Obama was the concept’s most visible proponent, putting considerable diplomatic effort into it during the third year of his first term, and his successors took up the idea as well. The time seemed right for a change, especially after the formal end of the US combat mission in Iraq in 2011. Since then, the defeat of the so-called Islamic State’s “caliphate” in 2017 and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 have meant that the United States is no longer actively engaged in major combat operations anywhere in the broader Middle East and North Africa. Meanwhile, the rise of a more aggressive China and the growing economic importance of the Indo-Pacific region have seemed to demand greater US involvement in that part of the world.

American weariness with the MENA region has played a major role too. The apparently intractable problems of the Middle East, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the threat of Iran, have often seemed impervious to

decades of US diplomatic and military interventions. Many expert observers and policy makers believe that the United States would be better off if it shifted its focus to more critical challenges elsewhere and left the Middle East to deal with its own problems, though with an occasional helping hand from Washington. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 radically transformed the United States' diplomatic and security priorities, as did growing great power competition in the Middle East. As a result, President Joe Biden's initial impulse to reduce US involvement in the region while chastising its leaders for their egregious human rights abuses was quickly transformed into a new policy of outcompeting Russia and China while simultaneously countering Iran. This has meant, in part, taking on new and increasingly burdensome political and security commitments.

Today, the United States appears poised to assume even more responsibilities for its partners' defense, potentially including bilateral security guarantees that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. These new obligations are anchored by a massive, long-standing American military presence in the region that shows every indication of being permanent. As Washington's latest moves to protect its interests in the Middle East take shape, it seems that if there was ever a moment when the United States could draw back from the region, that moment has passed.

The History of an Idea

During the first year of President Biden's term, discussion within both the administration and Washington's foreign policy establishment centered on the decreasing importance of the Middle East to US strategic calculations and the rising necessity of shifting resources away from the region to focus more intently on the Indo-Pacific. The debate is not new, of course. The George W. Bush administration contemplated focusing more attention on the Indo-Pacific region (at the time referred to as Asia-Pacific) as early as 2001, but this policy largely flew under the radar due to the administration's wish to keep it as quiet as possible to avoid provoking China.¹ This early "pivot" notably did not include any substantial shifts in the global US force posture, which would in any case have proved difficult, if not impossible, after the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Former President Barack Obama, convinced that Bush had not done enough to engage with the Indo-Pacific region, aired a proposal for his

1 Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 45-88.

own "pivot to Asia" during a trip to Australia and Indonesia in November 2011.² Unlike Bush's concept, this strategy envisaged a real military and diplomatic retrenchment in the Middle East. As Obama stated in a speech to the Australian Parliament, "After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region."³ Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, termed it the dawn of "America's Pacific century."⁴ As the American public increasingly soured on US involvement in the broader Middle East, it soon became clear that the political environment in the United States was aligning neatly with Obama's own foreign policy instincts.⁵

But Obama's pivot did not go as planned.⁶ The president's signaling about reducing the US footprint in the region—along with his successful efforts at concluding a nuclear deal with Iran, against the wishes of Israel and key Gulf states—caused alarm among the United States' closest partners, particularly Saudi Arabia. Riyadh, along with others in the Gulf, concluded that the United States was downgrading the importance of their legitimate concerns in its foreign policy and abandoning them to their own devices.⁷ It was no coincidence that the kingdom and other Arab states began to hedge their bets on Washington by building closer ties with Moscow and Beijing.

For all his vehement disagreements with his predecessor, former President Donald Trump shared Obama's aversion to entangling commitments in

2 Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," Brookings Institution, December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

3 "Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament," The White House, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

4 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

5 Stephen P. Cohen and Robert Ward, "Asia Pivot: Obama's Ticket out of Middle East?," Brookings Institution, August 21, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/asia-pivot-obamas-ticket-out-of-middle-east/>.

6 John Ford, "The Pivot to Asia Was Obama's Biggest Mistake," *The Diplomat*, January 21, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/the-pivot-to-asia-was-obamas-biggest-mistake/>.

7 The Iran nuclear deal of 2015 (officially the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) may have been the last straw for Saudi Arabia, other Gulf nations, and Israel, but it certainly was not the first. Obama's perceived failure to support Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring in 2011 and his real failure to enforce his own "red line" on the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians in 2013 reinforced the sense among allies of a feckless president eager to abandon long-standing commitments on his way out of the region.

the region, but his attempts to express that in policy terms compounded the confusion and resentment among US partners. Trump floated plans to pull US troops out of the Middle East and Afghanistan several times, and his sudden announcement that he was withdrawing all US forces from Syria in 2018 surprised the military and precipitated the resignation of then Defense Secretary James Mattis.⁸ Trump's repeated complaints about the cost to the United States of defending Saudi Arabia, as well as his administration's low-key response after a 2019 attack on key Saudi oil facilities (which was claimed by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi forces) were proof enough in the eyes of Gulf Arab states that the United States was no longer strongly committed to their defense against Iran.⁹ At the end of his term in office, Trump had succeeded in reducing the overall US force presence in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, against the advice of military leadership.¹⁰ But a substantial US presence nonetheless remained embedded throughout the region.

Policy Debate in Washington: Is Less Really More?

After the policy disarray and mixed messages of the Obama and Trump years, leading Middle East analysts began to make a strong case for a thorough reevaluation of the US presence in the region. Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, for example, argued that, "The turbulent Middle East—where more often than not American ideas go to die—has become

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- 8 Uri Friedman, "The Consequences of Donald Trump Washing His Hands of the Middle East," *The Atlantic*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/10/donald-trump-middle-east-consequences/600610/>; Paul Sonne et al., "Mattis Resigns after Clash with Trump over Troop Withdrawal from Syria and Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, December 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-announces-mattis-will-leave-as-defense-secretary-at-the-end-of-february/2018/12/20/e1a846ee-e147-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b_story.html.
- 9 "Trump Complains US Is 'Subsidising' Saudi Arabia's Military," *Middle East Eye*, October 3, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-complains-us-subsidising-saudi-arabias-military>; Joshua Keating, "Why Trump Is Playing the Tough Guy With the Saudis Now," *Slate*, April 29, 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/04/trump-saudis-opecc-salman.html>. On the 2019 attack, see: Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, "Saudi Offers 'Proof' of Iran's Role in Oil Attack and Urges US Response," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/18/saudi-oil-attack-rouhani-dismisses-us-claims-of-iran-role-as-slander>.
- 10 Lolita C. Baldor, "AP Sources: Trump to Order Troop Cuts in Afghanistan, Iraq," *Associated Press*, November 16, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-troop-reduction-afghanistan-iraq-92e43910a8822160ce45f950139ae048>.

decidedly less important to American foreign policy and to our interests. [...] American leadership and exceptionalism cannot fix a broken Middle East or play a major role in leading it to a better future.”¹¹ They advocated a much smaller US military presence, with special forces and over-the-horizon capabilities—often called “offshore balancing”—employed as needed to respond to terrorism and military contingencies.¹²

Some went further, arguing that the United States should withdraw its troops altogether. One observer claimed that “the importance of the Persian Gulf long has been [sic] exaggerated,” and that the presence of US troops in the region has actually fed instability, leading partners to assume that they can act with impunity under the American protective umbrella, which in turn fuels the rise of violent non-state actors and hostile proxy forces.¹³ Not only is the Middle East, as another analyst once argued, a “small, poor, weak region beset by an array of problems that mostly do not affect Americans—and that US forces cannot fix,” it is incredibly expensive for the American taxpayer to conduct Washington’s (largely irrelevant) missions in the region, from fighting terrorism—when the threat to Americans outside a war zone is vanishingly small—to maintaining the many military bases required to do so.¹⁴ Despite pushback from many in the think tank, policy, and academic spheres who believe the Middle East remains of vital strategic interest, this line of thinking remains durable among some prominent Middle East experts. One former senior official recently made the case that the United States is already well on its way to the exit, and for good reason: “A net assessment suggests that the United States would have been better off today had it not been so eager to intervene in the Middle East. Fortunately, America’s era there is drawing to a close, and probably not a moment too soon.”¹⁵

11 Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, “The Middle East Just Doesn’t Matter as Much Any Longer,” *Politico*, September 3, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/middle-east-just-doesn-t-matter-as-much-any-longer-pub-82653>.

12 Christopher Mott, “The Case for U.S. Offshore Balancing in the Middle East,” *The National Interest*, October 14, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/case-us-offshore-balancing-middle-east-170704>.

13 Doug Bandow, “A Blueprint for Getting Out of the Middle East,” Cato Institute, July 8, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/blueprint-getting-out-middle-east>.

14 Justin Logan, “The Case For Withdrawing From The Middle East,” Defense Priorities, September 30, 2020, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/the-case-for-withdrawing-from-the-middle-east>.

15 Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), 414.

Others, however, continue to believe that while a reduction in forces and political capital is desirable, some sort of limited engagement will continue to be necessary. Jake Sullivan, a longtime foreign policy aide to Joe Biden and now the president's national security advisor, has advocated something of a middle ground. He and Daniel Benaim—now the deputy assistant secretary of state for Arabian Peninsula affairs in the Near East Bureau at the Department of State—recommended a policy that would be “less ambitious in terms of the military ends the United States seeks and in its efforts to remake nations from within, but more ambitious in using US leverage and diplomacy to press for a de-escalation in tensions and eventually a new *modus vivendi* among the key regional actors.”¹⁶ Vigorous diplomacy and resizing the US military presence to reflect a “more modest regional engagement,” as Tamara Cofman Wittes puts it, were seen by Sullivan and others as the future of American regional policy.¹⁷

As president, Joe Biden was more than happy to adopt this approach. He revived Obama's concept of a pivot to the Indo-Pacific region, promising to redirect America's strategic efforts to meet the challenge of a more aggressive China while simultaneously de-emphasizing the Middle East.¹⁸ With Sullivan in the national security advisor's office, the Biden administration presumed that creative US diplomacy could encourage regional actors to negotiate their differences and find new ways to cooperate, obviating the need for either a significant US military presence or frequent diplomatic intervention to deal with regional conflicts. Biden's enthusiastic embrace of the Trump administration's singular Middle East diplomatic triumph, the Abraham Accords—which normalized relations between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain (soon followed by Morocco and Sudan)—became the foundation of his Middle East policy.¹⁹

16 Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, “America's Opportunity in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>.

17 Tamara Cofman Wittes, “What to Do—And What Not to Do—In the Middle East,” Brookings Institution, January 25, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-to-do-and-what-not-to-do-in-the-middle-east/>.

18 Carla Freeman et al., “A Closer Look at Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy,” United States Institute of Peace, March 7, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/closer-look-bidens-indo-pacific-strategy>.

19 “The Abraham Accords,” U.S. Department of State, undated, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>; Charles W. Dunne, “US Middle East Policy: The Trump-Biden Doctrine in Action,” Arab Center Washington DC, March 22, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/us-middle-east-policy-the-trump-biden-doctrine-in-action/>.

New Strategies and New Security Commitments Take Shape

If any serious consideration of paring back US involvement in the Middle East was being contemplated, however, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed both the narrative and the thinking in Washington. The ensuing disruption to global oil markets forced Biden to abandon his earlier hard line on both Saudi Arabia (even if it had been mostly rhetorical to begin with) and its controversial crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MBS).²⁰ In July 2022 Biden found it necessary to visit the kingdom and importune MBS to increase oil production in an effort to curb energy prices.²¹ While the effort was unsuccessful, the Biden visit was crucial for another reason: it marked the end of any immediate plans to extricate the United States from its commitments in the region and the start of a process to deepen American political and security ties to regional autocracies.

During this trip, Biden reaffirmed the American commitment to maintaining a strong presence in the Middle East, stating that Washington "will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran," and promising to assert "active, principled American leadership" to confront challenges to the existing regional order.²² While this statement emerged naturally from the president's rhetoric about defending global democracy against autocratic advances, it was also an acknowledgment that the war in Ukraine and continually rising US-China tensions had

20 Jonathan Guyer, "Biden Promised a Harder Line on Saudi Arabia. Why Can't He Deliver?," *Vox*, Jan 23, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/22881937/biden-saudi-arabia-mbs-khashoggi-yemen-human-rights>.

21 Hesham Alghannam and Mohammad Yaghi, "Biden's Trip to Saudi Arabia: Successes and Failures," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 11, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87662>.

22 David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, "As Biden Reaches Out to Mideast Dictators, His Eyes Are on China and Russia," *New York Times*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/16/world/middleeast/biden-saudi-arabia-china-russia.html>. This sweeping pledge did not extend to Syria, which was welcomed back into the Arab League at its May 2023 summit without noticeable opposition from the United States. This constituted a significant diplomatic win for Russia and Iran, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's two major foreign backers, and for Assad himself. The Syrian president took the opportunity to tell the assembled Arab leaders that Syria's readmittance was an occasion "to rearrange our affairs with the least amount of foreign interference," an obvious hint that it was time to abandon ties to the US in favor, presumably, of warming up to his own patrons. See: Raffi Berg and David Gritten, "Syria's Assad Tells Arab Leaders to Take 'Historic Opportunity' to Remake Middle East," *BBC News*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65625742>.

suddenly vaulted questions about the American role to the top of the US foreign policy agenda.²³ Biden carried this theme forward in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where he met with the leaders of the GCC+3 (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman, plus Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan). According to a White House fact sheet, Biden underscored the “centrality” of the Middle East to the United States and highlighted America’s “enduring commitment to the security and territorial defense of US partners.”²⁴

Biden’s remarks may have been the most public acknowledgment of America’s shifting policy, but the new approach was becoming clear even before the president’s regional tour. The United States, for example, indicated that it would back a “Middle East Air Defense Alliance” actively organized by Israel alongside its Abraham Accords partner, the United Arab Emirates, with potential Saudi involvement.²⁵ And legislation introduced in Congress would require the Pentagon to develop a plan for an “integrated air and missile defense system” that is primarily intended to protect the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, from Iranian attacks.²⁶ The integrated air defense scheme might only be the tip of the iceberg; the United States may be considering formal commitments to

23 Philip Bump, “The Newly Important American Political Axis: Democracy vs. Autocracy,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/18/newly-important-american-political-axis-democracy-vs-autocracy/>. On US-China tensions, see: Vivian Salama and Michael R. Gordon, “Chinese Balloon Carried Antennas, Other Equipment to Gather Intelligence, U.S. Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-balloon-carried-antennas-other-equipment-to-gather-intelligence-u-s-says-11675953033?mod=article_inline.

24 “FACT SHEET: The United States Strengthens Cooperation with Middle East Partners to Address 21st Century Challenges,” The White House, July 16, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/16/fact-sheet-the-united-states-strengthens-cooperation-with-middle-east-partners-to-address-21st-century-challenges/>.

25 Lara Seligman and Alexander Ward, “Biden Wants a Middle East Air Defense ‘Alliance.’ But It’s a Long Way Off,” *Politico*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/07/12/biden-middle-east-air-defense-alliance-00045423>.; Dan Williams and Aziz El Yaakoubi, “Israel Says It’s Building Regional Air Defence Alliance under U.S.,” *Reuters*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-building-regional-air-defence-alliance-under-us-2022-06-20/>.

26 Nancy A. Youssef and Stephen Kalin, “U.S. Proposes Helping Israel, Arab States Harden Air Defenses Against Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/u-s-proposes-helping-israel-arab-states-coordinate-air-defenses-against-iran-11654779601>.

defend the Gulf states—possibly starting with the UAE—against outside threats.²⁷ Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has reportedly asked the United States for security guarantees of its own as part of a potential deal to normalize ties with Israel.²⁸

In addition to this behind-the-scenes maneuvering to deepen regional security partnerships, Biden has been careful to show Saudi Arabia signs of respect. During his visit to the kingdom, the White House announced a “new bilateral framework for cooperation” on 5G/6G telecommunications networks that is intended to rival Chinese firm Huawei’s investments in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.²⁹ A separate communique reaffirmed Washington’s “strategic partnership” with Saudi Arabia, touting bilateral cooperation in diverse fields.³⁰ In fact, the administration’s 5G/6G cooperative framework is but one example of how, rather than compelling Washington to reposition US resources and attention to the Indo-Pacific the geopolitical competition with China has instead done the opposite: it has helped to convince decision-makers of the need to engage more deeply with the Middle East.

As the Biden administration has acknowledged—and as a recent United States Central Command (CENTCOM) posture statement affirms—the Middle East, by dint of its strategic location and economic significance, will remain a major arena in which geopolitical competition

27 Hussein Ibish, “Biden’s Trip Aims at Resurrecting U.S. Leadership in the Middle East,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, June 17, 2022, <https://agsiw.org/bidens-trip-aims-at-resurrecting-u-s-leadership-in-the-middle-east/>; Barak Ravid, “Scoop: U.S. and UAE Discuss Strategic Security Agreement,” *Axios*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/06/01/us-uae-discuss-strategic-security-agreement>.

28 Dion Nissenbaum et al., “Saudi Arabia Seeks U.S. Security Pledges, Nuclear Help for Peace With Israel,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-seeks-u-s-security-pledges-nuclear-help-for-peace-with-israel-cd47baaf>.

29 “FACT SHEET: Results of Bilateral Meeting Between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” The White House, July 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/15/fact-sheet-results-of-bilateral-meeting-between-the-united-states-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>; Aziz El Yaakoubi and Eduardo Baptista, “Saudi Arabia Signs Huawei Deal, Deepening China Ties on Xi Visit,” *Reuters*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-lays-lavish-welcome-chinas-xi-heralds-new-era-relations-2022-12-08/>.

30 “The Jeddah Communique: A Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” July 15, 2022, The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/15/the-jeddah-communique-a-joint-statement-between-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>.

will play out.³¹ The administration’s I2U2 initiative—a partnership among India, Israel, the United States, and the UAE—seems intended as a counter to China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI) in the region.³² As Jake Sullivan has said of the initiative, much like the BRI, “The fundamental notion is to connect South Asia to the Middle East to the United States in ways that advance our economic technology and diplomacy.”³³ In a similar vein, elements of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, announced by Biden and other leaders at the 2022 G7 summit, are aimed at mobilizing Middle East partner investments to fund strategic infrastructure projects linking the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.³⁴

The anchor of the US commitment to the Middle East remains the substantial American force presence, which, although it has fluctuated amid frequent disputes about “rightsizing” the US military footprint, has remained remarkably consistent over time. For the last few years, the United States has maintained between 40,000 and 60,000 troops in the 21 countries that comprise the US Central Command area of responsibility (CENTCOM AOR), a number that varies depending on regional exigencies and troop rotations.³⁵ These forces are mainly stationed at bases in Jordan, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. US troop missions in the CENTCOM AOR are broadly focused on counterterrorism, as well

31 “Statement of General Michael ‘Erik’ Kurilla on the Posture of U.S. Central Command - SASC Hearing Mar 16, 2023,” U.S. Central Command, March 16, 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.

32 “Expanding Regional Economic Integration through I2U2’s Business-to-Business Cooperation,” U.S. Department of State, February 22, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/expanding-regional-economic-integration-through-i2u2s-business-to-business-cooperation/>.

33 Jake Sullivan, “Keynote Address: 2023 Soref Symposium,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/keynote-address-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan>.

34 “FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Formally Launch the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment,” The White House, June 26, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/26/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-formally-launch-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>; Sullivan, “Keynote Address.”

35 Nicole Robinson, “2023 Index of U.S. Military Strength/Middle East,” Heritage Foundation, October 18, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-the-global-operating-environment/middle-east>; “United States Central Command,” Congressional Research Service, updated December 16, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11428.pdf>.

as on what can be described as “regional security and stability” activities, including exercises, training, and other forms of cooperation to support “enduring US interests.”³⁶ That description, however, belies the sweeping nature of the commitment to which the Biden administration has tied the United States. According to the administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy, “The United States will not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East’s waterways, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al Mandab [sic], nor tolerate efforts by any country to dominate another—or the region—through military buildups, incursions, or threats.”³⁷

All this has justified a massive and, to all appearances, permanent US military presence in the Middle East. As political scientist Marc Lynch has stated, “The United States’ network of bases and deployments may be low when compared with the mid-2000s, but it is rather more extensive than it was during the peak of the 1990s US unipolar moment.”³⁸ In fact, as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl stated at the Manama Dialogue in November 2022, “The United States remains committed to the region. We’re here and we’re not going anywhere.”³⁹

The Ties That Bind

With these latest moves to strengthen ties to the Gulf and other regional partners and allies, the United States seems to be implicitly acknowledging that it sees no way out of the Middle East for now. The current international situation, as well as the gravitational pull of Washington’s political and military infrastructure in the region, will not permit a

36 “Operations and Exercises,” U.S. Central Command, undated, <https://www.centcom.mil/OPERATIONS-AND-EXERCISES/>; “CENTCOM Mission and Command Priorities,” U.S. Central Command, undated, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/>.

37 “National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 12, 2022, p.42, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

38 Marc Lynch, “Does the Decline of U.S. Power Matter for the Middle East?,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/19/does-decline-us-power-matter-middle-east/>.

39 Colin Kahl, “Remarks by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Colin Kahl at the IISS Manama Dialogue (As Delivered),” U.S. Department of Defense, November 18, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3223837/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-defense-for-policy-dr-colin-kahl-at-the-iiss-mana/>.

disentanglement for the foreseeable future.⁴⁰ This infrastructure of course includes the complicated diplomatic relationships that the United States has spent decades developing. But it also comprises a vast and lucrative web of business and consulting ties, often involving high-ranking former US diplomatic, intelligence, and military figures. These individuals and the economic interests that they front—particularly in energy and the defense industry—serve to bind the US and the Middle East together in ways that resist pragmatic cost-benefit considerations.⁴¹ In addition, the network of military bases and basing rights that the United States enjoys not only furnishes it with an invaluable forward presence in a strategic region, but its very existence is vital to maintaining close political ties and the trust of host nations. Any major changes to this presence would not be easy, and perhaps are not possible without provoking a crisis of confidence.

Even the current American approach of strengthening the ability of regional states to settle their disputes and cooperate in their own defense—a strategy ostensibly intended to lessen the need for intensive US involvement—seems to be having the opposite effect, requiring a massive diplomatic effort to bring US partners together and keep cooperation on track, in effect deepening their dependence on Washington’s leadership role. The need for active US leadership in this sphere is strongly, if quietly, encouraged by Israel, a fact that is influential whenever voices in

40 An argument has been made that the March 10, 2023 deal brokered by China between Saudi Arabia and Iran to reestablish full diplomatic relations between the two rivals will boost Beijing and obviate the need for a US-led coalition to counter Iran, thus transforming the region to Washington’s strategic disadvantage. That very much remains to be seen. The agreement, for one thing, solves none of the fundamental disputes between Riyadh and Tehran, especially the decades-long struggle for supremacy in the region, Iran’s support for terrorism, and its malign activities in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. It may, however, help with a resolution of the Yemen war. See, inter alia: Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, “A New Order in the Middle East? Iran and Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement Could Transform the Region,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations>.

41 The United States is the largest international weapons exporter. It holds a 40 percent share of the global trade in major arms, amounting to \$205.6 billion in FY2022. Forty-one percent of the total goes to the Middle East. Four Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE) are among the top ten purchasers of US-made weapons. See: Mike Stone, “U.S. Arms Exports Up 49% in Fiscal 2022,” *Reuters*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-arms-exports-up-11-fiscal-2022-official-says-2023-01-25/>; Pieter D. Wezeman et al., “SIPRI Fact Sheet: Trends In International Arms Transfers, 2022,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2023, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf.

Congress or advisors in the White House consider backing away from the region. The United States can (as it has from time to time) shift military assets and policy emphasis back and forth between the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.⁴² But this seems unlikely to result in a major downgrading of the MENA region in any administration's list of global priorities anytime soon. For now, the United States seems to be more firmly tied to the region than ever before, and content to make the best of it while leveraging old ties to confront evolving threats. Any serious US retrenchment from the Middle East will have to wait.

42 Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. to Send Aging Attack Planes to Mideast and Shift Newer Jets to Asia, Europe," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-send-aging-attack-planes-to-mideast-and-shift-newer-jets-to-asia-europe-df72da15?mod=hp_lead_pos5.