

The US-Israel Nexus and the Question of a Pivot

Yousef Munayyer

How would a pivot in American foreign policy toward Asia impact the US-Israel relationship? I start answering this question by challenging the premise in order to modify it and provide an alternative frame that offers greater analytical leverage than a hypothetical proposition that is not borne out by observable facts. I argue that by understanding the evolution of US foreign policy as one that features a transition between paradigms rather than a geographic repositioning, we are both better able to understand the world and the relationships in question as they exist and to also think about the implications for those relationships as a transition occurs. Then, I will discuss the historical context of the US-Israel relationship across previous foreign policy paradigms and ask what another shift could bring given what we know about the two nations' history.

Pivoting Away Is the Wrong Question

As the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drew to a close, and as China continued to grow economically and expand its influence, it was expected that many would ask whether the United States was shifting its

focus from the Middle East to East Asia. The question of a so-called pivot to Asia has been often discussed in the last decade or more, as the foreign policy conversation tries to capture what the next focal point of US foreign policy will be. The idea of a pivot following a drawdown suggests not only a refocus but a repositioning of assets. The notion of a pivot suggests moving from a position one occupies to a new position that one does not yet occupy. Is the United States capable of such a maneuver? To answer this, we have to think about where around the globe the United States currently is, and where it is not. There are not many places on the map where the United States is not present through relationships, interests, and military ties and bases. According to a 2021 report by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, “The United States continues to maintain around 750 military bases abroad in 80 foreign countries and colonies (territories).”¹ How can the United States pivot from one place to another if it is already everywhere?

Similarly, when one considers economic interests and diplomatic ties, the United States is one of the most integrated and connected countries in the world. According to the World Bank, the United States lags behind only China in gross exports of goods and services.² When it comes to trading partners, as of 2020 and according to World Bank data, the United States has 222 trading partners, which puts it ahead of China’s 214. Diplomatically, according to the Lowy Institute, which tracks global diplomatic missions across the globe, the United States has 267 global diplomatic posts, second only to China which has 275.³ While China has managed to integrate itself across the globe economically and diplomatically, the United States is at least just as integrated, and when one brings the military dimension into the equation, the United States stands in its own category of global hegemony.

For these reasons, pivoting is not something the United States is in a position to do, as it is already well entrenched around the globe. However, the end of the Global War on Terror era, which itself was a period

1 David Vine, et al., “Drawdown: Improving U.S. and Global Security Through Military Base Closures Abroad,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, September 20, 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/drawdown-improving-u-s-and-global-security-through-military-base-closures-abroad/>.

2 “Exports of Goods and Services (Current US\$),” World Bank, accessed July 18, 2023, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.CD?most_recent_value_desc=true.

3 “Global Diplomacy Index: 2021 Country Ranking,” Lowy Institute, undated, https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/country_rank.html.

characterized by destruction, counterproductive policy, and the overreach of a hyperpower in a post-bipolar moment, is an important time to be asking questions about the dominant paradigm shaping US foreign policy. The answers to this question will undoubtedly have significant impacts on the US-Israel relationship. Historically, this relationship has been greatly shaped and affected by the dominant paradigms that set the parameters of geostrategic competition.

The US-Israel Relationship and Paradigms Past

How do we understand the structure and distribution of power in the international system? The United States, as discussed above, is not a small state or even a regional power; instead, it is the top competitor for global hegemony and has been since the Second World War reordered global power. For these reasons, understanding US foreign policy requires a global outlook and an understanding of competition on such a scale. Since the Second World War, two paradigms or interpretive frameworks have dominated the analysis of US foreign policy: the Cold War paradigm, and later and more briefly, the War on Terror paradigm. Below I will discuss each framework, the interregnum between them, and what they meant for the US-Israel relationship at each stage.

"City on a Hill" vs "Evil Empire" - The Cold War Paradigm

The State of Israel was established at the very outset of the Cold War era. The United States and the Soviet Union both recognized the new nation shortly after its declaration of statehood in May 1948.⁴ The competition between the United States and the Soviet Union would take place in various spots across the globe, each with their own sets of allies and movements, and each seeking to establish and maintain spheres of influence. The Middle East was a strategically important region in this global competition, and while it was far closer to Moscow and its satellite nations than to Washington, the region's energy sources were vital. Washington's relationship with Israel was heavily shaped by these dynamics. Early on, particularly as evidenced by the US position during the Suez Crisis, Washington was taking a more balanced position toward Israel in the region; but this would all change in the 1960s, and particularly during and after the 1967 War. The Israeli military's performance during the

4 "Israel International Relations: International Recognition of Israel," Jewish Virtual Library, undated, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/international-recognition-of-israel>.

1967 War, especially against Soviet-backed allies in Syria and Egypt, elevated the competition in the region between the two global powers, with both sides increasing investment in their respective allies, an increase that impacted the next major war in 1973.

It was during this era that the most important element of the US military relationship was established: consistent military support through financing and arms transfers, which not only ensured that Israel would be well armed but that it would maintain a qualitative military edge. Israel's strategic partnership with the United States, which developed significantly during this era, cemented the foundation of the US-Israel relationship as one that was not only based on geostrategic interests but also around being on the same side of the so-called moral divide that characterized the Cold War paradigm. Much like the US relationship with South Africa, Israel was seen as an outpost supporting US interests and also sharing western values in a region of strategic importance otherwise populated by non-western peoples. So long as this paradigm remained in place, the shared interests and values that were perceived through its lens made it easier to downplay any differences that may have existed between the United States and Israel during this time.

The Interregnum and the War on Terror Paradigm

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War paradigm brought significant changes and numerous questions around US foreign policy and the US-Israel relationship. How the United States would relate to Israel and its many other allies now that the defining framework had ended was an open question. The end of the conflict was welcomed by Washington as the beginning of a wave of democratization; but what would it mean for populations oppressed by America's Cold War allies? Would democracy and rights come their way as well? For South Africa, the moment coincided with the fall of apartheid after a long battle for freedom that was led against its government both locally and globally. For Palestinians, a window of hope appeared to open as the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising) gave way to an Israeli-Palestinian peace process. An Israeli-Jordanian agreement would follow, suggesting more change was possible in the region after the Cold War.⁵

5 "The Oslo Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," U.S. Department of State, undated, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/oslo>.

Importantly, outside of the Cold War framework, the plight of the Palestinians could no longer be as easily ignored as it had been previously. The US-Israel relationship was also shaped by other US campaigns in the region, including the Gulf War in 1990-1991, during which Washington sought to maintain the support of Arab friends. But with a new world order being declared, Israel no longer fit as neatly into the role it had once occupied as a strategic American outpost in a region contested by another superpower. In other words, Israel's strategic value decreased. This is not to say that it offered no strategic value to the United States in the region, but that regional conditions had changed in a way that made what it had to offer less valuable than before. The historic cooperation between the United States and Israel during the Cold War did, however, have a legacy effect, and the ties built by national institutions and agencies on both sides of the relationship continued to exist. At the same time, the shared values that form part of the relationship would increasingly come into question as the plight of the Palestinians remained unresolved. These shifts laid the groundwork for a rift to grow in the US-Israel relationship, but the growth of that rift would be delayed for nearly two decades as a new paradigm took shape that would once again bolster the relationship.

The attacks on New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 left nearly 3,000 Americans dead and shocked the nation and the world. The United States suffered a horrifying blow on its homeland for the first time in modern history. Further, the attacks were orchestrated not by a global superpower, but by a non-state actor operating in war-torn Afghanistan. All the previous rules and strategies of global politics fell short of explaining and addressing the challenges the United States saw itself facing in that moment, and from here the Global War on Terror would be born.⁶ Former President George W. Bush declared that other countries would either be "with us or [...] with the terrorists."⁷ American defense spending grew significantly (doubling from 2001 to 2008) and the United States launched major land wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and drone wars across much of the Middle East and North Africa.⁸

6 "2001-2004: How 9/11 Reshaped Foreign Policy," Council on Foreign Relations, undated, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/how-911-reshaped-foreign-policy>.

7 George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," The White House, September 20, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

8 Stephen Daggett, "Costs of Major U.S. Wars," Congressional Research Service, June 29, 2010, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RS22926.pdf>.

Underscoring the world-altering impact of this moment, NATO exercised Article 5 of its charter, pertaining to collective defense, for the first time in the alliance's history.⁹

While the Global War on Terror paradigm did not last nearly as long as the Cold War, it nonetheless provided an interpretive framework of world politics that allowed Israel to neatly place itself alongside the United States. This was not lost on Benjamin Netanyahu, who would go on to become the longest serving Israeli prime minister in history. He initially told the *New York Times* on September 11 that the attacks would be “very good” for the US-Israel relationship and would inevitably draw the two countries much closer together.¹⁰ With terrorism becoming the new communism—i.e., the global threat around which Washington would order its foreign policy—Israel once again found itself easily making the argument for being a strategic asset as a counterterrorism partner and a like-minded nation that was part of the western family's shared fight.

After two decades, the United States' land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drew to a close, leaving behind a profound sense of loss and folly. While the United States continues its numerous counterterrorism operations and the lasting impact of the Global War on Terror is still being felt, the power of the paradigm as an interpretive framework is not what it once was. The question now is what, if anything, will replace this paradigm and how will it impact the US-Israel relationship?

Essential Considerations as Paradigms Shift

Whatever the new prevailing paradigm will be (if a clear one indeed emerges to define US foreign policy), several essential questions arise that deserve attention in the interim. For example, could the US leave Israel behind given the two nations' long-standing relationship? Where does normalization with Arab states, for which both the US and Israel have been pushing, fit into the bigger question of refocusing US foreign policy beyond the region? What role does US domestic politics play in shaping Washington's changing position in the region? I will attempt to address these questions below.

9 “Collective Defence and Article 5,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, updated July 4, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

10 James Bennet, “Spilled Blood Is Seen as Bond That Draws 2 Nations Closer,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/us/day-terror-israelis-spilled-blood-seen-bond-that-draws-2-nations-closer.html>.

Would/Could the US Leave Israel Behind?

A complete American detachment from Israel does not seem possible, but as the relationship has evolved over time, the nature of American support has undeniably changed. While the core of the relationship is military financing, there used to be a much greater economic component to the aid relationship. As Israel grew to possess a more financially stable and independent economy, this support was phased out. Similarly, US military financing for Israel has included a unique component of the United States' offshore procurement exemption, which no other recipients of US military financing received, and which permitted Israel to spend roughly a quarter of US military financing in its own domestic military industry.¹¹ This support, given over years, has contributed to the significant growth and development of the Israeli military industry to the point where Israel is annually among the largest per capita arms exporters in the world. This unique component of US military financing is also being phased out as part of the memorandum of understanding around US military financing currently in place, as negotiated during the Obama administration.¹²

The clear pattern here in US policy around military financing is that as Israel becomes more independent and no longer needs American assistance, some assistance is reduced or modified. Israeli leaders often make the point of thanking the United States for helping Israel "defend itself by itself." In the last two decades, the United States has authorized additional spending to support Israeli missile defense systems to respond to strategic challenges posed by projectile fire from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.¹³ While Israel's domestic military industries excel in technology and surveillance and also have the capacity to produce some small arms and heavier equipment, Israel continues to rely on American weapons for its most significant power projection, specifically for its air force. Despite this, the Israeli economy has grown significantly, and Israel today exports

-
- 11 Josh Ruebner et al., "Bringing Assistance to Israel in Line With Rights and U.S. Laws," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 12, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/12/bringing-assistance-to-israel-in-line-with-rights-and-u.s.-laws-pub-84503>.
 - 12 Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel," Congressional Research Service, updated February 18, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33222/44#:~:text=According%20to%20USAID%20Data%20Services,1946%2D2021%20is%20%24247%20billion.>
 - 13 Michael Merryman-Lotze, "5 things to know about U.S. funding for Israel's 'Iron Dome,'" American Friends Service Committee, September 29, 2021, <https://afsc.org/news/5-things-know-about-us-funding-israels-iron-dome>.

in arms some three to four times what it receives in military aid from the United States.¹⁴ And US military aid as a percentage of Israeli GDP is less than one percent. Israel is clearly financially independent enough to pay for the weapons it buys from the United States without military financing, which is itself a product of the Arab-Israeli wars of the Cold War era, and of a time when the Israeli economy was not capable of responding to the strategic military challenge on its own.

Much has changed since then; not only is the Israeli economy in a fundamentally different position, but Israel also now has peace agreements with the neighbors with which it shares most of its borders, namely Egypt and Jordan. The argument for US military financing for Israel is far weaker today that it ever was before. As with economic assistance and offshore procurement, the conditions that once necessitated military financing in the eyes of policymakers have ceased to exist. Could the US reevaluate military financing for Israel while still making its weapons systems available for purchase, as it does with many other Middle Eastern clients? While the phasing out of previous programs like economic assistance and offshore procurement show that change is in fact possible when conditions necessitate a policy shift, military financing is such a staple of the US-Israel relationship that this policy question takes on a bitter political dimension, making change far more difficult.

What about US Domestic Politics?

For more than a century, American support for Zionism has had a domestic political component. From the early days when Americans saw Palestine through the lens of biblical history to the present where well organized interest groups lobby policymakers around US relations with Israel, the US-Israel relationship has always been about more than US geopolitical interests. As paradigms shift, how will this shape the domestic political component of the US-Israel relationship?

To understand how the domestic political component might shift during this period between paradigms, or even without a dominant paradigm, it is important to understand how it operated when other paradigms prevailed. During both the Cold War years and the War on Terror, domestic supporters of the US-Israel relationship made two key arguments that had significant traction within these frameworks. First, they emphasized that Israel is

14 Josh Ruebner et al., "Bringing Assistance to Israel in Line With Rights and U.S. Laws."

a strategic partner and an asset, not a liability, to the United States in the region. Second, they stated that the US and Israel share key values around democracy, rights, and pluralism. These were easy arguments to make in the past, especially as Israel was fighting Soviet client states in the region and combatting Islamist militant groups during the Second Intifada. But do they still make sense today? For a growing number of Americans, it seems that they now have much less resonance. The strategic partner argument is undercut by the fact that the Middle East is no longer viewed through the lens of great power competition, and furthermore, Americans have grown weary of endless engagements in the region which never seem to justify the cost expended and only generate more enemies. Further, the values argument is undercut by Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, its policies of apartheid, and the continued rightward and religious-nationalist drift of Israeli politics. This has had a significant impact on the American Jewish community, which mostly belongs to the Reform branch of Judaism, and which increasingly sees itself as having less in common with a more religious Israel.

There is little doubt that the pro-Israel arguments which used to be hegemonic in American public discourse are now regularly challenged, and notable shifts have taken place in American public opinion.¹⁵ There is, however, a significant gap between American opinion and American policy. This is where political institutions, from interest groups to elections, will have the most sway. The pressure to shift US policy away from Israel will continue to grow in this period, but the legacy of past policy, entrenched for decades, will be bitterly held onto by interest groups and policymakers alike. Over time, as a new paradigm takes hold new arguments for Israel's strategic value in the global competition with China will likely be developed, perhaps focusing on technological tools. And a new values-based argument will be needed as well, perhaps centered on neoliberal economics. During the interim period however, the US-Israel relationship will continue to come under stress as domestic politics shift away from where they were in response to the situation on the ground.

How Does Normalization with Arab Countries Fit In?

The primary American interest in the Middle East continues to be the stable flow of natural resources from the region into global markets. This

15 Lydia Saad, "Democrats' Sympathies in Middle East Shift to Palestinians," Gallup, March 16, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/472070/democrats-sympathies-middle-east-shift-palestinians.aspx>.

has always been the most important determinant in shaping US policy over the decades. Does normalization between Israel and Arab states with which it does not yet have relations contribute to the emergence of a more stable regional political structure?

There is little evidence to suggest that that is the case. Israel continues to be unpopular among Arab publics, and regimes normalizing with the country have resorted to repressive measures to deal with domestic opponents of this policy.¹⁶ Further, normalization seeks to isolate Iran by creating an Arab-Israeli alliance against it. While that might seem attractive to some, Iran is likely to see it as hostile and thus fuel confrontations across the region.

Washington also has domestic political interests in pursuing normalization because of the importance of Israel in American domestic politics. At the same time, expanding cooperation between American client states, like Israel and Saudi Arabia for example, is likely to be viewed positively; but when and how this happens and what the US relationship with Iran is going to be like over time will determine the extent to which this will contribute to regional security. In sum, there are too many open questions around the implications of normalization for it to reliably be considered an effective placeholder allowing a more significant American retreat from the region.

What Comes Next?

Is there a coherent organizing principle or interpretive framework that clearly orders American relationships around the globe today? It is hard to identify one, and none exist that are as defined as the preceding ones. That, however, can and likely will change, though it is not clear when.

If the timeline is not clear then the likely destination is; and that destination is China. Still, global American competition with China is probably in its very early stages. The Biden administration outlined the current American foreign policy in Secretary of State Antony Blinken's "Foreign Policy for the American People" speech in 2021.¹⁷ In his speech, Secretary Blinken identified eight principles of the administration's foreign policy. Last on the list was what Blinken called "the biggest geopolitical test of the twenty-first century: our relationship with China." This was a challenge

16 Dana El Kurd, "Peace and Authoritarian Practices: The Impact of Normalization with Israel on the Arab World," Social Science Research Network, July 9, 2022, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4143656.

17 Antony Blinken, "A Foreign Policy for the American People," U.S. Department of State, March 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

of a different order, according to America's top diplomat, because unlike Russia, Iran, and North Korea only China has "the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system – all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way we want it to, because it ultimately serves the interests and reflects the values of the American people."

There is much to dissect in this loaded quotation, but one thing is very clear: this is not analogous to the post-World War II order that was defined by superpower competition, but is instead something quite different. The United States is looking at China and at what it could become over time. Blinken noted that this would be the geopolitical test of the twenty-first century, suggesting a long view of China's rise and America's relationship to it. So what does the coming stage of that relationship look like and how does it order alliances and relationships around itself?

In the short to medium term, this looks like an attempt to manage and limit the proliferation of China's instruments of leverage across the globe, which at this stage is overwhelmingly in the form of economic investment and trade relationships and not weapons transfers (although that component has been growing over time). But absent the zero-sum ideological component and the threat that the "evil empire" and "global terror" presents to the American way of life, it is much harder to create a Manichean order today.

This may change over time, and it sounds as if Blinken expects it to, but it is not the case now. That leaves other American principles to shape relationships, including supporting allies and strengthening democracy while pushing back against authoritarianism. When it comes to the US-Israel relationship, these principles militate against each other, especially as Israel descends further down the path of apartheid with no end in sight.

This spells turbulence on the path forward in the US-Israel relationship. The strength of the relationship will continue to rely on the legacy of the past, but over time it will become increasingly hard to attract new supporters for it in the United States, especially as the situation on the ground (i.e., under occupation) becomes explicitly more undemocratic. Trends for over a decade have shown a growing partisan divide in support for Israel and have demonstrated that younger and diverse demographics sympathize more with Palestinians. Increasingly, the American Jewish community is expressing frustration with the Israeli government and its policies. Absent a Manichean global paradigm that buttresses the US-Israel alliance, these differences are likely to be magnified in the coming years.