

# U.S. Engagement and Disengagement in the Middle East: Paradox and Perceptions

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## *Introduction*

A recurring theme in the recent literature on international politics has been the change in the "structure" of the "international system" over the last decade (2011-2019). This idea is most commonly articulated as a shift from what was a post-Cold War "unipolar" system dominated by the United States to a "multipolar" system, with several "Great Powers," including China, Russia, and the U.S., but dominated by no one. This line of reasoning is based on theoretical literature that assumes that polarity is a central fact of international politics. The concept of polarity is based on ranking the relative power of countries, which is determined by assessing the relative distribution of military and economic power among states.

The idea of a multipolar world has become part of the conventional wisdom; so much so, in fact, that within months of each other Russian President Vladimir Putin (in May 2014) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (in November 2014) each declared the world to be "multipolar." Despite the widespread acceptance of this concept in assessing the structure of power in international politics, recent scholarship has raised the question of whether aggregate material power is the best way to gauge historical change in the structure of international politics.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this essay to challenge the conventional wisdom that a new multipolar international system has emerged.

Instead, this essay will explain what has led Middle East actors to perceive the U.S. as withdrawing or disengaging from the region. My argument is that since 2009, American leaders have elected to minimize security commitments in the region and restrict strategic engagements, leaving a "power vacuum" that Russia and perhaps China have sought to fill in different but perhaps complementary ways. The widespread perception that has emerged in the Middle East over the last decade was *not* that the U.S.'s relative economic or military power has declined, but rather the *attitudes* of American leaders about how the U.S. should use its military power to uphold its security commitments in the Middle East have distinctly changed.

In the Middle East, since 2011, there has been a continuous drum beat of discussion around the question of whether the U.S. was withdrawing or disengaging from the region, despite the fact that former Obama officials, like Derek Chollet, have referred to these perceptions as a "myth".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security*, 40:3 (Winter 2015/16), 7–53.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Chollet, Jake Sullivan, Dimitri Simes, and Mary Beth Long, "U.S. Commitments in the Middle East: Advice to the Trump Administration," *Middle East Policy* 24:1 (Spring 2017), 5-34, here 6.

Indeed, as Micah Zenko has shown, in terms of facts on the ground, the notion of a physical withdrawal or disengagement seems hard square with reality. The U.S. maintains large troop deployments in the Middle East (approximately 54,000 in September 2017); it also has multiple air bases, and conducts regular naval port visits. Moreover, there are bilateral security programs across the region that include weapons sales, training, advice, logistical support, and intelligence sharing and support.<sup>3</sup> The belief that the U.S. was disengaging from the region was rooted in the U.S. discourse during the Obama administration, which was actively debating how the U.S. should "rightsize" its role in the region.<sup>4</sup>

This has contributed to a recurring refrain that was heard across the region between 2011 and 2018, which was that the U.S. was retreating from the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, this claim was persistently expressed despite the fact that the U.S. played a major role in the military intervention that toppled Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011, and despite U.S.'s role in assembling and leading a military coalition of more than 70 countries to destroy the State of the Islamic Caliphate (IS) between 2014 and 2017 [and most recently resulted in the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi]. This dissonance between the actual scope and size of the U.S.'s presence and commitments in the region, and the widespread perception throughout the region that the U.S. is withdrawing or disengaging from the Middle East is the theme of this essay.

### ***A Brief History of Great Power Competition and the Modern Middle East***

The modern period of the Middle East has, for better or worse, been defined by its encounter and engagement with the West.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, the survival of the Ottoman Empire was vital to machinations of European power politics.<sup>7</sup> The "Eastern Question" and the Anglo-Russian "Great Game" in West Asia meant that the entire area from the Bosphorus to India

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<sup>3</sup> Micah Zenko, "[U.S. Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal](#)," Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2018. See, also: Thomas Juneau, "U.S. Power in the Middle East: Not Declining," *Middle East Policy* 21:2 (June 2014), 40-52.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role," *Foreign Affairs* 94:5 (Sept./Oct. 2015); Robert E. Hunter, "US Interests and the Use of Force in the Middle East," *The International Spectator*, 50:4 (2015), 95-112; Shadi Hamid, "[Islamism, the Arab Spring, and the Failure of America's Do-Nothing Policy in the Middle East](#)," *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2015; Gawdat Bahgat and Robert Sharp, "Prospects for a New Strategic Orientation in the Middle East," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 25:3(2014), 27-39.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Young, "[Obama's America prefers to ignore the Middle East](#)," *The National*, June 30, 2011; Abdullah al Shayji, "[In search of Obama's Middle East legacy](#)," GulfNews.com, February 17, 2013; Amir Taheri, "[The Middle East and Obama's redirection](#)," *aSharq al-Awsat*, October 4, 2013; Hisham Melham, "[Obama's Tarnished Legacy in the Middle East](#)," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Winter 2016; Basheer Nafi, "[US stance on Syria reflects regional retreat](#)," *Middle East Eye*, February 8, 2016; Efraim Inbar, "U.S. Mideast Retreat a Boon for Moscow and Tehran," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2016, 1-13; Nawaf Obaid, "[The Salman Doctrine: the Saudi reply to Obama's weakness](#)," *The National Interest*, March 30, 2016; Shalom Lipner, "[How Obama and Trump left a vacuum in the Middle East](#)," *Politico*, November 25, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Dror Zeevi, "Back to Napoleon? Thoughts on the Beginning of the Modern Era in the Middle East," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 19:1 (2004), 73-94.

<sup>7</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

was the setting for a European competition for power, influence, and resources.<sup>8</sup> The Great Game led to an intense competition for colonial possessions across territories that included the historic Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, subordinating parts of them to the tutelage of the West. And, paradoxically, in seeking to preserve the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Question led the European powers to become its largest stakeholder.

World War I shattered the Ottoman Empire and led the victorious European powers to establish Mandates that shaped the modern state system in the Middle East in line with their core interests.<sup>9</sup> Nationalist elites in the region, inspired by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's support for national self-determination, were frustrated by the Mandates, which they viewed as nothing more than colonialism in disguise.<sup>10</sup> While the Mandates were indeed an instrument for the European powers to safeguard their core political and economic interests in the Middle East, they also created modern state institutions and led to the West's preserving its stake in the region.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, much of the historiography about the nature of the relationship between the great powers and region engaged the theses of Malcolm Yapp and L. Carl Brown that suggested the regional powers were far more adept at manipulating great power interests for their own gain than had been previously acknowledged.<sup>12</sup>

In the aftermath of World War II, the northern provinces of Iran became the site of the first Cold War confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> And while Iran's oil nationalization, the Baghdad Pact, and the Suez Canal crisis led to nationalist struggles against European

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see: M.S. Anderson; *The Eastern Question 1774-1923* (London: Macmillan, 1966); Edward Ingram, *In Defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775-1842* (Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1921* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1956); Elie Kedourie, *The Anglo-Arab Labyrinth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Sean McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016); Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East, 1914-1958* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Peter Sluglett, "An improvement on colonialism? The 'A' mandates and their legacy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 90:2 (March 2014), 413-427.

<sup>11</sup> Uriel Dann, ed., *The Great Powers in the Middle East, 1919-1939* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988); Meir Zamir, *The Secret Anglo-French War in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2015); James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France, and the Struggle for Mastery of the Middle East* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011); James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Malcom Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East, 1792-1923* (London: Longman Press, 1987); Malcolm Yapp *The Near East since the First World War* (London: Longman Press, 1991); L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Jamil Hasanli, *At the Dawn of the Cold War: The Soviet-American Crisis over Iranian Azerbaijan, 1941-1946* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield 2006); See, also: Bruce Kuniholm, *Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

domination in the 1950s, it was the Cold War that defined the West's post-WWII engagement in the region.<sup>14</sup> The Arab-Israeli wars in 1956,<sup>15</sup> 1967,<sup>16</sup> and 1973<sup>17</sup> were each deeply interconnected with the West's role in the region.

With the peace process between 1973 and 1979 that led to the Camp David accords and Israel's peace with Egypt, the Soviet Union's influence waned, and its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan further weakened its stature in the region. Despite the 1978/9 Iranian Revolution that overthrew the Shah and ended forty years of American influence in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ensured that the U.S. and much of the West still viewed their interests in region through the prism of the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union.

### ***U.S. Grand Strategy and American Wars in the Middle East***

The Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended between 1989 and 1991. The U.S. found itself as the sole global superpower, and it exercised its power and influence during the 1990-1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), rolling back Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion and occupation of Kuwait. The U.S. mobilized a coalition of 35 countries to defeat Iraq and secured U.N. Resolution 678, which authorized the coalition to use "all necessary means" to undo Saddam's conquest of Kuwait. Since 1979, U.S. policy objectives in the region consisted of securing access to oil, brokering an Arab-Israeli peace, countering terrorist threats, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. More broadly, U.S. partnerships in the region relied on the U.S. to use its power to manage the security affairs of the region. The U.S. pursued a policy of "dual containment," against both Iraq and Iran during the 1990s, effectively sanctioning and isolating both regimes. The U.S. also expanded its commitments in the Persian Gulf during this period, creating a web of strong security partnerships with each of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Arab Gulf States were added to the U.S.'s long standing security partners in the region, which included Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel and Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

A decade after the end of the Cold War, on September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by *al-Qaeda*, which carried out simultaneous suicide plane bombings on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. George W. Bush's administration

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<sup>14</sup> Fawaz Gerges; *The Superpowers and the Middle East: Regional and International Politics, 1955-1967* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Nigel Ashton, ed., *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-1973* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007); Lorenz Luthi, ed., *The Regional Cold Wars in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Shemesh and Ilan Troen, *The Suez-Sinai Crisis of 1956: Retrospective and Reappraisal* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1990); Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Yaacov Ro'i and Boris Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008); Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, The Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> James F. Jeffrey and Michael Eisenstadt, "[U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East Policy](#)," Focus 143, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), April 2016.

responded to the attacks by invading Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban government in 2001 and then removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003. The military operations led to swift victories, however the post-war stabilization and occupation of both countries proved enormously challenging and prohibitively expensive. The U.S. completed a full troop withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011. At its peak in 2007, the U.S. troop presence in Iraq exceeded 170,000. In October 2014, the U.S. officially ended its combat operation in Afghanistan, and the majority of U.S. troops were withdrawn between 2011 and 2016. However, nearly 18 years after the initial invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. still maintains approximately 9,000-14,000 troops there. These American wars did not decisively defeat *al-Qaeda*, or destroy the appeal of salafi-jihadism, and they did not result in stable, pro-American, democratic governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, Iraq appears to be fighting to avoid becoming a dependent of Iran, while Afghanistan is still fighting to avoid a Taliban takeover, while the Islamic State gains ground there, as well. The overarching political effect of these wars in the U.S. was to generate widespread skepticism about the efficacy of using military force to advance U.S. interests abroad.

The Obama administration's perspective was that previous administration had mismanaged American power. It allowed the U.S.'s military commitments in the Middle East to command a disproportionate amount of resources at the expense of other more urgent priorities. Obama viewed the drag on American power caused by the war on terror as ultimately empowering U.S. rivals, while the U.S.'s unilateral approach had alienated partners. There were four practical consequences of these views. The first was that Obama took "a more restrained, economical, and precise approach to using U.S. military power."<sup>19</sup> Second, Obama emphasized diplomatic engagement, with both allies and adversaries. Third, Obama sought to rebalance U.S. engagement geographically. He believed that the U.S. needed to redirect its strategic resources away from the Middle East and towards the Asia-Pacific region. Fourth, during the Obama years defense spending was significantly reduced, from \$691 billion in 2010 to \$580.3 billion in 2016.

The economic shock of the global financial crisis between 2008 and 2012 created a public debate in the U.S. about whether the country could and should continue its profligate defense and military spending during a period that became known as the Great Recession.<sup>20</sup> In particular, the U.S.'s post-Cold War decision to maintain its security commitments to partners and allies in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia came under renewed scrutiny. During the Cold War, these commitments were made to prevent Soviet encroachment into the world's wealthiest and potentially most-resource rich states. After the Cold War, the logic of maintaining the

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<sup>19</sup> Hal Brands, "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 39:4 (2016), 101-125. See, also: Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, "The Wisdom of Retrenchment," *Foreign Affairs* Vol.90:6 (November 2011), pp.32-47; Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, 35: 4 (Spring 2011), pp. 7-44; Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37: 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 7-51.

commitments was to advance the aims of the three core objectives of the U.S. grand strategy: reducing near and long term threats to U.S. national security; "promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity"; and, "maintaining the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favorable to U.S. interests."<sup>21</sup> The U.S. commitment to its security partners and allies was a constant in U.S. foreign policy from the end of World War II through the Obama administration.

However, during the years following the global financial crisis (2008-2012), these security commitments began to be more critically examined and debated in the U.S., with a particular emphasis on evaluating the return the U.S. received on the cost of maintaining its military commitments abroad. Domestic critics bemoaned the growing U.S. budget deficits and the billions spend on defense personnel and infrastructure during a period of economic crisis and called for one form or another of military downsizing and greater burden sharing with respect to its international security commitments. Other critics argued that the U.S. security partnerships engendered resistance to U.S. power that was counterproductive, creating more friction than leverage for the U.S. abroad. Finally, a third line of argument claimed that resources devoted to maintaining U.S. commitments abroad could instead be used in service of domestic goals such as infrastructure, education, civilian research and development, innovation that would increase U.S. global competitiveness more than its military commitments abroad. These views created doubts among U.S. partners and rivals alike about the U.S.'s appetite for maintaining its security commitments in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, there were good reasons for these doubts. During Obama's first term in office, his Middle East team believed the Middle East's importance was exaggerated, as were the risks the region posed to U.S. interests. They claimed the region didn't really need the U.S. to the extent the conventional wisdom in Washington believed, and that the U.S.'s presence in the region actually contributed to problems in the region. Not only could the U.S. afford to disengage from the Middle East, but the region would be better off for it. And even if things went bad in the region, they wouldn't affect core U.S. interests.<sup>23</sup>

In the Middle East, these doubts about the U.S. commitment to the region were exacerbated by three developments that took place at the end of Barack Obama's first term. First, in 2010 and 2011 the U.S. withdrew all of its military forces from Iraq. Second, the U.S. withdrew its support for the Mubarak regime in Egypt during the January-February 2011 popular uprising. Third, the U.S.

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37: 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 7-51.

<sup>22</sup> Emile Hokayem & Becca Wasser, "[The Gulf States in an Era of American Retrenchment](#)," *Adelphi Papers* 54:447-448 (2014), 135-164.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Pollack, Paul Pillar, Amin Tarzi, Chas W. Freeman, Jr., "U.S. Foreign Policy and the Future of the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 21: 3 (Fall 2014), 1-30; Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Near Eastern Promises: Why Washington Should Focus on the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 93:3 (May/June 2014), 92-105.

backed the multilateral military operation that toppled Muammar Qaddafi from power in Libya, but its "light footprint approach" provided little strategic leverage in the aftermath of the intervention.<sup>24</sup> The Obama administration was guided by the principle, "engage where we must, disengage when we can." This approach was driven by the administration's perception that the primary lesson of the previous decade's wars was that for all of the U.S.'s military power, its ability to control the outcome of events in the region was limited.<sup>25</sup>

In 2009, the Obama administration's political engagement in Baghdad during Iraq's 2010 election cycle and the subsequent failed negotiations for a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) left the impression that Obama's priority was withdrawing U.S. forces rather than maintaining the U.S.'s strategic leverage in the region.<sup>26</sup> The U.S.'s behavior towards the Mubarak regime during the 2011 uprising in Egypt further sowed doubt about the U.S. commitment to its partners. After seventeen days of mass protests, the Obama administration concluded that Egyptian President Husni Mubarak's regime could not survive and withdrew their support for his regime. Obama's decision to side with the protesters against Mubarak, was made "remarkably quickly," according to Marc Lynch, who explained that Obama believed siding with the protesters would improve America's image with the Arab public and place the U.S. on "the right side of history."<sup>27</sup> The region took note of the speed with which the U.S. abandoned a core regional ally of more than thirty years.

In the case of Libya in 2011, the Obama administration ultimately conducted the kind of military intervention that it professed to eschew, a swift-regime change (even if unintended) without any means for stabilizing and influencing governance in the aftermath.<sup>28</sup> This created mistrust among both rivals and allies. Russia viewed the U.S. and NATO as exceeding the mandate that Russia supported in UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force in Libya to protect civilian protesters from being attacked by the Qaddafi regime's military forces. On the other hand, the U.S. adopted the approach of "leading from behind,"<sup>29</sup> which demanded that the U.S.'s

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<sup>24</sup> Hal Brands, "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 39:4 (2016), 101-125, here 112.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Simon, Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs at the White House from 2011 through 2012, outlined the case for U.S. disengagement from Iraq in 2007, see: Steven Simon, "America and Iraq: The Case for Disengagement," *Survival* 49:1 (2007), 61-84; "[Remarks by President Obama in Address to United Nations General Assembly](#)," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, September 24, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Hill, "[How the Obama Administration Ignored Iraq](#)," *Politico*, October 2, 2014; Hill's successor had a somewhat different take on these events, see: James F. Jeffrey, "Behind the U.S. Withdrawal From Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Marc Lynch, "America and Egypt After the Uprisings," *Survival* 53:2 (2011), 31-42.

<sup>28</sup> Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure," *Foreign Affairs* 94:2 (March/April 2015), 66-77; Derek Chollet and Ben Fishman, "Who Lost Libya? Obama's Intervention in Retrospect," *Foreign Affairs* 94: 3(May/June 2015), 154-159; Ronald Bruce St John, "From the February 17 Revolution to Benghazi: rewriting history for political gain," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21:3 (2016), 357-378.

<sup>29</sup> Nina Hachigian and David Shorr, "[The Responsibility Doctrine](#)," *Washington Quarterly* 36:1 (Winter 2013), 73-91.

NATO allies assume responsibility for the conflict, a burden for which they did not possess the necessary military resources to fully execute.<sup>30</sup> The U.S. withdrew its forces from a direct combat role on April 4, approximately 3 weeks after the operation began on March 19-20, 2011. And while the U.S. continued to play a vital role in supporting the operation with logistics, munitions, and intelligence, UK and French forces took the NATO lead in backing the rebel army that defeated Qaddafi's regime on August 20. Following the fall of Qaddafi's regime, the U.S. ceded responsibility for the transition to the United Nations, and the assassination of the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens by *Ansar al-Shari'a*, on September 11, 2012, succeeded in deterring the U.S. from taking a more prominent role in brokering a successful transition in Libya.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Syrian Tipping Point***

If these episodes planted the seeds of doubt in the region about the U.S.'s resolve to remain engaged in the Middle East, the tipping point was the U.S. approach to the Syrian civil war between 2011 and 2014. In August 2011, President Obama called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, but did nothing to make it happen. In August 2012, Obama declared "a red-line," which was intended to deter the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against the Syrian opposition. However, a year later the Obama administration opted not to enforce it in August/September 2013, instead making a deal with Russia that was supposed to destroy the Assad regime's stockpile of chemical weapons.<sup>32</sup> The administration's half-hearted efforts to arm the opposition in 2012 and 2013 led to the better armed and better financed salafi-jihadi militias cannibalizing the Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>33</sup> Administration officials privately conceded that the lackluster effort to arm the opposition was intended as much "to assuage allies who thought the U.S. wasn't engaged," as they were to help the rebels.<sup>34</sup> The nine-year war has killed more than 600,000 people; it has created more than five and a half million refugees, dispersed across the Middle East and Europe; and internally displaced more than half the Syrian population. In 2012 and early 2013, the Obama administration considered a full range of options in Syria. These included "a U.S.-enforced no-fly and buffer zones, regime change by force (facilitated by far more substantial American and allied military assistance to anti-Assad rebels, and limited retaliatory air strikes against the regime in response to its use of chemical weapons."<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, the administration decided against all of these options because it was concerned that U.S. intervention would bring it into direct conflict with Iran in Syria, and forestall the possibility of engaging Iran diplomatically on its nuclear

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<sup>30</sup> Ben Barry, "Libya's Lessons," *Survival* 53:5 (2011), 5-14.

<sup>31</sup> See: Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "[The Obama Doctrine](#)," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Weiss, "[The Unraveling: How Obama's Syria Policy Fell Apart](#)," *Politico*, January 2, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Entous and Siobhan Gorman, "[Behind Assad's Comeback, a Mismatch in Commitments](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 31, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94:6 (Nov./Dec. 2015), 2-10.



program.<sup>36</sup> In a January 2014 interview, Obama explained that "at the core of his thinking" was the idea that American military involvement could not be the primary instrument for bringing about a "new equilibrium" between Iran and the Sunni Gulf States and Israel that the region "so desperately needed."<sup>37</sup>

Obama's reluctance to directly intervene in Syria was regarded by administration officials as a policy "correction" rather than as an indication of American withdrawal. The U.S. was restoring stability by exercising a policy of restraint rather than one of aggressiveness, according to two former Obama officials, Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson.<sup>38</sup> In the Middle East, the Saudis, who had done everything they could to incentivize, cajole, and goad the U.S. into intervening in Syria, referred to the American restraint as a strategic "disaster."<sup>39</sup>

The Syrian civil war paved the way for Russia's return to the Middle East. More generally, the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East presented a strategic challenge for Russia, who viewed the Middle East as a neighboring region. There were four factors that shaped how Russia responded to the Arab Spring. First, Russia feared the Arab Spring uprisings were a continuation of the "color revolutions" that took place in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004-5), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), where popular protests overthrew sitting governments. The Kremlin viewed the West as encouraging and supporting the protesters in the Middle East. Russia believed the West was eager to see vulnerable, authoritarian regimes replaced by Western style democracies that would more closely align themselves with the U.S. and Europe. Second, there was some concern that the Arab Spring would fuel the West's appetite for supporting NGOs that sought to promote democracy in Russia. Indeed, the mass protests in Moscow during the winter of 2011-2012 seemed to reinforce that perception. Third, Russia's Middle East area experts were skeptical that the Arab uprisings would lead to the democratic transitions that the West was encouraging. They viewed the most likely outcome to be an "Islamist Winter" that would lead to chaos, empowering the most radical forces in the region. Finally, Russia did not want to see the West (the U.S. and NATO) return to acting unilaterally in the region, as they had done almost a decade earlier in Iraq.<sup>40</sup>

The Libya uprising was a test case for Russia. It believed it could work with the West through the U.N. to manage the crisis in Libya. When the U.N. authorized no-fly zone turned into NATO

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<sup>36</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94:6 (Nov./Dec. 2015), 2-10.

<sup>37</sup> David Remnick, "[Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama](#)," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense," *Foreign Affairs* 94:6 (Nov./Dec. 2015), 2-10.

<sup>39</sup> Nawaf Obaid, "Saudi Arabia's Master Plan Against ISIS, Assad, and Iran in Syria," *The National Interest*, February 16, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya, "Russia's Interests in the Middle East: A New Context," in *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2013), Zvi Magen and Vitaly Naumkin, eds., pp. 33-38; Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (London: Polity Press, 2017).

operation in support of regime change, Putin believed the U.S. and NATO took advantage of Russia's tacit support (by abstaining) for UNSCR 1793. While Russia lost \$4 billion in potential arms sales to the Qaddafi regime, as well as at least \$3 billion in strategic oil and natural gas investments, what galled Putin was the precedent of using humanitarian intervention as a pretext for violating state sovereignty and toppling an authoritarian regime.<sup>41</sup> When Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, the Libya experience led him to take a much tougher approach with the West on the Syria crisis. Russia blocked any draft resolution in the UN that might have served as the basis for foreign intervention in Syria, and, at the same time, began providing the Asad regime with military support to suppress the opposition.<sup>42</sup>

Putin used the Syria crisis to demonstrate Russia's Great Power status in the Middle East. Its aggressive, decisive, and steadfast behavior stood in stark contrast to the U.S. posture in the region during the Obama years. In the initial stage (2011-2013), Russia's approach in Syria had a symbolic value that transcended the value of its weapons deals with the Asad regime and its access to the naval port at Tartus. In other words, Russia's ability to repeatedly thwart international action against the Asad regime, and create the impression that the U.S. was impotent in the face of Asad's defiance, undermined the image of U.S. power and demonstrated the value of Russia's friendship.<sup>43</sup> On August 21, 2013, the Asad regime used chemical weapons to gas the opposition in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. The attack killed 1,400, including more than 400 children. The Obama administration found itself under immense pressure to enforce its red line and attack the Asad regime. On the sidelines of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg in early September, Putin offered the U.S. a deal that would remove Syria's chemical weapons stockpile in exchange for the U.S. backing down from military strikes against the regime. Obama, who was not convinced of the value of striking the Asad regime, seized the Russian offer. Apart from removing large amounts of chemical weapons from Syria, the deal had three secondary but equally important effects.

First, the deal cemented the impression of many in the region that Obama had no appetite for using American military power. Obama believed he was accomplishing more by foregoing deterrence for disarmament, but in reality he did not achieve either.<sup>44</sup> Second, it legitimized Russia's Great Power status in the Syria conflict, and more broadly in the Middle East, without deterring either Asad or Russia from using chemical weapons in the conflict.<sup>45</sup> Third, the September 2013 U.S.-Russian agreement, which eventually became incorporated into UN Security Resolution 2118,

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Blank & Carol R. Saivetz, "Playing to Lose?," *Problems of Post Communism*, 59:1 (2012), 3-14.

<sup>42</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (London: Polity Press, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Talal Nizameddin, *Putin's New Order in the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, Ltd., 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Peter Baker, "[For Obama, Syria Chemical Attacks Shows Risk of Deals with Dictators](#)," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Hisham Melham, "[How Obama's Syrian Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart](#)," *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2017; Colum Lynch, "[To Assuage Russia, Obama Administration Backed Off Chemical Weapons Plan](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, May 19, 2017.

provided a condition for using force against the Asad regime if it violated the deal:<sup>46</sup> “in the event of non-compliance, including unauthorized transfer, or **any use of chemical weapons** [emphasis added] by anyone in Syria, the UN Security Council should impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.”<sup>47</sup> Chapter VII permits the international community to authorize the use of sanctions and military force.<sup>48</sup> Instead, Russia used the agreement with the U.S. and its position in the United Nations to subvert any strong response to Asad regime’s repeated violations of the deal, which began almost immediately: Of the 161 documented chemical attacks between 2012 and 2016, “77 percent occurred after the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, which mandated cessation of use and elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile.”<sup>49</sup> Russia succeeded both in shielding the Asad regime from American military strikes in September 2013, but also used the subsequent U.N. agreement with the U.S. to undermine international institutional mechanisms that would have facilitated taking strong future action against the Asad regime.<sup>50</sup>

The chemical weapons deal demonstrated the value of a partnership with Russia. Russia not only provided weapons to the Asad regime, it provided it with strategic intelligence, international institutional protection, and vital diplomatic acumen during a crisis with the U.S. that threatened to destroy the regime.

### ***The Islamic State and the U.S. Light Footprint***

In June 2014, the Islamic State (IS) overran the Iraqi military and conquered Mosul, putting pressure on the Obama administration to redeploy the U.S. forces in the region. IS, which had led a growing insurgency in Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2014, shattered the western border of Iraq and the eastern border of Syria, establishing a territorial caliphate on large swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory. The new sovereign entity controlled territory that made it approximately the size of the United Kingdom, and it sought to expand both westward and eastward at the same time. The Obama administration defined its September 2014 strategy for defeating the Islamic State in terms of a counterterrorism mission. It promised to conduct air strikes in Iraq and Syria, to work with the Iraqi military forces, to increase assistance to the Syrian opposition, and to cut off funding and stem the flow of foreign fighters into the region.<sup>51</sup> In practice, the U.S. fought the war against

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<sup>46</sup> Aron Lund, “[Red Line Redux: How Putin Tore Up Obama’s 2013 Syria Deal](#),” The Century Foundation, February 3, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> “Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons,” U.S. State Department, September 14, 2013, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter VII,” United Nations, [www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii](http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii).

<sup>49</sup> Rebecca Hersman, “Syria’s Toxic Wars: Chemical Weapons are Undermining Deterrence and Nonproliferation,” WarOnTheRocks.com, April 26, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> In 2017, Russia vetoed (see [here](#)) renewing the joint UN-OPCW investigative mechanism established by UNSCRs 2235 (2015) & 2319 (2016). See also, John Hart, “[Confrontation at the OPCW: How will the international community handle Syria and Skripal?](#),” Warontherocks.com, June 18, 2018; Anthony Deutsch, “[Russia fails to curb new powers of chemical weapons watchdog](#),” *Reuters*, November 20, 2018; Una Becker-Yakob, “[Countering the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria: Options for Supporting International Norms and Institutions](#),” Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers No. 63, June 2019, SIPRI.

<sup>51</sup> “Statement by the President on ISIL,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Sept. 10, 2014.

the Islamic State by providing air support and intelligence to its local partners in Iraq and Syria that served as the “boots on the ground” in the war against the Islamic State.<sup>52</sup> The U.S. coalition also contributed valuable Special Forces units to support its local partners on the ground.

In Iraq, the U.S. officially partnered with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)’s *Peshmerga* in the fight against the Islamic State. However, the U.S. also found itself indirectly providing air cover for the *al-Hashd al-Sha’bi* (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF), Iraqi Shi’i militias, many of which were organized, armed, and trained by Iran.<sup>53</sup> In Syria, the U.S. provided air support to the Kurdish People’s Protection Units or Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), who resisted an Islamic State siege at Kobanî in October 2014. This led to a valuable strategic partnership with Syrian Kurds. The YPG ultimately formed the military backbone of the U.S. organized Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic force that did much of the fighting against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. The U.S. military’s new approach to fighting the Islamic State became known as “by, with, and through” (“BWT”), which referred to the U.S. partnerships on the ground.<sup>54</sup>

This approach should be viewed as the U.S. military's effort to provide the means to achieve Obama's aim of "rightsizing" the U.S.'s "footprint" in the region. As a result, it took three and half years for the U.S.-led coalition to reconquer the territory that the Islamic State had claimed for its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, despite the coalition's overwhelmingly superior military capabilities. Four factors contributed to this outcome: First, the U.S. coalition faced the complexity of identifying and coordinating with competing partners across two different theaters of war. In Iraq, the U.S. fought against the Islamic State through the Iraqi military and the KRG's independently commanded *Peshmerga* forces. In Syria, the U.S. had to bring together the Sunni Arab fighters from the tribes of the Middle Euphrates and the Kurds of Kobanî and Jazira cantons. Second, the coalition's reluctance to use its own forces on the ground led to prolonged engagements (in Raqqa and Mosul, for example) and massive collateral damage.<sup>55</sup> Third, the U.S. fought the Islamic State without fully addressing the preexisting Syrian civil war between the Asad regime and the opposition. Fourth, and relatedly, for many of the parties involved in the fight, defeating the Islamic State was not the top priority. For example, Turkey was more focused on defeating the Asad regime and containing Kurdish autonomy; Russia was more interested in protecting the Asad regime, and using the conflict to expand its international and regional influence vis-à-vis the U.S.

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<sup>52</sup> The key operational phrase for the [Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve \(CJTF-OIR\)](#), which was established in October 2014, was “in conjunction with partner forces.” [The global coalition](#) against the Islamic State ultimately included 81 countries.

<sup>53</sup> Linda Robinson, "[Assessment of Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation](#)," Rand Corporation, 2016; Michael Weiss and Michael Pregent, "[The U.S. is providing air cover for ethnic cleansing in Iraq](#)," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Morgan L. Kaplan, "[Thinking Critically About 'By, With, and Through' in Syria, Iraq, and Beyond](#)," *Lawfare*, January 20, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Gil Barndollar, "[A French Officer Speaks the Truth About the War in Syria](#)," *DefenseOne*, March 5, 2019.

## The JCPOA and the Russian/Iranian intervention in Syria

On November 24, 2013, two months after U.S.-Russia chemical weapons agreement, the P5+1 signed an interim nuclear agreement with Iran in Geneva, Switzerland. The U.S. and Iran had initiated secret backchannel talks in Oman beginning in March 2013 (preceded by initial contacts in July 2012), and Obama's reluctance to use force and punish Asad in September 2013 was related to the delicate start of the secret U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iran earlier in the year. The U.S. had agreed to isolate the nuclear negotiations from Iran's regional involvement in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. A period of 20 months of multilateral international negotiations followed, leading to the JCPOA, which was signed on July 14, 2015. Less than two weeks after the nuclear deal was signed, Qassem Soleimani, Iran's Qods Force commander, who was responsible for Iranian engagement in Iraq and Syria, traveled to Russia (in violation of Western sanctions) and met with President Vladimir Putin. During the visit (July 24-26, 2015), Soleimani presented Putin with a plan for military intervention to save a rapidly weakening Asad regime. Saving Asad's regime was always a means to a greater end for Russia.<sup>56</sup> Russia's ultimate aim in Syria has been to force the United States "to deal with Moscow on a more equal footing."<sup>57</sup> It wants to be a regional "rule-setter," like the U.S.<sup>58</sup>

In September 2015, Russia and Iran initiated a massive military intervention to prevent the collapse of the Asad regime, which had been steadily losing territory and manpower against the jihadi opposition.<sup>59</sup> Russia's pretext for the intervention was to provide air support to the regime in its fight against the Islamic State.<sup>60</sup> However, the regime and its partners did not target the Islamic State in Syria, instead they were targeting *Jaysh al-Fatah* (Army of Conquest) alliance and other Syrian opposition groups that were receiving support from the West and were based in areas outside of the territory controlled by the Islamic State. In reality, Russia's goal was to ensure that the Syrian regime was "the only legitimate and viable actor in Syria worth backing."<sup>61</sup>

The timing of these two events was carefully considered. The Russian/Iranian military intervention did not take place until it became clear that Obama would have enough Congressional support for the JCPOA to avoid a veto.<sup>62</sup> The U.S. administration had invested all of its domestic political

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<sup>56</sup> Pavel K. Baev, "[Order From Chaos: Moscow gambles on raising the stakes— in Syria and across the board](#)," Brookings Institution, October 7, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95: 3 (May/June 2016), 31-37; See, also: Pavel K. Baev, "[Order From Chaos: Moscow gambles on raising the stakes— in Syria and across the board](#)," Brookings Institution, October 7, 2016; Ehud Yaari, "Russia Pursues a New Baghdad Pact," *Times of Israel*, October 8, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Lain and Igor Sutyagin, "The View from Moscow," in *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds., Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute, August 2016, pp. 17-24; See, also: Mark Mardell, "[What Syria reveals about the new world order](#)," *BBC*, October 3, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Eyal Zisser, "[The Russian and Iranian Military Intervention in Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9:16, September 25, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, "Operation "Retribution": Putin's Military Campaign in Syria, 2015-2016," *Middle East Policy* 23:4 (Winter 2016), 42-60.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Kofman, "[The Russian Intervention in Syria: Policy Options and Exit Strategies](#)," WarontheRocks.com, October 21, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Yury Barmin, "[Russia's military role in Syria: A byproduct of the Iran deal?](#)," *Russia Direct*, October 13, 2015.

capital to secure the deal, and Russia and Iran were gambling that Obama's administration would not jeopardize the deal over their intervention in Syria. While the Obama administration viewed the deal as the best available means to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, the region viewed the deal through the prism of the September 2013 U.S.-Russia chemical weapons agreement, which in letter was to have denied the Assad regime its chemical weapons capability, but in practice did not. The chemical weapons deal allowed Obama to retreat from his commitment to enforce his red line, and some in the region believed the JCPOA was the means by which Obama would avoid the military option to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, but without fully cutting off Iran's access to the nuclear and military technologies that Iran would need to weaponize its nuclear program in the future. More broadly, at the same juncture that the U.S. was using diplomacy and a light footprint to reduce its military commitments in the region, Russia was expanding its direct military role in Syria to preserve the Assad regime, which had become the principal instrument through which Russia projected its influence in the region.

### ***American Retrenchment, Chinese Expansion***

Ironically, while the U.S. reaction to the 2008 global financial crisis was retrenchment, the Chinese response was expansion. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was intended to help bridge China's transition from an export driven economy to one based on domestic consumption. The BRI, in theory, offered a solution to China's two major economic challenges — infrastructure overcapacity<sup>63</sup> and excessive foreign exchange reserves (particularly U.S. dollars) — by connecting China to new overseas markets. The BRI was initially conceived as combining infrastructure construction with investment and economic development as the growth-oriented means to absorb China's industrial overcapacity and invest its foreign currency holdings. China's increasing involvement in the Middle East has been driven by the marriage between these BRI objectives and its three core economic interests in the region.<sup>64</sup> The BRI also addresses what China perceives as its major strategic challenge, the "Malacca dilemma."<sup>65</sup> In November 2003, former Chinese President Hu Jintao introduced the phrase as shorthand to refer to the economic damage that could be caused to China if an adversary blocked its access to the maritime routes for commercial trade and energy delivery through the Strait of Malacca. New overland trade routes transiting from east to west through Central Asia and the Middle East offer China significant commercial opportunities and less risk of military competition with the US, in comparison to the

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<sup>63</sup> Shuaihua Wallace Cheng, "[Overcapacity a time bomb for China's economy](#)," *South China Morning Post*, September 28, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> For slightly different emphasis on these issues, see: Andrew Scobell, "Why the Middle East matters to China," in *China's Presence in the Middle East: The Implications of the One Belt, One Road Initiative* (Routledge: London and New York, 2018) Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Niv Horesh, eds., pp. 9-17; and, Naser M. Al-Tamimi, "[Why China's Influence in the Middle East will grow](#)," *Arab News*, November 9, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> You Ji, "Dealing with the Malacca Dilemma: China's Effort to Protect its Energy Supply," *Strategic Analysis* 31:3 (2007), 467-489; Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma'," *Asian Security* 4:2 (2008), 143-161.

increasingly contested coastal regions of East Asia.<sup>66</sup> While it has been convincingly argued that the US reorientation to Asia began in 2004 and not 2011, and that the new US policy was not necessarily geared toward China's containment,<sup>67</sup> the new US emphasis on Asia led the Chinese to justify the BRI in geopolitical terms.<sup>68</sup>

While China's economic surge into the Middle East began in the two decades before 2016 and its strategic concerns were articulated in 2003, there were three related *regional* developments that contributed to the region becoming a much greater strategic priority for China between 2014 and 2016. First, the growing instability triggered by the Arab uprisings across the region presented a physical threat to the growing volume of Chinese citizens and business enterprises throughout the Middle East. Second, China viewed the U.S. behavior in the Middle East between 2009 and 2013 as retrenchment, which meant that China would have to more actively develop the capabilities to protect China's energy supplies and commercial trade and investment with Europe and Africa, most of which originates or transits through the Middle East. Third, China viewed the expansion and export of the Islamic State's ideology and networks from Iraq and Syria to Central Asia and western China as a direct security threat.

The U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and a passive approach to the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen between 2011 and 2013 created the impression that U.S. retrenchment was leaving a security vacuum in the Middle East.<sup>69</sup> China's vulnerability in Libya and Yemen in 2011 and 2015 respectively, together with its sense that instability and conflict were growing as the U.S. was disengaging from the region during Obama's administration, created urgent new incentives for a more active Chinese diplomatic, political, and military engagement in the Middle East to protect its interests.<sup>70</sup> China is not trying to fill a "vacuum," President Xi explicitly insisted in a 2016 Cairo speech.<sup>71</sup> Rather than replacing U.S. military power with its own, the core logic

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<sup>66</sup> Andrew Small, Choosing Not to Choose: The Belt and Initiative and the Middle East," in *The Red Star & the Crescent: China and the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), James Reardon-Anderson, ed., pp. 189-203, here 190-191.

<sup>67</sup> Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40:4 (Spring 2016), 45-88.

<sup>68</sup> Zhang Zhexin, "The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Geopolitical Strategy?," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 4:3 (2018), 327-343.

<sup>69</sup> Dong Wang and Chengzhi Yin, "Mainland China Debates U.S. Pivot/Rebalancing to Asia," *Issues & Studies* 50:3(September 2014), 57-101; Michael Singh, "[Chinese Policy in the Middle East in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings](#)," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2014, p. 6. (p.6); Dennis Ross, "[How Obama Created a Mideast Vacuum](#)," Politico.com, January 10, 2016; Marc Lynch, "[The Middle East Power Vacuum](#)," ForeignPolicy.com, October 25, 2013; Michael Singh, "[China in the Middle East: Following in American Footsteps?](#)" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June-July 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Wang Xingang, Zhang Wentao, and Yang Yulong, "[Ideology, Global Strategy, and Development of the Islamic State and Its Influence on China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative](#)," *Journal of Global South Studies* 34:2 (Fall 2017), 139-155; Jonas Parello-Plesner & Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's new global risk map," *Adelphi Papers* 54:451 (2014), 19-36.

<sup>71</sup> "[President Xi's Speech at the Arab League Headquarters: Full Text](#)," CRIEnglish.com, January 22, 2016.

underlying China's new approach has been what's been referred to as hedging, which puts the strategic infrastructure in place for an expanded strategic engagement in the Middle East, if circumstances call for it.<sup>72</sup>

### ***The Middle East Tries "Self-Help"***

The U.S.'s 2015 National Security Strategy argued that the U.S. aim of bringing long-term stability to the Middle East depended on "partners who can defend themselves."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the Obama "Responsibility Doctrine," and his belief that American partners needed to do more to protect themselves, was a consistent theme of his administration's approach to the region.<sup>74</sup> It was one that was reaffirmed, albeit in a very different manner and style, by the Trump administration's transactional approach to America's longstanding global security commitments.<sup>75</sup> Both of these presidents tended to view the U.S.'s security partnerships in the Middle East as economic burdens and strategic liabilities rather than as tools that helped the U.S. control risk, exert influence, and enjoy the rewards of an American-led international order.<sup>76</sup> The decisive evidence that U.S. partners in the region heard the American emphasis on self-help, was in the chaotic way such independent efforts at self-sufficiency have been exercised across the region since the Arab Spring. The following are four such examples,

- At the end of March 2015, Saudi King Salman and his ambitious son, Muhammed, launched a war to roll back the Houthi coup d'état in Yemen.<sup>77</sup> The war has turned into a quagmire for Saudi Arabia and a humanitarian disaster for Yemen.<sup>78</sup> It has not prevented Iran from using the Houthis against the Saudis in northern Yemen much as Iran has used Hezbollah against Israel in southern Lebanon.<sup>79</sup>
- In August 2016, following a domestic campaign against the PKK in southeastern Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launched "Operation Euphrates Shield," sending the Turkish

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<sup>72</sup> Muhammad Salman, Moritz Pieper, and Gustaaf Geeraerts, "Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition," *Asia Politics & Policy* 7:4 (2015), 575-596; Hai Yang, "Time to Up the Game:?" *Asia Europe Journal* (2018); Dong Wang and Chengzhi Yin, "Mainland China Debates U.S. Pivot/Rebalancing to Asia," *Issues & Studies* 50:3(September 2014), 57-101, here 61; See, also: Lanxin Xiang, "China and the Pivot," *Survival* 54:5 (2012), 113-128; Massoud Hayoun, "[China's Approach to the Middle East Looks Familiar](#)," *The Diplomat*, November 29, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf)

<sup>74</sup> Nina Hachigian and David Shorr, "[The Responsibility Doctrine](#)," *Washington Quarterly* 36:1 (Winter 2013), 73-91.

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> For alliances as tools of management, rather as a means to aggregate power, see: Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management," in Klaus Knorr, ed., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975), pp. 227–263.

<sup>77</sup> Jamal Khashoggi, "[The Salman doctrine](#)," *al-Arabiya*, April 1, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Maria-Louise Clausen, "[Competing for Control over the State: The Case of Yemen](#)," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29:3, 560-578; David Kirkpatrick, "[Yemen Has Been a Saudi Prince's War. Now It's His Quagmire](#)," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Michael Knights, "[The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture](#)," *CTC Sentinel* 11:8 (September 2018).



military into northwest Syria to block the expansion of Kurdish territorial autonomy across northern Syria towards the Mediterranean Sea. In January 2018, Turkey launched "Operation Olive Branch," again sending Turkish forces across the border, this time to drive the Kurds out of the Kurdish majority Afrin district of far northwest Syria. Most recently, the U.S. permitted Turkey to launch its "Operation Peace Spring," which has effectively destroyed Kurdish autonomy in northeast Syria. The Kurdish project in northern Syria was one byproduct of the Syrian Kurds' partnership with the United States in the war against the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>80</sup> Turkey, a U.S. NATO ally, repeatedly denounced the U.S. partnership with the YPG, which was a product of the U.S.'s new "by, with, and through" approach to war in the region.

- In 2019, Israel is believed to have expanded its "campaign between the wars" against Iran from Syria into Iraq.<sup>81</sup> There have been consistent reports that the Israeli military has struck Iranian supplied military sites throughout Iraq.<sup>82</sup> These attacks are a response to the Iranian effort to create "a corridor of influence" that extends from Tehran across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.<sup>83</sup> The increased Israeli military activity should be seen as part of a broad response to the U.S. desire to withdraw from its post-Islamic State military commitments in Syria.
- In 2019, there have been increasing signs that Saudi Arabia is interested in acquiring nuclear weapons,<sup>84</sup> while Egypt<sup>85</sup> and Turkey<sup>86</sup> are may be considering acquiring nuclear programs that would create a latent weapons capability.

These are just a few of the examples that one might examine. There is the multi-dimensional conflict in Libya and the securitization of the Horn of Africa that could also be included, as well as several others. The U.S.'s allies and adversaries in the Middle East have internalized that the circumstances in which the U.S. was still willing to use military force in the region have changed. The core argument presented here is that Obama and Trump administrations' attitudes and actions

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<sup>80</sup> Kilic Bugra Kanat and Jackson Banno, "The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of U.S.-Turkish Relations," *Middle East Policy* 25:3 (Fall 2018), 111-123; "[As Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch Completed, Turkey ready to push next stage in N Syria](#)," *Daily Sabah*, August 7, 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein, "[The Mabam Strategy: Israel, Iran, Syria \(and Russia\)](#)," *Jewish Review of Books*, Spring 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein, "[Is Iraq the New Front Line in Israel's Conflict with Iran?](#)," *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2019; Anna Ahronheim, "[Is Israel Going After Tehran in Broad Daylight?](#)," *Jerusalem Post*, August 22, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> David Adesik, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, Behnam Ben Taleblu, "[Burning the Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean](#)," Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), June 18, 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Sokolski and Victor Gilinsky, "[Only Congress Stands Between Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons](#)," *The National Interest*, June 23, 2019; "[Corporate and Foreign Interests Behind White House Push to Transfer U.S. Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia](#)," Second Interim Staff Report Committee on Oversight and Reform U.S. House of Representatives, July 2019.

<sup>85</sup> Raphael Afek, "[Egypt's Nuclear Deal with Russia](#)," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), January 8, 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Barcin Yinanc, "[Will Turkey reverse its nuclear policy?](#)," *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 19, 2019; Kadri Gursel, "[Why does Erdogan want nuclear weapons?](#)," *al-Monitor*, September 10, 2019.

towards using force and diplomacy in the Middle East appeared directed at winding down and minimizing U.S. security partnerships in the Middle East, rather than committing to using its power to manage the security affairs in the region.

The Obama administration's terms "geopolitical equilibrium" and "strategic patience" were euphemisms that it employed to signal its intention to reduce and revise the nature of U.S. security commitments in the Middle East. Obama's reference to creating a "geopolitical equilibrium" between Sunnis and Shi'is in the Middle East was his way of signaling that he did not believe it was in U.S. interests to use American military power to protect Saudi Arabia from Iran. The term "strategic patience" was also used as euphemism to signal that the U.S. would wait for its local partners to take the lead rather than employing U.S. military power to manage regional security affairs. The U.S. has continued to encourage more security self-help in the region during the Trump presidency; it remains to be seen how U.S. partners and adversaries will turn to other Great Powers to mitigate their security risk, and whether widespread security self-help will bring more or less stability to the region.