

The U.S. and the Middle East: Re-visiting American Vital National Interests and Military Might

By Ramil Kazimov

Following World War II, President Harry Truman [proclaimed](#) to the American people: "We must be prepared to pay the price for peace, or assuredly we will pay the price of war." He urged Congress to keep American forces in Germany until the peace was secure in Europe.

Today, more than twenty years after the end of the Cold War, American troops are not just in Europe, but in Africa, East Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. No president has made the clear case to the American public, as Truman did, on what interests are at stake. Regarding the place of the largest and most consistent troop deployments, the Middle East, what ties the use of the American military to national interests?

Clear Vital National Interests

There are two traditional yet vital U.S. national interests in the Middle East. First, the United States wants to ensure the uninterrupted flow of hydrocarbon resources from the Persian Gulf to the world market. The foundations of this vitally important policy were [established](#) between President Jimmy Carter and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi following the British pullout from the Gulf in 1971. In the face of the Arab oil embargo that took place following the 1973 war, the U.S. discerned that any future volatility in this context could undermine the backbone of its hegemony. Hence, it is reaping benefits as there are not any serious threats to block oil transfer from the Gulf Cooperation Council nations. With the domestic leveraging of the Permian Basin, the U.S. is conscious only of the nature of the global commodity of oil coming out of the middle East.

Secondly, the United States seeks to prevent weapons of mass destruction against U.S. territories and its interests abroad. The cacophony over nuclear weapons began during the Cold War. Each U.S. president since has attempted to address this matter differently. George W. Bush chose hard power by [making an](#) audacious decision to wage war with Iraq in 2002 aiming to "strip Iraq of biological and chemical weapons." President Obama [signed](#) the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran that forced the latter to accept restrictions. The Trump Administration's recent withdrawal from the JCPOA seems to be without a plan to make progress on the issue.

Unmatched Military Might and Spending

Despite the campaign promises of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump to withdraw troops from the Middle East, America's military footprint remains enduring and powerful in the region. The U.S. Department of Defense's unclassified [synopsis](#) of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) clearly states its objective to "remain the preeminent military power in the world and maintain favorable regional balances of power in the Middle East and other parts of the world."

Undoubtedly, the American "preeminent military power" in the region is not contested. An [estimated](#) 70,000 US troops in the region stationed at military bases in Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq and Saudi Arabia are unmatched from any country outside the region. Similarly, US [spending](#) for armed conflicts in the broader region in the last twenty years is unparalleled. By one account, the U.S. has spent almost 6 trillion wars in the Middle East and Asia since 2001.

So what is all this presence and spending for?

A Missing Link

In the face of strong military might along with abundant financial backing in the Middle East, the U.S. is seemingly incapable of translating these resources into a “favorable regional balance of power” as proposed by the NDS. Russia is the only [winner](#) in Syria. U.S. “maximum pressure” on Iran is not [working](#); instead, Tehran's network of influence is [rising](#). Daesh's strongholds were forced underground, but it has yet to be [defeated](#). The U.S. is struggling to find a [deal](#) with the United Nations [designated](#) terrorist group, the Taliban.

Similarly, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's silence during his [speech](#) at the 2020 Munich Security Conference did not seem reassuring. Although Secretary Pompeo claimed that “the West is winning collectively” in some instances, he did not spend any time to explain whether America is winning in the Middle East. Nor did he propagate the Trump Administration's so called “Peace to Prosperity,” the newly-unveiled comprehensive agreement between Israel and Palestine.

Reactionary Middle East vision

In his book *American Diplomacy*, George Kennan, father of the Cold War strategy of containment, described how Theodore Roosevelt was “repenting his initiative” on annexation of Philippines in 1890s. The situation of U.S. in the Middle East today is similar: trying to recover from proactive/preemptive expansionist policies by way of a “retroactive vision” based on post factum conflicts and incidents. The same applies to the Middle East where short term reactive plans by the U.S. missed heeding threats like the attacks of September 11 and the advent of violent extremist organizations such as Al Qa'eda and Daesh. .

No American President has articulated any long-term roadmap that would include the United States’ vital national interests as supported by its military posture in the wider Middle East region. Instead, the focus has been on a specific country or threat-specific action based on a conversation of tactics, rather than strategy.

In 2003, President George W. Bush [unveiled](#) his retroactive vision only after the September 11 attacks. His successor Barack Obama was often [rebuked](#) for not having a concrete Middle East plan. President Trump’s “Peace to Prosperity” vision omitted the wishes of the wider Arab world; as a result, the Arab League has [rejected](#) it.

A cathartic reflection

The U.S. should be candid with itself and ponder the critical questions as President Truman did after WWII in order to respond to the major changes in the aftermath of the Cold War. Are we achieving a “favorable balance of power” relative to Russia in Syria, containing Iran, obliterating Daesh, and winning in Afghanistan and Iraq? If not, why not and what are we missing? Does the U.S. fully understand Middle East dynamics and history? If yes, then why do 70,000 troops and military bases in the Persian Gulf not translate into political gains? Is America aligning with the right states at the right time and in the right locations?

The strength of the military and dollars we spend are not ends in themselves.—they are means to an end. While it is not an easy task to articulate an enduring Middle East plan that would align military posture and funding with U.S. vital national interests, this does not negate the need nor imply that the task is impossible. Quite the contrary, the U.S. needs proactive strategizing, as opposed to retroactive visioning, to address current threats and predict potential future risks and opportunities in pursuit of its interests.