



It Takes Two to Spiral: The Pitfalls of an American Forward Presence

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President Joe Biden joined the ever-growing club of U.S. presidents that have authorized airstrikes in the Middle East when the United States [targeted](#) and destroyed buildings belonging to Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria on February 25th. And while the White House [justified](#) its decision to carry out the operation by framing it as a “small” and “calibrated” military response to [attacks](#) on U.S. personnel in Iraq, the situation underscores yet again the risks the United States chooses to run by maintaining a forward-deployed presence in the region. Not only does this presence put U.S. servicemembers and civilians in unnecessary danger, but it also increases the likelihood that the ongoing military tit-for-tat meant to demonstrate American resolve might instead escalate to wider conflict.

This is neither a new problem nor one confined to the Middle East. The fetishization of “credibility” and anxiety about maintaining a reputation for resolve are hallowed traditions in U.S. foreign policy. And one might even forgive the Biden administration for responding to rocket attacks on U.S. servicemembers, noting as the administration did that the response seemed both proportionate and an effort to de-escalate tensions. Still, the issue at the heart of the matter remains—keeping U.S. forces forward-deployed in regions of dubious strategic value is akin to laying a tripwire for needless war. And as U.S. fighter jets and Katyusha rockets dance perpetually on either side of the wire, the situation has become ripe for [misperception](#) and thus inadvertent escalation. This is not to say that Iran’s behavior or that of its proxies is excusable, only that—when it comes to military confrontation—it takes two to spiral.

Policymakers could better serve U.S. security interests by recognizing the potential pitfalls of a forward-deployed posture, particularly in places like Iraq where it comes into contact with adversaries. It is unclear what benefits the United States hopes to glean or what vital national interest it intends to safeguard with a perpetual presence in these places, but the risks are far more evident. The potential for spirals of hostility to break out is only magnified by the stationing of U.S. troops abroad. Officials would be wise to acknowledge that even regional powers are capable of imposing significant costs on the United States should the next trading of jobs escalate. This reality is only exacerbated by the diffusion of military capabilities like more accurate ballistic missiles that can hold U.S. forward bases—and American lives—at risk.

Scholars have long recognized this potential for spirals to break out as a result of faulty efforts to “re-establish deterrence” with an adversary. They [point](#) to a range of potential sources



of misperception in managing these volatile situations ranging from a state's core evaluative capabilities to individual psychological biases. Regardless of the source it is clear that even the most calculated, well-intentioned military policies can appear ham-fisted and produce suboptimal political results. This then begs the question: is the game worth the candle? Opponents of my argument would [recite](#) the conventional incantations about the need to garrison U.S. troops abroad to dampen adventurism by revisionist actors, protect U.S. economic interests, or to provide reassurance to regional partners, but they overestimate both the degree to which a forward-deployed posture accomplishes these tasks and the ability of any level of U.S. military commitment to truly reassure allies and partners.

If the overriding U.S. interest in forward-deploying troops is to protect existing U.S. assets in theater or to protect American partner nations, then this is a case of tools wrongly driving grand strategy. This is not just true in the Middle East. The United States faces similar risks of spirals elsewhere like on the Korean Peninsula where the element of nuclear risks is perhaps even more [acute](#) than with Iran. The common root of these firetraps is not the way in which the United States responds to acts of aggression; rather, it is that a U.S. forward presence demands constant responses in a way that a [humbler](#) force posture would not. The risk then is not that the next rocket strike against troops will immediately escalate to war. The real risk is that, given an unending forward presence, conflict might one day result from a dynamic process in which uncertainty and miscalculation play a role. If, like the tango, it takes two to tempt this fateful spiral, then perhaps it makes most sense for one party to [step out](#) of the ballroom.