

# UK Withdrawal in the 1970s and Reduction of US Military Footprint in 2021: A Comparison

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## **Key Points**

- Switching from hard (military) power to soft (diplomatic) power is a new approach from the US to the region.
- The reactions in regard to the UK withdrawal in the 1970s from ME were:
  - The attitudes of the Gulf states towards the British decision to withdraw varied.
  - Secretary of State William Rogers reiterated in 1970 the United States' desire for those British forces to remain in the Gulf because their withdrawal would constitute an open invitation for the Soviet Union to fill the resulting vacuum.
  - The Soviet Union was in favor of Britain's decision because it served the Soviets' ambitions, and it also would lead to undermining the Western influence in the area.
- The current US reduction in military footprint and a decreasing influence is characterized by:
  - Removal of its most advanced missile defense system and Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia, even as the kingdom faced continued air attacks from Yemen's Houthi rebels.
  - Regional countries that seem to turn to another "partner of Choice".
- In regard to Strategic Competitors in ME:
  - Today, Russia plays an important role in the dynamics of the Middle East. A strong military presence in Syria provides them an opportunity to expand their influence in the region.
  - China is present in the region with the Belt and Road Initiative. This option opens the possibility of military cooperation in the future with the countries of the region.
- As China was not identified in the 1970s as a likely competitor in the ME, it could be interesting to explore now which new competitor will emerge in the region in the medium and long-term.

## **Introduction**

This document proposes through the study of a historical case – the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the Middle East (ME) in the 1970s – to establish a comparison with the continuous reduction of the US footprint. The political, financial, and military aspects will be highlighted. In particular, the redefinition of the American Hard Power Policy to the Soft Power, with a strengthening of the diplomatic approach as used in the 1970s, will be analyzed. In addition, a clarification of some of the identified challenges will be proposed. Finally, this document will propose answers to the following question: What opportunities should be explored by the United States with respect to the vacuum regional countries acknowledge is created by the US decisions?

## UK Withdrawal

In January 1968, the British Labour Government announced its decision to withdraw its military forces from East of Suez Canal, particularly from the Arabian Gulf, by the end of 1971.<sup>1</sup> Although the British decision was a significant turning point in the politics of the Gulf area, the implications of such a decision were not fully understood by Western countries.

Because the British presence had an impact on the political, economic, cultural, and social aspects of life in the region, major changes occurred in those spheres following the British announcement and they still have effects even today.<sup>2</sup>

The British Prime Minister of the Labour government, Harold Wilson, announced to the world on January 15, 1968, that Britain would withdraw all its forces from East of Suez Canal by the end of 1971. Wilson justified his government's decision as a realistic one, indicating that his government had been pushed into taking the important step in foreign policy by the deteriorating British economic situation.<sup>3</sup> Economic difficulties forced cuts to public expenditures, especially military spending overseas.<sup>4</sup> This economic situation was one of the main pressures to reduce forces in the Middle East, but also the regional opinion was significantly changing to oppose continued British presence there.

The Defense White Paper of that year stated that in the future, the British bases would be maintained only in those locations where their presence was welcome, such as Hong Kong and Diego Garcia.<sup>5</sup> This shifted the focus from the Middle East to the other regions where there were still positive reactions to the presence of British forces.

The British withdrawal from the Gulf presented two changes. The first was military, involving the recall of British ground troops stationed at the British bases in Bahrain and Sharjah in the UAE. The second change was the termination of the old special treaties of protection, replacing them with simple friendship treaties that carried no significant obligations for either side.<sup>6</sup> This new treaty presents the solution for the possibility to still stay involved in the region, and to allow the possibility of having some level of military cooperation in the future. It was proposed that the British presence shall continue in the Gulf with occasional port and air visits, and the provision of British officers and equipment for the local armed forces. In addition, Britain would continue its previous arrangements with the Sultanate of Oman; that treaty stipulated that Britain take the responsibility of training and equipping the Sultan's forces in exchange for staging rights on the airfield of Masirah. The purpose of the British withdrawal was the British desire to disengage, as far as possible, from military and political commitments which became untenable.<sup>7</sup> Like the agreement with the Sultanate of Oman presented, this was a new approach to keep some level of the ABO (Access, Basing, and Overflight), but also to have some foundations for future military operations in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin J. Cottrell, "British Withdrawal from the Persian Gulf", *Military Review*, 50, June 1970, pg. 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Masoumah Saleh Al-Mubarak, B.A., "The British Withdrawal from the Arabia Gulf and its regional political consequences in the Gulf", Denton, Texas, December 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Alvin J. Cottrell, "British Withdrawal from the Persian Gulf", *Military Review*, 50, June 1970, pg. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Davis McKie and Chris Cook, "The Decade of Disillusion: British Politics in the Sixties", London, 1972, pp. 53, 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Maclean, "British Foreign Policy--the Years Since Suez, 1956-1968", New York, 1970, pp. 171, 182

<sup>6</sup> Masoumah Saleh Al-Mubarak, B.A., "The British Withdrawal from the Arabia Gulf and its regional political consequences in the Gulf", Denton, Texas, December 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The Conservative government also started reviewing the purpose of any future British presence with leaders in the Gulf area. None of the Gulf powers accepted the proposals and attempts for British presence in the area beyond 1971 except Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States.<sup>8</sup>

In July of 1970, Britain started to implement its plans to withdraw its troops, though it still retained responsibility for the foreign policy and defense of the seven Trucial States, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait because the defense treaties between Britain and these states would not be terminated until the end of 1971. The government proposed that some elements of British forces would continue to be stationed in the area for liaison and training roles if the Union wished. Britain wanted to also keep the Trucial Oman Scouts in the Union to form a nucleus for its army with the assistance of British officers and equipment.<sup>9</sup> All this effort was based on the possibility of keeping some level of ABO for the future. But this was also intended to contribute to foreign military sales (FMS) in a future military race that would start with the UK withdrawal from the region.

### **The responses of the Arab States in regard with the UK decision to withdraw**

The attitudes of the Gulf states towards the British decision to withdraw varied. Some states opposed the withdrawal, others favored the decision.

Iraq invited all willing powers and organizations in the Arab countries to be prepared to meet their responsibilities in defending the Gulf after the British withdrawal. Iraq was calling for an Arab alliance in the Gulf which excluded Iran.

Kuwait did not believe that there would be a so called "power vacuum" in the area after the British withdrawal because the people of the region had the ability to defend their independence and safeguard their sovereignty. The Kuwaiti government also opposed any British attempt to remain in the Gulf area after 1971, but that position did not prevent Kuwait from rejecting proposals for an Arab defense alliance in the Gulf. Kuwait also refused the Iranian proposal to create the Gulf Defense Pact because of its policy of non-alignment. That decision only heightened the diversification of the arms race among the countries in the region that has begun.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, considered one of the most powerful of the Gulf Coast countries, derives its power from several sources. Perhaps the most significant one is the fact that two of the three Islamic holy sites are located there. When the British government announced its decision to withdraw, the Saudi government was pleased; it rejected the argument that the withdrawal would create a power vacuum, believing that the countries of the region could defend themselves and were able to maintain the stability. The Saudi officials established diplomatic contacts with the Iranian government to strengthen their friendly relations considering the new circumstances after the British withdrawal. Saudi Arabia refused the Iranian proposal to establish a Defense Pact in the Gulf and opposed the British Conservative Party proposition for UK forces to remain.<sup>10</sup>

When the British first announced the decision to withdraw, it was a surprise to many Gulf rulers. Therefore, the rulers of these states welcomed the election of June 18, 1970, hoping that success for the Conservative Party would bring about a serious attempt to reverse the 1968 policy announcement. But that hope faded when the Conservative Government decided to implement the Labour Government's decision. Shaikh Rashid of Dubai, one

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<sup>8</sup> Masoumah Saleh Al-Mubarak, B.A., "The British Withdrawal from the Arabia Gulf and its regional political consequences in the Gulf", Denton, Texas, December 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

of the most influential of the rulers of the Trucial States, said that he was very disappointed by the British decision and tried to express his view to British officials. Shaikh Rashid believed that the withdrawal of British forces would lead the area into an uncertain future; he urged the Trucial States and Qatar to speed up the creation of the United Arab Emirates. For these states to maintain their political stability, the logical option was the formation of the union.<sup>11</sup> Even though there was a change in the political leadership from the Labour to Conservative party, the decision to withdraw from the region did not change. This presents similarity with the current situation in the US from January 2021 when there was a change in the presidency, but the decision to reduce the military footprint in the Middle East did not change.

Bahrain's status was threatened by the Iranian disputed border claim. Therefore, the Bahrainis were anxious to have the British stay in the Gulf area beyond 1971 because Britain's presence was viewed as a guardian of the island's sovereignty against the Iranian claim. That security was granted with the US presence in Bahrain. The US took over the British Naval Base, or most of it, immediately after the Royal Navy left the base area.

The Iranian government welcomed the British decision to withdraw from the Gulf. The Shah of Iran expressed his belief that the stable conditions may best be insured without the continued stationing of British forces in the Gulf itself. And he was being urged by the United States to act as a new stabilizing factor in the area. Iran favored a formal Defense Pact in the Gulf and some type of regional cooperative treaty or pact among the Gulf states. But Kuwait and Saudi Arabia rebuffed the suggestion, refusing to participate in military and political pacts or blocs. After the failure of the Defense Pact project, Iran moved toward a massive allocation of funds for defense in preparation for the British withdrawal by the end of 1971. This was a reason used to justify the need to increase the country's defense capacity.<sup>12</sup> The arms race that began with the departure of UK forces from the region continues today. Today's situation is further complicated not only by state borders but also by much more complex challenges (proxy groups, regional competition), and is likely to continue in the future.

### **The response of the US in regards to the UK decision to withdraw**

When British government announced the decision to recall all the British troops and end commitments East of the Suez Canal, the US Presidents Johnson and Nixon, successively, warned of the danger of this policy. Secretary of State William Rogers reiterated in 1970 the United States' desire for those British forces to remain in the Gulf because their withdrawal would constitute an open invitation for the Soviet Union to fill the resulting vacuum. He also believed that the abrogation of the special British treaties in the Gulf would change the regional security pattern and encouraged a close cooperation between Iran and its Arab neighbors to settle their territorial disputes.<sup>13</sup> One of the main drivers for this conclusion was that the Soviet Union would fill the possible vacuum in the region. In that time, they already had presence in the region (Egypt, Iraq). United States Under-Secretary of State Elliot Richardson, stated that "The objectives of the Nixon doctrine that the United States took to the countries in the area and to the leadership of Iran in particular, to carry out the objectives of maintaining the framework of peace and stability within which the independent evolution and national integrity of countries of the area can go forward."<sup>14</sup> This idea was the basis for the Iranian proposal to the other countries in the region to form some kind of the military alliance, but because of the different understanding of the situation and border disputes this idea hasn't been implemented even today.

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<sup>11</sup> Masoumah Saleh Al-Mubarak, B.A., "The British Withdrawal from the Arabia Gulf and its regional political consequences in the Gulf", Denton, Texas, December 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Samuels, R. J.. "Nixon Doctrine." Encyclopedia Britannica, September 5, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Nixon-Doctrine>.

Despite the United States' objection to the British decision, US officials understood that, should the United States leave the area following the British withdrawal in 1971, the Soviet interests would also be served. The Soviet Union had also established diplomatic relations with Iran and Kuwait. In December of 1971, the United States and the State of Bahrain completed an agreement which permitted the United States to establish a naval base. In January of 1972, the United States set up a permanent naval base in Bahrain only weeks after the withdrawal of British forces.<sup>15</sup> The naval base in Bahrain highlighted the US intent to replace UK in the region and to establish a military presence that would continue until today.

Fossil fuels are an essential need for NATO partners' economy and US friendly countries located east of the Suez Canal. The Gulf region has a need for technological expertise and has an excess balance for investments in other countries, including the United States. Thus, the Gulf States, the United States and its allies can participate in an exchange of goods, services and capital with a mutual advantage for all. Joseph Sisco said the United States had no intention of making new military commitments in the Gulf region. Sisco added that the United States would support the efforts of new states to consolidate its independence through economic and social support and the improvement of defense and internal security. US officials have understood that the best way to ensure the interests of the United States in the Gulf region is to promote stronger economic and commercial ties as well as cultural and political ties with the countries of the region.<sup>16</sup>

### **The response of the Soviet Union in regard with the UK decision to withdraw**

The main objective of Soviet foreign policy in underdeveloped countries was to gain influence. To this end, the Soviet Union has often adopted any suitable opportunity provided by uprisings or revolutionary movements, seeking to direct those movements against Western influence. The Soviets had historical ambitions in the Arabian Gulf area, due to it being rich in oil and rich in markets. The Soviet Union was in favor of Britain's decision because it served the Soviets' ambitions, and it also would lead to undermining the Western influence in the area. By opposing the British presence in the Gulf, the Soviets gained the approbation of both the Arabs and the Iranians. The Soviets claimed that they did not seek to disturb the area but wanted friendly, mutual relations. In 1968, Moscow suggested that the United States should rely on the security groupings of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to fill the vacuum left by Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf. The motives of the Soviet Union to denounce the suggestion of the United States to create a regional alliance with Iran in a leading position was because such an alliance would not adopt a defensive posture, but rather an aggressive one towards against the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> The Soviet Union also thought that the US presence in the region will put strong pressure on the southern border of the Soviet Union, therefore presenting an opportunity for the US to open a new front in the case of conflict to stretch the Soviet military forces.

It is now clear that the main concern of the British government, whether in making the decision or in attempting to annul it, was not any regional interest, but the protection of their national interests. Britain was largely concerned with its overall economic and strategic position. Fearing that their interests might be disrupted by their withdrawal, the Conservatives tried to overturn the Labor government's decision, but the costs of postponing or amending it were judged too high to change the decision. On the other hand, the attitudes of the regional states about the British forces remaining were mostly negative, which certainly played a role in the final decision. The British forces were provided with ABO by the US military presence in the region, as well as by

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<sup>15</sup> Masoumah Saleh Al-Mubarak, B.A., "The British Withdrawal from the Arabia Gulf and its regional political consequences in the Gulf", Denton, Texas, December, 1976.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

concluding new agreements on cooperation (defense) with the states of the region. There was no power vacuum when the US came in and, in many places, it just replaced the British presence. This allowed for re-involvement in the event of a threat in the region for the British forces.

### **The current and ongoing US reduction of military footprint in ME**

Dwight D. Eisenhower's assertion that plans are worthless, but planning is everything is probably one of the most overquoted military aphorisms. But it is so for a reason: It is true. Talking about how to leave the Middle East affords added weight to discussions over the possibility of departing the region. A plan is also needed in this case because what is being proposed is somewhat unprecedented. The United States has never actually left a major geographic region.<sup>18</sup> To better understand the current situation and possible development, we must follow the idea that the planned reduction of the footprint in the CENTCOM AOR could be understood as a reduction of different capabilities in the region. However, it still implies a relatively strong military presence regionally.

A prerequisite for discussing withdrawal from the Middle East is obviously to understand the scope of the "footprint" the United States needs to divest. It might surprise most Americans that the United States now has almost as many forces in the Middle East as it does in Europe.<sup>19</sup> This comparison emphasizes that, although the Middle East region is subject to significant disturbances and is currently a zone of armed conflicts, the presence of the power is not emphasized. To elucidate this statement, the rough number of the military forces in the Middle East with regular rotational deployments of air units and large naval forces, like carrier battle groups (CVBGs), means that as many as 45,000 U.S. personnel can be in the Middle East at any time.<sup>20</sup> The largest concentration of US manpower lies in a berm of bases on the western shore of the Arabian Gulf, spreads out over four small Arab countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These four states account for more than half the total US forces in the region and house the most robust physical infrastructure of the US basing footprint.

In considering a plan for withdrawal from the Middle East, it is an obvious point that there are no legal impediments to the United States leaving. Although many of the states, including Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, and Kuwait, hold the official status of Major Non-NATO Ally (or MNNA), the distinction holds no treaty-bound commitments. MNNA is simply a designation that has more to do with defense industry collaboration and other forms of materiel security cooperation.<sup>21</sup> There are plans for defense of regional countries with the US, but due to the current reduction of the US military presence and the trend of further reduction in the region, there is a possible need to revise them. This conclusion is drawn from the example of the British withdrawal when new defense treaties were revised and signed with countries in the region. Also, it is important to address feelings

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<sup>18</sup> Rovner and Talmadge, "Hegemony," 554–560; Karol R. Sorby, "Great Powers and the Middle East after World War II (1945–1955)," *Asian and African Studies* 10, no. 1 (2001): 56–79; and Simon C. Smith, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A Pattern Not a Puzzle," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44, no. 2 (December 8, 2015): 328–51.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Masters and William Mellow, "How Is the U.S. Military Pivoting in Europe?" Council on Foreign Relations, September 23, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-us-military-pivoting-europe>, (Accessed September 25, 2021.)

<sup>20</sup> Eric Schmitt, "U.S. to Reduce Troop Levels in Iraq to 3,000," *New York Times*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/us/politics/iraq-troops-trump.html>, (Accessed September 25, 2021.)

<sup>21</sup> "Major Non-NATO Ally Status," Department of State, January 30, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>, (Accessed September 25, 2021.)

from the regional partners that may perceive a reduction as an abandonment and there is need to reassure commitment to the region.

A withdrawal from these four small countries would also constitute a spiritual decoupling of the United States from the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the six-nation bloc of Arab states formed in 1981. US presence in the smaller GCC states has been the physical manifestation of its partnership with the Arab world for the past thirty years. Leaving a country like Jordan or Iraq is not unimportant but decamping from Kuwait or Bahrain will be seismic from the perspective of US long-term commitment to the region.<sup>22</sup> Given the examples of possible consequences that could be caused by a diminished presence and commitment to regional partners, there are fears that partners may seek protection from international partners who, by their presence, will offer enough deterrence in regard with potential perception of the threats. Such a development could lead to tectonic shifts in the geo-political situation. With such developments, the possibilities of ABO potential in the region could be reduced.

A perceived neglect of the Middle East will constitute a fundamental shift in not only the US global military posture but also its strategic thinking.<sup>23</sup> The strategic thinking of the region must be clear to present it to regional partners. If there is shift in approach to the regional partners, that should be clearly articulated. With new challenges emerging and focus in shifting in that direction, there is a need to present all the possibilities to the region.

The US has removed its most advanced missile defense system and Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia, even as the kingdom faced continued air attacks from Yemen's Houthi rebels. The redeployment of the defenses from Prince Sultan Air Base outside of Riyadh came as America's Gulf Arab allies nervously watched the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, including their last-minute evacuations from Kabul's besieged international airport. Gulf Arab nations worry about the US' future as its military perceives a growing threat in Asia and recently in Europe that require those missile defenses. Tensions remain high as negotiations appear stalled in Vienna over Iran's collapsed nuclear deal with world powers, raising the danger of future confrontations in the region.<sup>24</sup> "From the Saudi point of view, they now see Obama, Trump and Biden — three successive presidents — taking decisions that signify to some extent an abandonment."<sup>25</sup> "I think we need to be reassured about American commitment," the prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia told CNBC in an interview. "That looks like, for example, not withdrawing Patriot missiles from Saudi Arabia at a time when Saudi Arabia is the victim of missile attacks and drone attacks — not just from Yemen, but from Iran." The timing of the US withdrawals comes amid wider uncertainty over the American posture in the region. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries have renewed diplomacy with Iran as a hedge.<sup>26</sup> Even if the US has the need to redeploy assets in other theaters where is imperative to protect national interests, major issues for regional partners and their needs must be taken in consideration. From the point of view of some regional partners, the threat of ballistic missiles by Iran

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<sup>22</sup> Mike Sweeney, "A Plan for U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East", Defense Priorities, December 21, 2020., <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/a-plan-for-us-withdrawal-from-the-middle-east>, (Accessed September 25, 2021.)

<sup>23</sup> Mike Sweeney, "Nothing is Forever: When the U.S. Military Eventually Leaves the Middle East, It's Going to Need a Plan," Modern War Institute, July 15, 2019, <https://mwi.usma.edu/nothing-forever-us-military-eventually-leaves-middle-east-going-need-plan/>, (Accessed, September 24, 2021.)

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press, "US pulls missile defenses in Saudi Arabia amid Yemen attacks", Politico, 09.11.2021., <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/11/missile-defense-saudi-arabia-511320>, (Accessed, September 24, 2021.)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

or Iranian proxies is a real threat that requires a security response. The need to deploy defensive anti-aircraft systems is not only for defense purposes, but also for deterrence purposes from potential future attacks.

Analyzing the current situation compared to the 1970s, the current one is much more complex and requires a more layered approach. The primary task should be to convince partner nations that a commitment to their security remains an imperative of the US. "Perceptions matter whether or not they're rooted in a cold, cold reality. And the perception is very clear that the US is not as committed to the Gulf as it used to be in the views of many people in decision-making authority in the region."<sup>27</sup> A change of approach by the US should not affect the perception of commitment to regional partners unless it is miscommunicated by the US.

The United States must rebuild what has historically been its most effective tool in the Middle East: diplomacy, especially in advancing conflict resolution.<sup>28</sup> A change in the approach to tackling the Middle East is necessary given the current trend of declining military presence.

Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) all have questions about the extent and durability of American security commitments to their neighborhood, and all three prefer to keep the US closely engaged.<sup>29</sup> Washington should pursue necessary engagements with these key partners in the region about where US interests begin and end, and where partners' own preferences and behaviors could present real obstacles to closer cooperation. As in all healthy relationships, honest communication and clear boundaries are essential to maintain mutual respect and good feelings. This is important to establish a basis for future interactions between regional countries in an era of the US reduction in military presence.

A post-COVID Middle East in which Iran is relatively advantaged will make right-sizing the American military posture in the region more important. The beefy posture of the last two decades by itself has not deterred the Iranians. Instead, the United States has deterred Iranian bad behavior most successfully when it has adopted a multifaceted approach using sanctions and intelligence to expose and interrupt bad behavior, multilateral pressure, and the tailored use of force when necessary. All of this requires close coordination with both regional and global partners. America's military priorities should be driven by the strategic objectives that support America's military presence in the region.<sup>30</sup> This example of an approach to the Iranian issue could provide a path that may be applied in future engagements with other contending counties in the region. An all-of-government approach in coordination with allied counties and regional partners may provide a path to solve issues without a heavy military presence, using diplomatic and economic means. The involvement of the regional partners is paramount for success. The main point for reaching this goal is the common understanding of a shared and desired end state.

As senior Pentagon official James H. Anderson outlined to Congress in May 2020, they are to "ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States and contributes to a stable global energy market." In this light, the objects of American military engagement become clearer: defeating IS and other terrorists and denying them safe havens, preventing Iran from achieving nuclear weapons

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, "What to do-and what not to do-in the Middle East", Brookings, January 25,2021., <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-to-do-and-what-not-to-do-in-the-middle-east/>, (Accessed, September 24, 2021.)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



status, and preventing disruptions to energy flows.<sup>31</sup> These goals present a common desired security for the region that should build the foundations in the common endeavor to create a safe and prosperous region.

If the global review now underway at the Department of Defense does not result in a smaller and different mix of military capabilities, personnel, and headquarters in the Middle East, it will have failed to meaningfully align US priorities in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> As US national interests need to inform priorities for any planned reductions, there is also a need to ensure a feeling of safety for regional partners, and their need to have much desired or needed capabilities that will be impacted with US reductions in the future. A systematic process with more durable results would better reassure regional partners and help reveal the potential and limits of the military's role in the region.<sup>33</sup> This process must also include opinions from the allies and regional partners to be sustainable in the long term. If allies and regional partners are excluded from this process it might trigger opportunities not favorable in regard with US interests.

The Biden administration seeks to shift the US' role in the region from military "big brother" to that of "diplomatic partner" on major issues, including security in its broader meaning. It does not seek to build alliances against Iran and its regional projects. It is merely interested in drawing some red lines. It is not interested in blocking Iranian expansionism but simply limiting it.<sup>34</sup> This message must be communicated to the partner countries and to the allies to create a positive impact and support. The necessity to explain this could be challenging because it doesn't address regional countries' perceptions on Iranian influence.

A geopolitical rivalry between the US and China is testing the loyalties of countries in the oil-rich Gulf. Despite decades of close cooperation with the U.S., including by hosting military bases, China has emerged as a major economic counterweight to America. The UAE, a crucial US ally in the Middle East, has been under pressure to reverse a push for stronger military and economic ties with China, which is seeking increased influence in the region. The US is asking the UAE to remove Huawei equipment from its networks within the next four years - before it's scheduled to get the F-35 in 2026 or 2027 - but Emirati officials have countered that they'd need longer plus an alternative that's as affordable.<sup>35</sup> To profile the US demands, UAE must reset projects that are already established, and that could present a significant effort from one side. In accordance with the new approach, the US should propose and offer some acceptable solution; that doesn't mean that the solution must be US centric but may open the opportunity for some other allies or regional partners and may create the possibility to cover the gap that this request could open. In addition, from an economic point of view and from that of a partner of choice, this solution should consider the likely costs of the UAE in this case and, in the final solution, take all the points of reference into consideration. The United Arab Emirates agreed to buy 80 Rafale fighter jets from France as part of a \$19 billion deal signed during President Emmanuel Macron's visit to the Gulf nation. As well as the fighters produced by Dassault Aviation SA, the UAE is also buying 12 Caracal military helicopters from Airbus SE. The UAE's Mubadala wealth fund signed separate deals totaling another 10 billion

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<sup>31</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, "What to do-and what not to do-in the Middle East", Brookings, January 25,2021., <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-to-do-and-what-not-to-do-in-the-middle-east/>, (Accessed, September 24, 2021.)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Tamara Cofman Wittes, "What to do-and what not to do-in the Middle East", Brookings, January 25,2021., <https://www.brookings.edu/research/what-to-do-and-what-not-to-do-in-the-middle-east/>, (Accessed, September 24, 2021.)

<sup>34</sup> Raghida Dergham, "The US may be changing tack in the Middle East. Will it work?", Opinion, October, 4. 2021., <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/2021/10/03/the-us-may-be-changing-tack-in-the-middle-east-will-it-work/>, (Accessed, October 4, 2021.)

<sup>35</sup> Zainab Fattah, "The top UAE Official Warns on Risk 'Cold War' Between China, US", Bloomberg, October2. 2021., <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-02/top-uae-official-warns-on-risk-of-cold-war-between-china-u-s>, (Accessed, October 4, 2021.)

euros during the trip. The Emiratis have frequently told their U.S. counterparts that they prefer to buy American hardware, but Washington places so many restrictions on their use that they also need other suppliers.<sup>36</sup> A request like this also creates opportunities for other countries involved to cooperate and create a baseline for future cooperation between the United States, its allies, and regional partners. Agreements like the UAE-France one is a successful example of how to fill the gap between the demands and needs of countries in the region that the US cannot currently meet or does not want to fill. In this way, the room for Russia and China to fill the gap is reduced. The "partner of choice" in this case becomes a member of NATO. This could be a prime example of cooperation within the Strategic Competition.

The current US desire is to implement the "Soft Power" paradigm envisaged in the 1970s thereby replacing "Hard Power", characterized among other things by a strong and visible military presence. This paradigm shift, for the countries of the region, the US and allies, is likely to force a re-think of the roles of each to maintain security and stability. Due to these changes, it is essential to approach each country and explain what capabilities will be reduced and how to mitigate that challenge. This also requires new defense agreements between the US and its regional partners that should include a new posture. One of the most important messages that must be communicated is they are not being abandoned by the US, but a different approach to deal with problems will be implemented and more cooperation between regional partners will be required.

Due to political changes, the US is reducing its military footprint. This decision is irreversible no matter which political party is in charge. The current US administration has maintained the planned reduction in footprint and is continuing its policies in place. We are uncertain about the dynamics involved and likely end state, which could vary from the 1970s presence of two bases in the region to any number of possibilities. Nevertheless, the US is changing its focus from this region to other regions. A similar situation happened with the UK in the 1970s and that significantly changed the situation in the Middle East.

In regard with ABO in the region, there will be many challenges that will require a significant adaptation to manage. After the UK withdrawal in the 1970, the US filled the vacuum. The situation was less complex at that time. After the withdrawal of UK forces from Bahrain, the US established their naval base by taking over the former UK one. The UK still had a presence in the region. Thanks to special agreements signed with regional countries, the UK secured sufficient ABO to meet their requirements. Another significant aspect was that the UK and the US have a close military cooperation. It granted the UK the possibility to reapproach the region if needed. One wonders today how the United States will maintain the same level of ABO as it currently has, with a robust military presence and a significant number of bases in the region. It also appears necessary to sign and revise the current bilateral defense agreements with regional partners in line with the future military posture to ensure an adequate level of ABO in the region. When it comes to "Over the Horizon" capabilities, there are a multitude of challenges ahead. For the time being, the implementation of the "Over the horizon" concept does not seem to have produced the expected effects after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Thus, there is a way to improve this ambitious concept in the future. The risk of losing significant ABO capabilities after the reduction of the military footprint in the region could, at the same time, endanger all possible future operations in the region, and significantly limit the projection capacity of military power in partner countries.

In regard to Strategic Competition, one of the questions that we need to ask is about the likely emergence of another competitor in the Middle East. Like China is today's peer-competitor, some other power could emerge

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<sup>36</sup> Samy Adghirini, "UAE Buys 80 French Rafale Fighter Jets in \$19 Billion Deal", Bloomerang, December 4, 2021., <https://www.bloomerang.com/news/articles/2021-12-03/france-s-macron-signs-deal-to-sell-80-rafale-jets-to-the-uae>, (Accessed, December 5, 2021.)

and present a challenge for global domination. That power could be from this region or possibly from neighboring regions like India in some mid-to-long range time projection.

### Conclusion

The reduced military footprint by the US will be a challenge in today's Strategic Competition dynamics and could produce an undesired effect on Strategic Competition in the region by opening up new opportunities for Russia and China. This applies not only to the FMS but also to the challenge of keeping the US as the partner of choice for regional partners.

Currently we have no answer to the question of how reductions in the military presence will affect regional partners. The question remains whether the United States will continue to be committed to complementing the capabilities that partners have not developed and providing them with the necessary support in this area. Today, Russia is an important factor in the dynamics of the Middle East. A strong military presence in Syria provides them with an opportunity to expand their influence in the region. Due to the complexity of the conflict in Syria, Russia coordinates communications with Syria, Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Russia is offered the possibility of further cooperation with other regional states. Despite war in Ukraine, Russia is still committed to support the Syrian regime. This highlights how this region is important to Russian interests. Because their influence in Iraq is increasing, for Iraqi officials, Russia could be considered as an alternative to the US and Iran.

It is important to point out that the reduction of the US footprint requires a detailed explanation of the plan to regional partners, with the dynamics of the reduction and aspects in infrastructure, capabilities, and possible impacts on building security capacity. It is necessary to define a "partner of choice" in the region and clearly define what capability gaps could be replaced within a defined time frame. The "partner of choice" should be used in close cooperation with allies, creating an opportunity for the countries in the region to choose the best option for their demands – but one which is acceptable to the US.

One of the constants in the region has been the arms race that has been continuing since the 1970s, perhaps because of claims that every state can bear responsibility for the security of its borders. While this may be a bold message that is due to a complicated situation, the creation of an alliance emphasizes the need to develop all skills in response to a threat. Today's situation of unresolved border disputes, religious issues, and regional power competition is likely to limit the creation of a long-lasting alliance.

As USCENTCOM was created to counter Soviet influence in the 1980s, in the current situation Strategic Competition should have primacy. Given that China was not identified as a global power in the 1970s, the real question arises: which country could come out of the horizon as a future global power? Given the Indian and Pakistani roots in the region and their possible global growth in the future, there is a real possibility that one of these two nations could greatly impact the region's future.

The US is currently still present in the area and represents a significant security factor to the countries of the region. The U.S. has never completely left a regional zone, but the current undefined, or at least unpublished, presence reduction plan is causing uncertainty among regional partners about the U.S. commitment to the problems they face. To reassure partners in the region and ensure the desired level of ABO in the future, it is necessary to approach the development of new defense plans with regional countries with a clear message that a change in approach does not mean abandoning regional partners. With the new challenges emerging in the present and the focus shifting mainly to SC, countries in the region continue to depend on the capabilities they

lack and if the US does not provide those capabilities that countries need, they will have to find other service providers to fill the gap.

**Recommendations for US / for USCENTCOM**

- Clarify any reduction of military footprint to regional partners by presenting stages, timelines, and likely impacts regarding bases, infrastructure, and capabilities.
- Try to advocate need of the ME and Levant countries' appetites to acquire capabilities and recommend the FMS process is made more effective and quicker.
- By the regional partners perception there is need to update bilateral and multilateral agreements (Defense Plans, ABO Agreements, etc.) with GCC countries.
- Explore possibility to reinvigorate regional partnerships to mitigate the regional perception of US military footprint reduction in the AOR.
- Closely monitor emergent actors' activities in the ME and Levant.