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America's Strategic Baggage in the Middle East:

Is it Necessary and Sustainable

Daniel L. Magruder, Jr., Colonel, USAF



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the Middle East:
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About the Author

Colonel Daniel L. Magruder Jr. is the Strategic Plans Division Chief at Air Force Special Operations Command. He received his commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 2003. As a Special Tactics Officer, he has led special operations forces in multiple deployments during Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, Willing Spirit, Freedom's Sentinel, and Inherent Resolve. Colonel Magruder has served in staff positions as a Weapons and Tactics officer, in operations at Special Operations Command Central, and as the lead speechwriter to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. He completed his doctorate in political science at the University of Chicago and has numerous publications, including the book, *Counterinsurgency, Security Forces, and the Identification Problem: Distinguishing Friend from Foe*.

Abstract

Is U.S. military presence in the Middle East sustainable at current levels? Troop levels are low in individual war zones, casualties are rare, and the fiscal cost is a bargain by historical standards. However, these estimates do not take into account strategic baggage accrued over the last two decades of sustained engagement in the region. Baggage is not just the weight of commitments of the past, but also the inability to let it go. The sustained presence in the region limits choices impacting current readiness and future defense strategy.

A more comprehensive analysis of U.S. military commitments to the Mid-East is achieved using a framework of analysis to evaluate perceived benefits, costs, and risks over time. This tally would include a wider scope of costs: tangible, societal, and forgone opportunities. The main opportunity costs are the strategic trade-offs between sustaining current overseas requirements and preparing a force for the future. In terms of developing and executing a defense strategy, the tension plays out during dialogue about readiness, capability, and capacity. National security leaders articulate pros and cons of trade-offs to identify the most consequential decisions about risk tolerance. Finally, maintaining baggage incurs risks in terms of unintended consequences, mission creep, potential for inadvertent escalation, and may lead to strategic insolvency.

The nation is at an inflection point given the evolving world order and erosion of U.S. military advantages. To prepare for the future the U.S. military cannot replace hard-nosed analysis with hope and delay tough choices. A superpower should be able to sustain its posture in the Middle East, but also be forthright about the true costs to Americans and impacts on future readiness. The U.S. should find ways to jettison or minimize strategic baggage in the Middle East in order to devote more time and resources to invest in the future.

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the help of many people. First and foremost, I owe an appreciation to the Air Force and American public to support a year of reflection. The Brookings Institution was a wonderful intellectual home. I must admit the idea for this line of research was not my own. Dr. Mara Karlin planted the seed in a seminar in 2019 and I finally got around to writing about it. I also thank the many unnamed folks who discussed my ideas, challenged me, and ultimately made me a better leader. The point of this year is to depart with a better understanding of how to use military power responsibly—and to give voice to those we lead.

I spent most of the time this past year with those closest to me. Jen, you give meaning to my life and I am glad I spent the majority of time this year with you. Maverick and Makenna, you are the future and my only hope is that you continue to reach for the stars.

Daniel L. Magruder Jr.
Alexandria, Virginia

Chapter 1

Introduction

A main challenge facing national security policy makers in the Middle East is how to reduce ambitions and military commitments to sustainable levels. How do the United States and its partners cost-effectively stabilize the region, deter Iran, and counter violent extremists? These are challenges that must be balanced against the structural changes in the international order. All the while, America's military capabilities that underwrite conventional deterrence are eroding. While the United States is a global power with global responsibilities, the National Defense Strategy Commission warned about the "growing tendency to conflate the stating of desired objectives with the wherewithal to accomplish them."¹

A superpower should be able to sustain its posture in the Middle East until acceptable political objectives are met. Troop levels are low in individual war zones, casualties are rare, and the fiscal cost is a bargain by historical standards. However, these estimates do not consider strategic baggage accrued over the past two decades of sustained engagement in the region. And, while it is entirely possible the United States could sustain this level of effort, it does not mean it increases American security or prosperity.

The paper defines *strategic baggage* and analyzes whether it is necessary and sustainable. The analysis recognizes a need for military presence and does not advocate abandoning US interests in the region—or the majority of the military presence. The study addresses arguments supporting the necessity of US military presence while emphasizing the hidden costs of strategic baggage. Baggage is not just the weight of commitments of the past but also the inability to let it go. This paper argues the sustained presence in the region limits choices impacting current readiness and adapting to future threats.

A more comprehensive analysis of US military commitments to the Middle East can better evaluate perceived benefits, costs, and risks over time. While holding benefits of military presence constant, this tally would include a wider scope of costs: tangible, societal, and forgone opportunities. The main opportunity costs are the strategic trade-offs between sustaining current overseas requirements and preparing a force for the future. In terms of developing and executing a defense strategy, the tension plays out during dialogue about readiness, capability, and capacity. National security leaders articulate pros and cons of trade-offs to identify the most consequential decisions about risk tolerance. Finally, maintaining baggage incurs risks in terms of unin-

tended consequences, mission creep, and potential for inadvertent escalation and may lead to strategic insolvency. Most debates about US military presence are not productive due to the fact analysts begin from vastly differing starting points. Fundamental assumptions turn on how broadly an analyst defines interests and values—and a corresponding willingness to commit military resources to secure them. The same minimal/maximal lens applies to one's toleration of risks. Of course, individuals view interests, values, risk, and desire to use force on a sliding scale. Therefore, one's fundamental assumptions and worldview may obviate any possibility to persuade. This explains how analysts arrive at different conclusions based on the same set of facts.

This study aims to give an accurate diagnosis rather than a perfect prescription. The nation is at an inflection point, given the evolving world order and erosion of US military advantages. While the urgency of the threat is debatable, to prepare for the future, the US military cannot replace hard-nosed analysis with hope and delay tough choices. The United States should find ways to minimize strategic baggage in the Middle East to devote more time and resources to invest in the future. This type of study comes with intellectual and professional risk but, as Andy Marshall was fond of saying, "I'd rather have decent answers to the right questions than great answers to irrelevant questions."² For example, is America's strategic baggage in the Middle East necessary and sustainable at current levels? Have American actions in the region furthered our interests or undermined them? How does the United States sustain security commitments in the Middle East while adapting to compete with peer adversaries? What are the challenges that inhibit change and opportunities to gain a competitive advantage over rivals?

This paper will be unsatisfactory to many. It does not present an elegant causal theory or bold policy prescriptions. Instead, I employ the concept of strategic baggage to gain new insights into the impacts of sustained military commitments to the Middle East. Admittedly, the framing of the subject as "baggage" could bias analysis. This is not the intent. The intent of the study is to capture the second- and third-order costs and trade-offs that are often assumed away. Over time, these costs and trade-offs have positive and negative impacts. Second, the traditional consensus is well-trodden ground that has vast support from academic and policy circles. While there are few remaining gaps in knowledge, there might be errors in the traditional paradigms employed to analyze costs and benefits. Recognizing benefits of US military presence, analysis should scrutinize, perhaps being more critical of sustained engagement, while the world order has evolved.

Notes

1. Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *The Last Warrior* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 252.
2. Krepinevich and Watts, *The Last Warrior*, xxii.

Chapter 2

Strategic Baggage

What Is Strategic Baggage?

Strategic baggage is a military commitment that has outlasted its utility. This occurs when, on balance, the perception of the costs is either too high, benefits too low, or risks too great to continue. Once decisions are made to commit military forces, you cannot wind back the clock. Choices about military engagement are often considered in isolation rather than as one part of a cumulative series of commitments. There are problems with this approach because, taken in isolation, a military engagement may seem logical, feasible, and sustainable. However, when the United States accepts multiple open-ended commitments without reducing promises elsewhere, the military runs the risk of overstretch as these commitments add up over time.

It is important to explain how and when a military commitment outlasts its utility. There are different types of military commitments that connect military operations to foreign-policy objectives: routine security activities, small- and large-scale interventions. *Routine activities* are those which the Pentagon conducts with partners and allies through security cooperation programs. The purpose of this type of activity is to “advance U.S. national security and foreign-policy interests by building the capacity of foreign security forces to respond to shared challenges.”¹ Second, *small-scale intervention* is typified by a relatively small footprint of US military personal working by, with, and through partners and allies. Finally, *large-scale interventions* are those with Americans decisively engaged in combat operations—such as the peak years of intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Through the execution of military operations in varying scenarios and contexts, the calculus of costs and risks change over time in relation to whether policy goals are achieved. When goals are not achieved at an acceptable cost or risk, a military commitment has outrun its course.

The perpetuation of baggage is due to privileging the short-term objectives over long-term ones. There are good reasons why this is so. First, it is easier to maintain the status quo than to make a big change based on an uncertain projection of the future. Similarly, political leaders have a bias for action and do not typically like to incur risks. This helps explain why no twenty-first-century president has ended a war they began. As Chris Brose argued, politics also helps explain why there is a “systemic failure in our defense establishment” to recognize trends and adjust.² He continued to explain the dynamic

makes it incredibly difficult to retire legacy platforms that carry lucrative sustainment contracts ensuring years of profits for defense contractors.

A second reason strategic baggage is perpetuated is because the military is a can-do organization. Despite shortcomings in achieving some strategic objectives, the US military consistently appeals for patience. This can be under the guise of allowing a partner to build on progress, create political trade-space, or extend time horizons.³ This is understandable, but at what point do short-term decisions aggregate into long-term baggage—5, 10, 20 years? The flip side is decision-makers cannot completely erase the consequences of past choices. However, a decision to maintain the status quo reduces opportunities to use those same forces for other purposes. For example, consider the squadrons, companies, and battalion of special operators required to maintain a presence at Al-Tanf Garrison in southeast Syria.⁴ US strategic objectives in Syria often appear confused, the military role is not clear, but policy has remained consistent across administrations. As Central Command commander, General Kenneth McKenzie, has said: “There’s no viable military solution to the conflict in Syria.”⁵ Yet, without a clear way forward we are left with an open-ended, military commitments which are reified with every turnover of leadership.

When commitments become baggage, it hampers America’s ability to make strategic choices moving forward. This is because we cannot wipe the slate clean. Baggage is not just the weight of commitments of the past but the inability to let it go. In this way, past choices are a burden that raises barriers to adapt to the future. For example, while the US military necessarily focused on readiness and capacity for irregular warfare during the last two decades, it lost relative advantages in conventional capabilities and key technologies needed for the future. Therefore, it is necessary to include the legacies of the wars in the Middle East in analysis because of the far-reaching impacts on current choices regarding global priorities, allocation of military forces, and preparing for future threats. For example, if demands were reduced there might be more flexibility to address other hot topics such as pandemic response, how to address the Department’s climate footprint, and developing a feasible theory of victory for certain scenarios.

Why Does Strategic Baggage Matter Now?

There are three reasons why assessing strategic baggage is important. First, despite many enduring strengths, American influence is in relative decline.⁶ Whether assessing the share of the global economy, conventional military capabilities, advanced technologies, and perhaps the confidence in the narrative

of democracy, the United States is on negative trend lines.⁷ These trends impact US ability to sustain military advantages, posture forces to deter aggression, and assure confidence in our political commitments to allies. While the pace of a rising China and type of threat can be debated, the United States will have to deal with a range of adversaries in a time of fiscal austerity for the Department of Defense. The main risk is a strategic miscalculation which leads to open hostilities between the two powers.

The second reason why it is time to assess strategic baggage is because the United States has often failed to achieve desired policy objectives in the Middle East. For sure, it could be worse. Looking forward, however, we must examine root causes of failure in the past. To identify those lessons, it is useful to examine the seeds of bad strategy: an overreliance on hope and optimism, avoiding intellectually honest analysis, and delaying hard choices.⁸ For its part, American military actions in the Mid-East have generally not led to acceptable political outcomes. Asking why this is the case is the first step toward understanding.

When key assumptions that drive foreign-policy preferences are too optimistic there is a tendency to misuse military power. For example, expansive views of national interests (i.e., what is worth fighting and dying for) and a belief in the fungibility of force will increase the range of scenarios for military activism. Experience in the Mid-East is evidence that there are some problems American military power cannot fix. And in some cases, like Libya, American activism made matters worse. Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster's book, *Battlegrounds*, recounts the bipartisan hubris and over-optimism that led to failures in major interventions.⁹ Often times, Americans place hope over experience because they underestimate the full commitment required to stabilize places like Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰ While Americans are generally optimistic about what their nation can achieve abroad, history should temper this enthusiasm's taste for the most extreme goals. For instance, McNamara recognized "misassumptions" that guided Vietnam policy and the fact there are some problems American power cannot solve.¹¹ We must also not want the solution more than our local partners.

Hard-nosed analysis should clarify difficult trade-offs limiting the ability of American power to bring about desirable outcomes. After all, strategy is about priorities and making decisions about which risks to accept or mitigate. It is impossible to live a risk-free life. The lack of resources will constrain choice. The National Defense Strategy Commission recognized that "DOD struggled to link objectives to strategy to operational concepts to programs and resources."¹² The United States has been here before. The American experience in the Cold War taught us that instead of responding to every Soviet

threat with a corresponding counter we found ways to undermine their advantages.¹³ The competitive approach we developed imposed costs on the adversary. The patience required to analyze and craft an effective long-term strategy is an American weakness. So too is taming bureaucracies to implement coherent strategy. These are all reasons to welcome a global posture review which aims to analyze links between policy, strategy, and basing.¹⁴

The result of analysis should dispel misplaced hope that trying the same action again will result in a different outcome. Instead, the breadth of American power allowed the United States to escape risk and hard choices. With a changing global order, a commensurate evolution of foreign-policy goals and willingness to tolerate risk is underway. Therefore, examining the sustainability of military commitments is critical. A more limited view of national interests in the region, creative approaches, or increased tolerance for strategic (security and political) risk may give reason to reduce overseas presence. On the other hand, there is a risk of scaling back too far. What if withdrawal blows up in our face? Ultimately, these decisions are a matter of judgment about whether the ounce of prevention is worth the pound of cure. But the judgment applies not only to the Mid-East, but to all the scenarios and opportunities getting short-changed by a focus on the region. In this way, moderately scaling back ambitious goals and recalibrating priorities in the region may allow more focus on what is relevant in the future.

It should reveal hard choices for civilian leaders and the Department. Issues of strategic choice are inevitably riddled with uncertainty, but they must be faced rather than avoided.¹⁵ The core challenges which face us today are almost identical to those in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review.¹⁶ In the early 2000s, the Office of Net Assessment was focused on the long-term challenges of terrorism, China's military modernization, and possible nuclear proliferation in the Mid-East.¹⁷ Are we better off today based on our experience since then? Any military operations that last more than two decades should have compelling reasons for doing so. Hard choices are often "punted" because of institutional inertia or unwillingness to challenge the status quo because it would be difficult or politically costly to do so.¹⁸

The final reason assessing strategic baggage is important is because policy outcomes do not change unless there are new ideas about how to engage the world. An assessment of strategic baggage in the Mid-East offers a corrective to conventional wisdom. For example, it is useful to consider whether the misuse of military power in the Middle East undermines our ability to uphold global order in the long run. Furthermore, do activities today impair US ability to prepare for scenarios when stakes could be much higher with great powers and not regional threats? An honest assessment would identify activi-

ties that no longer provide a return on investment. A clear-eyed analysis of costs, risks, and benefits might reveal fresh opportunities.

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10. Phillip Gordon, *Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020).
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Chapter 3

US Interests and Military Presence Necessary and Sustainable?

US Interests: Post–World War II to Today

There is a renewed US desire to keep the Middle East at arm's length, but a limited role in the region is not always what the world needs. Middle East policy after World War II relied on an open-ended commitment to use military force for regional stability. However, even at height of the Cold War, the US military had a limited presence in the region. It was not until after the Cold War that US military operations and presence increased dramatically in the region. Until recently, the post–Cold War level of military commitments went unquestioned.

Pres. Dwight Eisenhower wisely warned “we are opening a Pandora’s Box,” when the United States began its first combat mission in the Middle East.¹ According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Middle East policy has its roots in the Truman doctrine. Before a Joint Session of Congress on 12 March 1947, Pres. Harry Truman told Congress that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”² Without a review by the Joint Chiefs or support from Congress, President Eisenhower pledged economic and military aid to thwart communist takeovers of Middle East governments. He displayed this commitment by intervening in Lebanon in 1958.³ Similarly motivated by pushing back against communist expansion, Pres. Richard Nixon decided to intervene in Jordan in 1970. While a success from a strategic perspective in pushing back the Soviets, it planted the seeds for regional instability and led to the Arab-Israeli War of 1973.⁴

In 1977, Secretary of Defense Hal Brown asked Paul Wolfowitz, who was working as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Regional Programs, to assess whether the US military could defend Saudi Arabia or respond to Soviet aggression in a timely manner. The result was the “Capabilities for Limited Contingencies in the Persian Gulf” report, which concluded the US military posture was inadequate to defend a “vital and growing stake in the Persian Gulf region because of our need for Persian Gulf oil.”⁵ This analysis initially did little to convince senior policy makers to change course. However, by 1980, after the Iranian Revolution, seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the need for a strong response was clear.

The shifting tides in the region caused a reassignment of the goals and traditional tools of covert action and economic and military aid. Building on the consensus in Washington for change, Brzezinski drew inspiration from Truman and penned Pres. Jimmy Carter's 1980 State of the Union address to state, "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."⁶ At the time, permanent US presence in the region was only in Bahrain and Turkey.

Shortly after his address to Congress, President Carter established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) in March 1980. The intent was to prevent the Soviets from seizing oil in the Khuzestan region of Iran. National Security Advisor Bob Komer secured support in Congress by arguing that "we do not seek permanent garrisons or sovereign base areas as existed in the colonial past. Instead, we are seeking cooperation with friendly states."⁷ Initially provisional, under Pres. Ronald Reagan, the RDJTF was made permanent through the creation of Central Command. Ever since, the United States "and its partners have thus consistently provided a security guarantee for the region's overall stability."⁸ What was probably not expected was the amount of activity required to achieve "stability."

Although unforeseen at the genesis of the policy, the post-Cold War world saw a flurry of military interventions in the region. There are many reasons for this beyond the obvious security interests related to Iraq's misbehavior. In the shadow of the "unipolar moment" and "end of history," America could now shape the region in its interest. In 1998, Secretary of State Madeline Albright gave an interview addressing how to contain Iraq and the potential to use military force: It is the threat of the use of force and our line-up there that is going to put force behind the diplomacy. But if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us. I know that the American men and women in uniform are always prepared to sacrifice for freedom, democracy and the American way of life.⁹

The mantle of leadership as the "indispensable nation" has been the hallmark of US engagement in region during the twenty-first century. The United States engaged in the necessary war in Afghanistan and a war of choice in Iraq. In addition, the United States took offensive military actions in Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and the Horn of Africa. While the use of force in the region was an aberration before 1990, militarized responses are now normal and integral parts of regional policy. The legacy of US military operations and presence in the region is open to interpretation. Where one stands on the is-

sue depends on how expansive interests are defined and whether US military presence is required and sustainable.

Currently, the *Interim National Security Guidance* for the Middle East seeks to “right-size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.”¹⁰ The final phrase smartly gives leeway to broadly interpret what may or may not qualify as a vital interest. There are at least four possible other vital interests. First, America is attuned to Russian and Chinese activity in the region. Second, despite some friction, it can be assumed Israeli security cooperation will remain. This is because Israel enjoys broad-based American support due to cultural ties, security benefits, and the central role Israel plays in Middle East politics. Third, stability undergirds global access and free flow of oil and gas, which impacts our allies in Asia and elsewhere. Finally, analysis is not complete unless liberal values are considered. Over time, liberal values-driven goals like international cooperation, building democracies, advancement of freedom and human rights, or upholding international legal norms are given as reasons to sustain engagement.¹¹

US Military Presence in the Middle East Is Necessary and Sustainable

The conventional wisdom is that the current military commitment to the Middle East is required. First, America is a benevolent world leader that is the only willing and capable power to be the antidote to the disorder and predation of autocracies. Because America has the power and broad interests in the region, Washington has the responsibility to use its power for good. American military presence gives assurances to allies, deters aggression, and creates opportunities for diplomacy to advance our interests and values. Committing to the long haul to support local security forces increases the likelihood of favorable political negotiated solutions in the long run. Second, political leaders of the United States cannot afford another mass casualty terror attack on the homeland. Third, it is better to fight them “over there” than allow the war to come home. This is due to the belief that even if we are not interested in the problems of the region, eventually those problems will impact American or allied interests. Finally, what else would the military be doing if it were not involved in the world? When debating the merits of military intervention in the Balkans, then–Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Colin Powell recalled Secretary of State Madeline Albright saying, “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”¹² These factors lower the barriers to use the military instrument.

A reasonable argument exists to sustain the current level of engagement. Irregular wars will persist despite a need to rebalance to great-power competition. Washington can lead coalitions because the United States has the necessary command and control and preponderance of the force. America is the only nation with high-end capabilities to effectively project power. Hastily withdrawing forces risks having to reengage later when the situation worsens as it did when ISIS grew in strength upon US withdrawal from Iraq. Therefore, the cost of premature retreat is outweighed by balancing a sustainable commitment in terms of blood, treasure, and political risk at home. After all, as long as casualties are low and financial costs are meager in relative terms, American engagement can continue in perpetuity. In historical terms, Washington is spending very little, which is a bargain compared to what was spent in the World Wars. And while the reasons may change for our sustained presence, this does not mean there is no value. Using military force, even in low-threat environments, sharpens the blade and infuses combat experience across the joint force. Given this worldview, America can stay engaged at current levels indefinitely.

US Military presence in the Middle East Is Neither Necessary Nor Sustainable

The counterargument to the necessary levels of engagements rely on a narrow definition of interests and corresponding limited military means to secure them. This view begins with the inherent advantages of geography and a reliable, nuclear deterrent. Second, even with the broadest interpretation of which state counts as part of the “Middle East,” the region represents about 5 percent of the world’s population and slightly more than that of the world’s share of GDP.¹³ In this view, a vital national interest would impact US survival or direct threats to the American way of life (i.e., a secure, free, prosperous society). These factors constrain interests in the region to preventing a regional hegemon, stabilizing oil and gas markets, and suppressing terrorism. Finally, this view characterizes conventional wisdom through an ideological lens as hubristic zealots bent on reimagining the globe in the American image with democratic values.

Advocates for less engagement in the region point to past failures and high costs of military adventurism in the region. Today’s Middle East is less stable today than it was two decades ago. In fact, the hand of American geopolitical adversaries has been strengthened in the region. Iran now has considerable influence in Iraq, threatens Israel with a continued build-up of weapons in Syria and Lebanon, and is perhaps a year away from a nuclear

weapon if Tehran wants one. Russia is ensconced in Syria and is a key player in regional diplomatic negotiations on a range of issues. China is diligently rising, while at the same time idly watching the United States expend national treasure in conflicts Washington cannot seem to resolve politically. If there is a lesson, it is that the United States has made itself less prosperous and secure through its military interventions in the region. In this view, given all the domestic priorities, expenditures, and foregone opportunities, the costs of engagement are unsustainable.

These issues are brought into sharp relief when assessing a specific case. Consider the worst-case scenario as the United States is withdrawing forces from Afghanistan. NATO may follow the United States, and diplomatic energy behind a peace deal would evaporate. Any friendly Afghan forces would likely consolidate in areas with co-ethnic populations. The United States may end up supporting the Afghan government with aid, equipment, and perhaps a limited military advisory mission. The humanitarian situation may go from what is already bad to worse. Furthermore, even with two decades of US support and political pressure, Afghanistan is not a bastion of democracy—despite efforts to enfranchise voters and expand women’s rights. An alternative approach might be to negotiate a partition.¹⁴ Critics would say this may not prevent further bloodshed, but it is better than continued expenditure of US resources for what has been an unattainable outcome (i.e., defeat the Taliban and creation of a functioning state democracy).¹⁵

Regarding the threat of terrorism, significant progress has been made. It is a low standard to judge efforts as a success based on the metric that no significant foreign attack on the homeland has occurred since 9/11. Many reasons contribute to this outcome. Though imperfect, intelligence sharing with overseas partners helps to identify risks.¹⁶ At home, sophisticated law enforcement capabilities are successful at disrupting terrorist plots.¹⁷ Moreover, the global pressure on terrorist groups operating from “sanctuaries” certainly helps. However, “contrary to the bulk of the rhetoric from policymakers, terrorism does not represent an existential threat to the United States.”¹⁸ To the average American, terrorism is not a major security threat. Instead, it is a psychological threat that is given power through political narratives. There has been one attack directed by external actors since 9/11, when Saudi air force pilot Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani killed three men and injured three others.¹⁹ Depending on how researchers classify a foreign terrorist threat, there have been between 100 to 300 Americans killed in jihadist attacks since 9/11.²⁰ Given the rise of domestic terrorism, less emphasis is being placed on international terrorism.

Critics will point out that it is better to fight terrorists on their turf than let them plan in safety. It is better to have them on the run and under pressure.

Some argue the resurgence of ISIS as a caliphate and territorial entity is overstated given the current state of play.²¹ While failed states certainly can harbor terrorists, the record is mixed in terms of whether such states are effective platforms for exporting international terror—especially to the US homeland. The United States relies on building partner capacity to stabilize states. However, efficacy of this approach is also open to question. As the literature on the subject makes clear, the main challenges revolve around interest alignment and agency.²² In Iraq and Afghanistan, security force assistance success is “modest and attainable only if US policy is intrusive and conditional, which it rarely is.”²³ At best, this approach denies outright military defeat of the states involved, which might be good enough in policy terms but requires open-ended security commitments. Long-term foreign military presence can also serve to inflame rather than suppress terrorism.²⁴ This is because nationalism serves to unify locals against the outsider, while militants use the intervention for messaging and recruitment. Furthermore, there is simply not enough US military power to pacify the globe.

Even if Tehran continues nefarious behavior and inches its weapons program along, Iran has not yet achieved nuclear status. This does not short-change the enormous complexity surrounding the issue nor the extraordinary diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution. However, while Iran has reached a point of stasis in its nuclear ambitions, the related issue of deterring Tehran’s aggressive activity is less clear. Is the United States deterring Iran? Interpretations of effectiveness can differ depending on the framework used. Iran certainly was not deterred during the Iraq war at the apex of US troop levels when Americans were killed by Iranian-supplied arms. Nor have efforts stopped Iran from solidifying its indirect influence in Iraq and Syria—without much consequence from the United States. This led Israel to scale-up its attacks on proxy forces in Syria.²⁵ Doom and gloom aside, the fact remains Iran is not a nuclear state; so, in a minimal way, deterrence worked.

There will always be a need to engage militarily with our partners in the Middle East. However, Asia and Europe are prioritized in terms of core US political and economic interests compared to the Middle East. However, the scope of interests in the Middle East are wide and varied: containing Russian and Iranian influence, Israel’s security, counterterrorism, and regional stability. The military’s role is to conduct military activities with allies and partners toward those ends in open-ended arrangements. Given such an expansive view of American interests in the region, the question turns to the ways and means of achieving those goals while recognizing the risks and trade-offs for other priorities.

The question of protecting access to oil is more open to debate.²⁶ The traditional argument is that security and stability are required to ensure the free flow of oil and gas to global markets. Given all the turmoil in the region over the past two decades, there have not been major shocks to the oil markets. Domestically, America has benefited from the shale revolution and transition to greener sources of power. However, while America has reason to be optimistic about weaning itself from Middle East oil, there are lingering doubts about the long-term, strategic reasons to ensure global access.²⁷ It is estimated the United States spends 50 billion dollars annually to stabilize the region's oil markets.²⁸ In addition to the fact China receives half its oil from the region, access to oil is a vital concern for our allies in Asia and fuels the global economy.²⁹ For this reason, the United States has an interest in maintaining presence and potential strategic leverage over China.

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Chapter 4

Assessing Total Costs

Total Costs and Risks in Sustaining Strategic Baggage in the Middle East

Debating sustainability of the US presence in the Middle East places too much emphasis on troop levels, casualties, and budget line items in specific conflicts. Doing so does not consider the total regional commitments or second- and third-order implications. Instead, a more comprehensive account would begin at the baseline, traditional costs of military presence: deployed force structure, operating budgets, and casualties. However, this is the tip of the iceberg. For example, less than 10,000 troops are “on the ground” in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, but about 60–80,000 in the region. Support for operations in the Middle East comes from the continental United States and about 50,000 contractors in the region. Second, there are costs to a democratic society that go unnoticed. These include the fact that the average American does not vote, pay for, or fight in the nation’s wars. In short, the wars have no “political salience,” due to public indifference. Finally, there are opportunity costs for overemphasizing operations in the region. These costs primarily impact strategic choices in terms of how the Department of Defense (DOD) addresses short- and long-term risks. Strategic tradeoffs occur between readiness (people, equipment, and training), key capabilities (long-range fires, hypersonics, directed energy, etc.), and capacity (total airframes, ships, etc.). Finally, there are risks associated with activism in the region: unintended consequences, mission creep, inadvertent escalation with adversaries, and others. The severity of risks varies depending on “the probability and consequence of an event causing harm to something valued.”¹

Tangible Costs

This section details obvious and not so obvious costs of America’s strategic baggage in the Middle East. Sustained military engagement is not cheap and is under pressure given other fiscal priorities. While Americans recognize the visible wounds of war, more and more veterans have succumbed to the invisible wounds. It may be easy to assume risks are negligible after heavy combat, but this is not true. Much has been written about low troop levels in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, but these arguments fail to consider the full picture of US force commitments in the region. Little is mentioned about the size and

staying power of headquarters and staffs, but they too incur perpetual costs. It is not useful to talk about sustaining costs of the presence in the region without accounting for the full picture of dollars, lives, risks, and true size of commitment of forces.

Long-term, open-ended military commitments are not cheap. The “forever wars” have cost American taxpayers at least two trillion dollars already.² In roughly the same amount of time (18 years), this is enough money to pay the salary of all elementary school teachers in the United States.³ On the other hand, two trillion dollars pales in comparison to the broader estimates of the costs of war. Brown University’s Costs of War Project estimates the top-line cost to the taxpayer will be seven trillion dollars.⁴ This more inclusive figure accounts not only for DOD spending but also for US AID, Homeland Security, and costs for veteran healthcare in the future. To have the same economic impact today, there would have to be 1,667 Times Square types of attacks to equate to a similar dollar amount.⁵ Even as troop counts dipped below 10,000 in Afghanistan, the annual spending for the Afghan war hovers above 50 billion dollars annually.⁶ These totals are becoming less tolerable given competing—and perhaps more pressing—demands on the national budget.

Besides the effects of the actual costs of the wars, the spending has perverse effects on how Congress funds the DOD. First, what were supposed to be temporary combat operations have evolved into permanent fiscal bills that have been funded via supplemental defense authorizations. Second, because it is difficult to separate an activity in the base budget from an activity supporting overseas contingencies, some appropriations have been used to support activities that had nothing to do with deployments: for example, the Navy’s ship maintenance budget and Army’s tank modernization program. Furthermore, the base budget for installation costs has risen and fallen in line with the levels of deployment spending. And it is difficult to disentangle the spending in specific countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) with spending for activities that support actions across the entire theater. All these factors fuel a perception that the costs of the wars are less than they are. This lack of transparency obscures public accountability for defense spending. This led the Congressional Research Service to conclude that Congress has several oversight issues that need attention: distinguishing between base and wartime funding; accounting for government-wide, total spending for wars; and developing a means to sustainably budget for long-term engagements.⁷ To its credit, Congress is looking to reform not just spending but also issues surrounding the use of force.

It is telling that between the end of World War II and 1980 almost no American troops were killed in the Middle East, but in the past four decades, nearly

all combat casualties occur in the region.⁸ Since 9/11, there have been more than 7,000 dead and 53,000 wounded due to the conflicts in the Middle East.⁹ Then there are the invisible wounds caused by post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury (TBI). Nearly 185,000 veterans have been diagnosed with at least one incident of TBI.¹⁰ And more than half a million veterans are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress.¹¹ An analysis of 40 separate studies found the odds of screening positive for post-traumatic stress were consistently higher in the long term.¹² This does not address mental health aspects fueling suicide and substance abuse, which contribute to an explosion of health care costs. Finally, taking a US-centric view does not account for the dead, wounded, and displaced within the societies that bore the brunt of wars.¹³

After heavy fighting stops, the risk to advisors or the garrisoned force is not nil. For example, between the invasion of Iraq in 2003 through September 2010 there were 937 nonhostile deaths out of 4,418 total deaths—more than 20 percent were “nonhostile.”¹⁴ To draw an even sharper contrast, during Operation New Dawn, which occurred between September 2010 and the end of December 2011, there were 38 hostile deaths and 36 nonhostile deaths.¹⁵ For “low-risk” operations during Operation Inherent Resolve, four times as many service members died from nonhostile deaths than in combat.¹⁶ In each case, the vast majority of nonhostile deaths was due to accidents like vehicle roll-overs and aircraft crashes or suicide. Despite relative peace between Israel and Egypt, the four-decades-old UN observer mission is not risk free. Recently, five people died in a helicopter crash while patrolling the Sinai.¹⁷

Of course, military members volunteer to join the service and accept all risks that come with it. However, there is a deeper “conflict of duties” that is not addressed. Volunteer militaries generally serve to defend their own community and not the communities of others.¹⁸ Military officers and public servants alike take an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” This oath includes following lawful orders of all officers and civilians in the chain of command. Service members expect to take casualties when in direct or supporting roles in combat situations. Less clear is the role of the volunteer to die for another’s national interest. There was clear burden sharing in World War II. More ambiguous is the conflict of duties that exists when today’s volunteers risk themselves in an open-ended security commitment for another nation’s political goals. From a US perspective, achieving acceptable political outcomes in this manner has been illusory.

Tallying US troop levels can be misleading. Members supporting combat operations from outside the theater or contractors are not included. If we only counted “boots on ground” in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, the total might be

less than 10,000 troops. This is indeed a bargain, but a full account provides a different picture. Even at historically low levels, there are at most 80,000 service members stationed in the Middle East at a given time.¹⁹ In addition to those numbers, the United States pays for between 44,000 to 50,000 contractors to provide various combat and support services.²⁰ To add more perspective, there are three times as many US and foreign contractors as US service members deployed in Afghanistan, and the ratio is about 1:1 in Iraq.²¹ In the past, these contractor positions were often filled by active-duty members; so, comparisons to historical troop totals should take this into account.

There are at least two types of service members that are not included in the official Central Command (CENTCOM) numbers. These are troops that support operations from the continental United States and troops working at intermediate bases used for contingency operations. In the US Air Force alone, there are thousands across the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) enterprise whose only job is to support operations in the Middle East.²² These includes the remotely piloted aircraft pilots, maintainers, intelligence professionals, and all their support personnel. The analytical focus on the Middle East is also applicable across the joint force for many intelligence personnel. Second, since 9/11, US Air Force mobility aircrew primarily supported flights into and out of the region. Third, because these flights transit intermediate bases, there was increased demand for infrastructure and support personnel at bases like Ramstein Air Base, Germany, or Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. A broader view of support to operations in the region should take these numbers into account.

Once America commits temporary military forces, they often become permanent. The US military has spent 80 years in Europe and 75 years in Korea and is entering its third decade of sustained presence in the Middle East. When the United States creates a joint task force, it begins with a provisional headquarters—either from the core of the responsible combatant command or from a corps-level equivalent. However, once created, a headquarters and staff remain in some form. Consider our support to observer operations in the Sinai, which began in 1982. For nearly four decades, the United States has supported the multinational force observers with about 450 personnel.²³ Or take the peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, where there are nearly 700 Americans 20 years after the conclusion of hostilities.²⁴ More recently, the size of headquarters has ebbed and flowed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. There is no reason to think these headquarters will be shuttered any time soon.

It is not just the frontline headquarters that have remained but also many geographic combatant commands that grew in size and scope since 9/11. Unsurprisingly, CENTCOM's authorized positions grew 70 percent to 2,730 po-

sitions between 2001 and 2013.²⁵ However, this undercounts the true total, which would include 1,650 temporarily assigned personnel and contractors supporting operations in Afghanistan. This “temporary” part of the staff accounts for nearly 40 percent of the total staff at CENTCOM. As it pertains to overseas bases and headquarters, how long does it take for something to move from temporary status to permanent? While the total size of the military has shrunk, headquarters have remained substantive and grown in some cases to support an “ever-growing list of presence missions.”²⁶

Societal Costs: Inequity, Shared Sacrifice, Accountability

Beyond dollars and cents, long-term engagements in the Middle East incur indirect costs to society. As one analyst put it, “The average American citizen no longer directly pays, fights, or votes for war.”²⁷ This manifests itself in society bearing little financial burden, an unequitable distribution of the burden on an increasingly insular “warrior caste,”²⁸ and a perceived lack of accountability. Is this a problem? In 1970, the Gates Commission, which championed the creation of the all-volunteer force (AVF), cautioned that burdens would not be shared broadly.²⁹ All the while, the United States has a shrinking pool of people willing and able to serve.³⁰ This does not represent the type of societal equity many advocate for today. These societal costs are an integral part of the strategic baggage incurred by sustained military engagement in the Middle East.

A professional military that is increasingly distinct from the general population undermines a functional civil-military relationship and threatens national unity and security.³¹ Furthermore, the AVF currently is set up as a transactional, financial construct. However, at its best the AVF rests on a social contract between the country as a whole and the armed forces. Within the civil-military literature, it is accepted that a broadly representative military force is more democratic. Indeed, some argue there is a “democratic imperative” that the armed forces must be broadly representative of the populace.³² The practical claim is that “a broadly representative military force is more likely to uphold national values and to be loyal to the government—and country—that raised it.”³³

US citizens do not see direct financial costs of military engagement. While there used to be “war taxes” before the Korean War, Congress now borrows money to pay for wars. These indirect costs are lost in the fog of spending spurts due to the 2008 recession and COVID relief. The result is muted opposition that would normally act to restrain military adventurism.³⁴ Recently,

efforts to tax the public to pay for our most recent wars in the name of “shared sacrifice” arrived dead on arrival to the Congressional docket.³⁵

Fifty years on, the AVF has accrued tremendous benefits in terms of war-fighting focus and task cohesion as a group, but those who serve represent a small segment of America. The burden of military service has shifted from the majority of the population—including both those in uniform and those paying tax increases to finance them—to a tiny portion who volunteer.³⁶ And as long as the US military continues to have “volunteers” to serve, it provides fresh troops to support security commitments around the world. In a survey concluded in 2015, well over 40 percent of the 17,000 randomly selected respondents from across the joint force completed three deployments and nearly 60 percent completed one deployment.³⁷ Veterans are solidly middle-class, slightly more representative of Southern states, and represent 7 percent of the US population.³⁸ Military dependents are much more likely than others to join due to familiarity with the lifestyle.³⁹

The self-selection into a warrior caste, for generations in some cases, is becoming more prevalent. Consistent polling of new recruits shows that nearly 80 percent have a relative who served in the military.⁴⁰ Twenty-one percent of American veterans have a child in the service, while only nine percent of non-veterans do.⁴¹ This helps drive the perception that military service is a “family business” increasingly focused on an insular slice of American society. Perhaps the best contemporary example of this was US Army general James C. McConville’s testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in May 2019, when he “sat before a phalanx of Army uniforms worn by his three children and son-in-law.”⁴² Because military service is less prevalent in America, the costs are shouldered by an increasingly narrow portion of society.

American military activities in the Middle East incur remarkably little oversight or public debate. First, the broader American public does not participate in decisions for military engagement. Second, there are few political costs for continuing with the status quo or failures. Every president since the end of the Cold War spoke about reducing military commitments abroad but ultimately relented to the demands of national security. Most recently, then-president Donald J. Trump intended to reduce commitments—and did in some areas—but suffered few serious political consequences.⁴³ Regarding US experience in Afghanistan, two commentators summed it up well, stating, “That this miserable impasse could sustain itself for 18 years represents a failure of political leadership, and also a lack of honest public conversation.”⁴⁴ The lack of general interest was driven home after the *Washington Post’s* release of the Afghanistan Papers, which resulted in little, if any, public discourse. Despite multiple commanders and civilians serving with best inten-

tions while spending billions of dollars, the United States could not train a self-sustainable Afghan security force—or prevent corruption and a booming drug trade or rebuild a stable society. These efforts continued for two decades. It took the President of the United States to act against the advice of many of his advisors to change course.

Polling of American citizens brings up a crucial distinction that bears demonstrably on justifications for engagement. There is a difference between polling on a general foreign policy question and polling on a specific issue.⁴⁵ Americans generally favor “being engaged in the world,” but this engagement takes many forms. There is also a difference between being given a choice to choose a priority foreign policy objective out of 20 options and being asked a straightforward question. For example, according to a recent Pew poll with 20 options, it is no surprise “reducing military commitments overseas” came in 17th, being outpaced by domestic issues and the vague statement “taking measures to protect the U.S. from terrorist attack.”⁴⁶ This is not the same as asking whether to bring troops home from a particular country. In the most extreme poll taken by the Koch Institute, 75 percent of those polled provided some support or strong support for bringing troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁷ Of course, this poll may be biased. On the question of Afghan withdrawal, Peter Feaver and Jim Golby found divides between veterans who support withdrawal (44 percent) and nonveterans (33 percent)—and a generational chasm between pre- (40 percent) and post-9/11 (54 percent) veterans. However, the most interesting figure is that 43 percent of American civilians were ambivalent and expressed no opinion.⁴⁸ As Phillip Gordon argued, initial public support for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan waned once problems arose, costs mounted, and the wars were seen as mistakes.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in Libya and Syria, little meaningful public support existed for intervening in the first place.⁵⁰ This begs questions of accountability in terms of how and why the United States perpetuates commitments for which the public does not perceive a return on investment nor has a recourse to meaningfully hold leaders accountable for well-intentioned failures, mistakes, and missteps.

Opportunity Costs–Constraining Choice

To assess risk in the long term, it is useful to review opportunity costs that constrain choices for the future. An opportunity cost is the loss or gain that could be realized if an alternative was chosen. In this way, strategic trades imply giving up one thing in the near term for the promise of something else in the future. For purposes of this analysis, risk is bounded to those choices within the DOD’s purview. Risks must be considered in light of the outward

goals of the organization. For the DOD, the mission is “to provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our nation’s security.”⁵¹ Internal choices and risk mitigation measures are within an organization’s control. These are decisions concerning budgets, personnel policy, force design, and acquisitions priorities. External risks are exogenous to the institution. Of course, many outcomes are contingent upon factors that are not within direct control, such as uncertainty, chance, organizational dynamics, and interest group influence.

The risk senior civil-military leaders attempt to balance represents the interaction between external and internal risks. The result is a calculus that requires judgments based on the analysis of risks in light of national security goals. In the US military there is a risk management process. Staffs gather data, analyze risks, build an assessment, and frame choices. Mitigation measures are created to address short-term risks at the operational level (0–3 years) or long-term risks for strategic choices (5+ years). Ultimately, it is up to civilian leaders—with key inputs from senior military leaders—to judge what is an acceptable level of risk and what actions will be taken to mitigate operational and strategic risks. In this way, policy guidance details the circumstances when a risk should be given more consideration over others.

This brings up a crucial distinction in terms of time horizons and risk. This is an important issue, because two service chiefs argued “the DoD currently has no mechanism to assess current combatant command requirements, risk over time, and progress toward readiness for a ‘pacing threat’ conflict in 2030 or 2035.”⁵² Here there is a clash between operational and strategic risk decisions. Commanders in the field are responsible for operational risks that focuses on the current calculus of a situation out to perhaps three years. This is because they are necessarily concerned with execution of policy and operations in the field and reacting to current circumstances. They are constrained by decisions made by predecessors. They cannot simply choose to leave a theater of operation.

Service chiefs think about the current missions assigned, future threats, and trade-offs between preparing for today at the expense of preparedness for tomorrow. Like field commanders, they are constrained by previous budgetary decisions that live into the future due to past congressional decisions. They must address the key factors in creating all forms of readiness: people, training, and equipment.⁵³ Service chiefs must predict trends and design a force that may or may not be exactly what is needed in the future. Furthermore, it is hard to predict what choices will buy down risks. Therefore, the fundamental tension between services chiefs and geographic combatant commanders centers on managing near- and long-term strategic trades.

These tensions highlight numerous aspects impacting how risk is considered and how options are presented to civilian decision makers. Recently, it was noted that the requirements process favored short-term readiness and geographic combatant commanders.⁵⁴ Alternatively, these service chiefs argued to take the long view. They propose a common assessment framework that compares risks to a combatant command, opportunity costs to the force provider, and how modernization efforts are impacted.⁵⁵

To articulate risk in the future, it is reasonable to use the most dangerous threat: China.⁵⁶ Otherwise, the bar is artificially set low. The bipartisan Future of Defense Task Force opens its final report with the ominous tone that our Chinese and Russian adversaries present “a dual threat unseen since the military surge of Axis Powers in the 1930s.”⁵⁷ Additionally, through a host of exercises, war games, and congressionally mandated studies, the national security consensus has finally recognized US military advantages are in bad shape. Two senior leaders unambiguously argued the United States failed to prevent “the Chinese from achieving their operational and strategic objectives to-date in the South China Sea.”⁵⁸ This led them to conclude the joint force is not ready for competition in the Indo-Pacific but are ready for dozens of less existential missions. On the other hand, the danger of overestimating the threat might mean underinvesting in clear and present priorities.

These tensions also manifest as trade-offs during creation and execution of defense strategy. Before becoming Deputy Secretary of Defense, Kathleen Hicks wrote, “As long as the U.S. military is operationally engaged today, squeezing readiness and structure too tightly seems irrational, and investments for the future are the costs most easily deferred.”⁵⁹ And this is especially true as long as US troops are decisively engaged in ground combat. However, given the potential for reduced interests in the Middle East and perhaps a reduction in military commitments vis-à-vis the Global Posture Review, it makes sense to revisit central claims of defense planning.

There are two general types of defense planning: demand- or supply-based. A demand-based, top-down approach flows from analyzing threats in order to build required “strategies, capabilities, and capacities” for future assumed scenarios.⁶⁰ On the other hand, supply-based planning is bottom-up and privileges real-world constraints such as “current force size, capabilities mix, or budget limits.”⁶¹ Where a leader decides to invest depends greatly on the level of analysis. Where one stands on an issue depends on where they sit in the organizational architecture. These bureaucratic preferences play out within services, among services, and across the DOD. Debates also focus on “preparing to be ready today (readiness), preparing to be ready tomorrow (invest-

ment), and sizing the force (structure).”⁶² Any good planning process will take the strategic tradeoffs and types of defense planning into consideration.

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Chapter 5

Short- and Long-term Strategic Trades

Strategic Trades—Readiness, Capability, and Capacity

This section addresses strategic trades among the “iron triangle”: readiness, capability, and capacity. Readiness is part art and part science. The core building blocks of readiness are equipment, personnel, and training. These come together to create a capability. Multiple, integrated capabilities combined with political will underwrite a credible deterrent. Finally, I will analyze the strain on force structure. In the future, there are four general types of situations facing the military: a crisis, planned contingencies, day-to-day strategic competition, and high-end conflict. Across these scenarios, senior leaders weigh supporting current commitments. Service chiefs are responsible for generating forces for near-term requirements *and* building a force that addresses long-term, strategic risks.

Readiness—People, Ideas, and Things

There are opportunity costs to military readiness because of a disproportionate focus on the Middle East.¹ At least three areas of readiness suffer due to the focus on operations in the Middle East: equipment degradation, development of new operational concepts, and training. Admittedly, it is difficult to rely on metrics to inform what is ultimately a subjective, qualitative judgment about readiness.

The simplest way to gain an understanding of readiness is to ask: “ready for what and ready when?”² These questions cover the expected missions and timing of potential taskings. In the broadest sense, where the Department of Defense (DOD) commits dollars in terms of acquisitions, research and development, and operating costs shows prioritization. Second, these questions also highlight how the DOD directs service members’ time by prioritizing training and developmental focus: for example, the increased attention to irregular warfare after 9/11 and now a turn toward great-power competition. However, an aggregate analysis of readiness fails to account for the particular scenarios and environments when force may be employed. Given situational context, readiness is assessed at an individual, unit, and aggregated joint or coalition levels. Assessing dollars spent, number of exercises, or hours in a curriculum omits other key pieces of the puzzle.

Metrics are great, but qualitative assessments must supplement statistics. For example, to rigorously assess readiness via metrics, in 2018, the DOD directed an 80-percent mission capable rate for fighter aircraft. This seemed like a reasonable metric at the time, but goals were not met despite significant capital investment. The F-35's mission capable rate increased from 50 percent to 62 percent, and F-16s increased from 70 percent to 73 percent. However, F-22s decreased from 52 percent to 51 percent. The Navy actually met the 80 percent mark but recognized it would be difficult to sustain it.³ Through the experience, the Air Force showed that creating readiness for fighter aircraft is multifaceted. The service added 4,000 maintainers, addressed pilot retention, bought more aircraft parts, improved maintenance, and created relevant, realistic training.⁴ Even after years of attention, the Air Force is still wrestling with its pilot shortage, and readiness is dogged by a lack of fully qualified maintenance personnel and availability of parts.⁵ Furthermore, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report studying the Trump-era infusion of cash into the DOD and found mixed progress at best.⁶

Equipment

Decades of unanticipated operations have eaten away at the service life of many of the aerial platforms that are the backbone of power projection. As early as 2008, Air Force leaders were sounding the alarm that flight hours far outpaced program projections shortening the life of the C-17 airframe from 30 years to 22 to 25 years.⁷ The solution was two-part. First, Air Mobility Command decreased the number of aircraft allocated to operational missions and began rotating C-17s with high flight hours to the Air National Guard where they are flown less.⁸ Second, based on upgrades to the C-17, Air Force Materiel Command assessed the service life as 45,000 flight hours as opposed to the initial 30,000 flight hours projected by the manufacturer.⁹ This puts the C-17 on a similar track as the B-52, which is nearing its seventieth year of service with reason to believe it may be the first aircraft to be in service for 100 years. Lately, fourth-generation fighters patrol the sky over Syria, where air threats could be dangerous but are minimal.¹⁰ This is an issue across the joint force. According to a GAO report covering 2011 to 2016, the Air Force and Navy's readiness declined for half of the 12 aircraft studied, and maintenance costs increased for eight of the 12 aircraft.¹¹ Without enough replacement aircraft in the procurement pipeline, the DOD will be forced to find ways to extend the service life, which is expensive.

Personnel

In a post-9/11 world, the US military created a cohort of leaders who bore the brunt of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and operations across Central Command.¹² However, the leaders the US military developed to be successful may not have the senior leadership skills needed in the future.¹³ During this time, unless regionally aligned with Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) or European Command (EUCOM), the majority of a service's force-generation efforts were focused on support to operations in the Middle East. Despite efforts to align regionally within the special operations community, it is rare that any mid- or senior-level service members have not deployed to support operations in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan. There are advantages for our officer and enlisted corps. These leaders have proven themselves tactically in irregular warfare. For many, they have not lost many single battles while facing an elusive, but persistent enemy. Their confidence is steeled because of their combat experiences. However, despite the benefits of this experience, there is also a downside.

It is possible that for all the upside of combat experience, it may have conditioned service members in adverse ways. An entire cohort has been steeped in a low-threat environment and a specific type of conflict and rules of engagement. This could lead to faulty planning assumptions for future scenarios. First, a generation has grown up with the understanding that we have unfettered access to anywhere in the world. We can move people and materiel any time, any place. Second, once they arrive, service members are incorporated into a built-up base of operations. The base infrastructure, security, communications, and support required is already up and running. Third, once settled into operations, there is the expectation that any reasonable, combat-related request will be supported via the logistics supply chain that is tied to the homeland. Fourth, the United States has enjoyed incredible overmatches in military capability. For example, the airspace above the battlefield is not considered high-risk, and American ground forces have not been attacked from the air since the Korean War. Finally, the type of operations conditions service members. Following years of deployments to Afghanistan, Hy Rothstein recognized the risk of "conventionalization" of US Army Special Forces, because such troops were used essentially as advisors in a conventional fight with the Taliban.¹⁴ Considered together, these factors impact the way service members view planning and execution of future operations.

Training

Out of necessity, training for the past 20 years has focused on scenarios based on Middle East threats.¹⁵ The military is currently ready for most crises and some contingencies. However, while operations were deadly for ground operators, they were relatively low-threat for naval and air components. Nevertheless, these are the forces expected to face the highest threat in a conflict with a peer or near peer. This is principally why two service chiefs argued for a new way to assess readiness, which would privilege future capability in high-threat environments versus near-term availability of forces.¹⁶ By and large, joint training has not focused on scenarios against a technologically equal foe.

Testing new concepts in training is at a small scale: for instance, F-35s practicing island hopping¹⁷ or testing the “Rapid Raptor” concept that deploys a C-17 with munitions, fuel, and maintainers to an austere environment to support four F-22s.¹⁸ A key operational issue will be refueling aircraft to overcome the tyranny of distance problem in the Indo-Pacific. One novel solution was recently tested with the first ever “engine running refuel” of a KC-135 Stratotanker.¹⁹ It reduced the time on the ground by five hours and allowed the refueler to be back in the air in one hour. Crucially, what would be possible by combining these three concepts—Rapid Raptor, island-hopping F-35s, and quick refueling? A more survivable force that could potentially be more lethal because of faster sortie generation. The Air Force has conceptualized Agile Combat Employment (ACE), which draws on networks of air bases with equipment and personnel able to support combat capability as it moves around a theater. However, the joint force has not meaningfully validated these concepts in exercises nor explored what it means to aggregate units and capability at the operational level of war. Moreover, the United States has limited high-threat training ranges, which further constrains the joint force’s ability to prepare for the future. Testing and refining ACE concepts at the operational level underwrites a credible, conventional deterrent.

Undervaluing effort to invest in the development of new concepts sidesteps opportunities to develop and test new tactics to project power.²⁰ Special operations forces (SOF) have led campaigns in the Middle East—often being the “supported” force. However, this paradigm will necessarily be turned on its head in a conventional war. SOF would have to return to its historical roots and find creative ways to add value to conventional campaigns. For example, what if the joint force explores ways that ground elements can facilitate airpower projection? Aerial lodgments facilitate how a joint force projects airpower into a denied environment. The use of temporary airheads is not a novel concept, but what is new is employing them in support of a broader airpower

campaign in pursuit of operational objectives. Aerial lodgments were established repeatedly during World War II's Pacific campaign. Joint land operations conducted to establish airheads can facilitate follow-on actions that uniquely contribute to airpower projection. Practicing complex aerial lodgments could enable the US military to revise operational access concepts useful in high-intensity battles. However, efforts to increase exposure of troops to high-threat environments would benefit readiness at one spectrum of conflict.

While preparation for high-end, conventional war occurs less frequently, competition below the threshold of conflict is the norm in the field. This is where the most conceptual work needs to be done. There are unresolved debates surrounding the conceptual clarity of gray-zone warfare²¹ and great-power competition.²² However, such debates are useful for thinking through how to combine all elements of national power in the competitive space below the threshold of conflict. As a commander of combat forces at Al-Tanf Garrison in Syria, one of the most frequent actions was a press release. This was because Russian and Syrian outlets repeatedly employed misinformation about the coalition roles and actions in the area.²³ This opens a cascade of issues in terms of how the broader force is prepared to exercise nonkinetic military means such as information operations against a state adversary. How do actions in combat theaters tie into national narratives? These are just some of the unsolved issues in defense thinking.

Given the need to prepare for multiple scenarios at once, it might be tempting to ask a tactical unit to simultaneously prepare for each. This is not reasonable. As the Congressional Future of Defense Task Force concluded, "a unit deployed to the Middle East to support counterterrorism operations cannot also prepare to deter conflict in the Pacific."²⁴ As a commander charged with simultaneous preparation of service members for known deployments and unknown contingencies, it is difficult to train to a high state of readiness for both. For example, the unit may be tasked with a deployment supporting operations in the Middle East and potentially to support a contingency in Korea. However, these are two vastly different scenarios that force the hand of a line-unit commander to buy down risk for the most likely, but least dangerous scenario while accepting risk of the least likely, but most dangerous scenario. A commander can "buy down" risk by first focusing on activities common to both scenarios. However, doing this in perpetuity is akin to playing Russian roulette, and, as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, risks "going to war with the army you have" under unfavorable conditions. While we cannot predict what crisis will erupt in the future, it is clear that by overemphasizing deployments to the Middle East, the DOD risks shortchanging the white space required for commanders to prepare units for high-end conflict.

Capability—Underwriting Credible, Conventional Deterrence

It is notable that most Congressional testimonies of senior military leaders begin with the threat of Chinese capabilities. From the outset of hostilities with a peer adversary all five domains (air, sea, land, space, and cyber) will be contested. The question is not *whether* American competitive advantages are eroding but *how fast* and *to what extent*. Advantages are not just eroding in traditional domains but also in technological areas that have military purposes. For example, Eric Schmidt, co-chair of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, fears the United States may lose its lead fairly quickly in the coming years, which is “literally a threat to our nation.”²⁵ Artificial intelligence (AI) is just one cross-cutting capability of many the United States is developing “to harness the game-changing power” for defense purposes.²⁶ While the United States enjoys an innovative defense industrial base and top-tier research facilities and hosts the globe’s top tech companies, there is no doubt concerted Chinese efforts aimed at eroding American advantages.

A credible deterrent is not limited to specific capabilities but also operational concepts that fuse new tactics and capabilities in a way that could feasibly achieve desired military objectives. In this light, a “theory of victory” is what matters most, because there must be a reasonable military action that could lead to acceptable political outcomes. For many of the scenarios facing the United States, deterrence by denial is at the heart of theories of victory. Earlier in 2021, ADM Phil Davidson, Indo-Pacific Commander, testified to Congress that as China’s power grows to match Beijing’s ambitions, “the greatest danger is the erosion of conventional deterrence.”²⁷ Here the debate turns on imprecise factors about intent, credible commitments, and the United States’ resolve to defend Taiwan in a *fait accompli* attempt by China. Crucially, America’s strength of will relies on a backstop of military supremacy—which is not a forgone conclusion. Today’s theories of victory have yet to produce optimistic outcomes for the US military, let alone evidence to support the political will required for armed confrontation with China.

While there is room for debate about the pace and implications of changing military advantages, the DOD is investing in what it sees as key capabilities and, to a lesser extent, operational concepts. Individual acquisition efforts are being made across the space, cyber, air, land, and sea portfolios. However, without an operating concept, advanced technologies are just “things.” It will take time for staffs and policy makers to not only procure systems and platforms but also implement new capabilities in the field. This is to say nothing of how capabilities impact frameworks of regional assurance, deterrence, es-

calation dynamics, and the effects on the military balance in key regions.²⁸ The time lag between developing, acquiring, assimilating, and integrating new capabilities into operational frameworks also adds to a sense of urgency.

Capacity—Imbalance and Stress on the Force:

Capacity is typically viewed as the size of the services. This is an important metric to assess aggregate demands based on combatant commander requirements. Even if an analyst does not think the overall capacity of the DOD is strained, many believe the commitment of US forces in the Middle East is out of balance.²⁹ About 80,000 troops are stationed in Asia, 60,000 in Europe, and 60,000–80,000 at any given time in the Middle East. Aggregate totals can be misleading, because they do not include a broader assessment of a regional coalition's capacity and how such forces might work together in various scenarios. That said, if US foreign policy prioritizes Asia, perhaps the United States has taken action to bolster its military position in the region. However, the “pivot to Asia” is approaching its ten-year anniversary but little has changed in terms of force posture—this despite consistently aggressive Chinese behavior throughout the past decade.

How did we get to this point? One example is the Air Force did not recoup overseas force structure after the Cold War. The Air Force had 11 wings and 39 fighter squadrons in Europe in 1990. By 2019, there were just three wings and nine fighter squadrons. Where did this force structure go? Since 1990, seven combat wings, a sprawling Air Operations Center, and an Air Warfare Center were created in CENTCOM.³⁰ Furthermore, in 1991 the service had 401 operational squadrons across the Total Force. It drew from that pool of capacity to defeat a middle-weight nonnuclear adversary. Today, the service has 312 of the same type of squadrons to deter two near-peer adversaries (one nuclear capable) and two nuclear peers who have considerable conventional capabilities. While these examples focus on structure, the force mix of capabilities also changed. The units deployed in the 1980s in Europe were primarily focused against capable peers, while most of the force structure currently deployed is not survivable in a high-threat environment.

In an era that privileges air and sea power projection, here too there are signs of stress. Based on the insatiable demand for more capacity to pursue a wide-range of global missions,³¹ service leaders have argued for more force structure.³² The size of the Air Force is at an all-time low, while aircraft ages and readiness are also reeling.³³ Paradoxically, the Department of the Air Force (DAF) has the smallest force structure in its history but the highest budget share due to many “pass-through” commitments and the establish-

ment of the Space Force.³⁴ Many conclude the DAF is spread too thin across its five traditional missions and trying to stand up a new service.³⁵ The Navy is also feeling pressure from the demands to keep two-carriers in the Middle East.³⁶ For example, The USS *Nimitz* returned from a year-long deployment despite being unable to assess whether the deployment tamed Iran's behavior.³⁷ Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley recognizes that "the fundamental defense of the United States and the ability to project power forward will always be for America naval and air and space power."³⁸

There are unrealized gains of a more scaled back footprint in the Middle East. These gains represent the flip side of the opportunity costs argued in this paper. How might those high-demand, low-density capabilities currently used in the Middle East be employed to support competition or development of operational concepts in higher-threat environments? Even as the United States maintains forces in each region of the world, some capabilities are better suited for Asia; for example, advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, fifth-generation fighters, and special operations aviation platforms. While specific capabilities are in high demand, reducing the aggregate demand on the joint force potentially creates opportunity for investment in areas of lesser priority like the Arctic or South America. Finally, how much is there to lose or gain in terms of assurance and deterrence by altering the amount of routine security cooperation activities with partners and allies in each region? These are crucial "first-order" questions, but without basing an analysis on a reduction of the footprint in the Middle East, it is hard to assess the full implications.

While the Air Force has shrunk in size, the most deployed part of the joint force grew. Despite growing, the stress on Special Operation Command's (SOCOM) joint forces has been an issue of concern. SOCOM is about five percent of the total active-duty force but has been a participant in every major operation since 9/11. The Army's 75th Ranger Regiment has been deployed to Afghanistan continuously since it seized an airfield at Objective Rhino on 19 October 2001.³⁹ While the Army and Marines have borne the brunt of ground combat, they require significant critical capabilities from the joint team. For example, the 17th Special Tactics Squadron, which works with the Rangers, has sustained "a deployed streak of nearly 7,000 days dating back to October 2001."⁴⁰ Looking at the individual level, there are many special operators who have completed over a dozen deployments. For example, SFC Kristoffer Domeij, USA, and MSgt Joshua Wheeler, USA, both completed 14 combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan—only to perish in separate incidents.

The result of high deployment rates has visible and invisible impacts. There are higher rates of casualties and mental health issues per capita in the special

operations community.⁴¹ The stress of repeated deployments spurred the creation of the Preservation of the Force and Family program, which supports resiliency through physical and mental health, social, and spiritual support. Due to an emphasized focus on supporting global missions and a series of ethical missteps, Congress mandated a comprehensive review of SOCOM. The report concluded that “cultural focus on SOF employment and mission accomplishment is to the detriment of leadership, discipline and accountability.”⁴² These symptoms are unfortunate but not entirely implausible, given what is asked of members of SOCOM.

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Chapter 6

Risks of Long-term Military Presence

Risks—Dealing with the Inevitable

There are short- and long-term risks associated with US strategic baggage in the Middle East. While we do not live in a risk-free world, short-term risks of ignoring strategic baggage are not negligible. The United States has already dealt with unintended consequences, mission creep, and multiple brushes with inadvertent escalation. However, long-term risks of strategic baggage drive up current costs and imperil American ability to adapt to bolster military advantages. Meanwhile, the United States faces headwinds of its own making in terms of domestic politics and budgetary pressures. These frictions in governance may stifle action. Rather than dealing with these risks in a reactive way, the US military should proactively plan for things going sideways in the long run. Doing so would at least highlight potential long-run costs before taking action in the short term.

Unintended Consequences

While American might is useful in many contexts, Washington must balance the good achieved with the costs of what comes next. Planners must have solutions to address the “day after” the fighting stops. Wars consistently last longer and cost more than planned in terms of blood and treasure. Even when casualties are high and public disapproval increases, the United States rarely abandons its commitments and presence. As Philip Gordon argued in *Losing the Long Game*, there are enduring challenges that are not within the power of foreigners to solve. First, improving security and governance via state-building is difficult if not impossible in some circumstances. Using Colombia as an example, efforts took half a century to successfully create a stable, secure democracy. Second, nationalism binds local partners together to work toward their own welfare, which can be at odds with US interests.

One example of unintended consequences is the current state of play in Syria. It is possible to argue the United States has stayed beyond both possible mandates for intervention in Syria: regime change and defeating Islamic State (ISIS). Russia and Iran appear to have gained the most. Bashar al-Assad is likely remain in power as president of Syria. ISIS is down, but not out, as the embers of the movement burn in neighboring Iraq and the coalition is still left with the vexing problem of what to do with “2,000 foreign fighters and some

8,000 Iraqi and Syrian fighters,” which represents “one of the most significant risks to the success of the mission.”¹ Many analysts recognize that without Russian participation, the Geneva process is not a viable path forward. Destabilized by the turmoil on its border, Turkey, a key NATO ally, is taking an active approach of its own. Due to refugees who are unlikely to return to Syria and the domestic nationalist movements that have gained strength as a consequence, Europe is destabilized too. All the while, Israel and Iran are fighting a proxy war in Syria. It is impossible to assess with any degree of certainty how alternative approaches would have played out. However, we do know the aftermath of US military intervention.

Mission Creep

Once the United States begins an intervention, there is a tendency for mission creep. In the context of this analysis, *mission creep* is sustaining a military presence beyond its original purpose. There are at least two logics that create mission creep: threat inflation and moving the goalposts. *Threat inflation* was originally conceived as a term to “sell” an intervention, as it was before the invasion of Iraq.² However, the term has evolved to support a logic for sustained engagement in the region. This is because the scope and urgency of a perceived threat can be expanded and presented as a worst case to justify doing more or maintaining the status quo. For example, US citizens are more likely to die in a car accident or be electrocuted to death than falling victim to an international terrorist attack. However, the threat of international terrorism is invoked in the rhetoric for sustained engagement in the Middle East.

When a rationale evolves past the original mandate for the initial military action it is mission creep. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were never meant to be long-term, state-building efforts. Once the United States defeated al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, efforts turned to fighting and negotiating with the Taliban (who no doubt harbored al-Qaeda). Furthermore, arguments made to sustain the military presence have expanded well beyond the original purpose. For example, the Afghanistan Study Group concluded that US troop presence is key for the state to combat terror groups and “exercise sovereignty over its borders and internal affairs and govern in terms that reflect the popular will and self-determination of the Afghan citizenry while managing conflict peacefully through accountable civilian institutions.”³ Regardless of how much international help the country receives, how is this feasible given the history of Afghanistan? Another example of justifying an open-ended presence for political purpose is the case of Al-Tanf Garrison, Syria. The original and primary purpose of troops at Al-Tanf Garrison was to defeat ISIS. How-

ever, once ISIS was defeated, the utility of the US presence has been justified as leverage in the political outcome of Syria writ large.

Inadvertent Escalation

While the United States engages in security activities in the Middle East, there is always the risk of inadvertent escalation. There are many scenarios when this could feasibly play out. In Syria, United States and Russian interaction on the ground has already resulted in the exchange of gunfire multiple times.⁴ One notorious incident occurred when coalition troops repelled an aggressive action by Wagner Group mercenaries near Dayr az Zawr.⁵ Russia also acted provocatively against coalition forces at Al-Tanf in at least two instances in June 2016⁶ and September 2018.⁷ Second, before Americans pulled support for proxies in northwestern Syria, partners of two NATO allies routinely shot at each other in Manbij with American service members nearby.⁸ Potential Russian and Turkish flashpoints were mediated by extensive deconfliction. This is not the case with Iran. A US-Iranian escalatory spiral was entirely possible following the strike on Iranian general Qassim Soleimani and a retaliatory missile strikes on US forces stationed at Al Asad Airbase, Iraq.⁹ The Syrian regime and Iranian-backed proxies successfully cleared terrain just outside the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone, isolating forces at Al-Tanf.¹⁰ In acts of self-defense, coalition forces struck Iranian-directed forces on at least three occasions and downed an Iranian drone.¹¹ Finally, there are escalatory risks vis-à-vis our partners. If Washington is unsuccessful in restraining Turkish, Syrian Democratic, or Israeli forces, how far does the United States go to regain regional stability? These are difficult questions that should not be assumed away.

Risk of Doing Nothing

Finally, deciding not to act is an act itself. It is inevitable that as headlines fade and new crises erupt attention will shift elsewhere. If anyone thinks we can predict the future, 2020 is a good reminder to be humble. Besides inattention, maintaining the status quo amid changing circumstances is equally bad. Trying the same approach and expecting a different outcome is the definition of madness. There are strong domestic political and international diplomatic pressures that constrain leaders' choices. Furthermore, the challenges of developing, planning, and implementing policy in the field are impacted by institutional pathologies of the DOD and US partners. It is worth noting that, left unattended, bureaucracy will "do its thing" and continue inefficiencies that so often dominate government work.¹² As portrayed in a canonical analysis of the

war in Vietnam, the decision-making approach is “the logical consequence of a set of assumptions and concepts,” which allows the “system” to deliver a sensible, middle-of-the-road approach.¹³ Inertia is a powerful force to change. It is easy to rationalize staying just a little longer to allow time and space for a political process to work. This is due to the fact that sunk costs make it easier to continue efforts as a result of previous investments. This certainly plays a part in fueling the staying power of US military presence in the region.

Strategic Insolvency

The *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* concluded there is a risk of strategic insolvency if the United States does not address the strategy mismatch among ends, ways, means, and risk. Traditionally, America has the power and responsibility to make the world safe for democracy through a “can-do” spirit of problem solving. Given an assumption of broad, maximal ends as outlined in the latest *NDS*, we should have military capabilities to push back in any scenario when the United States is contested. This is simply not possible. While policy makers debate foreign policy goals, the DOD is struggling to produce the concepts and force structure proposals that buy down risks in pursuit of those goals. As the global order evolves, maintaining the same goals and force structure in the Middle East affects America’s ability to act, operate, and focus in other areas of the world. Maintaining the status quo risks indefinitely tying up resources that could be used elsewhere.

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

This paper used the idea of strategic baggage to illuminate a main challenge facing national security policy makers in the Middle East: whether US military commitments are required and sustainable. The United States has enduring interests in the region but will have to efficiently stabilize the region, deter Iran, and counter violent extremists. Doing so requires adjusting short-term commitments and investing in future military capabilities that underwrite conventional deterrence. A superpower should be able to do both. By focusing on the costs and risks of a sustained presence over the past two decades, it is possible to correlate data that shows how strategic choices become limited in the long run. Recognizing tangible, societal, and opportunity costs of long-term engagement builds a comprehensive understanding of US actions of the past. Additionally, recognizing the persistent risks of unintended consequences, mission creep, potential for inadvertent escalation, and strategic insolvency adds dimensions to consider. While this study aimed to provide a diagnosis rather than prescribe the fix, I will make some recommendations anyway.

First, a main difficulty for policy makers is to assess when the promise of political leverage or unrealized benefit becomes baggage. This is extremely hard to do given the pressures on policy makers—especially when they have such short time horizons. There are a few key questions to consider. Historically, how much leverage does a troop presence give diplomats in negotiations? Does US presence create moral hazards and increase costs over time without a clear upside? When do past commitments become no longer worth deploying forces into situations with no feasible political outcome? Any answer turns on a tolerance for risk, willingness to bear the cost in perpetuity, and judgment of the benefit considering those factors. While these are all political issues to answer, military leaders have a role to play in terms of outlining potential benefits, costs, and risks. At its best, this plays out in private through a dialogue of mutual respect when creative tension identifies opportunities or ways to mitigate challenges.

Second, the US military should continue its work to scale back presence in the region. Those taking on this hard work are carefully considering all options in terms of scale, timing, and impact to relationships. Some will argue the scale down will be too fast, others too slow. The point is that a responsible strategic approach will recognize misplaced optimism and the sunk costs that go with it. If the Middle East is indeed defined by mere narrow national inter-

ests, then the US military should correspondingly scale back ambitions, share burdens with like-minded partners, and mitigate risks that remain. Some activities will remain that only the US military can do. However, these tasks should only be reserved for the most critical national interests in the region. It is also worth noting that an alternative approach moving forward with a smaller US military presence may not be any more effective in achieving political goals. The main point is that changes in world order should force a strategic shift in US military focus away from the Middle East.

Third, as they age and reflect on their careers, many experienced foreign policy professionals have come to laud humility. In his reflective memoir, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recognized “misassumptions” that guided Vietnam policy and the fact that there are some problems American power cannot solve.¹ Secretary of State Colin Powell cautioned against the invasion of Iraq, using logic that Tom Friedman ultimately dubbed the “Pottery Barn Rule” that if you break it, you own it. Later, Powell observed that, “We thought we knew what would happen in Libya. We thought we knew what would happen in Egypt. We thought we knew what would happen in Iraq, and we guessed wrong.”² Finally, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates cautioned less experienced colleagues that “when you start a war you never know how it will go.”³ And most recently, Ambassador Robert Ford came to a similar conclusion about our efforts in Syria, just as McNamara did 30 years earlier.⁴ For these and other leaders, only as ambition faded did sober reflection take root. Finally, invoking his favorite philosopher, Reinhold Niebuhr, Pres. Barack Obama once said, “there’s serious evil in the world and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction.” The trick, as President Obama noted, is to balance a healthy skepticism while also taking positive action, however small, to nudge progress along.

Finally, hard intellectual and practical work remains. Many of the strategic trades within the DOD will impact readiness, capability development, and capacity. In terms of policy, it is not entirely clear how ambitions will be scaled back or how much withdrawal will take place. In practice, US interagency coordination could improve its ability to respond comprehensively to crises. For example, civilian and military leaders alike should gain more experience in decision making during an escalatory spiral with nuclear-armed peers. Theoretically, more work can be done to clarify the US military’s role in competition and to what end America is competing. The US national security community can make progress by debating what “victory” looks like in a conflict over Taiwan. Using those defined end states, new operational concepts need to be refined and, more importantly, exercised. As they mature, rehears-

als of military concepts in micro-scale should be aggregated within and across services. Ultimately, these drills would include foreign partners. The new thinking and concepts will have to be institutionalized across the joint force. Crucially, leaders who came of age during the wars in the Middle East will need to develop an understanding for an additional set of skills—preparing a new generation of leaders to plan for war to secure an everlasting peace.

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