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# **Implications of US Disengagement from the Middle East**

**Efraim Inbar**



**Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 122**

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**BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**  
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# Implications of US Disengagement from the Middle East

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is retreating from the Middle East. The adverse implications of this policy shift are manifold, including: the acceleration of Tehran's drive to regional hegemony, the palpable risk of regional nuclear proliferation following the JCPOA, the spread of jihadist Islam, and Russia's growing penetration of the region. Manifest US weakness is also bound to have ripple effects far beyond the Middle East, as global players question the value of partnership with an irresolute Washington.





# Implications of US Disengagement from the Middle East

*Prof. Efraim Inbar*

## INTRODUCTION

The United States is retreating from the Middle East. The adverse implications of this policy shift are manifold, including: the acceleration of Tehran's drive to regional hegemony, the palpable risk of regional nuclear proliferation following the JCPOA, the spread of jihadist Islam, and Russia's growing penetration of the region. Manifest US weakness is also bound to have ripple effects far beyond the Middle East, as global players question the value of partnership with an irresolute Washington.

## WASHINGTON DISENGAGES

From his earliest days in power, President Barack Obama has pursued a grand strategy of retrenchment based on the belief that the Bush administration's interventionist policies had severely damaged US standing. In Obama's view, a very different strategy was required: a non-aggressive, multilateral, and non-interventionist approach.<sup>1</sup> This has resulted in the erosion of US clout in several regions, notably Eastern Europe, the Far East, and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

Most unambiguous was Obama's intent to reduce the US presence in the Middle East. The rationale for this policy shift was clear: the region is among the world's most volatile areas, and anti-US sentiment is particularly fierce. US forces fought two costly wars in the region over the past decade, in Afghanistan and in Iraq, in an attempt to prevent

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those states from becoming bases of terrorism and to promote their democratization – only to be taught a painful lesson about the limits of power and the need for greater foreign policy realism. As Washington’s deficiency at political engineering in the Middle East became clearer, overseas interventions became less popular at home. This evolution in domestic attitudes facilitated Obama’s strategic shift.

The desire for a lower profile in the Middle East was not the only factor behind Washington’s retreat from the region. US dependence on energy resources from the Persian Gulf has been reduced, thanks to new technologies that can extract natural gas and oil within the continental US. The country has, in fact, become an influential producer in the global energy market and is heading toward energy independence. According to a 2015 Energy Department report, even with low prices, US crude oil production was expected to hit a new record.<sup>5</sup> Under these new circumstances, the Middle East appears less directly relevant to US interests. However, in the long run, this perspective might prove short-sighted, as the decline in energy dependency could be temporary.

The preference to downgrade US involvement in the Middle East was reinforced by Washington’s pronounced decision to “pivot” toward China, an emerging global challenger. While Asia has always been important for the US, Obama emphasized that his administration would no longer be diverted by secondary arenas such as the Middle East and would instead elevate Asia to top priority.<sup>6</sup> Despite such declarations, however, “pivoting to China” remains primarily a slogan with little policy content. The hollowness of the initiative has accomplished little other than to underscore American inaction and weakness.

As a result of this re-prioritization, the Obama administration has reduced military assets available for projecting power in the Middle East. For example, there have been no aircraft carriers in either the eastern Mediterranean or the Gulf since October 2015 – an unprecedented situation. And while officials within the Navy continue to recognize the need for a permanent aircraft carrier presence in the Gulf or its vicinity, the Navy is going ahead with plans for longer periods during which there will be no carriers in the area at all. A US spokesperson has said that the reduced presence is due not to lack of need but to the availability of fewer carriers and the prioritization of the Asia-Pacific.<sup>7</sup>

As President Obama's reluctance to act in the Middle East became clearer, his policies were often viewed within the region as unwise, projecting both weakness and a lack of understanding of Middle Eastern politics. One early example was the administration's initial inclination to try to engage foes, such as Iran and Syria. Other defining moments were the passive approach toward the mass protests in Iran against the rigged June 2009 presidential election; the desertion of long-time Egyptian ally Hosni Mubarak in February 2011; the "leading from behind" strategy during the Western intervention in Libya in March-October 2011, and the retreat from threats to use force against Syrian president Bashar Assad for crossing a chemical weapons "red line" that Obama himself had promulgated in August 2012. These decisions contributed to a widespread perception, both in the Middle East and beyond, that Obama is an anemic, unreliable ally with a questionable grasp of regional realities.<sup>8</sup>

The campaign against the Islamic State (IS) provides additional evidence of the retreat of US power in the Middle East. In August 2014, after a long and confused decision-making process, Washington concluded that IS's land conquests were evolving into a significant threat to US interests and ordered its air force to attack IS installations and forces in Syria and Iraq.<sup>9</sup> By the summer of 2015, the territory in those areas under IS control had indeed shrunk, but IS had made gains elsewhere. Unfortunately, the gap between the administration's goals and its willingness to allow its troops to pursue them on the ground has only bolstered IS's dual message about the weakness of the decadent West and the group's ability to withstand military pressure.<sup>10</sup> The campaign also illuminated the daunting political and logistical challenges involved in organizing proxies to fight IS.<sup>11</sup>

While Washington remains reluctant to reinsert ground forces, it still hopes to reduce IS's potency. The expectation is that a protracted air campaign, accompanied by special operations, will break the group's momentum while buying time for local forces to organize and conduct ground operations. Washington's object is to transform IS into a manageable problem rather than build a coalition to vanquish it. It hopes to place the onus for ground fighting – and, indeed, for the ultimate defeat of the group – on the actors directly affected.

The problem with this approach is that while the administration wants the Arab states to fight IS, those states want Washington to do the job for them. The administration has failed to induce local actors to cooperate effectively against IS, and the limited air campaign has so far produced insufficient results. Nevertheless, the administration continues to express commitment to a war on IS. This is partly because a high threat perception helps legitimize the controversial nuclear deal with the Islamist regime in Tehran. In effect, the administration is telling its critics that Tehran is a legitimate partner in the struggle to defeat IS, since it too views the extremist Sunni group as a threat.

The Russian intervention in Syria, which began at the end of September 2015, has similarly underscored US weakness. In typical fashion, Obama issued dismissive statements about Russia's involvement. He called the intervention a likely quagmire for Russian forces, thereby absolving himself of the need to take any action. He did not specify how he would respond to Russian aircraft targeting US-supported rebel factions, but underlined that the US would not directly confront Moscow.<sup>12</sup>

The tacit expectation that Syria would turn into a replay of the Afghanistan experience for Russia has proved to be unfounded. Putin's intervention, limited in scope and with no ground component, helped Assad consolidate his grip on parts of Syria, particularly the Mediterranean littoral where the Russian bases are located. The tepid US reaction to Turkey's November 2015 downing of a Russian Su-24 aircraft highlighted the administration's overwhelming desire to avoid escalation.

Above all, Washington has desisted from confronting Iran on its nuclear program, instead going to great lengths to accommodate it. President Obama proudly contends that by concluding the July 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran, he has resolved one of the outstanding security risks in the region before leaving office. In fact, the deal legitimizes a large nuclear infrastructure in Iran, leaves it with the ability to produce nuclear weapons within a relatively short time, and ignores the fundamental national security interests of at least two key US allies: Israel and Saudi Arabia. The removal of international economic sanctions – with no reciprocal requirement for any change in Iranian regional policy – positions Tehran to reap great financial benefits at no cost.

Since the conclusion of the deal, Iran has deliberately provoked the US, the UN Security Council, and the European Union by firing long-range ballistic missiles. Tehran is signaling that even if the development of Iran's nuclear program has been postponed by the deal, it will do all it can to ensure that it will be able to deliver a nuclear warhead once the stipulated fifteen-year delay is up. It is also using these missile tests to bolster its image as a regional powerhouse. Washington's response to these provocations has been weak: White House press secretary Josh Earnest declared that the missile test was "not a violation of the nuclear agreement" but reassured reporters that "we're still reviewing the launch ... to determine what the appropriate response is."<sup>13</sup> President Obama's Iran policy has occasioned a dramatic change in the regional balance of power, yet he and his administration appear largely unperturbed.

To add insult to injury, Washington is withdrawing from the region in a manner that does not command respect.<sup>14</sup> It left Iraq without waiting to build up the Iraqi army adequately. It is withdrawing from Afghanistan without leaving a government strong enough to withstand the pressure of the Taliban. It refrained from attacking Assad when the dictator used chemical weapons on his citizens, an action that flagrantly crossed a red line enunciated by the American president. Washington has ruled out the military option in its negotiations with Iran, and is now conducting a very low-profile campaign against IS with limited success. Overall, the US projects infirmity and fatigue: an overall frailty and confusion noted by America's friends as well as her foes.

## REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Whereas the Obama administration's Iran policy has been primarily guided by wishful thinking about the possibility of encouraging moderation in that country, the apprehensions of regional actors with regard to Tehran's hegemonic ambitions have correspondingly multiplied, especially in response to the nuclear deal. While Washington says it welcomes Iranian assurances "to work on regional stability,"<sup>15</sup> leaders in Ankara, Cairo, Jerusalem and Riyadh see Tehran's behavior as almost entirely unaltered from its pre-deal state in any meaningful political sense, with the added threat that it will be able to produce nuclear bombs within a relatively short time.

The gravest consequence of the US policy of disengagement from the region is the increased probability of nuclear proliferation. Powers contending for regional leadership, such as Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, will not stand idly by in the nuclear arena, particularly as Washington is no longer seen as a reliable security provider. Riyadh has made it eminently clear that it desires a nuclear infrastructure on par with that of Iran,<sup>16</sup> and Turkey and Egypt are in the process of enhancing their nuclear programs.<sup>17</sup> It will take considerable time for such programs to come to fruition, but the nuclear race is on. The Obama administration's fecklessness will likely scupper any attempts to convince regional powers to rely on a US nuclear umbrella in a bid to prevent nuclear proliferation. The emergence of a multi-polar nuclear Middle East, which is a plausible consequence of the US nuclear accommodation with Iran, would be a strategic nightmare for the whole world.

As noted, the nuclear deal with Iran is not linked to any demand for a change in Tehran's foreign policy or its military build-up. Iran continues to invest in its missile program and naval capabilities and to pursue interventionist policies with great vigor, boasting the control of four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa (Yemen).<sup>18</sup> Its imperialist impulses are readily apparent. The February 2016 parliamentary elections produced a Majlis scarcely more moderate than its predecessor, and any change in Iranian policies is highly unlikely.<sup>19</sup> An emboldened Tehran, which traditionally acts through proxies rather than through military conquest, might intensify its campaign to subvert Saudi Arabia, possibly by agitating the population in the country's oil-rich Eastern province where Shiites are a majority. The loss of that province would seriously weaken the Saudi state and might even bring about its disintegration. The visible consequences of the unraveling of statist structures in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen do not augur well for the desert kingdom.

Tehran could use subversion, terrorist attacks, and intimidation of the Persian Gulf states to evict the thinning US presence completely from the Gulf, which is a stated goal of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>20</sup> In the absence of American determination and ability to project force, an Iranian superior power might turn the Gulf monarchies – protected, up to this point, by the US security umbrella – into satellites. Bahrain, home to the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet, is particularly vulnerable to Iranian subversion, as its majority Shiite population has many grievances toward the ruling Sunni monarchy.



**Figure 1: The Strategic Energy Ellipse**

Source: Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997, 113.



The satellization of the Caspian basin, where Iran shares the coast with important energy producers such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, is another plausible scenario. This area and the Persian Gulf form an “energy ellipse” containing a large part of the world’s energy resources. Tehran wants to link its massive energy resources to key regional projects that transport energy via the South Caucasus to European markets. Iranian activism in the south Caucasus and Central Asia has increased following the lifting of sanctions that accompanied the nuclear deal.<sup>21</sup> The satellization of the “energy ellipse,” if it occurs, would bestow upon Tehran a central role in the world energy market, enhancing its political clout.

Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are very fearful of growing Iranian influence. It is possible that those countries, which adopted a pro-Western foreign policy orientation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, might either bow to Tehran’s wishes or decide to return to the Russian orbit, as Moscow appears to be a much more reliable ally than Washington. The Western loss would be considerable.

## **RUSSIA BENEFITS**

Russia is fully alive to the potential for a reassertion of its historic role in the region. Though NATO proclaims that the European theater has diminished in strategic importance,<sup>22</sup> Moscow seems to have other thoughts. According to Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu,<sup>23</sup> the Mediterranean region, bordering NATO’s southern flank and the Middle East, has been the core of all essential dangers to Russia’s national interests, and continued fallout from the Arab upheavals of the past five years has only increased the region’s importance. Shortly after releasing that statement, Shoigu announced the decision to establish a navy department task force in the Mediterranean “on a permanent basis.”<sup>24</sup>

The Russian naval facility in Tartus, on the Syrian littoral (leased since 1971), is a vital base for enhanced Russian naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, and Moscow has gradually improved its fleet size and stepped up patrols in the area. The nearby Hmeymim air facility is also important for the Russian deployment. Russia’s greater military footprint in the eastern Mediterranean is intended to project

increased power into the Middle East. Putin has taken the major step of intervening militarily in Syria to assure the survival of the Assad regime and with it, continued access to its naval base. In addition, as a major player in the global energy market, he wants to protect energy prospects that depend on Assad's survival. Moscow has already signed exploration contracts with Damascus with regard to recent gas discoveries in the Mediterranean basin.<sup>25</sup>

The preservation of the Assad regime is vital not only for Russia but also for Tehran. Damascus is Iran's corridor to Hezbollah, its Shiite proxy in Lebanon. Syria has been an ally of Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 – one of the longest alliances in the Middle East. Moreover, Syria could serve as a launching pad for Iranian destabilization of Jordan, a longstanding US ally. Moscow's efforts on Assad's behalf thus directly serve the interests of the Iranian regime. If successful, those efforts will further Tehran's influence in the region.

The confluence of Iranian-Russian interests is also visible outside Syria. Putin is by no means averse to the Iranian goal of pushing the US out of the Persian Gulf. Russia is also a clear beneficiary of the nuclear deal, which frees it from international constraints on exporting arms to Tehran.

A further outcome of the US withdrawal may well be Iran joining Russia in supporting Kurdish political ambitions in order to weaken Turkey, its main rival for regional leadership. Kurdish aspirations have long been a thorn in Turkey's side. While Tehran and Ankara are supporting opposing sides in the Syrian civil war, the Kurds are busy carving out autonomous regions from the moribund state. Kurdish national dreams might, therefore, actually benefit from the power vacuum created by the disruption of Arab statist structures and the US exit from the region. The emergence of an independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq seems more probable nowadays with Washington seemingly taking no clear position on such a contingency.

Another consequence to the US exit can be seen in Egypt. Moscow has been well served by Washington's reluctance to support the regime of Abdel Fattah Sisi, who came to power following a military coup against Muhammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Russians are selling

the Egyptians weapons, negotiating port rights in Alexandria, and supplying them with nuclear reactors. In Iraq, too, there are harbingers of a Russian presence in coordination with Iran as US influence in that state continues to wane. Iraq signed an arms deal with Russia in October 2012, and a joint intelligence center was set up in Baghdad in October 2015. Baghdad is also seeking Russian military support in its anti-terrorist campaign.<sup>26</sup> Moscow's and Washington's different approaches to the region tell the regional protagonists: "America is feckless, but Russia and Iran are strong."

## REGIONAL LOSSES

The rise of a more aggressive Iran – a direct consequence of the US retreat – may bring about greater tacit cooperation among Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. A big question is whether Ankara would join this anti-Iranian alignment. The Turks and the Persians have long been rivals who have nonetheless displayed great caution toward each other in the more recent past. Moreover, Turkey under Erdoğan has been at loggerheads with both Egypt and Israel while simultaneously becoming increasingly dependent upon energy from Iran.

Regardless of Ankara's behavior, a reduced US commitment in the region is likely to influence the destiny of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a pro-Western country and a beneficiary of US support. Jordan could have more and more difficulty insulating itself from what is happening just beyond its borders in Syria and Iraq. Either Iran or IS, both of which enjoy greater freedom of action following the US retrenchment, may attempt to destabilize Jordan.

For Israel, the stability of Jordan as a buffer state is critical. Their joint border is the longest and closest to the Jewish state's heartland, and the Hashemite dynasty has been both an informal and a formal ally of Jerusalem for decades. While the dissolution of neighboring Arab states has reduced the threat of large-scale conventional military attacks against Israel (with the additional positive effect of reducing somewhat its dependence on US weaponry), Jerusalem cannot be happy with the turn of events. The growing Iranian threat, and the greater appeal of radical Islam in the region, facilitates cooperation between Israel and "moderate" Sunni states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, but they are the proverbial weak reeds.

It remains true, however, that Sunni forces are losing in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. The rise of Iran and the consequent change in the regional balance of power, together with the growing potential for nuclear proliferation, are detrimental to Israel's national security. Although Jerusalem is being pushed into a preemptive mode to minimize the repercussions of Obama's nuclear deal and mitigate its effect on the regional strategic equation, it may well choose to wait until the president is out of office to take significant action.

The US retreat from the Middle East, and the manner of that retreat, weaken Israel's deterrence. The perception that Washington will come to Israel's aid in case of need has been a longstanding and important component of Jerusalem's ability to project a deterrent threat. The new perception of the US administration as a vacillating ally damages that deterrent capability. In addition, Washington's attempt to compensate its Arab allies for the Iranian nuclear deal by providing them with the latest state-of-the-art weapons erodes Israel's qualitative advantage.

As a result, the US exit from the Middle East ironically increases Israel's leeway to do as it sees fit. It is burdened with less of an obligation to weigh the consequences of its own actions on US interests and personnel in the region. Moreover, if the next American administration employs the logic of "offshore balancing," whereby one country uses favored regional powers to check the rise of potentially hostile powers, Washington's dependence on Jerusalem is likely to increase, as Israel is the strongest and friendliest military power in a highly volatile region.<sup>27</sup>

Lastly, Washington's disengagement from the Middle East appears to close the book on the longstanding US support for liberty and for democratic movements around the world. It undermines the relatively small and weak pro-democratic forces in the Arab world, which need greater US involvement and support for their causes. The prospect of regime change in Iran has faded as challengers to the mullahs see little hope of getting substantial assistance from Washington. Similarly, in Turkey, where a struggle is taking place over the identity and soul of the nation, pro-democratic, pro-Western forces are discouraged by Washington's regional policies.

## THE INTERNATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

US weakness in the Middle East will inevitably have ripple effects in other parts of the globe. Its credibility is now subject to question, and allies elsewhere may determine that it would be wise to hedge their bets and look elsewhere for support.

The decision to exit the Middle East, while leaving intact a large part of the Iranian nuclear infrastructure, has created incentives for nuclear proliferation in other regions of the world. Credible US guarantees backed by a military presence were once an effective way of encouraging states to make the strategic calculation in favor of nuclear restraint.<sup>28</sup> Such credibility has been eroded.

Washington's reluctance to confront Tehran on the nuclear issue sends the message that nuclear aspirants need not fear direct US intervention, despite stated commitments to counter-proliferation. In addition, states that are ready to sell sensitive technologies are now less deterred by Washington from doing so. One can already see increased cooperation between North Korea and Iran.<sup>29</sup> The difficulties the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has had in inspecting Tehran's nuclear facilities, and the ridiculously ineffective verification clauses accepted by the Obama administration in the JCPOA, do not augur well for the future of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). While the NPT is not a panacea for preventing global nuclear proliferation, it was a useful tool insofar as it restrained modest nuclear aspirations.

Russian assertiveness, in parallel with US hesitation, has also increased the threat perception in countries such as Poland, which might decide that its security would be enhanced by nuclear weapons. A similar rationale could lead Australia, facing increased Chinese clout, to consider a nuclear program. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan share similar apprehensions about US determination and power and might also conclude that nuclear weapons have become a necessity.<sup>30</sup>

The US exit from the Middle East further exacerbates European weakness. The European Union – an aging political entity that lacks military force and consistently displays questionable political will – is hardly a strategic

player. It now faces a significant demographic challenge as migrants from the Middle East and North Africa pour into its borders. Capitalizing on EU weakness and US indifference, Turkey is pushing immigrants into Europe even as it is being paid by the EU not to do so. Europe's record on absorbing immigrants from Muslim countries is already problematic, and the continent will need to address this new problem seriously if it is to maintain its identity. The recent terror attacks in Brussels and Paris vividly demonstrate these dual concerns: jihadists, posing as refugees, can murder scores of European citizens and manage to evade domestic security services by hiding in the midst of their Muslim compatriots, hosted by these very same European countries.

Meanwhile, parts of Europe are within range of Iranian missiles, an arms program that was not even addressed by the US-brokered JCPOA. Europe may, therefore, be in even greater danger from events in the Middle East that are partly the result of the US abandonment of the region.

The emergence of a nuclear Iran will likely also have a negative effect on the stability of the Indian subcontinent. Tehran's neighbors will inevitably have to adjust their nuclear posture in response to a new nuclear player. Sunni Islamabad may be eyeing Shiite Iran with even greater suspicion,<sup>31</sup> while any change in Pakistan's nuclear posture is apt to prompt a response by India, potentially increasing tensions between them. Nuclear arsenals at the disposal of the two states have not induced greater caution on the Pakistani side. Furthermore, upheaval in the Persian Gulf, threatened as it is by Tehran's aspirations, could disrupt oil supplies to both nations and harm their economies. The Indian subcontinent, which consists of India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, benefits from remittances from a large diaspora in the Gulf region, and therefore might be particularly vulnerable.

Washington's behavior in the Middle East is also increasing its difficulties in the Muslim world at large. Obama started his presidency by visiting Turkey and Egypt in a clear effort to improve US relations with Muslim-majority states. Despite that effort, the president's subsequent policies have resulted in a widespread perception in the Muslim world that his administration has sided with the Shiites rather than with the huge Sunni majority. The nuclear deal with Iran, a Shiite power, was opposed by

most Sunni states in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the limited US military effort against IS – a barbaric radical organization, albeit Sunni – has helped consolidate the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, a key component of the perceived Shiite axis. While the Sunni-Shiite religious divide does not necessarily resonate the same way across all Muslim realms, US policy undoubtedly leaves important Sunni states such as Indonesia and Malaysia uneasy.<sup>33</sup>

In more general terms, a weaker US strengthens anti-US and anti-democratic forces around the globe. Apprehensions in Central Asia have already been mentioned, and Russia under Putin has become more assertive in Eastern Europe and might try to exert greater influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

But it is with regard to China that the greatest potential for a major realignment exists, due largely to perceived US exhaustion. Beijing may become even less cooperative, primarily in its immediate region. North Korea is, after all, a Chinese satellite, and Pyongyang could adopt a more destabilizing posture toward South Korea. North Korea and China could become more aggressive in the sale of missile and nuclear advanced technologies. Beijing's creation of artificial islands on disputed South China Sea reefs – the actual dredging and pumping of sand, ongoing since 2014 – represents its latest attempt to extend Chinese territory and exert pressure on the five other countries that claim parts of the sea. So far, Washington has displayed great reluctance to confront Beijing.<sup>34</sup>

US allies in Asia could decide that their interests are better served by a realignment of relationships. Taking into consideration the rise of China, they might calculate using traditional balance of power thinking and opt to be on the stronger side. The image now projected by the US is that of a country in decline that can no longer be assumed to be a reliable ally. China may benefit by comparison.

## CONCLUSION

Washington is retrenching. It is projecting weakness and eliciting doubts about its value as an ally. The US has the potential to snap back under different leadership, but this could take time. Building military assets is a lengthy process, particularly when it comes to training qualified military forces. Overcoming mistrust is perhaps more difficult. Certain strategic losses, such as foreign policy reorientation by former allies, are not easily reversible.

US allies in the Middle East believe Washington needs a different lens through which to view international affairs.<sup>35</sup> It needs a clear conceptual framework by which to identify friends and foes. This is a basic mechanism for any military activity and has to be deployed also within the politico-strategic sphere. As Samuel Johnson observed, though there is twilight, there is still light and darkness. Strategic clarity is vital for astute policy-making.

Washington's reluctance to deploy ground forces is understandable, and such military involvement is not always useful. Conserving blood and treasure, rather than expending them to pursue ambitious political schemes, is a good instinct. But Obama-style disengagement has produced harmful outcomes for the US and its allies. While the Middle East seems to have become gradually less important in the international arena, it is still very relevant with respect to several global challenges: Islamic radicalism, nuclear proliferation, and energy security. These issues cannot be ignored. For the time being, there is no alternative to a responsible and well-calibrated US role in world affairs. An assertive US position is also important for spreading the values for which it stands – democracy and the free market. Abdicating this role is simply irresponsible.





## NOTES

- 1 See Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016; Daniel Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?” *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (July/August 2011); Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Steven David, “Obama: The Reluctant Realist,” in Efraim Inbar and Jonathan Rynhold, eds., *US Foreign Policy and Global Standing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Realities and Perceptions* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 41-62.
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