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The Politics of Restraint in the Middle East

Andrew Payne*

Abstract

This manuscript argues that domestic constraints make it difficult for the United States to pursue a coherent program of restraint in the Middle East. Drawing on insights from relevant literature regarding public opinion, foreign policy decision-making and civil-military relations, it goes beyond existing accounts which either ignore the domestic components of grand strategy altogether or narrowly attribute a perceived lack of strategic adjustment to the obstructionism of a foreign policy establishment. To illustrate its claims, the article offers a case study of the Obama administration's record, drawing on data on the distribution of military capabilities and interviews with senior officials. As events in Gaza prompt policy and military practitioners to re-visit debates about the appropriate size and scope of the military footprint in the region, this study offers a cautionary lesson about the importance of grounding any revised posture on a firm domestic foundation.

Keywords

Middle East; restraint; public opinion; domestic politics; polarization; civil-military relations

Introduction

The war between Israel and Hamas has reignited a debate over the appropriate size and scope of the U.S. commitment to the Middle East. Until recently, the notion that blood and treasure has been invested disproportionately in a region of declining strategic importance had been emerging as the new conventional wisdom. For some, events in Gaza now offer proof that it is an "illusion" or "myth" to suggest that the United States can pull back without leaving chaos in its wake.¹ Others fear that the Biden administration's response to the current crisis could herald a return to the "bad habits" of past policies and bloated force postures that only increase the chances of the United States being dragged into costly regional conflicts in which it has

¹ Suzanne Maloney, "The End of America's Exit Strategy in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, 10 October 2023; Hal Brands, "Four Myths Exposed by the Hamas Attack on Israel", *Bloomberg*, 13 October 2023.

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few interests at stake.² Few, however, would contest that the assumptions upon which existing policies towards the region had been based are ripe for re-assessment.

Yet, as important as this debate is, it too rests on an equally shaky assumption. While commentators continue to spill ink prosecuting the case for change, few have stopped to seriously consider whether any administration *could* embark on a more fundamental course correction than we have seen to date – even if it wanted to. Without fully understanding the constraints on strategic adjustment, realistic assessments of the prospects for change are likely to remain mired in the realm of what one scholar has called “a somewhat confused mixture of normative recommendations and questionable empirical assertions.”³

This article contends that an important reason why successive administrations have found it difficult to “do less” in the Middle East stems from the existence of a series of domestic constraints on a program of restraint. It goes beyond accounts which tend to ignore the role of domestic determinants of grand strategy or attribute the challenges narrowly to the obstructionism of a foreign policy establishment.⁴ Drawing on insights from studies in political science, it sheds light on the broader and more nuanced ways in which public opinion, electoral pressures and civil-military relations constrain attempts to right-size strategy. Illustrating its argument with evidence from the Obama administration, the article is a response to and amplification of recent calls for scholars of grand strategy to take more seriously the role of variables below the level of relative power and national resources.⁵

This argument is presented in three sections. First, I briefly survey the case for “doing less” in the Middle East. Second, I assess the degree to which Obama embraced the logic of restraint. Third, I outline three pathways through which domestic pressures constrain strategic adjustment. I conclude with a discussion of the policy implications of the article’s findings.

The Case for “Doing Less”

Each of the past three administrations has sought to divert resources and attention away from the Middle East and towards other geopolitical priorities, notably those in Asia.⁶ This exercise in strategic adjustment has been rooted in the assessment of a growing number of scholars and

² Jennifer Kavanagh and Frederic Wehrey, “Washington’s Looming Middle Eastern Quagmire,” *Foreign Affairs*, 24 November 2023.

³ F. Gregory Gause III, “Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East,” *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 5 (2019): 7.

⁴ Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Spring 2018): 9–46; Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Christopher Layne, “The US Foreign Policy Establishment and Grand Strategy: How American Elites Obstruct Strategic Adjustment,” *International Politics*, Vol. 54 (2017): 260-75. A valuable exception is C. William Walldorf Jr. and Andrew Yeo, “Domestic Hurdles to a Grand Strategy of Restraint,” *The Washington Quarterly* (2019) 42 (4): 43-56.

⁵ Peter Trubowitz and Peter Harris, “The End of the American Century? Slow Erosion of the Domestic Sources of Usable Power,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May 2019): 619-39; Paul Musgrave, “International Hegemony Meets Domestic Politics: Why Liberals can be Pessimists,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2019): 451-78; Jonathan D. Caverley, “The Domestic Sources of Grand Strategy,” in Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): 239-255.

⁶ For simplicity, I define the Middle East region as comprising those states within the area of responsibility of U.S. Central Command.

policymakers that Washington's commitment to the region has become lop-sided in relation to the range and significance of U.S. interests at stake.⁷ Historically, these interests have been anchored in three core tasks: ensuring the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf; guaranteeing the security of Israel; and preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon. Over time, additional interests have been added to this list, such as promoting democracy, tackling Islamist extremism, and limiting nuclear proliferation.

Advocates of a more restrained grand strategy are among the most committed proponents of the case for “doing less” in the region.⁸ For them, the recent history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East serves as a case study of the ills of a strategic approach they refer to as liberal hegemony, or primacy. In this telling, efforts to promote democracy, human rights and other liberal values in Iraq, Libya and Syria are judged to be generally ineffective and often counterproductive attempts to remake other societies in the image of the United States. Elsewhere, the seemingly unconditional support granted to foreign countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, is held to undermine the ability of the United States to act as an effective mediator in regional disputes and limit its capacity to apply meaningful leverage in the conflict behavior of allies. And while terrorism and proliferation remain real problems, restrainers believe that there are limits to how much can be done to address them using military instruments, preferring instead that diplomatic and other non-military solutions be pursued.

Restrainers are not isolationists. They generally concede that the Persian Gulf is among those regions in which the U.S. retains an interest in maintaining a favorable balance of power. But they are skeptical of the utility of force postures in which that balance is preserved through the forward deployment of large number of troops. Instead, they point to the historical record of states successfully embarking on a program of retrenchment, which generally involves a reduction in scope of overseas commitments.⁹ Most favor some form of “offshore balancing,” whereby local allies shoulder a greater proportion of the burden of ensuring that no single power comes to dominate the region. Implicit in this prescription, too, is an assessment of the strategic threat posed by Iran as relatively modest. While Tehran has undoubtedly engaged in destabilizing activities across the region, its principal threat to the U.S. manifests in its capacity to disrupt the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. In turn, the enhanced resilience of the hydrocarbon market, coupled with increased domestic production through fracking practices, has insulated the United States from price fluctuations that might result. Many analysts have suggested that risks to energy supply routes can be managed through an over-the-horizon

⁷ See, for instance, Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2020; Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, “The Middle East Just Doesn’t Matter as Much Any Longer,” *Politico*, 3 September 2020; Chris Murphy, “America’s Middle East Policy is Outdated and Dangerous,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 February 2021; Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (January/February 2019): 88-100; Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Less is More: The Future of the U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2014): 47-60.

⁸ David Blagden and Patrick Porter, “Desert Shield of the Republic? A Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2021): 5-48; Eugene Gholz, “Nothing Much to Do: Why American Can Bring All its Troops Home from the Middle East,” Quincy Institute Paper No. 7 (June 2021); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁹ See Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

posture relying on intelligence and patrols by local forces and unmanned systems, or at most a skeleton deployment of units focused on logistics and tactical airpower.¹⁰

Prescriptions for what a *sufficiently* restrained commitment might look like vary. Some call for a full withdrawal and abandonment of the region. Others recommend a residual forward presence be maintained, albeit in a downsized form and consolidated across fewer bases and installations. Adjudicating this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices here to recognize that a consensus exists on the basic direction of travel in this debate: a more restrained strategy is one which does less, with less. In other, words, advocates of restraint favor a curtailment in the ends, ways and means of America's commitment to the Middle East. For simplicity, then, we can think about the degree to which a given administration embraced the logic of restraint in terms of the extent to which it i) redefined a more limited range of core interests, ii) reduced its reliance on military intervention in addressing threats to those interests, and iii) retrenched the overall military presence in the region.

Obama's Attempt to Rebalance

That Barack Obama came into office intending to embark on at least some form of strategic adjustment was no secret. His opposition to the "dumb war" in Iraq contributed to his emergence as a national political figure and subsequent electoral victory, and he made clear his intention to focus on "nation-building at home" after years of overextension in the Middle East. Yet scholars of various stripes have complained that Obama's policies represented more continuity than change, while restrainers argued that his record was one of "judicious trimming, not retrenchment."¹¹ To what extent does the historical record bear this assessment out?

Redefining Interests

A retrospective look at Obama's actual policy statements towards the Middle East reveals that the president's objectives were hardly lacking in ambition. In his 2009 Cairo speech, Obama reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to countering violent extremism, fostering peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict and countering nuclear proliferation, while also expressing support for the promotion of democracy, religious freedom and women's rights across the region.¹² These interests were formally embedded into the 2010 *National Security Strategy*.¹³ And as the Arab Spring swept across the region, Obama used a May 2011 speech to clarify that support for political and economic reform in the region "is not a secondary interest," before indicating support for regime change in Syria.¹⁴

¹⁰ See Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary Kelanic (eds), *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the US Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil* (Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2013), 230. See also Fawaz Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* (New York: Macmillan, 2012).

¹² "Remarks by the President at Cairo University," June 4, 2009.

¹³ "National Security Strategy," May 2010, 24-26.

¹⁴ "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011.

For all that Obama would subsequently be criticized for his belief in the limited utility of U.S. power in bringing about these changes, then, it is important to note that the loftiness of the administration's goals was not the principal source of frustration for those charged with turning them into action on the ground. As David Petraeus, who served as CENTCOM commander during this period, told me, "the administration repeatedly fell into the trap of very expansive rhetoric in speeches, but then hesitated to actually take the actions that the rhetoric led folks to believe would logically follow."¹⁵ If the ends of policy remained expansive, then, to what extent did the president exercise restraint in the ways and means?

Reducing Military Interventionism

On the one hand, it seems axiomatic that Obama favored a less militarized role for the United States in the Middle East. He did, after all, order an end to the combat phase of the war in Iraq and invested considerable energy in fostering diplomatic solutions to problems such as nuclear proliferation, yielding the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. His preference for "light footprint" approaches to countering terrorism may also be seen as indicative of a desire to reduce the traditional U.S. reliance on military instruments, as part of a perception that "the strategy that was crafted in Washington didn't always match up with the actual threats that were out there."¹⁶

On the other hand, the vast expansion in the scope of the military activities in which forces were engaged mitigates against any judgment that Obama had fully embraced the logic of restraint. Reasonable observers can and do disagree on the wisdom of Obama's response to the complex international, regional and local politics of a region that was still taking up 80% of NSC meeting time by 2015.¹⁷ But there is no denying that the administration's record of military intervention was more substantial than anticipated. Between his "surge" in Afghanistan, support for regime change in Libya and Syria, a campaign of airstrikes and support for proxies in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and continued arms sales that effectively underwrote Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, the Obama administration was anything but a bystander in these developments. In Obama's final year in office, the U.S. dropped at least 26,158 bombs on six countries in the region.¹⁸ As one observer wryly put it, "none of this has the smell of a country that is looking to leave the Middle East."¹⁹

Retrenching Military Presence

¹⁵ Author Email Correspondence with David Petraeus, March 27, 2020. See also Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Quoted in Steven Simon, *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East* (New York: Penguin, 2023), 285.

¹⁷ "A Dangerous Modesty," *The Economist*, 6 June 2015, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2015/06/06/a-dangerous-modesty>.

¹⁸ Micah Zenko and Jennifer Wilson, "How Many Bombs Did the United States Drop in 2016?" Council on Foreign Relations, 5 January 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-many-bombs-did-united-states-drop-2016>.

¹⁹ Gause, "Should We Stay," 13.

Finally, a closer look at the available data on the distribution of troop numbers can give a rough indication of the extent to which Obama brought the means of U.S. policy in line with the logic of restraint.²⁰ *Figure 1* illustrates the number of active-duty personnel deployed to countries in the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility in which at least 1000 troops were stationed. When measured strictly in these terms, President Obama clearly did oversee a significant reduction of the size of the U.S. military footprint. In 2009, Obama's first year in office, there were 167,000 troops stationed across these ten countries. By 2016, his final year in office, this figure had reduced by over 80% percent to just 32,000.

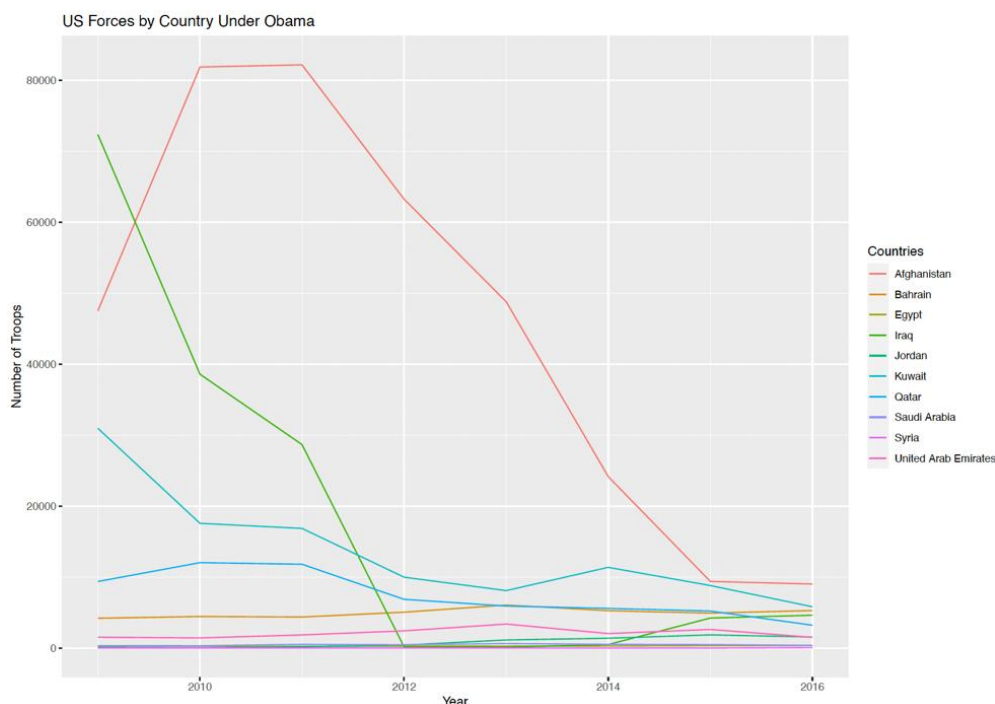


Figure 1: Total U.S. Force Levels in CENTCOM AOR, 2009-2016

But even this significantly reduced overseas presence dwarves that of the pre-9/11 era. *Figure 2*, depicting troop levels in the same countries between 1980 and 2020, gives a better sense of Obama's retrenchment in historical perspective. With the brief exception of Operation Desert Shield, U.S. force levels never came close to Obama-era presence in the two decades prior to 2000, and has held broadly steady since. This data is also likely an *underestimation*, since it does not include National Guard and National Reserve deployments. These comprised a significant portion of the overall force composition during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Department of Defense data, overall personnel levels increase by 36 percent measured across the period from 2009-2016 when these deployments are added alongside civilian personnel stationed in the region.²¹

Depicted this way, the effect of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is clear. To be sure, deployments elsewhere in the region were in many cases inextricably linked to changing

²⁰ Data via Michael A. Allen, Michael E. Flynn, and Carla Martinez Machain, "Global U.S. military deployment data: 1950-2020," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 3 (2021): 351-370.

²¹ Data in "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications," at <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

support requirements, pre-positioning and redeployment patterns in those conflict theatres. A more granular single-country focus thus sheds further light on the scale of the permanent overseas presence the Obama administration left in place, even as it sought to wind down those principal combat operations. In Obama’s final year in office – five years after the end of the Iraq War and two years after the combat mission in Afghanistan finished – there were still over 20,000 troops stationed across the three states which host the forward service headquarters in Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain.²²

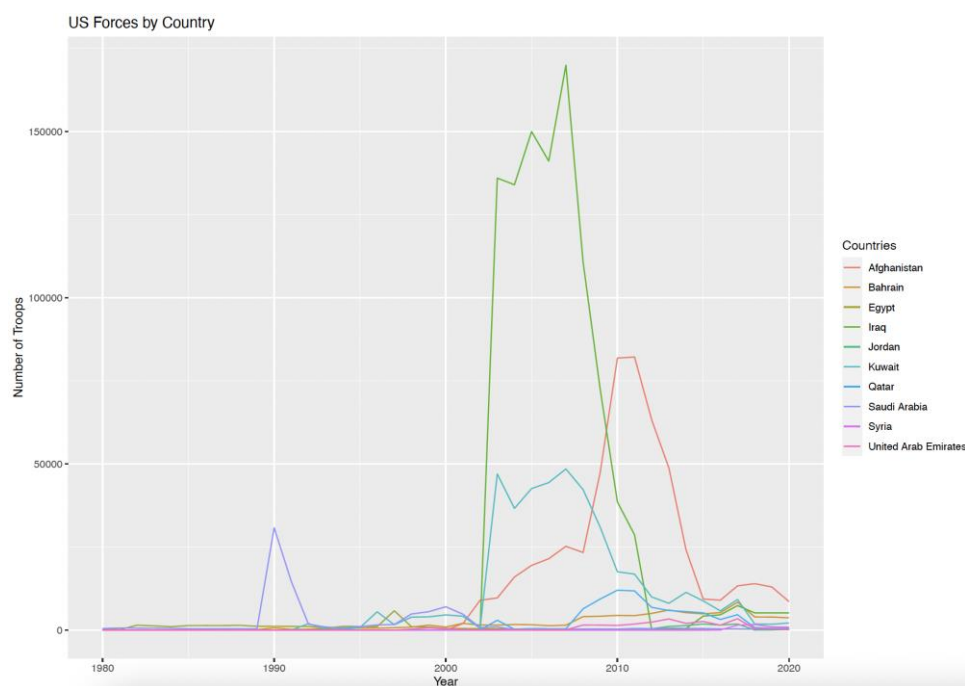


Figure 2: Total U.S. Force Levels in CENTCOM AOR, 1980-2020

To sustain this forward presence, the U.S. maintains or has access to a sprawling network of bases and military facilities across the region. While the largest and oldest bases are covered by well-documented diplomatic and legal agreements, the U.S. has also re-purposed pre-existing facilities and established temporary structures to support ongoing combat missions without formally disclosing their locations. Ambiguity as to what constitutes a “U.S.” facility further muddies the water, since many ports, airfields and other structures are often used by U.S. forces yet retain other civilian and commercial capacity. Nevertheless, the data that the DoD has released tells its own story – one of a significant physical infrastructure that expanded to meet the needs of the war on terror and has since proven remarkably sticky.²³

A Mixed Record

²² “DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications.”

²³ See Matthew Wallin, “U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East,” *American Security Project*, June 2018.

Taken together, Obama's policies towards the Middle East resemble a middle ground between his overstretched inheritance and the prescriptions of restraint scholars. Exemplified in the president's unofficial doctrine – “don't do stupid shit” – his strategy has been appropriately described as one of selective engagement, or liberal internationalism lite.²⁴ In other words, Obama managed to reduce the costs of the means of the existing strategy but failed to fundamentally alter the ends. And in so doing, he left in place the underlying overseas presence that made it easy to fall back on militarized responses when events in the region invited further U.S. intervention. It is therefore difficult to categorize Obama's record as a victory for those calling for restraint in the Middle East. “Adjustments might be in the offing,” recalled Andrew Bacevich, “but the United States military was not coming home.”²⁵

Domestic Constraints on Restraint

This section draws on studies of public opinion, foreign policy decision-making and civil-military relations to illustrate how domestic constraints help explain the partial nature of Obama's embrace of restraint. It makes three key claims.

1: Public opinion is permissive of expansive strategic commitments

The first domestic hurdle operates at the level of mass public opinion, where opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has yet to translate into a wider embrace of the full program of retrenchment envisioned by proponents of a more restrained approach to the region. Polling data reveals the Middle East was a major preoccupation for Americans during the Obama administration. A survey conducted in 2012 – *after* the withdrawal from Iraq and *before* the emergence of the Islamic State – revealed that 73% of respondents considered the region to represent the greatest future source of threats to U.S. security.²⁶ International terrorism topped the list of concerns, with majorities in favor of the use of military tools to address this threat.²⁷ 53% supported the use of troops to ensure the oil supply. Under Obama, Iran topped Gallup's list of countries Americans considered to be the greatest enemy of the United States more times than any other state.²⁸ Solid majorities favored increasing or maintaining economic aid to Israel, with a poll taken shortly after Obama left office finding as many as 73% supported U.S. military backing of Israel.²⁹ More generally, 42% of respondents in 2012 thought maintaining U.S. military superiority was very effective in achieving U.S. foreign policy goals – more than

²⁴ See Paul van Hoof, “All In or All Out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2020): 717; Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 331.

²⁵ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 230.

²⁶ “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012, https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/2012_CCS_Report.pdf, 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸ “Americans' Views of the United States' Greatest Enemy (Trends),” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/227906/americans-views-united-states-greatest-enemy-trends.aspx>.

²⁹ “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” 30; “American Attitudes on Middle East Policies,” MEI/Ipsos, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/IpsosMEIPoll_Oct2017.pdf, 5.

double the proportion who felt similarly about nonmilitary instruments.³⁰ And 61% favored maintaining or increasing the number of overseas bases operated by the U.S.³¹ These attitudes suggest that most Americans were comfortable with the expansive nature of military priorities in the Middle East. Voters might not favor “endless war,” but they still have a long “to do” list – and one that would require elected officials to maintain a considerable investment of military resources in the region.

Polling data captures only a snapshot of public sentiment. Moreover, there is a kernel of truth to the conventional wisdom that voters tend to know little – and care less – about foreign policy. The preferences above may therefore be weak or latent, revealed to pollsters only when prompted, but otherwise not of daily concern. But experimental work consistently demonstrates that public opinion is not as irrational and incoherent as was once assumed. Rather, it is now generally agreed that citizens rely on cues – from both political elites and social peers – when forming judgments about a given foreign policy issue.³² Public attitudes as expressed in polls must therefore be understood in the context of the partisan identities and broader foreign policy dispositions from which they spring.

The challenge for restrainers is that the behavioral roots of these public attitudes make the pursuit of a coherent program of restraint harder, not easier. Take partisanship, for example. There are sharp partisan divides in the above data. During the Obama administration, Republicans tended to be more supportive of keeping troops in Afghanistan, more inclined to address terrorist threats with military tools, and more prone to favor military intervention in Syria and even Iran.³³ In theory, this might have provided the president with an opportunity to go further than he did towards reducing the military footprint. Since liberal-minded citizens tend to be more concerned about casualties than conservatives, a Democratic president might be able to rely on sympathetic co-partisans for political insulation when pursuing extraction from conflicts overseas.³⁴ But as the association between restraint and the Republican Party during the Trump administration has since demonstrated, the apparent ownership of a particular foreign policy posture by one “side” may be a double-edged sword.³⁵ Precisely because voters tend to instinctively support policies of their party and oppose those of the other party, it is difficult for any president to embark on a major strategic overhaul that is able to survive the next electoral cycle.

We also know that there is a “hawk’s advantage” at the ballot box, whereby voters tend to favor candidates who espouse policies that cultivate an image of strong leadership, *even if* those policies are more hawkish than what voters actually want.³⁶ And studies also show that the “rational ignorance” of the average voter towards events in distant lands can be interrupted by

³⁰ “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³² Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 61, no. 3 (2017): 543-558.

³³ “Foreign Policy in the New Millennium,” 46-47.

³⁴ Carrie A. Lee, “Polarization, Casualty Sensitivity, and Military Operations: Evidence from a Survey Experiment,” *International Politics* 59, no. (October 2022): 981-1003.

³⁵ Walldorf and Yeo, “Domestic Hurdles to a Grand Strategy of Restraint,” 46-47.

³⁶ Jeffrey A. Friedman, “Issue-Image Tradeoffs and the Politics of Foreign Policy: How Leaders Use Foreign Policy Positions to Shape their Personal Images,” *World Politics*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2023): 280-315.

shocking acts that “activate” public attention, especially if they are perceived to threaten cherished values or spark moral outrage. The severity and frequency of these traumatic events in the Middle East has in turn generated and sustained a strategic narrative in which elected officials must be seen to “do something” to avoid suffering a domestic political penalty for appearing “weak.”³⁷

It is in this context that Obama’s counterterrorism policies, centering on drone warfare and targeted assassination, might be best understood. Though he doubted the utility of military force in addressing the root causes of terrorism, he routinely signed off security agencies’ “kill lists,” alert to advisers’ warnings that a “new, liberal president couldn’t afford to look soft on terrorism.”³⁸ When Islamic State forces murdered journalists in 2014, Obama again found himself out of step with the public mood, and adjusted accordingly. While he privately bemoaned the inflation of the terrorist threat, citing the higher probability of being injured by slipping in a bathtub, Obama nevertheless felt the pressure of what one adviser called “the Fox News bullhorn, which depicted the world as a raging inferno that demanded more bombs and tough talk.”³⁹ The president’s subsequent use of airpower, special operations forces and local proxies scratched the interventionist itch of an otherwise war-weary public. As Obama left office, a massive 82% supported continued U.S. involvement in the counter-ISIS campaign, despite just 26% believing that the U.S. and its allies were winning.⁴⁰

It is not all bad news for restrainers. We also know that public opinion is somewhat malleable, with citizens relying at least in part on elite cues when coming to judgments. Advocates of restraint can therefore try to lead the public towards such an agenda.⁴¹ Doing battle in the court of public opinion will be difficult; under Obama, a bipartisan consensus in favor of liberal internationalism among foreign policy opinion leaders persisted.⁴² And the polling data above might be interpreted as a sign of their rhetorical success. But others have noted that there is a considerable restraint constituency to which pro-restraint voices might appeal, and the electoral salience of the “endless war” label in recent years indicates that central elements of that agenda can attract mass support.⁴³ The challenge here is that it is surely easier to mobilize public opposition to long and costly conflicts in which the very concept of “victory” is elusive than it is to educate voters about the relative benefits of alternative force postures – issues which may be familiar to defense intellectuals and military practitioners but largely obscure to the wider public.

³⁷ C. William Walldorf, Jr., “Narratives and War: Explaining the Length and End of U.S. Military Operations in Afghanistan,” *International Security* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 93-138.

³⁸ Obama, *A Promised Land*, 354.

³⁹ Derek Chollet, *The Middle Way: Three Presidents and the Crisis of American Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021): 133-134.

⁴⁰ “American Attitudes on Middle East Policies,” 7-8.

⁴¹ See Elizabeth N. Saunders, “Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 219-240. On elites and public opinion polls, see also Ronald H. Hinckley, *People, Polls and Policy Makers: American Public Opinion and National Security* (New York: Free Press, 1992) and James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs, *Who Governs? Presidents, Public Opinion and Manipulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

⁴² “2016 Opinion Leader Survey,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 20, 2017, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/2016-opinion-leader-survey>.

⁴³ See A. Trevor Thrall, “Identifying the Restraint Constituency,” in Thrall and Friedman, *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21st Century*, 243-268.

2: For elected officials, the status quo tends to offer the path of least political risk

Though foreign policy is rarely a decisive driver of electoral outcomes, there is now plenty of research indicating that decisions involving the commitment of military force serve as important exceptions to this conventional wisdom, especially during ongoing wars.⁴⁴ Both voting patterns and turnout can be meaningfully shaped by public perceptions of presidential policies.⁴⁵ When making decisions about military and diplomatic strategy, then, elected officials must balance the national interest with their own political interest. Not all presidents weigh these competing preferences equally, but as professional politicians they understand that a failure to manage the political risks of foreign policy commitments can have a decisive impact on their ability to pursue their preferred policies – in that domain or any other. This dynamic was captured perfectly in Lyndon Johnson’s comment to an adviser in 1963: “I’d hate like hell to be such a statesman that I didn’t get elected.”⁴⁶ And it has several implications for the prospects for a sustained program of restraint in the Middle East.

First, at the presidential level, political constraints encourage commanders-in-chief to perpetuate U.S. involvement in wars as an exercise in blame avoidance. While leaders who inherit wars may be less “culpable” for their outcomes than their predecessors, they may still be vulnerable to partisan charges of “bungling” the conflict or “selling out” to reach a sub-optimal outcome.⁴⁷ As a result, even those who are firmly convinced that victory is out of reach may end up prolonging or escalating a conflict to mitigate the domestic political consequences of admitting defeat.

This plausibly explains Obama’s slower-than-expected drawdown in Iraq, whereby the administration decided to leave tens of thousands of troops stationed in theatre for over a year beyond the end of the combat phase in mid-2010. James Jeffrey, who as U.S. ambassador played a key role in subsequent negotiations aiming to keep troops on even longer, told me that Obama’s appetite for a prolonged commitment represented “an insurance policy against a return to chaos.” With his re-election bid on the horizon, Obama wished to avoid the fate of predecessors, whose presidencies had been blown up by foreign policy crises, and a residual troop presence appealed as something that “might be able to fix something that starts going wrong.”⁴⁸

Second, elected decision-makers face incentives to embrace military strategies and tools that enable them to satisfy the public’s demand to “do something” about threats without incurring the political costs associated with large commitments of “boots the ground.” By

⁴⁴ Andrew Payne, *War on the Ballot: How the Election Cycle Shapes Presidential Decision-Making in War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 14.

⁴⁵ John H. Aldrich et al., “Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 477-502; Michael T. Koch and Stephen P. Nicholson, “Death and Turnout: The Human Costs of War and Voter Participation in Democracies,” *American Journal of Political Science* 60, No. 4 (2016): 932-946; Christopher Gelpi et al., “Iraq the Vote: Retrospective and Prospective Policy Judgments on Candidate Choice and Casualty Tolerance,” *Political Behavior* 29 (2007): 151-174.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Payne, *War on the Ballot*, 89. See also *ibid.*, 32-36 on variation between presidents.

⁴⁷ Shawn Cochran, “Gambling for Resurrection Versus Bleeding the Army: Explaining Risky Behavior in Failing Wars,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2018): 204-232.

⁴⁸ Author interview with James F. Jeffrey, June 28, 2018.

relying on technology over manpower, presidents re-distribute the costs of using force away from the average voter, thereby mitigating the significance of domestic constraints.⁴⁹ At some level, this “light footprint” approach might be considered to be consistent with a broader strategy of restraint, since it requires a reduced investment of military resources. In practice, however, few of these capabilities negate the forward deployment of at least some supporting capabilities. And, more importantly, policymakers may feel more tempted to resort to the use of force if the tools available to them are cheaper and less politically controversial – a dynamic which clearly cuts against the basic thrust of a more restrained approach.

Obama’s embrace of drone warfare and doctrinal pivot from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism as a means of waging the broader war on terror is a paradigmatic example of these dynamics. “By definition counterterrorism involves less commitment of resources, personnel on the ground, a real presence, than a counterinsurgency,” explains John Brennan, adding that this “was in keeping with what President Obama campaigned for, in terms of reducing our engagement in these foreign wars and trying to extricate ourselves.”⁵⁰ Not everyone agrees. Petraeus, Brennan’s predecessor as CIA director, told me the idea that counterterrorism operations are less dependent on ground forces “by definition” amounts to “an exercise in redefining doctrinal definitions so that they fit the desired amount of commitment.”⁵¹ Yet even Brennan concedes that some in the administration “had an inflated view about the ability to replace an on the ground presence with a more technical capability, such as drones.” As he told me, “It’s not just a drone in a box... there is a tremendous, *tremendous* upstream capability you need.” And since local forces in places like Iraq were unable to operate this, “an American presence on the ground was critically important in order to be able to have the infrastructure, the hardware, and the capabilities that are necessary.”⁵² Beyond Iraq, Obama’s vast expansion of the use of armed drones for counterterrorism missions in non-battlefield settings – a policy sold to the American people explicitly as a means of addressing the threat in relatively precise and less costly manner – now stands as a legacy of military interventionism that is central to the restraint school’s critique of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Third, in a polarized environment, representatives in the legislative branch have weak incentives to participate constructively in any sustained process of strategic adjustment. Members of both parties have moved towards the ideological extremes and increasingly share a basic distrust and dislike of the other side. From a political perspective, therefore, it pays to criticize the initiatives of the other side. To be sure, it is easy to exaggerate the extent to which foreign policy founders on the rocks of political discord. Democrats and Republicans have always proven capable of coming together to support some policies even as differences elsewhere prove irreconcilable. Partisan bickering is thus a feature of the U.S. political system, not a bug.⁵³ Yet it is one thing for there to be grudging cooperation on specific issues, and another for these alignments to obtain long enough to facilitate a sustained redirection of

⁴⁹ Jonathan Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ Author Interview with John Brennan, July 19, 2018.

⁵¹ Author Email Correspondence with David Petraeus, March 27, 2020.

⁵² Author Interview with Brennan.

⁵³ See Jordan Tama, *Bipartisanship and US Foreign Policy: Cooperation in a Polarized Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

national effort. Just as others have emphasized how the political system offers a weak foundation upon which *new* or *prolonged* international commitments are difficult to build and sustain, so too does the absence of a bipartisan compact inhibit attempts to do less. When it comes to strategic adjustment, the perils of polarization run both ways.

During the Obama administration, majority leader Mitch McConnell said the quiet part out loud when he declared “the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.”⁵⁴ More interested in political tribalism and point-scoring than the exercise of meaningful oversight, criticism of Obama’s “apology tour” and the “Benghazi” scandal became bywords for the supposed incompetence of the administration’s Middle East policies in a manner almost entirely disconnected from the substance of those policies. These dynamics also help explain the legislative branch’s lack of appetite to claw back its traditional war powers by challenging the president’s reliance on the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Force. Obama’s decision to put intervention in Syria in 2013 to a congressional vote was the exception to the rule of a lack of congressional interest in exercising meaningful oversight of the executive branch’s frequent resort to military force in the Middle East.⁵⁵ And when the administration sought to negotiate one diplomatic route out of cyclical hostility with Iran, legislators’ reluctance to cross the aisle led the president to pursue an executive agreement – rather than a legally binding treaty – making it easy for Donald Trump to rip up the 2015 nuclear deal later.⁵⁶

3: Senior military officers can be powerful bureaucratic roadblocks to retrenchment

The military should not be a constraint on a president’s decision to do less in the Middle East. Under the constitutional principle of civilian control, the commander-in-chief should be able to order the military to carry out virtually any lawful policy they choose, irrespective of its strategic merits. They have the “right to be wrong.”⁵⁷

But in reality, senior officers operate as important group of foreign policy elites with whom the president must bargain in order to manage the politics of national security.⁵⁸ They can evade civilian authority and increase the amount of political capital required to pursue the president’s preferred policies. They may do this issuing direct public appeals challenging the wisdom of a policy with which they disagree. They can mobilize public opposition indirectly, relying on allies in Congress or retired military elites to exact a political price for proceeding with a course of action they deem unwise. And they can register their objections through bureaucratic means, framing courses of action and obstructing the implementation of orders in such a way that forces the president to adopt the military’s preferred option.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Simon, *Grand Delusion*, 287.

⁵⁵ James Goldgeier and Elizabeth N. Saunders, “The Unconstrained Presidency: Checks and Balances Eroded Long Before Trump,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018): 144-156.

⁵⁶ Kenneth A. Schultz, “The Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2017): 14-16.

⁵⁷ Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 65.

⁵⁸ Andrew Payne, “Bargaining with the Military: How Presidents Manage the Politics Costs of Civilian Control,” *International Security* 48, no. 1 (Summer 2023): 166-207.

While a president can punish any behavior that amounts to “shirking,” overruling recalcitrant generals also carries potentially grave political risks. Societal attitudes towards the military are such that the revelation of any significant disagreement may trigger a damaging backlash, even when the military remains apolitical and “works.” These dynamics are rooted in the extraordinary level of public confidence in the military, which marks senior officers out as more credible cue-givers on the wisdom of a policy than civilian leaders.⁵⁹ Recent surveys confirm that the public wants its elected officials to defer to the judgment of the military in a manner that is inimical to civilian control.⁶⁰ As James Cartwright, who served as Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the Obama administration, puts it, “the country spends all this time saying how wonderful the military is, so politically it’s very difficult to criticize them.”⁶¹

While there is no reason to believe the military is automatically opposed to restraint, the sheer size of CENTCOM and its responsibilities for advising on force posture in the region ensure that senior officers engaging in these debates carry immense bureaucratic heft. These dynamics may be observed most clearly in the interactions between the White House and the four-star generals in charge of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who repeatedly pressed the administration to maintain or increase its commitment to those theatres. The civil-military drama of the Afghan “surge” has been well documented, with White House sources complaining that the president had been “boxed in” by a slew of on-the-record comments in the press by senior generals advocating for more troops. Obama later wrote of his concern that that “an entire agency under my charge was working its own agenda” through seemingly routine leaks. The episode illustrated to the president “just how accustomed the military had become to getting whatever it wanted” thanks in part to the fact that the public “saw the military as more competent and trustworthy than the civilians who were supposed to make policy.”⁶² Similar dynamics operated in the debate over the pace and finality of a drawdown in Iraq.⁶³

Conclusion

The Obama administration fell some way short of fundamentally altering the military foundations of U.S. commitment to the Middle East. But while the restraint school may agree that the status quo bias of the foreign policy “establishment” played a role in explaining this outcome, this article demonstrates that the pathways through which domestic political pressures make it difficult to “do less” are deeper and broader than this narrative implies. Dynamics associated with public opinion, electoral pressures and civil-military relations coalesce to narrow the political space available for a more comprehensive strategic adjustment of the ends, ways and means of policy.

This argument carries significant scholarly and policy implications. At a general level, as decision-makers return to the question of *whether* and *how* the U.S. should scale back its

⁵⁹ James Golby, Peter Feaver and Kyle Dropp, “Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Force,” *Armed Forces & Society* 44, no. 1 (January 2017): 44-71.

⁶⁰ Ronald R. Krebs, Robert Ralston, and Aaron Rapport, “No Right to Be Wrong: What Americans Think about Civil-Military Relations,” *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 2 (June 2023): 612.

⁶¹ Author Interview with James Cartwright, March 26, 2018.

⁶² Obama, *A Promised Land*, 434-5.

⁶³ See Payne, “Bargaining with the Military.”

commitment to the Middle East, this article indicates that the success of any revised posture depends to a considerable degree on the strengths of its domestic foundations. When choosing among the myriad paths on offer, this should serve as a cautionary tale of how domestic constraints can limit the appetite and capacity of elected officials to carry through a coherent program of strategic adjustment.

More specifically, advocates of restraint should engage more closely with studies in political science as a means of identifying more concrete steps towards greater realization of their preferred policies. Those tasks might involve crafting a rhetorically appealing framework through which the public can better understand the full implications of a program of restraint, going beyond the highly salient but prescriptively thin “endless war” slogan, which addresses the interventionism but not the underlying infrastructure of the U.S. commitment to the region. Alternatively, greater effort might be invested in building bipartisan coalitions behind-the-scenes on those elements of the restraint agenda that do not cut through with the public at large, capitalizing on the common desire among progressive and libertarian ends of the political spectrum to reduce the costs of overseas commitments. Either way, a greater appreciation of the political constraints under which elected officials make decisions and a wariness about too close an alliance with any partisan side is vital to sustain momentum for a set of policies beyond the next electoral cycle.

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