

The Goldilocks Decade? US Foreign Policy in the Middle East toward the 2020s

Dr. Jessica P. Ashooh

Will the United States, just like Goldilocks in the famous fable, be able to adopt a regional policy that is neither too big, nor too small, but just right for the times and the challenges of the twenty-first century Middle East? The answer may prove fundamental to the future of the region.

Opposing Doctrines, Equally Rooted in History

The early years of the twenty-first century have been fraught with challenges for the United States in the Middle East, as the post-Cold War triumphalism of Desert Storm, Madrid, and Oslo gave way to the horrors of 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the violent collapse in the regional state system brought on by the Arab uprisings of 2011. Through Presidents Bush and Obama, the United States has sought to meet these challenges with two fiercely polar policies: the Bush Doctrine and the Obama Doctrine.

The Bush Doctrine, developed in reaction to 9/11, emphasised the need for robust American engagement in the Middle East—militarily, if necessary. “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands,” said Bush in his second inaugural address. Although not the first elucidation of the Bush Doctrine, the 2005 speech is in many ways the clearest articulation of the main points of the policy, which can be distilled into four key elements:

1. A strong belief in the importance of a state’s domestic regime in determining its foreign policy;
2. The perception of great threats that can be defeated only by new and vigorous policies, most notably preventive war;
3. A willingness to act unilaterally when necessary;
4. An overriding sense that peace and stability require the United States to assert its primacy in world politics.

In contrast, the Obama Doctrine is not four principles but four words: “Don’t do stupid sh-t,” as he reportedly drilled into a plane full of reporters in 2014. While the doctrine was sanitised and refined for an April 2015 interview with Thomas Friedman, emphasising “engagement,”

and a willingness to test and readjust decades-old policy assumptions, the subtext is clear: the US should avoid any military engagement abroad, because it is expensive and contributes to American insecurity rather than reducing it. Indeed, whereas the Bush Doctrine was far too willing to resort to the use of military force, that use of force was in service of an organising principle predicated on the belief that the spread of democracy makes the United States safer, and that democracy can be seeded by removing dictators. And while that premise is now understood to be deeply flawed, the Obama doctrine also fails in that it entirely lacks an organising principle. The President’s preoccupation with not using military force has created a negative policy that is predicated solely upon the avoidance of a tactic, rather than a positive policy based on a strategic vision.

Though the Bush and Obama Doctrines might seem isolated in their historic moments—one in response to a violent tragedy and the other a self-conscious corrective action to that response—they are in fact both equally strongly rooted in the American political tradition and represent a classic tension between impulses toward isolationism on the one hand and notions of American exceptionalism and moral duty on the other. While George Washington may have been making an early case for isolationism when he admonished his successors not to “entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition,” it is important to point out that it was essential for him to do so, to dampen the ideological overexpansion that often besets post-revolutionary societies.

Indeed, in many ways, Washington’s address should not be seen as a cornerstone in the foundation of US foreign policy, but rather as a plank in a barricade to contain its moralist tide. John Quincy Adams was reacting to the same pressures as Washington when he insisted that America “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy,” in his

July 4th speech on foreign policy in 1821, which was not so much a statement as it was a plea against those agitating for American intervention in the Latin American wars for independence. DeTocqueville, writing in 1833, also noted this ideological impulse in the American public, and called “the tendency of a democracy to obey its feelings rather than its calculations” one of its “natural defects” as a form of government. More than one hundred years later, George Kennan concurred, and put a name on Americans’ ideological foreign policy tendencies: “legalism-moralism.”

Interestingly, however, lest one might think that the moral impulse in American foreign policy is purely interventionist, Kennan on the contrary lamented it for keeping the US out of conflicts in the interwar years, in favour of a naïve, moral pursuit of peace at all costs, enshrined most absurdly in the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war. In Kennan’s view, this overreliance on ideological principles prevented the United States and others from intervening to stop fascism at an early, manageable point. As Kennan wrote, “The evil of these utopian enthusiasms was not only, or even primarily, the wasted time, the misplaced emphasis, the encouragement of false hopes. The evil lay primarily in the fact that these enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening.”

In many ways, one might draw a parallel between the interwar experience of which Kennan writes and the current state of affairs in US foreign policy, with a nationally traumatic episode of conflict leaving Americans and their leadership reluctant to reengage, while problems abroad grow ever more protracted.

Indeed, the fable of Goldilocks and the Three Bears comes to mind in pursuit of a right-sized US foreign policy. Thus, if Bush’s vision was too big, and Obama’s too small, what does a “just right” foreign policy look like for the United States in the Middle East? This is largely the question with which the next American president will be grappling, and it will be a defining policy challenge through the 2020s.

Assumptions about Priorities

Before one can begin to approach this question, however, it is essential to take stock of assumptions. Firstly, let us assume that the interests of the United States in the Middle East will be underpinned by four essential priorities:

1. Mitigating the terrorism threat emanating from the region;
2. Managing the continued aftershocks of the “Arab Spring” and the state failure problem;
3. Containing Iranian regional ambitions;
4. Restoring standing and credibility with allies, especially Israel.

These assumed policy priorities—as well as those that don’t make the list—say a great deal about how one might expect the region to look in the next decade. Violent radical groups will still have sufficient capacity to threaten the United States and its allies. The countries hit hardest by the revolutions of 2011 will still be struggling to stand up and will continue to present an enormous financial and security burden on the region. In the best case scenario, fragile national unity peace plans will be forged in places like Syria, Libya, and Yemen, reducing violence and tamping down refugee flows, though not entirely. At worst, these countries will remain in open warfare, and will perhaps have dragged one or two other vulnerable states down with them. They will continue to destabilise their neighbours, foment human misery, and draw in foreign fighters. Iran will continue to take advantage of this instability in Arab politics to undermine situations it sees as threatening, such as the re-emergence of a strong and sovereign Iraq. And a trust deficit will remain between the United States and its closest partners in the region: Israel, the Gulf states, and Turkey. In short, even under the best-case scenario, regional dynamics will remain dangerously unstable.

Notably absent from the list of American policy priorities in this assumed future, however, is an emphasis on oil. While, to be sure, the supply of energy will remain a solid American interest, it will become less of a priority in terms of the Middle East specifically. The stunning development of North American oil resources has created more flexibility in global supply. The United States, which now produces more oil than it imports, has since 2012 become the top oil and gas producer in the world, effectively displacing Saudi Arabia as the global swing producer. This status as top producer is projected to last until around 2030, meaning that Middle East energy supplies will be a much less significant driver of American policy in the region for the medium term.



Nevertheless, despite this good news in energy markets, the United States will still face significant constraints on its foreign policy. However, these constraints will not be external; the U.S. will remain the dominant military power in the region and the world well into the 2020s and beyond. Rather, the factors that impose limits on America's ability to implement this power in the Middle East will be almost entirely domestic in nature.

Firstly, the continued hangover from the global financial crisis of the late 2000s will still be felt via cautiousness about budgets and government spending, even if the United States remains in consistent economic growth. While the Tea Party will remain a fringe movement, the peculiarities of the American legislative system create an environment where even small players can drive a major party's agenda, as demonstrated by the fight over the debt limit and the separate but concurrent government shutdown of 2013. While military spending used to be somewhat immune from these types of policy battles, the budget sequester of 2013 represents a sea change, wherein defence budgets are no longer guaranteed.

This tightening of the purse strings is also linked to increasing Congressional activism in matters of foreign policy. As James Lindsay notes, "the pendulum of power on foreign policy has swung back and forth many times over the course of American history," between Congress and the White House. At the present moment, it seems that the pendulum is swinging back toward Capitol Hill, as lawmakers grow impatient with the increasing use of Executive Orders and Presidential Directives, in what they see as an effort by the White House to sidestep Congress's Constitutional authority to declare war and ratify treaties. As a result, Congress has steadily shown more willingness to try to claw back some of its influence in this regard. While the results have often been ham-handed, as with Senator Tom Cotton's March 2015 letter to Iran, there is no reason to believe that this trend will stop; though it may periodically lighten in situations where there is more public and Congressional confidence in the President.

All of this will be girded by a public that remains ambivalent toward international engagement, and will still be impacted by a lukewarm global economy and the experience of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2013, 52% of Americans polled believed that the United States "should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get

along as best they can on their own." This represented the highest percentage since the question was first tracked, in 1964 (when only 20% of respondents agreed with that proposition), and was the first time that a majority was recorded as favouring disengagement. The numbers represent a trend, and voters can therefore be expected to continue to pressure elected representatives to prioritise domestic issues and pull back from international matters that are perceived as not being America's own.

These combined issues will contribute to a climate where the US will still be a leader in the Middle East, but will have to more earnestly pursue partners for implementation. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as functional partnerships have the potential to mitigate both of the worst tendencies of the two US foreign policy poles of isolationism and overreach. Well-placed, trusted partner countries can help draw the United States into action when needed, and they can also help moderate it in times of overreach.

A 'Just Right' Policy

Given these assumptions about what the United States and the region will look like in the next decade, what does it mean for the shape of US policy to come? In many ways, given the current geopolitical and domestic pressures that the US faces, the most expected outcome will be a return to the norm of US policy in the region, the traditional median between the excesses of George W. Bush and the regressive tendencies of Obama. On the whole, this looks like a United States that openly declares the Middle East as a priority, and is much more consistently engaged, both diplomatically and, when necessary, militarily. However, while still willing to act without a UN imprimatur when necessary, it will seek partners to help create legitimacy and relieve pressure on its own resources. To support the strength and readiness of these partnerships, continuing emphasis will be placed on military-to-military cooperation, helping to build confidence between countries that, despite convergent interests, remain culturally very different. This type of US-led but strongly alliance-based regional security architecture in many ways represents the right-sized Middle East policy that the United States seeks.

While the scenario of a United States refocused on Middle East security seems to be most likely in the event of the election of an establishment candidate, what of the alternatives? Given the fact that broad American approaches to foreign policy are typically the prerogative of the



President—despite the fact that Congress increasingly seeks to have a say—much rides on the character of the individual who prevails in 2016. The candidate field displays a wide range of foreign policy views when it comes to the Middle East. However, the mainstream candidates of both parties hew to the norm of an active (but not overbearing) US foreign policy in the Middle East. Although none supports George W. Bush-scale interventionism in the region, a number of candidates believe that the US should take a more active policy in Syria, something Clinton advocated for, at odds with President Obama, during her tenure as his Secretary of State. A number of candidates also support more American effort in containing Iranian activity in the Arab world in the aftermath of the nuclear deal.

Thus, while it is possible (though very unlikely) that a fringe isolationist like Sanders could become President, the odds are against it. Nevertheless, in this unlikely scenario, the problems of the region would likely continue on their downward, violent trajectory. The vacuum would be bloodily fought over for some time, either between regional players who don't have the military acumen to bring a swift conclusion to the test of force, or with interspersed intervention from adventurous outside powers like the Russians. Indeed, extended American neglect of the region through the 2020s would likely create a situation either so dangerous from a security standpoint, or hellish from a humanitarian one, that it would eventually prompt American action no matter what. And that action, when it did come, would follow the same ally-seeking model in reaction to the faults of the Bush Doctrine.

Nevertheless, while it is a simple matter to talk about judicious, coalition-based foreign policy in times when the broad international parameters are known, how might we account for the black swan events, such as the Arab Spring, that are both infrequent yet inevitable? The fall

of the clerical regime in Iran, a massive terrorist attack on American soil, a third intifada in Palestine—all of these events would draw a significant American response. Even a committed isolationist would be hard pressed not to respond militarily to another 9/11-style attack on US soil, and the American public would almost certainly demand such a response. In times of crisis, domestic constraints lift, tolerance for sacrifice increases, and US policy tends to revert to its most instinctive historic norms, a policy morally driven and based on a notion of American duty and exceptionalism. And while recent experiences in Iraq might make such a policy response seem like a frightening and undesirable outcome, if channelled appropriately by allies, American military might can be a transformative element.

Thus, even if a black swan event is to occur in the 2020s, there is still a strong case to be made that the United States, through learning from the worst tendencies in its national foreign policy character, will be better positioned to take advantage—with its partners—of its best elements: a regional policy that is neither too big, nor too small, but just right for the times and the challenges of the twenty-first century Middle East.

Dr. Jessica P. Ashoob

Deputy Director of the Middle East Strategy Task Force at the Atlantic Council (Washington, D.C.).

This is a shortened version of a chapter in the forthcoming (March 2016) anthology "Middle East Security to the Mid-2020's – Expert Perspectives" (Eds. Erika Holmquist and John Rydqvist). For full sources and citations, please see chapter version of this text.