Balancing Act:
Foreign Policy in a New Middle East

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: The United States has long been one of the most influential actors in the Middle East and North Africa, but, as you and others have written recently, American involvement is likely to decrease in coming years as social, political, and human costs rise. What do you anticipate the U.S. presence in the region to look like in coming decades?

Stephen Walt: I think the most important thing to understand is that the level of involvement the United States has had in the Middle East over the last decade or so has been historically quite unusual. The United States has been actively engaged in the region since World War II. We've had close security partnerships with a number of different countries in the region and a moral commitment to the state of Israel as well. We have long seen the Middle East as an important strategic arena, which is why we've been deeply engaged there.

What's interesting, however, is that the United States tended to keep its military role limited. The United States did not have large military bases in the region, nor did it deploy lots of ground troops or air troops on a frequent basis. When we did intervene, we did so only for very short periods of time—for example, in Lebanon in 1958. We tended to act like an offshore balancer: we intervened when we had to, and then got out as quickly as we could while maintaining close relations with a number of local countries. We were essen-

tially playing balance of power politics the entire time. It wasn't perfect, but it worked pretty well.

Beginning in the 1990s, the United States' position began to shift. We first adopted a strategy called "dual containment," which committed us to containing both Iran and Iraq and to leaving troops in Saudi Arabia on a permanent basis. Then, with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the American role reached its peak. We had well over a hundred thousand troops invading another country, occupying it, and attempting to reengineer its politics and society. And we were hoping that these actions would trigger a wave of transformation all across the region. What we're seeing now is a retreat back from that high-water mark—those high hopes. This doesn't mean, however, that the United States is going to get out of the region entirely.

I think we're going to go back to the kind of relationship that we had from 1945 to 1990, where we had close ties with a number of countries in the region, but our military forces were not directly engaged; we were not directly involved except in moments of crisis or emergency. Going back to this strategy will be much better for us and much better for most of the countries in the region. It's not going to generate the same kind of anger and resentment that the invasion of Iraq did. And if the United States can also adjust some of its other policies to be more consistent with American values and—in my view—with American interests, that's also going to diminish over time some Arab and Islamic hostility towards the United States.

Journal: How has the United States' present unwillingness to intervene in Syria shaped the U.S. image in the Middle East?

Walt: Interestingly, it's done no damage so far. It hasn't improved the U.S. image, but it hasn't really harmed it either. The American image is pretty bad to begin with, so it's not as if we're suddenly going to drive it down to very low numbers—it's already pretty low. The real question is whether getting involved would make things better or conceivably make things worse. I think the Obama administration made the calculation that getting more actively involved would only make the civil war more prolonged, more violent, and potentially lead to a worse situation down the road.

The President certainly wasn't going to send American troops to attempt an overthrow of the Assad regime and then try to run Syria in the aftermath. If Assad doesn't know how to run Syria, then I guarantee we don't know how to run Syria either. Even on a smaller scale, I don't think a no-fly zone would

make that much of a difference. It becomes essentially a way of backing one side in a civil war when we don't know enough about the people on that side or exactly what they're going to be like should they gain power. Unfortunately, the Syrian crisis is one of those agonizing situations where inaction makes you feel bad because what's happening there is awful, but direct action doesn't look very attractive because we couldn't make things substantially better.

Ultimately this conflict is going to be resolved by primarily the Syrians themselves with some degree of outside help. And I think it's important for whoever gains power to have done it themselves. If the victors are perceived as riding into Damascus on the backs of American power, that will undermine their legitimacy and make it harder for them to build a new Syrian state and a new Syrian regime.

Journal: You mentioned that you see United States turning toward a foreign policy similar to that seen during the Cold War. That era's policy was characterized in particular by a high level of C.I.A. involvement that tended to generate a lot of anti-American sentiment. Do you see us moving towards this more indirect, covert type of engagement in the Middle East?

Walt: I think you do see some signs of that already. The most visible manifestation is the greater use of special forces and drones by the United States—both are relatively discreet, relatively modest, and certainly harder to detect. Instead of conducting a highly visible, very public operations by several hundred thousand troops, the U.S. government is now saying, "let's just send a few dozen special forces," or "let's just send a bunch of drones in to take care of a particular problem for us." It'll be on page 17 of the newspaper, not page 1.

In addition, we can classify as "top secret" a lot of what we are doing, so ordinary citizens aren't necessarily going to know exactly what's going on. And the consequences, whether good or bad, will be seen later on, well down the road. The dangers here is that we end up doing a variety of things whose ultimate effects are unpredictable, and where nobody really knows what the government is actually doing at any point in time. If that generates a backlash in other parts of the world, as it may well do, we won't understand that that backlash actually has some basis because we didn't know about all the things that the U.S. government was up to. Twenty years from now we'll discover that there are a bunch of countries that are very

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angry with us and we're not going to quite know why. We'll think that it's just because they hate us when in fact they have a grievance based on something that they experienced directly but that we didn't know about.

One of the lessons that I wish the United States had learned is that it's really not necessary for us to do a lot of detailed social engineering in many parts of the world. Instead, we ought to have more confidence in how secure we already are here at home and in the resilience and strength of our own society. We don't have to tell the rest of the world exactly how to govern themselves, exactly who should be running their countries, exactly what products they should be buying in their local groceries, and so on. I don't think the United States should be using military force and killing people unless there are truly vital national interests at stake. We shouldn't be sending our troops—whether regular soldiers or special forces—into harm's way unless there are direct and imminent threats to American security, and we certainly shouldn't be doing this just because we think we'd prefer a different government in power. So I raise the bar fairly high there.

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There's one exception to that: in cases of mass killing and genocide where even I might want to intervene for humanitarian reasons. Syria's a tricky case, but even there we shouldn't intervene unless we are confident we can make things better and that we have a plausible strategy for getting in, being able to solve the problem, not making things worse, and then getting out.

Journal: So we shouldn't be directly intervening militarily in the region, and at the same time covert intervention is generating anti-American sentiment that may, in the long term, result in violence against the United States. Is this a catch-22? How can the United States ensure national security and conduct counterterrorism operations if it can't engage directly or covertly? Do you recommend an alternate path for our foreign policy in the region?

Walt: Well if we're talking strictly about the Middle East, I do think that the United States should be prepared to intervene there if the balance of power looks like it's going to shift against us in some fundamental way. For instance, what if some hostile power threatened to take over all of the oil in the Middle East and manipulate the supply? This is why the United States intervened in 1990 to throw Iraq out of Kuwait, for example. So I'm not saying that there's

no circumstance under which the United States should use military power to protect its interests in the Middle East or anywhere else. Fortunately, there's no danger of something like that happening right now, so we don't need to worry very much about that kind of an event.

Counterterrorism seems to me a trickier problem. I don't mind using American power, and that includes drones, to go after individuals or groups that are actively plotting or trying to attack the United States. However, I think we have tended to slip now towards defining our terrorist enemies in quite broad terms, and occasionally going after organizations—the Taliban in Afghanistan would be a good example—that are not fundamentally anti-American, and whose agenda is not that of global terrorism. We have tended to conflate many of those organizations and see them all as one big variegated phenomenon, and assume that it's in our interest to try and wipe them all out simultaneously. I think that's being overly ambitious.

Journal: You have said that, at this moment, there is no direct threat to American interests in the Middle East. If Iran were to acquire the bomb, that is clearly a threat to Israel. Since the interests of Israel have ostensibly and historically been aligned with the interests of the United States, would an Iranian bomb be a direct threat to U.S. interests?

Walt: First of all, I think the Iranian threat to Israel is greatly exaggerated. Israel has a robust nuclear deterrent of its own and Iran fully understands that. So, if at some point down the road Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, they couldn't do anything with them without causing their own destruction, and I see no evidence that the leadership of Iran is suicidal. So the threat to Israel is greatly overstated.

The second point I'd make is that it's not threatening the United States. We have some interests in common with Israel and we support Israel's existence—I certainly do—but that doesn't mean our interests are identical. Problems for American allies can be our problems, but I think in this case Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon—though not a good thing—doesn't pose the sort of vital threat that would warrant the use of military force to prevent. I'd like to persuade Iran not to obtain a nuclear weapon, but I think that can be done through diplomacy. I would not favor the use of military force to try and prevent them from going nuclear. Ultimately, by the way, this is impossible to do, unless you are willing to keep attacking them every time they rebuild their nuclear program.

Journal: Now, tracing back just a little bit to the U.S. "retreat" from the Middle East, we have often heard that politics abhors a vacuum. Who is likely to step into the role once filled by the United States? Are we likely to see a regional leader emerge or will another foreign power step in?

Walt: I think it's unlikely that any of the countries in the region will be able to exercise political dominance over the area. Israel will continue to be the strongest military power in the region, but its political influence is limited for all the obvious reasons.

The other point to bear in mind though is that there is this tendency in the United States to say, "Well, if we don't have the dominant influence some place, then somebody else might, and that would be bad for the United States." But in some cases we end up trying to manage some intractable area like Afghanistan and that ends up being very costly for the United States. Just as it was for the Soviet Union in the 1980s, I might add.

People are worried about the rise of China. One of the reasons that China has been able to rise so rapidly is that the United States has been trying to solve all sorts of problems in various parts of the world, and the Chinese haven't. The Chinese have largely been free riding on the United States. The Chinese can invest in Afghanistan while we pay $100 billion a year to provide security there. If the United States adjusts its strategic posture in a variety of ways, where we worry about the places that matter and worry less about the places that don't, it might be quite good for the United States to hand responsibility off to others.

Journal: You've highlighted the Obama administration's "strategic pivot" towards Asia. Do you see that as stemming out of a desire to counter China's rising prominence? What do you see our future relationship being with the East Asian states?

Walt: In my opinion, Asia will be the primary locus of American strategic attention over the next 20 to 40 years, for both economic and military reasons. This is going to be an extremely difficult diplomatic and military challenge for the United States. Forming a loose coalition—a balancing alliance—against a powerful China is not going to be easy. I say that even though there will be lots of countries in Asia who won't want to be dominated by China, and who will see the United States as a very powerful and useful ally.

But managing an effective balancing coalition in Asia will be difficult. First, the countries in that coalition would be spread over an enormous geo-

graphic distance. If a problem arises in one part, some of the other states may not think it really affects them and won't feel the need to get involved—that's a big collective action problem. Second, a number of these countries still have pretty intense rivalries or resentments towards each other. Just this past year we've seen that South Korea and Japan were unable to reach a new intelligence-sharing agreement due to domestic political opposition in South Korea, based on resentment of Japan's colonial role in South Korea. Finally a number of Asian countries also have close economic ties with China. These are countries where we would like to ensure security cooperation, but they don't want to risk the economic ties they've already been constructing with China. The bottom line here is that managing this kind of coalition is going to be very tricky.

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The big problem for us is how to make sure that we don't have to do all the work while all of our Asian allies free ride? Our Asian partners have the same problem in reverse: how do they make sure that we don't get them to do everything and we just sit back and let them do all the heavy lifting? So there'll be a lot of bargaining going on between the United States and Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and others, where each side will try to get the other to do more work, and that'll be a source of friction too. It'll be a real challenge for future diplomats.

Journal: What is the one piece of advice for improving Sino–American relations that you would offer the President of the United States?

Walt: I can never give one piece of advice, so in this case I'll give three. I'd say first, Mr. President, recognize that China is not a monolith and that the Chinese leadership has internal politics the same way that you do. There are different interest groups in China; there are different factions; there are different people pulling and hauling at the Chinese leaders that you'll be meeting with. Don't assume that every act is a result of some well-thought-out, carefully conceived plan. The second thing I would advise him to do is be clear and unambiguous in his communications with Chinese officials. You want them to understand that you empathize with some of their circumstances, but that international politics is a serious business and that ultimately, the United States has lines that it won't let China cross. Third, I would say that you would want to make sure that contacts between Chinese leadership and American leaders are extensive

and ongoing; nothing will be served by cutting of communication. You want to have an extensive set of ties between top officials, mid-level officials, and other interested parties outside the government, so that lots of information is flowing back and forth.