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STATECRAFT

Will a Military Withdrawal from the Middle East Leave a Vacuum?

JULY 2021 | QUINCY BRIEF NO. 14

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Executive Summary

- The Biden administration must not allow disputes among combatant commanders about resource allocation to dictate decisions concerning U.S. force posture. The White House has acknowledged that the Middle East is no longer as central a concern to our national security as it once was and that the U.S. must reshape its military presence in the region.
- Fears that Russia or China might take advantage of a reduction in the U.S. military presence in the Middle East are exaggerated. China and Russia have both benefited from America's willingness to shoulder the security burden of the Middle East.
- Washington should complement its reduced military presence in the Middle East with greater diplomatic involvement. The objectives should be retaining influence and advancing U.S. interests in a peaceful and stable environment.

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The ongoing debate over whether, how, and how many U.S. forces should be based in the Middle East coincides with the broader debate over where the U.S. should be spending its defense dollars – and whether the resources it is expending in the Middle East should be spent elsewhere. The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft has participated in this debate by issuing several papers on these questions, including Eugene Gholz's "[Nothing Much to Do: Why America Can Bring All Troops Home From the Middle East](#)," which QI published in June 2021. The U.S. has "no compelling military need to keep a permanent troop presence in the Middle East," Gholz argued. "It should be the medium to long-term objective of the United States to align its military presence with its strategic interests in the Middle East, beginning a responsible and timely drawdown of U.S. forces in the region now."

QI senior analyst Steven Simon and the Carnegie Endowment's Richard Sokolsky deftly summarized QI's position in the April edition of Foreign Policy magazine. They wrote:

- "First the United States has no vital interests in the Persian Gulf. The region's strategic importance to the country is declining primarily because of its growing energy production and global energy market diversification.
- "Second, the main threats to regional security and stability are internal, stemming from state weakness and dysfunctional governance; U.S. military forces are ill-suited to address these sources of conflict.
- "Third, core U.S. interests in the region are not currently endangered and can be safeguarded at a lower cost and with fewer risks and military resources. The United States does not need to maintain a permanent peacetime military presence to protect the free flow of oil, defend Israeli security, combat jihadist terrorism, or prevent the emergence of a hostile regional hegemon.
- "Fourth, the United States would save a considerable amount of money if forces in the Persian Gulf were withdrawn to the United States."
- "Finally, limiting the exposure of U.S. military forces in the Persian Gulf would reduce the risk of their involvement in other countries' internal conflicts; as long as the United States operates forces in the region, the argument goes, it will be too tempting for U.S. leaders to pursue military solutions to foreign-policy problems."

Since the appearance of the Gholz paper and the Simon–Sokolsky article, senior military officers have warned against our point of view – asserting that a withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Middle East would create a political and military void in the region that would be exploited by U.S. regional competitors (such as Iran) and putative global adversaries such as Russia and China. The warnings have been public, strident, and

issued by senior military officers who are the current combatant commanders in the Middle East (Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.) and Africa (Gen. Stephen J. Townsend).

This brief is a response to those concerns.

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In April 2021, Gen. Townsend, the head of U.S. Africa Command, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia was inhibiting the U.S. military from responding to the continued threats posed by terrorist networks. “There’s no denying that the repositioning of forces out of Somalia has introduced new layers of complexity and risk,” Townsend said. His statement expanded on similar remarks he had made twice in 2020 – on which he further elaborated in June 2021. Gen. McKenzie, the head of the U.S. Central Command, endorsed Townsend’s views that same month.¹

In several instances, Townsend couched his argument as a dire warning of the consequences of a U.S. withdrawal from Africa and the Middle East – which, as he warned, might endanger the United States. If the U.S. “steps back from Africa too far,” he noted, “China and Russia will fill the void to our detriment. Violent extremist organizations will be able to grow unchecked, some will ultimately threaten the homeland, and we will lose opportunities for increased trade and investments with some of the fastest growing economies of the world.”²

Townsend’s statements reflect a broad spectrum of military views that a redeployment of U.S. forces from the Middle East and Africa will leave a vacuum that can be exploited by terrorist networks or foreign competitors. Townsend was particularly outspoken

¹ In November of 2020, the Quincy Institute recommended a military withdrawal from Somalia: “The U.S. government should reorient its intervention in Somalia, leading with diplomacy and development endeavors targeted at political and governance challenges, while reducing and eventually ending military engagement.” See, Shackelford, Elizabeth. “Ending the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Realigning Our Engagement With Our Interests In Somalia. Quincy Institute, November 10, 2020. <https://quincyinst.org/2020/11/10/ending-the-self-fulfilling-prophecy-realigning-our-engagement-with-our-interests-in-somalia/>

² Townsend, Stephen J. “2020 Posture Statement to Congress.” United States Africa Command, January 30, 2020. <https://www.africom.mil/about-the-command/2020-posture-statement-to-congress>.

about the Trump administration's December 2020 decision to withdraw U.S. military forces from Somalia. Since that decision, Townsend said, U.S. forces have been "commuting to work" by flying into the country from nearby nations for training events and then leaving. Townsend's "commuting to work" has become a standard theme among senior military officers who oppose a lighter or nonexistent U.S. military footprint in the Middle East and Africa.³

Neither McKenzie nor Townsend concluded that a lighter military footprint in the Middle East or Africa, or no U.S. military presence at all, would actually pose a risk to U.S. homeland security, or the security of its major allies.

Gen. McKenzie has echoed Townsend's views, saying that a drawdown of U.S. forces in the Middle East would leave a vacuum that could be exploited by Russia, China, or Iran.⁴ "I think the Middle East broadly is an area of intense competition between the great powers," McKenzie told reporters in May of 2021. "And I think that as we adjust our posture in the region, Russia and China will be looking very closely to see if a vacuum opens that they can exploit."⁵ Crucially, McKenzie tied America's ability to counter Russia, China, and Iran to the Defense Department's global posture review, hinting that the three nations he noted would study the outcome of the review in assessing whether to exploit what they perceive as America's weakened stance in the region.

What is interesting about Townsend's and McKenzie's views is that, when later pressed by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, neither commander turned out to believe that a lighter, or even nonexistent U.S. military footprint in either the Middle

³ Everstine, Brian W. "U.S. Troops May Return to Somalia After Force Structure Review." *Air Force Magazine*, June 29, 2021. <https://www.airforcemag.com/us-troops-may-return-to-somalia-after-force-structure-review/>.

⁴ McKenzie, Kenneth F. "Interview with AP and ABC." U.S. Central Command, May 23, 2021. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2643111/gen-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-on-the-record-interview-wit-h-ap-and-abc-may-23rd-2021/>.

⁵ Choi, Joseph. "Russia, China will look to expand influence in Middle East as U.S. pulls back." *The Hill*, May 23, 2021. <https://thehill.com/policy/international/middle-east-north-africa/554994-top-general-russia-china-will-look-to-expand>

East or Africa would result in the kind of political vacuum they warned about. Subsequently, when asked about whether a U.S. withdrawal would leave a vacuum in the region, McKenzie said that he viewed Russia's involvement in the Middle East as opportunistic, temporary, and even counterproductive, while China's goals in the region were and are, as he said, "primarily economic." Iran, McKenzie added, can be countered through the assurance that the U.S. will continue its commitment to deter Iranian activities by military means – whether or not U.S. forces are based in the region. McKenzie further explained his views in remarks he gave to the National Council on U.S.-Arab relations, saying that forward basing is only one option in deterring Iran, then implying that forward basing is not necessary.

McKenzie's reasoning is crucial: "The military component of this is to convince Iran it is not in their best interest to launch an attack. . . and we obtain that through deterrence. And deterrence is you either do it by preventing them from achieving the object of their attack, or do it by punishment. You prefer to do it by the first of the two, which is that they're not able to achieve it because of the [U.S. military] posture in the theater. But if not, the promise that we can come back and we can impose cost on you at a time and place of our choosing."⁶ In simpler terms, while McKenzie prefers the U.S. deter Iran by basing U.S. troops in the Middle East, America's ability to punish Iran by projecting forces into the region is a sufficient alternative.

More pointedly, neither McKenzie nor Townsend concluded that a lighter military footprint in the Middle East or Africa, or no U.S. military presence at all, would actually pose a risk to U.S. homeland security, or the security of its major allies, despite Townsend's initial claims to the contrary. While China, Russia, and Iran challenge U.S. political influence in the Middle East and Africa, none of the three "pose a direct military threat to U.S. national security interests" in either region, both commanders confirmed. Even in the case of Saudi Arabia, which remains under the threat of Iranian-supported

⁶ McKenzie, Kenneth F. "Remarks as delivered to the National Council on US-Arab Relations." U.S. Central Command, November 19, 2020. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2421604/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-remarks-as-delivered-to-the-national-council-on-u/>.

Houthi attacks, McKenzie argued that the U.S. should not opt for stationing troops in the country, as the U.S. military's over-the-horizon and offshore capabilities will provide "larger assurances" such that such troops are unnecessary.

Which is to say that, while McKenzie's blunt statements on a drawdown of U.S. military assets in the Middle East (and Townsend's on Africa) were couched as a warning when they were issued, neither McKenzie nor Townsend's testimony supported the alarmist views they expressed when not testifying on Capitol Hill. That was particularly true for McKenzie, who backed away from predictions that abandoning the extensive deployments that have marked nearly 40 years (since the 1987 U.S. Navy reflagging operation in the Persian Gulf) would result in increased threats to the United States. In fact, when McKenzie was asked directly whether a redeployment of U.S. troops out of the Middle East and the adoption of an "over-the-horizon counterterrorism strategy" would make his job impossible, he demurred: It would make his job more difficult, he said, "but it doesn't make it impossible."⁷ Townsend agreed as regards Africa.

More pointedly, McKenzie and Townsend each told the Senate Armed Services Committee that America's most important asset in the Middle East and Africa was not the presence of its troops, or U.S. basing arrangements, but a suite of U.S. initiatives that tied Middle Eastern and African nations to U.S. interests: joint military exercises, America's training of foreign military officers, U.S. weapons sales, and economic aid. Presumably, the actual presence of U.S. troops in the region registers below these factors. Finally, and particularly in the case of the Middle East, the United States has actually been "commuting to work" for four decades — since the U.S. Central Command was formally established in January 1983.

⁷ "Inhofe Asks AFRICOM, CENTCOM Leaders to Clarify Resource Requirements to Defend US Interests in Africa, Afghanistan." Office of Senator James Inhofe, April 22, 2021. <https://www.inhofe.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/inhofe-asks-africom-centcom-leaders-to-clarify-resource-requirements-to-defend-us-interests-in-africa-afghanistan>.

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Oddly enough, Central Command was established over the strident opposition of the U.S. military, which preferred strengthening the U.S. Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, at the express direction of President Reagan and Caspar Weinberger, Reagan's secretary of defense.⁸ The justifications for Centcom were two: to protect U.S. energy shipments flowing through the Persian Gulf – in his discussions with senior military officers, Reagan specifically cited Mobil Corporation's natural gas contract with Qatar as in America's national interest – and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.⁹

While the U.S. would later use Centcom as a platform for subsequent conflicts – the U.S.–Kuwait reflagging operation, the two Persian Gulf Wars, and the invasion of Afghanistan – the U.S. military's initial objections to establishing Centcom have retained their power: The new combatant command diluted the strength of American global forces, as Centcom regularly accessed resources from other regions to meet its tasks. The 1987 reflagging operation was conducted primarily by naval and air assets that Centcom "borrowed" from the Pacific Command, while U.S. ground forces taken primarily from the European Command fought and won the first Persian Gulf War. More recently, the Indo–Pacific Command has raised alarms that the diversion of resources to the Central Command means that it will not be able to meet its requirements under the 2018 National Defense Strategy.¹⁰ Indo–Pacom's argument has great appeal inside the U.S. military: The U.S. pivot to Asia cannot be credible, a number of senior U.S. military officers argue, until the U.S. is willing to divert resources from past threats (the U.S. global war on terrorism) to meet emerging threats arising from great power competition.

But removing military assets from the Middle East does not mean those assets would be or should be redeployed to bases in East Asia to meet a purported threat from China.

⁸ Drea, Edward J., *et al.* "History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–2012." Washington. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint History Office, 2013.

⁹ According to Gen. George Crist and Gen. Joseph P. Hoar.

¹⁰ Lubold, Gordon. "U.S. Works Up New Effort to Shift Military's Focus to Asia." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-works-up-new-effort-to-shift-militarys-focus-to-asia-11571840433>.

Indeed, even senior military officers who view China as an emerging threat argue that the removal of military assets from the Middle East would mean a reallocation of badly needed resources that can be used to enhance readiness, strengthen modernization, and provide funding for East Asia initiatives aimed at countering China. The redeployment of troops from the Middle East would be primarily to Europe and the United States, enhancing available East Asian deterrence.

The debate over resources between Indo–Pacom and Centcom has focused primarily on U.S. Navy assets, and the debate has recently become nasty. In September 2020, U.S. Navy officers argued that the Central Command’s request for an additional aircraft carrier (what the Pentagon calls a “double pump deployment”) placed critical resource burdens on Navy ship deployments — and was unnecessary. As noted in an authoritative report on the debate in *Defense News*, the Navy was enraged by the Centcom request. The sotto voce complaints of Navy officers were hard to miss: Centcom, they implied, was playing politics with military deployments to enhance its continued access to shrinking defense dollars. “Experts and analysts have for years questioned, for example, the value of sending carriers to deter Iran given the enormous strain it puts on the Navy to constantly provide flattop presence in Central Command,” *Defense News* reported. “In recent years, the military has shown more willingness to take chances with leaving Central Command without a carrier.”¹¹

Other U.S. Navy partisans were even more outspoken, questioning whether the deployment of additional Navy assets to the Middle East would actually accomplish the deterrence goals Centcom laid out. They pointed out that carriers in the region don’t actually deter Iran, as their “malign activities” continue despite their presence. The same is true for Russia, which continues to operate in Syria despite the U.S. military presence in the region, as well as China, which continues its Belt and Road Initiative (which now

¹¹ Larter, David B. “After a grueling deployment, the carrier Eisenhower gets set for a dubious ‘double pump.’” *Defense News*, September 20, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/09/20/after-a-grueling-deployment-the-carrier-eisenhower-gets-set-for-a-dubious-double-pump/>.

includes port contracts with Israel) despite the flow of U.S. military forces into the region. What exactly is the U.S. deterring?

“It’s an asinine strategy,” the Hudson Institute’s Bryan Clark told Defense News. “The Iranians don’t perceive carriers as a threat to their ability to project power because they project power through gray zone activities and terrorism – the kind of things that carriers aren’t very good at dealing with.” He went on to note: “And when they are inside the Persian Gulf, the Iranians perceive them as being an easy target. They can range the entire Gulf with shore batteries along the coast in caves and other terrain where it’s hard to root them out. So the Iranians see the carrier as a way to get the Americans to spend a lot of money on a show of force that doesn’t really impact their strategic calculation.”

The dustup between Centcom and Indo–Pacom reflects the fight over resources playing out among combatant commanders, an internal feud that has replaced the interservice funding debates that were a feature of the U.S. military in the first decades following World War II. But the debate between Centcom and Indo–Pacom involves much more than which troops should be deployed where. The real question is about resources for readiness and modernization. The deployment of the U.S.S. Eisenhower to Centcom’s area of responsibility is symbolic of this controversy. Successive deployments of older ships (such as the Eisenhower) to the Middle East have a pernicious impact on fleet readiness, as protesting Navy officers made clear when McKenzie insisted on the deployment. Put simply: Cutting fleet deployments to the Middle East will free up funds for enhanced readiness, while continuing fleet deployments will “put more wear on hulls than they were designed to sustain.”

Then, too, as senior Navy officers point out, cutting back Middle East deployments, or engaging them only in the direst circumstances, will free up resources for what the Navy views as enhancing fleet maintenance and focusing on fleet modernization – two requirements for strengthening what the Navy believes it must have for meeting the

challenges it faces in the western Pacific. This is not about purchasing more ships: This is about maintaining what the Navy already has.

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The claim that a smaller military footprint in the Middle East would undermine U.S. security interests actually reflects a concern that a reduced force presence would undermine the interests of combatant commanders, who wish to maintain access to resources. The Biden administration must not allow disputes about resource allocation among combatant commanders to determine its force posture decisions in any such manner. The White House has acknowledged that the Middle East is no longer as central a concern as it formerly was, especially in the face of new and more pressing challenges, and that it must reshape the U.S. military presence in the region accordingly.

The claim that a smaller military footprint in the Middle East would undermine U.S. security interests actually reflects a concern that a reduced force presence would undermine the interests of combatant commanders, who wish to maintain access to resources.

Finally, fears about possible moves by Russia or China to take advantage of a reduction in U.S. military presence in the region are unfounded. Up to this point, China and Russia have benefited from America's willingness to shoulder the burden of securing access to oil resources and managing regional tensions. Russia lacks the capacity – and China the inclination – to pursue a military buildup in the region. If either Russia or China attempted to assume the role played by the United States as regional security guarantor, it would likely prove even more difficult than it did for the United States, given the two nations' more limited resources. There is no evidence indicating that either nation is interested in repeating America's mistakes.

About the Author

Mark Perry is a senior analyst at the Quincy Institute. He is a widely published military and foreign affairs reporter and analyst. He is the author of ten books, including *The Pentagon's Wars: The Military's Undeclared War Against America's Presidents* (Basic Books, 2017); *The Most Dangerous Man In America: The Making of Douglas MacArthur* (Basic Books 2014); *Talking To Terrorists* (Basic Books, 2010); *Partners in Command* (Penguin Press, 2007); *Grant and Twain* (Random House, 2004); *A Fire In Zion: Inside the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process* (William Morrow, 1995); and *Four Stars: the Joint Chiefs of Staff and America's Civilian Leaders* (Houghton Mifflin, 1989). The Boston Globe named his book on Gen. MacArthur the best non-fiction work of 2014. Mark served as a senior foreign policy analyst and political director for Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, which founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. He is a graduate of Boston University.

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