

A Post-Hegemonic Gulf? Reassessing U.S Strategy

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The United States currently faces a fundamental strategic choice in the Gulf. After five decades of military dominance and energy security commitments, Washington must now determine how to maintain the regional influence and stability without bearing the unsustainable political, financial, and military costs of traditional hegemony, an issue widely noted in the grand strategy debate. Neither full retrenchment, as urged by proponents of offshore balancing, nor continued primacy in the form of liberal hegemony represents a viable path forward for the USA. Instead, the United States should pursue an adaptive partnership model that combines maritime focused force posture, formalised burden sharing agreements with its Gulf partners, and calibrated diplomatic engagement with Iran, in line with the shift toward “targeted partnerships” in the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy.¹

The Strategic Challenge

Several structural changes have rendered the traditional U.S. approach to Gulf security increasingly unsustainable. The shale revolution has dramatically reduced America’s dependence on Gulf oil weakening the domestic political case for extensive military commitments and reinforcing arguments for strategic restraint and rebalancing toward Asia. Public fatigue with Middle Eastern interventions has constrained policymakers’ freedom of action, contributing to what Schuessler labels an “ambivalent” approach to offshore balancing in the region. Meanwhile, China’s rising regional presence, which is exemplified by its brokering of Saudi–Iranian détente in 2023 and broader economic statecraft in the Middle East and North Africa, has helped create a more multipolar regional environment.²

The core policy problem is straightforward to state but difficult to resolve. How can Washington preserve its interests in a strategically vital region while managing competing pressures from domestic political constraints, great-power competition with China, commitments to Gulf partners, and the persistent risk of escalation with Iran? The challenge is compounded by the absence of any clear endpoint. Regional security remains both inherently open-ended and conflict-prone, with multiple actors pursuing contradictory and competing interests, as recent analyses of Gulf hedging and great power rivalry underscore.³

Historical Evolution of U.S. Gulf Policy

Understanding the current strategic structure requires appreciation of how U.S. Gulf policy has evolved through three distinct phases. During the Cold War era from the 1970s through the 1990s, the American strategy was mainly centred on containment and energy protection. The Carter Doctrine established explicit military guarantees to protect oil flows, while Washington cultivated Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait as core security partners and forward deployment deterred both the Soviet expansion and instability from the Iran–Iraq War.⁴

The second phase, spanning roughly from 2001 to 2015, was defined by counterterrorism, regime stability, and direct intervention. The 2003 invasion of Iraq fundamentally destabilised the regional balance of power and dramatically increased U.S. entanglement, prompting a major expansion of American military infrastructure with large bases in Gulf states such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait and sustained operations against Al-Qaeda and later ISIS. Policy priorities shifted toward counterterrorism campaigns and the protection of Gulf monarchies from internal and

external threats, embedding the logic of liberal hegemony in U.S. Middle East strategy.⁵

The current phase, beginning around 2015 is characterised by gradual retrenchment, burden-sharing, and adaptation to multipolarity. The shale revolution fundamentally altered America's energy calculus, while the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations each experimented with partial drawdowns, greater emphasis on allied contributions, and a strategic "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward Asia. Recent U.S. strategy documents stress "right-sizing" commitments, supporting normalisation agreements such as the Abraham Accords, and reprioritising resources toward strategic competition with China.⁶

Evidence of Policy Recalibration

Several developments illustrate to us the ongoing recalibration of U.S. Gulf strategy. The Abraham Accords represent an effort to institutionalise tacit cooperation between Israel and the Gulf states, thereby reducing America's load bearing role in regional security framework while retaining a core U.S. convening function. The decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2021, despite its execution failures, signalled clearly that Washington has limited appetite for open-ended military commitments highlighting an inflection point that Gulf partners read as a warning about American reliability and staying power.⁷

U.S. policy toward Iran has oscillated between maximum pressure and constrained engagement. This generates uncertainty among Gulf allies about the consistency and durability of American strategy and reinforcing the "ambivalence" identified in recent studies of U.S. balancing behaviour. Such unpredictability has encouraged regional hedging, which China has capitalised on by expanding its Gulf presence through Belt and Road infrastructure projects, telecommunications investments, energy deals, and high profile diplomatic mediation such as the 2023 Saudi-Iran agreement. Beijing's offer of "non-conditional" partnerships, security and economic cooperation without governance or human-rights conditionality, has proven attractive to Gulf capitals seeking strategic autonomy.⁸

Regional autonomy has increased correspondingly. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have pursued independent military campaigns in Yemen, coordinated oil production with Russia through OPEC+, and diversified their security partnerships beyond the traditional Western suppliers, illustrating a pattern of strategic hedging documented across the region.⁹ These developments don't represent a rupture with the United States, but rather indicate a more transactional approach to the relationship and reduced deference to American preferences.

Analytical Framework

This analysis situates U.S. Gulf policy within 3 competing theoretical frameworks. Proponents of offshore balancing argue the United States should withdraw from direct regional commitments and rely on local powers to check each other, intervening only when a potential hegemon threatens to dominate the region, a position articulated forcefully by Mearsheimer. Advocates of liberal hegemony maintain that American primacy remains essential for regional stability. And any retrenchment would create dangerous power vacuums, warning that offshore balancing underestimates risks of regional instability. A third perspective emphasises multipolarity and regional security complexes, suggesting that the Gulf is transitioning towards a more diffuse distribution of power in which multiple external actors, including China and Russia, play significant

roles alongside the United States.¹⁰

Assessing the feasibility of continued dominance requires consideration of several constraining factors. Fiscal pressures limit defence spending flexibility, while public opinion remains sceptical of Middle Eastern military commitments, contributing to contentious domestic debates whenever major interventions are contemplated. Gulf partners are actively diversifying their external relationships, and threat perceptions are evolving as cyber capabilities, drone warfare, and energy market dynamics reshape the regional security environment in ways that traditional force postures may not adequately address.¹¹

Future Scenarios

Three broad scenarios merit consideration. Under continued U.S. dominance, Washington would have to maintain or expand its military presence and security commitments, preserving deterrence credibility and limiting Chinese and Russian influence but at high financial costs and limited domestic political support. This approach would also sustain the risk of entanglement in local conflicts and constrain the ability to reallocate resources to other theatres, a concern highlighted in the offshore balancing literature.¹²

A second scenario envisions managed disengagement, in which the United States systematically reduces its regional footprint and encourages the Gulf states to assume greater responsibility for their own security. This would lower American burdens while also aligning policy with domestic preferences for restraint, but it risks creating power vacuums, encouraging partner hedging, and generating regional instability that external actors such as China may exploit.

The third scenario, the one this brief recommends, is an adaptive partnership model. This approach would establish a shared security framework with Gulf partners, shift toward a maritime-focused force posture, and maintain selective American presence at critical chokepoints, echoing calls for a more flexible and “ambivalent” offshore role rather than full withdrawal.¹³ The principal challenge is that this model requires institutional frameworks and burden-sharing arrangements that do not yet exist and would take sustained diplomatic effort to construct.

Policy Recommendations

Rather than choosing between full retrenchment and unsustainable dominance, Washington should instead pursue an adaptive partnership framework that combines complementary instruments. This is consistent with the emphasis on burden-sharing and networked security partnerships in recent U.S. strategy documents.

First, the United States should adopt a maritime-centric force posture. This means consolidating American presence around critical maritime chokepoints, particularly the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, while reducing ground-based footprints in Qatar and Bahrain, leveraging naval and air assets and unmanned systems to maintain deterrence at lower cost. Maritime forces can preserve freedom of navigation and deterrence credibility with reduced political exposure compared to large onshore installations, though at the cost of weaker intelligence cooperation and slower response to land-based contingencies.¹⁴

Second, Washington should also negotiate formalised burden-sharing agreements with key Gulf partners. Drawing on the NATO model and emerging U.S.–Gulf dialogue on defence industrial

cooperation, the US should establish explicit defence contribution frameworks with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, linking advanced arms sales to measurable security investments and interoperability standards.¹⁵ This approach institutionalises the partnership while also distributing costs more equitably, though Gulf partners may resist formalisation as an infringement on sovereignty, requiring sustained and carefully sequenced diplomacy.

Lastly, the United States should pursue a parallel Iran de-escalation track. Without abandoning containment, Washington should engage Tehran on narrow, verifiable issues such as maritime incidents and prisoner exchanges, ideally via third party mediations by states like Oman or under multilateral umbrellas. The objective would be to reduce Gulf partners' perception that American policy oscillates unpredictably between confrontation and accommodation, while limiting opportunities for China or Russia to monopolise diplomatic channels with Tehran.¹⁶ Any engagement risks accusations of appeasement from Gulf allies and domestic critics, requiring careful signalling to manage perceptions.

Risks and Unintended Consequences

Policymakers should also monitor several potential unintended consequences of this approach. If U.S. commitment signals weaken excessively, Gulf partners may respond with free-riding by reducing their own security investments in expectation of continued American protection, or hedging through accelerated diversification toward China and other alternative partners, a dynamic already visible in recent Gulf diplomatic and economic behaviour. Emphasis on burden-sharing and advanced arms transfers could paradoxically accelerate regional weapons acquisitions, generating an arms race dynamic that increases rather than decreases instability.

Most critically, Iran may misread American posture adjustments as weakness, creating escalation risks that undermine the strategy's core objectives, particularly if maritime incidents or proxy attacks occur in the absence of robust deconfliction mechanisms. At

the same time, reduced U.S. footprint could weaken Washington's ability to shape the regional norms on human rights and governance.¹⁷ This leaves greater space for China's non-conditional model of engagement to influence regional order.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the era of uncontested American hegemony in the Gulf is ending, but this shouldn't mean abandonment of U.S. interests or acceptance of regional instability. An adaptive partnership model offers a sustainable middle path, one that maintains American influence and deterrence capability while also distributing burdens more equitably, reducing political exposure, and accommodating the realities of an increasingly multipolar regional environment. Success will require sustained diplomatic investment, careful management of partner expectations, and willingness to accept trade-offs inherent in any strategy short of unlimited commitment.

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