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Major Power Rivalry in the Middle East

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Middle East experts, journalists, and foreign policy generalists have devoted significant attention to the Arab uprisings and their aftermath, including various proxy wars in the region, competing bids for leadership, and geopolitical maneuvering among regional powers. During this period, as the United States has debated its role in the Middle East, Russia and China—and to a lesser extent India and the European Union—have sought greater influence in the region. Journalists and analysts tend to assume that great power competition is underway in the Middle East, but this commentary rarely sheds light on what major powers want and how they seek to achieve their goals. Competition among these actors has not thus far led to direct confrontation but rather remains within the realm of establishing, extending, and reinforcing influence and prestige at each other's expense. This competition does not preclude cooperation among major powers in specific areas, as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015 attests. Still, this cooperation tends to be episodic and circumstantial given the overriding interest among great powers to advance their own interests and prestige, often at the expense of other major powers.

Although the United States remains an important—even the most important—external actor in the region, American leaders and the foreign policy community that serves them are debating whether Washington should be the primary provider of security in the region, especially as interests such as energy security no longer seem as important as they once were. This debate, coupled with actual American disengagement in certain places, has had three significant effects. First, regional powers, believing that the United States is "leaving" the region, have taken matters into their own hands, contributing to chaos

in parts of the Middle East. Second, external actors have seized the opportunity to exercise power in a region that was previously an area of exclusive American dominance. Third, although major powers and their allies have been careful to avoid direct conflict with each other, they have also either refused or failed to compel regional powers to resolve existing conflicts.

Of course, the status quo could change. The geopolitics of the Middle East continue to evolve, and developments in places as far from the region as Europe and the South China Sea could alter power configurations and partnerships in ways that sharpen competition or pave the way for greater cooperation. Given the unpredictability of events, it is impossible to say what factors or changes will contribute to either outcome. Within all this uncertainty, however, one development is clear: the American moment of regional supremacy—when no state or combination of states could hope to challenge U.S. power and influence—is over. The Middle East is now up for grabs among a variety of regional powers and external actors, including the United States. This power vacuum has made the region less secure. Indeed, competition among major powers—and between great powers and regional competitors—has significantly affected the trajectory of conflicts in the region, especially in Syria and Libya but also in Yemen and to a lesser extent Lebanon.

Accounts of major power competition often present regional actors as subject to the calculus of the greater powers. These analyses tend to leave out a critical dimension of the story, namely the ability of states within the region to complicate, oppose, and undermine the goals of the major powers. This has been the experience of the United States in the Middle East with both foes and partners. As the United States, China, and Russia—and to a lesser extent India and the European Union—jockey for position in the region, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have pursued their own interests by working with, against, or around these outside powers. These conflicting interests have created an unstable dynamic within the spheres in which major powers are competing—at times pitting regional powers against greater powers that are themselves attempting to outmaneuver other great powers.

This game becomes clear with even a thumbnail sketch of the interests around which regional powers conduct their foreign policies in the Middle East. For instance, Israel defines its core national interest as preventing its regional adversaries, most recently Iran in its drive to acquire nuclear technology, from acquiring the means to pose a threat to Israeli

security. The United States, which provides Israel with the means to ensure its security, is therefore critical to Israel's national security. The Israelis have demonstrated independence from the United States, however, having coordinated with Russia in the region and developed strong economic and technological ties with China.

Like Israel, Saudi Arabia regards Iran as its primary regional antagonist and has relied on the United States for protection. The Saudis do not have any realistic options other than to align closely with the United States, but, as differences over Yemen and human rights issues test U.S.-Saudi relations, the Saudis have indicated their willingness to further develop their relations with China and Russia.

The UAE is an important actor in the regional anti-Iran coalition and a security partner of the United States, but it defines its interests more broadly. Notably, the Emiratis have sought to counter the accumulation of Islamist power around the region and to oppose popular uprisings. As a result, the UAE has a confluence of interests with Russia, which is also suspicious of popular protests and Islamist political parties. Separate from its core geostrategic interests, the Emirati government has deepened its economic ties with China.

The primary interests of Egypt's leaders are economic development and social stability. The way the Egyptian leadership has gone about achieving these goals coincides with the views and goals of Beijing and Moscow, though Cairo has sought to balance these developing ties with its long-standing relations with Washington.

Of all the regional powers, Turkey's relationships and interests are the most dynamic. Turkish leaders seek a more independent foreign policy from the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in order to establish Turkey as a leader in the Middle East. As a result, Turkey has played a major role in regional conflicts such as those in Libya and Syria, resulting in both conflict and cooperation with major powers, especially the United States and Russia.

Finally, Iran aspires to become a regional leader as well and has thus sought to undermine the United States and its regional partners. The Iranian leadership has advanced this goal through geostrategic cooperation with Russia, especially in Syria, and the development of economic ties with China.

RUSSIA

Aside from the United States, Russia is the most visible major power in the Middle East. Although Moscow's influence in the region waned considerably after the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia renewed its role when President Vladimir Putin ordered his armed forces to intervene in the Syrian civil war in 2015. Russian military power stabilized the battlefield and in turn rescued Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad from defeat. Since then, the regime's forces—with the help of Russia—have been able to regain most Syrian territory. In the process, the Russian navy has upgraded its long-standing base in Tartus, and the Russian air force has established a presence at Syria's Khmeimim air base.

For some leaders in the region, especially those in the Arabian Gulf and Egypt, Moscow's determined assistance to a longtime ally stood in contrast to American conduct during the Arab uprisings. From the combined perspective of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Cairo (after Abdel Fatah al-Sisi seized power), and others, Washington was feckless, believing that democracy rather than Islamist-style authoritarianism and chaos would result from people power in the region. They point to President Barack Obama's demand that Hosni Mubarak, who supported U.S. policy in the region for three decades no matter how unpopular it was among Egyptians, step aside as the definitive example of U.S. weakness and naivete.

Moscow's clear view that the Arab uprisings in 2011 would produce instability instead of democracy coupled with its determination to rescue Assad affected America's allies in the region. Egyptians, disillusioned with the strategic relationship with the United States even before Mubarak's ignominious fall, were receptive to deepening Cairo's ties with Moscow. The expansion of military-to-military ties proceeded, as did major Russian arms sales to Egypt. Between 2013 and 2019, the

Egyptians purchased $3 billion worth of Russian arms, including warplanes and helicopters.[1] These transactions represent the largest transfer of weapons systems from Moscow to Cairo since the early 1970s.[2] Rumors have persisted that Russia would establish a military presence in Egypt, but that scenario has not materialized (though Russia is building a naval and logistics base in the Red Sea at Port Sudan, and its intervention in Libya raises the prospect that Putin would like access to that country as well).[3] The fact that Egypt and Russia are on the same side of the conflicts in Syria and Libya helped expand bilateral ties, but an unarticulated yet unmistakable anti-Americanism underscored the development of these relations. The Russians sought not necessarily to peel the Egyptians away and place them firmly in Moscow's orbit, as Washington had done with Cairo five decades prior, but rather to pull Egypt away from the United States enough to complicate American efforts in the region.

Russia's strategy was made easier by the fact that drift had marked the U.S.-Egypt relationship for much of the two decades preceding the Arab uprisings. Washington and Cairo were at odds over Arab-Israeli peacemaking, UN sanctions on Iraq, the role Egyptians played in the 9/11 attacks and al-Qaeda more generally, President George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the Obama administration's approach to Cairo after the fall of Mubarak. All of these issues fostered mistrust between the two countries, providing Moscow with an opportunity to present itself as at least a partial alternative to Washington. In Russia, the Egyptians have a partner whose hostile views toward Islamism, human rights, and political reform are consistent with their own. Despite this alignment, Egyptian leaders are reluctant to sever ties with the United States due to the $1.3 billion in annual

American military assistance and the leverage that comes with having connections to both Washington and Moscow (as well as Beijing). Egypt has benefited from playing these powers off of one another.

Egypt is not the only country that has experienced an evolution in ties with Russia. A similar dynamic has played out in Turkey, where a long list of geopolitical issues has undermined ties with the United States. Much of the anger and dismay with the United States in Turkey is bound up in the Syrian conflict—in particular, the Obama administration's unwillingness to undertake regime change in Syria and Washington's decision to partner with the People's Protection Units, an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has been waging a war against Turkey since the mid-1980s. There is also the problem of Fethullah Gulen, the cleric who officials in Ankara allege masterminded the failed 2016 coup d'état. Gulen is a permanent resident of the United States who remains on his compound in Pennsylvania despite the Turkish government's extradition request. American officials maintain that the Turkish government has not submitted sufficient evidence of Gulen's guilt to warrant extradition.

For the United States, the Turkish role in helping Iran evade international sanctions, the brazen disregard for U.S. law and law enforcement when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's security team assaulted peaceful protesters in Washington in May 2017, and Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system have combined to erode trust between the two governments. Moscow exploited the difficulties in the bilateral relationship to conclude a deal on S-400s, which resulted in the U.S. decision to terminate Turkey's participation in the F-35 joint strike fighter program and apply sanctions on the Turkish defense industry. Despite having divergent interests in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh, Ankara and Moscow have compartmentalized their differences in ways that have allowed them to forge diplomatic, economic, and defense ties.

Like Egypt, the Arabian Gulf states were impressed with Russia's intervention in Syria. Since then, King Salman of Saudi Arabia paid an October 2017 visit to the Kremlin—a first for a Saudi monarch—and Vladimir Putin enjoyed lavish state visits in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi two years later. Given the American partnership with the two primary Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) powers, the willingness of the Saudis and Emiratis to explore how to enhance ties with the Russians is a significant departure from the past.[4] Throughout much of the Cold War, relations between the Gulf states and Moscow were tense, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Saudi Arabia and the Soviet

Union only restored diplomatic relations after fifty-two years in 1990, though it would be almost another two decades before Russia began its effort to re-stake its claim to regional influence, as the United States was mired in Iraq. And it would be another ten years before Moscow had any tangible results in its diplomatic investment in the Gulf, specifically in Saudi Arabia. Despite its development of ties with Saudi Arabia, Russia continues to coordinate with Iran on Syria, and, much to the dismay of the Gulf states, the Russians have used an air base in Iran to conduct operations in Syria.

In late 2016, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Russians, as well as nine other non-OPEC oil-producing countries—now known as OPEC+—agreed to limit oil production in order to raise oil prices after a steep decline in 2014. Despite sharp disagreement between Riyadh and Moscow in early 2020, the production limit agreements that OPEC+ struck in 2016 remain intact.

Russia and the United Arab Emirates have a broader set of common concerns in the region, despite their differences regarding Iran. Unlike the Saudis, the UAE's leaders are willing to accommodate a regime victory in Syria. This confluence of views on an Assad victory stems from a shared perspective on the Arab uprisings, which to policymakers in Moscow and Abu Dhabi produced only chaos and empowered Islamists—including extremists. As a result, in addition to Assad, the Emiratis and Russians support Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who came to power in a 2013 coup d'état that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi, and Libya's Khalifa Haftar. The Libyan would-be strongman has launched an assault on the government in Tripoli, which its opponents argue includes Islamist factions.[5] The Emiratis share the Saudis' concern over Moscow's ties to Tehran and have sought to entice the Russians to tilt toward the GCC states, though to no avail. In addition, the widely held perception among Emirati leaders that the United States is leaving the region or is too distracted with domestic developments to play its traditional stabilizing role has encouraged them to hedge with Russia. The result has been a deepening of investment, commercial, tourism, and defense ties. These ties have limits, however. For example, despite a 2017 agreement to jointly develop a light combat aircraft for the Emirati air force over seven years, the project has not progressed.[6] The agreement was likely a hedge, as Abu Dhabi has also sought to purchase the F-35, which President Donald J. Trump promised and the U.S. Senate approved in late 2020 after the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel. Regardless of what happens with their fighter jet project, the Emiratis

have concluded that the Russians are once again important actors in the region and that, unlike during the Cold War, enhancing ties with Moscow will be to Abu Dhabi's benefit.

Among U.S. allies in the region whose relations with Russia have evolved, Israel is perhaps most significant. Over the course of the past five years, Moscow has become a critical interlocutor for Jerusalem on matters of security, primarily due to Russia's role in the Syrian conflict. Like Turkey, Israel needs Russian cooperation to protect its interests in Syria—specifically, to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence there and to disrupt the flow of advanced weaponry from Iran to Hezbollah. This requires a continuous diplomatic dialogue at the highest level as well as military-to-military communications in the field. Since Russia's intervention in 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Putin have met eleven times and speak on the phone often.

The Israelis and Russians have used the robust relationship between their leaders to ensure that their militaries do not collide in Syria. This strategy has worked well, but not always. In September 2018, Syrian air defenses shot down a Russian surveillance aircraft, killing all fifteen servicemen aboard. The Russians accused the Israelis of not providing enough warning of their operations and of using the Russian plane to cover the presence of Israel's aircraft.[7] In response, the Russians shut down Syrian airspace to the Israelis but eventually relented, and Israeli air strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria resumed. Reports at the time indicated that the Russian military was opposed to Israel's operations but that Putin overruled them. Although the Russian leader is a partner of Iran in Syria, he has different goals there than his Iranian counterpart. Putin seeks a Syria under Bashar al-Assad that is aligned with Russian interests in the region. In contrast, Iran sees Syria as an asset to be leveraged in its confrontation with the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.[8] Moscow and Jerusalem thus share an implicit interest in keeping the Iranians off-balance and on the defensive in Syria. The Israel-Russia relationship also benefits from the fact that the leaderships in both countries share the view that American support for the Arab uprisings a decade ago—and for political reform more generally—empowered Islamists and produced chaos around the region.

Beyond the confluence of interests that Russia has with American allies in various regional conflicts and issue areas, Moscow has calculated that it can advance its overarching geostrategic interest in weakening the Western alliance by taking advantage of American missteps

and Washington's apparent desire to reduce its commitments in the Middle East. To that end, Russian leaders have presented themselves as competent, nonideological, and coherent alternatives to the United States at a moment when Washington appears to be the exact opposite in the eyes of its regional allies. This positioning has allowed Russia to pull—if not redirect entirely—traditional American partners toward Moscow. This helps to weaken NATO, in the case of Turkey, and disrupt a regional coalition that has made it relatively easier and less expensive for the United States to pursue its interests in the Middle East. The Russian government apparently shares the view with its Turkish and Iranian counterparts—as well as perhaps leaders in Egypt—that an American-led order in the region does not serve its interests.

CHINA

Although Russia's renewed presence in the Middle East has garnered significant attention among analysts, China's increased activity across the region has the potential to be transformational given the economic resources at Beijing's disposal as well as Chinese military advances across all domains. A growing volume of commentary speculates that, as the United States reduces its presence, China could be the next great power to play the role of regional stabilizer. These analyses have taken on a greater sense of urgency as relations between Washington and Beijing have faltered. Journalists, scholars, and policymakers depict either a China determined to supplant the United States in the Middle East as part of an overall effort to dominate global governance, commerce, and security in the coming decades or a China that is a competitor of the United States, with primarily economic ambitions in the Middle East. In the latter view, Beijing neither is positioned to challenge nor has an interest in challenging American dominance in the region.[9] These competing narratives are a function of the fact that the Chinese leadership is not clear about its regional goals. China's 2016 "Arab Policy Paper" offers little insight in its ten pages of platitudes covering cooperation in a long list of areas from politics and finance to tourism, space exploration, and health care.[10] Given the lack of detail, analysts—especially those who are not experts on China and Chinese foreign policy—tend to graft their own biases, assumptions, and politics onto Beijing's approach to the region. China's conceptions of military power, statecraft, and economic assets are different from those that prevail in the West. As a result, to the uninitiated, both the hawkish and more benign interpretations of Chinese Middle East policy are plausible.

Despite the varying views on China's Middle East strategy, Beijing's approach to the Middle East is broadly seen as a significant break

from the past, when China was little more than a peripheral figure. The Chinese government supported anti-colonial and national liberation movements from afar and had little diplomatic contact with the Arab world, Israel, Iran, and Turkey.[11] For example, Beijing and Riyadh only established diplomatic relations in the 1990s. Since then, ties between China and Saudi Arabia—as well as the entire region—have grown exponentially.[12] China's rapid economic development, which began in the 1990s, was the leading edge of Beijing's foray into the Middle East, driven by the country's demand for energy resources. In the two decades between 1990 and 2009, China's imports of Middle Eastern oil increased from 4.8 million to 47.8 million tons per year.[13] The U.S. Energy Information Agency estimates that between 2019 and 2020, the Gulf countries supplied about 40 percent of Chinese oil imports. Of that, 16 percent originated in Saudi Arabia, making it the largest supplier of crude oil to China.[14] For its part, in 2019, Iran ranked eighth on China's import portfolio with approximately three hundred thousand barrels of oil per day.[15]

Over the past thirty years, the scope of China's relations with the Middle East has broadened beyond energy resources, though oil remains Beijing's core concern in the region. Trade between China and the region increased significantly, and Beijing began investing in infrastructure around the Middle East. Like in other regions of the world, China is now the single largest regional investor and the largest trading partner of eleven Middle Eastern countries. The Chinese leadership clearly understands that the development of Beijing's role in the Middle East is critical to the success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—President Xi Jinping's plan to place China at the center of global trade in goods, services, and ideas.

As a result, China and twenty-one Middle Eastern countries have inked deals on BRI projects. Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates also enjoy "comprehensive strategic partnerships" with China, the designation the Chinese Foreign Ministry attaches to countries of particular importance. China has also designated Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Qatar as strategic partners and has a "strategic cooperative relationship" with Turkey and a "comprehensive innovation partnership" with Israel. Beijing and Jerusalem have well-developed ties in the realm of defense technology, which has at times put Israel at odds with the United States.

China invested in the development and expansion of ports and industrial parks in Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and nearby Djibouti, where China maintains its sole overseas military base. The Chinese leadership's emphasis on these areas is understandable: they lie along the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb strait, and the Suez Canal, all of which can be choke points for the shipment of goods to Africa, Europe, and beyond. If the BRI is to succeed—which is by no means guaranteed given the massive expenditures it requires—China will need to ensure that commerce flows through these areas smoothly, rendering the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea indispensable to the Chinese government's plans. This strategic necessity is why Beijing is shoring up its relations with major countries in the immediate region.

Although the Persian Gulf is an area of focus for the Chinese leadership, Beijing has also devoted considerable resources to North Africa. Among its "comprehensive strategic partners" are two North African giants: Egypt and Algeria. The Suez Canal is not only particularly important as China's gateway to Europe but also critical for the manufacturing and distribution of Chinese products destined for Africa. As a result, Beijing has poured billions of dollars into Egypt through investments, loans, and joint projects. Between 2016 and 2019, the Chinese invested as much as $20 billion in the country, with a focus on the Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone and a three-square-mile industrial park in Ain Sukhna, thirty miles south of Suez.[16]

Economic interests drive China's decisions in the Middle East, but is economic determinism all there is to Beijing's approach to the region? A cogent case can be made that the Chinese leadership is striving to make the world safe for Chinese commerce. Middle Eastern leaders have decided to embrace this version of China's strategy, calculating that Beijing can offer the economic benefits of Chinese expertise in infrastructure development and advanced technology with relatively

little upfront cost and without political conditions. The fact that China comes to the Middle East with no commitment to the types of regimes it partners with or the quality of political and economic institutions within them is precisely what makes it so attractive to leaders across the region. The Chinese approach stands in contrast to that of Americans and Europeans, who have at times and to varying degrees expected reforms in exchange for assistance and investment. The emergence of China as a regional actor is thus an attractive alternative for leaders who do not want to answer for the human rights abuses and corruption that are routine parts of their political and economic systems.[17] For Middle Eastern leaders, Beijing has achieved something to which they aspire: consistent economic growth while maintaining political control.

Whether Washington's apparent desire to reduce its presence in the Middle East and Beijing's appeal and considerable investment in the region will embolden President Xi to take a more active role in regional geopolitics and security remains an open question. Some analysts believe this outcome is inevitable given the exigency of protecting an ever-widening array of interests from North Africa to the Persian Gulf.[18] Others argue that this was precisely the Chinese strategy when it first made its presence felt in the region three decades ago. For this group, "strategic patience" best characterizes China's foreign policy, including its approach to the Middle East. They aver that the Chinese leadership understood that China was in no position to challenge U.S. primacy in the region. Instead, it leveraged the public goods Washington provided in the region—notably, security—to develop diplomatic, political, and economic ties so that in time, as Beijing modernized and expanded its military capabilities, China would be in a position to supplant the United States as the provider of order and stability in the Middle East.

For those who believe China's geostrategic goal is to eclipse the United States, Beijing's neutrality with respect to regional rivalries and conflicts is not neutrality at all. These analysts point to China's unyielding position with respect to American and Western efforts to penalize Bashar al-Assad's regime for the various crimes against humanity it has committed throughout the Syrian civil war. To be sure, China has long adhered—rhetorically, if not in practice—to a policy of noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. But shielding the Syrian government from censure and thereby frustrating U.S. policy contains geostrategic benefits for China, especially given that American partners in the region such as Egypt, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates—all important to the BRI—support the Assad regime to varying degrees.[19]

Then there is Iran. During the summer of 2020, Beijing agreed to a twenty-five-year strategic partnership with Tehran. Analysts and journalists interpreted the pact as a shift—a considerable deepening of ties between China and Iran.[20] From one perspective, this development demonstrates China's strict neutrality in the region given that Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are also important Chinese partners. Yet China's approach to Iran clearly has a geopolitical dimension. First, given how much oil it imports from Iran, China has an interest in ensuring that the Iranian regime does not collapse. Second, the Chinese leadership has an interest in preserving the Iranian regime in a way that keeps the United States focused on developments in the Persian Gulf and not the South China Sea. The lifeline that Beijing has provided Tehran, suffering under crushing American sanctions, only adds to the growing list of grievances American policymakers have compiled against China. President Joe Biden is likely to emphasize diplomacy with Iran and possible sanctions relief, which could mitigate differences between Washington and Beijing in the Persian Gulf. Analysts allege that the Chinese government's approach to Iran was intended to undermine American policy. That may have been the outcome, but another explanation is equally possible: China's leaders have sought to maintain their flexibility in an important part of the world.

Despite its expanding role in the Middle East, Beijing is not presently capable of providing what most states in the region want in addition to trade and investment: a great power to provide stability and security. Egyptian officials, for example, have welcomed a deepening of bilateral ties with China and insist that they will not be drawn into the global competition between Beijing and Washington, but they also freely admit that there is no current alternative to American security and military assistance. Leaders of Arab states clearly believe that they can gain much from Chinese investment, trade with China, and joint projects with Beijing, but they want to maintain their bilateral security ties with the United States as well.

INDIA

In the past two decades, but particularly since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, India has invested more of its diplomatic resources into developing and expanding its ties to the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf.[21] Yet for all of India's recent efforts, it is far behind the Chinese and the Russians. This stems from a number of issues: the legacy of New Delhi's commitment to nonalignment, which kept both Israel and the Arab states of the Gulf at arm's length; the close ties between Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council, especially heavyweights like Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and, related to the issue of Pakistan, divergent views on Afghanistan.

The confluence of the electoral successes of India's Hindu nationalists and the threat of Islamist extremism in the 1990s and early 2000s played an important role in shaping New Delhi's outreach to both Israel and the countries of the Gulf. In 1992, the Indian government upgraded its relations with Israel, beginning an era of cooperation in the technology and defense sectors that continues to thrive.[22] A decade later, after Saudi Arabia experienced a wave of al-Qaeda attacks, Gulf leaders discovered they had a common interest with India in combating this threat. The subsequent deterioration of ties between Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates over Islamabad's support for extremist groups greatly aided the development of Indian ties. Even the Saudi-Pakistani relationship, which has long been based on Riyadh's financial backing in exchange for Islamabad's support of Saudi security, went through a period of difficulty in recent years. The changes have provided an opportunity for India's leaders to forge a more active and influential role in the region, which has only intensified during the Modi era.

Still, India remains at a disadvantage in the region despite importing 59 percent of its oil from the Persian Gulf and the fact that millions

of Indians work in the region, sending billions home in remittances.[23] The primary impediment to India's influence and a primary reason for its interest in the region is China.[24] The Indian leadership has grown increasingly concerned with China's influence in a region of such importance to India, especially with China's apparent drive to become a naval power in the area. Yet, for all of Modi's efforts and success in developing closer ties with countries in the region, India simply does not have the appeal of China with its Belt and Road Initiative and the financial wherewithal that goes with it. Leaders in the region regard New Delhi neither as a hedge in the event that Washington draws down its presence in the Middle East nor as a potential counterweight to Washington should the Americans remain. As a result, India, for all its size and potential, will remain an also-ran in the region. No doubt its security cooperation and commercial ties will expand, but its influence will remain largely limited and in the shadow of China.

THE EUROPEAN UNION

By a variety of measures—proximity, economic power, and political weight—the European Union (EU) should be more consequential in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet it is not. Much of the reason for its lack of influence is structural. The European Union's foreign policy is subject to the rule of unanimity, making it difficult for the bloc to pursue a coherent strategy. In addition, the EU's primary goals in the region—pursuing a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, maintaining the JCPOA, and preventing waves of refugees from Middle Eastern conflict zones—are often subject to the influence of more powerful actors that are more willing than Brussels to take risks to achieve their goals. As a result, the United States, Israel, Arab countries, and the Palestinian Authority often stymie Europe's efforts to bring an end to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Brussels was able to keep the JCPOA alive after the Trump administration breached the agreement, which is an achievement, but it could neither dissuade the United States from taking that dramatic step nor prevent Iran from enriching increasing amounts of uranium.[25] The EU has perhaps been most successful in keeping refugees out of Europe, but this success is either the direct result of bribery (in the case of Turkey) or in contradiction to the EU's own core principles concerning respect for human dignity and human rights. In its efforts to end conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the EU has been no more successful than other major actors.

This is not to suggest that the European Union's efforts in the Middle East are inconsequential. Europe's approach, which has included the European Neighborhood Policy, the Union for the Mediterranean, and a variety of association agreements with individual countries, indicates that Brussels has an active influence in the region. These efforts provide an opportunity for Europe to leverage dialogue with Middle Eastern

leaders to promote political and economic reforms as well as cooperation between the EU and regional governments. The EU has also served as a mediator and interlocutor in a variety of conflicts. These efforts have benefits, especially when made in concert with other powerful actors. Yet the European Union alone has not had much success in these areas, especially when it comes to reform. Authoritarian leaders in the Middle East welcome Europe's investment in their economies but do not want it to be conditioned on political and economic changes that threaten their interests. Also, officials in the Middle East understand that, despite Europe's rhetoric, members of the EU are most interested in preserving security and stability at home and thus will work with even those in the region with the worst human rights records.

Few, if any, Middle Eastern leaders regard the European Union as an alternative to the other great powers. The EU has neither an interest in nor the capability to play a greater role in the region. Its approach to the Middle East tends to be more effective when enacted in concert with other great powers. Even on issues over which the EU is alleged to have some influence and moral sway, Brussels has been unable or unwilling to apply pressure on regional leaders to correct even the most egregious violations of human rights. Instead, Middle Eastern leaders tend to regard the EU as a source of investment and individual European countries such as France and Germany as reliable sources of weaponry in the lucrative Middle Eastern arms market.

MAJOR POWER RIVALRIES AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS

The return of Russia and the emergence of China as influential actors after a long period of American dominance add new dynamics to the conflicts across the Middle East. As noted, Russia's intervention in Syria's civil war to rescue Bashar al-Assad from defeat in 2015 signaled the end of unipolarity in the region. Two years before Moscow's move to save the Syrian regime, the Chinese government announced the Belt and Road Initiative after quietly investing considerable resources in the region during previous decades. These were dramatic steps, but they did not fundamentally alter the prevailing U.S.-led regional order or America's self-appointed role as the provider of regional security and stability. They also did not pose any specific threat to U.S. interests in the region. The Obama administration, along with a sizeable portion of the American foreign policy community, was willing to allow Russia to embroil itself in Syria's civil war. Although China has opposed American efforts to hold Assad and his supporters accountable and has undermined the United States' Iran policy, it has not sought to challenge America's leading regional role directly.

To be sure, the great powers have been involved in conflicts in the region, but for the most part not with each other. To the extent that competition among great powers exists in the Middle East, the Chinese, Russian, and American governments are battling to extend or maintain their influence. Instead of direct confrontation among the great powers, the United States and Russia (but not China) have had to confront regional powers that are making bids to shape the Middle East to their own ends, especially in Syria and Libya.

The threat from the self-proclaimed Islamic State drew the United States back to Iraq in the summer of 2014 and from there into Syria. There, the United States had to confront its NATO ally Turkey. The U.S. decision to partner with a Syrian Kurdish fighting force linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party—a Turkish Kurdish group on the U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations—in the fight against the Islamic State angered the Turkish leadership. At the time, Ankara argued that the only way to defeat the Islamic State was to bring down the Assad regime. Erdogan also indicated that his priority in Syria was fighting Kurdish nationalism. The resulting rift in U.S.-Turkey relations has persisted despite Trump's decision in late 2019 to draw down the number of American forces in Syria. He also ordered the remaining contingent to pull back from the Syria-Turkey border and not to intervene between Kurdish, Turkish, and Turkish-aligned Syrian forces. The differences between the United States and Turkey over Syria are not just significant challenges to the bilateral relationship and unity within NATO, but they have also prolonged the Syrian conflict.

Since the fall of the Islamic State's Syrian capital, Raqqa, the United States has not had a major presence in the conflict. Although the small number of U.S. soldiers who remain there periodically encounter aggressive Russian behavior along the roadways of northern Syria, not since American special forces operators killed two to three hundred regime soldiers and Russian security contractors in February 2018 have the United States and Russia instigated any violent confrontations. Neither the Trump administration nor the Democratic Party's foreign policy leaders wanted to take a more active role in Syria beyond the U.S. military's limited presence, which protects oil fields in the northeast and is supposed to deter Iran. Instead, Washington has focused periodically on a diplomatic resolution to the conflict and on punishing the Assad regime for its many crimes. The United States and its European allies have pushed UN Security Council resolutions to hold the Syrian leadership accountable over the objections of China and Russia, both of which have reliably vetoed these measures. And although the Trump administration sought to pressure the Assad regime by threatening sanctions on entities that could invest in Syria's postwar reconstruction, the United States was willing to allow Russia to mire itself in Syria alongside a sometimes troublesome client and a host of countries with competing goals.

Bashar al-Assad, Syria's Kurds, Iran, Israel, and Turkey are all to varying degrees beholden to Putin in the effort to protect their interests

in the Syrian conflict. However, they all have the ability to act independently of Moscow. At times, all of them have defied the Russians, who have only periodically responded punitively. In 2018, Israeli F-16s shadowed a Russian surveillance plane, which Syrian air defense crews mistook for an Israeli aircraft and shot down, angering Russia's commanders. Seeking to de-escalate with the Russian military, the Israel Defense Forces ceased all air operations over Syria as a result but resumed them after a few months. Also, the Syrian regime and the Iranian-backed forces have not always conducted the war in ways that Russia has wanted; as noted, Moscow and Tehran have different goals in the conflict beyond rescuing Assad. That said, the Russians are stuck with both the Syrians and Iranians.

The far more significant challenge to Russian primacy in Syria is the presence of Turkish forces in the northern tier of the country. Russia and Turkey have a confluence of interests in opposing what they both perceive to be the United States' destabilizing and predatory power in the region and have developed closer commercial, diplomatic, and security relations over the last five years. Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system over U.S. and NATO objections is the clearest indication of Turkey's willingness to spurn its traditional allies when its interests dictate. Among those interests is an outcome of the war in Syria that does not threaten Turkish security. To that end, Erdogan has dropped regime change in Syria in favor of a policy that prevents any settlement of the war that provides Syrian Kurds a state of their own or even autonomy. Erdogan has sought to enlist Moscow's support in this effort, but the Russians have also played both ends of the issue, offering support to Syria's Kurds at times while working with Ankara. Turkey and Russia have generally been able to smooth over their differences in the realm of diplomacy in the regular dialogue between Erdogan and Putin, but twice in 2020 the Turkish and Russian militaries took action against each other, albeit indirectly.

The first confrontation occurred in February 2020, when Russia allegedly conducted air strikes on Turkish forces and their Syrian militia allies—which include elements of extremist groups—after they liberated of the village of Saraqeb in Idlib. The strikes killed thirty-three Turkish soldiers. In response, Turkey launched a series of attacks not on Russia's positions but rather on Assad's forces and their allies, doing extensive damage and setting back the Russian-Syrian plan to retake Idlib. It remains unclear whether the Turkish offensive forced the Russians off the battlefield for a time or whether Putin willingly stood by as Turkey's air strikes, drone strikes, and artillery fire damaged his allies in

an effort to gain more leverage over them. A second flare-up occurred in late October when Russia conducted air strikes on Turkey's Syrian militia allies in northwestern Syria, killing fifty-six fighters and injuring one hundred more. The Russians were sending a message to Turkey intended to clip its regional ambitions after it deployed Syrian mercenaries to Azerbaijan, which is at war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Clearly not wanting to escalate tensions with Moscow, Ankara decided not to respond to the Russian air strikes. Turkey likely had broader interests in mind given the battlefield advantage its ally Azerbaijan had over Armenia, which enjoys a defense pact with Russia. As in conflicts in the Middle East, Turkey and Russia set aside their differences and worked together to guarantee a cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh that ended the fighting to Azerbaijan's advantage.

LIBYA

As in Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria, Turkey and Russia are on different sides in Libya. Ankara does not depend on Moscow to help protect its interests in North Africa. The conflict in Libya has drawn in Egypt, France, Italy, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to Turkey and Russia. The French, Emiratis, Egyptians, and Russians support the Libyan National Army (LNA) of General Khalifa Haftar and the House of Representatives (HoR) based in Tobruk, while the Turks and Qataris have thrown their military and financial weight respectively behind the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, which also enjoys political and diplomatic support from former colonial power Italy and others. The United States and various members of the EU, especially Germany, have sought to mediate the conflict in support of the United Nations. The Trump administration recognized the GNA, though as he was laying siege to Tripoli in mid-April 2019, Haftar spoke by phone with Trump. The call was highly unusual, as Haftar is not a head of state nor head of government and because the Trump administration recognized the legitimacy of the GNA and promoted negotiations as a means of reconciliation.

After Turkey agreed to send forces to Libya in late 2019, the military situation for the GNA improved markedly. The combination of Turkish air defenses, armed drones, and up to five thousand Syrian mercenaries helped the GNA push Haftar's forces from the outskirts of Tripoli to Sirte by June 2020. Yet the conflict hardly stabilized. The presence of the GNA in and near Sirte combined with Turkish threats to drive Haftar out of Libya completely and to establish permanent bases in the

country aroused the ire of Egypt. While inspecting forces in Egypt's west, President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi said that having the Turks in Sirte was a "red line." The Egyptian parliament almost immediately affirmed its support for a cross-border incursion should Libya's HoR request it.

Libya's civil war–cum–proxy conflict avoided sparking a regional conflict for three reasons. First, given how far their forces were from home, the Turks were forced to take Egypt's threats of intervention seriously. Second, political infighting and anti-government protests in the streets in Tripoli destabilized the GNA, albeit briefly. And third, Turkey was increasingly isolated in the region—even among European supporters of the GNA—and was unable to build any international support for a Turkish-enabled GNA military drive to Libya's eastern border. As a result, in October the United Nations announced that the GNA and the HoR had agreed to a permanent cease-fire, although the durability of the cease-fire remains to be seen. It depends on the willingness of international supporters of the two sides to abide by an arms embargo, something they have not been willing to do. For his part, Erdogan offered that he did not see how the cease-fire would hold.[26] If it does not, Turkey and Russia will likely use their leverage with the GNA and HoR respectively to divide the country and its resources. Neither the United States nor China has invested much in Libya's civil war, instead allowing Russia to extend itself further and deeper into yet another complex regional conflict. The risk, though, is that Russia could succeed and extend Moscow's influence along the North African rim, giving Putin another vector through which to sow discord in Europe.[27]

At the same time, the conflict in Libya underscores the competition among regional powers and great powers. As noted, the significant differences between Turkey and Russia in Libya intensified to the point that their proxies came into direct conflict. The GNA's Turkish-assisted offensive in the late spring of 2020 pushed Russian mercenaries supporting Haftar's LNA out of the battle for a time before Moscow reinforced its airpower in Libya—using crews from a Kremlin-backed military contractor.[28] Yet as they have in Syria, the Turks and the Russians were able to compartmentalize their opposing aims in Libya. This was particularly important for Moscow given its overarching effort to sow discord and weakness in the West—a goal that perpetuating the Libyan conflict advances.

Another important development that emerged from Libya was the deterioration of relations between Turkey and France (which played into Putin's hands and thus motivated him to contain his differences with Erdogan over the Libyan conflict). The French—concerned about

their commercial interests, Islamist extremism, and the potential of Libya's violence to drive greater numbers of refugees to European shores—allied with Haftar against the GNA, which enjoyed Ankara's support.[29] The tension between France and Turkey became more acute when Tripoli and Ankara signed a maritime border agreement in November 2019 and a military pact in July 2020. The new maritime borders—which bisected the Mediterranean—had no legal basis and effectively extended the Libyan conflict into the eastern Mediterranean, where Turkey was already at odds with Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel over boundaries and gas exploration. What became known as the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum sought to box Turkey into a limited area in the Mediterranean, posing a threat to Turkish security. Yet for the French and others, Turkey's muscle-flexing was a sign that it sought to enhance its ability to influence politics and security in the entire Mediterranean Basin. In addition to geostrategic calculations, the fact that an irredentist, romantic nationalist, hostile-to-the-West worldview—called *Mavi Vatan* (or Blue Homeland)—was guiding Turkish policy intensified both Turkey's aggressive posture and the Cypriot, Egyptian, French, Greek, Israeli, and even Emirati effort to counter it.

As a result of Ankara's provocative policies, Paris quickly stepped up its support for both Athens and Nicosia. The French navy linked up with its Greek counterpart as they both increased their surveillance of the Turkish navy and Turkey's small fleet of gas exploration vessels that were prospecting in Cyprus. The Turkish government also planned to deploy exploration vessels close to the island of Kastellorizo, which is only 1.5 miles from the Turkish coast, and Crete, the largest Greek island.

The maneuvering among hostile navies in the eastern Mediterranean raised the prospect of miscalculation or error resulting in hostile fire. In June 2020, a French frigate enforcing the arms embargo on Libya confronted Turkish vessels. In August, Greek and Turkish warships collided as the Greeks were shadowing a Turkish survey vessel. In addition to the increased French naval presence and joint maneuvers with the Greek navy, France deployed two fighter aircraft and a C-130 cargo plane to Cyprus in a symbolic gesture supporting Cypriot security and offered new Mirage fighters, frigates, and helicopters to Greece. Yet not only the French lined up against Turkey; pilots from the UAE—one of Turkey's regional rivals—appeared on Crete and conducted joint exercises with the Greek air force. Egypt and Greece also ratified their own maritime boundary agreement.

Given the tension among so many important American partners and allies—Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Qatar, Turkey, and the United

Arab Emirates—over the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean, Putin's decision not to directly oppose Erdogan in Libya (and Syria) clearly paid dividends in terms of infighting within NATO and the European Union. Although the United States has participated in episodic diplomacy to achieve a cease-fire in Libya and has at times demonstrated a show of force in the eastern Mediterranean—which has restrained Turkish naval and gas exploration activity, though only temporarily—American officials have largely left these twin crises to European, UN, and NATO negotiators.

The Trump administration's apparent disinterest in these conflicts reinforced the notion among leaders in North Africa and Europe that the United States intends to greatly reduce its presence and profile in the eastern Mediterranean, leaving regional actors free to take matters into their own hands. It also invited greater Russian security cooperation with countries such as Egypt, the UAE, Haftar's LNA, and even Turkey. The Chinese government, as is its practice, is not involved in any of the conflicts directly, but it does have a growing interest in the Mediterranean given its investments in North Africa. Perhaps the most important actor in the area is the European Union, though a lack of cohesion on issues such as Libya and the eastern Mediterranean has led to divergent approaches by EU member states. Although France, in supporting Haftar, has taken a lead in opposing what it considers to be Turkey's predatory policies, the wisdom of this approach—particularly regarding the LNA—is not universally agreed upon in Brussels. As a result, the German government has been left to mediate among all sides in Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, with mixed results.

YEMEN AND LEBANON

When it comes to the other major conflicts and crises in the region, such as those in Yemen and Lebanon, the roles of the great powers have not been as extensive as in Syria or Libya. For example, the United States has provided support for Saudi Arabia's intervention in the conflict in Yemen between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government that was driven out of Sanaa in 2014. The Russians and the Chinese have avoided the conflict, though China maintains an interest in the port of Aden and will likely want to invest in Yemen's reconstruction. Lebanon's collapse has increased American and French diplomacy, which has generally been mutually reinforcing as the Russians and Chinese have steered clear of Lebanese politics. That said, China is rehabilitating Lebanon's Port of Tripoli—which is sixty-five miles

from the Syrian city of Homs—as it eyes future Syrian reconstruction. This aid can be tempting to some Lebanese officials and elites given the transparency requirements necessary to obtain Western relief via the International Monetary Fund. Yet aligning with China would place Lebanon's important economic, political, and cultural ties to Europe and the United States at risk.

PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION AMONG MAJOR POWERS

Cooperation in the Middle East is not impossible, but such efforts are rarely more than episodic and limited to certain areas such as anti-piracy and freedom of navigation. Even so, cooperation can reflect or advance the agendas of major powers that are positioning for greater regional influence.

Consider, for example, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. If, as expected, President Biden brings the United States back into the agreement or seeks a new, broader deal that addresses issues beyond Iran's nuclear development, Russian, Chinese, Indian, and EU leaders will likely welcome the move. The Europeans have worked hard to keep the JCPOA viable since the Trump administration breached the accord in May 2018, and India, which imports significant amounts of oil from Iran, would not be forced into the unenviable choice of either defying the United States or rendering itself more dependent on other suppliers. Although Russia and Iran share an interest in the continuation of the Assad regime, Moscow's effort to extend its influence in the region would benefit from an agreement that restrains Tehran's regional ambitions. The Chinese leadership would welcome a new accord with Iran, if only because it would allow China, which now has a head start over Europe, to continue developing its relations with Iran without concern for any type of American retaliation.

Despite the confluence of interests among the great powers on the JCPOA or some type of new agreement with the Iranians, cooperation on nonproliferation more generally is difficult. In addition to providing technology for Iran's nuclear program, Russian companies are involved in the development of Egyptian and Turkish nuclear plants. The United States is, and the Chinese are rumored to be, involved in Saudi Arabia's own—as yet undeclared—nuclear efforts.

Assuming the wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen come to a merciful end, the Chinese, Russians, Turks, and Europeans could be willing to cooperate. Yet any end to the conflict in Syria that leaves Bashar al-Assad in place would make European, Turkish, and American

cooperation with Russia and China difficult at best. The Turks and Russians could yet oversee the division of Libya and the attendant economic benefits to Ankara and Moscow, with the Chinese also playing a role. This is not the kind of cooperation most observers have in mind when they suggest that collaboration among great powers is possible in the Middle East and North Africa.

CONCLUSION

The prospects for either regional powers or great powers cooperating to contain or mitigate conflicts in the Middle East are unfavorable. There is little capability or will within the region to bring the various civil and proxy wars to an end. In most cases, those countries around the region with the greatest state capacity are parties to the conflicts. When it comes to the great powers, the outlook is also inauspicious. As noted, the EU has proven to be weak and divided on most of the pressing regional issues. Instability in the region does not threaten India's interests, which are narrowly focused on counterterrorism, commercial opportunity, cooperation with Israel in the high-tech sector, and—of course—energy. Moreover, India has neither the ability nor the regional gravitas to take on major issues in Lebanon, Libya/the eastern Mediterranean, Syria, and Yemen.

Russia has sought to contain and mitigate conflicts in the region, but to its own advantage and in ways that render Moscow a party to these conflicts. For example, rather than leveraging its diplomatic and political influence to bring the Syrian civil war to an end, Russia sought to terminate the conflict through the force of its arms in support of the Assad regime, which has only drawn Moscow further into Syrian politics and made it the power broker in Damascus. Although his intervention in Syria won Putin greater respect and increased Russian access in the Middle East, he is now saddled with the Syrian civil war, a conflict that will likely persist. For its part, China has no interest in ordering the region and every interest in avoiding the mistakes of the United States and Russia in the Middle East. Rather than mitigate or contain conflicts, the Chinese have demonstrated a willingness to clean up after they are over or nearly over, all the while advancing Beijing's mercantilist agenda.

The United States has not demonstrated a consistent effort in conflict containment or mitigation. To the extent that it has, the effort has been left to the diplomatic corps and career civil servants who, throughout the Trump era, lacked policy guidance and power to be constructive in Syria and Yemen. Whether the conflicts in either of these countries will be a priority for the Biden administration, which already has a long list of domestic and foreign policy priorities, remains to be seen. At moments, Lebanon and Libya have received higher levels of attention, but American disengagement has been a clear departure from past practice. To be sure, not every problem has an American solution, but the four major regional conflicts either directly affect core U.S. interests in the Middle East or have precipitated instability to adjacent regions such as Europe, whose stability is a primary concern for the United States.

Under these circumstances, the prognosis for regional or great power cooperation in containing and ending conflicts is hardly promising. In their efforts to advance their own interests, these countries have made conflicts in the region harder to resolve, rendering the Middle East less stable. The good news is that—despite tensions in the field and, on a few occasions, shots fired—the great powers have demonstrated an aversion to direct conflict with one another. De-confliction procedures have generally been followed, and diplomatic lines of communication have remained open. This approach is reassuring, but it has not contributed to stability if only because the great powers are parties to various conflicts and regional actors are not yet ready to lay down their arms.

Of course, developments both inside and outside the Middle East could alter the trajectory of great power competition and cooperation.

The Biden administration's decision to rejoin the Paris accord and the global coronavirus pandemic could provide impetus for greater cooperation, especially given that countries of the Middle East are vulnerable to climate change and infectious disease. Still, the last decade of developments in the Middle East has proven that predicting events in the region is well beyond the capabilities of government officials, analysts, and journalists alike. It does, however, seem unlikely that the United States will want to more deeply entrench itself. A significant investment in the Middle East would require political support from the American people and Congress that does not seem to exist. In addition, a consensus of sorts among foreign policy elites both inside and outside of government has developed recommending change to the U.S. role in the region. The debate in Washington is not whether the United States should withdraw from the region but how best to do so.[30]

When it comes to great power competition, two competing strands of thinking about the American role in the Middle East predominate. One claims that by drawing down in the region the United States is freeing up resources to confront new challenges in Asia stemming from China's global ambitions and Russian revanchism in Europe. The other—more compelling—argument acknowledges that American policymakers need to rethink U.S. policy goals in the Middle East but suggests that retrenchment is too radical a solution and would provide an opportunity for Moscow, Beijing, and a variety of regional actors to advance their interests at Washington's expense, potentially sowing chaos in the process. For all the challenges the United States faces in the Middle East, it remains the region's most important, powerful, and influential actor. It also has the benefit of continued cultural sway. Thus, it seems likely that if U.S. officials have a clearer understanding of what is important to the United States, they will have a better chance of avoiding the kinds of strategic errors of the past two decades that have provided opportunities for competitors such as Russia and China, which tend to have limited goals, to advance their own interests in the Middle East.

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Steven A. Cook

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven A. Cook is the Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies and director of the International Affairs Fellowship for Tenured International Relations Scholars at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). He is a columnist at *Foreign Policy* magazine and an expert on Arab and Turkish politics as well as U.S.-Middle East policy. Cook is the author of *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East*; *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square*, which won the 2012 gold medal from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; and *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*. Oxford University Press is publishing his next book, *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*, in 2022. He has also published widely in international affairs journals, opinion magazines, and newspapers and is a frequent commentator on radio and television. Prior to joining CFR, Cook was a research fellow at the Brookings Institution (2001–02) and a Soref research fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (1995–96). Cook holds a BA in international studies from Vassar College, an MA in international relations from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, and an MA and a PhD in political science from the University of Pennsylvania.

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Council on Foreign Relations
cfr.org

58 East 68th Street
New York, NY 10065
tel 212.434.9400

1777 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
tel 202.509.8400