

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Paradigm Shift

by Jon B. Alterman

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American foreign policy strategy has been dynamic for much of this century, but its underlying principles have been relatively stable. For more than four decades, the Cold War provided a durable organizing principle, and for the two decades that followed, a quest for energy security has explained much of how the United States has seen the world.

Each had clear implications for how the United States approached the Middle East. With the rise of U.S. domestic energy production in the coming years, however, energy security seems a less durable guide going forward—and no one knows what will replace it. Whatever does, it seems likely that, for the first time in three quarters of a century, the Middle East will not be a central component of U.S. global strategy.

Global strategy is not just any strategy. We have seen a lot of the latter. In recent decades, the U.S. government has issued numerous strategy documents that have been large and lumpy, tending to accumulate priorities rather than choose between them. Former National Security Adviser Samuel Berger used to be fond of the formulation, “The president has no higher priority than...”, apparently because it was infinitely flexible. The construction would suffice for Arab-Israeli peacemaking one day, Iran the next, and Iraq the day after that. There are good reasons for that. Institutional interests in the U.S. government militate for inclusion, and efforts to reach consensus encourage accommodation rather than parsimony. Yet, even sloppy strategy documents make some choices. They emphasize one thing over another, and they link things in space and time. Each presidential administration has several strategies operating simultaneously, seeking to exploit opportunities in different parts of the world, combat threats, and promote interests.

Amidst the mess and shifting currents are certain constants—basic conceptions about how the world works and how the U.S. pursues its interests. The Cold War framed the competition among foreign policy strategies in the middle of the previous century. While many differed on how to pursue the Cold War, a broad consensus held not only that the Soviet Union was a malign force, but

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Losing Language

Qatar is worried about its children’s language skills. It is establishing a school to train women highly literate in Arabic how to be nannies.

Promoting Arabic proficiency is a broader challenge across the region. In 2011, one international study found that more than a third of surveyed fourth grade students from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar scored below the lowest category for proficiency reading in Arabic. More than half did in Oman, and more than three quarters in Morocco. Multilingual countries like Lebanon and Algeria have long struggled to cultivate students’ Arabic skills alongside French, and regional elites have recently put a new emphasis on English. Doing so can isolate them from local audiences. Ex-Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s inability to address the Lebanese parliament in Arabic coherently in 2009 was roundly mocked, but his difficulties are not unique. Remedial Arabic instruction is common. The American University in Cairo, for example, prides itself on its English-only instruction, but it was forced to offer an Arabic course to aspiring Egyptian television journalists whose Arabic skills did not pass muster.

Part of the problem is the distinction between spoken and written Arabic, which renders the second essentially a foreign language. Another part is that Arabic curricula are famously uninspiring, emphasizing rote memorization and grammar. Teacher training and the quality of instruction also play a role. But a growing problem is that students aspire to be bilingual (or tri-lingual), and too often fail to be literate in any language.

Dealing with a Nuclear Iran

Jon Alterman and Haim Malka spoke at the CSIS Proliferation Prevention Program’s conference “Dealing with a Nuclear Iran” on February 6, 2013. Alterman interviewed Gen. James Cartwright (USMC, ret.) about the military component of an Iran strategy. Speaking on a panel about perspectives from the region, Malka presented an overview of the public and behind-the-scenes debates in Israel over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, emphasizing the consensus that compromise requires a credible military threat. Alterman outlined how the GCC states and Turkey view their rivalries with Iran, often seeking to manage an enduring conflict whose origins long predated the Islamic Republic. You can watch video or listen to audio of the event [HERE](#). ■

also that it posed the principal threat to the United States. Whatever strategy the United States adopted, it was in answer to that problem.

The U.S. approach to the Middle East fit into this paradigm. It sought to keep the Soviet Union away from warm water ports and major energy supplies, end regional conflicts that Soviet agitators could exploit, and inoculate populations from the attractions of communism. The United States wasn't always successful, but the goals were clear.

The end of the Cold War meant an end to the clarity of the Cold War structure. While many scrambled to mold that world in their desired image, the organizing principle for U.S. strategy that emerged was a U.S. commitment to global energy security. While some might argue that energy was not at the core of U.S. geostrategy—after all, the United States sanctioned energy producers such as Libya and Iraq—energy is intimately intertwined with the places where the United States concentrated its diplomatic and military efforts. Energy was at the center of two major wars that the United States fought, and it was the connection to oil-rich parts of the world that helped make al-Qaeda such a threatening—and well-financed—threat to U.S. interests. The U.S. focus on Arab-Israeli peacemaking in the 1990s was in some measure an effort to settle an unsettled, oil-rich Middle East, while the U.S. Navy's commitment to protecting the sea-lanes in Asia was in large part a commitment to energy security. As the world economy has grown, it has done so on the back of increased energy consumption. Safeguarding that growth, and thereby protecting friendly governments, is ultimately about energy security. As with the Cold War paradigm that preceded it, the imperatives this paradigm created for the United States in the Middle East were fairly clear.

This energy-centric paradigm has had a basic truth at its core: that the United States is in the same boat as its allies. The United States is not only the world's largest energy consumer but also its largest energy importer. While the United States might not directly import millions of barrels per day of oil from the Middle East, U.S. security was inextricably linked to the global oil trade.

This is about to change. The prospect of U.S. energy independence is rising sharply. New drilling techniques and technologies provide access to new supplies of domestic energy. BP's "Energy Outlook 2030" suggests that the United States will be a net energy exporter by 2030. A change is coming: the rest of the world will be more intimately tied to Middle Eastern energy than will be the United States.

The United States will continue to protect energy flows, in part because there will be an enduring connection between global and domestic prices, and in part because the United States will seek to protect its allies. But as an organizing principle for U.S. foreign policy, it is hard to imagine that global energy security will remain dominant as energy imports decline.

What will take its place? Some argue that the future will be a struggle over the future of China, as the Middle Kingdom seeks to expand its economy at the expense of U.S. economic and military interests. Some argue that the future will principally be about the rise of non-state actors (both benign and malign), and it will be the state system itself that is under scrutiny. Others suggest that in an increasingly networked world, the central organizing principle of U.S. policy should be safeguarding the integrity of networks.

While it will be some time until the future's outline becomes clear, one thing appears certain: while the United States will continue to have a Middle East strategy, U.S. geostrategy will be less intimately tied to the Middle East than at any time since the Hoover administration. The United States will not abandon the Middle East, and it will remain a powerful presence in the region for many years to come. What its overarching goals in the region will be is less obvious.

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Links of Interest

AFP quoted Jon Alterman in "[Iran Talks Risk Failure Without Fresh Moves: US Experts.](#)"

The New York Times quoted Jon Alterman in "[As Arab Spring's Glow Fades and Turmoil Rises, Unsettling Questions.](#)"

Jon Alterman discussed unrest in North Africa and the Middle East on "[This Week in Defense News.](#)"

Voice of America featured Haim Malka in a segment called "[Tunisian Mourners, Police Clash at Opposition Leader's Funeral.](#)"

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