

US Foreign Policy and Strategic Interests in West Asia: Continuity and Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the development of US foreign policy in West Asia, emphasizing the balance of continuity and change in its strategic aims. Historically, US involvement in the region has been driven by priorities such as securing energy supplies, maintaining the stability of allied regimes, and protecting Israel's interests. From the Cold War through the post-9/11 era, American policies have consistently focused on military presence, counterterrorism, and limiting regional threats, chiefly Iran. Recent developments, such as the US shift toward Asia, evolving energy markets, and war fatigue from long conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, have led to strategic adjustments. The study considers how new geopolitical influences, especially China and Russia's rising roles, have further affected US strategic priorities. By examining policy trends across different administrations, the paper shows that despite largely unchanged core interests, tactical strategies have adapted to regional complexities and global shifts, illustrating a sophisticated mix of continuity and change in US foreign policy.

Keywords: US Foreign Policy, Strategic Interest In West Asia, Cold War

Historical Foundations of US Engagement in West Asia

The United States' historical involvement in West Asia (often called the Middle East) is rooted in a mix of geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors that have developed with some continuity over time. Although the US had only limited direct engagement before the mid-1900s, its influence grew substantially after World War II, when the decline of European colonial powers like Britain and France left a strategic gap. This allowed the US to become a leading external actor, guiding the region's political direction to serve its broader interests (Gause, 2010). During the early Cold War, American policy focused mainly on preventing the spread of communism, following the broader containment strategy outlined by George F. Kennan. The region's strategic position, bridging Europe, Asia, and Africa, made it a vital

arena in the superpower rivalry. Efforts such as the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) aimed to build a pro-Western security system to oppose Soviet influence. While these efforts had limited success, they initiated ongoing US involvement in regional security issues (Little, 2008).

A key aspect of US involvement has been safeguarding energy interests, especially securing access to oil. The discovery of large petroleum reserves in countries like Saudi Arabia significantly shifted American foreign policy focus. The 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud on the USS Quincy marked the start of a strategic partnership in which security commitments were exchanged for reliable oil supplies. This alliance laid the foundation for a lasting US-Saudi relationship, which remains a central element of American policy in the Middle East (Vitalis, 2007).

US involvement in West Asia has been marked by strong political, military, and economic support for Israel (Sahu, 2024). Since its founding in 1948, Israel has been viewed as a key ally, sharing democratic values and serving as a strategic partner in a volatile region. US backing for Israel has shaped its relationships with Arab nations and has been a consistent factor in regional conflicts, including the Arab–Israeli wars and the ongoing Palestinian issues. This alliance has often complicated US diplomacy, requiring a careful balancing act between supporting Israel and maintaining relations with the Arab world (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007). The 1970s represented a turning point, especially after the 1973 Oil Crisis revealed Western economies’ dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Consequently, the US increased its regional engagement to secure energy supplies and prevent future crises. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter articulated the Carter Doctrine, stating that any outside effort to control the Persian Gulf would constitute a threat to US vital interests and would justify military intervention if needed (Klare, 2004).

The end of the Cold War did not diminish the strategic importance of West Asia; rather, it redefined US objectives. The Gulf War demonstrated the United States’ willingness to use military power to protect its interests, particularly in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. The successful expulsion of Iraqi forces reinforced US dominance in the region and led to a sustained military presence in the Persian Gulf. This period also witnessed efforts to promote peace between Israel and its neighbors, exemplified by initiatives such as the Oslo Accords, although lasting stability remained elusive (Quandt, 2005).

The post-9/11 era marked another significant phase in US engagement, characterized by an intensified focus on counterterrorism and regime change. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led to the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, reflecting a shift toward preemptive security strategies. These interventions aimed to dismantle terrorist networks and promote democratic governance, but also resulted in prolonged conflicts and regional instability. The legacy of these wars continues to shape US policy and perceptions in West Asia (Lynch, 2016).

US Core Strategic Interests in West Asia: Energy, Security, and Alliances

The United States’ main strategic interests in West

Asia have traditionally centered on three interconnected pillars: securing energy resources, ensuring regional security, and building strategic alliances. These priorities have deeply influenced American foreign policy and sustained a US presence in the region through various historical periods. Although the emphasis on each pillar has varied over time, its overall importance continues to shape US engagement in West Asia. A key reason for US involvement is energy security. West Asia contains some of the world’s largest proven oil and natural gas reserves, making it a vital part of the global energy market. Since the mid-1900s, the US has aimed to secure continuous access to these resources, both for its own needs and to support global economic stability. The strategic significance of the Persian Gulf has been repeatedly highlighted in US policies, especially after the 1973 Oil Crisis revealed Western economies’ vulnerability to supply disruptions (Rudolph, 2025). As a response, the US increased its political and military ties with key oil-producing countries, notably Saudi Arabia, combining economic cooperation with security assurances. However, energy interests are not limited to direct imports. Even as the United States has reduced its dependence on Middle Eastern oil through domestic energy production, the region remains vital to global energy stability. Disruptions in oil supply can have far-reaching economic consequences, affecting international markets and allied economies. Therefore, the United States continues to play a crucial role in safeguarding critical maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of the world’s oil supply passes (Gause, 2010). This underscores the broader strategic logic that US energy policy in West Asia is as much about global economic stability as it is about national consumption.

The second pillar of US strategic interests is regional security, which involves preventing conflict, containing adversaries, and conducting counterterrorism operations. During the Cold War, security efforts mainly focused on halting Soviet influence. After the Cold War and especially following 9/11, the emphasis shifted to fighting terrorism and controlling weapons of mass destruction proliferation. Countries like Iran have been key to US security strategies due to their regional power and nuclear goals. US policies include diplomacy, economic sanctions, and military deterrence to address threats from such nations (Lynch, 2016). The emergence of non-state actors like ISIS has further complicated regional security, challenging traditional state-based methods. This has led to new

approaches that combine military action, intelligence sharing, and counter-radicalization. The coalition against ISIS demonstrates how the US has adapted its security strategies to handle asymmetric threats through collaboration with regional and global partners (Byman, 2015). Overall, this reflects a shift toward more flexible, multilateral security solutions.

The third pillar of US strategic interests involves building and sustaining alliances with key regional players. Among these, the relationship with Israel is particularly central to American policy. The US consistently supports Israel with significant military aid, diplomatic backing, and strategic assistance, considering it a dependable partner in a volatile area. This alliance is based on shared political values and mutual strategic goals, such as intelligence sharing and technological collaboration (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007). Beyond Israel, the US has cultivated strong ties with Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These ties are rooted in security cooperation, arms sales, and economic partnership. The presence of US military bases in the Gulf highlights the strength of these alliances, facilitating rapid deployment and deterring regional threats. However, these alliances sometimes cause tension, especially when US commitments to democratic principles clash with the domestic policies of regional partners (Gause, 2010).

Additionally, US alliances in West Asia are becoming more multilateral. Efforts like security dialogues and joint military exercises aim to create a more cohesive security framework. The normalization deals between Israel and various Arab nations, facilitated by US diplomacy, mark a key development, possibly shifting regional alignments and easing historic tensions (Lynch, 2016).

Continuity in US Foreign Policy: Patterns Across Administrations

Despite leadership changes and shifts in global and regional landscapes, US foreign policy in West Asia has shown notable consistency across administrations. This stability stems from core strategic priorities, energy security, the safeguarding of allies, and regional stability, which have universally guided America's actions in the region. Although policy tools and rhetoric may differ, the fundamental goals have stayed largely the same, reflecting a long-standing strategic consensus within the US foreign policy community. A key constant has been the firm commitment to Israel's security. From President Harry S. Truman, who recognized Israel in 1948, to

modern administrations, the US has consistently provided diplomatic, military, and economic support to Israel. This alliance is justified by shared democratic values, strategic interests, and domestic political factors. Even when disagreements arose over settlement policies or peace talks, the core commitment to Israel's security persisted (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007). Another aspect of continuity is the steady US military presence in the Gulf region. Since the Carter Doctrine in 1980, successive administrations have upheld the principle that the US can deploy military force to defend its Gulf interests. This has led to the establishment of military bases, naval deployments, and security partnerships with Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia. This persistent military footprint highlights the region's strategic importance and the US's aim to sustain a power balance aligned with its interests (Gause, 2010).

The US stance toward regional rivals, such as Iran, also shows consistency. Since the Iranian Revolution, Iran has been regarded as a primary challenge to US interests in West Asia. US policy has focused on curbing Iran's influence through sanctions, diplomatic efforts, and military deterrence. Despite moments of engagement, such as the 2015 nuclear deal, the aim of restricting Iran's regional role has remained steady across administrations, reflecting bipartisan backing (Lynch, 2016). Counterterrorism is another ongoing focus, particularly after 9/11. After September 11, the US implemented a broad counterterrorism strategy that remains a core part of its West Asia policy. While military actions have varied from invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to drone strikes and special forces missions, the primary objective of dismantling terrorist networks persists, underscoring terrorism as a key security threat (Byman, 2015).

While the operational importance of energy security continues to evolve, it remains a fundamental aspect of US policy in the region. Although domestic energy production has grown, reducing reliance on Middle Eastern oil, the US remains dedicated to maintaining global energy market stability. This involves protecting key infrastructure and maritime pathways and fostering strong ties with major energy producers. This ongoing focus underscores the interconnectedness of global energy systems and the continued strategic significance of West Asia for the US (Klare, 2004). Additionally, US foreign policy consistently depends on alliances and partnerships to exert regional influence. Successive administrations have prioritized collaborations with both

long-standing allies and new partners to tackle shared challenges. This approach encompasses bilateral relationships and multilateral efforts to boost regional cooperation. The persistent reliance on alliance-based strategies indicates that US interests in West Asia are best served through a network of cooperative ties rather than unilateral actions (Gause, 2010).

Simultaneously, it is key to recognize that continuity does not mean inflexibility. Instead, it exists alongside tactical flexibility, enabling various administrations to adjust their strategies to evolving situations while staying true to fundamental goals. For example, one administration might focus on diplomatic efforts, whereas another might prioritize military action; nonetheless, both aim for the same strategic objectives. This combination of steadiness and adaptability has characterized US foreign policy in West Asia.

Changing Dynamics: New Challenges and Policy Shifts

While continuity has characterized US foreign policy in West Asia, the last twenty years have seen major changes in regional dynamics and American strategic responses. These changes stem from shifting geopolitical realities, domestic limitations within the U.S., and the rise of new actors and challenges. As a result, US policy has increasingly undergone a process of recalibration, balancing longstanding interests with the need to adapt to a rapidly evolving regional landscape. A significant development has been the gradual shift in US global strategy, often called the “pivot to Asia,” which emphasizes the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region amid rising competition with China. As a result, West Asia has become less central to US strategic priorities, leading to a decreased willingness to engage in large-scale military interventions. The ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan not only deplete American resources but also cause domestic war fatigue, prompting policymakers to reevaluate the costs and benefits of deep military involvement (Lynch, 2016). This reassessment is clear in the shift from direct intervention to more limited, indirect engagement methods. Instead of deploying large numbers of troops, the United States has increasingly used tools like drone warfare, special operations forces, and support for local allies. The fight against ISIS illustrates this strategy, in which the US led but did not act alone, collaborating with coalitions and regional partners to achieve its goals. This approach reflects a

broader trend towards burden-sharing and multilateral efforts to tackle security issues (Byman, 2015).

A major development has been the evolving nature of regional conflicts, especially after the Arab Spring. The uprisings led to the dissolution or weakening of several state institutions, resulting in civil wars, humanitarian crises, and heightened geopolitical competition. Countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen have become battlegrounds for proxy conflicts involving regional and global powers. In this complex landscape, US policy has often appeared reactive and inconsistent, struggling to support democratic movements while addressing stability and security concerns (Gause, 2010). The influence of regional powers has also changed, further complicating US strategy. Nations such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia have adopted more assertive foreign policies to expand their regional influence. For example, Iran’s involvement in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen has intensified its rivalry with the US and its allies. US responses have fluctuated between confrontation and diplomacy, as seen in the negotiations and subsequent challenges over the Iran nuclear deal. These shifts underscore the difficulty of managing regional rivalries within a coherent strategic approach (Lynch, 2016).

Besides regional players, global powers like Russia and China are adding new layers to West Asian geopolitics. Russia’s military involvement in Syria was a major move to reaffirm its influence, challenging US hegemony and shifting power balances. Meanwhile, China has grown its economic footprint through investments and infrastructure, positioning itself as an important regional stakeholder. These shifts have prompted the US to reassess its strategy, as it faces increasing competition in a region it once led (Gause, 2010). Economic and energy developments also impacted US policy. The expansion of domestic shale oil production lessens America’s reliance on Middle Eastern energy, changing its strategic outlook. However, since energy markets are still interconnected worldwide, the US remains interested in regional stability. This has resulted in a more selective engagement, emphasizing maritime security and infrastructure protection over broad regional dominance (Klare, 2004).

Furthermore, domestic political considerations within the United States have played an increasingly important role in shaping foreign policy decisions. Public opinion, fiscal constraints, and political polarization have all contributed to a more cautious, at times inconsistent,

approach to West Asia. Different administrations have adopted varying strategies—ranging from interventionism to retrenchment—reflecting divergent interpretations of national interest and global responsibility. This variability underscores the growing influence of domestic factors in foreign policy formulation.

Emerging Geopolitics and the Future of US Strategy in West Asia

The changing geopolitical landscape of West Asia is marked by multipolarity, shifting alliances, and the rising influence of both regional and external powers. These shifts significantly shape the future direction of US foreign policy, necessitating a thoughtful reevaluation of strategies to remain relevant and effective in a complex, competitive environment. Although core priorities such as security, energy, and alliances remain consistent, their application is being influenced by new geopolitical dynamics.

A major development is the growing competition among the great powers, especially between China and Russia. China's growing economic influence in West Asia, driven by initiatives such as the Belt and Road, has made it a key player in regional development and infrastructure. Unlike the U.S., China mainly avoids direct military action, focusing on economic diplomacy and strategic investments. This strategy has helped Beijing establish strong connections with regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, without getting involved in conflicts. For the U.S., this presents both challenges and opportunities: China's growing presence may weaken US influence, but it could also foster shared responsibilities in areas like economic development (Gause, 2010). Meanwhile, Russia has re-emerged as a major security actor, notably through its military support in Syria. Supporting the Syrian government, Russia has protected its strategic interests and demonstrated its influence in regional affairs. This has complicated US policy, as Washington now faces a more assertive Russia willing to challenge American positions. The involvement of multiple great powers indicates a shift from the unipolar era after the Cold War, pointing to a more contested geopolitical landscape (Lynch, 2016).

At the regional level, alliances are evolving, and efforts to normalize relations are reshaping political alignments. The gradual warming of relations between Israel and several Arab states signifies a significant shift in regional diplomacy. Partly assisted by US mediation, these developments suggest a realignment of priorities,

with shared security concerns, especially regarding Iran, becoming more prominent than traditional ideological differences. The strengthening connections between Israel and Gulf countries indicate new strategic arrangements that could enhance regional stability and increase US influence (Quandt, 2005). However, ongoing conflicts and internal unrest remain major hurdles. Crises in Yemen and Syria demonstrate the limitations of external intervention and the difficulties in establishing lasting peace. These conflicts, fueled by local grievances, regional rivalries, and international involvement, resist simple policy solutions. Addressing these crises requires the US to adopt a nuanced approach that balances humanitarian needs with strategic interests. Additionally, the evolving energy landscape significantly influences US strategy. While the US has gained greater energy independence through advances in shale production, West Asian energy resources remain of global importance. Disruptions in the region can still impact global markets, requiring ongoing US engagement to maintain stability. Meanwhile, the global shift toward renewable energy may gradually diminish the strategic importance of oil, potentially transforming regional roles over time (Klare, 2004).

Technological progress and the emergence of non-traditional security threats are shaping US policy. Issues such as cybersecurity, misinformation, and the spread of advanced weapons pose new challenges to regional security. Non-state actors continue to leverage these technologies, creating problems that cannot be solved solely through conventional military means. This necessitates the US to develop more integrated and flexible strategies, blending military, economic, and technological approaches to confront these threats (Byman, 2015). Looking forward, the US strategy in West Asia is likely to be marked by selective engagement and strategic prioritization. Instead of trying to dominate the region, the US may aim to sustain a balance of power, support key allies, and prevent the rise of hostile hegemonic forces. This reflects a shift toward realism and pragmatism in US foreign policy, recognizing both the limits of American influence and the complexities of regional dynamics.

In short, the emerging geopolitics of West Asia present both challenges and opportunities for the United States. The rise of new powers, shifting alliances, and evolving security threats requires a flexible, forward-looking strategy. While the era of unchallenged US

dominance in the region may be waning, the United States remains a critical actor with significant influence. From the US perspective, Iran is one of their main barriers in the region, despite having had very close and cordial relations with Iran before 1979. Its ability to adapt to changing circumstances will determine the effectiveness of its engagement in West Asia in the years to come.

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