

SPECIAL REPORT

America's Global Retreat and the Ensuing Strategic Vacuum



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By Ariel Cohen

Shortly after President Donald Trump ordered a U.S. retreat from Syria and Afghanistan in October 2019, events in the region drew U.S. forces right back in. The administration's decision to target Gen. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, triggered tit-for-tat retaliation between Washington and Tehran at the opening of 2020, bringing bilateral tensions to their highest levels since the 1979 hostage crisis. Despite these actions in the region, Washington is still seeking to retreat from its security commitments in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia. While there are financial and political benefits to reducing America's footprint abroad, a reduced presence in this geopolitically critical part of the world could also create a strategic vacuum with dire diplomatic, economic, and security consequences.

The specters of a resurgent Russia and rising China raise the question of how a U.S. withdrawal from the world stage could harm Washington's long-term strategic interests. The best approach to analyzing such a scenario is through the realpolitik perspective, wherein countries strive to safeguard and expand their own strategic interests. By definition, strategic interests are power-based, yet they don't exclude policies to uphold doctrines of democratization, state building, or liberal values, especially if *raison d'état* dictates it.

In true realist fashion, the Trump administration is concerned primarily with American economic and security interests – and domestic politics. Yet the high

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COVER: U.S. troops from the Combined Joint Task Force talk with Iraqi soldiers during a handover ceremony at an Iraqi base in Mosul, northern Iraq. The base was turned over to Iraqi forces on March 30. (Photo by Zaid AL-OBEIDI / Getty Images)

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costs of maintaining a U.S.-centric international system and American diplomatic and military presence abroad brings a tremendous return: a guaranteed place atop the international security architecture designed by the United States and its allies after World War II.

The term “strategic vacuum” refers to a situation in the international system whereby a regional or global hegemon withdraws from an area, leading to an imbalance of power which eventually becomes filled. Geopolitics – like nature – abhors a vacuum. History is replete with examples that demonstrate how the rapid depressurization of a power pulling out from a region too quickly or too soon can lead to instability in the form of civil wars, military coups or genocide. This paper argues that U.S. disengagement from the Middle East and beyond would create a strategic vacuum portending systemic and regional instability while undermining American liberal hegemony. Other opportunist contenders for great power status, such as Russia and China, or even intermediate powers such as Turkey and Iran, may view such a retreat as a strategic opportunity to bolster their hard and soft power around their periphery at the cost of American influence and power projection.

The Post-Cold War Hegemony and its Discontents

The United States maintained a position of seemingly unmatched economic and military strength relative to its global peers from the Soviet collapse until the 2010s. Despite the so-called “rise of the rest” – namely the emergence of China as a near-peer competitor, the re-emergence of Russian international ambitions beyond its near abroad, and the appearance of regional powers like Turkey and India – the United States and its allies enjoyed a Pax Americana for 30 years. However, racial protests across the country and Washington’s delayed response to the

COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the United States’ internal crises. These events may indicate how untenable this hegemony could be if the United States does not maintain a healthy and robust social compact, which predicates an active foreign policy.

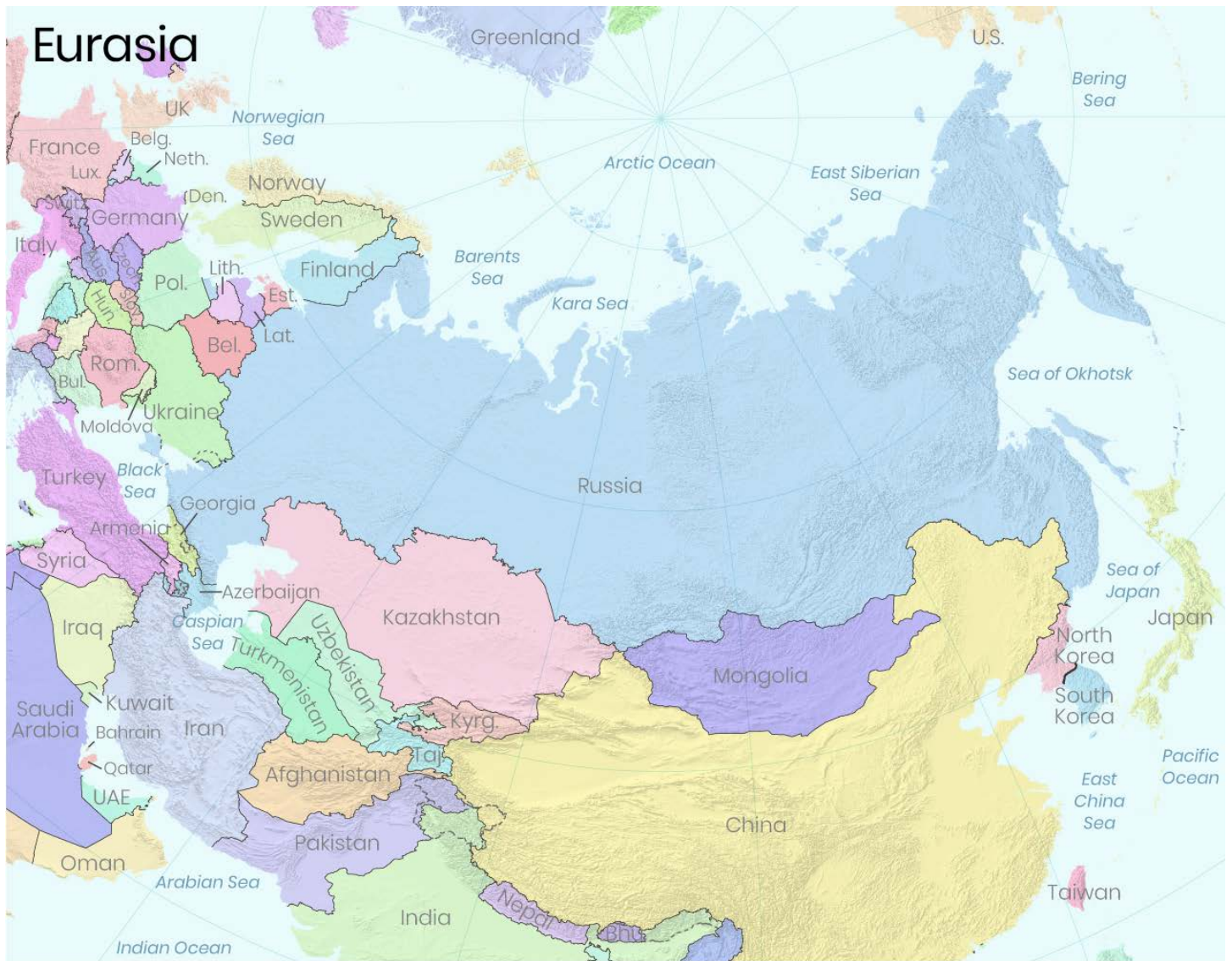
Trump’s ill-considered decision to halt funding for, and quit, the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic ceded ground to Beijing and projected the image of a disinterested superpower turning inward, while China has been actively trying to escape criticism for being the source of the virus. China’s new “mask diplomacy,” which involves sending planeloads of medical personnel and protective equipment to Belt and Road

countries and beyond, sends a very different message from the one the United States is projecting (Ma, 2020).

Foundations of U.S. Power

The United States’ dominance has been predicated on, among other factors, the deployment, maintenance, and actions of the military around the world. From the Navy’s protection of international shipping lanes to the U.S. Army’s presence in Afghanistan and Iraq since the early 2000s, U.S. military assets have played a key role in maintaining relative global stability. U.S. global power is also dependent on an array of alliances in Asia and Europe, which are fraying under numerous stresses, including the lack of an agreed-upon enemy (a role the Soviet Union used to fill), U.S. nationalist economic policies, and Europe’s perceived inability to pay up for NATO defenses. Only nine countries were able to meet the 2% of GDP share goal that U.S. President Barack Obama and the NATO leaders agreed upon at the Wales summit and which Trump doubled down on in July 2018 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2014; Haltiwanger, 2019).

The current U.S. administration believes that energy resources should be wielded as a foreign policy tool, a strategy familiar to Russian President Vladimir Putin (Guliyev, 2020). Trump criticized the infamous Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Germany and Russia as counter to NATO defense objectives, as the 55 billion



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cubic meter pipeline encourages greater European economic dependence on Moscow. The White House alternative is to sell the United States' plentiful liquefied natural gas to Europe, extending a lifeline to Eastern European countries like Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States, which are particularly vulnerable to Russian energy coercion. Energy diplomacy with Europe should become a lynchpin of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Energy diplomacy reinforces the sound strategic notion of building stability through careful economic and military alliances, with the deployment of troops on foreign soil reserved only as a last resort in achieving U.S. foreign policy aims. According to the realist credo, endless wars should be avoided. In the extreme cases where a force deployment is necessary, history shows that these forces should not be removed until polit-

ical objectives are achieved and regional allies are empowered. The Congressional decision to halt aid to South Vietnam in 1973, for example, led to the emboldening of the North Vietnamese and brought about the eventual fall of Saigon (Kissinger, 2003). Iraqi security forces were similarly abandoned in the aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom, which allowed ISIS to rise from the ashes of al Qaeda, despite stark warnings from State

Department and Defense Department officials in Iraq (Brands & Feaver, 2017).

Trump's order to withdraw some troops from war-torn Syria in October 2019 follows the pattern of "mission accomplished": the premature U.S. withdrawals from Iraq under President George W. Bush (2008), and from Afghanistan (2014) and Iraq (2011) under Obama. At minimum, it highlighted the acceleration of an existing trend toward U.S. disengagement from the Middle East and possibly from Europe. While the Trump presidency has neutralized ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Iran's Soleimani, suggesting a proactive stance in defense and counterterrorism activities, these actions are still taking place in the context of a broader U.S. retreat from the vast areas to which the United States has been committed since Sept. 11. The withdrawal of the 2,000 troops from Syria also holds more symbolic importance: It sends a message of disinterest and lack of resolve to Kurdish allies and especially to the resurgent Russia.

The lesson the United States should have learned from Vietnam was that suddenly withdrawing troops and aid in the midst of an unstable political situation will eventually result in the enemy coming back stronger. Leaving Syria at this stage – and deserting the United States' Kurdish allies – allows ISIS to consolidate and regroup, just as the group's predecessor did after a hasty U.S. withdrawal under Obama in 2010 (International Crisis

Group, 2019). It is indeed time to stop endless wars, but not without leaving a stable situation in both Iraq and Syria.

The Trump Doctrine

Trump's National Security Strategy, laid out in 2017, promoted an "America First" approach based on "preserving peace through strength" (Trump, 2017). The document stressed that the Trump administration would keep a necessary military and economic presence in the Middle East to maintain regional stability and emphasized the importance of bolstering vulnerable partners in the region against Iran and the scourge of violent extremism. A peaceful resolution to the Syrian civil war is another primary U.S. foreign policy objective – one that is far from being met. The strategy does, however, note that U.S. security challenges and interests in the Middle East are far too many to expect success on all fronts. A little realism never hurt anyone.

The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy encourages greater U.S. involvement in the world and increased military spending, focusing less on renegotiating old geostrategic deals and much more on improving U.S. military and technological advantages. The Department of Defense is adamant that the previously uncontested U.S. military now faces competition on every front. It prioritizes preparedness for war in the face of the rogue Iranian regime and especially emphasizes working to ensure the

lasting defeat of ISIS in Syria by "developing enduring coalitions" (Mattis, 2018). The decision to move out of Syria and essentially abandon the Kurdish forces goes against the 2018 National Defense Strategy but, it could be argued, is more in line with Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy.

Trump has yet to articulate a specific foreign policy doctrine under his presidency, but excerpts from his White House address on Oct. 23, 2019, shed insight on his position:

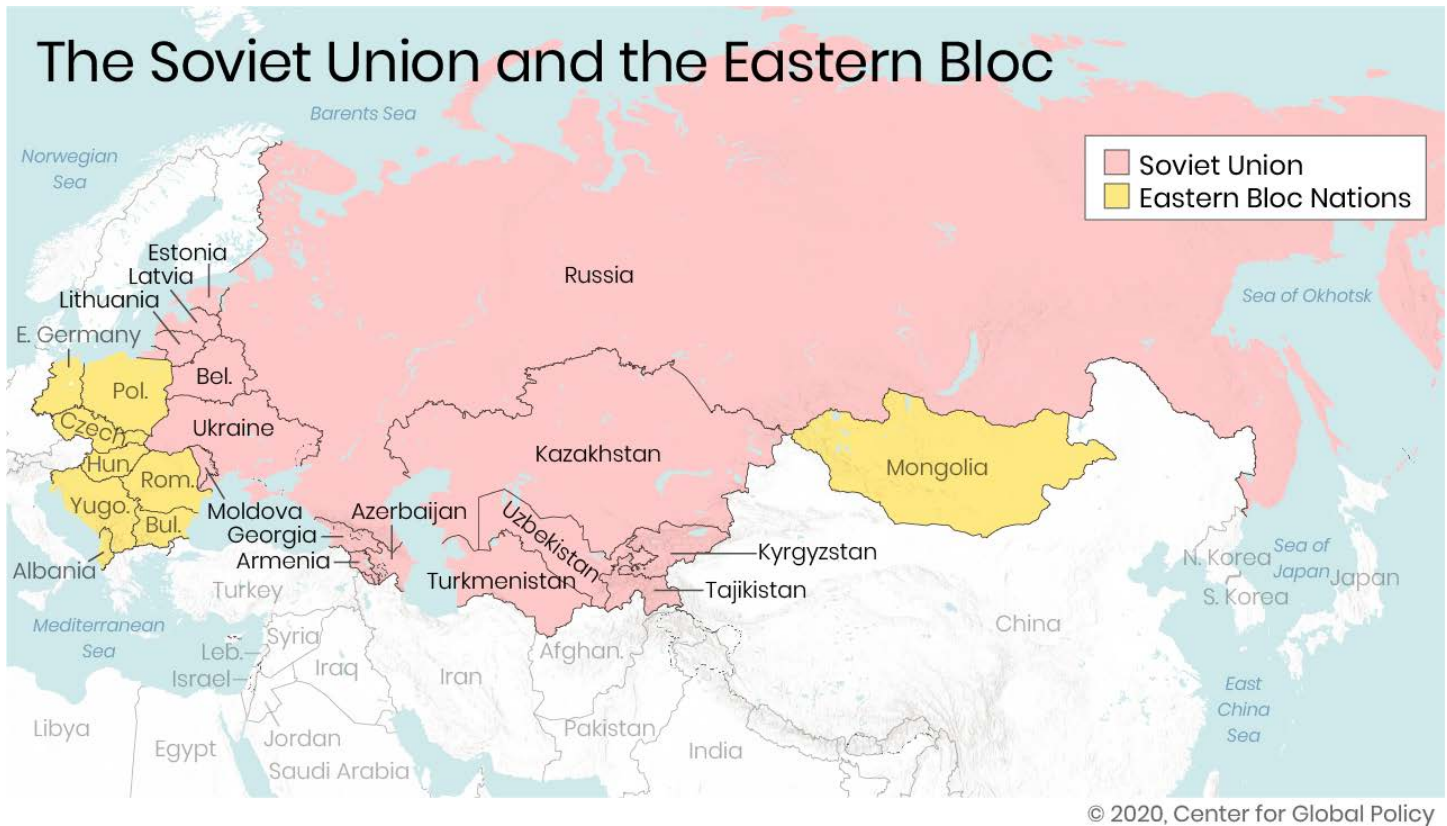
"I am committed to pursuing a different course, one that leads to victory for America."

"As a candidate for president, I made clear that we needed a new approach to American foreign policy, one guided not by ideology but by experience, history, and a realistic understanding of the world ... when we commit American troops to battle, we must do so only when a vital national interest is at stake and when we have a clear objective, a plan for victory, and a path out of conflict."

"Our whole basis has to be the right plan, and then we will only win. Nobody can beat us."

"The job of our military is not to police the world. Other nations must step up and do their fair share – that hasn't taken place."

“The United States paid to defend Europe from Soviet aggression for over 70 years, as well as to thwart terrorism and transnational bad actors. Today, just a handful of NATO members are meeting the agreed-upon spending obligations.”



Under this “doctrine,” the United States will not engage in military conflict without clear objectives and an overwhelming probability of success. This philosophy is shared by the Weinberger Doctrine (Correll, 2014) and its corollary, the Powell Doctrine, which advocate for clear and achievable goals in any U.S. military intervention (Hoffman, 2014). The Weinberger Doctrine derives itself from the Clausewitzian principle of strategy, i.e., clear

objectives for achieving the national interest (Dimitriu, 2018). “Endless wars” may blunt the American voters’ commitment to supporting the troops, create costly foreign policy endeavors, and lead to hasty disengagements with unpredictable consequences to the global security system.

When it comes to the role U.S. troops should play to help stabilize global hotspots like Syria and Iraq,

the president believes that local or regional powers must bear the burden, not the United States. That may explain Trump’s permissive attitude toward Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s unprecedented incursion into Syria in October 2019 (Speckhard, 2019). This reflects an overarching Trumpian policy of making regional allies “pay their fair share” to secure Western interests (Riechmann, 2019). The urge to diminish global

Former Soviet Union



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commitments is understandable. The United States paid to defend Europe from Soviet aggression for over 70 years, as well as to thwart terrorism and transnational bad actors. Today, just a handful of NATO members are meeting the agreed-upon spending obligations (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2019), and without a common galvanizing threat, as was provided by the Soviet Union after World War II, the justification for Washington to meet its alliance commitments is arguably minimized. And China, despite its numerous economic and ideological differences with the United States and the Western world, does not yet pose the same

threat to global peace and stability that the USSR did. The domestic mistrust from the president's GOP base toward globalism further cements the Trump administration's stance toward American military commitments.

However, if the United States wishes to maintain its superpower status and prevent more unruly spaces like Afghanistan and Syria from emerging, it must preserve its carefully crafted alliance structures. In the event of an emerging challenger – be that China or a militant transnational Islamist movement – a violent conflict could ensue, a phenomenon that many

U.S. policymakers and academics believe to be inevitable. The fulfillment of commitments between allies helps to deter would-be challengers and attracts new partners. In fact, NATO Article 5 was invoked only once, after 9/11, where it served as the legal base for the European allies supporting U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan. At the same time, it was a coalition of the willing that conducted operations alongside the United States in Iraq. NATO as such did not conduct operations, as France and Germany, two key members, refused to support the United States in the war against Saddam Hussein's regime.

Middle Eastern Challenge

Reducing the U.S. military footprint in the geostrategically critical Middle East not only hurts American interests; it also signals weakness to the United States' foes and sends a message of apathy to U.S. allies. The United States has a longstanding interest in Middle East affairs founded in energy security, anti-terrorism, and global stability. After 9/11, the United States fought to protect the world from terrorist groups. The battle to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS, both sworn enemies of the United States, continues on Iraqi and Syrian soil. Yet as the importance of oil declines, and the perceived threat of China's dominance grows, the United States is shifting its security focus eastward toward China and the Pacific. This pivot has, to some extent, been justified, but it would be a strategic blunder to neglect the security and economic importance of the Middle East.

Protecting the strategic waterways of the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea, through which over 20% of the world's oil exports transit, is still paramount despite increased U.S. oil production. The United States is not self-sufficient in oil; it produces about 12 million barrels per day and consumes around 20 million barrels per day (Energy Information Administration, 2020). Saudi Arabia still accounts for 25% of U.S. oil imports. The post-World War II global economy that Washington helped build is reliant on

Middle Eastern oil, which must be safeguarded not just in the interests of the world's largest crude consumer – the United States – but for the sake of global markets, including those in Asia.

More devastating attacks, like those Iran conducted against the Abqaiq and Khurais oil fields in Saudi Arabia on Sept. 14, 2019, must be prevented. The Abqaiq strikes took half of Saudi oil production temporarily offline and could have plunged the world into a supply crisis. However, in March 2020, only seven months after the attack, Trump withdrew U.S. Patriot missiles from Saudi Arabia. The Pentagon attributed this move to “routine asset circulation,” but was no doubt influenced in some part by the Kingdom starting an oil price war with Russia during the pandemic (Hannah & Bowman, 2020) in an attempt to drive up prices.

When Great Powers Withdraw

There is a price for American withdrawals, and it is often paid by non-Americans. Obama's precipitous pullout from Iraq cost the lives of tens of thousands of Arabs, Kurds, Yazidis, and others (Schmitt et al., 2019). The abandonment of America's Kurdish allies in Syria in particular still reverberates in and beyond the region. Trump's decision left a perception of weak U.S. resolve to protect Middle Eastern allies from national (Iranian, Russian) and transnational (violent extremism, paramilitary forces, piracy, etc.) threats.

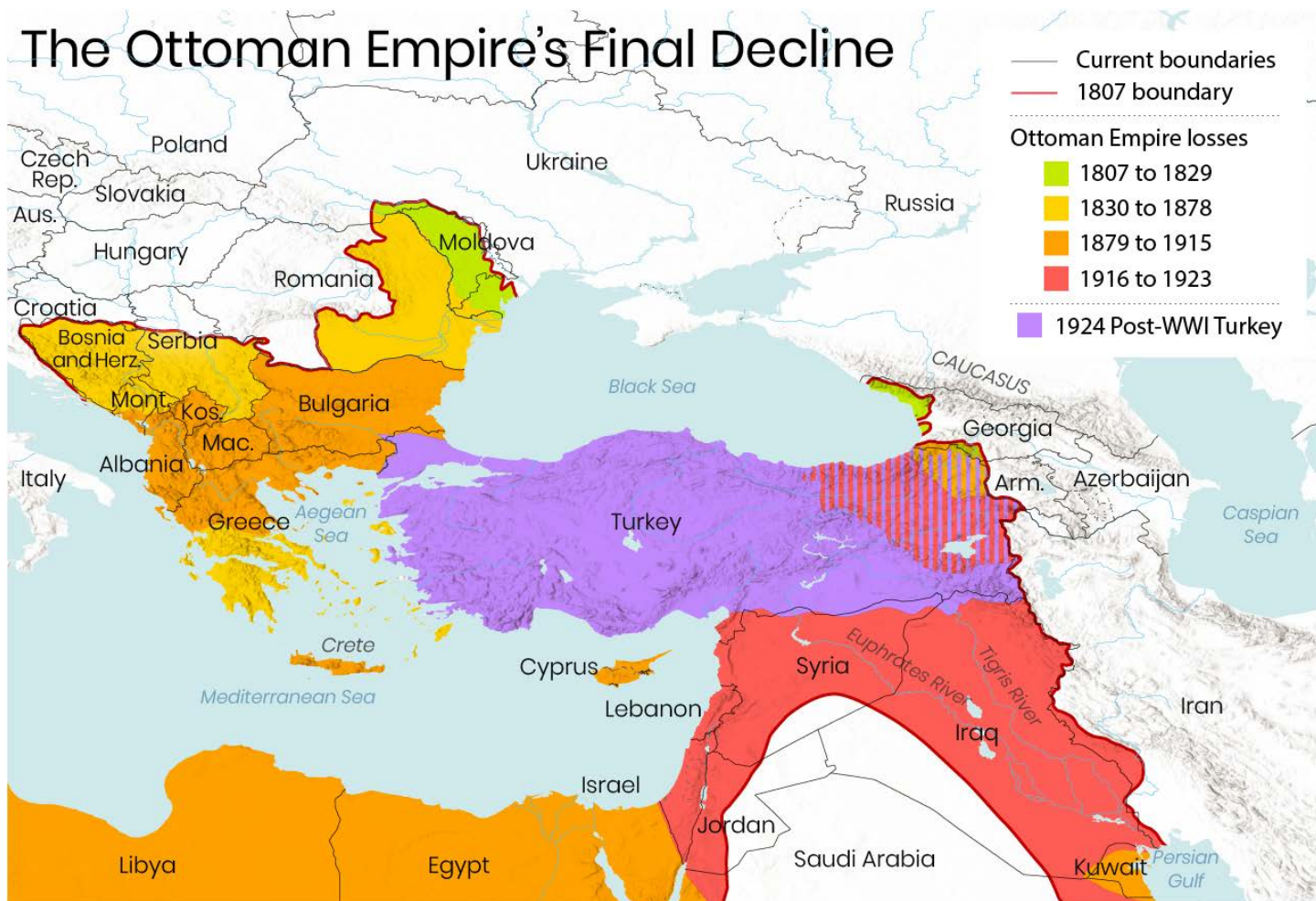
After three decades of resistance, the United States has finally allowed a resurgent Russia to regain a foothold in the Middle East. Indeed, Moscow is expanding its bases in the port cities of Tartus and Latakia in Syria, which are the base of operations for the Russian navy in the Mediterranean and can house Russia's largest nuclear-powered vessels.

While neither Obama nor Trump wanted another war in the Middle East, there was an additional consideration: Weakening Bashar al-Assad's position meant chaos and lawless zones, creating more space for extremists like ISIS. It was in the United States' interest that the Assad regime not collapse. The United States could not do business with the Syrian government for obvious reasons, but the Russians could, giving Moscow its first victory in the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The very real cost for Washington's reluctance to stay committed to strategic regions is that other great powers fill the vacuum, to the detriment of U.S. allies and interests. The United States needs to face the consequences of a withdrawal and bring in coalitions of the willing to fill the vacuum, calculate the cost-benefit balance of a strategic competitor moving in, or decide not to leave in the first place.

Deserting Kurdish allies in Syria not only resulted in a military setback but also makes other allies rightfully question America's reliability. From Tokyo to Taipei, and from

The Ottoman Empire's Final Decline



Source: britannica.com

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Jerusalem to Jeddah, the United States' reputation as an unwavering partner is being undermined.

The Costs of the Global System – and of Retreat

Trump's realpolitik brand of foreign policy includes scuttling wide-reaching trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which were designed to bind the Pacific Rim and Europe with the United States.

Washington is also in the process of pulling out of a number of arms

control treaties, such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty, and is likely not to prolong the START 3 Treaty. This regression may come back to haunt U.S. national interests (Gordon & Salama, 2019). Trump would argue these actions do not constitute "retreat" but rather the reassertion of U.S. interests in a system biased against those interests. Other actors will be forced to respond (e.g., NATO allies on defense spending, Russia with catching up in the nuclear race, and China on trade sanctions).

This is the ultimate tragedy of great power politics: The hegemon can

never rest on its laurels (Mearsheimer, 2001), nor can it expect to remain unchallenged. The United States must continue to adjust the global architecture it created in the aftermath of World War II, and needs to go the extra mile to minimize threats to global stability – and to its strategic dominance.

The U.S.-led global architecture we live in today is the product of four generations of work, paid for by thousands of American lives and trillions of dollars in investments. It is more liberal, democratic, and free trade-oriented than anything that existed before, and what may come after it may be more

authoritarian and mercantilist. However, the existing foreign policy framework's undeniable success has kept the United States safe and prosperous since 1945. Great powers place a high premium on survival, and a responsible hegemon does not and should not disregard this strategic calculus (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The Lessons of the 20th Century: Imperial Collapse, Chaos, and Conflict

The 20th century provides numerous examples of chaos and local wars ensuing upon imperial disintegration or withdrawal. A collapsing empire, like an imposing building going down, leaves rubble after its demise – a natural phenomenon, which policy makers should remember. We will examine a number of those, including the collapse of the Russian, and British Empires, and the disorder they left behind.

The emergence of a multipolar order often brings chaos after the relative stability of a unilateral hegemon (Rubin, 2019). After the collapse of the Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German empires, a number of conflicts erupted, driven by nationalism and great power competition. These conflicts included the Polish-Soviet war of 1920, the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922, and wars leading to the independence of the Baltic states and Finland. In an attempt to resurrect the Russian Empire in communist garb, Moscow fought to recap-

ture Ukraine, the Trans-Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), and Central Asia. Again, millions were killed or displaced.

Since the late 1980s, the United States has etched out a relatively stable international order to replace the tense confrontation of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was a global military, political, and ideological challenger. Today, although the United States has not created a formal empire, a precipitous global U.S. withdrawal could generate a strategic vacuum leading to chaos and conflict, as the following historical examples may suggest.

After the Empire Departs: Case Studies

Upon winning World War II, inheriting the mantle of the British Empire, and finally triumphing against the Soviet Union in the Cold War during the USSR's collapse in 1989-1991, the United States painstakingly put together a system of alliances, international organizations, and military bases which made the world safe and gave U.S. businesses an advantage.

This new global order was carved out deliberately wherever the United States made its presence felt across the globe to limit Soviet advances. The creation of NATO was an unprecedented move that helped the United States become the Western security guarantor and provider of last resort, around the same time when the Bretton Woods institutions became the ultimate global economic security

providers. NATO also helped safeguard the United States' position as the lone superpower upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Today, this status is challenged by the growing Chinese economic and military might, and Russian truculence.

But this was not always the case. Until World War II, Great Britain was the premier global power, albeit in decline after World War I. The British people were bled white by the Great War, and the empire lacked the funds to maintain its naval and air power deterrence against its German and Japanese challengers. Without U.S. and Soviet support, the British would have faced defeat at the hands of the Nazis and the Japanese. The United States under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his successors – Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower – achieved global dominance through realist thinking, not pure idealism.

After the war, London, broke and exhausted, made a reluctant strategic decision to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent by 1948, as well as from the Middle East after the 1956 Suez crisis. The British abandoned Africa by the early 1960s, as reflected in British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's "Winds of Change" speech (Macmillan & Hurd, 1966). Following unsuccessful attempts after World War II to hold to parts of the Middle East as an informal hegemon, the British elite had lost the willpower and taste for the imperial enterprise, allowing the United States to take

“China is a strikingly different challenger to the United States than the Americans were to their British cousins. It would be a grave mistake for the United States to surrender this hard-won position willingly. The citizens of Hong Kong can certainly vouch for this.”

the United Kingdom's place. This is only half the story, however.

The British sacrificed their empire to receive American help in order to survive the German challenge. At the Atlantic Charter meeting in 1941, Winston Churchill convinced Franklin D. Roosevelt to bring the United States into World War II (Patrick, 2011). The underlying strategic intention of the meeting is less talked about. Britain agreed to dismantle its empire in exchange for U.S. support in winning the war. In principle, this was the meeting that transferred the reins of global power and management of the international system to the United States.

Washington forced London's hand toward reducing its posture in the world so that the United States could replace it at the helm. Today, China is a strikingly different challenger to the United States than the Americans were to their British cousins. It would be a grave mistake for the United States to surrender this hard-won position willingly. The citizens of Hong Kong can certainly vouch for this.

The relatively swift worldwide

British exodus, caused by the rise of nationalism in the developing world, the Cold War, and imperial overstretch, generated a geopolitical vacuum. As a result, a series of postcolonial conflicts occurred from the 1940s through the 1960s. These included the partition of India, during which around 1 million people died, as well as subsequent India-Pakistan Wars.

The vehement Arab resistance to the creation of Israel also fomented a number of wars between Israel and coalitions of Arab states. A Communist Chinese insurrection in Malaysia, the failed Enosis (unification with Greece) in Cyprus, and a slew of bloody ethnic conflicts in Africa from Kenya to Nigeria followed suit. Millions perished, and several millions more became refugees.

Partition and the Indo-Pakistani Wars

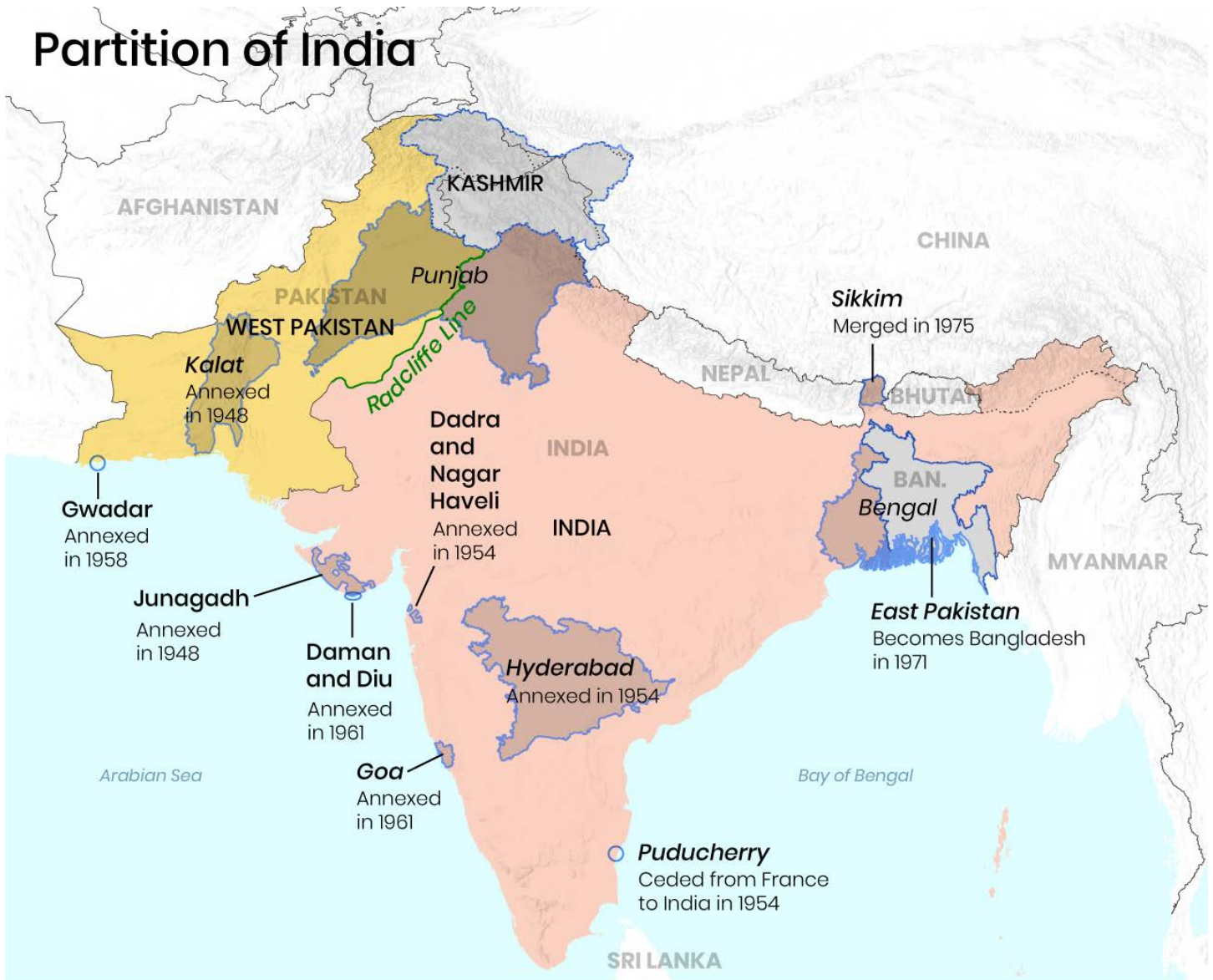
Britain's grip over the crown jewel of its empire was already loosening as it went into World War II. The Indians, under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, were able to negotiate a promise of independence from

London in exchange for Indian participation in the war. However, the manner in which the British left India created an enormous power struggle between Hindus and Muslims. Communal tensions between India's two largest religious populations were at a boiling point even before the British withdrawal.

Britain's decision to leave all but ensured a grisly conclusion. The British withdrawal from India in 1947, after years of negotiations between India's National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, generated a humanitarian and geopolitical catastrophe much bigger than the Turkish-Greek war of 1920. The partition led to one of the largest (if not the largest) mass migrations in history as well as a communal conflict that resulted in around 1 million deaths – the scars of which remain with us today.

The massive vacuum of imperial power and largely undefined borders caused genocidal violence to erupt throughout the subcontinent, with trains full of dead migrants arriving in both India and Pakistan (Doshi & Mehdi, 2017).

Partition of India



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The (British) Radcliffe Boundary Commission had failed to allocate key areas to either country, especially in the case of Jammu and Kashmir (Ilahi, 2003). India and Pakistan still vie for control of the whole of the former princely state.

The geostrategic vacuum in the subcontinent has led to three major wars fought in Kashmir – in 1948, 1965, and 1999 – as well as the

invasion of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The British exit from the subcontinent not only sparked deadly insurgencies but eventually brought two armed nations to the brink of a nuclear war (Mian, 2016). As we can see, the consequences of a superpower’s global retreat without designing and implementing the post-withdrawal architecture can be far-reaching and devastating.

Arab-Israeli Wars

British and French imperial fingerprints can be found across the Middle East and Africa to this day. The region’s post-Great War partition – compounded by poorly executed exits after World War II – remains one of the lasting sources of instability across the region.

The British dismantling of the Otto-

man Empire without consideration of simmering intra-Arab rivalries set in motion a series of conflicts, while their inability to resolve conflicts around the national aspirations of Jews and local Arabs set the stage for Arab-Israeli wars, of which there have been five so far.

Britain realized that it could not keep both the promises of the 1917 Balfour declaration and also keep the local Arab population and the newly independent Arab countries satisfied (Schneer, 2010). The Crown could not cope with the armed conflict between the Yishuv (pre-independence Israel) and the Arab populations, leading to the closing of the gates of the Jewish National Home Mandate in the dark days before and during the Holocaust, thus trapping Jews who might otherwise have been able to escape Europe.

In 1948, Britain hurriedly deferred to the U.N. General Assembly Partition resolution and turned in its original League of Nations Mandate. Almost instantaneously, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq invaded the British Mandate territories, part of which became the newly proclaimed Israel, while Gaza and the West Bank were occupied by Egypt and Jordan, respectively.

This would not be the end; wars in the Middle East broke out every few years as the British left a power vacuum that the Soviets sought to fill. The Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six Day War of 1967, the Yom Kippur War (1973), the two Lebanon Wars (1982 and 2006), and

the two intifadas (1987 and 2000) all have at least some roots in the initial British withdrawal of their once-hegemonic power. While it is true that the modern Middle East is largely the result of imperialist rule by Great Britain and France, both of which were inevitably driven out, the Arab-Israeli wars greatly influenced the region, providing an excuse for the rulers to delay much-needed domestic reforms in order to maintain mobilization against the “Zionist entity.”

The United States secured relative stability in the Middle East with the Camp David Accords (1979), jeopardized from time to time by radical Shiite, Iranian, and Sunni transnational militant organizations (al Qaeda, ISIS). Thus, a U.S. departure from the area could escalate simmering conflicts and may be disastrous for Washington, its allies, and hundreds of millions of people in the region.

Post-Soviet Civil Wars in Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Nagorno-Karabakh

Of course, the British Empire was not the only great power that left behind a void resulting in civil war or ethno-religious conflict. The policies of perestroika and glasnost – sweeping social and political reforms under Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev – decreased Moscow’s influence in the USSR’s periphery (Gidadhubli, 1987), bringing previously suppressed conflicts back to the forefront from the Baltics to Armenia/Azerbaijan and in Central Asia.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and Tajikistan became independent in September 1991, a power struggle began in the capital of Dushanbe. In the country’s first presidential election since independence, former Communist party General Secretary Rahmon Nabiyeu emerged victorious. Nabiyeu was backed by a faction of ex-Communists in direct conflict with a coalition of Democrats and Islamist factions. By June 1992, fighting had sprung up between pro-government forces and the United Tajik Opposition.

The opposition forces captured Nabiyeu and forced him to resign his presidency. His successor, Emomali Rahmon, led a campaign of militias based in Kulob, an agricultural region aligned with the capital Dushanbe and the key city of Khojent, in mass ethnic cleansing against the Ismaili Pamiris and Gharmis – groups that had backed the opposition and had ethnic connections in Afghanistan. Civil strife continued, with a variety of liberal-Democratic and Islamist factions operating from South Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The violence only ceased in the face of massive Russian military support of Nabiyeu and Rahmon.

An armistice was signed in 1997, but anywhere between 20,000 and 100,000 people had been killed over five war-torn years (Toshmammadov, 2004). Cross-border Tajik connections with Afghanistan contribute to the flow of arms, drugs, and fighters in both directions to this day.



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Even more people died in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, as hundreds of thousands became refugees. Moscow, the imperial metropolis, favored Christian Armenia before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and today Russia benefits from keeping the conflict sim-

mering, as it allows Moscow to play an intermediary role and sell weapons to both sides. The realist lens is especially important in this case because it shows how power struggles inevitably result when a strategic vacuum is created.

Finally, the two brutal wars in

Chechnya (1994-1997 and 1999-2003) demonstrated to the Russian government and to the world how creating a power vacuum leads to the emergence of terrorism-ridden enclaves that export violence thousands of miles away (Cohen, 2014). Over 100,000 killed and hundreds of thousands of refugees

compounded the tragedy of the Chechen people, previously ethnically cleansed from their ancestral homeland and genocidally exiled by Josef Stalin to Siberia and Central Asia in 1944.

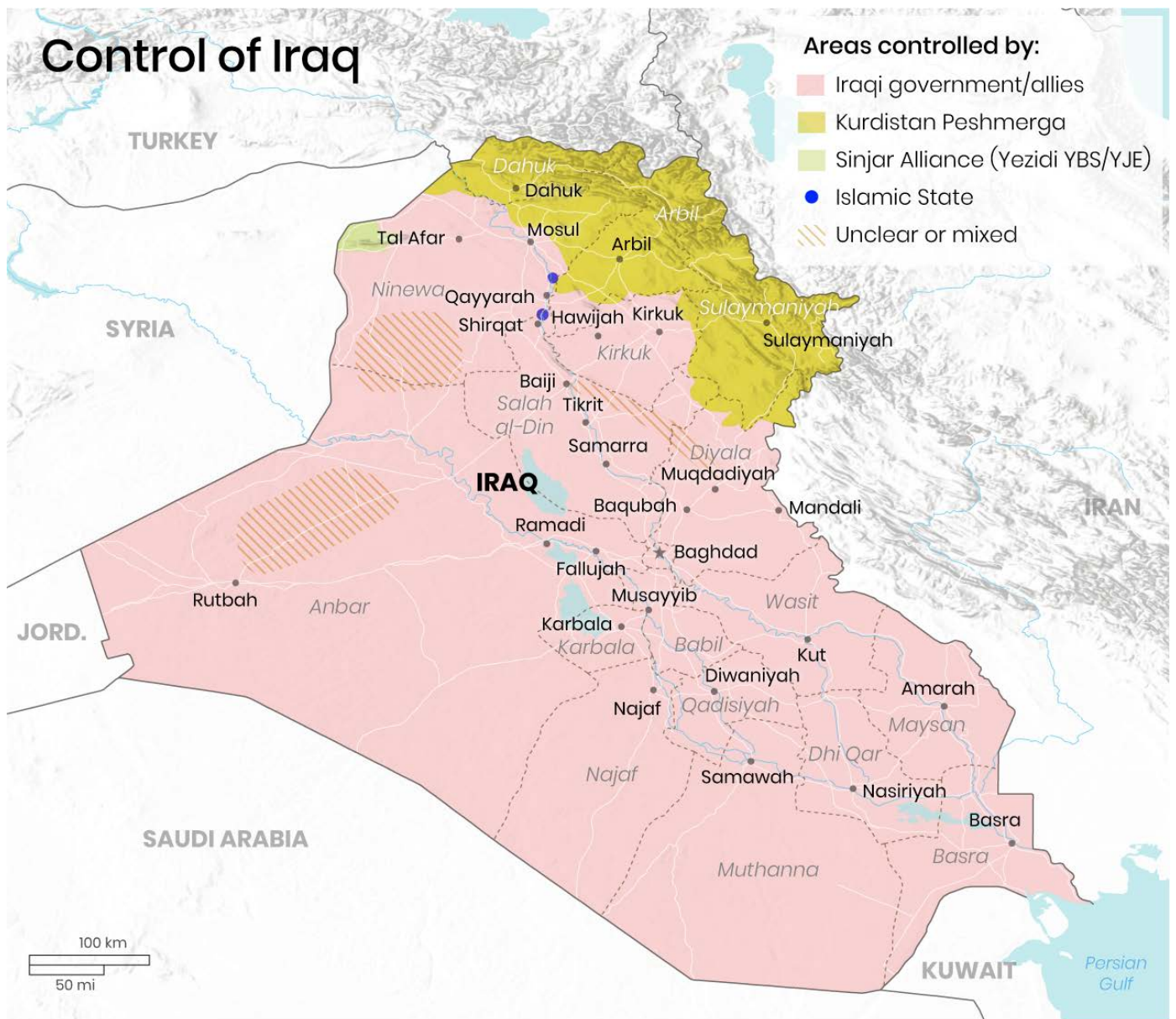
The Soviet Union, a communist reiteration of the czarist empire, kept together by the ruling party, ideology, and artificial borders drawn by Stalin to weaken ethnic groups,

could not hold together. The decay and collapse of the central power in Moscow generated a vacuum in which regional wars flared up.

The 21st Century: Iraq and Syria

The United States bit off more than it could chew in Iraq. Washington's inept political management of the Sunni-Shiite divide, pursuit of

de-Baathification, and the ham-fisted transition of power from Hussein's brutal dictatorship to a U.S.-imposed quasi-democratic system ensured Shiite dominance and Iranian influence in post-war Iraq. This development in turn led to an unprecedented deficit of security, law and order, and governance. As the United States tried to disengage, radical militants filled the Sunni space, while Iran and its



Source: Political Geography Now

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“An American strategic retreat is also likely to trigger further regional conflicts. Iran and Russia are the primary candidates to challenge regional supremacy in the Middle East, as evidenced by Russian military expansion along the Syrian Mediterranean coast, Russian military police taking control of Manbij, and a triumphant visit by Putin to the Gulf.”

allied militias filled the Shiite space. Iraq destabilized and parts of it became ungovernable, contributing to the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq, and later, to ISIS.

In the case of Syria, multiple power vacuums have arisen, as the challenge to Assad’s control during the local iteration of the Arab Spring in 2011 almost dissolved the Baath-led Syrian state. The Syrian civil war created an environment ripe for the Islamic State to thrive, operating in areas outside of government control in both Syria and Iraq. In 2014, ISIS launched the Eastern Syria Offensive, winning control of Raqqah province (Wilson Center, 2019). The Palmyra offensive in 2015 allowed ISIS to further capture the military base in the region and increase its control to roughly half of Syria. The emergence of ISIS and the weakening of the Assad regime prompted a whole host of nations to pursue their own power interests in Syria (Laub, 2017).

The United States had all but defeated ISIS in Syria after intensive bombardments, the use of Special Forces and the help of Kurdish reb-

el troops. Iran and Russia have a strong relationship with the Assad regime and contributed to ISIS’s decline. Turkey is fighting ISIS but is completely opposed to Kurdish forces due to longstanding enmity.

Israel and Saudi Arabia are strongly opposed to Iranian military entrenchment in Syria. This confluence of often-opposing national interests in Syria indicates great peril. Syria has already turned one-third of its citizens into internally displaced persons, and 6.1 million became refugees in Turkey, Jordan, and other Middle Eastern and European countries, contributing to great societal and political upheavals.

The Trump administration’s decision to withdraw entirely from Syria, later partially reversed, could create the space for ISIS to regroup, and for Iran and Russia to solidify their foothold within Syria, jeopardizing U.S. ties with Iraq further and dooming the Syrian Kurds to disaster. This would greatly undermine American credibility as the security guarantor of last resort.

Beware of Unintended Consequences

The United States must learn from history, including the case of the British Empire and the ensuing chaos caused by its strategic fatigue and disengagement, as well as from the collapse of the four European empires in the early 20th century: Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian. Much can be gleaned from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Earlier cases of imperial collapse reinforce the conclusion that a great power disengagement creates a vacuum that, if not filled by the hegemon’s allies or another great power, can easily deteriorate into chaos. Managing international security architecture remains an elusive and difficult task. A statesman’s mistake can lead to conflict. For example, when U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson omitted Korea from the all-important U.S. “defense perimeter” in 1950, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and the founder of the Kim dynasty Kim Il-Sung attacked South Korea, and a bloody war raged until 1953 in which 3 million people — in-

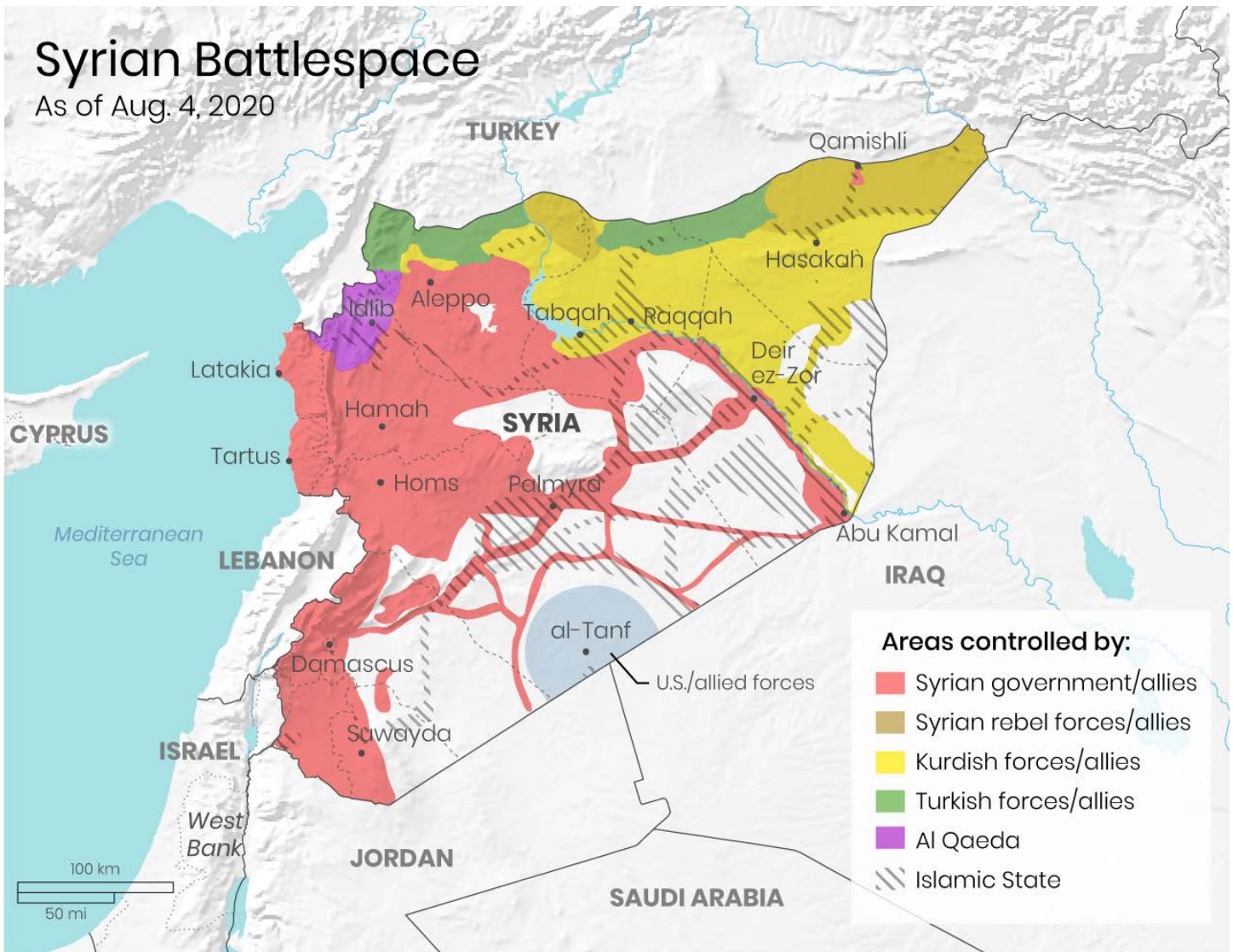
cluding 36,000 Americans — lost their lives

Moreover, as was the case with Great Britain, Germany, Ottoman Turkey, and the USSR, a strategic disengagement leads to loss of markets, economic decline, industrial base deterioration, and currency devaluation. This was true in all the cases listed above, and the U.S. disengagement is unlikely to be different.

These lessons need to be heeded. The goal of the withdrawal of

the United States from the Middle East, which Trump inherited from the Obama administration, and the weakening of U.S. commitments in Europe will shift the global balance of power in favor of Iran, Russia, and China (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). It will also lift the pressure from radical Islamic groups, such as al Qaeda and ISIS. Such scenarios may bring about nothing less than a U.S. strategic defeat, i.e., the United States' abandoning its post-Cold War hegemonic superpower status.

An American strategic retreat is also likely to trigger further regional conflicts. Iran and Russia are the primary candidates to challenge regional supremacy in the Middle East, as evidenced by Russian military expansion along the Syrian Mediterranean coast, Russian military police taking control of Manbij, and a triumphant visit by Putin to the Gulf (Hubbard et al., 2019). China recently offered Iran a strategic cooperation agreement. In addition to Beijing's military base in Djibouti, this would be an early and significant step for a permanent Middle



East strategic engagement.

In the wake of the Soleimani assassination, Iran is likely to continue its game of geopolitical chess through asymmetric low-intensity warfare, using Shiite militias in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Yemen to intimidate neighbors. It will also attack and threaten with drones and cruise missiles, as well as intermediate-range ballistic missiles, which the aborted Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action failed to limit. Tehran is weaponizing the Shiite populations in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, in Kuwait and Bahrain, and around the Gulf (Saul et al., 2017). A U.S. troop exit from neighboring Iraq, which may occur soon, would be the greatest gift the Trump administration could give Ayatollah Khamenei.

With the United States scaling down its presence in the region, Iran will boost its naval power in the Gulf of Aden and near Bab al-Mandeb, the entrance to the strategic Red Sea and the southern gateway to the Suez Canal (Cordesman, 2019). This will represent a threat to the Horn of Africa, and to shipping from the Gulf, especially of oil and natural gas (Barden, 2019).

Further south, Iran and Russia will continue attempts to push the United States from the Gulf. Great power security providers get first dibs for weapons, infrastructure projects, finance deals, and other big-ticket government contracts. China, already the primary investor in ports, airports, and most other

large-scale infrastructure projects, will enhance its military, economic, cultural, and educational presence in Europe and the Middle East as well (Zeneli, 2019).

Realist Wisdom

The U.S. retreat is not limited to the Middle East. On the African continent, Russia and China are expanding their economic and military presence, while cuts in the U.S. African Command are under consideration (Copp, 2019). China surpassed the United States as a trade and investment partner with Africa as early as 2009 (Ighobor, 2013). Meanwhile, Russia is using its expertise in hybrid warfare, propaganda, weapons sales, nuclear reactors, and raw materials, to expand its hold from the Central African Republic to Congo to Madagascar and South Africa (Smith, 2019). As a trenchant Russia and a rising China accumulate more power and presence in the developing world, challenges to U.S. influence will abound.

A weaker U.S. commitment to Europe would encourage Moscow to increase its military presence in NATO's periphery further, including in Belarus and in the South Caucasus. Russian influence in Turkey, complete with arms sales and energy projects, will continue to grow. Moscow is actively bringing Ankara into its orbit, building upon the giant \$20 billion Akkuyu nuclear power project, completing the massive TurkStream gas pipeline, and increasing sales of advanced weapons systems like the S-400

(Astakhova, 2019). Turkey's merits as a NATO ally will become increasingly questionable.

The historic lesson is simple: A detailed, long-term cost-benefit balance based on the United States' national interests needs to be conducted concerning the U.S. overseas presence. Both inter-agency leaders and external experts should participate in such an effort.

No nation should maintain global influence out of vanity, but losing one's status may become costlier, messier, and bloodier than readjusting that global presence to fit 21st-century interests and threats. The realist case for Washington's participation in world affairs is not advocating world domination, but rather preservation of the stability of the global order Americans painstakingly put into place over the past six decades.

Otherwise, a protracted era of chaos, wars, conflicts, terrorism, and turbulence would exact its own price on U.S. security and business. The commander-in-chief's duty is to develop and implement strategy, to assemble the brightest minds to formulate it, and to listen to those who know and understand it — not to beat a hasty retreat for no reason or abandon allies while the world watches and challengers lie in wait.

To address its global challenges, the United States should focus on encouraging NATO members to increase their military allocations, developing their armed forces

for defense against the Russian threats and missions in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Washington should work with moderate Arab states and Israel to shore up stability in the Middle East, while making an effort to repair relations with Turkey. Furthermore, AFRICOM needs to be moved into the theater and not operated out of Europe. Africa will remain an

important theater both in opposing militant extremism and in balancing Chinese and Russian encroachment. Finally, the principal economic and security challenges of the 21st century to the United States and to the non-Chinese actors in the Indo-West Pacific region will emanate from Beijing. Both traditional naval and air assets and new cyber and space capabilities

will need to be deployed with that in mind. However, none of this can happen before COVID-19 is brought under control and political stability is restored in the United States.

The rise of other powers and the lessons of history make it imperative that the United States does not abdicate its post as leader of the free world. □

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