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WEBINAR

SUSTAINABLE U.S. PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST:  
BALANCING SHORT AND LONG-TERM NEEDS

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Good morning everyone. Welcome to today's discussion on the sustainability of the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. I'm Colonel Magruder, Brookings' federal executive fellow. I want to thank Brookings for the opportunity today for allowing me to moderate today's panel and I couldn't have picked a better place to spend a year reflecting on my military service.

This morning we're excited to discuss whether the current footprint in the region is required and sustainable over time. We'll also get into a discussion about risk. The risks of drawing down too much, too fast. The risks of sticking with the status quo and the risks and tradeoffs about what those choices in the new term need for our preparedness in the future.

I think we have a terrific panel of practitioners, academics and policy experts to wrestle with these key questions. You can find their bios on our website. But a quick introduction of our panelist is in order. This morning we have Emma Ashford, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. Michael O'Hanlon, senior fellow at The Brookings Institution. Bob Pape, professor of political science at the University of Chicago and director of Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism. And Becca Wasser, fellow, Defense Program, Center for a New American Security. And a final participant, you. Please email your questions to [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu) or on Twitter using the #USMiddleEast. Of note please point out which panelist your question is for or if it is directed at the entire panel. So let's get started.

To remind our viewers regarding the Middle East the president's interim national security guidance states that we will right size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression and protect other vital U.S. interests. That's the current guidance.

But I want to frame our discussion today by summarizing the current state of play. A couple of domestic issues weigh heavily. One, domestic priorities will remain paramount and consume a lot of votes. Domestically, defense budgets probably won't increase by much so you can assume that there's going to be intense debate about meeting our current military requirements and balancing our preparedness for the future in terms of readiness, capability and capacity.

In foreign policy, there's a general agreement that the U.S. should privilege Asia and

Europe over the Middle East and that in the Middle East we have over militarized our presence there. And there's a desire to reinvigorate diplomatic efforts.

Finally, this discussion takes just a week of after the administration's announcement of a planned withdrawal from Afghanistan, which I know will come up in today's panel. But there are some unresolved issues which are less clear which warrant more dialogue than what we're doing here today.

These are whether to make strategic competition, para terrorism or some mix of both be anchor for our policy in the region. How do we determine our routine security activities during competition below the threshold of conflict and how that posture impacts our preparedness for the future? How do we avoid a resurgence of ISIS or al Qaeda but still maintain pressure on these terrorist organizations?

And even if we do (inaudible) forces, how are we still able to deter Iran and also support our diplomats from a position of military strength? Finally, how do these decisions in the near term affect the U.S. military's ability to prepare for long-term trends? I think these challenges offer a great opportunity to relook how to efficiently and sustainably do these things.

And if we get it right, this will put the U.S. on better footing for future decades. Based on the broad scope of challenges facing the U.S., it wouldn't be fun and engaging for our panel if we didn't have some divergent interests. So I would encourage our panel to engage each other on key points of difference. That being said, I'm excited to hear from the panel in some of these tough choices.

Given what our relatively narrow interests in terms of terrorism and deterrence, it might be easy to justify a much reduced military footprint. But that broad term at the end of the national security guidance other vital interests complicates things.

Emma, in your view given so many challenges around the world and domestically, what's your take on U.S. interests in the region and the attention that the U.S. gives them?

MS. ASHFORD: Great. Thanks. And thank you, Dan, for setting this up. It's a really interesting (inaudible) event. So I am, you know, a realist and I consider our scope of interests in the Middle East to be fairly limited. Certainly, more limited than they have been over the last 20 or even 30 years.

So just, you know, to give a very brief list. I'd argue that we have an interest in

preventing any other major state from dominating the region. So whether that's, you know, Iraq during the Gulf War or the Soviet Union back during the Cold War that's a big interest. We have somewhat of an interest in the free flow of oil. We have somewhat of an interest in preventing nuclear nonproliferation and an interest in at least minimal counterterrorism.

But the interesting thing is that all of those are either less important than they used to be or we've discovered over the last couple of decades that we simply don't need a major true presence in the region to do that. So oil, for example. Oil flow out of Middle East is less important to U.S. interests than it used to be thanks to the growth of shale here at home and the growing robustness of international markets.

We've learned over the last few years that that counterterrorism is best accomplished with a very small footprint and nuclear nonproliferation might actually be best accomplished via nonmilitary means. You know, considering the success of the JCPOA versus the Trump administration's approach towards Iran.

So, you know, the question for me is given those interests, how many troops do we need in the Middle East? And if you look back historically, you know, we had, you know, in the vicinity of a couple of hundred or a thousand troops in the late Cold War period in the region. In the 1990s, we had about 10,000 or so, mostly naval personnel after the Gulf War. In the 2000s, we went up to close to 500,000 troops in the region. And today, we're back down to about 50,000.

And I would argue that we should be targeting more the troop levels than we had in that sort of late Cold War early 1990's period than the amount that we've had in recent in years.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thank you. And that's a viable perspective and I think it also highlights -- you mentioned the number of 50,000 troops and that number can be debated exactly where it sits between 50 and 80. I think it's a sliding scale in terms of actual troops.

And then I think what's often not spoken of are the 50,000 contractors that are also there. That historically, would have been active-duty troops providing combat support or combat service support.

And then on top of that with the development of modern technology, we're able to support

these operations and central command from garrison in the United States meaning there are probably tens of thousands of troops that are dedicated to various activities whether it be intelligence or looking at intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft and exploiting those videos for targeting or other capabilities that we have that reside in the United States. That's an interesting take on it. Thank you, Bev. Or I'm sorry, Emma.

Rebecca. Pivoting to Becca's question here. Whether there is a U.S. impulse to disengage from the region. You've argued for a smaller, well distributed force posture in terms to risk -- reduce our risk to our forces. Can you unpack that for us?

MS. WASSER: Sure. So right now, it's become abundantly clear that the Biden administration is trying to right size U.S. force presence in the Middle East and that's been clear in the interim national security guidance. That's been clear with the Department of Defense undertaking a new global force posture review. And that's also clear in the president's budget request, which slashes overseas contingency operation funds which means there's going to be less to manage some of the operations and footprint in the Middle East.

And so, it's become really clear that the United States is going to divest of some of the legacy basing, some of the legacy architecture. And frankly, the presence which has really become sort of the guardian not of U.S. involvement in the region, but it's not clear how quite yet.

And so, there's, you know, more commonly sort of two different theories of the case of how you can get to less. How you can get to using less resources for the Middle East? How you can get to, you know, less force posture?

You know, one is consolidation. A consolidation of the U.S. basing network which is very expensive in the Middle East particularly in the Gulf. Consolidating those bases that you almost have one or two sort of mega massive major operating bases and you divest of all the other smaller outposts.

But the risk here is that that essentially puts a giant bull's eye on your one or two bases. And as you look at who the regional adversary is Iran. They have increased their short-, medium- and long-range ballistic missiles stockpiles and capabilities in the past few years. And U.S. basing is already at risk for those. So consolidating bases means that chance are if something were to, you know, conflict

were to arise and things were to go hot, things aren't looking so great in terms of being able to secure your forces and capabilities.

The other theory is for dispersion or to move to almost a series of constellation of dispersal bases. So, you know, these are essentially having a network of smaller bases that are distributed around the region. Some of these are constant bases where you have some form of a presence. While others are warm bases. Ones that you can use in case of a crisis or a contingency.

And so, it requires a smaller permanent footprint, but it does require a pretty extensive logistics network. And it does require calling upon, you know, all of the operational support that often resides in the United States.

Dispersal is meant to sort of -- it's meant to meet adversary targeting a little bit more difficult because these bases are spread out, they're smaller. It also creates necessary redundancies in the case of a potential attack. And it also provides an opportunity for more agile capabilities.

So, for example, thinking about our U.S. air assets to, you know, to go from one base to another in case of an attack or during operations to complicate adversary decision making when it comes down to targeting. But, you know, it's pretty clear right now that DOD doesn't really know which theory it's going to be going with in terms of the global force posture review.

And then on top of that there's preferences by the services that are a little bit complicated as well as when you take in some of the Setcom demands which tend to go against perhaps maybe some of the impulses that the White House and DOD is trying to do when it comes down to changing the footprint.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Rebecca. That's a great perspective because I think it really tees up a discussion about those past choices and legacy basing. How we look at what the combat operations that we've participated in the region? How that affects our choices moving forward?

And so, there's a real push in terms of looking at what's cost efficient counterterrorism? How do we do deterrent some of the (inaudible)?

And I think without discussing those previous military operations and the things that made them go well, and the constraints that are placed as a legacy of those is important. So I'm going to take a bit of moderator's privilege and just talk for a second to add some operational perspective to this.

I've deployed to every conflict of at Syrian or Afghanistan spanning the years of 2006 to 2019. And so, my observations are largely consistent across time and space and in different theaters.

And I think what's been classically typified is the (inaudible) through approach. Is something that we've done in all these countries to varying levels of success. And this is mostly coming from experience working with Army Special Forces and SEALs. And the Army Special Forces groups, they're the true experts in this approach.

And I think the main things that come through in this approach, one, is trust. Tactically and operationally, military success is really based on the relationships that you have with your partner force of speaking the language and living with them and being fully embedded with them. And most of the time, at the tip of sphere of these combat operations. So it's not just advice that gets you success. It's the assistance in combat that you provide.

And Becca, you brought this point up, which is logistics. I don't think these outcomes in our conflicts would have the same efficacy if we didn't have such a strong training program in these regions. Primarily, I'm speaking to Syria because this, I think, was the lowest investment that we've had in terms of military manpower and dollars. But we've had the largest effect in terms of eradicating ISIS as a territorial (inaudible).

And finally, I wouldn't be a good airman if I didn't recognize the power of airpower and this is the broadest sense. I really think that airpower facilitated our partners ground scale maneuver to clear ISIS from terrain. Now, this would have been possible without a ready and capable partner in the Syrian democratic forces in Northeast Syria. So you have to recognize their role and their sacrifice as well.

However, airpower would not have been -- you could have done it without airpower but you would have had more casualties and it would have taken more time. So I think you have to recognize that.

I think the challenges would be by with a (inaudible) approach moving forward is that you must commit resources in multiple different ways. A military forces material and money for the long haul. And then you have to ask yourself, how many of these types of operations can we simultaneously commit

to at any given time and for how long? Since we've been in Afghanistan for 20 years. The president has recognized that maybe it's time to pack up and go home.

Second is once you commit to a partner force and decide to change course, as we are in Afghanistan, it places a strain on the leaders you have to interact with those partner forces and the government officials not to mention the reputational costs to U.S. security commitments in the future.

And while there was only a couple of thousand troops on the ground in Syria during the height of combat operations that was just the tip of the iceberg. As I had mentioned earlier, there were tens of thousands of troops providing direct and indirect support who weren't actually in Syria. And there were hundreds of aircraft flying missions overhead.

And many times, this approach will appeal to policymakers because of the perceived low costs and high benefit, but this approach may not be sustainable if political solutions don't exist.

Bob, you testified to Congress about how a hammer and anvil approach was successful in terms of defeating ISIS as a territorial entity. But the source of strength for ISIS is its ideology based on Sunni grievances and a sense of disenfranchisement which is really a political issue.

I'm interested in trying to move the discussion from combat operation to how the military can sustainably support diplomats to do the necessary work to reach politically acceptable outcomes.

We've looked at trends within Afghanistan such as territorial control, confidence of Afghanistan's inner government, among other factors. Do you think that ultimately our military presence lost its leverage?

MR. PAPE: Thank you, Dan. And thank you for making me borrow this great panel. The American military has truly answered the call of our country and has bravely done everything that we have asked our military to do.

President Biden has just made among momentous decision to withdraw all American ground forces out of Afghanistan by September 11. This will have implications for our grand strategy in this region. Not just in Afghanistan going forward for years.

The question today is can we build a viable strategy that will protect American lives and American interest without the deployment of heavy ground forces? Now, in Afghanistan when we remove

those ground forces, we can expect over time that this will weaken the Taliban. I want to underscore. Weaken the Taliban. Why? Because our presence has been congealing not just Pashtun support for the Taliban, but support in non-Pashtun ethnic areas of Afghanistan that has been strengthening the Taliban over time.

So if we remove the key way in which the Taliban has been congealing support from so many different parts of Afghanistan who do not agree with the Taliban ideological this will help weaken the Taliban over time.

Now, going forward. We need to decide on whether we can adopt a strategy for the next five plus years or are we simply going to abandon Afghanistan as so many other foreign powers have over the last two centuries in different ways?

And I believe that the over the horizon strategy, over the horizon strategy, is our best way forward. The details for anyone who wants to see. The details of using airpower, intelligence, special forces, and partnering with local allies -- I can send you links to my books and my articles.

What I want to talk about today are the benefits of an OTH strategy going forward because that's really what we have to come to grips with. And I would say, benefit number one is flexibility. The advantage to an OTH strategy going forward is it takes into account the unpredictable nature of the evolution of the terrorist threat going forward across the region. We simply don't have a crystal ball to know where that's going to lead. And so, it's very helpful to have such a highly flexible strategy going forward.

Second is surveillance. An OTH strategy puts a great premium on robust surveillance capabilities which we are technically adept at and we can make robust over time which of course provides (inaudible) and early warning.

And then third, sustainability. The OTH strategy does not focus on the population. It's targets the actors and actions that are set to harm America and Americans. And so, it does not alienate so much of the population. This is the cart of a sustainable strategy.

Now, are there simply solutions to our different situation? I cannot offer simple solutions, but that too is the advantage of the OTH strategy. You see, any situation we're going to confront in any

specific country at any point in time is going to be complex. We're going to need complex solutions tailored to that specific situation.

So the OTH strategy provides all the ingredients to create the complex solutions for those future situations that we cannot identify in detail at this point in time. And that's why I believe that we should move to an OTH strategy going forward.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Bob. I'll turn to Mike now. And Mike, you can respond to Bob or Anne. Address this question I have for you which is we've been here before, right? With the withdrawal from Iraq?

And my observation is that there's a lot of things that might have went wrong or right in that. But what are the lessons that we might be able to learn from a hasty withdrawal from Iraq? And how do we apply that to our situation currently in Afghanistan?

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks, Dan. And hi everybody. It's wonderful to be part of this panel. You're bringing together really some colleagues that I don't do enough with, but have admired for a long time and it's nice to have a mix of people from different parts of the country, different perspectives, different expertise.

Let me pick up as you say on Afghanistan. And, Bob Pape, is so smart and eloquent that I have to say, Bob, you actually made me feel a little better about a policy that I really don't agree with so thank you.

But let me explain that the reason why I don't agree with President Biden is that even though I think there's a lot to what Bob just said about mitigating whatever threat to the United States could develop out of Afghanistan. I think that it's not going to be any easier than what we've been doing within Afghanistan and it's going to be much worse for the Afghanistan people.

So my best prognostication, which is admittedly now coming from a humanitarian impulse as well as a strategic one, and I can see that upfront. But I also feel, you know, the Afghans helped us with the Cold War in the 1980s. We don't have a lot of allies who helped us win major wars the way the Afghans did.

So if there's ever a time for loyalty, this is at least a situation where one should consider

invoking that as an additional concern not to reinforce a losing cause admittedly. I'm not suggesting that loyalty can be the loyalty can be the preeminent criterion for decision making, but I think it is almost never discussed and should be kept in mind.

But more generally, what I expect to see happen and Bob's point how the Taliban may actually lose some steam is applicable here. And I hope you're right, Bob. But whether you are or not, I don't expect the Taliban to take power in Afghanistan completely any time soon. I think a lot of people have given a false impression of what would happen if the United States left.

I've seen this even in the Afghanistan study group and the red team that worked on this problem. I was part of the Afghanistan study group under General Dunford and Senator Ayotte through the U.S. Institute of Peace. When we had a red team, they did great work but there was still much of a presumption that if we pull out pretty soon you've got a Taliban sitting in Kabul in power that we can try to influence through economic levers because this Taliban isn't one hopes the Taliban of the 1990s. They don't want to live in the stone ages and they want to do enough minimal things to protect human rights that we will be willing to give them some of the multiple billions of dollars that have been funneling into Afghanistan the last two decades. That's the theory of the case.

There may be something to that once the Taliban are in power. But the more likely scenario as I see is the Taliban begin to take some cities. Kabul becomes extremely contested and the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan essentially decide that the best thing to do is to turn the northern regions of the country above the Hindu Kush mountains into their sanctuary from which to fight.

In many ways as the northern alliance did in the 1990s out of the Panjshir Valley. But in this case, I believe the Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara could actually become strong enough to control virtually the majority of the north.

However, they're going to do it in my judgment through a lot of ethnic cleansing because there are a lot of Pashtun in the north who have been populated there by various government policies over the centuries. And the problem if you're a Tajik, Uzbek or Hazara, you really don't know which Pashtun you can trust because the only ethnic group from which Taliban recruits successfully is the Pashtun group for all intense and purposes.

And so the safest way to protect yourself following the logic of people like Barry Posen and others have developed about the sort of security dilemmas in ethnically complex environments is to make sure you don't have hostile ethnic groups around you.

I apologize to Barry. I'm not necessarily associating him with my argument about Afghanistan, but I do think there is a compelling logic that says, that's what will happen.

So what I expect is a rump Afghanistan to the north that we may affiliate with. Some of the OTH approach that Bob talked about. The over horizon approach may involve special forces and covert teams within Northern Afghanistan working with groups there. So we'll still have American boots on the ground in my judgment because I don't think these strategies work when you have no Americans on the ground. You'd have to build up relationships to get the kind of intelligence that Dan and Bob and others have been alluding to here today.

And so, that's what I expect. I expect a protracted fight with a lot of ethnic cleansing. And the Taliban ultimately taking control of a large fraction of the Pashtun Southeast with Kabul probably a contested city for a long time. I hope very much I'm wrong, obviously. But I think this is looking like a Bosnia of 1992, '93, '94 kind of scenario as the most likely outcome, which I think creates opportunities for terrorist groups.

If what we were doing was so hard before maybe I would be willing to try this, but I just don't see why we had to get out when we only had 3,500 troops. And yes, people will say the Taliban would have picked up attacks against us pretty soon because we would have overstayed our welcome, but the Taliban are nowhere near compliance with their obligations under the February 29, 2020, you know, accord either. So I don't know what they would have done and I admit there could have been some more American bloodshed, but compared to the risks of a terrorist sanctuary on Afghanistan soil, I think it would have been worth it.

One last point I will make, Dan, is that, you know, people have been saying the last week. Well, the terrorist threat isn't that great anymore from South Asia, I find this logic perplexing. The reason it is not that great is because we've been there dealing with it. And so, you know, at least Bob Pape, he's done a beautiful job of laying out an alternative strategy to try to keep the threat mitigated. But the

assumption that just because it isn't that huge now that it will stay modest after we leave is a very poorly construed argument the way it's been used and deployed rhetorically by the Biden administration in the last few days.

So, you know, those are my main thoughts, Dan. I'm not going to try to claim that by pulling all the way out we can mitigate the disaster that befell after 2011. I think this is the one thing you can't do if you're trying to prevent that. And so, at some point, I'm just going to call a spade a spade. I don't think there is a mitigation strategy.

Bob is right, and I'll finish on this. There is a mitigation strategy for protecting ourselves but even if we're all the way gone from the region with a formal military presence. I don't see a mitigation strategy for how to help the Afghan people and polity remain cohesive once we depart. Thanks.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Mike. This is a good time to remind the audience that please email your questions to the address [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu) or post on Twitter using the #USMiddleEast.

I think Mike brought up a lot of great points as we consider moving from combat operations to more routine security operations and searching for a sustainable way to do that. I think Emma might have a different take in terms of the breath of our interests and how much force we have to net to secure them.

And I think you thought a lot about it on alternative (inaudible). And I'll cue this in terms of risk that Mike brought up in terms of a risk for a terrorist threat. Should the U.S. have a higher tolerance for risk in a region given that 911 happened 20 years ago. And now, we have a much different domestic security surveillance framework? And we have a very forward posture with a lot of relationships that we didn't have developed at the time of 911. So what's your take, Emma?

MS. ASHFORD: Yeah, thanks. So I mean obviously I have a different take here. I, in fact, am pleasantly surprised. I'm usually the person on the panel advocating for a reduced presence and I'm very pleased to see Bob do an end run around me and advocate for even more than I am suggesting in terms of over the horizon presence.

I think on the question of Afghanistan, you know, Mike laid it out actually pretty well. I

think, you know, a withdrawal from Afghanistan, we can protect ourselves. You know, as you know, Dan, we have put in place much better intelligence and surveillance and policing approaches to counterterrorism, things that we didn't have 20 years ago.

We put in place information sharing between intelligence agencies. We're more aware of the fact that we might miss things. And I think, you know, that from the point of view where counterterrorism is as much an intelligence problem as it is a military problem or perhaps more so we are in a much better place to do that these days.

I think we're also in a much better place to sort of assess and get to identify and preempt threats coming from overseas long before they become a problem. And I think where I differ from Mike and from many others on this is that, you know, I don't believe that we necessarily need a presence on the ground in order to do that.

I think when it comes to Afghanistan, you know, the arguments -- again, the arguments that things are probably going to get worse there before they get better. Those are fairly compelling. I'm not saying that Afghanistan is going to become more peaceful in the aftermath of a U.S. pullout. But what I think we can say is that the odds that Afghanistan will again in the near to medium future become a terrorist even the way that it did during the 1990s. I think that is extremely unlikely and there are a variety of reasons for that.

You know, not least the fact that the Taliban today is not the Taliban of the 1990s because the Taliban of the 1990s are dead. And they were killed by the U.S. in response to sheltering terrorist and leading to the 911 attacks. And so, the Taliban of today are far, far less likely, I would say, to consider inviting in terrorist groups because they know that it will invite a U.S. response. And none of this requires presence on the ground.

Now, I agree with Mike that I think in many ways, you know, without a presence on the ground we can't help the Afghans in the same way that we have been, but it's also not clear that the presence that we had on the ground there was dramatically improving things for them anyway even if you consider that a core issue. It would take far more troops than we actually have in Afghanistan in order to improve the situation.

And so, at the end of the day I think U.S. foreign policy needs to be about Americans and it needs to be about protecting our liberty and security here at home. And pulling out from Afghanistan, I think is the best way to achieve that goal.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Emma. I'm going to stick on this theme of risk and how we mitigate risks given the changing international environment. And this is for Becca.

You know, how do we find ways to offset those risks either to allies or how do we mitigate based on our force posture the worst case operational (inaudible)?

MS. WASSER: Thanks, Dan. So thinking more broadly not just about Afghanistan but about how the United States is probably going to change its force posture in the Middle East more broadly.

You know, I think if you're looking at ways to mitigate risk, one of the best things that you can do is enhance your planning. You know, you can do a lot more robust contingency planning and that's just not happening in the way in which it needs to right now, quite unfortunately.

So DOD needs to really think through, you know, a range of different scenarios and be prepared for them. And this involves thinking outside the box, which unfortunately isn't something that the Department has always known for.

It means that the Department needs to think more than just the defense planning scenarios, more than just the O plans, more than just what it looks at on a daily basis. But instead think through scenarios that are perhaps less expected, but also ones that could actually not necessarily stem from but are linked to what the core U.S. interests are.

So here, I'll kind of, you know, parrot back what Emma was saying initially, which is a different hierarchy of interests. So thinking through what the U.S. interests are. What are the scenarios that could most threaten those? And then when you're thinking through those scenarios, okay.

What are the forces that you would need in case that were to occur? What are the capabilities that you would need? Where do you need to position them? And why? And as you're also thinking through that you can think through sort of what is your rank and staff? What is your hierarchy? What is your priority of interests? And that tells you how you would prioritize those contingency plans.

Thinking through it a little bit more holistically like that is perhaps one of the best ways in which we can hedge against the risk that could befall, you know, any U.S. forces when we try and alter the U.S. footprint.

And I'll just note that, you know, one of the reasons why traditionally this hasn't happened is, you know, some of the kind of behind-the-scenes internal fighting that we tend to see at the Department of Defense. You know, because we haven't been doing this sort of contingency planning in a constructive way, we've often had, you know, requests for forces that are coming from of the, you know, combatant commands that are not in line with what the strategic interests and priorities are.

And so, when you have that you ultimately end up with a degradation of readiness that makes U.S. forces less prepared for future contingencies as well as, you know, the crisis that they may have to deal with, you know, both around the globe and in the Middle East.

When you're looking at, you know, more of the allies and partners piece, I think there's two parts to it. One is burden sharing, you know, which is always, you know, this lofty goal that we have. But we do have, you know, some pretty capable allies and partners that we could rely on for burden sharing. And here, I think it's important to, you know, speak to some of the strengths that those allies and partners have, right? So a partner that is not highly capable in, you know, special operations counterterrorism missions should not be called upon to do that.

But, you know, looking at your high-end partners who perhaps maybe have pretty significant maritime capabilities. Well, is protecting the freedom of navigation and ensuring, you know, free flow of oil and goods through the Strait of Hormuz is a strategic priority for the United States. It also happens to be a strategic priority for a number of U.S. allies and partners.

So why shouldn't those allies and partners step up and do more in that mission so that it's not just a sole U.S. responsibility? And you can think about ways to burden share which would, you know, reduce some of the emphasis on the U.S. always having to undertake these missions to secure its own interests and thinking about the ways in which it can pull resources to ensure not only U.S. interests but those of its allies and partners.

And then sort of the last piece of the puzzle is security cooperation, which is quite often a

double edge sword and we don't need to necessarily get into that now. But, you know, for some of the allies and partners who do face threats, you know, to their security. Part of the reason why the U.S. has had such an extensive basing network in the Gulf is because there's been a request from Gulf partners to have U.S. forces on their soil in order to protect them from foreign threats, and frankly even internal threats.

If the U.S. is going to be changing that thinking through what do they actually need? And starting to think about ways in which they can build up the skills and capabilities that are actually useful not just ones that they want. So thinking through, for example, for Saudi Arabia which has faced a number of, you know, rocket missile attacks from Hazara forces.

Thinking about building up, you know, integrated missile defense capabilities as opposed to just allowing them to buy shiny, fifth gen aircraft. Those are the types of things that we need to be thinking through a little bit more robustly than we currently are if we're trying to make egress.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Becca. That's very thoughtful comments. And, Emma, you would like to respond?

MS. ASHFORD: Yeah, thanks. No, I just wanted to add something to that because I really love the way that Becca put it a little earlier where she said, you know, that prioritizing interests and then building capabilities are postured out of that. Because I think that's something we don't do a lot. We basically almost never do it.

And, you know, I thought I would just give one example. And so, I come out of -- my background is in energy security so I've done a lot thinking about the Gulf in that context. And two of our biggest interests when it comes to energy security, you know, maintaining the free flow of oil through some of the choke points there, so the Strait of Hormuz, for example.

And trying to prevent regional instability or even civil war in some of the big oil producing states like Saudi Arabia. Those interest are often intention and we don't really think that through because a large force posture that might serve to reduce the risk of some sort of transit stoppage is also the kind of posture that is likely to maybe constitute strife in some of these countries.

And so, there's a place where our interests even in just one concrete issue area that the

oil energy aspects of it are intention and DOD planners need to think that through. They need to think through the second order of implications of, you know, you are handling one of these problems, but you might be making the other one worse. And I think that the kind of prioritization that we just don't do when it comes to the Middle East.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Emma. I think we've covered both tried and ground over the terrorism arguments and the other interests. So those are two of the three main issues in the national security guidance. And I'd like to pivot a little bit now to deterring Iran and this question is for Bob.

Given the flashpoint last year with the killing of Soleimani and the response and the ballistic missile attack on Al-Assad Airbase escalation was a real concern. But now that we're reengaged diplomatically and we're assuming a little bit more withdrawal in military forces. Do you think Iran will be deterred and remain engaged at the negotiating table?

MR. PAPE: So I think we are at a very serious moment with Iran. I think there are, of course, issues of terrorism and so forth, but the number one issue with Iran has been and is today whether Iran is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, an actually working nuclear weapon.

And we have to see that when the Obama administration ended, we had a freeze, essentially a nuclear freeze. Now, of course, there were weaknesses in that freeze but that at least was a freeze that would go for some time about where we would be confident that Iran would not acquire a nuclear weapon.

Since then, however, things have changed. There has been more pressure put against Iran, economic pressure, military pressure. Just recently, there's suspected Israeli pressure. Military destroying dewan.

What has been the result? Speeding up an Iranian nuclear bomb. So the fact that Iran has just announced that it is going to move to 60% enrichment of its uranium. This means it is greatly shortening the time table to a nuclear weapon. The fact that it is now doing the metallurgy to form that enriched uranium into uranium metal that is a key component for a bomb.

We have to see that what that action of maximum pressure and also intense military

pressure has done is made our situation worse and more dangerous because as Iran goes forward, which is a natural response, wouldn't we if we were under those circumstances be putting the pedal to the metal? Yes, we would.

If Iran goes forward this is going to create more uncertainty and danger with multiple actors in the Middle East. This is not just an American problem. This is a problem for the U.E. A problem for Saudi Arabia. This is eventually going to become a problem for every country in the Gulf and, in fact, Israel. And so, what we have seen is years of pushing Iran to develop a nuclear weapon and they're simply responding by doing that.

We need to think again a new approach here. Going back to the old deal is not going to be enough. We have to be creative. We have to have discussions. This is going to turn on what we cannot know in this panel, which is how open are the diplomatic channels with Iran at the moment? I don't have that classified information. And so, we are really though in a very dangerous situation with Iran that the maximum -- the idea that we should just keep putting more and more pressures on is only going to make it worse.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Bob. And now, I'd like to discuss and move from discussing that kind of the risks to our means and ways in which we use military force to the risks to our U.S. policy objectives in the region.

Not only are we trying to balance achieving those ends with a lower investment perhaps, but this constrains some of our strategic choices for DOD to prepare for the future.

And this question is for Mike because I think he has the most experience on the panel of speaking to service chiefs and geographic combatant commanders. And the main tension here is the short- and long-term. So your geographic combatant commanders are trying to mitigate risks to their military theaters by asking most of the times for a large investment.

But your service chiefs have this long-term view and they're looking at the risks of Russia and China eroding some of our comparative advantages that have traditionally never been challenged. So now, we're in this situation where there are clearly, as we've discussed today, short-term requirements in central command. But there's also a compelling argument to be made that we need to look to the

future as well and start investing there.

Mike, for you what are some of the key issues that should drive the analysis and decisions between these tradeoffs that we have between providing a near term ready force, but also investing in capabilities and capacity for the future?

MR. O'HANLON: Thanks, Dan. I think you have to be pragmatic. I don't think there is a good theoretical answer to your question. And so, here I'm going to tap into a little bit of the spirit of the discussion especially Becca's earlier points but also Emma and Bob's, I think.

Whether one wants to downsize dramatically in the Middle East or not, whether one agrees with President Biden's decision on Afghanistan or not, I think the four of us can agree and have said today that the United States has a wide range of capabilities in the broader Middle East already.

To me that means we've actually worked our way towards a strategy that's probably the least bad of most of the ones I can think of. Obviously, Emma and Bob in particular would prefer further major change. But the point is we have a lot of options and locations already. And I think Becca agrees with me too. So I hope she'll correct me if I'm wrong.

But if we look around the broader region, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Djibouti and Diego Garcia. Those are just the ones I can quickly think of off the top of my head to say nothing about U.S. naval presence whether in the Persian Gulf itself or in the neighboring waters of the Indian Ocean and that's not Afghanistan. That's essentially our Setcom footprint. It's pretty compelling.

A lot of it is land based, but we don't depend so much on any one thing with the possible exception of Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar that we've become particularly hostage to the politics of any one country. I think that gives us flexibility on presence and crisis response issues. And in particular, I think we can do a little bit less of it than central command commanders tend to advocate.

So, for example, there was some very nice work done by the Stimson Center, Melanie Sisson and Barry Blechman wrote a book last year that looked in fairly advanced methodology at the counterresponses.

We've had the crisis since the Cold War ended and basically concluded, you know, yes,

there may be some value to responding, but the actual asset you use doesn't necessarily have to be an aircraft carrier if you're looking for good outcomes. In other words, we're always debating causation versus correlation, but the overall picture since 1990 is that it is not as if you have to send a carrier taskforce or two to send a message.

I don't think Iran believes that United States is disinterested in the military situation of the Persian Gulf just because Jim Mattis wanted to send one carrier of deployment up to the Baltic Sea instead of to the region. So I would actually advocate that we be a little more flexible especially on the naval side of things where I think we're working the Navy too hard.

And, you know, service chiefs aren't quite as innocent of this general problem as you sort of implied. Not that you were trying to assign blame, and I respect all the perspectives in this. But service chiefs sometimes get very comfortable with a pretty demanding pace of deployments because it helps them argue for more force structure for their service.

And so, for example, with the Army as much as I, you know, admire John McConville and I think that he and his predecessors on the civilian side have done a great job. They've got a rotational concept for how to keep a brigade in both Poland and South Korea. And they say this is good because it involves a lot of the Army in preparation. It's good for soldiers to have the focus of doing preparation training, deployment. You know, for a lot of young soldiers it gives them a sense of engagement with the broader world. Yes, there's something to that but I don't think it's worth putting so much strain on the Army that you've got to advocate for a larger force structure because the rotations to the broader Setcom region those, I think have to be rotational. We don't have good places to put people long term.

But in Germany and Korea, I think those should be probably permanently stationed brigade combat teams with families along and not worried so much about using those two locations to generate training opportunities for the military.

And so, I think in general we can actually take a little bit of the strain off our military today even as we engage in great power competition. And again, you've got to be specific and look for places where you've got other assets that are already there.

And so, you may be able to afford not sending the carrier or maybe be able to afford not

rotating the Army brigade but instead just basing one there and letting the rest of the Army force structure handle the Middle East. Thanks.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Mike. I'd like to turn now to some of the audience questions. So picking up on the Navy theme. I'm going to turn to a foreign area officer, Michael Farmer, U.S. Navy. His question is with Iranian missile systems able to range Bahrain and cover all of the Persian Gulf, should the U.S. Navy consider moving Fifth Fleet?

MS. WASSER: I'll sort of take an initial crack at this and say, no, probably not. The U.S. shouldn't consider moving the Fifth Fleet, but we might want to consider what it is that we think most of our deployments to the region are doing?

So to go all the way back to sort of the start of the discussion, you know, when I listed U.S. interests, I didn't say deterring Iran. And, you know, I know that Dan then sort of said deterring Iran.

But I think that the interesting question is, you know, what do we care about actually achieving in the region? And I would say, well, you know, we want to deter Iran or other states from interfering with some of our key interests. Things like the free flow of oil but that doesn't necessarily mean that we're talking about being in the region in order to prevent Iran from, you know, from being involved in the region.

We're not trying to deter Iran on behalf of other Gulf states, for example. And I worry that a lot of what our presence in the region has become is a bit of a self-licking ice cream cone, right? That we are there in large numbers in order to deter Iran from something that ends up mostly being attacking our forces because they're in the region. And so, I worry that this becomes a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

And so, my argument would be that you don't need to move the Fifth Fleet, but you probably do need to draw down those other deployments to the region. Once you've done that Iran's sense of threat will probably get less and we don't have to worry so much about the naval aspects here. But I see Becca also has a hand up on this.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Go ahead, Becca.

MS. WASSER: Yeah. So, you know, it's a really question. But by the logic in the

question, it's not just about Bahrain and the Fifth Fleet. You know, by that logic almost every single one of U.S. bases in the Gulf is at risk because they are within the range of some of Iran's worse threat rings.

You know, and so thinking through that you have to think about, okay, that doesn't necessarily mean that the United States needs to shift its posture in the Gulf alone, but it needs to rethink how it's doing it. What it places there? And what capabilities it requires because right now there is a massive strain on some of the high demand, low density assets like air and missile defenses.

So Patriot missile systems in particular that are required for force protection for these bases. So as we're thinking through how to change the posture, thinking through the way in which we can mitigate some of these risks that we've been talking about throughout the panel to U.S. forces to create a more secure footprint. Because at the end of the day the U.S. is trying to right size its footprint which means it's still going to maintain a presence.

That said, I think it's worth noting that, you know, the Fifth Fleet has grown exponentially in the past few years. And some of the service members that happen to be in Bahrain stationed out at the Fifth Fleet and naval central command probably not necessary. So you can think about the ways in which where you can reduce the forces that are based at the Fifth Fleet because you can still do a lot of the activities that, you know, NAVCENT and the Fifth Fleet do frankly back in the United States.

So still maintaining a presence but thinking about the ways in which you can make them smaller. And again, that also in some ways reduces some of the risks and some of the force protection mechanisms that you are pretty much necessitated to have.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thank you. Bob, you'd like to comment?

MR. PAPE: I think this is a good time to talk about building on the idea of vulnerability of bases. The idea of widening the aperture on downside risk to presence.

So we brought on the table the issue of why pull out troops in Afghanistan now? Well, one of the big issues here that we have to go forward is consider not just the troops are staying a course, but are vulnerable to large scale attack in the future which may come at a high price for the Taliban and look a lot like the Tet Offensive.

So we need to remember that in 1967 there were an offensive that was carried out at

great cost to the enemy that had an enormous impact on the lives of troops in country and, of course, a giant political impact as well.

The Taliban is a suicide attack organization. So they are in the business of having these kinds of exaggerated ratios. Now, that means that we need to also go balance that with some of the concerns about what does that group -- what does the presence do?

So in the case of Afghanistan, we do have to be concerned about humanitarian issues, but that's where we need to be clear that we have ways to retaliate that don't have to do with troops on the ground. And we need to thicken up those plans, those op plans and it may require keeping certain ports and bases on the Persian Gulf. It may not but this is the detailed planning that we need to start now so they're in place by the end of the summer.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Bob. And this will probably be our final question before we wrap up. It comes from Annelle Sheline from the Quincy Institute.

She asks, given the substantial U.S. military presence in the region, how can we argue that the U.S. military dominance contributes to stability rather than exacerbating instability? Yes, Mike?

MR. O'HANLON: I'll start and then set myself up for retaliation by my panelist. But I think one thing -- and this sounds a little flip, but it's not really meant to be. It's actually serious. I have a colleague who says, as bad as things are in the Middle East, they can always get worse.

And let's bear in mind that despite the civil wars in about five or six of the countries in the Setcom region. Oil has continued to flow pretty well. I'm sort of stunned at how well oil has flowed since the various problems of this century in the Middle East. And that's partly because we've allied in key places with some of the right partners some of the time even though Becca and Emma and Bob have had ideas of how we could do better and be more selective. We haven't gotten it all wrong.

So it is important to bear in mind that a region that continues to produce something in the vicinity of a quarter of the world's hydrocarbons and have, I think, something in the vicinity of half of the world's hydrocarbon reserves, even if we all hope we never have to use them all since the planet is warming too fast to allow that. But nonetheless, this remains a key region for the global economy and that could get a lot worse. That part of things could get a lot worse.

Also, if we ever have to have a military confrontation of some kind against China, I don't want it to be a hundred miles off China's coast trying to open up shipping lanes into Taiwan that China has blockaded. I want it to be in the Indian Ocean where we can interfere with China's lifeline. Not in a decisive fight for the finish regime change operation, which I think is impossible in the era of great power combat and nuclear deterrence of the type we have today, but as part of a broader negotiating strategy and an economic warfare strategy.

And so, I think maintaining military dominance in the broader Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean region is actually a strategic asset for the United States visa via China in this era of great power competition. So I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

COLONEL MAGRUDER: Thanks, Mike. I do want to thank today's panel for engaging on this very timely and important issue about trying to find the right balance as the panel has alluded to in many different ways. As a nation, we have some work to do in trying to find out what exactly is our sustainable military presence in the Middle East to secure our interest. So thank you again to Brookings for allowing me to have this opportunity today and I look forward to engaging in this debate with many of you in the future. Thank you.

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