A NEW WAY FORWARD IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
NINE STRATAGEMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document proposes a military-lite, foreign-aid-lite approach to executing American foreign policy in the Middle East. The basic aim, as with Security Studies Group (SSG)’s Grand Strategy, is for the United States to positively affect our interests by rewarding friends and punishing enemies. This regional application of that strategy focuses on large scale projects that will have the greatest strategic impact at the lowest cost.

Several of these are major investments, although US funds may not be required, and US contractors may benefit from increased employment that offsets the cost to the United States to some degree. These include:

- National canal project in Turkey;
- Neom business & technology project in Saudi Arabia and;
- Egyptian resource industry improvements

For the most part the region stands to benefit from this re-alignment of US power along a military-lite model. Some enemy nations do not stand to benefit, as is proper for a US strategy. Wavering former friends are offered a chance to return to the fold and receive benefits, or else to become subject to substantial costs if they double down on their present course.

INTRODUCTION

How this Approach fits into American Grand Strategy

This paper expands upon the Security Studies Group (SSG) Grand Strategy built around the twin principles of Freedom and Fair Trade. The essential idea is to align all facets of America’s power, economic and technical, political and cultural, as well as diplomatic and military, in order to help America’s friends and harm her enemies. Former enemies who decide they would prefer to benefit from American power can enjoy forgiveness under certain circumstances, as can allies who have strayed. This complies with a winning strategy from game theory, sometimes called ‘tit for tat plus forgiveness.’ All of the uses of American power can be done in a scalable way, so that larger problems are met with larger degrees of power, and greater acts of friendship can be met with greater rewards.¹

SSG decided to produce this expansion following President Donald Trump’s announcement of short-term withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan. The restriction of military options changes the balance of powers available to American policymakers. An additional difficulty faced by Trump administration officials who are charged with executing this plan is that the President is disinclined to foreign aid almost as much as he is to long-term military deployments. The good work done by the United States Agency for International Development and others, though important, is another tool of statecraft that is likely to be minimized because it represents a net loss of American treasure, as military strategy often results in a loss of American

blood. Attempting to navigate grand strategy with minimal expenditures of blood and treasure is quite challenging and deserves some further commentary.

The grand strategic moves proposed here are meant to be very visible, large-scale shifts that change the strategic landscape with minimal American investment in blood or treasure. Indeed, whenever possible, the ideal is to advance American interests by cementing relationships that produce profit for both sides. The plan is to promote American ideals of freedom while pursuing trade relations that enrich both parties to the deal. While that ideal is not always attainable, it is the goal: America comes away richer and stronger, our friends come away richer and stronger, and our enemies have reason to rethink their opposition and try to get on the friendly side of American policy.

Though this is a significant change in the postwar approach to American relationships, it is not entirely new. President Trump’s military model is not entirely unlike Ronald Reagan’s approach to the military. Reagan presided over a strong increase in the US military’s power and personnel, while nevertheless barely deploying it during his tenure. Trump also values the military for deterrence, and like Reagan views a strong military as discouraging near-peer competitors from even trying to equal or surpass American power. He nevertheless is a man of business rather than war, who prefers nonviolent solutions to problems.

This general approach has a lot to recommend it and need not necessarily imply a loss of American influence if properly wielded.

**Comparisons and Contrasts with Russian and Chinese Methods**

Strategic thinkers sometimes read Sun Tzu’s discussion of “the indirect” approach as being an endorsement of non-military means of advancing national interests. Sun Tzu was principally writing about indirect military maneuvers, however, rather than direct assaults on enemy positions. Nevertheless, this kind of grand strategy does strongly characterize contemporary Chinese efforts. The most notable of these are the “One Belt, One Road” project, although it has become better known as the “New Silk Road.” They are planning to devote $900 Billion to infrastructure improvements that will enable Chinese trading, thus allowing themselves and their partners to both gain in wealth. China expects to further its political ties at the same time and in the same way.

The approach SSG is recommending is similar in that it sometimes entails infrastructure programs: when it does, they are on a large enough scale as to reshape both the practical nature and the symbols of our relationships. Like the Panama Canal, a few infrastructure projects are worth doing as they advance America’s interests in a major way, while also establishing a symbolic connection with the host country that can serve as a lasting basis for a relationship. Of course, we recommend aligning America’s messaging capacities to reinforce that symbolism, but the practical gains should stand on their own.

However, our approach is different in that it is frank about its interests. The Chinese infrastructure moves are presented as gestures of friendship and inclusion but appear structured to entrap the foreign

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nations in debt. We do not propose any similar traps. SSG’s plan normally looks to minimize American investment, even though loans; on the few occasions when actual investment of foreign aid dollars is pondered, they are not loans but cost-sharing contributions to the project. The things to be gained are asked for up front, e.g., in the case of the Turkish canal project we propose we will want guaranteed treaty access for American liquefied natural gas (LNG) tankers, because the goal is to draw Turkey closer while also undercutting Russian energy domination in Eastern Europe. We also frankly look to minimize our costs by having American firms hired to do some of the work. Turkey is currently planning to fund this directly, as a point of national pride, but they are likely to be over budget and time and might be glad of some American assistance.

Frankness is a crucial aspect of SSG’s proposal, as credibility is the currency of messaging operations. Why trust America instead of Russia or China? In part because we will tell you up front what we are expecting to get out of the project, rather than hiding it behind false smiles and high words. The Trump administration’s frankness is often disturbing to those accustomed to more traditional diplomatic language, but its directness has merits. All of these proposals are designed primarily to advance America’s interests and wealth. Insofar as they are aimed at friends and allies, they are secondarily designed to advance their interests and wealth. Enemy nations beware or reconsider your enmity.

The Chinese approach has also been painted by nations, especially in South and Southeast Asia, as a return of colonialism. It very plausibly is just that: the ‘maritime Silk Road’ is accompanied by moves to acquire naval outposts for the People’s Liberation Army’s naval forces, and there is no reason to doubt that increased power projection is something China intends. The American approach proposed by SSG, by contrast, is accompanied by a reduction in emphasis on military force, including substantial military withdrawals. It represents an attempt to develop working relationships, if not quite between equals than at least between independent entities that might be friends or enemies.

The Russian approach has been much in the news lately, as it has been used successfully to advance Russian interests in Crimea and Ukraine, as well as Georgia. It is characterized as an “essentially political struggle against the West through political subversion, economic penetration, espionage, and disinformation.” Russia’s national security strategy is more modest than it might at first appear, aimed less at achieving domination than at undermining the superiority of others in the international sphere. While this is properly read as targeting American predominance, a canny reader might assume that the Russians are at least as concerned about the rising Chinese prospects, at least locally and perhaps globally.

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4 China’s approach is similar on this point: they are arranging loans to foreign countries to hire Chinese firms, then expecting the foreign countries to pay back the loans as well.
5 “Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohamad warns against ‘new colonialism’ during China visit,” ABC News (Australia), 20 August 2018; Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “A New Chinese Military Base in Pakistan? Reports about Beijing trying to acquire another facility there could have significant consequences for the region,” The Diplomat, 9 February 2018.
6 Mark Galeotti, “Russia’s Hybrid War As A Byproduct of A Hybrid State,” War on the Rocks, 6 December 2016.
The American approach differs sharply from the Russian approach even though it makes use of politics, economics, espionage, and information/messaging. Subversion is a viable tool against enemies, but no longer under the Trump administration in the hope of occupations (like Iraq) nor conquest (like Crimea). Nor is subversion even ordinarily the goal: when dealing with friendly nations the ideal is to strengthen their institutions. Disinformation, while not completely off the table in American operations, is of limited importance: American information power is enhanced by its credibility, and most effectively counters the kind of disinformation that Russia specializes in when it can provide sources for information that people trust.

**Comparisons and Contrasts with Other Proposed American Models**

The American model that we propose builds on some lessons from the recent wars, even as it tries to walk away from war as its primary model. The use of civil military operations and Civil Affairs is a core part of American counterinsurgency doctrine; so too are psychological operations and information operations aimed at informing populations of the good work being done by those building operations. At the grand strategic level, the same kinds of ends can be attained through non-military means primarily, with the military supporting in the background as necessary. This reliance on the non-coercive more than the coercive aspects of American power is a crucial part of being at peace, even when national interests are being pursued aggressively by our government.\(^8\)

That said, SSG’s model is sharply different from the military’s models. It differs also from the bureaucratized model recently proposed by the RAND corporation for a ‘National Political Warfare Center.’ Our sense is that a bureaucratic model is not viable in the current moment, and that this is not the proper time to try to construct one. SSG is recommending a model built around a few high-level strategic initiatives that will each create major effects, without getting bogged down in interagency feuds or military staffing processes.\(^9\)

The reason for this approach is that American bureaucracies, as allied ones abroad, have ossified. The idea of bureaucratic ossification is borrowed from Joseph Schumpeter’s economic account of why Marx’s predictions about monopoly domination of economies failed to come true. Marx had argued, plausibly in the eyes of the first generations of economists to follow him, that the advantages of monopolies would eventually allow them to crush all competition and prevent entry into the market. This sets up the crushing mechanism that forces nearly everyone into the oppressed proletariat in *Das Kapital*, as all other management class members are forced into the working class as their companies are absorbed or destroyed. By the 1930s, it was obvious this had not happened, and Schumpeter asked why.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency, 3-1, 7-8; Steven Metz, “To Better Deter Russia, the U.S. Should Rediscover the ‘Indirect Approach,’” *World Politics Review*, 21 December 2018.


His answer is relevant to us today. In growing larger and larger, a monopoly had to develop a bureaucracy to ensure its initially successful methods continued to be followed. The orders that once went directly from the corporate president to his five workers now had to five subordinates who each headed a department; then to sub-department heads; and so forth and so on. When information had to filter up, it had to pass through all these many levels, getting distorted by communication errors or suppressed through lack of interest or competing concerns. Schumpeter’s insight was that this process, ossification, eventually allowed smaller firms to compete successfully against the giants. That was why the markets kept seeing new entries in spite of monopoly advantages.

The United States is well beyond the point of bureaucratic ossification. US military and diplomatic failure to finalize victory in the Iraq War were not due to a lack of tactical competence, but to bureaucratic inertia that prevented the successful attainment of a status of forces agreement. US military and diplomatic failure in Afghanistan are not due to a lack of tactical victory – our forces have hardly lost an engagement in what is nearly two decades, and never higher than the platoon level – but to the inability of the bureaucracy to turn its ship in the face of a failing strategy. Two Presidents have come in with new ideas and found a bureaucracy that was chiefly devoted to convincing them to ‘stay the course.’ Minor adjustments such as President Obama’s half-surge were all the ossified bureaucracy could recommend or accept.

It is this ossification that is allowing smaller, objectively worse organizations to out-compete us. This is why we are losing to the Taliban in Afghanistan in spite of all of their problems. This is why the Russians continue to snake pieces of American allies into their sphere, such as Georgia’s South Ossetia. This is how the Chinese are stealing a march on the order America painstakingly built for decades. They are doing it just as Schumpeter said — that smaller, faster players would steal from the powerful monopolies: by exploiting the monopoly’s bureaucratic ossification. This ossification is the problem we most need to address.

In spite of the dismay his administration has caused among many establishment figures, and in spite of the ugliness of the clashes, American bureaucrats should recognize that this is a structural challenge that President Trump’s approach is uniquely suited to address. The main advantage enjoyed by President Trump is his capacity to break bureaucratic systems that have ossified, allowing new processes to form with shorter decision chains. This is one reason he has been successful at some ventures, such as driving a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), that his predecessor in office thought impossible. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will now reform, one way or another, rather than carrying on in dysfunction. There will now be a new approach in Afghanistan, not simply a staying of the 17-year-old course. There will be a new approach in the Pacific, in the Atlantic, and in the Middle East. Schumpeter’s warnings about ossification are being addressed, not by a hostile competitor but by disruptive executive leadership.

Sometimes this kind of disruption is necessary to progress. There are certainly risks to breaking ossified bureaucracies: for example, the original methods or principles that underlay the original success can be lost. There is a great deal of chaos that can occur, and this can be upsetting (especially to those in the bureaucracies whose internal structures are being broken loose). A great deal of experience can be lost, which can lead to mistakes – even major mistakes. However, if it is not done the ossified structures will no longer be able to carry out their original functions in any case. The choice is not between the comfortable wisdom of the
old order and the chaos of such breakings-free; the choice is between accepting certain failure or daring a new attempt at finding a winning way.

Eventually new structures will be needed, but right now is not the time for them. Before new bureaucracies can be successfully erected to universalize the new successful process, the new successful process must be discovered. The right kind of mind for breaking an ossified system may not also be the right kind of mind for making new systems that are broadly acceptable. Right now is the time for short decision chains, and a small number of focus projects rather than a large number of initiatives developed and executed across a large bureaucratic structure.

**STRATAGEMS BY COUNTRY**

**Turkey**

**Problem:** President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been leading Turkey’s drift away from its longstanding alliance with the West, and toward the emerging Russian/Iranian faction that has developed since the 2015 “Iran Nuclear Deal.” This poses a significant problem for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which Turkey joined in the 1950s. NATO’s charter requires unanimity for major decisions, so if a member state should defect to the Russian faction the defecting state could in principle prevent NATO from taking any future action.

In addition, Turkey controls the Black Sea’s union with the Mediterranean Sea through the strategic choke point at the Strait of Bosporus, located directly in the center of modern-day Istanbul. Continued control of this strait was what brought Turkey into NATO, as it had been neutral after World War II; but Soviet attempts to gain at least partial jurisdiction over the Strait of Bosporus led Turkey to join the West’s faction. As Russia gains in power in the current era, Turkey could cut off Western access to the Black Sea with relative ease. This would be a significant strategic benefit to Russian attempts to dominate Eastern Europe, especially and could immediately affect its efforts against the nation of Ukraine.

The Iranian partnership sought by the Turks has recently allowed Turkey to help the nation of Qatar defy the blockade imposed by the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations. Shipments of supplies to Qatar can now proceed over land through Iran and across a short water route, making the trip in only two days instead of weeks. Qatar has suggested formalizing a kind of alliance with Iran and Turkey that would also draw Turkey tighter to the Iran/Russian axis. More on this will follow in the sections on Iran and Qatar.

Finally, Turkey has significant strategic ambitions in Syria, especially in the regions currently held by the Syrian Kurds. These regions also contain some oil and gas reserves, small in scale compared to those in Iran, but nevertheless significant as a potential additional set of resources for the Turks. Turkey worries about any drives for Kurdish independence, as the Kurds within Turkey (and within Iraq and Iran) may be inclined to join such movements. Turkey has labeled a number of Kurdish groups ‘terrorists,’ and has used that label as a pretense for incursions in the past. Turkey’s military is largely fresh, unlike other forces in readiness in the region, and it is a modern combined-arms force equipped to NATO standards. While American forces are
categorically superior, Turkey’s whole military is immediately deployable in the region, with short supply lines and direct lines of communication. A war with Turkey would break NATO and be tremendously expensive, but also, it would take quite some time to deploy adequate American forces to win such a war in any case. In the short term, the Turks have a localized military advantage.

**Objective:** Pull the Turks out of alignment with the Russian/Iranian axis and restore them as a functional NATO ally.

**Stratagems:** Emphasize economic gains and partnership with US and allies that disadvantage Russia and/or Iran.

- Promise to help Turkey re-negotiate arrangements governing Bosporus strait in a way that will assist them in collecting fees or tolls from passing ships.
  - A major priority should be obtaining passage for American Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) tankers, currently forbidden by the Turkish government.
  - American LNG through the Black Sea to Ukraine would undercut the strategic influence that the Russians have used in their attempts to further hegemony over Eastern Europe. Control of energy supplies is one of Russia’s major levers.
  - Success in getting American LNG through Turkey is thus a double victory.
    - It would tie Turkey closer to the United States and the anti-Russian Ukrainian faction by the substantial revenue generated via tolls and security for tankers.
    - It would greatly undercut Russian power over Eastern Europe.
  - American companies profit, increasing jobs and trade for US entities.

- Turkey has a proposed canal project\(^\text{11}\) that would provide an additional connection point between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Turkey’s proposed timelines and budget ($10B total) are unrealistic, but its strategic interests in the success of the project are real.
  - President Trump is suspicious of foreign aid, but an infrastructure project like this one may appeal to his instincts as a builder. Likening it to Teddy Roosevelt’s construction of the Panama Canal may be successful.
  - The President and the US taxpayer may be more likely to agree to back the project if US contractor firms are used, though Turkey has so far claimed that it will use only domestic resources.
  - Because the canal would allow Turkey greater control over the passage of warships than is currently true for the Bosporus strait, we are more likely to gain a US stake if we combine assisting completion of the canal with a renegotiation of the Montreux Convention governing the existing waterway.

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\(^{11}\) “Turkey’s Ambitions Canal Project,” STRATFOR, 16 May 2013; “Turkey to build Bosphorus bypass,” New Civil Engineer, 28 April 2011.
• This would eventually provide an even safer route for American LNG to Ukraine.
  • While US taxpayers would cover part of the cost, there would be some offset in US jobs and economic gains.

- Messaging aimed at highlighting US/Turkish historic friendship vs. Russian attempts at domination.
  • Highlight Soviet-era struggles to gain control of the Bosporus strait.
  • Contrast this with US partnership to build canals giving Turkey additional options.
  • Compare Turkey's situation with that of Crimea, Georgia (South Ossetia), and Ukraine, where Russia has been expanding its hegemonic controls at the expense of neighbors.
  • Emphasize that America's shift away from military force implies that the US is now a safer partner than the Russians.

**Egypt**

**Problem:** Stability in the Egyptian government is crucial for US interests. The Egyptian military has deep ties to US Central Command. The Egyptian state under its current leader, President Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil el-Sisi, is more willing to assist in counter terror missions than it would be under the opposition faction. The main opposition groups are hostile to the West, especially those aligned with the powerful Muslim Brotherhood. Unfortunately, while that faction is currently disrupted, it enjoys wide support among members of the population. Egypt's democracy functions chiefly by limiting voter choice, including by disallowing some opposition candidates or even arresting them. This could lead to unrest as opposition movements ferment underground. Insofar as the sitting government is unable to address the problems of the people, its suppression of the people’s democratic choices may also be destabilizing.

**Objective:** The current government in Egypt remains in place and increases in popularity among the Egyptian people.

**Stratagems:** Egypt's most likely sources of unrest are related to unemployment and resource access. Insofar as the United States can help the Sisi government address these problems while ensuring that the Sisi government gets credit for the improvements, stability will be increased along with popularity.

- Resource access is often solvable through economic activity, which would generate employment as well. For example, desalinization plants can improve access to clean water, while also providing jobs.
- Egypt has a reasonably well-educated population with a high literacy rate, which could be employed in industrial projects aimed at ameliorating resource issues.
- Egypt also has basic infrastructure capable of supporting such projects.
- Two major obstacles stand between Egypt and these sorts of projects.
  • The Egyptian bureaucracy is byzantine and difficult to navigate.
In large part this is because membership in the bureaucracy was an earlier method of dealing with unemployment, especially for one’s political supporters.

Since this has been a lifeline for relatively powerful families, every part of the bureaucracy has accreted small bits of authority that each is unwilling to relinquish.

The United States government can develop recommendations and provide expertise in how to do the streamlining. However, developing the will to do it among the Egyptian government officials themselves will be challenging.

Working with the Egyptian government to streamline its bureaucratic processes might be easier if there were the promise of better-paying jobs in the private industries that will be constructed.

This leads to the second problem, which is funding the projects.

The United States is unlikely to directly fund Egyptian infrastructure programs under the Trump administration, which would prefer to fund such projects at home than abroad.

The overall strategy being proposed in this paper will work to the benefit of the GCC nations, with the potential exception of Qatar.

These nations will be asked to bear some burdens in return for these benefits. One such burden could be assisting Egypt with funding at least some of its projects to increase resource access.

In return, Egypt’s military is reasonably powerful and could assist the GCC nations in operations e.g. in Yemen.

The Trump administration and the United States Department of State can be helpful in negotiating these agreements, however, it is important that Sisi get the credit for any successes in the eyes of the Egyptian people.

This can be assisted with messaging programs and American public diplomacy efforts, emphasizing Sisi’s role in attaining any given success, as well as the general commitment of the current government to bettering the condition of ordinary Egyptians.

An obvious focus area is desalinization plants to improve water access.

Israel is a world leader on this topic, generating a substantial percentage of its own water through desalinization.

Furthering a relationship between Israeli engineers and Egyptians constructing desalinization plants would strengthen relations between Israel and Egypt.

Israel might be persuaded to offer Egypt a good deal given the diplomatic advantages, furthering the economy of the project from the Egyptian perspective.
Israel

Problem: Israel faces well-known enemies bent on its destruction, as well as internal corruption issues. The government in Israel is currently popular in spite of these issues and is expected to win a snap election in the spring. While Israel is an effective partner in many respects, it will become more so if its political integration into the region can be furthered. Support from Arab nations in particular could be transformative and stabilizing.

Objective: Arab regimes develop and deepen ties with Israel, without interfering with Israel's self-defense against its enemies.

Stratagems: Rather than attempting another 'peace process' in the hope of defusing the Palestinian issue, the United States should work to encourage diplomatic and economic ties through the region.

- The longstanding American push for a 'peace process' is probably unhelpful to both Israel and the Palestinians.
  - The longer that the hope of a two-nation solution is held out as a possibility that America might help make real, the longer it will make sense to some to remain in insurgency against the Israeli government.
  - The basic conflict is more intractable than is usually admitted.\(^\text{12}\)
  - While the President may be convinced of the need for further American involvement, insofar as it is possible, we recommend disengagement from this process.

- Building economic and diplomatic ties will improve Israel's stability, as well as the physical conditions of everyone living in Israel.
  - Ties between Israel and Egypt's Sisi government, as well as that of the House of Saud, make sense because they have a common enemy. The same forces that threaten to overthrow the Sisi government, or to replace the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, are aligned with the Hamas movement that is sworn to the destruction of Israel.
  - In the past, the profile of the Palestinian movement was high enough that Arab leaders did not openly align with the Israelis in spite of common interests. However, the Palestinian leadership is divided and aged, and there have been encouraging signs of diplomatic engagement.
  - The Israelis under Benjamin Netanyahu have already enjoyed numerous successes in developing new diplomatic and economic ties. The United States need only build on successes already underway, with momentum on our side.

\(^{12}\) Our organization has recommended a complete rethink of the basic assumptions at work in this conflict. We assess that truly radical proposals would be necessary to affect a lasting peace that was truly acceptable to both sides. “A Fresh Strat on Middle East Peace: 5 Options Going Forward,” Security Studies Group, 22 June 2017.
o Messaging programs aimed at encouraging people to use their Arabic language skills to join the economic boons associated with this engagement might encourage some to abandon insurgency in favor of seeking employment in joint Arab-Israeli ventures.

- Israel should continue to be given leeway to carry out military operations against both terrorist organizations and Iranian proxies.
  
  o As the United States withdraws from direct kinetic operations and advise-and-assist missions in Syria, Israeli action will take on a new importance.
  
  o The Iranian government has expended significant resources and personnel in Syria. Given that Iran is under significant economic strain, as will be explored further in the section on Iran, Israeli efforts that tax Iran’s resources are of significant benefit to the United States’ overall grand strategy.
  
  o Israeli military and intelligence operations are highly effective and require minimal US support even compared to GCC operations in Yemen.

**Syria**

_Problem:_ The proposed American withdrawal will expose some 50,000 Syrians and numerous Kurds to new military action from either the Assad regime or the Turkish government, or both. Also, Iranian proxy militias are present and uncontrolled in the region. There is a danger of the reconstitution of the Islamic State (ISIS) absent a strong military presence in this area.

**Objective:** Protect Kurdish allies and give them time and space to organize themselves politically. Complete protectorate division of Syria to ensure stabilizing peace.

**Stratagems:** America should proceed with a modified version of the protectorate strategy proposed by SSG’s white paper “An End Game for Syria.” The Kurdish protectorate will need to be secured via a combination of a No Fly Zone (NFZ) and diplomatic arrangements with Turkey, in lieu of a US military tripwire. The US should pursue guarantees with Turkey in part by promising cooperation on the canal, as described in the “Turkey” section, and by offering to persuade Iraq to continue to permit Kurdish energy shipments to Turkey in return for peace. This should give Turkey enough of a carrot to avoid invasion, with the NFZ serving as a potential stick.

- SSG’s Kurdish analyst, Diliman Abdulkader, finds very limited interest for non-Kurdish peacekeeping forces among the Kurds in eastern Syria (this region is called “Rojava” by the Kurds).

- The priority of a NFZ is based upon good experiences with the NFZ imposed against Saddam during the 1990s.

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This NFZ, coupled with small-scale 5th Group US Special Forces engagements with the Kurds, built out the American-Kurdish alliance that was useful in the Iraq war and the war against ISIS.

France contributed to this historic NFZ.

In order to avoid giving Turkey a veto on the NFZ, it would be wise to base airframes out of non-Turkish locations.

- Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan is one option, as it has already been playing a role in anti-ISIS operations.
- The United States has allocated $143 million to upgrade this base, and thus might reasonably ask to use it for this purpose.
- Al Asad Air Base in Iraq’s Anbar province is additional option, although it may be better in a supporting role due to limited capacity.

The French have suggested that they might be willing to contribute to a new NFZ.

- French President Emmanuel Macron has voiced “the need to recognize the rights” of “forces allied with the US led coalition, notably the Kurds.”
- Syrian Democratic Council co-chair Ilham Ahmed made a petition to the French government to participate in a NFZ, and says they were initially receptive to the idea.
- Some coordination with the EU may be necessary for the French to feel licensed to do this under the Macron regime.

Obtain Turkish guarantees against invasion.

- The Turkish government claims that it will need a wide buffer zone in Syria to protect itself against Kurdish terrorists.
- While a wide buffer zone is unacceptable to the Kurds, a smaller one – perhaps a mile deep, rather than 25 miles deep – might be negotiated.
- Of course the Turks could also construct a buffer zone within their own territory.
- The United States should begin negotiations to determine a zone acceptable to both parties, offering guarantees to press the Kurds to control Kurdish factions against operations within Turkey.
- The existence of a NFZ will be partly persuasive, as US airframes can contest an incursion to some degree.
  - Turkey has a substantial air force to devote to such a conflict, and the United States has much to lose by coming into a direct conflict with Turkey.
  - However, the short-term price to Turkey may be convincing. Loss of Turkish air frames can be coupled with destruction of armor, should they attempt an incursion.
- Work with the Kurds and the Turks to ensure economic benefits flow from peace.
  - The Kurdish region controls 52 percent of Syria’s oil riches, accounting for 80 percent of the countries pre-war production.
  - Kurdish regions in Iraq have been using pipelines to deliver energy products to Turkey in spite of political tensions (as well as opposition from Baghdad). This could be a model for Rojava’s cooperation with Turkey on the energy front.
  - From a US perspective, in addition to lowering tensions between these two formal allies, Kurdish/Turkish energy cooperation also lessens Russia’s influence on Turkey.
    - Turkey also relies heavily on Iranian energy imports, which offers further incentive for this NATO ally to drift into the Russian/Iranian axis.
    - Currently Turkey is enjoying a waiver against US sanctions on Iranian oil imports.
  - According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), north east Syria contains over 75 percent of agricultural wheat production, with major dams and the bulk of the Euphrates River.
    - The potential for agricultural trade, although dwarfed by the energy trade, remains substantial.
    - Water supplies will be an increasing focus of competition throughout the Middle East.
  - Endorse the Kurdish-led protectorate as a vehicle for long-term autonomy within the context of a final political settlement.
    - Per SSG's original Syria plan, the Assad regime will not be able to return as the legitimate government of much of Syria
      - Its chemical attacks on civilians and brutality will spark an insurgency if people are forced to accept it.
      - A final settlement will need to be developed over time, once peace holds.
    - The government in the Kurdish protectorate will pursue Kurds' interests in this process.
**Saudi Arabia / GCC Minus Qatar**

**Problem:** The Saudi government needs to modernize and transition away from the oil-based economy that has been its power source since the 1970s. This will be a radical transformation for a traditional society with highly conservative, religious values. The government has to manage the shift without going too fast and provoking revolutionaries within, but also while pushing as fast as it can in order to deal with the declining price of oil and improving energy technologies abroad. Its best bet for doing this is an alliance with technologically sophisticated societies such as the United States and Israel, but anti-Semitic sentiment remains strong in the population as a whole, and anti-American sentiment at the presence of American forces inside the kingdom once provoked Al Qaeda’s 9/11 action. Moving towards this alliance is thus often done in the shadows more than openly, but it will need to be accelerated.

In addition, the Saudis and GCC are trying to corral Iranian moves to control both the Straits of Hormuz and the Bad el Mandeb strait. As keeping Iran from dominating these straits is a key US strategic interest with ramifications from Europe to Japan, the Saudis need American support in their efforts. However, Iran’s ally Qatar has been successfully waging a propaganda campaign aimed at swaying Congress into punishing Saudi Arabia for the recent killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident who defected to Qatar. The Saudis will need help rehabilitating their image and our alliance, as well as encouragement not to engage in provocative state actions such as the assassination of dissidents.

**Objective:** Enable a Saudi victory in the campaign to protect crucial shipping routes, while encouraging the development of ties with Israel and the United States.

**Stratagems:** Encourage Saudi Arabia to accept, and Israel to provide, increased support in their common interests.

- The Neom Project is something that the United States should encourage.
  - The Neom project is a new city that Saudi Arabia has proposed to build on the Gulf of Aqaba, across from Egypt’s Sharm el Sheikh.
  - Because it would be a new city constructed in what is now largely uninhabited territory, the city would not be occupied by members of the conservative Saudi populace. The Saudis have promised Neom significant political autonomy.
  - Neom is thus an ideal location for diplomatic and coordination efforts that bring Saudi and Israeli forces together.
  - It is also well-positioned to enable the Egyptian and Saudi governments to coordinate. Egypt has promised to donate an island in between the countries to Saudi Arabia for the purpose of connecting Sharm el Sheikh with Neom by a causeway.
  - Jordan, another key regional ally, is also close by and would be able to readily access the city for diplomatic meetings.
  - Without devoting taxpayer resources to the project, the United States can assist in finding private investors.
We can also provide planning and engineering resources to speed the project.

Should we wish to devote taxpayer resources, we might offer Saudi Arabia similar terms as proposed with regard the Turkish Canal, in which American contracting firms might be hired to construct the city.

**Yemen**

**Problem:** From the US perspective, the only strategic issue of real significance is the ability of anti-ship missiles fired by Iranian proxies on Yemeni territory to close the Bab el Mandeb strait. This strategic chokepoint must not be controlled by America’s enemies. As long as that issue is resolved, Yemen is otherwise not of especial interest to the United States. However, the Saudis have legitimate concerns about missiles being launched against their own territory from anywhere within Yemen. While the US can walk away from that issue, our allies in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia will need a resolution that respects their interests.

**Objective:** Prevent Yemen from being used as a missile launchpad by Iranian forces or their proxies.

**Stratagems:** In general, finding legal ways to support the Saudi war has the potential to resolve the issue in our favor, without the need for a US military deployment. It may be possible to attain our objective in even more nonviolent ways.

- The peace talks currently underway have caused the Houthis to withdraw from one of the coastal cities, and it may be that a demilitarized zone along the coast can be negotiated.
- UN peacekeepers have a poor record of success and are often associated with crimes against those they are supposed to be protecting. However, they are probably not worse than the combatants in this conflict.
- Since the US interest is satisfied strictly by protecting the strait, if the peace process produces safety from missiles right along the coastline we can be satisfied.
- We should nevertheless support the broader Saudi interests, both to develop the relationship with the kingdom and to ensure the potential for a more stable peace.

**Iraq**

**Problem:** Iraq’s political culture, haunted by Saddam’s decades of oppression, proved incapable of the trust that would have allowed the Shi’a majority to treat the Sunni and Kurdish minorities with justice. Instead of keeping the promises made during the American counterinsurgency effort, especially to former Sunni insurgents, the Shi’a majority turned on the Sunni population and expelled them from positions of authority. As a consequence, there was a fertile field for the Islamic State (ISIS) insurgency that sprung up in the wake of America’s withdrawal. Neighboring Iran took advantage of this opportunity to insert proxy militias into interoperation with the Iraqi Security Forces, even though the loyalty of such militias is to Iran’s clergy instead of the Iraqi government. While even Shi’a Iraqis resent Iranian meddling in their nation, they are more under the domination of Iran than they would like to admit.
**Objective:** Iraq recovers political independence from Iran, while treating its Kurdish and Sunni minorities fairly enough to avoid future insurgencies or independence movements.

**Stratagems:** A major messaging effort is needed to explicate that the way forward for Iraq runs through the difficult problem of building trust and accepting power-sharing.

- Iraqis can resist Iranian domination if they can transcend these divisions, but in order to do so the Shi’a in particular will have to accept Sunni power – at least within an autonomous region of Sunni majority areas.
- Sunni tribes within Iraq generally have cousins in Syria and can be engaged with cross-border stability in mind.
  - However, ISIS waged a deadly war on the tribal leadership structure, so that many of the legitimate leaders the US worked with during the Surge/Awakening period are dead.
  - That said, tribal structures are organic and thus heal. New leaders are emerging, and we should be getting to know them.
- The Kurds have effectively created an autonomous region whose independence should be defended via US diplomacy.
- The Kurdish region’s oil transfer to Turkey is a leverage point.
  - Baghdad is not happy about the shipments, but the Turks are.
  - Using US influence to keep these oil shipments flowing can help with the project of bringing Turkey closer again.
  - It also provides the Kurds with increased independence via wealth.
- The basic problem is Iran, which is dealt with in its own section below.

**Iran**

**Problem:** The Iranian regime is devoutly anti-American, and closer than they admitted to developing nuclear weapons. In principle they are committed to the destruction of Israel, and in practice they are at war with American ally Saudi Arabia. Their proxy forces have infiltrated the Iraqi military, the Lebanese military, and the Houthi militants in Yemen. They are one of the primary pillars of support for the Assad regime in spite of its war crimes against its own people. They also impose a brutal and impoverishing tyranny on their own people, in the service of clerical rule based on an apocalyptic vision.

**Objective:** Empower Iranian popular moves to take back control of their nation and its destiny from the clerical regime.

**Stratagems:** SSG’s Iranian team suggests that unrest is broad and deep, but that it exists in disconnected movements without a common goal or leadership. Helping these movements to coalesce around a shared vision and leadership may provoke change in Iran.
• Iran’s power over its citizens can be disrupted through encrypted communications.
  o Currently Iran has managed to seize control of popular communications methods, such that it is difficult for Iranians to organize and communicate in opposition to the regime.
  o Developing a Persian-language encrypted communication app that is readily useable over Iran’s networks would help the Iranian protest groups come together and organize.
  o Such a system could be coupled with a cryptocurrency that would allow Iranian dissidents to move wealth out of the country, further weakening Iran’s economic system.

• Labor unions are a promising mode of organizing insofar as they can be inculcated.
  o Iran’s government does not currently permit labor unions as such. Instead, they have Islamic labor organizations that report to approved political parties within the government.
  o Labor unions have proven to be an effective mode of driving political change.
  o Labor has often managed to organize in spite of formal attempts at suppression, to include violence from employers and from governments.
  o The United States can encourage the development of organized labor within Iran and provide assistance to diaspora attempts to organize labor.

Qatar

Problem: Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC have developed significant tensions with Qatar, whose interests locate it more properly in Iran’s sphere of influence. To wit, Qatar like Iran is a major producer of natural gas – they sit astride the same gas field – whereas the other GCC nations are consumers of natural gas rather than exporters of it. As such, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) forces gas sales at lower prices for members, which advantages the GCC at the expense of Qatar. The result has been Qatar’s departure from OPEC, re-opening of relations with Iran, and Qatari encouragement of revolutionary Sunni Islamic movements that threaten American allies in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and elsewhere.

Objective: End Qatari support for Iran and revolutionary movements threatening American allies.

Stratagems: Qatar’s center of gravity is its foreign contract labor.

• In spite of their universal conscription and urban warfare capacities, Qatar has set itself up for disaster by importing a contract labor population that vastly outnumbers its domestic population.
  o 88% of the population of Qatar is foreign born labor, while only 12% are native Qataris.
  o Furthermore, Qatar treats this foreign labor majority in an abominable fashion.15

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15 Jonathan Liew, “World Cup 2022: Qatar’s workers are not workers, they are slaves, and they are building mausoleums, not stadiums,” Independent (UK), 3 October 2017.
Not only are the contract laborers subject to vicious legal conditions, poor housing, frequent death, unfree to enter or leave the country without permission, and unfree to quit their jobs and go home, they are also frequently lied to about the terms of their contracts.

Pay is often half what was promised; associated ‘fees’ are outrageously higher.

Pay may be withheld for months at a time without explanation.

These workers thus not only vastly outnumber the Qatari, they have a very righteous set of grievances.

- Qatar is the richest country on earth per capita and could easily afford to pay these workers what it promised them while recruiting them in places like Bangladesh or Pakistan.
- Qatari refusal to keep their word, while viciously exploiting the poorest among them, is a major vulnerability in terms of their international reputation.
- In addition to the perils of insurrection or even governmental overthrow by imported labor, Qatar risks significant reputational damage via its conduct.

By pursuing a labor strategy with regard to Qatar, the United States can both effect a moral good and move Qatar without need to resort to any sort of military force.

- Compelling the Qatari to treat their labor better, at least paying as agreed and giving labor freedom of movement, would be a moral exercise that improved US standing.
- The Qatari are in real physical danger as a consequence of their decisions regarding their labor supply.
  - By pushing on this lever, the United States should be able to encourage the Qatari government to make concessions on support for Iran or Sunni revolutionary movements.
- Insofar as they cooperate, the United States can help them defuse the explosive situation into which they have put themselves.
- Insofar as they do not, the situation is adequately explosive to compel Qatari cooperation by empowering the workers.
**CONCLUSION**

The United States has entered into a disruptive period in which our internal institutions as well as those erected since World War II have ossified and are thus subject to challenge and defeat by even inferior actors with a shorter decision chain. The choice in front of us is whether we are disrupted by our enemies’ successes, or by breaking the ossified structures and finding new modes of victory.

One method that is likely to prove helpful is to minimize the use of direct military force. China and Russia have been moving aggressively, and successfully, with minimal usage of expensive military force. Even Iran, which has committed substantial national blood and treasure to regional wars, has found success especially by the use of proxy forces rather than by engaging its main military arm in direct combat. Turkey is now in the powerful position it is, with regard to the disposition of northern Syria, precisely because it has largely managed to avoid being drawn into the conflict so far.

Another option that is likely to be successful is to prioritize profit-making investments that reshape the economics of the region to align with US interests. Because these methods make money rather than costing money, at least in the medium to long term, they are sustainable in ways that expensive methods are not. If it profits us to destabilize Russian power in Eastern Europe by selling LNG to Ukraine, for example, we can carry right on doing so for as long as necessary.

In the longer term, as new methods come into focus, we will want new rules-based organizations to formalize those methods and the relationships they secure. In the short term, however, the ossification problem means that the focus has to be on finding new ways, not on formalizing them. Short decision chains and an acceptance of change open new paths. Some of those paths will prove more valuable than others. Once we know which, the United States can resume for a while the more comfortable role of ensuring the stability of a successful order.

Only for a while, however. Schumpeter’s problem is cyclical, as the problems of capitalism tend to be. The new structures will also ossify as they expand, and at some point, once again disruption rather than stability will be the order of the day. Just as we understand that the business cycle cannot be permanently tamed, we should understand that this feature of reality too is beyond our power to eliminate.

As a nation, we do have the choice of whether to let our enemies take advantage of the stiffness created by our ossification, or alternatively to disrupt our systems according to designs of our own. The former allows competitor states to tear free parts of the international order to place under their own hegemony. The latter has substantial risks, to be sure, but also the opportunity to exert greater control over what the next stable order looks like.

This period may be uncomfortable, but it should be faced with courage. There is every chance that, if engaged boldly, America and our allies may come out of this period of disruption with greater peace and prosperity than we have heretofore known. Periods of disruption are periods of opportunity for the bold. *Fortuna audaces iuvat*. 