The American Gorbachev

Trump, Strategic Retrenchment, and the Unmaking of Hegemonic Infrastructure

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“Systems can disappear relationally before they disappear geographically.”

— Douglas C. Youvan

Preface

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This book began with an image rather than a theory: a social-media photograph of Donald Trump altered with a purple mark on his forehead, invoking Mikhail Gorbachev. The joke was immediate. Gorbachev is remembered as the leader whose reforms coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet sphere and then of the Soviet Union itself. The image asks, without saying so, whether Trump could become attached to a comparable historical transition in the American case.

Taken literally, the comparison is poor. The United States is not the Soviet Union. NATO is not the Warsaw Pact. Saudi Arabia is not East Germany. Trump is not a liberalizing communist reformer, and contemporary American society does not reproduce the political economy of the late Soviet system. Yet analogies can be useful when they compare mechanisms rather than identities. The question pursued here is therefore narrower: can a leader who promises national restoration inadvertently weaken the external relationships through which national power has been exercised?

That question became more urgent during Trump's second term. In 2026 the United States completed important withdrawals from Syria, including al-Tanf, while Iraq took full control of Ain al-Asad under a drawdown trajectory negotiated before Trump returned to office. At the same time, Gulf partners demonstrated that hosting American forces does not imply unlimited permission to use their territory for offensive action. Iran's missile and drone capabilities further revealed that major regional bases cannot be treated as politically or militarily frictionless sanctuaries. And regional states increasingly built security relationships with one another, including the Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani defense arrangement announced in August 2026.

None of these developments proves that American hegemony is ending. The United States remains an extraordinary military, financial, technological, scientific, cultural, and diplomatic power. Nor does this book predict a Soviet-style collapse. Its argument is more specific: hegemonic power is partly relational. It resides not only in aircraft, ships, missiles, GDP, or nuclear weapons but in the permissions, expectations, dependencies, and habits of other states. Those relationships can weaken while the center retains enormous absolute capabilities.

The term “hegemonic infrastructure” is used throughout the book to describe this invisible architecture. A runway is infrastructure, but so is the host government’s willingness to let that runway be used. A treaty is infrastructure, but so is an ally’s belief that it will be honored. A dollar clearing system is infrastructure, but so is the preference of firms and governments to remain inside it. The American order has been powerful because these physical and relational structures reinforced one another.

The Gorbachev analogy becomes interesting at precisely this level. Gorbachev did not have to destroy the Soviet Army in order to alter the political meaning of Soviet power in Eastern Europe. Once peripheral governments and publics believed Moscow would not intervene as it had in Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968, their calculations changed. The map changed later. Expectations changed first.

Trump’s mechanism, if one exists, is nearly the inverse. He does not remove the threat of intervention from subordinate regimes. He makes commitments among allies more explicitly conditional and transactional. But the structural effect can rhyme: peripheral actors acquire reasons to build alternatives. The center may still be welcome. It is simply less

exclusive. This is how a hub-and-spoke system can become a mesh.

The pages that follow treat the Middle East as a particularly revealing laboratory because military bases, host-country permissions, missile vulnerability, energy routes, and emerging regional alignments are all visible at once. The argument then widens to the American international order as a whole. The purpose is not to celebrate or condemn retrenchment. Some commitments are obsolete; some bases may be liabilities; some allies can and should carry more responsibility. The analytical task is to distinguish unnecessary burden from load-bearing relationship.

If this distinction is mishandled, restoration can become a mechanism of dissolution. If it is handled well, strategic retrenchment could instead produce a leaner and more durable order. That uncertainty is why the issue deserves treatment as a hypothesis rather than a slogan.

This expanded edition develops that initial argument by returning to a larger body of related work in the author's research archive. Earlier studies of American hegemony, the Iraq wars, the U.S.-Qatar relationship, the vulnerability of Gulf bases, reserve-currency power, sanctions, strategic role-splitting, and

historical overextension are not reproduced as separate papers here. They are revised and folded into a single question: what happens when the infrastructure of primacy becomes simultaneously more expensive, more conditional, and easier for other actors to route around?

The result is deliberately broader than a paper about one president or one region. Trump remains the focal case because his second term makes alliance conditionality and strategic retrenchment unusually explicit, but the deeper subject is systemic. The Middle East supplies the clearest contemporary evidence; the dollar, sanctions architecture, alliance network, and historical comparisons show why the same mechanism can operate beyond military basing.

Abstract

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Donald Trump and Mikhail Gorbachev appear to be political opposites. Yet historical analogy need not depend on personality or ideology. This book develops the hypothesis that Trump's second presidency may prove "Gorbachev-like" in a structural sense: an attempt to restore a superpower by reducing what its leader regards as excessive burdens may accelerate the decomposition of the international architecture through which that superpower exercises influence.

The emerging contraction of the American military footprint in Syria and Iraq, constraints on the use of American facilities elsewhere in the Middle East, the vulnerability of fixed Gulf bases to missiles and drones, and new lateral security relationships among regional powers all suggest a distinction between military capability and hegemonic control. A state can retain overwhelming destructive power while losing some of the permissions, expectations, dependencies, and political alignments that convert force into durable influence.

The comparison with Gorbachev is therefore not a claim that the United States resembles the Soviet

Union, that American collapse is imminent, or that Trump and Gorbachev share intentions. Rather, it identifies a possible common mechanism: a leader seeking national restoration discovers that apparently costly peripheral commitments were constitutive elements of the very system whose power he intended to preserve. Hegemonic decline should consequently be studied not merely as territorial withdrawal or military defeat but as a nonlinear transformation in network topology. Bases may remain while permissions disappear; alliances may survive on paper while confidence decays; allies may remain friendly while constructing systems that no longer require the center.

The expanded edition places the Middle Eastern basing story inside a wider architecture of power. It examines the post-1945 construction of American centrality, Desert Storm and Iraq as successive stages of power projection, Qatar and Al Udeid as a case of host-state agency, the vulnerability of fixed installations, the dollar and sanctions as nonterritorial infrastructure, the politics of legitimacy and strategic ambiguity, and the recurring historical problem of overextension. The central claim remains conditional rather than predictive: the United States can remain the strongest individual state while becoming

progressively less necessary to the organization of other states' choices.

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1. Introduction: The Joke That May Become a Historical Metaphor

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Political memes are usually bad political science. They favor recognition over qualification and compression over evidence. Yet a good meme can expose a question that conventional analysis has not framed cleanly. The altered photograph of Donald Trump with a Gorbachev-like forehead mark works in exactly this way. Its humor depends on one historical association: Gorbachev is the face attached to the end of a superpower order. The meme asks whether Trump might eventually occupy a similar place in American memory.

The first task is to resist the obvious overstatement. Trump is not Gorbachev, and the United States is not the Soviet Union. There is no American Warsaw Pact held together by the threat of invasion. The United States is not a multinational communist federation facing separatist republics in the same way the USSR did. American private capital, universities, technology companies, civil society, financial markets, and constitutional institutions create a vastly different

social structure. A literal comparison collapses under inspection.

But historical analogies are most useful when they are not literal. They can identify a recurring mechanism under different conditions. A restoration-minded leader inherits an expensive international system. He sees waste, dependence, asymmetry, and commitments that appear to have outlived their purpose. He tries to repair the center by reducing burdens at the periphery. The peripheral actors, however, respond to uncertainty by constructing alternatives. The network begins to reorganize. What looked like cost may turn out to have been connective tissue.

The phrase “American Gorbachev” therefore describes a possible historical function, not a personality type. Gorbachev’s reforms were intended to preserve and revitalize a system he believed could be made sustainable. Yet reforms altered the expectations that held the system together. Trump’s project is also explicitly restorative: Make America Great Again. His method, however, stresses reciprocity, conditional commitments, bilateral bargaining, tariff pressure, skepticism of indefinite deployments, and a

preference for allies that contribute more visibly to their own defense.

The structural question is whether such policies distinguish correctly between burden and infrastructure. A military base costs money. So does a permanent deployment. So does an intelligence network, an aid program, a treaty commitment, and a diplomatic presence. But these expenditures can purchase more than the services immediately visible in a budget. They may buy access, alignment, agenda-setting power, interoperability, legitimacy, information, and the expectation that major decisions will pass through Washington.

That expectation is a form of power because it shapes behavior before the United States has to issue a threat or offer a payment. The post-1945 American order was remarkable not simply because the United States accumulated military strength but because other governments frequently organized their choices around American institutions. The result was a system in which American preferences traveled through networks.

The Middle East in Trump's second term provides an unusually clear place to examine whether that architecture is changing. American forces left major

Syrian positions, including al-Tanf. Iraq's long-negotiated drawdown removed American forces from Ain al-Asad. The United Arab Emirates publicly restricted use of its territory, airspace, and territorial waters for hostile action against Iran. Fixed bases were exposed to an environment in which missiles and drones could make concentration expensive. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan formalized a new mutual-defense arrangement. Each event is different. Together they raise the question of whether the region is becoming less dependent on a single external hub.

The central claim of this book is therefore deliberately conditional. If the American order is changing, the decisive evidence will not be found in a single base closure or a single treaty. It will be found in network behavior. Who calls whom first? Who can refuse access? Which states need Washington to coordinate their security? Which can increasingly build lateral relationships? How much insurance do allies purchase against the possibility of American absence? These are indicators of centrality.

A hegemon does not cease to be powerful when others gain options. It ceases to be hegemonic when those options become sufficient to route important

functions around it. That transition can occur without defeat, without bankruptcy, and without collapse. The bases can remain. The treaties can remain. The aircraft carriers can remain. Yet the system can be less centered than before.

The Gorbachev meme, then, contains a serious hypothesis beneath its joke: the leader who promises restoration may become the name attached to the transition from one kind of power to another. Whether that hypothesis proves correct is unknown. But it is now precise enough to test.

2. Gorbachev Without Gorbachevism

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The phrase “American Gorbachev” is misleading if it encourages a search for ideological resemblance. Gorbachev’s political vocabulary centered on perestroika, glasnost, reform of socialist institutions, and a reduced willingness to use force to sustain Communist regimes abroad. Trump’s vocabulary centers on national sovereignty, reciprocity, border control, tariffs, energy dominance, military strength, and suspicion of arrangements described as unfair to the United States. The two men do not represent the same political project.

The comparison becomes more rigorous once ideology is removed from the foreground. Gorbachev inherited a system whose costs had become increasingly difficult to carry. The Soviet economy was stagnant, the Afghan war was draining resources, technological competition with the West was unfavorable, and the legitimacy of Communist institutions was eroding. Reform therefore had a strategic logic: reduce external pressure and internal rigidity so that the Soviet system could survive.

What made the result historically transformative was not simply that reforms failed. It was that they changed the rules by which actors interpreted the center. Eastern European governments had long understood that political autonomy had limits enforced by Moscow. Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 were not merely past interventions. They were institutional memories. Their importance lay partly in making future intervention seem credible.

Gorbachev changed the expected probability of coercion. Once Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and others perceived that Moscow would not automatically use force to preserve Communist rule, political space widened at extraordinary speed. The material capability of the Soviet Army did not vanish. What changed was the belief governing its use.

This distinction between capability and expected use is the bridge to the American case. In an American alliance system, the relevant belief is not that Washington might invade an ally but that Washington will defend, consult, supply, and remain. The American system is therefore sustained less by fear than by confidence. Yet confidence, like fear, is an expectation about future behavior. It can be altered without

dismantling the instruments that originally made it credible.

Trump's approach makes the conditional nature of commitments more visible. Allies are asked what they contribute, how much they spend, whether trade is balanced, whether the United States is receiving sufficient value, and whether commitments serve an immediate national interest. Many of these questions are reasonable. Previous administrations also complained about burden sharing. The difference is that conditionality itself becomes a prominent public feature of alliance politics.

For a partner state, the important issue is not whether a treaty has formally disappeared. It is whether the probability distribution of future American behavior has widened. A commitment believed to be nearly automatic can support long-term dependence. A commitment believed to be contingent on the next election, the next trade dispute, or the next presidential judgment creates incentives for insurance.

Insurance can take many forms: larger indigenous military budgets, new defense industries, purchases from multiple suppliers, diplomatic accommodation with adversaries, new regional treaties, independent intelligence capacity, or stronger relations with powers

such as China. None requires hostility toward the United States. They simply reduce exposure to a single point of failure.

This is how an analogy can operate without identity. Gorbachev reduced the expected coercive enforcement of a Soviet-centered system. Trump may reduce the expected automaticity of an American-centered one. The moral character and political context are different. The network response can still rhyme: peripheral actors become more autonomous because the center is less predictable.

The value of the analogy therefore depends on a disciplined formulation. Trump is not “like Gorbachev” in general. The hypothesis is that both leaders may illustrate a recurring historical mechanism: reform from the center changes expectations at the edge, and altered expectations generate structures that the center did not intend to create.

3. The Difference Between Power and a Power System

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Great powers are often measured as inventories. Analysts count aircraft, ships, missiles, nuclear warheads, satellites, soldiers, industrial output, energy resources, gross domestic product, patents, computing capacity, and defense expenditure. These quantities matter. But they can obscure the difference between possessing power and operating a power system.

A power system is relational. Military access depends on host governments. Sanctions depend on banks, firms, and foreign ministries choosing to participate. Intelligence depends on partner services. Reserve-currency privilege depends on the preferences of institutions and investors. Technical standards matter because others adopt them. Diplomatic influence matters because others treat a government as a necessary participant.

The postwar United States became powerful in both senses. It accumulated extraordinary national capabilities and occupied the central position in dense international networks. The two reinforced one another. American military strength made security

guarantees credible. Those guarantees produced alliances and basing access. The resulting access made American military power more deployable. Financial centrality facilitated sanctions and borrowing. That financial advantage supported national capacity, which in turn made the system more attractive.

This circular reinforcement is what makes hegemony different from raw strength. A hegemon is not simply stronger than everyone else. It is positioned so that the behavior of others reproduces its power. Foreign officers train on its systems. Firms hold its currency. diplomats consult its government. Armies standardize around its equipment. Universities attract talent into its institutions. Technology firms build ecosystems on its platforms. Each choice by another actor becomes a small edge in a larger network.

This explains how a country can become stronger in one dimension while weaker in another. The United States can field more advanced aircraft while fewer states grant unrestricted access for those aircraft. It can increase defense spending while partners develop alternative security arrangements. It can win a military engagement while damaging the diplomatic coalition necessary to translate battlefield success into political settlement.

The distinction also explains why domestic debates frequently talk past one another. One side points to material capability and concludes that decline is exaggerated. Another points to diplomatic resistance and concludes that hegemony is collapsing. Both may be observing different layers of the same system. The United States can remain the strongest individual state while losing some network centrality.

Network centrality is especially important because it lowers the cost of influence. If another state already shares American doctrine, depends on American spare parts, uses American intelligence, and expects American diplomatic coordination, Washington does not begin each crisis from zero. The network carries influence continuously. By contrast, if every coalition must be reassembled transaction by transaction, political power becomes more expensive even when military power remains unchanged.

This book therefore uses the phrase “hegemonic infrastructure” to name both physical and relational assets. Bases, ports, fuel depots, fiber links, satellites, and headquarters are infrastructure in the conventional sense. But so are permissions, habits of consultation, shared command structures,

interoperability, expectations of continuity, and the belief that Washington will remain involved.

These relational components are not sentimental additions to strategy. They alter the operational meaning of physical assets. A base with political permission is different from a base without it. A treaty believed to be durable is different from a treaty interpreted as conditional. A sanctions mechanism joined voluntarily by many governments is different from one enforced through secondary threats.

The American Gorbachev hypothesis begins here. A restoration program that evaluates only visible costs may reduce the very network effects that make national capabilities unusually productive. The problem is not that all commitments must be preserved. It is that the system's value is distributed. What looks unprofitable in isolation may be profitable because of what it connects.

A useful way to see the distinction is to imagine two states with identical military inventories but different networks. State X possesses a large navy, advanced aircraft, and nuclear weapons, yet has few allies, little basing access, limited intelligence sharing, and a currency rarely used abroad. State Y possesses the same inventory but also sits at the center of defense

treaties, financial clearing systems, logistics agreements, research partnerships, and communications standards. The two states are not equally powerful in practice. State Y can mobilize the resources and locations of others, while State X must create cooperation anew in each crisis.

This difference also helps explain why power can be path dependent. Once officers, firms, banks, universities, and ministries build routines around a central state, those routines become self-reinforcing. Personnel learn common procedures. Supply chains develop specialized compatibility. Legal systems adapt to shared standards. Switching away becomes costly. Hegemony therefore has a technological and institutional dimension resembling a platform: the more actors use it, the more useful it becomes.

But platforms can lose their advantage when users perceive excessive extraction or uncertainty. If access to the platform becomes unpredictable, sophisticated users develop redundancy. The same logic applies internationally. States may remain inside an American-centered system while constructing backup mechanisms. At first the alternatives are inefficient. Over time they improve. Eventually they can reduce

switching costs enough that American centrality is no longer taken for granted.

This is why the question of American power cannot be answered by a single ranking. The country may lead in military expenditure and advanced technology while simultaneously losing some ability to define the default pathways through which other actors cooperate. The latter is not visible in a weapons inventory, yet it determines how much leverage the inventory can generate.

4. The American Base Network as Hegemonic Infrastructure

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The global network of American military installations is frequently represented as a map of dots. That visual language is useful but incomplete. A base is never merely a dot. It is a bundle of agreements, logistics, intelligence, local politics, infrastructure, and expectations.

At the physical level, a base may provide runways, hardened shelters, fuel storage, ammunition, maintenance, communications, medical capacity, prepositioned equipment, and command facilities. These functions shorten response times and reduce the cost of projecting force over distance. They allow a military to operate as though geography were smaller.

At the political level, however, a foreign base exists only because another sovereign government permits it. That permission may be formalized through treaties or executive agreements, but it is never purely technical. Domestic politics in the host state can narrow its use. A government can distinguish between defensive and offensive operations, between counterterrorism and

interstate war, or between transit and launch authority.

A base therefore contains an invisible permission layer. This layer can be more important than the concrete. An airfield full of aircraft has little offensive value if the host government refuses the sorties required for a particular operation. Conversely, a smaller facility with broad political permission can be strategically more useful than a larger but tightly constrained one.

The base also functions as a commitment device. Personnel stationed abroad are not merely assets; they are signals. Their presence creates expectations that the United States has invested itself in the host state's security. An attack on that state risks harming Americans and therefore drawing Washington more deeply into a conflict. This "tripwire" logic has been central to alliance deterrence for decades.

The same base can simultaneously create risk for the host. If an adversary regards the installation as part of an American offensive system, the host state may become a target. The value of protection is therefore balanced against the cost of exposure. When adversaries possess weak retaliatory capability, the balance can favor hosting. When missiles and drones

can reliably reach fixed facilities, the balance becomes more complicated.

This is why counting bases is an inadequate measure of hegemony. One must ask at least four questions. Is the installation physically present? Is it politically usable? Is it operationally survivable? Does its presence strengthen or weaken the host government's confidence in American protection?

These questions are particularly important in the Middle East because the same facility can support operations against several distinct threats. A government may approve one mission and reject another. It may welcome missile defense but oppose offensive operations against Iran. It may value intelligence cooperation while simultaneously pursuing diplomatic accommodation with Tehran. The base remains, but its strategic meaning becomes conditional.

The American base network should therefore be understood as a set of negotiated relationships rather than an empire of permanent territory. That makes it adaptable, but it also makes it sensitive to trust. The network's strength depends on foreign governments continuing to believe that hosting American forces

produces more security, status, and leverage than vulnerability or political cost.

A restoration policy focused on reducing deployments must therefore ask what each node contributes to the wider system. Some may indeed be redundant. Others may appear small while carrying intelligence, access, or signaling value out of proportion to their troop count. Retrenchment becomes strategically intelligent only when it distinguishes the unnecessary dot from the load-bearing edge.

The political ecology around a base deserves particular emphasis. Bases employ local workers, generate contracts, create roads and utilities, and establish relationships with nearby communities. They can also produce noise, accidents, legal disputes, land conflicts, and resentment over jurisdiction. The strategic value of a facility therefore depends partly on whether the host government can sustain a domestic coalition in favor of it.

In durable basing relationships, the installation becomes normalized. Its presence is not renegotiated during every crisis. Military planners can assume continuity, and the host state incorporates the base into its own defense planning. In fragile relationships, by

contrast, every regional escalation reopens the question of permission. Political opposition can convert operational planning into a domestic controversy.

This difference matters for deterrence. An adversary evaluating an American base does not merely ask how many aircraft are present. It asks whether the host will permit those aircraft to fly after retaliation begins. If the answer is uncertain, the deterrent effect of the base falls even before the first shot.

A strategically sophisticated basing policy must therefore manage relationships as carefully as concrete. It should diversify access, reduce the political burden on any single host, invest in local legitimacy, and make clear which missions are mutually understood. The purpose is not to erase sovereignty but to make permission predictable. Where predictability cannot be achieved, the United States must treat access as contingent rather than build strategy around an assumption that may fail in crisis.

5. Three Ways to Lose a Base Without Losing the Base

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The phrase “losing a base” normally evokes a dramatic image: troops depart, the flag comes down, equipment is loaded, and the host government takes possession. That is physical loss. It is important, but it is only one way a base can lose strategic value.

The first layer is presence. Are American personnel, aircraft, communications systems, and logistics actually there? When the United States leaves al-Tanf or relinquishes a major installation, the answer changes visibly. Maps can record this form of contraction.

The second layer is political permission. A base may remain crowded with American assets while the host government refuses to let those assets support a particular war. The United Arab Emirates’ January 2026 statement that its territory, airspace, and territorial waters would not be used for hostile military action against Iran illustrates the point. The physical node existed, but one category of use was politically restricted.

The third layer is operational sanctuary. Even when the host grants permission, the base must be able to function. Precision missiles, drones, cyberattack, sabotage, attacks on ports, and strikes on fuel or power infrastructure can degrade operations without capturing the facility. A base can become a liability if defending it consumes disproportionate resources or if aircraft must disperse whenever a crisis intensifies.

These layers interact. A host government facing repeated retaliatory attacks may narrow permission because the physical presence creates political risk. A base considered vulnerable may require expensive hardening and missile defense, increasing the cost of maintaining it. A reduced U.S. presence may in turn weaken the host's belief that Washington will remain committed, encouraging alternative security relationships.

The analytical advantage of this framework is that it prevents binary thinking. A country need not "expel the Americans" for American influence to decline. Nor should every restriction be described as eviction. The relevant question is how much usable strategic option the United States possesses under realistic political and military conditions.

Imagine two air bases. Base A hosts ten thousand personnel but cannot be used for offensive action against the primary adversary and lies under dense missile threat. Base B hosts two thousand personnel, has broad launch authority, redundant logistics, dispersed aircraft, and strong host-government support. Counting personnel would make Base A appear more important. Operationally, Base B may provide more usable power.

This distinction also helps avoid exaggerated headlines. Reporting that the United States has “lost the Gulf” because a host imposes restrictions would be inaccurate. So would assuming that the network is unchanged because flags remain over the facilities. A rigorous analysis must track changes in each layer separately.

For the American Gorbachev hypothesis, the permission layer is especially important. Relational power can erode without spectacular events. A small narrowing of access, repeated across multiple states and multiple contingencies, can produce a large cumulative effect. The network becomes less automatic, and therefore more expensive to use.

The map may not change until late in the process. The strategic options can change much earlier. That is

why systems often disappear relationally before they disappear geographically.

The three-layer framework can also be applied over time. Physical presence tends to be the slowest variable because building and closing major facilities requires money, logistics, and political decisions. Permission can change faster: a government may alter the rules in days. Sanctuary can change faster still if a new missile system, drone capability, or intelligence breakthrough suddenly makes an installation more vulnerable.

This difference in tempo creates strategic surprises. A basing posture that looks stable on a map can lose much of its utility between two planning cycles. Political permission can disappear during the same crisis for which the base was intended, while operational vulnerability can be exposed by the first salvo. Planning must therefore distinguish nominal capacity from crisis capacity.

The framework also discourages dramatic but imprecise language. A base does not become useless simply because one mission is restricted, and a vulnerable base can remain valuable if it is hardened or used as part of a distributed network. The goal is to measure degrees of usable access rather than declare binary victory or loss.

For historical analysis, however, the layers provide an early-warning system. If the physical map remains stable while permission narrows and sanctuary erodes, the visible geography will lag behind the strategic reality. This lag is exactly what makes hegemonic transitions difficult to recognize in real time.

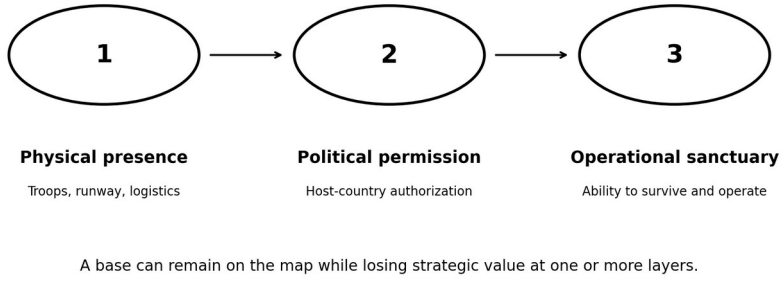


Figure 1. Three analytically distinct ways a foreign base can lose strategic value.

6. Syria and Iraq: Physical Contraction

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Syria and Iraq provide the clearest examples of physical contraction in the Middle East, but they also demonstrate why causation must be handled carefully. Not every withdrawal in Trump's second term began with Trump, and not every withdrawal should be interpreted as defeat.

In Syria, the American military presence was never comparable in scale to the occupations of Iraq or Afghanistan. Its strategic importance came from location and leverage. The al-Tanf garrison sat near the tri-border region of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. It supported counter-ISIS activity, complicated Iranian-linked movement across the region, and embodied a continuing American role in Syria's postwar balance. Reuters reported on February 12, 2026, that the United States completed its withdrawal and handed the base to Syrian forces. Later that month Reuters reported additional withdrawals in northeastern Syria.

The physical meaning is straightforward: the United States had fewer nodes. The political meaning is more ambiguous. A withdrawal can reflect improved local

capacity, a decision that a mission is complete, a desire to reduce exposure, or a shift toward remote counterterrorism. Strategic contraction is not automatically strategic failure.

Yet node removal has consequences even when rational. Local partners revise expectations. Intelligence collection changes. Logistics reroute. Adversaries no longer have to account for the same physical obstacle. Future reentry becomes more expensive than continued presence because permissions, facilities, and political relationships must be rebuilt.

Iraq illustrates the importance of historical continuity. The coalition drawdown was negotiated before Trump returned to office. Reuters reported in September 2024 that the United States and Iraq had agreed on a path under which hundreds of troops would leave and the coalition mission would wind down. In January 2026, Iraq took full control of Ain al-Asad after American withdrawal. It would therefore be misleading to treat the entire Iraqi process as a unilateral Trump initiative.

But inherited policies still become part of a president's strategic environment. Trump did not reverse the contraction. In that sense, the Middle

Eastern footprint continued to shrink during his second term even where the original timetable preceded him. Historical transitions often combine inherited momentum with new political logic.

Iraq is particularly revealing because American troops have simultaneously been a security asset and a political irritant. Their presence supports training, intelligence, counterterrorism, and regional deterrence, but it also provides a target for Iran-backed groups and a recurring symbol in Iraqi sovereignty debates. A government can therefore conclude that a smaller American footprint increases domestic legitimacy even while it values continued bilateral cooperation.

This is a reminder that hegemony is most efficient when it does not feel like occupation. The best basing relationships are those in which the host government sees the foreign presence as part of its own security strategy. Once a presence must be defended politically as much as militarily, its cost rises.

The Syria-Iraq contraction should therefore be interpreted neither as proof of American collapse nor as a trivial troop movement. It is evidence that the United States is becoming less physically embedded in two countries that once occupied central positions in

its regional military posture. The strategic question is whether other forms of access, intelligence, deterrence, and partnership compensate for that reduced footprint.

If they do, retrenchment may represent adaptation. If they do not, physical contraction becomes one component of a wider loss of centrality. The distinction can only be judged in relation to the rest of the network.

A further issue is the asymmetry between leaving and returning. Withdrawal can be completed in weeks or months once the political decision is made. Reconstituting a comparable position later may take years. Facilities have to be negotiated, renovated, protected, supplied, and connected to local intelligence and logistics. Partners who reorganized after the departure may be less willing to recreate the previous arrangement.

This asymmetry means that even a reversible policy decision can have irreversible relational consequences. Local actors respond to the expectation of absence. They seek new patrons, make compromises with rivals, or integrate into different command structures. When the United States later considers returning, it encounters a new political landscape.

Syria is especially illustrative because the American presence had become entangled with relationships among Kurdish forces, the new Syrian state, Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and anti-ISIS missions. Removing a small number of troops can therefore alter a large number of local calculations. The strategic effect cannot be inferred from troop count alone.

Iraq likewise shows that drawdowns are embedded in sovereignty politics. A smaller foreign footprint may improve the legitimacy of bilateral cooperation by reducing the symbolism of occupation. Retrenchment can therefore strengthen a relationship if it replaces an unwanted military presence with intelligence, training, economic, and diplomatic ties that the host government can sustain. The relevant question is not whether troops leave, but whether influence is preserved in a less politically costly form.

7. The Gulf: Permission Without Ownership

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The Gulf demonstrates a more subtle form of change because the United States can retain major bases while host governments impose boundaries on what those bases can do. This is not a contradiction. It is the normal consequence of sovereignty.

American forces in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and nearby states operate through agreements with governments that possess their own interests, domestic constraints, rivalries, and relationships with Iran. Hosting American forces does not convert those states into instruments of American policy.

The UAE's January 2026 declaration that its airspace, territory, and territorial waters would not be used for hostile military action against Iran made the permission layer unusually visible. The statement did not end the American security relationship. It demonstrated that the relationship has categories. A state can support defensive cooperation while refusing to facilitate a particular offensive war.

For Washington, this complicates the assumption that forward presence automatically equals freedom of action. Military plans can be technically feasible and politically unavailable. Alternative launch points, tanker routes, overflight permissions, naval positioning, and long-range strike options become more important when a host government narrows access.

For Gulf governments, such restrictions can be rational. They are geographically exposed to Iranian retaliation, economically dependent on stable shipping, and often responsible for dense urban and energy infrastructure within missile range. Their security problem is not simply how to align with Washington. It is how to survive a regional conflict that Washington may enter or leave according to American priorities.

This produces an incentive for strategic ambidexterity. A Gulf state can rely on American missile defense, train with American forces, purchase American weapons, and simultaneously maintain diplomatic channels with Tehran. It can seek Chinese investment while keeping dollar assets. It can build relationships with Turkey and Pakistan while avoiding a formal break with Washington.

Traditional alliance language tends to interpret such behavior as inconsistency or hedging. From the standpoint of a middle power, it is diversification. The state is minimizing dependence on any single external actor. That strategy becomes more attractive when American commitments are perceived as conditional and when American facilities themselves can attract retaliation.

Permission without ownership therefore captures the fundamental reality of overseas basing. The United States can build infrastructure, but it does not own the sovereign decision surrounding its use. The political value of a base is renewed continuously through the host's calculation that cooperation remains worthwhile.

This is one reason a hegemonic order can weaken quietly. No dramatic expulsion is required. A series of case-by-case restrictions can reduce the option set available to the central power. Each restriction may be modest. Taken together they create friction, and friction changes strategy.

The Gulf should therefore be read not as a region that has simply rejected the United States, but as a region in which states increasingly insist on controlling the terms of American power. That is consistent with

continued partnership. It is also consistent with reduced American centrality.

Permission politics also reveals the difference between alliance and alignment. A government may be aligned with the United States on many long-term interests while disagreeing sharply about a specific operation. Treating every refusal as defection can become self-defeating because it forces partners to choose between sovereignty and alliance.

For Gulf monarchies, the political problem is acute. Their economic infrastructure is concentrated, their populations are exposed, and their proximity to Iran means that retaliation arrives faster than American reinforcement. Their risk calculus therefore differs from Washington's. A policy that looks decisive from across the Atlantic may look existential from a capital within missile range.

The United States can respond by demanding obedience or by designing a posture that accommodates differentiated permissions. The latter approach is more complex but potentially more durable. It may rely on mobile platforms, distributed access, defensive cooperation, and clearly negotiated mission categories rather than assuming that every base is available for every contingency.

Such flexibility would not restore the unilateral freedom of action associated with the unipolar moment. It would instead acknowledge a more sovereign and multipolar environment. The strategic choice is whether to interpret that environment as intolerable decline or as a condition to be managed. Hegemonic infrastructure can adapt, but only if planners treat political permission as a variable rather than an entitlement.

8. From Sanctuary to Target: The Vulnerability of Fixed Infrastructure

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Forward bases were built to solve distance. Aircraft located near a theater can fly more sorties. Fuel and ammunition stored nearby reduce logistical strain. Commanders closer to the region can coordinate more rapidly. The system works best when the forward base itself is relatively secure.

That assumption is increasingly difficult to sustain. Precision-guided missiles, cruise missiles, drones, loitering munitions, cyber operations, and distributed launch systems make large fixed facilities visible and targetable. The strategic issue is not whether an adversary can permanently destroy a base. It is whether it can impose enough interruption to change operations.

Runway cratering can delay sorties. Attacks on fuel storage can create shortages. Threats to power or communications can force redundancy. Drone swarms can consume expensive interceptors. Warning of incoming strikes can compel aircraft dispersal and

personnel relocation. Even failed attacks can impose operational costs because defenders must respond as though the next attack may succeed.

This creates an unfavorable economic relationship. A low-cost drone need not be equivalent to an advanced interceptor to create value for the attacker. It only needs to force the defender to spend more, disperse more, or operate less efficiently. The important metric is therefore friction rather than destruction.

Iran's regional missile and drone capabilities make this issue especially acute in the Gulf. During the 2026 conflict, attacks and threats against Gulf infrastructure demonstrated that the rear area can become part of the battlefield. A host government considering American basing must therefore weigh protection against exposure. The base can deter one kind of attack while attracting another.

The military response is familiar: harden shelters, disperse aircraft, duplicate command nodes, expand missile defense, preposition equipment across more locations, use austere airfields, increase naval and long-range options, and build rapid repair capacity. Each measure improves resilience. Each also adds cost.

The result is a strategic paradox. The forward base exists to make projection cheaper and faster. The more vulnerable it becomes, the more resources must be spent to preserve those advantages. If protection costs rise sufficiently, some missions may be shifted farther away, reducing the very efficiency forward basing was meant to create.

This is not a unique American problem. Every military that concentrates assets faces the same logic. But it matters disproportionately to the United States because American global power has long depended on the ability to operate from a network of large, sophisticated installations.

Vulnerability therefore changes the political meaning of the base as well. If civilians in the host country believe an American installation makes their city a target, domestic support can erode. The operational and permission layers begin to interact. Missile defense becomes not merely a military requirement but part of the political price of continued access.

The broader lesson is that hegemonic infrastructure must be maintained against changes in technology. A network that was optimal under one threat environment can become brittle under another.

Strategic retrenchment may be sensible if it removes vulnerable concentrations and replaces them with resilient distribution. It becomes dangerous if it simply removes nodes without restoring the connectivity they provided.

The sanctuary problem has an additional implication for alliance politics: missile defense itself becomes a shared public good. A host state is more likely to tolerate American facilities if those facilities bring credible protection for civilian population centers and critical infrastructure. Conversely, a posture that protects the base while leaving the surrounding society exposed can become politically toxic.

This creates a demand for integrated air and missile defense, early warning, shared radar, hardened civil infrastructure, and rapid recovery. These systems are expensive and technically difficult, but they can convert a vulnerable base from a liability into part of a broader protective architecture.

The balance between offense and defense also affects escalation. When both sides can strike fixed infrastructure quickly, political leaders may feel pressure to act early before assets are degraded. Dispersal and resilience can reduce that pressure by

making forces less dependent on immediate use. In this sense, a less concentrated posture may be strategically stabilizing even if it appears to represent retrenchment.

The challenge is that dispersion requires more relationships, not fewer. A resilient network may need access to many smaller locations instead of a few giant bases. Strategic modernization could therefore produce a paradoxical outcome: fewer permanent mega-bases but more politically negotiated points of access. The map becomes less impressive while the network becomes more robust.

9. Transactional Alliances and the Destruction of Network Value

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Transactional alliance management begins from a defensible intuition: relationships should produce reciprocal benefit. If the United States spends resources defending wealthy partners, those partners should contribute significantly to their own defense. If an agreement produces persistent economic asymmetry, the terms deserve scrutiny. If a deployment no longer serves a clear mission, inertia is not a sufficient reason to preserve it.

The difficulty is that bilateral accounting can miss network value. An alliance is not merely an exchange between Washington and one capital. It is a connection that may affect logistics, intelligence, sanctions, technology, diplomacy, arms standardization, shipping routes, and the behavior of neighboring states.

An airport analogy is useful. A route can appear unprofitable when evaluated alone, yet support profitable connections across the entire hub. Eliminate enough apparently weak routes and the hub becomes less valuable. The loss is nonlinear because the routes are not independent.

The same is true of security systems. Country A may contribute little cash compared with what it receives in protection, yet provide a port used to support operations in Countries B and C. Its intelligence service may produce information relevant to a fourth state. Its decision to buy American equipment may strengthen industrial scale and interoperability. Its diplomatic alignment may influence multilateral votes. None of these benefits appears neatly on a bilateral invoice.

This creates a potential accounting error. Visible costs are easy to measure. Counterfactual benefits are not. A budget records the troops stationed abroad. It does not record the rival navy that never obtained the port. It records foreign aid. It does not record the government that stayed aligned because assistance made alternatives less attractive. It records the cost of exercises. It does not record the crisis that was easier to coordinate because officers had trained together for twenty years.

The Trump critique of alliance free riding can therefore be simultaneously correct and incomplete. Some allies may indeed have underinvested because American protection allowed them to do so. Pressuring them to spend more can strengthen deterrence. But if the method of pressure reduces confidence in the

alliance itself, the United States may gain burden sharing while losing centrality.

The difference depends on whether allied self-reliance remains integrated with American leadership or becomes insurance against American absence. More European defense capacity inside NATO can reinforce the alliance. The same capacity developed explicitly to operate without Washington can reduce American indispensability. Materially, the weapons may look identical. Politically, the network is different.

This is why “pay more” is not a complete strategy. The strategic objective must define what kind of network the United States wants after allies contribute more. If the desired end state is a resilient coalition with distributed capability and retained American centrality, burden sharing is constructive. If every relationship becomes a separate bargain whose value must be proved repeatedly, the network can fragment into transactions.

Hegemony is efficient precisely because it reduces the number of transactions that must be renegotiated. Rules, institutions, habits, and expectations create continuity. A hyper-transactional order may produce short-term concessions while increasing long-term bargaining costs.

The restoration dilemma is therefore not whether to demand reciprocity. It is how to do so without destroying the relational capital that makes reciprocity valuable in the first place.

There is also a domestic political reason transactional logic is attractive. Voters can understand a bill. They can understand a percentage of GDP. They can understand a trade deficit. Network benefits are abstract and often invisible. Political leaders therefore receive more immediate credit for extracting a payment than for preserving a relationship whose value appears only in a crisis that never occurs.

This creates a bias toward measurable reciprocity. It can be corrected only by making the indirect returns more explicit: access, standardization, intelligence, diplomatic support, industrial scale, and reduced need for unilateral deployments. A mature alliance debate should ask not only what the partner pays but what alternatives would cost if the relationship weakened.

The same principle applies to sanctions and economic statecraft. A central financial network is valuable because others choose to remain in it. Frequent coercive use can be effective, but it can also increase the incentive to develop bypasses. The short-

run gain from leverage and the long-run cost to centrality belong on the same balance sheet.

A sustainable hegemonic strategy therefore resembles stewardship more than extraction. The center must obtain enough value to justify the system while leaving participants enough value that they prefer continued membership. Once the relationship is perceived as purely extractive, diversification becomes rational.

10. When Allies Begin Connecting Around the Center

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A hub-and-spoke system is defined not merely by the strength of the hub but by the weakness of direct connections among the spokes. The center is powerful because important relationships pass through it. When peripheral actors begin connecting to one another, the topology changes.

This transition need not be hostile. An ally can remain friendly to the United States while building direct defense ties with another ally. Indeed, such lateral connections may initially be encouraged as burden sharing. The strategic question is whether they complement American centrality or substitute for it.

Consider a group of regional states that historically depended on Washington for intelligence, advanced weapons, mediation, and deterrence. If those states begin sharing intelligence directly, conducting joint exercises, developing common weapons projects, or establishing mutual-defense commitments, the cost of acting without Washington falls.

This is a basic property of networks. A central node's power depends partly on betweenness: how often it lies on the shortest or most important path between other nodes. A node can remain very large while its betweenness declines. The others have learned new routes.

Strategic hedging is one path toward such a mesh. States cultivate multiple suppliers, multiple diplomatic channels, and multiple defense partners. Over time, the redundancy becomes institutionalized. What began as insurance becomes an alternative architecture.

The Middle East is especially conducive to this pattern because no regional state wants complete dependence on another. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, the Gulf states, Iran, and Israel all possess distinct capabilities and interests. External powers add another layer. A state can use American security ties, Chinese investment, Turkish defense technology, Pakistani military relationships, and regional diplomacy simultaneously.

A unipolar system discourages such complexity because the dominant hub can offer enough benefits to make alternatives unnecessary or costly. A multipolar system rewards optionality. States that can move

among partners gain bargaining leverage and reduce vulnerability.

This is why the most important evidence of American decline may not be anti-American alignment. It may be successful non-American coordination among states that remain American partners. The transformation is subtle because the old relationship is not terminated. It is diluted.

The dilution can be strategically beneficial to Washington if it produces capable partners that still orient their systems around American standards and political leadership. But if those lateral ties increasingly determine regional outcomes without American participation, they represent a genuine reduction in centrality.

The key question is therefore not whether allies are "with" or "against" the United States. The binary is obsolete. The question is how many consequential functions can be performed through routes that do not require Washington. Once the answer grows large, the network has changed even if every flag remains in place.

Lateral connections among allies can also change the political psychology of consultation. In a hub-dominated system, a regional government facing a

crisis often asks first what Washington thinks. In a meshed system, it can compare the positions of several partners before approaching the United States. This seemingly minor change reduces agenda-setting power.

Agenda setting is an underappreciated form of hegemony. The actor consulted first helps define the problem, the available options, and the language in which a solution is discussed. Losing first-call status does not eliminate influence, but it moves the central power from architect toward participant.

At the same time, lateral networks can make the whole coalition more resilient. If every relationship must pass through Washington, the system has a single coordination bottleneck. Direct allied cooperation can preserve function when the United States is distracted. The strategic challenge is therefore to encourage lateral capacity without becoming irrelevant to it.

One model is a federated network in which partners possess strong direct ties but remain connected through common standards, intelligence, logistics, and strategic planning. Such an order would be less hierarchical than classical hegemony but could still preserve substantial American centrality. The

alternative is fragmentation into multiple overlapping systems with no privileged hub.

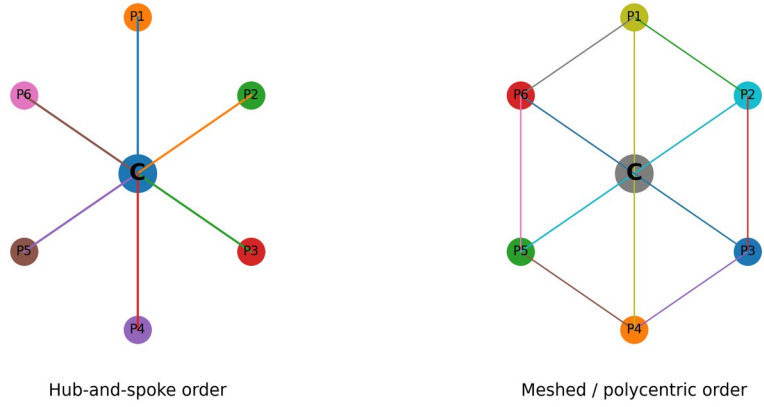


Figure 2. A hub-and-spoke system can become polycentric without the central node disappearing.

11. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, and Strategic Hedging

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The 2026 defense arrangement among Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan is significant because it joins three states with complementary resources and long-standing but different relationships with the United States. Reuters and the Associated Press reported in August 2026 that the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement contained a mutual-defense principle and mechanisms for deeper political and military coordination.

The pact should not be romanticized into a fully integrated “Islamic NATO.” Treaties can be politically impressive and operationally shallow. Saudi, Turkish, and Pakistani interests are not identical. Their militaries differ in doctrine, equipment, geography, and immediate threat perception. The durability of the arrangement will depend on institutions, exercises, planning, and real willingness to bear costs for one another.

Its structural meaning, however, does not require full integration. Saudi Arabia contributes financial resources, energy significance, and political weight in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Turkey possesses a large

military, NATO experience, strategic geography, and a rapidly developing defense-industrial sector. Pakistan brings a major military establishment, nuclear weapons, and deep historical security ties with Gulf states.

These capabilities create a form of regional insurance. The participating states do not have to reject the United States in order to conclude that additional security architecture is useful. Indeed, public statements have emphasized complementarity rather than replacement. That is precisely why the agreement is relevant to a study of hegemonic transition.

A hegemonic order weakens not only when allies defect but when they cease to need the center for every important function. If Saudi Arabia can deepen deterrence through Pakistan and Turkey while retaining American cooperation, it has improved its option set. From Riyadh's perspective, this can be prudent diversification. From Washington's perspective, it can be welcomed burden sharing or a sign of declining exclusivity, depending on how the arrangement evolves.

The pact also illustrates the changing role of middle powers. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are not simply clients choosing between Washington and Beijing. They

increasingly act as autonomous centers that create institutions of their own. Pakistan can simultaneously maintain deep ties with China, seek engagement with Washington, and expand its role in Gulf security. This is not classic bloc politics.

The most revealing feature of multipolarity may therefore be the proliferation of overlapping commitments. A state can belong to NATO, cooperate with Russia in selected areas, trade extensively with China, and join a regional defense mechanism. Traditional categories of ally, neutral, and adversary become less predictive.

For the American Gorbachev thesis, the pact is best read as a data point rather than proof. One agreement does not unmake an order. But it shows that important American partners are willing and able to build collective-security mechanisms that are not designed in Washington.

If such arrangements remain supplementary, American centrality may survive in a more distributed form. If they become preferred mechanisms for regional crisis management, they could mark a deeper transition. The decisive variable is not the existence of the pact but the behavior it makes possible.

The Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani arrangement also raises a nuclear question even if the agreement does not explicitly transfer nuclear guarantees. Pakistan's status as a nuclear-armed state inevitably gives the relationship symbolic weight. Saudi leaders have long worried about strategic vulnerability in a region that includes nuclear-armed Israel and an Iranian nuclear program that has repeatedly generated crisis. Closer ties with Pakistan can therefore have deterrent meaning beyond conventional exercises.

That does not mean a Pakistani nuclear umbrella automatically extends to Saudi Arabia. Such an inference would exceed public evidence. The important point is that regional states are assembling portfolios of capability and association that complicate the old assumption that ultimate deterrence must flow through Washington.

Turkey adds a different element: industrial autonomy. Its drone, missile, electronics, and aerospace sectors make it a supplier as well as a security partner. When regional states can obtain advanced capabilities from one another, dependence on American export decisions falls.

The pact is therefore best interpreted as part of a broader trend toward regional capacity aggregation.

Money, technology, manpower, geography, and deterrence can be combined across several states. Whether the arrangement matures or not, it demonstrates that the institutional imagination of the region is no longer limited to American-sponsored structures.

12. The Topology of Hegemonic Decline

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The word “decline” encourages a linear picture: power begins at a high level and then falls gradually. Complex political systems rarely behave so smoothly. Networks can absorb local losses for long periods and then reorganize quickly after crossing thresholds.

This is why topology is a useful language for hegemonic change. The American order consists of nodes and edges. Nodes include states, military bases, financial centers, intelligence agencies, ports, corporations, universities, digital platforms, and international organizations. Edges include treaties, trade, data flows, weapons supply, currency use, basing rights, diplomatic consultation, and shared expectations.

A system can lose one node with little effect because other routes compensate. It can lose several edges without visible crisis. But losses can become nonlinear when they reduce redundancy or encourage alternative routing. The critical change is not simply how many components remain but how the pattern of connection changes.

In a highly centralized system, peripheral actors rely on the center to interact effectively with one another. The hub gains power because coordination passes through it. In a meshed system, peripheral actors maintain direct links. The hub can remain large, but fewer paths depend on it.

Network theory calls one measure of this property betweenness centrality. A node has high betweenness when it lies on many of the shortest paths between other nodes. The concept is not a complete theory of geopolitics, but it provides a useful intuition. A hegemon's advantage is partly that others must pass through its institutions.

American sanctions power, for example, has historically depended not only on the size of the American economy but on the central position of dollar clearing and American-linked financial institutions. Military influence has depended not only on weapons but on training, spare parts, standards, intelligence, and command relationships. Diplomatic power has depended on the expectation that Washington is a necessary participant in settlement.

A decline in centrality can therefore occur while absolute capability remains stable. If states develop alternative payment channels, alternative weapons

suppliers, alternative defense pacts, and alternative mediators, the United States may still be the strongest node but no longer the unavoidable one.

This form of transition is difficult to recognize because it lacks a dramatic moment. No capital falls. No army is destroyed. No treaty needs to be formally dissolved. The network simply becomes more redundant around the former center.

The concept also clarifies why some attempts to preserve primacy can accelerate its erosion. Coercive use of a central network may incentivize others to build alternatives. Conditional alliances may incentivize hedging. Tariffs may encourage supply-chain diversification. Sanctions may encourage payment alternatives. Each tool can be effective in the short run while stimulating long-run exit options.

The question for American strategy is therefore not how to freeze the network in its 1990s form. That is impossible. The question is how to remain central in a world where other nodes are stronger and more connected. A sustainable hegemonic strategy may have to tolerate greater autonomy while preserving the value of connection to the center.

Topology also helps explain why the loss of centrality can accelerate after a long period of

apparent stability. Alternative links have to reach a minimum density before they become genuinely useful. Early bilateral arrangements may be fragile and expensive. As more states participate, however, the alternatives become easier to use and more legitimate.

This resembles a threshold phenomenon. Before the threshold, the central network remains overwhelmingly convenient. After the threshold, diversification becomes self-reinforcing because each new connection increases the value of the others. A regional defense pact creates exercises; exercises create interoperability; interoperability supports procurement; procurement creates industrial ties; industrial ties create political constituencies for continued cooperation.

The same logic applies in finance and technology. A payment system is unattractive when few counterparties accept it. Its usefulness rises as participation grows. A technical standard becomes powerful when complementary products and skills accumulate around it. Hegemonic centrality therefore contains network effects, and network effects can migrate.

This perspective suggests that policymakers should pay particular attention to early alternative

institutions. Their initial scale may be small, but the relevant question is whether they are building the conditions for cumulative adoption. Once an alternative network is good enough, the cost of remaining exclusively dependent on the old center can exceed the cost of switching.

13. Gorbachev’s Problem: The Periphery Learns That the Center Will Not Intervene

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The decisive shift in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War was a shift in expectation before it was a shift in borders. For decades, Soviet military power defined the limits of political autonomy in the Warsaw Pact. Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 demonstrated that the center could intervene when reform threatened the system.

The memory of intervention mattered because power is often most effective when it does not have to be used. A credible threat changes behavior in advance. Governments censor themselves, opposition movements limit ambitions, and elites calculate within boundaries they expect the center to enforce.

Gorbachev altered those expectations. The Soviet Union retained enormous military capability, but the willingness to use it to preserve Communist governments in Eastern Europe became doubtful. Once that doubt became credible, political possibilities expanded rapidly. Opposition movements became

bolder. Governments negotiated. Citizens demanded more. The same tanks existed, but they no longer meant the same thing.

This is the structural lesson relevant to the American case. Political order depends on beliefs about future action. An American ally does not only count American aircraft. It estimates the probability those aircraft will arrive. A host government does not only see a U.S. base. It evaluates what Washington will do if the host is threatened. A rival does not only measure American capability. It calculates American willingness.

Credibility is therefore an unusual strategic asset because it exists in the minds of others. It cannot be replenished as easily as ammunition. A damaged expectation can trigger behavior that becomes self-sustaining: allies increase defense budgets, diversify suppliers, develop domestic production, or reconcile with adversaries.

Once such investments are made, a later American reassurance does not automatically restore the old structure. The alternative institutions now exist. Political leaders have constituencies invested in them. Military officers have trained with new partners. Firms

have developed new supply chains. Hedging becomes embedded.

Gorbachev's history demonstrates how quickly this can happen once a threshold is crossed. The Soviet Army did not suddenly become weak in 1989. Its political meaning changed because the expected rules of use changed.

This does not make Trump's situation equivalent. American allies are not coerced satellite governments seeking liberation. But the analytic mechanism survives: if peripheral states revise their estimate of the center's future behavior, they will adapt before formal structures disappear.

The American Gorbachev hypothesis therefore depends less on what Trump says about decline than on what other governments infer from American conditionality. Their budgets, treaties, weapons purchases, and diplomatic choices are the real evidence.

The periphery does not need to reject the center. It only needs to become capable of living with its absence.

14. Trump’s Problem: The Periphery Learns That the Center Is Conditional

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The post-1945 American alliance system acquired a reputation for continuity. Administrations changed, wars ended, and presidents disagreed, but major security commitments persisted. That durability allowed allies to plan for decades rather than election cycles.

Trump’s political style challenges this sense of automaticity. Commitments are framed in terms of contribution and reciprocity. Allies are asked whether they are paying enough, opening markets, supporting American priorities, or behaving in ways judged fair. A relationship that was once described as an enduring common interest can be presented as a bargain whose terms are subject to revision.

Again, this does not make the critique irrational. Free riding can weaken alliances. Dependence can create complacency. The problem lies in how allies respond to uncertainty about the future of the bargain.

Suppose a government once assigned a 95 percent probability to American support in a major crisis and now assigns 75 percent. The alliance remains valuable. Yet a 25 percent risk of abandonment is too large to ignore if national survival is at stake. The rational response is insurance.

Insurance creates a feedback loop. Visible conditionality encourages hedging. Hedging reduces dependence on the United States. Reduced dependence lowers American centrality. Lower centrality makes retrenchment appear less costly to Washington. Further retrenchment reinforces the original uncertainty.

This mechanism is not inevitable. The loop can be interrupted if allies spend more while remaining deeply integrated with American planning, or if Washington makes clearer distinctions between burden-sharing demands and the credibility of core commitments. But if conditionality is applied broadly and unpredictably, the incentives for diversification increase.

The Middle East provides vivid examples because regional governments already face severe uncertainty. American involvement has oscillated between intervention, withdrawal, diplomacy, sanctions, and

direct military action. Gulf states can therefore rationally seek security relationships that remain useful regardless of the next American election.

The same logic applies beyond the Middle East. European strategic autonomy, Asian defense modernization, indigenous weapons production, and alternative diplomatic arrangements can all be understood partly as responses to uncertainty about the external environment. They may strengthen American alliances, weaken them, or do both at different times.

The key distinction is between shared capacity and autonomous capacity. Shared capacity makes the alliance more resilient while preserving network integration. Autonomous capacity makes exit cheaper. The same missile battery can contribute to either outcome depending on doctrine, command, supply, and political intent.

Trump's strategic problem is therefore not simply whether allies pay more. It is whether the method used to make them pay more also teaches them that they must be able to function without the United States. If it does, a successful negotiation can produce a less centered system.

The conditionality problem is intensified by democratic alternation. Allies do not negotiate with a timeless abstraction called the United States; they negotiate with administrations that may reverse one another. In a polarized political environment, a commitment credible for four years may be judged uncertain over twenty.

This temporal mismatch is strategically important because defense planning operates on long horizons. Aircraft programs, missile defenses, shipbuilding, basing infrastructure, and officer training take years or decades. A government that cannot predict the direction of American policy across several election cycles will naturally design for flexibility.

The result can be a permanent hedging premium. Even an administration that strongly reassures allies may not fully erase uncertainty if partners believe the next election could produce another reversal. Credibility therefore becomes institutional rather than personal. Treaties, congressional support, shared procurement, military integration, and public commitments all help make a policy more durable than one presidency.

Trump’s lasting impact may consequently depend less on any single withdrawal than on whether allies

internalize the idea that American strategy is election-contingent. If they do, diversification can persist even under later presidents who favor traditional alliance management.

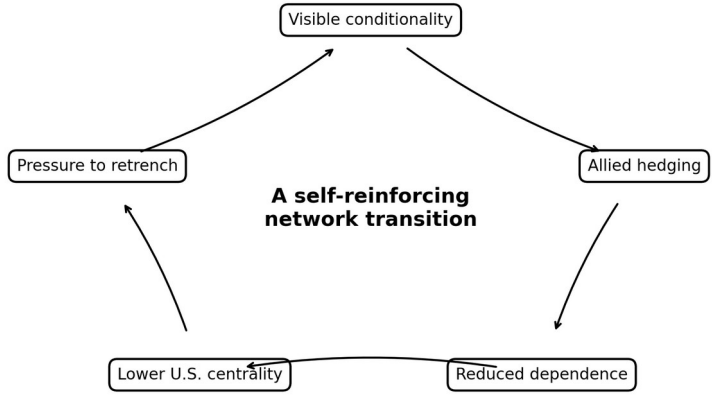


Figure 3. A possible feedback loop linking conditionality, hedging, and reduced centrality.

15. Restoration as a Mechanism of Dissolution

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The paradox of restoration is that it begins by identifying things to remove. A reformer sees accumulated obligations, bureaucracy, inefficiency, and outdated commitments. The system appears burdened by history. The promise is to strip away what no longer serves the core.

This can be exactly right. Institutions do accumulate obsolete functions. Military deployments can persist after missions disappear. Alliances can distribute costs unfairly. A strategy that refuses to reconsider any inherited commitment is not strategy at all.

The danger lies in complex systems where the function of a component is distributed. A suspension bridge is an intuitive analogy. Each cable has weight and maintenance cost. Viewed independently, removing cables can appear efficient. Yet the pattern of tension among the cables constitutes the bridge. The cost cannot be evaluated apart from the structure.

Hegemonic systems contain similar load-bearing relationships. Foreign aid can purchase access and

political alignment. A small base can sustain an intelligence architecture much larger than its footprint. A security guarantee can discourage a regional arms race. A diplomatic institution can make allied behavior more predictable. These effects are often invisible precisely because the system is working.

Counterfactual benefits are notoriously difficult to value. Budgets measure the soldiers who are deployed; they do not measure the crisis that did not happen because deterrence held. Trade statistics measure a deficit; they do not automatically measure the strategic value of a partner economy anchored in an American-centered system. A treaty's cost is visible; the rival alliance it prevented is not.

The restoration-minded leader is therefore vulnerable to an asymmetry of evidence. Costs appear in columns. Network benefits appear as absences. The easiest reform is to cut what can be counted.

Gorbachev confronted a different version of the same structural difficulty. Restrictions, subsidies, and coercive mechanisms that made the Soviet system rigid were also part of what held it together. Liberalization exposed suppressed political forces. Reducing coercion improved legitimacy in one sense while reducing enforceability in another.

Trump's system is not coercively integrated in the same way, but the structural warning remains. A commitment can be both expensive and load-bearing. A partner can both free ride and provide centrality. An institution can both constrain American freedom and multiply American influence.

The correct policy response is therefore neither unconditional preservation nor indiscriminate retrenchment. It is structural analysis: which edges produce unique network value? Which can be replaced? Which are redundant? Which generate dependencies that competitors cannot easily replicate?

Restoration succeeds when it preserves the architecture that generates power while reducing the cost of maintaining it. Restoration becomes dissolution when it mistakes the architecture itself for waste.

16. Why the Soviet Analogy Can Mislead

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Any serious comparison with the Soviet collapse must state its limits clearly. Otherwise the analogy becomes a rhetorical weapon rather than an analytical tool.

The Soviet Union was a multinational territorial state. Its dissolution created independent republics from constituent units of the union. The United States is not undergoing an equivalent process merely because its external influence may contract. Losing a foreign base is not comparable to losing Ukraine, Kazakhstan, or the Baltic republics from a federal state.

The Warsaw Pact was also sustained under conditions of coercion that distinguish it sharply from NATO and most American bilateral alliances. Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia demonstrated limits to political autonomy. American allies are sovereign states that can negotiate, refuse access, alter policies, and in principle leave alliances without expecting American tanks to overthrow their governments.

The economic structures differ even more. Late Soviet central planning suffered chronic inefficiencies, shortages, technological weaknesses, and institutional rigidities unlike the highly decentralized American economy. The United States faces debt, inequality, industrial vulnerabilities, political polarization, and infrastructure challenges, but these do not reproduce Soviet economics.

The external environment is also different. The Soviet Union confronted a coherent rival coalition centered on the United States and Western Europe. Contemporary American competition is more diffuse. China is the leading strategic competitor, but India, the European Union, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Brazil, Iran, and other middle powers pursue independent combinations of cooperation and rivalry. A post-American order may therefore be polycentric rather than dominated by a single successor.

Geography matters as well. The United States possesses unusually favorable continental security, large agricultural and energy resources, two ocean barriers, and nuclear deterrence. A contraction of overseas commitments does not imply a comparable threat to the territorial state.

Finally, American power extends far beyond government. Universities, research laboratories, capital markets, software ecosystems, entertainment, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure, and the English language generate influence that cannot be mapped onto military bases. The American system can lose some governmental centrality while retaining immense social and technological attraction.

For all these reasons, predictions of an “American Soviet collapse” are weak. They confuse a structural analogy with a forecast of identical outcomes.

The useful comparison is narrower. Both systems demonstrate that part of great-power influence resides in the expectations and behavior of actors outside the center. When those expectations change, material capability can remain formidable while political centrality declines.

The analogy should therefore function as a question generator. Which relationships are load-bearing? What changes when the center becomes less predictable? How quickly can peripheral autonomy become institutionalized? Those questions are valuable even if the final American trajectory bears little resemblance to 1991.

17. Why the Soviet Analogy May Nevertheless Matter

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Once the false equivalences are removed, the Soviet analogy becomes more rather than less interesting. Its value lies in demonstrating how relational power can disappear before material power does.

The Soviet Union's influence over Eastern Europe was partly externalized into the behavior of governments outside Russia itself. Those governments adopted Soviet-compatible institutions, military doctrines, economic relationships, and diplomatic positions. Moscow's power therefore existed not only in Soviet assets but in the alignment of other states.

American power has an analogous relational dimension even though its alliances are generally voluntary. Foreign governments host American forces, buy American weapons, share intelligence, hold dollar reserves, participate in sanctions, coordinate diplomatic positions, and structure command systems around interoperability with the United States.

The center can lose some of this power without losing its own assets. If a host requires case-by-case

approval for operations, no American aircraft disappears, but operational freedom narrows. If an ally buys weapons from multiple suppliers, American factories remain, but leverage declines. If a country settles a regional dispute through a new institution, American diplomats remain, but mediation becomes less indispensable.

This is relational power loss. It is difficult to perceive in domestic political debate because national statistics are easier to see. Defense budgets, GDP, ship counts, and missile inventories are concrete. Trust, dependence, and diplomatic centrality are not.

Yet those intangible variables determine how efficiently material power can be translated into outcomes. A highly trusted guarantee can deter with few forces. A distrusted guarantee may require more forces to produce the same effect. A network that others join voluntarily spreads influence cheaply. A network maintained by constant coercion is expensive.

Gorbachev's relevance therefore lies in the speed with which relational changes can compound. Once alternative arrangements become imaginable, they can spread. Political actors learn from one another. The success of one autonomous move lowers the perceived risk of another.

The American case may never reach such a threshold. The United States retains enormous attractiveness and many allies actively seek stronger rather than weaker American commitments. But the possibility of nonlinear change should caution against reading stability directly from the continued existence of institutions.

A treaty can survive after its political meaning has shifted. A base can survive after its permission has narrowed. A currency can remain dominant while alternative settlement systems grow at the margin. A hegemonic order can therefore erode in layers.

The Soviet analogy matters because it teaches us to watch the layers rather than wait for a dramatic collapse. By the time the map changes, the deeper transformation may already have occurred.

18. Military Supremacy Without Political Hegemony

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The United States can remain the world's most powerful military state while becoming less politically hegemonic. This proposition sounds contradictory only if military superiority and political control are treated as synonyms.

Military power answers questions of destruction, denial, defense, deterrence, and occupation. Political power asks who defines the settlement, whose preferences become rules, which coalitions form, and how long others continue to organize around a particular center. The two overlap, but neither guarantees the other.

The post-Cold War experience repeatedly demonstrated the difference. American forces could defeat conventional opponents rapidly. Building stable political orders afterward proved much harder. Military victory creates possibilities; it does not automatically determine which possibilities become durable.

The same distinction applies to alliance management. An aircraft carrier can enter a region without host-country permission, but it cannot substitute for every function of a network of bases. A missile can punish a state, but it cannot make an ally trust the next administration. Airpower can destroy infrastructure, but it cannot compel another sovereign government to grant permanent access.

This creates the possibility of a post-hegemonic superpower: a state with unmatched capacity for episodic force but less ability to shape the routine behavior of the international system. Such a United States would not be weak. It would be powerful in a different way.

Its power would be more visible because it would have to be exercised more often. Embedded influence is frequently invisible. When allies already share American preferences, no coercion is needed. When standards are already American, no negotiation is required. When military systems are interoperable, coalition formation is faster.

As embeddedness declines, influence becomes transactional. Every access agreement must be negotiated. Every coalition must be assembled. Every sanctions package requires renewed persuasion or

pressure. Every crisis retests the alliance. The center spends more political capital to obtain outcomes that once emerged from structure.

This distinction is especially relevant to the Middle East. The United States can project devastating force into the region even with a smaller land footprint. Long-range aircraft, submarines, carriers, missiles, satellites, and regional partners provide enormous reach. But destructive reach does not answer the question of who writes the political order after the strike.

If regional states increasingly build security arrangements among themselves, the United States may retain escalation dominance in certain scenarios while losing some agenda-setting power. This is not defeat. It is a separation of capabilities that were once more tightly coupled.

The long-term strategic question is whether America can adapt to this separation. A successful strategy may accept reduced exclusivity while preserving enough centrality to remain the preferred partner. An unsuccessful one may confuse the ability to punish with the ability to lead.

Political hegemony also requires restraint. A state that can use force but often chooses not to may gain

legitimacy because partners believe its power is embedded in rules. A state that relies increasingly on unilateral coercion can demonstrate strength while simultaneously encouraging others to seek protection from its unpredictability.

This is not an argument that force should never be used. Credible military capability is one foundation of alliance confidence. The issue is whether force reinforces a political architecture or substitutes for one. When military action produces a settlement accepted by partners, destructive power has been converted into order. When it produces only temporary compliance, the conversion has failed.

The distinction matters for assessing Trump's second term. Retrenchment in one theater can coexist with escalation in another. The result is not simple isolationism. It is a pattern in which the United States may prefer greater freedom to choose where it acts while reducing the permanent commitments that constrain those choices.

Such freedom can be valuable to the center but unsettling to partners. Hegemony trades some unilateral freedom for predictable leadership. A great power outside a hegemonic order may have more

discretion but less automatic support. This tradeoff lies near the heart of the current transition.

19. From Unipolarity to Multipolarity

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International orders rarely end on a date that contemporaries recognize. Historians later choose symbolic moments: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the invasion of Iraq, the financial crisis, the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Each date captures part of a longer transition.

The American unipolar era may prove equally difficult to delimit. Military primacy, financial centrality, technological leadership, cultural influence, and alliance dominance do not rise and fall together. One can weaken while another persists.

Multipolarity does not require several states to become equal. It requires a system in which no single center can reliably determine the major outcomes across domains. The United States can remain the strongest individual state in such a system.

This is perhaps the most plausible future: America remains enormous while the world becomes less exclusively American. Regional powers acquire more freedom of action. China provides economic

alternatives. European states debate strategic autonomy. India resists bloc discipline. Gulf governments diversify security ties. Turkey combines NATO membership with independent regional strategy.

The key behavioral change is the normalization of "both." A state can want American security and Chinese trade. It can buy Western aircraft and Turkish drones. It can cooperate with Washington while negotiating directly with Tehran. It can join one defense mechanism without abandoning another.

Unipolarity makes such diversification less attractive because the dominant power can offer a uniquely comprehensive package. Multipolarity lowers the cost of optionality. Middle powers gain leverage by maintaining multiple relationships.

This does not mean the United States loses every competition. Its alliances, markets, universities, military capabilities, and technologies remain exceptionally attractive. But partners can compare alternatives more credibly than during the 1990s.

The transition is therefore less about replacement than about dilution. China does not need to reproduce the American global network everywhere. Regional states do not need to join a Chinese bloc. They only

need enough alternatives to reduce the cost of saying no to Washington.

For this reason, the central metric of multipolarity is not how many countries are anti-American. It is how many important decisions can be made without American participation. A world in which Washington remains widely respected but frequently bypassed is already structurally different from a world in which Washington is the default organizer.

The American Gorbachev hypothesis belongs inside this larger transition. Trump may not cause multipolarity. The rise of other powers has deep structural roots. The question is whether his approach accelerates a process already underway by making diversification more rational for states that would otherwise remain more tightly centered on the United States.

Multipolarity also changes the meaning of neutrality. During periods of intense bloc competition, neutrality can be a distinct diplomatic identity. In a more fluid system, most states practice selective alignment instead. They may align with one power on security, another on trade, and a third on technology.

This issue complicates American attempts to define global competition as a binary choice. Many

governments do not want to choose between Washington and Beijing because their interests are not binary. Pressing them to choose can sometimes push them toward precisely the diversification the United States hopes to prevent.

A more durable strategy may therefore focus on domains rather than loyalty. The United States can remain the preferred security partner even where it is not the largest trading partner. It can maintain technological leadership without controlling every infrastructure project. Hegemony may give way to layered primacy in which different networks have different centers.

The American Gorbachev thesis is strongest if several layers shift away from Washington simultaneously. If military access narrows but finance, technology, and alliances remain deeply American-centered, the change is limited. If alternatives mature across domains, the transformation becomes systemic.

20. The Historical Question: When Did the American Order End?

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Future historians will know something we do not: whether the developments of the 2020s were turbulence inside a resilient American order or the early stages of a successor system. That asymmetry should make contemporary claims more cautious.

People living through transitions experience events separately. A base closes. A treaty is questioned. A government refuses overflight. A new regional pact is signed. An ally buys weapons from a competitor. A sanctions coalition becomes harder to assemble. Each event has a local explanation.

Only retrospectively can historians see whether those events formed a phase transition. They may identify the end of the unipolar era with the rise of China, the Iraq War, the financial crisis, the first Trump presidency, the Afghanistan withdrawal, the second Trump presidency, or a later event that has not yet occurred.

This problem can be called historical phase recognition. Complex systems do not display a gauge

reading “hegemony remaining: 62 percent.” The transition can cross a threshold before the participants agree that a threshold existed.

A historian writing in 2050 might describe the 1990s as the mature unipolar order, the 2000s as strategic overextension, the 2010s as the consolidation of Chinese competition, and the 2020s as the period when American allies began building credible alternatives. In such a narrative, Trump’s second term could appear as the moment when transactional conditionality moved from rhetoric into structure.

Another historian might tell the opposite story. The same period could be remembered as a successful redistribution of burdens that forced allies to become more capable while preserving their alignment with the United States. A smaller American footprint could be interpreted as modernization rather than retreat. Regional defense pacts could be seen as complementary layers inside a still-American security architecture.

Both stories are plausible because the evidence is not yet complete. The important task is therefore to identify discriminating indicators.

Do allies build capabilities that remain interoperable with American forces, or systems

designed to operate independently? Do regional pacts consult Washington during crises, or bypass it? Do restrictions on American bases remain exceptional, or become normal? Does the dollar remain the overwhelmingly preferred financial infrastructure? Do states increasingly turn to non-American mediators for the most important disputes?

These questions can be observed over time. The American Gorbachev thesis should stand or fall according to such evidence rather than according to memes or partisan preference.

History will eventually choose a date. Strategy cannot wait for history. Policymakers must act while the phase is still uncertain.

The problem of dating an order also has practical consequences. If leaders declare decline too early, they may abandon valuable institutions that remain effective. If they recognize transition too late, they may spend enormous resources trying to restore an architecture whose participants have already moved on.

Strategic judgment therefore requires leading indicators. One is the frequency with which allies say no without suffering lasting damage to the relationship. Another is the growth of institutions that

coordinate security without American command. A third is the diversification of arms supply and payment systems. A fourth is the emergence of diplomatic settlements in which Washington is not the principal broker.

No single indicator is decisive. The value lies in convergence. If several domains show the same movement toward autonomy, the case for a structural transition strengthens.

The historian of 2050 will see this convergence with the advantage of hindsight. The policymaker of 2026 must decide under uncertainty. That is why the most useful question is not “Has American hegemony ended?” but “Which parts of the system are becoming less dependent on American centrality, and which investments could preserve mutually beneficial dependence without demanding subordination?”

Interlude: The Strongest Counterargument - Retrenchment as Renewal

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The American Gorbachev thesis can be overstated. There is a strong counterargument that many of the same developments described in this book may represent not the unmaking of hegemony but its adaptation to a world in which allies are richer, regional powers are more capable, and fixed bases are more vulnerable.

From this perspective, a smaller American footprint is not necessarily retreat. It can be a shift from occupation-era infrastructure toward distributed deterrence. The United States no longer needs the same permanent ground presence in Syria and Iraq if local forces, remote intelligence, long-range aviation, naval power, special operations, and regional partners can perform essential missions at lower political cost. A base closure may therefore remove a liability while preserving the function that mattered.

The same argument applies to allied burden sharing. For decades American officials across parties

have complained that wealthy partners underinvest because the United States bears too much of the cost. If Trump's pressure causes those partners to spend more, manufacture more weapons, harden infrastructure, and coordinate regionally, the resulting network could become stronger. A hub does not need weak spokes. It may be more durable when the spokes can carry greater loads.

The Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani defense arrangement can be read in this optimistic way. Regional states are developing the capacity to deter threats collectively rather than waiting for Washington to solve every crisis. If those states remain friendly to the United States, use compatible equipment, share intelligence, and coordinate with American planners, their cooperation could reduce demands on U.S. forces while making the overall anti-aggression architecture denser.

Likewise, restrictions on the use of Gulf bases need not signify strategic rupture. Sovereign allies have always placed conditions on access. The fact that those conditions are publicly visible during a major regional war may reflect the severity of the contingency rather than a secular decline in American influence. A partnership mature enough to tolerate disagreement

may be stronger than one that depends on automatic compliance.

Technological change also favors a redesigned posture. Large, concentrated bases were optimized for an era in which the United States enjoyed extraordinary sanctuary. Missile and drone proliferation makes dispersion rational. Fewer mega-bases combined with more small access points, prepositioned stocks, resilient communications, and mobile platforms could produce a network that looks smaller but survives better.

There is also an economic argument against declinism. American capital markets, universities, artificial intelligence firms, biotechnology, aerospace, energy production, and the dollar remain central to the world economy. States seeking greater military autonomy may still prefer American technology, investment, education, and financial access. Hegemony can evolve rather than disappear.

Finally, multipolarity does not necessarily imply the collapse of American leadership. A network can be hierarchical without being monopolistic. Washington may remain first among several centers because it offers a combination of capabilities no competitor can match: global logistics, nuclear deterrence, advanced

intelligence, technology, finance, and a large alliance system. Partners can diversify at the margins while still treating the United States as the ultimate security backstop.

This counterargument matters because it changes the interpretation of the same evidence. Physical withdrawal can be efficiency. Hedging can be burden sharing. Lateral ties can be resilience. Political permission can be healthy sovereignty. Dispersion can be modernization.

The American Gorbachev hypothesis therefore requires more than a list of contractions. It requires evidence that the replacement structures are increasingly independent of American power rather than complementary to it. The thesis is weakened if allies become more capable while remaining deeply integrated with Washington. It is strengthened if their capabilities reduce the cost of ignoring Washington.

A fair assessment must keep both possibilities open. Retrenchment is not inherently decline. It becomes decline when the network effects lost exceed the costs saved and when the alternatives created by partners reduce the center's future ability to shape outcomes.

Interlude: Retrenchment Without Dissolution

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If the diagnosis in this book is even partly correct, the policy problem is not how to preserve every inherited American commitment. That would confuse hegemony with immobility. The problem is how to reduce costs without destroying the relationships that make American capabilities unusually productive.

The first principle is to distinguish functions from footprints. A base should not be preserved merely because it exists. Analysts should identify the functions it performs - intelligence, deterrence, logistics, command, training, political signaling, or access - and determine whether those functions can be reproduced elsewhere at lower cost. Retrenchment is safest when functions are deliberately transferred rather than simply abandoned.

The second principle is to treat political permission as infrastructure. Access agreements require the same strategic attention as runways and fuel storage. Washington should negotiate mission categories in advance, understand domestic constraints in host countries, and avoid building war plans around

permissions that have never been politically tested. A smaller number of clearly usable options can be more valuable than a larger number of ambiguous ones.

The third principle is resilience through distribution. Missile vulnerability means that dependence on a handful of enormous bases is increasingly dangerous. A distributed network of smaller sites, rapid-access agreements, prepositioned stocks, mobile command systems, and maritime platforms can reduce both military and political concentration. Such a network may appear less imperial because it is less physically massive, yet it can remain operationally powerful.

The fourth principle is alliance capacity without alliance ambiguity. Asking partners to spend more should be paired with clear statements about what American commitments mean. Burden sharing works best when allies believe greater capability makes the partnership stronger, not when they believe they are preparing for abandonment. The distinction can be reinforced through joint procurement, shared logistics, exercises, and institutional commitments that survive electoral cycles.

The fifth principle is to welcome lateral cooperation while remaining connected to it. Saudi-Turkish-

Pakistani coordination, European defense initiatives, or Asian minilateral arrangements need not be treated as threats if they increase collective capacity. The strategic objective should be interoperability and consultation rather than monopoly. A center can remain central in a dense network if its standards and institutions continue to connect the other nodes.

The sixth principle is restraint in using network leverage. Financial sanctions, export controls, and access restrictions can be powerful precisely because American systems are central. Overuse can encourage alternatives. The same is true of alliance conditionality. A privileged position should be used selectively enough that participants continue to prefer the network over the cost of building substitutes.

The seventh principle is to measure centrality directly. Traditional defense metrics should be supplemented with indicators such as the share of allied systems interoperable with U.S. forces, the frequency of American participation in regional crisis diplomacy, the durability of basing permissions, the degree of dependence on American intelligence, and the growth of alternative payment and procurement networks. What is measured is more likely to be managed.

The eighth principle is to preserve reversibility. Some deployments should be reduced only after agreements are in place that make rapid return possible. Prepositioned equipment, legal access, infrastructure standards, and recurring exercises can keep a door open even when permanent troop levels fall. Retrenchment becomes less dangerous when it does not require reconstructing the entire relationship from zero.

The ninth principle is to recognize that legitimacy is an operational asset. A base accepted by the host population and political system is more useful than one sustained by constant controversy. Defensive cooperation that protects both American forces and local civilians can strengthen legitimacy. The political sustainability of the network should therefore be treated as part of military readiness.

These principles describe a form of post-hegemonic centrality: less monopoly, fewer assumptions of automatic obedience, but continued structural importance. The United States would not need to organize every relationship. It would need to remain the partner whose connection creates the greatest marginal value.

Such a strategy would accept that the unipolar moment cannot simply be restored. It would aim instead to preserve the benefits of centrality in a more capable and sovereign network. If successful, retrenchment could become renewal rather than dissolution. That is the alternative outcome against which the American Gorbachev thesis must ultimately be judged.

21. How Hegemony Was Built: The Invisible Infrastructure of 1945

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American primacy did not emerge simply because the United States possessed more weapons or a larger economy. After 1945, material superiority was converted into an architecture: reconstruction programs, financial institutions, security alliances, overseas access, trade rules, cultural prestige, intelligence relationships, and the expectation that Washington would remain the organizing center of the non-communist world. The distinction matters because an architecture can survive fluctuations in raw power - and can also weaken while raw power remains immense.

The phrase "hegemonic infrastructure" is useful precisely because it joins visible and invisible assets. A base runway is visible. A treaty is visible on paper. Less visible are habits: which currency is held, which officers train together, which capital market is treated as safe, which government is called first during a crisis, and which diplomatic forum is assumed to have the authority to settle a dispute. The postwar American

achievement was to make many of these choices mutually reinforcing.

The postwar construction of centrality

Understanding the roots of U.S. hegemony requires an examination of the historical events and strategies that established and solidified American dominance on the global stage. The period following World War II marked a pivotal moment in world history, with the United States emerging as an unrivaled economic and military superpower. This foundation was reinforced and extended throughout the Cold War and further entrenched during the era of neoliberal globalization. Each phase represents a chapter in the evolution of U.S. global hegemony, highlighting a blend of economic, military, and cultural tools deployed to maintain dominance.

War II Global Order: The Marshall Plan, IMF, World Bank, and U.S.-led International Institutions The end of World War II left much of Europe and Asia in ruins, with devastated economies, collapsed governments, and millions of displaced people. Amidst this chaos, the United States found itself in a unique position: its homeland remained unscathed by the war, its economy was booming, and its military prowess was

unmatched. These advantages positioned the U.S. as the architect of the post-war global order.

The Marshall Plan: Officially known as the European Recovery Program (ERP), the Marshall Plan was launched in 1948 to rebuild Western European

economies. While framed as an altruistic effort to prevent economic collapse and political extremism, the plan also served to establish U.S. economic influence in Europe. By requiring recipient countries to purchase American goods and adopt market-friendly policies, the plan tied European recovery to American economic power.

The Bretton Woods System: In 1944, the Bretton Woods Conference laid the foundation for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These institutions were designed to stabilize global currencies, facilitate international trade, and provide loans for development projects. However, they also cemented the role of the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency, giving Washington unusual influence within global finance.

U.S.-Led International Institutions: The establishment of the United Nations (UN), NATO, and other multilateral organizations placed the U.S. at the center of global governance. While these institutions

promoted collective security and cooperation, they also allowed the U.S. to exert disproportionate influence over global decision-making processes. The post-war global order was thus not merely a product of goodwill but a strategic maneuver to secure long-term U.S. dominance. By intertwining economic aid, financial systems, and security alliances, the U.S. created an ecosystem where its influence was deeply embedded in the international architecture.

Containment, intervention, and the Cold War

With the end of World War II came the rise of the Cold War - a geopolitical struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. While the conflict was often framed as an ideological battle between democracy and communism, it was equally about securing spheres of influence and global dominance.

Containment Policy: First articulated by diplomat George Kennan, the policy of containment sought to prevent the spread of communism through political, economic, and military means. This strategy justified U.S.

involvement in numerous foreign conflicts and interventions, many of which had little to do with protecting democracy.

Proxy Wars: Instead of direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union, the U.S. engaged in proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Latin America. These wars were framed as efforts to halt the spread of communism, but they often caused massive civilian casualties, long-term destabilization, and humanitarian crises.

CIA Interventions: The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) became a crucial tool in the Cold War playbook. Covert operations and support for regime change became recurring Cold War instruments, including interventions in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and Chile in 1973. These episodes remain central to debates over the gap between American democratic rhetoric and geopolitical practice. These interventions were often justified using the language of national security and democracy, but their outcomes frequently undermined both. The Cold War era solidified a precedent for U.S. foreign policy - one that prioritized geopolitical dominance over the self-determination of other nations.

Globalization: The Spread of Free-Market Ideologies Serving U.S. Corporate Interests By the late 20th century, the Cold War was drawing to a close, and the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse. The U.S.

emerged victorious not just militarily, but ideologically. Capitalism and free-market economics became the dominant global paradigm, and the U.S. played a central role in shaping this new world order.

The Washington Consensus: In the 1980s and 1990s, a set of economic principles known as the Washington Consensus became the blueprint for global development. These principles included deregulation, privatization, trade liberalization, and reduced government spending. While these policies were promoted as pathways to economic growth, they often resulted in increased inequality, loss of sovereignty for developing nations, and dependency on Western markets.

Corporate Expansion: U.S.-based multinational corporations expanded their global footprint, dominating industries ranging from technology and finance to agriculture and pharmaceuticals. Critics of the post-Cold War trade order argued that institutions such as the WTO often privileged market integration and corporate mobility over local economic autonomy.

Debt Dependency: Developing nations, lured by promises of development loans from the IMF and World Bank, often found themselves trapped in cycles of debt. Structural adjustment programs imposed by

these institutions forced countries to cut social spending, privatize public resources, and prioritize debt repayment over domestic welfare.

Cultural Hegemony through Globalization: Alongside economic influence came cultural dominance. Hollywood films, American music, and global franchises like McDonald's and Starbucks became symbols of Western modernity. This cultural export reinforced not just admiration for American culture but also acceptance of American economic and political ideals. Neoliberal globalization was not merely an economic phenomenon; it was a a possible extension of U.S. hegemony through nonmilitary means. By aligning economic policies with U.S. corporate and strategic interests, globalization became a tool for extending American dominance without the need for overt military force.

Conclusion to Section II The historical foundations of U.S. hegemony reveal a consistent pattern: economic leverage, military strength, and cultural influence have been deployed in tandem to secure American dominance. From the Marshall Plan and Cold War interventions to neoliberal globalization, each phase represents a calculated effort to shape the world order in ways favorable to U.S. interests. However, these

strategies have also left behind a legacy of economic inequality, political instability, and cultural homogenization. For the present argument, it becomes crucial to understand how these historical foundations continue to influence modern U.S. foreign policy - and whether a more equitable global order is achievable.

The mechanisms reinforce one another

The United States maintains its global dominance through a multifaceted strategy combining military power, economic leverage, cultural influence, and political alliances. These mechanisms operate in tandem, reinforcing one another to create a comprehensive system of control and influence that spans the globe. While each mechanism serves distinct functions, their interconnectedness amplifies their impact, solidifying U.S. hegemony in ways that extend far beyond traditional military or economic dominance.

Power: Global Military Bases, Defense Spending, and Strategic Deployments The United States possesses an unparalleled military apparatus, both in terms of sheer spending and global reach. This military dominance serves not only as a defense mechanism but also as a means of projecting power, securing resources, and enforcing geopolitical interests.

Global Military Footprint: The U.S. operates a worldwide network of overseas installations, rotational deployments, and access agreements, dwarfing the global presence of any other nation. These bases serve as strategic outposts, enabling rapid deployment of forces, surveillance operations, and control over critical trade routes.

Defense Spending: The U.S. consistently outspends the next several nations combined on military expenditures, with an annual defense budget exceeding $800 billion. This funding supports advanced weapon systems, cybersecurity infrastructure, and unparalleled intelligence capabilities.

Strategic Deployments: U.S. military presence in regions like the Middle East, East Asia, and Eastern Europe underscores its strategic objectives. Deployments in places such as South Korea and NATO-member states act as both deterrents against adversaries and tools for influence over regional allies.

Arms Sales and Military Aid: The U.S. remains the world's largest arms exporter, supplying advanced weaponry to allies and partners. Military aid

programs, such as those supporting Israel, Ukraine, and Egypt, strengthen alliances while creating dependencies on American military technology. While

often framed as measures for global stability and security, these military mechanisms also serve to reinforce U.S. strategic interests, ensuring access to critical resources, trade routes, and geopolitical leverage.

Leverage: The Dollar as the World Reserve Currency and Sanctions as Control Tools Economic power is a cornerstone of U.S. hegemony, with the U.S. dollar serving as the world's primary reserve currency and economic sanctions acting as tools for coercion and punishment.

The Dollar's Global Dominance: The U.S. dollar underpins global trade and finance, with the dollar remaining the leading global reserve currency. Institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank operate predominantly in U.S. dollars, giving Washington significant control over global liquidity.

SWIFT and Financial Surveillance: The U.S. exerts influence through its control over global financial infrastructure, such as the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) system. This control allows the U.S. to monitor and restrict international financial transactions.

Economic Sanctions as a Weapon: The U.S. frequently uses economic sanctions against nations that oppose its foreign policy, including Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, and Russia. These sanctions often cripple economies, limit access to global financial systems, and pressure governments into compliance.

Debt Diplomacy: Through institutions like the IMF and World Bank, the U.S. often conditions financial aid on structural reforms that align with its economic and political goals. These conditions can include privatization, deregulation, and austerity measures, creating long-term economic dependencies.

While these economic tools are framed as promoting global financial stability and punishing rogue states, they often have disproportionate humanitarian impacts and exacerbate inequality in developing regions.

Influence: Hollywood, Digital Platforms, and the Export of American Values Cultural hegemony serves as a subtle yet potent mechanism of influence, shaping global perceptions of American values, lifestyles, and ideologies.

Hollywood as a Cultural Powerhouse: American films dominate global box offices, portraying U.S. cultural values, hero archetypes, and geopolitical

narratives. Movies often reinforce the image of the U.S. as a moral authority, framing conflicts in ways that align with U.S. foreign policy.

Digital Platforms and Social Media: American tech giants such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serve as the primary channels for global communication and information sharing. These platforms not only export American values but also allow the U.S. government to monitor and influence global discourse.

Language and Education: English has become the lingua franca of global business, diplomacy, and academia, largely due to American cultural and economic dominance. Additionally, prestigious U.S. universities attract students from around the world, instilling American perspectives in future global leaders.

Consumer Culture: Brands such as McDonald's, Starbucks, Apple, and Nike have become global symbols of modernity and success. This consumer culture often carries with it underlying messages about individualism, capitalism, and the American Dream. Cultural dominance often goes unnoticed because it operates subtly through entertainment, education, and everyday consumer choices. However, its effects are

profound, shaping how people worldwide view America, democracy, and success.

Alliances: NATO, Bilateral Agreements, and Economic Partnerships Political alliances play a crucial role in sustaining U.S. hegemony, providing both legitimacy and practical tools for achieving strategic goals.

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization): Established as a defense pact against the Soviet Union, NATO has evolved into a tool for U.S. geopolitical strategy. While framed as a collective security alliance, NATO's actions often reflect American priorities, as seen in interventions in the Balkans, Libya, and ongoing tensions with Russia.

Bilateral Agreements: The U.S. maintains a web of bilateral treaties and partnerships, securing military bases, trade privileges, and favorable political alignments. Examples include defense agreements with Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

Economic Partnerships: Trade agreements such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are designed not just to foster economic cooperation but also to reinforce U.S. dominance in global trade networks.

Diplomatic Pressure and Soft Coercion: The U.S. uses diplomatic tools such as foreign aid, diplomatic recognition, and public endorsements to reward allies and isolate adversaries. While alliances are portrayed as partnerships based on mutual benefit and shared values, the power dynamics within them often tilt heavily in favor of the United States, limiting the sovereignty of smaller partners.

Conclusion to Section III The mechanisms of U.S. hegemony - military power, economic leverage, cultural influence, and political alliances - are deeply interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Together, they create a system of dominance that is resilient, adaptable, and capable of shaping global realities across multiple domains. However, these mechanisms are not without consequences. Military

The central point is not that every component of the postwar order was benign or that every American intervention served the principles used to justify it. It is that the system accumulated network effects. Security access supported financial influence; financial influence supported sanctions; alliances supported legitimacy; legitimacy lowered the cost of leadership; cultural reach made cooperation familiar. If reform removes pieces of this architecture one bilateral

transaction at a time, the lost value may appear elsewhere in the network rather than on the ledger where the cut was made.

22. Desert Storm and the High-Water Mark of American Power

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If one wants a visual image of the post-Cold War unipolar moment, Operation Desert Storm is difficult to improve upon. The United States assembled a broad coalition, moved a vast force into the Gulf, obtained extensive regional access, operated from a position of overwhelming technological advantage, and achieved the declared military objective - the liberation of Kuwait - with remarkable speed. The war seemed to demonstrate not merely military superiority but the ability to organize international action around American command.

That combination is important. A great power can fight alone; a hegemon makes its own logistics, diplomacy, financing, and coalition-building appear natural to others. Desert Storm therefore represents more than a successful campaign. It marks a moment when the physical and political infrastructure of U.S. power in the Middle East worked together with unusually little friction.

Coalition war as a demonstration of centrality

On August 2, 1990, Iraq, under the leadership of President Saddam Hussein, launched a surprise invasion of its small, oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait. The invasion was motivated by several factors, including Iraq's desire to control Kuwait's vast oil reserves, its claim that Kuwait was historically part of Iraq, and economic disputes over oil production and debt repayment. Additionally, Iraq was facing severe economic challenges following the costly Iran-Iraq War, and Saddam Hussein viewed the annexation of Kuwait as a potential solution to these problems. The international community swiftly condemned Iraq's aggression, viewing it as a blatant violation of international law and a threat to regional stability. The invasion also posed a direct threat to global oil supplies, given Kuwait's significant oil production and its proximity to Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter. In response, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 660, demanding Iraq's immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. When diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis failed, the U.N. authorized the use of force under Resolution 678. The U.S., under President George H.W. Bush, took the lead in forming a broad international coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. This coalition included over 30 nations,

ranging from NATO allies to regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The coalition's objectives were clear: to liberate Kuwait, restore its legitimate government, and ensure the security of the Gulf region. The Execution of the Gulf War and Its Military and Political Outcomes Operation Desert Storm, the combat phase of the Gulf War, began on January 17, 1991, following a massive buildup of coalition forces in Saudi Arabia, codenamed Operation Desert Shield. The operation commenced with a devastating aerial and missile bombardment that targeted Iraq's military infrastructure, communication networks, and key government facilities. This air campaign, which lasted several weeks, effectively neutralized Iraq's ability to wage war and crippled its economy.

On February 24, 1991, the coalition launched a ground assault, quickly overwhelming Iraqi forces and liberating Kuwait within 100 hours. The speed and efficiency of the coalition's victory highlighted the technological and logistical superiority of the U.S.-led forces, particularly in terms of precision-guided munitions and air power. The war ended on February 28, 1991, with a ceasefire declared by President Bush. However, the decision was made not to pursue Iraqi forces into Baghdad or to remove Saddam Hussein from power, a choice that would later be a subject of

intense debate. The primary objectives of the operation were achieved: Kuwait was liberated, and Iraq's military capabilities were significantly degraded. However, Saddam Hussein remained in power, and Iraq's internal stability was severely compromised. Politically, the Gulf War reinforced the U.S.'s role as a dominant global military power and demonstrated the effectiveness of international coalitions in enforcing U.N. resolutions. However, the war also left Iraq in a state of economic devastation and humanitarian crisis, setting the stage for further conflict and U.S. involvement in the region.

Containment after victory

Saddam Hussein's regime to prevent further aggression and to compel Iraq to comply with U.N. resolutions, particularly those related to disarmament and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). To this end, the U.N. imposed a comprehensive set of economic sanctions on Iraq, starting with Resolution 661, which prohibited all trade with Iraq except for medical supplies and, under certain conditions, food. These sanctions aimed to pressure Saddam Hussein into relinquishing his WMD programs and complying with international norms. However, they also had severe unintended

consequences for the Iraqi population, leading to widespread poverty, malnutrition, and a collapse of the country's healthcare and education systems. The sanctions became a point of contention within the international

community, with critics arguing that they disproportionately harmed ordinary Iraqis while failing to weaken Saddam's grip on power. In addition to sanctions, the U.S. and its allies established no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq in the early 1990s, under the pretext of protecting Kurdish and Shia populations from Saddam Hussein's reprisals. The northern nofly zone, established in April 1991, aimed to protect the Kurdish population in Iraq's mountainous regions, while the southern no-fly zone, established in August 1992, sought to shield the Shia population around Basra. These zones were enforced by coalition aircraft, which regularly patrolled Iraqi airspace and engaged any Iraqi forces that violated the zones. The no-fly zones were intended to serve as a deterrent against Saddam Hussein's attempts to reassert control over these regions, but they also effectively partitioned Iraq and limited the central government's authority. The zones allowed Kurdish and Shia groups to establish de facto autonomous regions, which would later play a significant role in

Iraq's post-2003 political landscape. The Impact of These Measures on Iraq and the U.S.'s Ongoing Military Presence in the Region The sanctions and no-fly zones had a profound impact on Iraq and contributed to the long-term instability of the region. Economically, the sanctions devastated Iraq's infrastructure and crippled its economy, leading to widespread suffering among the civilian population. The humanitarian crisis that ensued became a source of significant international criticism and strained relations between the U.S. and some of its allies. Politically, the sanctions and no-fly zones undermined Saddam Hussein's control over parts of Iraq but failed to dislodge him from power. Instead, the measures entrenched his regime's defiance and fueled anti-Western sentiment among Iraqis, who viewed the sanctions as a form of collective punishment. The persistence of the no-fly zones also meant that the U.S. and its allies maintained a continuous military presence in the region, with regular air patrols and occasional strikes on Iraqi targets. This ongoing presence kept Iraq on the international agenda and set the stage for future confrontations.

For the U.S., the enforcement of sanctions and no-fly zones represented a longterm commitment to containing Saddam Hussein's regime, but it also

highlighted the limitations of such measures in achieving broader political objectives. The failure to bring about regime change or significant disarmament through these means led to growing frustration within the U.S. government, which would later influence the decision to pursue a more direct approach in 2003. Overall, the period between the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq was marked by a tense and volatile standoff between Iraq and the international community. The sanctions and no-fly zones, while effective in containing Saddam Hussein to some extent, also sowed the seeds for future conflict and laid the groundwork for the U.S.'s re-engagement in Iraq under the banner of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The aftermath also contained the seeds of the later problem. Sanctions, no-fly zones, forward deployments, and recurring strikes transformed a short coalition war into a durable regional commitment. Infrastructure built for contingency became infrastructure for permanence. The high-water mark of easy power projection therefore became the beginning of a much more expensive era in which military presence was asked to produce political outcomes that military superiority alone could not guarantee.

23. Iraq: From Invasion to Withdrawal

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Iraq shows the difference between destroying an adversary's military capacity and creating a durable political order more starkly than almost any other American intervention of the modern era. The 2003 invasion again demonstrated extraordinary U.S. conventional reach. What followed demonstrated the limits of that reach. Occupation, insurgency, sectarian conflict, institutional collapse, the rise of the Islamic State, and repeated American re-entry converted Iraq into a long experiment in the relationship between force and legitimacy.

For the argument of this book, Iraq matters because it traces a complete arc: access and mass deployment, regime change, occupation, counterinsurgency, partial withdrawal, return for counterterrorism, advisory presence, and renewed contraction. That arc is not a simple story of defeat or victory. It is the history of a superpower learning how difficult it is to turn battlefield dominance into a self-sustaining political network.

Invasion, occupation, and insurgency

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, was initiated by the United States and its coalition partners under the leadership of President George W. Bush. The invasion was justified on multiple grounds, each reflecting the broader strategic aims of U.S. foreign policy in the post-9/11 world. The primary rationale for the invasion was the belief that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), including chemical, biological, and potentially nuclear weapons. The Bush administration argued that these weapons posed an immediate threat to the United States, its allies, and regional stability. This concern was heightened by Iraq's history of using chemical weapons against both Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and its own Kurdish population. The administration also claimed that Saddam Hussein's regime had links to terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, and that Iraq could potentially provide such groups with WMDs, thereby amplifying the threat of global terrorism. These concerns were framed within the broader context of the Bush Doctrine, which advocated for preemptive military action to neutralize perceived threats

before they could materialize. The doctrine marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, emphasizing the need to address security risks proactively rather than reactively. In this context, the invasion of Iraq was presented as a necessary step to prevent a future catastrophe akin to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Additionally, the Bush administration sought to promote the idea that the removal of Saddam Hussein would pave the way for democratization in Iraq and the broader Middle East. This goal was rooted in the belief that spreading democracy would contribute to long-term regional stability and undermine the ideological foundations of terrorism. The Initial Military Campaign and the Toppling of Saddam Hussein Operation Iraqi Freedom officially began on March 20, 2003, with a massive and coordinated air assault, followed by a swift ground invasion. The initial military campaign, characterized by the doctrine of "shock and awe," aimed to overwhelm the Iraqi military with a display of overwhelming force, targeting key government and military installations across the country. The campaign involved extensive airstrikes, missile attacks, and rapid advances by coalition ground forces. Within weeks, coalition forces had reached the outskirts of Baghdad, and by April 9, 2003, Saddam Hussein's regime had effectively

collapsed, symbolized by the toppling of a statue of Saddam in Baghdad's Firdos Square. Saddam himself fled the capital and went into hiding, while the remnants of his military were quickly defeated or surrendered. The speed and efficiency of the coalition's advance were widely praised, with many viewing the operation as a decisive victory. However, the swift military success did not translate into immediate political stability. While Saddam Hussein was eventually captured in December 2003 and later executed, the fall of his regime created a power vacuum that would soon be filled by a variety of insurgent groups, sectarian militias, and foreign fighters, setting the stage for a prolonged and bloody conflict. B. Occupation and Insurgency The Challenges of Nation-Building in Post-Saddam Iraq With the fall of Saddam Hussein, the U.S.-led coalition faced the enormous challenge of rebuilding Iraq's political, economic, and social structures. The

Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), led by the United States, was established to govern Iraq during the transition period. The CPA's mandate included the disarmament of militias, the establishment of democratic institutions, the reconstruction of infrastructure, and the revitalization of the economy. One of the most controversial decisions made by the

CPA was the policy of de- Baathification, which involved purging members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from government positions and the dissolution of the Iraqi military. While intended to dismantle the remnants of Saddam's regime, these measures had the unintended consequence of alienating a significant portion of the Sunni population, many of whom were left without employment or political representation. This fueled resentment and contributed to the emergence of a widespread insurgency. The insurgency was driven by a complex array of factors, including opposition to foreign occupation, sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and the presence of foreign jihadists who saw Iraq as a battleground for their cause. Insurgent groups, including al-Qaeda in Iraq, carried out a campaign of guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, and assassinations, targeting coalition forces, Iraqi security personnel, and civilians alike. The Rise of Insurgency, Sectarian Violence, and the Descent into Civil War As the insurgency gained momentum, Iraq began to descend into a cycle of sectarian violence. Sunni and Shia militias, often backed by external actors such as Iran, engaged in brutal retaliatory attacks against each other, leading to widespread killings, displacement, and the fragmentation of Iraqi society. The bombing of

the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in 2006, a site of immense religious significance to Shia Muslims, marked a turning point in the conflict, sparking a full-scale civil war. The situation on the ground became increasingly dire, with coalition forces struggling to maintain order and protect civilians. The Iraqi government, still in its infancy, was largely ineffective in controlling the violence, and the country's infrastructure continued to deteriorate. By 2006, Iraq was teetering on the brink of total collapse, with violence reaching unprecedented levels and the prospect of a stable, unified Iraq seeming increasingly remote.

The failure to anticipate the depth of Iraq's sectarian divisions and the complexities of nation-building in a post-dictatorship environment highlighted the limitations of the U.S. strategy. The occupation period exposed the difficulties of imposing democracy through military means, especially in a society deeply scarred by decades of authoritarian rule and sectarian strife.

Withdrawal and the rise of ISIS

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 marked a significant turning point in the country's recent history. This withdrawal was guided by the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), a bilateral treaty

signed in 2008 between the United States and Iraq. SOFA outlined the terms and timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq, reflecting both the U.S. desire to end its combat mission and the Iraqi government's growing insistence on reclaiming full sovereignty. According to SOFA, U.S. combat troops were to withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and from the entire country by December 31, 2011. This timeline was largely adhered to, with the last U.S. combat brigade leaving Iraq in August 2010,

followed by the formal end of the U.S. military mission, Operation Iraqi Freedom, which was replaced by Operation New Dawn. The remaining U.S. troops transitioned to an advisory and training role, focusing on building the capacity of the Iraqi security forces. The complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2011 was seen as a major milestone, fulfilling President Barack Obama's campaign promise to end the war in Iraq. However, it also left Iraq at a critical juncture, as the country struggled to manage its security and governance challenges without the direct support of U.S. military forces. The Impact of the U.S. Withdrawal on Iraq's Stability The U.S. withdrawal had profound implications for Iraq's stability. While the Iraqi security forces had made significant progress in terms of training and capabilities, they were still heavily reliant

on U.S. support for intelligence, logistics, and airpower. The sudden absence of these resources created a security vacuum that exposed Iraq to new and resurgent threats. Politically, the withdrawal exacerbated existing tensions within Iraq's fragile power-sharing arrangements. The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia Muslim, became increasingly authoritarian and sectarian in its approach, marginalizing Sunni Arabs and other minority groups. This deepened the sense of alienation and resentment among Iraq's Sunni population, many of whom had already felt excluded from the post-Saddam political order. The withdrawal also coincided with broader regional upheavals, particularly the Arab Spring, which had a destabilizing effect on many Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq. The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, further complicated the situation by creating a chaotic and ungoverned space that would soon become a breeding ground for extremist groups. In this context, Iraq's security situation deteriorated rapidly after the U.S. withdrawal. Insurgent groups, including the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, began to regroup and reassert themselves. The Iraqi government's inability to effectively govern and secure the country contributed to the resurgence of violence, setting the stage for the

emergence of a new and even more dangerous threat: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

B. The Emergence of ISIS The Conditions That Led to the Rise of ISIS The rise of ISIS was the result of a confluence of factors, both within Iraq and across the broader region. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Iraq's Sunni population increasingly felt disenfranchised by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. This sense of exclusion was exacerbated by Maliki's heavy-handed tactics, which included the arbitrary detention of Sunni leaders, the suppression of Sunni protests, and the use of sectarian rhetoric. These actions alienated many Sunnis, some of whom began to view the central government as an oppressive force. Meanwhile, the civil war in neighboring Syria provided a fertile ground for jihadist groups to flourish. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had been severely weakened during the U.S. surge, rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and began to exploit the chaos in Syria to rebuild its strength. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS adopted a more extreme and brutal approach than its predecessor, focusing on establishing a territorial caliphate rather than merely waging guerrilla warfare. ISIS's success in Syria allowed it to amass significant resources, including weapons, money, and recruits. The group's ideology, which

combined extreme Sunni Islamism with a rejection of modern state structures, attracted a wide range of followers, including foreign fighters from around the world. By 2013, ISIS had established a stronghold in northeastern Syria and began to expand its operations into Iraq, taking advantage of the weak and divided state. The Fall of Mosul and the Rapid Expansion of ISIS in Iraq and Syria The turning point for ISIS's expansion came in June 2014, when the group launched a lightning offensive across northern Iraq. On June 10, 2014, ISIS forces captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, with little resistance from the Iraqi security forces, who were demoralized, poorly equipped, and plagued by corruption. The fall of Mosul was a stunning victory for ISIS and a humiliating defeat for the Iraqi government, which lost control of vast swathes of territory almost overnight. With the capture of Mosul, ISIS declared the establishment of a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader, and rebranded itself simply as the Islamic

State. The group's rapid expansion continued as it seized control of key cities such as Tikrit, Fallujah, and Ramadi in Iraq, as well as Raqqa in Syria, which became the de facto capital of its self-proclaimed state. ISIS's success was fueled by its ability to exploit sectarian divisions and state weaknesses in both Iraq

and Syria. The group employed a combination of conventional military tactics, guerrilla warfare, and terror attacks to subdue populations and enforce its draconian version of Sharia law. Its brutal methods, including mass executions, enslavement, and the destruction of cultural heritage, shocked the world and drew widespread condemnation. The rapid rise of ISIS posed a severe threat not only to Iraq and Syria but to regional and global security. The group's control of territory allowed it to generate significant revenue through oil smuggling, extortion, and taxation, making it one of the wealthiest terrorist organizations in history. Moreover, ISIS's sophisticated use of social media and propaganda attracted thousands of foreign fighters, who traveled to Iraq and Syria to join its ranks. The fall of Mosul and the subsequent expansion of ISIS represented the culmination of years of instability and conflict in Iraq and the wider region. The group's rise highlighted the fragility of the post-2003 Iraqi state, the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal, and the profound challenges of addressing the underlying causes of extremism in the Middle East. As ISIS continued to expand its reach, it became clear that the group would not be defeated through conventional military means alone. The international community, led by the United States, was forced to

respond, leading to the launch of Operation Inherent Resolve in August 2014, a new phase in the ongoing struggle to stabilize Iraq and counter the threat of jihadist extremism.

Return without reoccupation

In response to the rapid territorial gains and extreme brutality of ISIS, the United States, under President Barack Obama, made the critical decision to return to Iraq

in 2014. This decision marked the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve, a coordinated military campaign aimed at degrading and ultimately defeating ISIS. The return to Iraq came just three years after the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011, highlighting the severity of the threat posed by ISIS not only to Iraq and Syria but to global security. The decision to intervene was driven by several factors. First, the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent expansion of ISIS across Iraq and Syria shocked the international community and underscored the inadequacy of the Iraqi security forces to counter the group. The humanitarian crisis caused by ISIS's brutal campaign, including mass executions, enslavement, and genocide, further galvanized international action. Additionally, the strategic importance of Iraq, with its

vast oil reserves and central location in the Middle East, made it imperative for the U.S. and its allies to prevent ISIS from establishing a lasting caliphate. Operation Inherent Resolve officially began on August 8, 2014, with U.S. airstrikes targeting ISIS positions in northern Iraq. The operation quickly expanded to include a broader international coalition of over 60 nations, each contributing to the fight against ISIS through airstrikes, intelligence sharing, training of local forces, and humanitarian aid. The coalition's efforts were focused on three main objectives: halting ISIS's advance, weakening its capabilities through sustained military pressure, and supporting local forces to reclaim and hold territory. Key Military Operations and the Role of the International Coalition Operation Inherent Resolve was characterized by a series of key military operations designed to target ISIS strongholds, disrupt its command and control, and degrade its ability to wage war. These operations were carried out by coalition forces, including U.S. and European air forces, special operations units, and local ground forces such as the Iraqi Army, Kurdish Peshmerga, and various militia groups. One of the earliest and most significant operations was the defense of Erbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. In August 2014, ISIS

forces advanced toward Erbil, prompting a swift response from U.S. airpower, which conducted strikes to halt the ISIS advance and prevent the city from falling. This operation marked a turning point, as it demonstrated the effectiveness of

airstrikes in stopping ISIS's momentum and provided the Kurdish forces with the support needed to launch counteroffensives. Another critical operation was the Battle of Kobani, a city in northern Syria that became a symbol of resistance against ISIS. In September 2014, ISIS laid siege to Kobani, but the determined defense by Kurdish fighters, supported by coalition airstrikes, ultimately led to the group's defeat in the city by January 2015. The Battle of Kobani highlighted the importance of close air support and the resilience

By 2026, the physical footprint was contracting again. Iraq had taken full control of Ain al-Asad after U.S. forces withdrew under the drawdown framework negotiated in 2024. That chronology matters: the contraction cannot honestly be attributed to Trump alone. Yet it still belongs to the strategic environment of his second term. The larger lesson is that a network can be inherited in motion. A president may accelerate, reinterpret, or politically reframe a withdrawal whose

institutional origins precede him, while regional actors respond to the cumulative signal rather than to the partisan genealogy of any single decision.

24. Qatar and Al Udeid: Host-State Agency Inside the American System

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Qatar complicates any picture of American basing as simple possession. Al Udeid is indispensable precisely because it is not American territory. Its value comes from a bargain between a great power seeking access and a small state seeking security, status, leverage, and room for diplomatic maneuver. The host is therefore not a passive platform. It is an actor that can use the base relationship to enlarge its own strategic autonomy.

This reverses the usual perspective. Maps of U.S. bases often place a symbol on Qatar and treat the symbol as an American asset. A relational view asks what Qatar receives, what conditions it can impose, what risks it absorbs, and how the existence of the base changes Doha's relationships with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Europe, and the United States itself.

From Gulf War cooperation to a security bargain

The origins of the military relationship between the United States and Qatar are rooted in the shifting power dynamics of the late 20th century Gulf region,

especially in the aftermath of the Cold War and the rise of new regional threats. Qatar, a small but wealthy nation wedged between powerful and often competing neighbors, recognized early on that its survival and autonomy would depend on the strategic partnerships it could build beyond the region. Among these, its military relationship with the United States proved most transformative. This section explores the key events and strategic considerations that laid the foundation for what would become one of the most robust military alliances in the Middle East.

Gulf War and Initial Cooperation The turning point in U.S.-Qatar military relations came during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, when Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait, triggering an international military response led by the United States. Operation Desert Storm, the combat phase of the war, involved a broad coalition of countries and required extensive logistical and strategic coordination across the Gulf region. Although Qatar was not a major player militarily, it allowed U.S. and coalition forces to use its territory, including access to airfields and logistical support. This cooperation, while limited compared to larger Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, demonstrated Qatar's willingness to align itself with Western powers in defense of regional order and sovereignty. For the

United States, the war reinforced the importance of forward operating bases and host-nation agreements in the Persian Gulf as a means of projecting power and deterring aggression, particularly from Iraq and Iran. Qatar's participation in the coalition effort marked the beginning of an enduring military relationship with Washington. It provided a foundation of trust and interoperability, and introduced the idea of Qatar serving as a long-term host for American military infrastructure.

Strategic Calculation: Balancing Larger Neighbors Following the Gulf War, Qatar began to rethink its long-standing security posture. As a small state surrounded by more populous and assertive neighbors - Saudi Arabia to the south, Iran across the Gulf, and Iraq to the northwest - Qatar recognized that traditional regional alliances and its limited military capabilities would not be sufficient to guarantee its sovereignty in an increasingly unstable environment. The leadership of Qatar, particularly under Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (who assumed power in 1995), embraced a bold strategy: deepen ties with the United States, not just as a protector but as a permanent presence. This would provide both a deterrent against external threats and a buffer against regional

domination - especially from Saudi Arabia, which had traditionally viewed Qatar as falling within its sphere of influence. This calculation also aligned with broader Qatari foreign policy goals. By becoming a host to American forces, Qatar could claim a central role in maintaining Gulf stability, gain diplomatic leverage, and ensure that any hostile action taken against it would have direct implications for the United States. It was a strategy of asymmetrical security - leveraging alliances rather than raw military power.

Defense Cooperation Agreements Building on the cooperation during the Gulf War and Qatar's strategic reassessment, the two nations signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 1992. This agreement laid the formal groundwork for a sustained U.S. military presence in Qatar. It provided legal and logistical frameworks for U.S. access to Qatari military facilities, joint training exercises, and the prepositioning of equipment. Under the terms of the DCA, Qatar allowed the United States to store military hardware and equipment at several sites, ensuring rapid deployment capability in the event of regional conflict. The U.S. began to invest heavily in military infrastructure within Qatar, signaling long-term strategic intent. These early agreements also included provisions for joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and

capacity building for Qatari forces - further deepening interoperability between the two militaries. These foundational agreements would evolve over the decades into one of the most significant military partnerships in the region. They also paved the way for the establishment and expansion of Al Udeid Air Base, which would emerge as the linchpin of U.S. operations across the Middle East and Central Asia. The decision to formalize military cooperation so soon after the Gulf War demonstrated Qatar's foresight and willingness to stake its security future on a close alliance with the United States - a decision that continues to define its foreign and defense policy

Al Udeid as a regional pivot

Al Udeid Air Base, located approximately 20 miles southwest of Doha, has emerged as the centerpiece of Qatar-U.S. military cooperation and one of the most strategically vital installations for the United States in the Middle East. Initially conceived by Qatar as a hedge against regional volatility and external threats, the base has grown into a sprawling complex that underpins U.S. air power projection, surveillance, and logistical operations across the entire U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) theater, encompassing the Middle East, Central Asia, and parts of South Asia. This

section traces the development, strategic role, and future prospects of Al Udeid Air Base as a critical node in the architecture of U.S. military power and Qatar's defense strategy.

Initial Use The initial construction of Al Udeid Air Base began in the mid-1990s, funded almost entirely by the government of Qatar. Anticipating that regional instability would persist beyond the Gulf War era, Qatar sought to build a state-of-the-art facility capable of hosting advanced air operations and allied forces. The move reflected a broader strategic shift under Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who saw value in aligning Qatar's security architecture with that of the United States. At the time of its inception, the base was not immediately occupied by the U.S. military. However, Qatar's intent was clear: Al Udeid was designed with specifications that would make it attractive and operationally efficient for U.S. and allied use. It featured one of the longest runways in the region - capable of accommodating the largest military aircraft - and included hardened shelters, maintenance facilities, and advanced command infrastructure.

5.2 U.S. Expansion Post-9/11 and Iraq Invasion The events of September 11, 2001, marked a dramatic turning point in U.S. global military posture. As the U.S.

prepared for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and, shortly thereafter, Operation Iraqi Freedom, it required reliable and politically sustainable bases in the region. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, long the hub of U.S. operations in the Gulf, became increasingly sensitive to the domestic and political repercussions of hosting large numbers of foreign troops. In this context, Qatar offered Al Udeid as a viable alternative, and the U.S. rapidly expanded its presence there. By 2002, the U.S. had moved its Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) from Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid. This marked a fundamental shift in regional basing strategy. The base quickly became CENTCOM's forward command center, coordinating air operations not only in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in Syria, Yemen, and the broader Gulf region. The U.S. poured significant resources into expanding and upgrading the base, installing advanced communications infrastructure, expanding housing and operations centers, and constructing extensive logistics and fuel systems. Al Udeid rapidly transformed from a strategic reserve base into a fully operational joint command hub for combat and support operations.

A base as command, logistics, and political relationship

Airborne Operations, Surveillance, and Logistics The operational significance of Al Udeid extends far beyond its geographic location. As the primary base for air refueling missions, surveillance flights, and airlift logistics, it enables sustained military activity across thousands of miles. U.S. Air Force tankers operating from Al Udeid support continuous patrols over conflict zones, providing fuel to bombers, fighters, and reconnaissance aircraft throughout the region. The base also serves as a major intelligence and surveillance hub, hosting Global Hawk and Predator/Reaper drone operations, as well as signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities. It plays a pivotal role in the command and control of air campaigns, including targeting decisions, real-time threat assessments, and battlefield coordination with ground forces and naval assets. In logistical terms, Al Udeid is the central node for air transport into Afghanistan (until 2021), Iraq, Syria, and other theaters. It functions as a staging ground for the deployment of troops and materiel and facilitates the rapid rotation and resupply of U.S. forces throughout the CENTCOM region.

Plans and Upgrades Recognizing the long-term strategic value of the base, both Qatar and the United

States have committed to significant upgrades and modernization efforts at Al Udeid. In recent years, Qatar has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure improvements, including permanent housing for U.S. personnel, expanded command centers, and new hangars and maintenance facilities. These upgrades are part of a broader Qatari effort to solidify the U.S. presence as a deterrent against regional threats and to reinforce Qatar's position as a reliable and capable partner in U.S. global military planning. At the same time, the U.S. views these enhancements as necessary to adapt to evolving threats, including asymmetric warfare, cyber operations, and long-range missile defense. Looking ahead, Al Udeid is also expected to play a key role in any future military contingencies involving Iran, and potentially in non-traditional missions such as humanitarian operations, evacuation planning, and counterterrorism campaigns. Discussions have even included the possibility of establishing a permanent base designation, although political sensitivities have so far kept the arrangement informal.

In sum, Al Udeid Air Base has become far more than a military installation - it is a geostrategic anchor for the U.S. presence in the Middle East and a central pillar of Qatar's national defense strategy. Its continued

development reflects the evolving nature of warfare, the durability of U.S.-Qatar military cooperation, and the

Al Udeid therefore illustrates both the strength and the fragility of hegemonic infrastructure. The arrangement multiplies American reach, but it also depends on Qatari consent and on Qatar's calculation that hosting the United States remains more protective than dangerous. In a period of missile vulnerability and regional hedging, that calculation can change at the margin without producing a dramatic eviction. The base can remain while its political meaning evolves.

25. Strategic Exhaustion: When Fixed Bases Become Liabilities

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One of the sharpest versions of the base-vulnerability argument appears in the work of former U.N. weapons inspector Scott Ritter. His conclusions are much more categorical than the thesis advanced in this book, and they are contested. They are nevertheless analytically useful because they force attention away from nominal inventories and toward survivability, logistics, sortie generation, interceptor consumption, supply chains, and the political risk imposed on host governments.

Ritter's framework should therefore be read here as a stress test, not as an authority that settles the question. If even part of his diagnosis is correct, the relevant issue is not whether the United States possesses superior platforms in the abstract. It is whether those platforms can be supplied, protected, dispersed, and politically sustained in a theater saturated with precision missiles and drones.

From dictating terms to managing crises

The concept of strategic leverage is foundational to international relations, defining the ability of a nation to compel adversaries and allies alike to align with its geopolitical objectives without necessarily resorting to direct conflict. For decades, the United States possessed an overwhelming surplus of this leverage in the Middle East, derived from unparalleled economic weight, diplomatic influence, and the looming threat of devastating military intervention. However, Scott Ritter's analysis posits that this surplus has been thoroughly exhausted. The current geopolitical reality is defined by a rapid erosion of American influence, where the traditional levers of power no longer yield the expected results. This section explores the historical foundations of American power projection in the region and traces the structural shift that has relegated the United States from a regional hegemon capable of dictating outcomes to a reactive power struggling to manage cascading crises.

To fully comprehend the magnitude of the current decline, it is necessary to examine the historical baseline of American power projection in the Persian Gulf and the broader Levant. The architecture of United States dominance was built incrementally,

beginning in earnest during the Cold War as a mechanism to secure global energy supplies and contain Soviet influence. This strategy was formalized by the Carter Doctrine, which explicitly stated that the United States would use military force to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States entered a unipolar moment, operating without a peer competitor.

The peak of this hegemonic era was arguably Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s. This massive military undertaking demonstrated an unprecedented logistical and technological superiority, allowing the United States to deploy hundreds of thousands of troops across the globe and decimate a large, conventional regional army with relative impunity. In the aftermath, Washington established a sprawling network of permanent military installations across allied Gulf Arab states, cementing its physical presence and establishing an uncontested security umbrella over the region.

Ritter's analysis frequently contextualizes this era not as a permanent structural reality, but as a historical anomaly heavily dependent on a specific set of circumstances that no longer exist. During this period, regional adversaries were conventionally

structured, technologically outmatched, and isolated from significant external support. The American military footprint served as an absolute deterrent because the threat of overwhelming, uncontested kinetic action was entirely credible. United States leverage was absolute; adversaries were fully aware

that Washington possessed both the capability and the political will to systematically dismantle opposing military infrastructures from a position of near-invulnerability.

The transition from this peak of unipolar dominance to the current state of strategic exhaustion is the focal point of Ritter's contemporary commentary. He argues that the turning point was the advent of the Global War on Terror, specifically the protracted military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. These conflicts fundamentally altered the regional balance of power by eliminating regional counterweights to Iranian influence while simultaneously trapping the American military in costly, asymmetric counterinsurgency campaigns. As the United States expended immense resources attempting to pacify decentralized insurgencies, regional actors - most notably Iran - observed the limitations of conventional

Western military power and systematically adapted their own strategies.

Ritter emphasizes that Washington has fundamentally lost escalatory dominance. In previous decades, the mere deployment of an American aircraft carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf was sufficient to alter the behavior of regional governments. Today, such maneuvers are increasingly viewed as hollow gestures. Adversaries have recognized that the United States lacks the domestic political appetite, the industrial capacity, and the strategic endurance to engage in a prolonged, large-scale conventional war in the Middle East. Consequently, the threat of American military intervention no longer serves as an absolute deterrent.

This loss of leverage has forced a profound shift in American foreign policy from dictating terms to frantically managing crises. Rather than proactively shaping the geopolitical environment to align with its interests, Washington is now trapped in a reactive cycle. When regional tensions flare, the United States finds itself navigating complex escalatory ladders where its adversaries possess localized superiority. Ritter points out that American diplomats and military commanders are increasingly forced to seek de-

escalation because the cost of escalation has become unacceptably high. The United States can no longer impose sweeping regional architectures or grand treaties; instead, it is consumed by the daily operational imperative of protecting its increasingly vulnerable forward-deployed forces from asymmetric attacks. This reactive posture fundamentally defines the collapse of hegemony, illustrating a superpower that retains a massive military apparatus but can no longer translate that theoretical capability into tangible geopolitical leverage.

3. Assessing U.S. Military Readiness and Capability Decline

A critical component of Scott Ritter's analysis is his unsparing assessment of the material and operational readiness of the United States Armed Forces. The perception of American military

omnipotence is largely a residual psychological artifact of the late twentieth century, masking a severe, contemporary degradation in actual warfighting capability. To evaluate the true balance of power in the Middle East, Ritter insists on moving beyond the theoretical capabilities listed in defense white papers and instead auditing the physical reality of the force. His assessment reveals a military apparatus that, while

still possessing unparalleled budgetary resources, is fundamentally ill-equipped to sustain a high-intensity conventional conflict against a heavily armed, technologically capable regional adversary. This section details the specific dimensions of this capability decline, focusing on the degraded American force posture in the region and the systemic logistical vulnerabilities that constrain operational effectiveness.

The concept of force posture refers not merely to the number of troops deployed in a theater, but to their strategic alignment, their defensive survivability, and their capacity to project decisive offensive power. Ritter argues that the United States force posture in the Middle East has degraded from a dominant, expeditionary juggernaut into a fragile network of tripwire deployments. Following the mass mobilizations required for the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, successive administrations have incrementally drawn down troop levels, leaving behind a skeletal framework of distributed bases. These outposts, scattered across Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf states, lack the critical mass required to launch major offensive operations. Instead, they function primarily as localized security garrisons or political symbols of American commitment.

Ritter notes that this diminished footprint is structurally misaligned with the realities of modern warfare in the region. The forward-deployed units are highly vulnerable to the anti-access and area-denial strategies perfected by Iran and its allied militias. In previous decades, the United States relied heavily on the deployment of Carrier Strike Groups to compensate for fluctuations in ground troop levels, utilizing massive floating airbases to project power with impunity. However, Ritter frequently highlights that the advent of advanced anti-ship ballistic missiles and saturation drone tactics has severely compromised the survivability of these naval assets. To avoid the unacceptable risk of losing a capital ship, the United States Navy is increasingly forced to operate at extreme standoff distances, drastically reducing the operational radius and sortie generation rates of its carrier air wings.

Furthermore, the defensive architecture protecting these diminished forces is critically inadequate. The proliferation of cheap, precision-guided loitering munitions and tactical ballistic missiles has overwhelmed the traditional American air defense umbrella. High-tier interceptor systems, such as the Patriot and THAAD batteries, are deployed in insufficient numbers and are designed to counter

limited volleys of expensive state-level weaponry, not the relentless swarm tactics currently employed by decentralized regional actors. This leaves American personnel in a

state of perpetual defensive anxiety, occupying bases that serve more as fixed targets than as springboards for power projection.

Beyond the immediate tactical vulnerabilities of forward-deployed troops, Ritter identifies a profound crisis in the logistical and industrial backbone of the United States military. The ability to sustain prolonged combat operations requires an industrial base capable of replacing expended munitions, repairing damaged equipment, and maintaining vast, complex supply chains across thousands of miles. Ritter posits that the American military-industrial complex has been optimized for low-intensity counterinsurgency operations and peacetime corporate profitability, leaving it entirely unprepared for the voracious material demands of conventional, peer-level warfare.

This systemic limitation is most acutely visible in the stockpiles of precision-guided munitions and advanced interceptors. Ritter's analysis points to the alarming rate at which modern conflicts consume these assets. In a hypothetical high-intensity engagement with Iran,

the United States would be forced to expend its inventory of defensive interceptors and offensive standoff weapons at a rate that far exceeds the manufacturing capacity of the domestic defense industry. Once these limited reserves are depleted, the American military would face an operational culmination point, unable to adequately defend its assets or strike adversary targets without exposing its aircraft and personnel to unacceptable attrition.

Moreover, the logistical tyranny of distance heavily penalizes the United States in the Middle Eastern theater. Resupplying forces in the Persian Gulf requires navigating vulnerable maritime chokepoints and relying on long, exposed aerial supply routes. Conversely, Iranian and allied forces operate on internal lines of communication, manufacturing and distributing weapons within their immediate geographical sphere. Ritter emphasizes that warfare is fundamentally an exercise in logistics and industrial endurance. The inability of the United States to rapidly surge production of critical munitions, combined with the extreme difficulty of projecting logistics across the globe into contested environments, constitutes a catastrophic operational limitation. This logistical fragility ultimately negates the theoretical technological advantages held by American forces,

rendering the execution of a sustained, dominant military campaign in the

The fixed-base problem

6. The Vulnerability of the U.S. Base Architecture in the Persian Gulf

The physical manifestation of American geopolitical hegemony in the Middle East has long been its sprawling architecture of military bases. From the massive airfields in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to the sprawling logistical hubs in Kuwait and naval facilities in Bahrain, this

network of installations was designed to project overwhelming, uncontested power across the region. However, Scott Ritter's analysis posits that this infrastructure is fundamentally misaligned with the current technological realities of warfare. Built during a unipolar era when the United States enjoyed absolute air supremacy and adversaries lacked the capability to strike back, these bases have transitioned from strategic assets into acute strategic liabilities. As the balance of power shifts toward regional actors armed with advanced asymmetric capabilities, the American military footprint in the Persian Gulf is no longer a springboard for proactive military campaigns; rather,

it is a highly vulnerable network of static targets struggling to justify its own defense.

The core vulnerability of the American base architecture lies in its static nature. In the strategic calculus of modern warfare, a fixed geographic coordinate is increasingly viewed as a destroyed coordinate. During the height of American regional dominance in the 1990s and early 2000s, the inability of adversaries to accurately strike these facilities meant that the United States could centralize its operations. Immense runways, concentrated fuel depots, exposed ammunition dumps, and densely packed barracks were constructed with little regard for camouflage, hardening, or dispersion. Ritter emphasizes that this centralized, static approach is completely incompatible with an era defined by precision-guided munitions.

The drastic reduction in the Circular Error Probable of Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles means that regional adversaries no longer need to rely on sheer luck to damage an American installation. Instead of missing by kilometers, modern conventional warheads can be reliably guided to within mere meters of their intended targets. This precision fundamentally alters the survivability of American bases. An adversary does

not need to obliterate an entire base to render it operationally useless; they merely need to accurately strike the air traffic control tower, crater the primary runway, or detonate the central aviation fuel farm.

Furthermore, the defensive systems tasked with protecting these fixed installations are structurally inadequate for the threat environment. The United States heavily relies on sophisticated air and missile defense networks, but these systems were engineered to counter limited threats, not the synchronized, high-volume saturation strikes that characterize modern Iranian doctrine. Ritter frequently points out the mathematical disadvantage faced by American defenders: high-tier interceptors are incredibly expensive, slow to manufacture, and deployed in limited quantities. Conversely, the loitering munitions and tactical ballistic missiles utilized by regional actors are comparatively cheap and exist in vast stockpiles. In a high-intensity conflict, an adversary can easily exhaust the defensive magazines of a targeted base, leaving the fixed infrastructure completely exposed to follow-on strikes. The illusion of an impenetrable defensive umbrella has evaporated, exposing the stark reality that these multi-billion-dollar

installations can be systematically dismantled by a technologically capable adversary operating from within its own borders.

Beyond the vulnerability of individual installations, Ritter argues that the overarching geographic distribution of American bases in the Middle East is tactically obsolete. The current architecture was optimized for outward power projection, designed to funnel troops and material into theaters like Iraq and Afghanistan with maximum efficiency. It was not designed to survive a peer-level inward assault. The geographical reality of the Persian Gulf is inherently unforgiving for forward-deployed forces. The waterway is narrow, and the surrounding landmasses place American bases well within the operational range of not just intermediate ballistic missiles, but also short-range rockets, artillery, and low-cost tactical drones.

This proximity effectively strips the United States of strategic depth and early warning capabilities. When an adversary can launch a strike from heavily fortified, subterranean silos located just across the Gulf, the reaction time afforded to American air defense crews is reduced to minutes, if not seconds. Furthermore, the logistical lifelines that sustain these distributed bases

are equally vulnerable. The immense quantities of food, fuel, and munitions required to maintain the American footprint must be transported via slow-moving maritime convoys through narrow chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, or flown in via predictable aerial corridors. Both methods of resupply are highly susceptible to interdiction, meaning that in the event of a regional conflict, American bases could be rapidly isolated and starved of critical resources.

The tactical obsolescence of this base distribution also generates severe political friction with the host nations. Gulf Arab states originally agreed to host American forces under the assumption that the United States would act as an invincible guarantor of their security. However, as the vulnerability of these bases becomes undeniable, host nations are increasingly realizing that the American presence acts as a magnet for devastating retaliatory strikes. Ritter notes that this realization is leading to a profound operational constraint: host nations are increasingly restricting the United States from launching offensive strikes from their sovereign territory, fearing the inevitable kinetic backlash. If the United States cannot utilize its regional bases to project offensive power due to host-nation restrictions, and must expend massive resources simply to defend those bases from precision strikes, the

entire strategic rationale for the base architecture collapses. The network transforms from a mechanism of hegemonic control into a self-defeating geopolitical trap.

The strongest counterargument is that vulnerability does not equal obsolescence. The United States can harden facilities, disperse aircraft, move command functions, improve missile defense, rely more heavily on submarines and long-range aviation, and exploit a global logistics system no regional opponent can match. But that answer reinforces the cost argument. Every adaptation required to preserve the usefulness of forward bases changes the economics of the basing system. A sanctuary that must be continuously dispersed, defended, duplicated, and politically insulated is still valuable; it is simply no longer cheap hegemonic infrastructure.

26. The Dollar as an Invisible Overseas Base

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Military geography is only one layer of American centrality. The dollar performs a comparable function in a domain without runways. It is embedded in reserves, trade invoicing, bank funding, collateral, commodity markets, payment systems, and crisis management. For decades, this financial architecture allowed the United States to exercise influence at distances where no soldier needed to be present.

The analogy to an overseas base is imperfect but productive. A base lowers the logistical cost of military action because infrastructure is already in place. Dollar centrality lowers the institutional cost of financial action because contracts, reserves, banks, and payment habits are already organized around the currency. In both cases, power comes from preexisting connectivity.

Demotion rather than collapse

1. Introduction: Dollar Demotion, Not Dollar Collapse

The U.S. dollar is not collapsing. It is being demoted from uncontested monetary hegemon to the leading currency within an increasingly plural reserve system.

That distinction matters. Collapse implies a sudden flight, a broken Treasury market, a failed payment system, and a rapid loss of confidence in dollar-denominated assets. Demotion implies something slower, less dramatic, and more historically plausible: central banks, sovereign wealth funds, trading blocs, commodity exporters, and sanctioned states gradually reduce their dependence on a single national currency without abandoning it altogether. The dollar remains dominant, but it is no longer treated as structurally unavoidable.

For decades, the dollar's power rested on a circular system of trust, liquidity, military protection, institutional credibility, and habit. Oil was priced in dollars. Global trade was invoiced in dollars. Banks borrowed in dollars. Governments held Treasuries as reserves. Financial crises generated demand for dollars, not flight from them. Even critics of U.S. power typically needed access to dollar clearing, dollar funding, dollar collateral, and dollar-denominated markets. The dollar was not merely a currency. It was the operating language of globalization.

That system is now changing at the margins, and margins matter. Reserve managers are not necessarily dumping dollars. They are adding hedges. Gold

purchases, euro allocations, smaller reserve currencies, bilateral clearing arrangements, local-currency trade settlement, and experiments with digital payment infrastructure all point toward the same underlying logic: reduce single-point dependence on Washington, Wall Street, and the U.S. Treasury market. The world is not moving from dollar hegemony to yuan hegemony. It is moving from a concentrated system to a distributed one.

This chapter argues that the key future question is not whether the dollar disappears. It will not. The key question is what happens when the dollar remains central but no longer commands automatic obedience. A reserve currency can lose power long before it loses first place. The great transformation ahead is therefore not de-dollarization as an event, but dollar demotion as a process.

The reserve-currency question asks what governments choose to hold when they store national financial power. Foreign-exchange reserves are not ordinary investment portfolios. They are emergency buffers, credibility signals, exchange-rate tools, import insurance, sanctions shields, and instruments of state survival. A central bank does not hold reserves only to

earn yield. It holds them because, in a crisis, reserves are supposed to be usable.

For much of the modern era, the dollar solved this problem better than any alternative. U.S. Treasury securities were liquid, deep, widely accepted, and backed by the world's largest

financial system. Dollar markets were open at scale. Dollar-denominated assets could be sold quickly. Dollar funding was available through global banks and, in extremis, through Federal Reserve swap lines for selected allies. The dollar's reserve role was therefore not a decorative symbol of American prestige. It was a practical answer to the problem of sovereign liquidity.

But reserve managers now face a more complicated question. What if the safest asset is also politically conditional? What if the most liquid reserve currency is issued by a state that uses financial access as a strategic weapon? What if holding the dominant reserve asset exposes a country not only to interest-rate risk and exchange-rate risk, but also to seizure, freezing, exclusion, or coercion? These questions do not automatically destroy demand for dollars, but they change the psychology of reserve management.

The reserve-currency question has therefore shifted. In the twentieth century, the question was: what asset

is safest in a financial crisis? In the twenty-first century, the question is increasingly: what asset is safest in a geopolitical crisis? The answer may still include the dollar, but it no longer ends with the dollar.

The dollar's share of global reserves matters because it measures more than central-bank preference. It measures the depth of U.S. financial power. When foreign governments hold dollar reserves, they help sustain demand for U.S. government debt. They reinforce the dollar's role in trade and banking. They strengthen the network effects that make dollar use convenient, expected, and difficult to avoid. A high reserve share is therefore not just a statistic. It is a pillar of American geopolitical leverage.

Reserve share also affects the United States domestically. Persistent foreign demand for dollar assets helps the U.S. borrow more cheaply than it otherwise could. It supports the Treasury market as the world's primary safe-asset pool. It allows the United States to finance deficits with unusual flexibility. It gives Washington more room to run fiscal, military, and financial policies that would be harder for a normal debtor nation. This is the famous privilege of issuing the world's reserve currency: the liabilities of the United States become the assets of the world.

When the dollar's share declines, the effect is not immediate catastrophe. It is cumulative pressure. A few percentage points of reserve diversification may not move markets dramatically. But over time, lower reserve concentration can mean less automatic Treasury demand, higher term premia, greater scrutiny of U.S. deficits, and reduced tolerance for monetary or fiscal mismanagement. The United States may still borrow enormously, but it may have to pay more for the privilege. The difference between hegemony and primacy is that hegemony receives deference; primacy must compete.

The dollar's reserve share also matters symbolically. Once a dominant currency is no longer seen as inevitable, the psychology of the system changes. Central banks do not need to abandon the dollar to weaken dollar power. They only need to believe that alternatives are prudent, respectable, and increasingly necessary. Monetary regimes often change slowly, then suddenly appear obvious in retrospect. The decline of a reserve share is one of the early indicators that habit is giving way to strategy.

Decline, collapse, and demotion are often confused, but they describe different processes. Decline is a measurable reduction in share, influence, or relative

advantage. Collapse is a sudden loss of functionality and trust. Demotion is a change in rank, status, and obedience without total failure. The dollar's current trajectory is best described as demotion.

A collapsing dollar would look very different from today's world. Central banks would flee Treasuries in panic. Global trade invoicing would rapidly shift away from dollars. Offshore dollar debt markets would break. Commodity markets would reprice into another unit. Financial institutions would refuse dollar exposure. The United States would face a classic external funding crisis. That is not the present situation. In crises, global actors still often seek dollars. The Treasury market still anchors the global financial system. Dollar payment channels remain central. No rival currency has yet assembled the full package of convertibility, legal trust, asset depth, military reach, and institutional habit required to replace it.

Demotion is subtler. It occurs when the dollar remains indispensable but becomes less exclusive. States continue using it, but they also build alternatives. Allies still hold it, but hedge more actively. Adversaries still need it, but design escape routes. Neutral countries still transact in it, but resist total dependence. Commodity producers still price in

dollars, but experiment with other settlement channels. The dollar remains first, but its first-place status becomes conditional, contested, and less politically commanding.

This distinction is essential because exaggerated collapse narratives can obscure the real transformation. If analysts wait for a dramatic dollar crash, they may miss the slower institutional migration already underway. The dollar can lose geopolitical power even while remaining the largest reserve currency. A hegemon does not need to fall to become less feared. It only needs to become avoidable at the margin.

The thesis of this chapter is that the global monetary order is moving from dollar hegemony toward monetary pluralism. The future is unlikely to be a clean replacement of the dollar by the renminbi, euro, gold, or any single successor. Instead, the world is building a layered reserve architecture. The dollar remains the central layer, but other layers are gaining strategic

importance: gold for neutrality, the euro for diversification, smaller currencies for safety and optionality, regional arrangements for political

autonomy, commodity settlement for resource blocs, and digital infrastructure for bypass and redundancy.

This is not a frictionless transition. Monetary pluralism may reduce U.S. coercive power, but it may also increase instability. A single dominant currency creates dependency, but it also creates coordination. A more fragmented system gives states more room to maneuver, but it can reduce liquidity, complicate crisis response, and generate competing financial blocs. The post-dollarhegemonic world may be freer in some respects and more dangerous in others.

For the United States, the central challenge is credibility. Dollar power ultimately rests not only on military strength or market size, but on trust that dollar assets are liquid, lawful, and broadly usable. If U.S. fiscal policy appears reckless, if sanctions are overused, if political dysfunction threatens debt payments, or if dollar access becomes too openly conditional on geopolitical obedience, diversification will continue. The world may not find a perfect substitute, but it does not need one. It only needs enough substitutes to reduce dependence.

The coming era is therefore best understood as the world after automatic dollar obedience. The dollar will remain powerful. It will remain liquid. It will remain

embedded in contracts, debt, trade, and reserves. But its monopoly aura is fading. The reserve system of the future will not be dollarless. It will be less dollar-centered, less Washington-centered, and less obedient to a single sovereign balance sheet. That is dollar demotion.

2. The Dollar System as Global Financial Operating System

The dollar system is not merely a matter of exchange rates or central-bank reserve percentages. It is a global operating system for finance, trade, credit, collateral, sanctions, and crisis management. Its power comes from integration. A government may hold Treasuries as reserves, a corporation may invoice exports in dollars, a bank may borrow in offshore dollar markets, a commodity trader may price oil in dollars, and a central bank may intervene in foreign-exchange markets using dollar liquidity. These functions reinforce each other. The dollar is useful because everyone uses it, and everyone uses it because it is useful.

This circularity is the essence of monetary hegemony. The dollar became more than the national currency of the United States. It became the settlement layer of globalization. The United States exported not

only goods, capital, and military power, but balance-sheet infrastructure. Dollar liabilities became the world's reserve assets. U.S. Treasury securities became the closest thing to a universal safe asset. Dollar funding markets became the bloodstream of international banking. American financial law, payment systems, and sanctions mechanisms became embedded in the daily operations of global commerce.

This system did not arise from market choice alone. It was built by war, diplomacy, institutions, oil politics, banking networks, legal credibility, military reach, and repeated crises in which the world discovered that dollar liquidity was indispensable. The result was a monetary order in which the dollar served several roles at once: reserve asset, trade unit, funding currency, collateral instrument, payment medium, and geopolitical control channel. No rival currency has yet replicated this full stack.

Dollar demotion therefore cannot be understood by looking only at one number, such as the dollar's share of reserves. The reserve share is important, but it is only one layer of a much larger architecture. A country may reduce dollar reserves while still borrowing in dollars, invoicing in dollars, trading commodities in dollars, or relying on dollar liquidity in a crisis.

Conversely, a state may wish to escape dollar dependence but discover that each exit route leads back to some dollar-linked function. The dollar system's strength lies in its networked structure.

Yet networked systems can also decay unevenly. A global operating system does not fail all at once. Users add parallel systems. They build backups. They seek redundancy. They keep the old system because it still works, but they stop trusting it as their only option. This is the beginning of dollar demotion: not the disappearance of the operating system, but the emergence of

Bretton Woods and the institutional birth of dollar centrality

The modern dollar order was born from the ruins of war. By the end of the Second World War, the United States possessed unmatched industrial capacity, vast gold reserves, military reach, and creditor status. Europe and Japan were devastated. Britain, whose pound sterling had once anchored imperial trade and finance, emerged weakened and dependent. The balance of power had shifted decisively. The dollar did not become central because of theory alone; it became central because the United States was the only power

capable of underwriting a new financial architecture at scale.

Bretton Woods institutionalized this shift. The postwar system linked currencies to the dollar, and the dollar to gold. This arrangement gave other countries exchange-rate stability while placing the United States at the center of monetary settlement. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank emerged within a dollar-centered order, and postwar reconstruction expanded the reach of American financial influence. The dollar became the bridge between national currencies and the global system.

The Bretton Woods design contained a built-in tension. The world needed dollars for reserves, trade, and liquidity, but the more dollars the United States supplied, the more pressure accumulated against the gold convertibility promise. A reserve-currency issuer must provide

liabilities to the world. Yet those liabilities can eventually exceed confidence in the issuer's ability or willingness to redeem them on the original terms. This tension was not a technical flaw. It was the structural paradox of monetary leadership: the world's safe asset is someone else's debt.

When gold convertibility ended, the dollar did not lose its central role. Instead, the system transformed. The dollar was no longer anchored by formal gold redemption, but by Treasury markets, oil pricing, U.S. military power, institutional habit, and the absence of a better alternative. The post-gold dollar became more flexible and more political. It no longer derived authority from a metallic promise. It derived authority from the size, liquidity, and coercive reach of the American-led financial system.

This transition is crucial for understanding the present. The dollar has already survived one major demotion: from gold-backed anchor to fiat reserve currency. Its survival after the end of convertibility showed that reserve systems depend not only on formal rules, but on network effects and institutional inertia. The world kept using dollars because trade, banking, debt, and reserves were already organized around them. This history warns against simplistic collapse predictions. It also shows that the dollar's role can change profoundly without disappearing.

Bretton Woods created the institutional birth of dollar centrality, but the post-Bretton Woods

The dollar need not lose first place for American financial centrality to diminish. The more useful

threshold is avoidability. If governments can hold a somewhat larger share of reserves elsewhere, settle some trade outside the dollar, build alternative payment rails, or keep emergency assets beyond Washington's reach, the system becomes less concentrated. That is structurally similar to an ally creating a second security relationship: the original connection remains strong, but exclusivity weakens.

27. Sanctions, Financial Coercion, and the Incentive to Route Around Washington

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Financial centrality becomes geopolitical power when access can be conditioned. Sanctions are one of the clearest examples. Because dollar finance, correspondent banking, insurance, clearing, and Western capital markets intersect, Washington can impose costs far beyond its territorial jurisdiction. This is a formidable advantage. It also creates an incentive for targeted states - and for states that fear they might someday be targeted - to build escape routes.

The paradox resembles the military one. A capability used successfully can generate behavior designed to reduce the future usefulness of that capability. The more valuable access to the system becomes, the more threatening exclusion from it becomes; the more threatening exclusion becomes, the greater the incentive to diversify.

From fragmentation to financial sovereignty

9. Sanctions, Sovereignty, and the Limits of Financial Coercion

The dollar system is not only a financial architecture. It is a coercive architecture. Its reserve role, payment channels, correspondent banking networks, securities markets, and clearing systems give the United States an extraordinary ability to project power without firing a weapon. A country, bank, company, or individual can be geographically distant from the United States and still vulnerable to U.S. financial pressure if its transactions touch dollars, U.S. banks, U.S. persons, U.S. technology, or allied compliance systems. This is one of the great geopolitical discoveries of the post-Cold War era: monetary infrastructure can function as strategic territory.

Sanctions are therefore not external to the dollar order. They are one of the ways the dollar order reveals itself as power. The same features that make the dollar useful also make it controllable. Liquidity, universality, legal centralization, compliance standards, and institutional depth create chokepoints. Those chokepoints can be used to freeze assets, block payments, isolate banks, punish firms, restrict exports, and pressure third parties. In practice, dollar access has become a permission structure.

This creates a profound contradiction. The dollar's reserve role depends on trust that dollar assets are liquid, safe, and usable. But sanctions demonstrate that usability can be politically conditional. For states aligned with Washington, this conditionality may look like lawful enforcement of international order. For states outside the U.S. alliance system, it may look like evidence that reserves held in Western jurisdictions are not truly sovereign. For nonaligned states, it may look like a warning. The same event can be interpreted as justice, coercion, or precedent depending on where one sits.

The freezing of sovereign reserves sharpened this contradiction. It taught central banks that reserves are not merely financial assets. They are jurisdictional assets. A bond, deposit, or securities claim may belong to a state in accounting terms, but if it is held inside another power's legal and financial infrastructure, its usability depends on political conditions. That realization has changed the psychology of reserve management. It has made access risk as important as market risk.

Yet the limits of financial coercion are also becoming clearer. Sanctions can impose enormous costs, but they also create incentives for adaptation.

States under pressure seek alternative payment rails, bilateral clearing, gold, non-dollar settlement, domestic custody, barter-like arrangements, and regional financial systems. These alternatives are often inefficient, incomplete, costly, and fragile. But they do not need to replace the dollar completely in order to weaken U.S. leverage. They only need to provide enough survivability to reduce the fear of exclusion.

The central issue is therefore not whether sanctions still work. They do. The issue is whether repeated sanctions use accelerates the construction of a world in which sanctions work less absolutely. Financial coercion is strongest when the target has no exit. Dollar demotion begins when targets, nonaligned states, and even cautious allies decide that exit routes must exist before they are needed.

Dollar access is one of the most powerful strategic assets the United States possesses. It gives Washington influence over actors far beyond U.S. borders because global finance is deeply entangled with dollar settlement, dollar funding, U.S. banks, and U.S.-linked compliance systems. When the United States restricts access to these systems, it can impose costs on governments, banks, corporations, shipping firms, insurers, commodity traders, technology suppliers, and

individuals. The reach is not merely national. It is systemic.

This leverage comes from the dollar's centrality in several overlapping domains. International banks need dollar funding. Commodity markets often price and settle in dollars. Corporations borrow in dollars. Central banks hold dollars. Trade finance uses dollars. Financial institutions depend on correspondent banking relationships that connect them to dollar clearing. A transaction between two non-U.S. parties may still pass through dollar infrastructure. That is the source of extraterritorial influence.

Dollar access also matters because many institutions fear secondary consequences. A non-U.S. bank may not be the primary target of a sanctions action, but if it risks losing access to dollar clearing or U.S. financial markets, it may comply preemptively. This creates a powerful compliance halo around U.S. policy. The United States does not need to police every transaction directly. It can shape the risk calculations of global intermediaries. Banks and corporations often over-comply because the cost of being wrong is too high.

This is why sanctions can work even when not universally supported. A country may disagree with U.S. policy, but its banks may still avoid sanctioned

counterparties because they cannot risk their own dollar access. A company may want to trade with a target state, but insurers, shippers, lenders, and payment intermediaries may refuse involvement. The dollar system turns private compliance into public power. It decentralizes enforcement through fear of exclusion.

Dollar leverage is especially strong because it targets the infrastructure of modern life. States require imports, energy, food, medicine, technology, insurance, shipping, credit, and payment settlement. Financial sanctions can disrupt these flows without a formal blockade. They can make normal commerce legally uncertain and operationally difficult. A sanctioned state may still possess resources, factories, or trading partners, but the channels connecting those resources to world markets can be narrowed or blocked.

This leverage is not identical to military power, but it can complement or substitute for it. Financial coercion allows the United States to punish, isolate, and pressure adversaries while avoiding the immediate risks of direct war. It can be calibrated, expanded, narrowed, or combined with diplomatic demands. It can target elites, sectors, banks, reserves, technology

flows, or entire economies. It offers policymakers a spectrum between protest and military action.

However, the power of dollar access depends on the belief that access is indispensable. If the world develops alternatives, even imperfect ones, the coercive value of exclusion declines. A sanctioned state that can sell some commodities through non-dollar channels, obtain critical imports through regional partners, hold gold outside foreign jurisdiction, and settle with friendly states may still suffer, but it may not collapse. Coercion becomes costlier, slower, and less decisive.

The United States therefore faces a strategic tradeoff. The more it uses dollar access as a weapon, the more it demonstrates the weapon's power. But the more visibly powerful the weapon becomes, the more other states invest in shields. Sanctions can win the present battle while weakening the future monopoly. This is not an argument that sanctions should never be used. It is an argument that sanctions have system-level consequences.

All great infrastructures derive power from trust. The dollar system is trusted because it is liquid, reliable, and widely accepted. If it is increasingly viewed as a conditional political instrument, its

usefulness remains but its neutrality declines. This matters because reserve currencies are not sustained by force alone. They are sustained by the willingness of others to organize their own financial lives around them. Dollar access is strategic leverage precisely because the world values it. If the world begins to value alternatives more, the leverage weakens.

The deepest danger for the United States is that dollar leverage may be overdrawn. A bank account can be debited too often; so can a political privilege. Each sanctions action spends a small amount of the dollar system's neutrality. Sometimes that spending may be justified. But if the balance falls too far, reserve managers and trading states will change behavior. The dollar will still be used, but with more hedges, backups, and escape routes. That is the beginning of the limit.

Routing around Washington does not require a replacement hegemon. That is the crucial point. A country does not need a financial system better than the dollar system in every dimension. It needs enough alternative channels to preserve options in a crisis. Fragmentation can therefore advance faster than replacement. In network terms, the question is not whether a new hub becomes larger than the old one. It

is whether enough lateral edges appear that the old hub loses some of its control over the shortest path.

28. Legitimacy, Narrative, and the Global South

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Hegemony is never only coercion. A durable order also requires a story explaining why the order is legitimate, useful, normal, or at least preferable to the alternatives. That story need not persuade everyone. It must persuade enough governments, institutions, elites, and publics that participation is less costly than defection.

The post-1945 American order combined claims about collective security, open markets, development, human rights, sovereignty, and institutional cooperation with unmistakable asymmetries of power. The resulting tension is not unique to the United States; every hegemonic order universalizes some interests of the center. What changes during a transition is the willingness of other actors to accept that universalization.

The anatomy of a legitimacy crisis

1. Theoretical Framework: The Anatomy of a Hegemonic Collapse

The study of international relations has long been dominated by the concept of Hegemonic Stability Theory, which posits that a single dominant state is necessary to create and enforce the rules of the global system. Since 1945, this role has been occupied by the United States, supported by a network of Western allies and institutional frameworks such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. However, the theoretical foundation of this order is not static. Hegemony relies on two distinct pillars: coercive power and consensual legitimacy. While coercive power is maintained through military and economic strength, consensual legitimacy is derived from the hegemon's ability to present its own interests as the universal interests of the global community. When the gap between the hegemon's actions and its stated values becomes too wide to bridge, the system enters a period of terminal decline.

The Erosion of Structural Power and Institutional Credibility

Structural power refers to the ability to shape the frameworks within which other states operate. For decades, the West has defined the parameters of international law, the definitions of human rights, and the criteria for state legitimacy. The current global shift

suggests a transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar reality where the Western definition of "the rules-based order" is no longer accepted as a neutral baseline. This erosion occurs when secondary powers no longer see the benefit of participating in a system that they perceive as being biased toward the preservation of a specific hierarchy. As emerging powers like China, Russia, and the BRICS coalition gain economic weight, they seek to transition from rule-takers to rule-makers. This theoretical shift is characterized by the deconstruction of Western-centric narratives and the proposal of alternative legal and historical frameworks that challenge the very roots of the existing order.

Gramscian Hegemony and the Crisis of Moral Authority

The concept of hegemony is not limited to physical or economic dominance; it is also profoundly ideological. Following the theories of Antonio Gramsci, a hegemon maintains its position by establishing a "common sense" that justifies its leadership. In the post-WWII era, this common sense included the inevitability of liberal democracy, the sanctity of the dollarbased financial system, and the unique historical status of specific geopolitical actors. A collapse of

hegemony begins when this cultural and moral consensus is fractured. When the Global South begins to view international institutions as instruments of neo-colonialism rather than platforms for justice, the "common sense" of the Western order is replaced by a spirit of defiance. This ideological rupture allows for the introduction of radical reclassifications, such as

the reassessment of Zionism or the legal challenges to unilateral sanctions, which would have been unthinkable under a stable hegemonic period.

Constructivism and the Reimagining of International Identity

The final theoretical component of this realignment is rooted in constructivism, which argues that the international system is shaped by shared ideas and identities rather than just material forces. The identity of a nation-state is often tied to its historical narrative and its recognition by the international community. If the shared understanding of a state's history or its people's ancestry is successfully challenged on a global stage, the ontological security of that state is compromised. In this context, the scientific and anthropological debates regarding lineage and indigenous status are not merely academic; they are geopolitical weapons used to undermine the

foundational myths of the current order. As the monopoly on "global truth" held by Western media and academic institutions fades, a pluralistic and often contradictory landscape of identities emerges, leading to a state of systemic instability where the very definitions of nationhood and justice are up for negotiation.

The Transition to a Polycentric World Order

As we move toward a polycentric world, the theoretical framework of international relations must account for the rise of "parallel systems." This involves not only new financial architectures but also new legal interpretations that bypass traditional Western consensus. The anatomy of hegemonic collapse is not defined by a single catastrophic event but by a series of cascading delegitimizations. Each challenge to the established order - whether it be the legality of sanctions, the definition of terrorism, or the genetic history of a people - acts as a catalyst for the next. This creates a feedback loop where the institutional frameworks designed to maintain peace instead become the primary arenas of conflict. The following sections will analyze how these theoretical cracks manifest in specific diplomatic, economic, and social

disruptions that are currently reshaping the global map.

This is why the Global South matters to a book that began with bases in the Middle East. A base can be denied physically, but an order can also be denied narratively. When governments stop treating Western institutional preferences as the default vocabulary of legitimacy, they gain political room to join alternative forums, resist sanctions, bargain among several great powers, and reinterpret neutrality as autonomy rather than indecision. The transition to multipolarity is therefore partly a transition in what kinds of behavior require explanation. Under hegemony, defection must be justified. Under multipolarity, alignment increasingly must be justified.

29. Good Cop, Bad Cop Statecraft and the Erosion of Trust

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Great powers rarely use force and diplomacy as cleanly separated instruments. Threat and reassurance often operate together. An earlier paper in the author's archive described this as a "good cop, bad cop" structure: one actor or institution raises the perceived cost of resistance while another offers an off-ramp. The framework is useful, but it must be handled carefully. Apparent role-splitting does not by itself prove secret coordination.

The larger relevance to hegemonic infrastructure lies in trust. Ambiguity can be tactically effective because it narrows an adversary's perceived options. Used repeatedly, however, the same ambiguity can teach allies and adversaries that diplomatic assurances are provisional, that threats may be theatrical or real, and that the safest response is to build independent options.

Pressure, hope, and ambiguity

II. The Good Cop / Bad Cop Framework in International Relations The "good cop / bad cop"

technique traces its origins to the psychology of interrogation, where it emerged as a manipulation strategy used to extract information or confessions from suspects under duress. In its classic form, two interrogators alternate roles: one plays the harsh enforcer, applying pressure through threats, hostility, and emotional intensity - the "bad cop." The other presents themselves as sympathetic, offering protection, understanding, and the promise of a less severe outcome - the "good cop." The target, placed under psychological stress, is nudged toward cooperating with the "good" figure in order to escape the threat posed by the "bad" one. What makes this technique effective is not brute force but the illusion of choice under asymmetric pressure: the target feels cornered and relieved to find even a narrow path forward. This dynamic has been transposed with striking success into international diplomacy and statecraft. In high-level geopolitics, the roles may be played not by individuals, but by entire governments, departments within a single administration, or allied states acting in tandem. The key is that each actor's behavior reinforces the other's posture. One party issues ultimatums, signals an intent to use force, or imposes sanctions - the diplomatic equivalent of the "bad cop." The other maintains a tone of reason,

offering dialogue, compromise, or aid - the "good cop." Importantly, both parties may share the same strategic goal, such as disarmament, regime change, or regional stability, but their contrasting approaches create a narrative of last chances and narrowing options.

The effectiveness of this framework relies on three primary psychological levers: 1. Fear: The threat posed by the "bad cop" - be it military intervention, economic collapse, or political isolation - creates a sense of urgency and vulnerability. The target becomes more pliable under perceived danger. 2. Hope: The "good cop" offers an off-ramp: a path that avoids catastrophe. Even if this path is still aligned with the orchestrators' objectives, it feels comparatively benevolent and thus more acceptable. 3. Ambiguity: Crucially, the coordination between the actors is never explicitly acknowledged. The target must interpret the dynamic on their own, often suspecting collusion but lacking proof. This uncertainty amplifies the psychological pressure and ensures plausible deniability. The structure of the tactic depends on asymmetric messaging with a unified objective. The actors present divergent tones and methods, but work toward a common end. This divergence must be carefully managed: if too coordinated, it appears manipulative and insincere; if too divergent, it risks genuine

breakdowns in trust or policy coherence. When done skillfully, it allows allied powers to apply both pressure and relief simultaneously, creating a controlled corridor in which the target's options are reduced to one: acquiescence to the preferred outcome. Examples of this tactic are abundant in Cold War-era politics, contemporary negotiations with Iran and North Korea, and internal dynamics between intelligence agencies and diplomatic bodies. The remainder of this chapter will explore both historical and modern examples of this framework, beginning with the current U.S.-Israel relationship and tracing backward to earlier manifestations

The ethical and political cost of strategic ambiguity

VII. Ethical and Political Implications While the strategic use of the good cop / bad cop framework in diplomacy and intelligence offers short-term advantages, it raises profound ethical and political concerns. Beneath its psychological effectiveness lies a tension between tactical expediency and the long-term credibility of democratic governance. What is often justified as clever statecraft may ultimately damage trust between nations, erode public confidence, and weaken the moral foundation of international relations. This section explores the principal ethical

hazards of this dual-role approach and its potential political consequences. Dangers of Manipulation and Erosion of Trust At its core, the good cop / bad cop tactic relies on manipulating perception, often by distorting the reality of policy alignment between actors. When used domestically, manipulation of the public through staged disagreements can undermine democratic accountability, creating a political environment where citizens are unsure who to believe or where true intentions lie. Internationally, allies and adversaries alike may begin to question the sincerity of diplomatic

overtures, assuming them to be strategic theater rather than genuine engagement. This erosion of trust can have cascading effects. Nations that feel deceived may refuse future cooperation or respond with their own manipulative strategies, creating a feedback loop of suspicion and duplicity. In worst-case scenarios, such misperceptions can escalate into conflict - as one party acts preemptively, misreading a "bad cop" threat as a real and imminent danger rather than calculated pressure. Furthermore, when partners in dual-role diplomacy deny coordination despite evidence of shared objectives, the thin line between strategy and deceit becomes ethically blurry. In such cases, the tactic begins to resemble psychological coercion more

than diplomacy. The Role of the Press in Interpreting or Misinterpreting Staged Conflicts The media plays a critical and often ambivalent role in this dynamic. On one hand, the press amplifies the appearance of disagreement - turning divergent rhetoric into headline drama. This amplification often serves the intended purpose of the good cop / bad cop strategy by heightening the perceived stakes and reinforcing the illusion of choice. On the other hand, a press corps that fails to scrutinize these divergences critically becomes an unwitting tool of the performance, lending legitimacy to what is, in effect, a controlled narrative. Conversely, investigative journalism that exposes the underlying coordination behind the scenes can disrupt the tactic, stripping it of ambiguity and weakening its impact. However, such exposure may also provoke disillusionment among both foreign and domestic audiences, who feel manipulated or betrayed by the dissonance between stated values and hidden strategies. Ultimately, the press functions as a double-edged sword - either reinforcing the power of the tactic or puncturing its effectiveness through transparency.

Impact on International Law and the Credibility of Democratic Diplomacy The use of asymmetric, coordinated roles in diplomacy walks a fine line in terms of legality and legitimacy. While there is no

international statute prohibiting nations from employing divergent tones in foreign policy, the use of covert threats, disinformation, or psychological warfare may breach norms associated with sovereign respect, non-interference, and the principle of good faith in treaty negotiations. Moreover, when democracies employ such strategies repeatedly, they risk undermining the core principles they claim to uphold. If democratic states are seen as behaving with duplicity - espousing transparency and ethical norms in public while manipulating perceptions and threatening war behind closed doors - they lose the moral high ground. This hypocrisy erodes the global credibility of democratic institutions and values, especially when juxtaposed against authoritarian regimes that, for all their flaws, are more openly aggressive and less reliant on rhetorical masks. In a multipolar world, where emerging powers are increasingly skeptical of Western intentions, such erosion of legitimacy can weaken alliances, disrupt treaty negotiations, and embolden rival blocs. Public Perception and the Potential for Backlash In democratic societies, the electorate plays a pivotal role in holding leaders accountable. When the public becomes aware - or even suspects - that supposed disagreements between national leaders are

performative, a backlash may occur. Citizens may begin to question not just the specific policy at issue, but the overall integrity of the political system. Trust in institutions can diminish, cynicism may rise, and voter engagement may decline. The risk is particularly high when the strategy involves the illusion of war or conflict, such as threatening military action as a bluff. If exposed, such tactics can trigger outrage from both anti-war constituencies and nationalist groups who feel misled.

The potential for backlash is magnified in the age of social media, where state narratives are rapidly scrutinized, deconstructed, and often ridiculed. In this environment, dual-role diplomacy must walk an even finer line: too subtle, and it lacks impact; too obvious, and it becomes counterproductive.

In sum, while the good cop / bad cop model can produce desirable short-term outcomes in foreign policy, it carries substantial ethical liabilities. These include diminished trust, weakened democratic credibility, legal gray zones, and potential backlash from both international partners and domestic constituencies. Like all powerful tools of statecraft, it demands restraint, transparency, and above all,

accountability - qualities often at odds with its very design.

The connection to the Gorbachev thesis is indirect but important. Hegemony depends on more than fear; it depends on the predictability of the center. A system in which every commitment might be bargaining leverage can still generate short-term concessions, but it increases the value of insurance against the center. The more states insure themselves, the less indispensable the center becomes.

30. Hegemony and Hubris: Rome, America, and the Cost of Overextension

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Comparisons between the United States and Rome are usually too easy. Rome was a territorial empire based on conquest, tribute, slavery, provincial administration, and the direct rule of lands around the Mediterranean. The United States is a modern constitutional state embedded in alliances, markets, international institutions, private corporations, and a nuclear order. The differences are so large that any claim of simple repetition should be rejected.

Yet Rome remains useful for a narrower reason: it demonstrates that infrastructures of power create maintenance burdens. Roads, forts, fleets, frontiers, administrative systems, tribute networks, and political bargains all expand the reach of the center while simultaneously creating obligations. The problem is not expansion by itself. It is the possibility that the cost of sustaining the system begins to rise faster than the strategic return.

Overextension as a recurring problem of power

Manifestations of Hubris The ascent to hegemony for any great power carries with it the seeds of hubris - a dangerous overconfidence that can lead to overreach and decline. Both the Roman Empire and the United States have displayed signs of hubris, manifested through various internal and external challenges that tested the resilience and adaptability of their hegemonic status.

1. Overexpansion and Administrative Challenges

The Roman Empire's continuous territorial expansion, while a source of strength, eventually became a source of vulnerability. The sheer size of the Empire made it increasingly difficult to govern effectively, leading to administrative inefficiencies and the dilution of central authority. The cost

of maintaining and defending its vast borders placed a heavy burden on the state's resources, exacerbating the difficulty of managing such a sprawling empire. This overexpansion exposed the Empire to external threats and internal dissensions, stretching its military and administrative capacities thin.

2. Economic Disparities and Reliance on Slave Labor

Economic success in Rome was heavily reliant on conquests and the exploitation of conquered peoples. The accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few elite families, combined with a heavy dependence on slave labor, led to significant economic disparities and social tensions within the Empire. The reliance on slaves for agriculture and other industries stifled technological innovation and contributed to economic stagnation. As conquests slowed, the supply of slaves decreased, undermining the economic model that had fueled Rome's expansion.

3. Political Instability and Leadership Crises

The Roman Empire was plagued by political instability and leadership crises, particularly in its later years. The transition from the Republic to the Empire saw the erosion of traditional republican values and institutions, leading to autocratic rule and the concentration of power in the hands of emperors. Succession crises, assassinations, and civil wars became common, weakening the state and contributing to its eventual fragmentation. The inability to establish a stable and effective system of governance exemplified the hubris of assuming eternal dominance without sufficient attention to the foundations of political stability.

1. Foreign Policy Criticisms and Military Overextensions

The United States, in its pursuit of global leadership, has faced criticism for instances of foreign policy overreach and military interventions perceived as

manifestations of hubris. Conflicts such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have been cited as examples of overestimating American military capabilities and underestimating the complexities of local politics and societies. These military engagements have not only strained the country's resources but have also led to questions about the moral and strategic bases of American foreign policy.

2. Domestic Inequalities and Social Divisions

Domestic inequalities and social divisions represent another aspect of American hubris. The belief in the United States as a land of unlimited opportunity and equality has often been challenged by the realities of racial, economic, and political disparities. The concentration of wealth, systemic racism, and partisan polarization have highlighted the contradictions between the ideals and the realities of American society, undermining the social cohesion necessary for sustaining global leadership.

3. Adapting to a Multipolar World and International Rivalries

The emergence of a multipolar world, with rising powers challenging American dominance, has exposed the limitations of U.S. hegemony. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the growing assertiveness of regional powers have created a geopolitical landscape that the United States must navigate carefully. The assumption of unipolar dominance has been challenged, requiring a reevaluation of foreign policy strategies and the adaptation to a world where American influence is significant but not unchallenged.

Both the Roman Empire and the United States have faced the consequences of hubris, manifested through overexpansion, economic and social disparities, political instability, and challenges to their global leadership. These experiences underscore the dangers of overconfidence and the importance of humility, adaptability, and foresight in the management of hegemonic power.

The cycles of rise and decline that characterize the histories of hegemonic powers are profoundly influenced by the interplay between hegemony and hubris. The Roman Empire and the United States, each in their era, have faced significant consequences

stemming from their dominant positions and the overconfident approaches that sometimes accompanied their hegemony.

1. Economic Strain and Social Unrest

The economic policies and practices of the Roman Empire, while initially underpinning its expansion, eventually led to significant strain and unrest. The reliance on conquests for wealth, coupled with a dependence on slave labor, created an unsustainable economic model. As the pace of expansion slowed and the supply of slaves decreased, Rome faced increasing economic difficulties. The heavy taxation required to support the military and bureaucratic apparatus of the state contributed to widespread social discontent, exacerbating the divide between the wealthy elite and the common populace.

2. Military Pressures and the Loss of Territories

The vastness of the Roman Empire made it increasingly difficult to defend its borders against external threats. The military, stretched thin across numerous frontiers, faced pressures from Germanic tribes in the West and Persian forces in the East. The inability to effectively manage and repel these incursions led to the gradual loss of territories. The sacking of Rome by Visigothic and later Vandal forces

symbolized the weakening of Roman power and the eventual disintegration of the Western Roman Empire.

3. The Fall of the Western Roman Empire and Its Historical Legacy

The fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century CE marked the end of ancient Rome's hegemony in the Mediterranean world. This event left a profound legacy, shaping the course of European history for centuries to come. The fragmentation of the Western Empire led to the emergence of the feudal system and the rise of various Germanic kingdoms, laying the groundwork for the modern nations of Europe. The Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, continued for another thousand years, preserving many aspects of Roman culture and law.

1. Challenges to Global Leadership and International Credibility

The United States, in its role as a global leader, has faced challenges to its international credibility due to instances of perceived overreach and unilateralism in foreign policy. Military interventions and foreign policy decisions have sometimes been viewed as manifestations of American hubris, leading to criticism and resistance from both allies and adversaries. The challenges to American leadership are also evident in

the rise of alternative power centers and the questioning of the liberal international order that the U.S. has championed since World War II.

2. Internal Cohesion and the Impact of Political Polarization

Political polarization and social divisions have raised concerns about the internal cohesion of the United States, impacting its ability to project a unified stance on the global stage. The intensification of partisan politics, racial tensions, and economic disparities has not only strained domestic politics but also affected the country's international image and diplomacy. The internal challenges facing the U.S. underscore the importance of domestic stability for sustaining global leadership.

3. Rebalancing Global Power and the Future of American Hegemony

The future of American hegemony is likely to involve a complex process of adapting to a changing global landscape, characterized by the rise of new powers and the increasing importance of multilateral institutions. The United States will need to navigate the realities of a multipolar world, where cooperation and competition coexist. The ability to adapt, forge strategic partnerships, and address internal disparities will be

critical for maintaining influence and advancing American interests in a more balanced global power structure.

The consequences of hegemony and hubris for both the Roman Empire and the United States highlight the cyclical nature of power dynamics and the inherent challenges in maintaining a dominant position. These histories underscore the need for prudent governance, strategic foresight, and the cultivation of resilience to navigate the complexities of global leadership.

The comparative analysis of the Roman Empire and the United States illuminates both striking similarities and notable differences in their paths to hegemony, the manifestation of hubris, and the consequences thereof. Understanding these parallels and divergences can yield valuable insights and lessons applicable to contemporary global leadership dynamics.

Similarities in the Rise and Maintenance of Hegemony

1. Foundation on Military Strength and Strategic Conquests: Both the Roman Empire and the United States established and maintained their hegemonies on the back of military prowess and strategic conquests or interventions. Rome's legions expanded the Republic

and later the Empire's borders across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Similarly, the United States used its military capabilities to influence global affairs, protect its interests, and shape the international order, especially after World War II. 2. Economic Power as a Basis for Influence: Economic strength underpinned the hegemonic status of both powers. Rome's control over vast resources and trade networks across the Mediterranean and beyond was a key element of its dominance. The United States' economic influence has been characterized by its leading role in global finance, trade, and innovation, establishing the dollar as the world's primary reserve currency. 3. Cultural and Ideological Export: Both empires have exerted considerable cultural and ideological influence. The Roman Empire spread Latin language, Roman law, and culture across its territories, leaving a lasting legacy on Western civilization. The United States has promoted democratic ideals, human rights, and American cultural products, shaping global norms and values.

Differences in the Manifestation of Hubris and Its Consequences

1. Nature and Scope of Overreach: The Roman Empire's hubris was manifested in overexpansion and the overextension of its military, leading to

administrative inefficiencies and vulnerabilities along its borders. In contrast, American hubris has often been reflected in foreign policy overreach and the assumption that democratic capitalism could be universally applied, sometimes overlooking cultural and historical complexities. 2. Economic Sustainability and Innovation: While the Roman economy eventually stagnated, partly due to its reliance on slave labor and lack of technological innovation, the United States has continually reinvented its economy through technological advancements and innovation. However, economic inequalities and the challenges of globalization present new tests to American resilience.

3. Globalization and Interconnectivity: The United States operates in a vastly more interconnected and interdependent world than the Roman Empire did. The global implications of U.S. policy decisions and the challenges of international governance are complexities that Rome did not face on the same scale, influencing the nature of American hegemony and its potential vulnerabilities.

Lessons Learned from the Roman Empire Applicable to the United States

1. The Importance of Sustainable Governance: The decline of the Roman Empire underscores the need for

effective, adaptable governance structures. The United States can draw lessons from Rome's administrative challenges by promoting a responsive and flexible political system capable of addressing contemporary challenges. 2. The Risks of Overextension: Rome's history highlights the dangers of overextending military and administrative resources. The United States should heed this lesson by carefully balancing its global commitments with its national capabilities, avoiding the pitfalls of overreach. 3. The Value of Economic and Social Cohesion: Economic disparities and social unrest contributed to Rome's decline. The United States faces its own challenges of inequality and polarization. Prioritizing policies that promote economic opportunity, social cohesion, and political inclusivity can strengthen the domestic foundation necessary for sustained global leadership. 4. Adaptation to a Changing World: Just as the Roman Empire faced shifting dynamics and emerging threats, the United States must navigate a rapidly changing global landscape. Flexibility, strategic foresight, and the willingness to adapt policies in response to global trends and challenges will be crucial for maintaining relevance and leadership in the 21st century.

By examining the trajectories of the Roman Empire and the United States, it becomes evident that the paths to hegemony and the pitfalls of hubris

share commonalities across history. The lessons drawn from Rome's experience can inform contemporary strategies for managing and sustaining global leadership, highlighting the importance of humility, adaptability, and strategic foresight in the face of complex global challenges.

The Roman analogy therefore does not predict an American fall. It clarifies a decision problem. A hegemon must distinguish between commitments that are wasteful and commitments that make the rest of the system cheaper to maintain. Cutting the first can renew power. Cutting the second can accelerate fragmentation. That is the same ambiguity at the heart of the Gorbachev comparison: reform may save a system, or it may reveal that the system depended on precisely the arrangements the reformer considered expendable.

31. The Fiscal Boundary: Debt Service, War Costs, and the Price of Primacy

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The hidden budget behind the visible network

Hegemonic infrastructure is often discussed as though its principal constraint were military: troops, ships, aircraft, missiles, bases, and munitions. But every one of those assets rests on a fiscal foundation. Overseas access must be maintained, equipment replaced, personnel paid, stockpiles replenished, allies reassured, and new technologies financed. A base is therefore not merely a point on a map. It is a recurring claim on future budgets. The same is true of carrier groups, missile-defense networks, intelligence systems, and the industrial capacity required to sustain them.

This matters because the cost of primacy is not measured only by defense appropriations. A government carries many simultaneous obligations: retirement programs, health programs, infrastructure, disaster response, debt service, research, domestic security, and the political demand to preserve living standards. Strategic commitments compete with all of them. In periods of cheap borrowing, that competition can be obscured. A state can finance present

commitments by shifting part of their cost into the future. When borrowing becomes more expensive, the hidden competition becomes visible.

The fiscal problem therefore adds a fourth meaning to strategic retrenchment. A base may be physically abandoned, politically constrained, or militarily vulnerable. It may also become financially difficult to justify relative to other uses of national resources. The installation itself can remain useful while the opportunity cost of maintaining it rises. At that point, the argument for withdrawal need not rest on pacifism, isolationism, or defeat. It can emerge from arithmetic.

Debt service as strategic friction

Debt service is strategically important because it purchases no new capability. Interest payments do not add a runway, intercept a missile, build a ship, or repair a bridge. They are the price of past borrowing. As that price rises, policymakers face a narrowing discretionary margin. The effect is gradual rather than cinematic. No single interest payment closes an overseas base. Instead, each additional fixed claim on revenue makes every optional commitment harder to defend.

This is one reason great powers can appear strongest shortly before they become more selective.

Their accumulated assets remain impressive, but the cost of maintaining all of them simultaneously grows. The political system then begins asking questions that previously seemed unnecessary. Which theater is essential? Which ally should carry more of the burden? Which stockpile must be rebuilt first? Which modernization program can be delayed? Which deployment is a deterrent and which is merely inherited habit? Retrenchment begins as prioritization.

The Gorbachev analogy becomes sharper at this point. The late Soviet leadership confronted a system in which military commitments, subsidies, domestic stagnation, and institutional rigidity were entangled. Gorbachev did not simply decide that geopolitical influence had no value. He inherited a structure in which the cost of sustaining the old pattern competed with the project of domestic renewal. The American situation is fundamentally different, but the decision problem can rhyme: preserve every external commitment, or redirect resources toward the internal capacity that ultimately sustains external power.

War as a fiscal stress test

War reveals these tradeoffs more quickly than peacetime budgeting. A conflict consumes munitions, accelerates maintenance, raises transportation costs,

expands intelligence requirements, and can expose industrial bottlenecks that are invisible during routine operations. The immediate question is whether the military can prevail. The longer question is how rapidly the underlying stock of capability can be regenerated without crowding out other national priorities.

The Middle East is especially revealing because a relatively small number of fixed facilities can trigger very large defensive expenditures. Protecting bases against missiles and drones requires interceptors, radars, hardened infrastructure, dispersal plans, redundant communications, and continuous resupply. The attacker can impose costs without destroying the installation. It may be sufficient to force the defender to spend more, move more often, and devote scarce high-end systems to protection rather than other missions.

This creates a strategic accounting problem. A forward base once justified by the efficiency it creates may gradually require so much protection that part of the original efficiency disappears. The proper question is not whether the base is valuable in isolation. It is whether the total package - base, defenses, logistics, political compensation, force protection, and

replacement stockpiles - remains the least expensive way to obtain the desired strategic effect. A system built during an era of sanctuary can become far more costly in an era of precision attack.

The reserve-currency shield and its limits

The United States possesses an advantage unavailable to most historical empires: it issues the currency at the center of global finance. That position increases fiscal flexibility. Deep capital markets and broad demand for dollar assets allow Washington to borrow on a scale that would place much harsher constraints on many other states. In strategic terms, monetary centrality functions as part of the infrastructure of primacy. It expands the distance between a new commitment and the moment when its full cost must be felt domestically.

But this advantage should not be confused with immunity. Borrowing capacity can delay choices; it cannot abolish them. If debt service absorbs a larger share of public resources, if investors demand greater compensation for holding long-term obligations, or if other governments diversify reserves as insurance against geopolitical coercion, the fiscal space supporting global commitments can narrow even while the dollar remains the world's leading currency.

Decline need not take the form of a currency collapse. As argued earlier in this book, demotion at the margins can matter long before displacement occurs.

This is also where sanctions policy and military policy intersect. Financial centrality gives Washington coercive leverage, but extensive use of that leverage gives other states an incentive to build alternatives. Those alternatives do not have to replace the dollar system. They need only reduce dependence enough to improve bargaining freedom. If monetary centrality becomes slightly less automatic at the same time that military commitments become more expensive, two separate forms of hegemonic infrastructure begin placing pressure on one another.

Retrenchment as choice or compulsion

Fiscal constraint does not prove that strategic retrenchment is wise. A government can save money by abandoning an alliance and lose far more through the instability that follows. It can close a base and later discover that recreating access in a crisis costs several times as much. It can reduce deterrence and thereby increase the probability of an expensive war. The cheapest policy in a one-year budget can be the most expensive policy across a decade. Network value again complicates bilateral accounting.

The relevant distinction is therefore between deliberate pruning and uncontrolled contraction. Deliberate pruning identifies commitments whose strategic return has genuinely fallen and reallocates resources to stronger positions. Uncontrolled contraction begins when fiscal pressure forces decisions faster than the alliance network can adapt. Allies hedge, adversaries test boundaries, industrial capacity lags operational demand, and each emergency consumes resources intended for the next one. The center still possesses great power, but it spends more of that power maintaining the conditions that once came automatically.

This is the fiscal version of the American Gorbachev hypothesis. A president may believe that reducing overseas burdens will restore national strength. He may be correct. But if the burdens are also the infrastructure through which financial, military, and political advantages reinforce one another, retrenchment can reduce the future revenue, access, trust, and leverage available to the center. The decisive question is not whether America can afford every inherited commitment. It plainly should not preserve commitments merely because they are old. The question is whether it can distinguish expensive redundancy from expensive structure.

The price of primacy is therefore not simply what the United States spends abroad. It is the total cost of keeping a global network credible, protected, liquid, politically legitimate, and reproducible over time. When that cost rises faster than the willingness of the domestic political system to pay it, strategic architecture becomes vulnerable to simplification. Some simplification may be overdue. Some may be destructive. History rarely labels the difference in advance.

32. Conclusion: The Face Attached to the Transition

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The image that began this inquiry is deliberately crude. Trump's face carries the purple mark associated with Gorbachev. The joke says in a glance what a book requires many pages to qualify: perhaps the leader who promised restoration will become the face attached to the ending of an order.

The serious argument is narrower. Trump does not need to resemble Gorbachev ideologically, morally, psychologically, or institutionally. The United States does not need to resemble the Soviet Union. There need be no territorial collapse. The analogy concerns a recurring possibility in complex systems.

A restoration-minded center identifies burdens. It reduces, renegotiates, or conditionalizes them. Peripheral actors adapt to the new uncertainty. They build alternatives. Those alternatives reduce dependence. Lower dependence reduces the center's network centrality. A policy intended to strengthen the core can therefore weaken the architecture through which the core exercised power.

The Middle East provides evidence for several parts of this mechanism. American forces have physically withdrawn from important Syrian and Iraqi positions. Gulf partners have demonstrated that hosting American forces does not imply unlimited permission. Missiles and drones have reduced the assumption of sanctuary at fixed bases. Regional powers have built additional security relationships with one another.

None of these facts alone establishes hegemonic decline. Together they justify a framework in which bases are analyzed at three levels: physical presence, political permission, and operational sanctuary. They also justify attention to network topology: the number of important relationships that increasingly bypass Washington.

The policy implications are not simply “stay everywhere.” Some bases are strategically unnecessary. Some commitments are too costly. Some partners should assume more responsibility. A system that cannot adapt becomes brittle.

The more useful principle is to distinguish burden from infrastructure. Retrenchment should remove costs that can be removed without destroying unique connectivity. Burden sharing should increase allied capacity without making American commitment

appear arbitrary. Regional self-reliance should be encouraged where it adds resilience, but policymakers should understand when it also creates independent centers of power.

The deepest lesson is that hegemonic power is partly invisible. It resides in other people's expectations. It exists in the assumption that Washington will be consulted, that an American guarantee will hold, that American standards will be used, and that American access will remain politically acceptable.

Such power can disappear without a dramatic surrender. The bases may remain. The treaties may remain. The carriers may sail. The dollar may circulate. The center may still possess extraordinary military capability.

But the other actors may have learned to organize increasing portions of their world without it.

At that point, nothing has collapsed and almost everything has changed.

The Gorbachev mark on Trump's forehead is therefore more than an insult or a joke. It is a visual hypothesis about historical role. Gorbachev became the name attached to a transformation he did not originally set out to produce. Trump's political project

is the opposite of decline in intention: it is explicitly a project of renewed greatness.

Whether the irony becomes history will depend on what happens to the network. If allied capacity grows while American centrality remains, Trump may be remembered as the president who forced a stronger distribution of responsibility. If allied capacity grows by creating alternatives to American leadership, he may be remembered differently.

The question is not whether America remains powerful. It almost certainly will.

The question is what kind of power remains when the infrastructure of hegemony becomes optional.

Afterword: The Gorbachev Test

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The phrase “American Gorbachev” will remain merely provocative unless it can be converted into a set of observations that might prove it wrong. A useful hypothesis must be falsifiable in practice, even when the relevant evidence accumulates slowly.

The first test concerns basing access. If American overseas installations remain broadly usable across major contingencies, then reports of “lost bases” should be treated cautiously. Physical closures may represent efficiency rather than decline. By contrast, if more host governments routinely distinguish defensive from offensive missions, require case-by-case authorization, or impose geographic limits, the permission layer is becoming more restrictive.

The second test concerns survivability. A resilient basing system can adapt to missile and drone threats through dispersion, hardening, active defense, rapid repair, and redundancy. If such adaptation preserves sortie generation and command continuity at sustainable cost, fixed infrastructure remains viable. If protection consumes increasing resources while operations repeatedly relocate, sanctuary is eroding.

The third test concerns allied investment. Increased military spending by partners is not inherently evidence of American decline. It may be exactly what Washington has requested for decades. The discriminating question is whether the new capability is designed to integrate with American systems or to substitute for them. Interoperability, shared command arrangements, common logistics, and joint planning point toward distributed alliance strength. Independent supply chains, parallel institutions, and doctrines built around American absence point toward strategic autonomy.

The fourth test concerns diplomatic routing. Which state or institution becomes the default mediator during major crises? The United States need not mediate everything to remain central. But if important settlements increasingly occur through regional mechanisms, Beijing, Ankara, Riyadh, Doha, or other capitals without meaningful American participation, betweenness centrality is declining.

The fifth test concerns economic and technological networks. Hegemony is not reducible to military posture. Continued dollar dominance, centrality of American capital markets, leadership in artificial intelligence and biotechnology, and the attraction of

American universities can compensate for some geopolitical contraction. A genuine systemic transition would involve diversification across several layers rather than military basing alone.

The sixth test concerns reversibility. Temporary hedging is different from institutionalized autonomy. If a later American administration can restore confidence and quickly recover centrality, the Trump period may be remembered as turbulence. If alternative institutions become durable, staffed, funded, and politically legitimate, the change becomes harder to reverse.

The seventh test concerns the behavior of adversaries. A declining perception of American commitment can invite testing, but a more distributed allied system can also strengthen deterrence. The relevant evidence will therefore be whether challengers gain freedom of action or confront a denser network of capable states.

These tests point toward a more balanced conclusion than either triumphalism or declinism. The American order is not a single object that either exists or does not. It is a layered network. Some layers can weaken while others strengthen. Some relationships

can become more autonomous while remaining friendly. Some retrenchment can improve resilience.

The historical importance of Trump's second term will therefore depend on whether the changes of 2025-2026 become path dependent. If allies learn to operate without Washington and find that they prefer the freedom, the network may not return to its previous topology. If distributed responsibility makes the American-led system more credible and less burdensome, the same period may be remembered as successful adaptation.

Gorbachev's history is valuable because it warns that leaders do not control the full consequences of changing expectations. Once the periphery learns a new possibility, politics can move faster than the center anticipates. That is the final reason the analogy is worth preserving, with all of its limits clearly marked.

Note on Method and Scope

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This manuscript is an interpretive geopolitical essay rather than a predictive model. Contemporary factual claims are limited to publicly reported developments and are separated from the book's analytical inferences. The core framework - physical presence, political permission, operational sanctuary, and network centrality - is intended as a tool for organizing evidence rather than as a claim that every withdrawal or new alliance has the same meaning.

The argument also distinguishes policy causation from presidential timing. The Iraq drawdown, for example, arose from an agreement negotiated before Trump's second term. It is included because it forms part of the strategic environment and physical contraction occurring during that term, not because it can be attributed wholly to Trump. This distinction is important throughout. Historical transitions are usually produced by inherited trajectories interacting with new decisions.

The manuscript uses "hegemony" in a relatively narrow sense: the ability of a central state to shape outcomes because other actors organize significant

parts of their security, finance, diplomacy, technology, or trade around systems in which that state occupies a privileged position. Hegemony is therefore compatible with sovereignty among partners and does not require formal empire.

Note on Sources

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The contemporary portion of this manuscript relies on public reporting rather than classified information or private government assessments. Reuters and the Associated Press are used for several 2026 events because they provide dated, attributable reports on base withdrawals, host-country restrictions, and regional defense arrangements. Older historical claims are anchored in established scholarship and official historical resources.

Because the argument is interpretive, readers should distinguish reported events from the inferences drawn from them. A withdrawal from a base is a reported event. The claim that the withdrawal reduces network centrality is an interpretation that depends on what replaces the lost function. Likewise, a regional defense agreement is a reported event; whether it complements or substitutes for American leadership is a question to be answered through later behavior.

The manuscript closes its contemporary evidentiary window on August 19, 2026. Events after that date are not incorporated into the analysis. For that reason, the book should be read as a structured snapshot of an

unfolding transition rather than a definitive history of Trump’s second term.

The expanded chapters also draw selectively on prior studies in the author's Google Drive archive, including work on U.S. hegemony, Iraq, Qatar and Al Udeid, strategic exhaustion, reserve-currency power, sanctions, diplomatic role-splitting, multipolarity, and historical overextension. These materials have been edited for continuity and, where necessary, softened or updated so that older estimates and predictions are not presented as current facts. They function here as prior analytical work by the same author rather than as independent corroboration.

The chapter on fiscal constraint also develops themes from the author's March 2026 study of sovereign-debt sustainability and Middle East war costs. The present edition uses that earlier paper principally for its conceptual treatment of debt service, wartime fiscal stress, reserve-currency privilege, and investor confidence; time-sensitive numerical estimates from the earlier paper are not reproduced as current facts.

Selected Chronology

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1985 - Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and began the reform process later associated with perestroika and glasnost. His objective was renewal of the Soviet system, not its dissolution.

1989 - Communist governments across Eastern Europe fell in rapid succession. The opening of the Berlin Wall in November became the most visible symbol of a transformed expectation: Moscow would not use military force to restore the previous political order.

1991 - The Soviet Union dissolved in December. Gorbachev resigned as president of a state that no longer existed. The sequence established the historical image that underlies the “American Gorbachev” metaphor: a reformer who became attached to a systemic ending he had not originally intended.

2001 - The September 11 attacks began a period of intense American military engagement in the broader Middle East. The ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq greatly expanded the physical and political footprint of the United States in the region.

2003 - The United States invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein. The invasion demonstrated overwhelming conventional military superiority while opening a much more difficult problem of political order, legitimacy, occupation, insurgency, and regional influence.

2014 - The U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State expanded military operations in Iraq and Syria. American facilities and local partnerships became important parts of the counter-ISIS network.

2017-2021 - Trump's first presidency made burden sharing, alliance reciprocity, sanctions, tariffs, and skepticism toward long-running military commitments central themes of American foreign policy. At the same time, the administration used substantial coercive power, illustrating that retrenchment and force can coexist.

2021 - The United States completed its military withdrawal from Afghanistan under President Joe Biden, following an agreement negotiated during Trump's first term. The event intensified international debate about the durability and limits of American commitments.

2024 - The United States and Iraq agreed on a transition away from the U.S.-led coalition military

mission. The arrangement is important to this book because the Iraqi drawdown occurring during Trump's second term was not created wholly by Trump; it was an inherited trajectory.

2025 - Trump returned to the presidency. The second term placed alliance conditionality, reciprocal burden sharing, and strategic selectivity back at the center of American policy while the Middle East entered another period of severe conflict.

January 2026 - Iraq took full control of Ain al-Asad after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the base. In the same month, the United Arab Emirates publicly stated that its territory, airspace, and territorial waters would not be used for hostile military action against Iran, making the distinction between physical basing and political permission unusually visible.

February 2026 - The United States completed its withdrawal from al-Tanf in Syria and continued reducing its footprint elsewhere in the country. The episode became one of the clearest examples in this manuscript of physical contraction of an American basing node.

August 2026 - Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan announced a new defense arrangement with a mutual-defense principle and plans for deeper coordination.

The agreement did not end the participants' relationships with the United States; its importance lies in demonstrating the growth of lateral security architecture among major regional powers.

August 19, 2026 - The regional environment remained unstable, with continued conflict involving Iran, pressure on Gulf shipping and infrastructure, and renewed questions about whether regional escalation was outrunning any single actor's ability to control it. This manuscript closes its contemporary evidence at this date.

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