



THE U.S. DOCTRINE OF STRATEGIC PATIENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER 2020: COHERENT DOCTRINE OR POLICY DRIFT?

Gouasmia Saadia *

Department of English, University of
Mohamed Cherif Messaadia, Souk Ahras,
Algeria
saadia.gouasmia@univ-soukahras.dz

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Abstract:

This article investigates whether the post-2020 United States (U.S.) posture in the Middle East reflects a coherent doctrine of strategic patience or a pattern of policy drift. Guided by this central research question—and secondary questions concerning strategic consistency, operational continuity, and doctrinal articulation—the study employs a qualitative, comparative case-study method focused on Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Using document and discourse analysis of National Security Strategies, presidential statements, and leading policy assessments, the article evaluates how U.S. restraint has been practiced and justified across administrations. Findings reveal that while strategic minimalism has become the dominant mode of engagement, it remains under-theorized and unevenly implemented, producing a posture suspended between deliberate prioritization and reactive crisis management. The study argues that the Middle East now functions as a test case for whether restrained engagement can mature into a coherent doctrine of strategic patience or persist as fragmented policy drift.

Keywords: Strategic Patience; U.S. Foreign Policy; Middle East; Policy Drift; Limited Engagement; Grand Strategy.

* Corresponding author



Introduction :

Since 2020, American engagement in the Middle East has entered a markedly transitional phase, shaped by the end of large-scale interventions, intensifying great-power competition, and growing domestic aversion to protracted conflict. Against this backdrop, scholars and policymakers increasingly debate whether contemporary U.S. behavior reflects an intentional doctrine of strategic patience—a calibrated posture of restraint, burden-sharing, and long-term prioritization—or whether it represents an ad hoc response to fatigue, resource constraints, and crisis-driven decision-making. The question carries profound implications: doctrines provide direction and continuity, whereas drift risks inconsistency, misperception, and strategic vacuums.

While prior administrations articulated elements of restraint—most notably the Obama administration’s formal embrace of “strategic patience” and the Trump administration’s reduced appetite for military entanglements—the Biden administration has continued this trajectory by elevating the Indo-Pacific as the primary theater of U.S. grand strategy while limiting exposure in the Middle East. Yet the absence of a clearly defined regional doctrine has generated uncertainty about whether these practices amount to purposeful strategy or merely the inertia of decline.

This study addresses that ambiguity by posing a central research question: Does the post-2020 U.S. posture in the Middle East constitute a coherent doctrine of strategic patience, or does it reflect policy drift driven by constraint rather than design? To answer it, the article further asks how consistently U.S. objectives, resources, and instruments are aligned across key theaters; whether policy demonstrates continuity across administrations; and to what extent restraint is explicitly articulated in official discourse.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative comparative case-study approach, examining Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan as critical theaters of post-2020 restraint. It integrates document and discourse analysis of National Security Strategies, presidential statements, and major policy assessments with process-tracing, all structured through a tripartite framework of strategic consistency, operational continuity, and doctrinal articulation. This integrated approach enables a systematic evaluation of whether U.S. restraint in the Middle East represents a deliberate model of sustainable engagement or exemplifies the risks of under-theorized retrenchment.



By situating contemporary U.S. behavior within broader debates on offshore balancing, strategic ambiguity, and retrenchment, the paper argues that the Middle East has become a pivotal testing ground for a new paradigm of limited engagement. Whether this paradigm evolves into a coherent doctrine of strategic patience—or remains fragmented as policy drift—will shape both regional stability and America’s global role in the decades ahead.

THE FIRST TOPIC: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of “strategic patience” has become a defining yet contested term in contemporary U.S. foreign policy discourse. It reflects not only a tactical posture of restraint but also a broader rethinking of American power projection in an era of relative decline and systemic transition. To clarify its intellectual lineage and policy implications, this section outlines the conceptual foundations of strategic patience, its evolution into what some analysts have termed “strategic uncertainty,” and the challenges of policy drift that threaten to undermine its coherence as a guiding doctrine.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: DEFINING “STRATEGIC PATIENCE”

The term strategic patience first emerged as a distinct element of U.S. grand strategy under the Obama administration, most explicitly articulated in the 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS). That document emphasized long-term engagement, coalition-building, and the avoidance of precipitous military action—marking a decisive departure from the interventionist posture of the George W. Bush era ^(1) . By affirming that the U.S. had “moved beyond the large ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” while retaining the prerogative to act unilaterally when vital interests were threatened, the 2015 NSS codified restraint as a central strategic principle ^(2) .

At its conceptual core, strategic patience integrates two interrelated ideas: first, the recognition of the limits of American coercive leverage in managing complex regional conflicts; and second, the belief that time, diplomacy, and indirect influence can yield more enduring outcomes than large-scale intervention ^(3) . It thus embodies both a strategic disposition—favoring endurance, prudence,



and selective engagement—and a doctrinal framework for managing relative decline without strategic withdrawal.

Realist interpretations regard strategic patience as a pragmatic retrenchment doctrine, reflecting an acknowledgment of systemic overstretch and the need to reallocate resources toward great-power competition ^(4) . From this perspective, it represents a form of strategic economy—minimizing commitments without forfeiting influence. Liberal and institutionalist scholars, however, frame it as a mechanism for collective action and legitimacy-building, arguing that patience enhances U.S. credibility by aligning its actions with international norms and shared institutions ^(5) . One interpretation emphasizes that it operates through “uncertainty,” allowing regional actors to assume greater agency while the U.S. shapes outcomes indirectly through deterrence, sanctions, and diplomacy ^(6) . In this sense, strategic patience merges realist caution with liberal institutionalism, constituting a form of “restrained engagement” that seeks equilibrium rather than dominance.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: FROM STRATEGIC PATIENCE TO STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY

The evolution from Obama’s strategic patience to Trump’s strategic uncertainty and, subsequently, Biden’s integrated deterrence underscores both continuity in restraint and discontinuity in doctrinal articulation. While the underlying logic of limited exposure persisted across administrations, the strategic narrative and institutional coherence of this restraint shifted markedly. Rilwan Omar contrasts Obama’s diplomacy-based patience with Trump’s “direct diplomacy and coercive signaling,” describing the transition as “a tale of two ends”—one anchored in multilateralism, the other in transactional assertion ⁽⁷⁾ .

Although President Trump declared the end of strategic patience, particularly toward adversaries such as North Korea and Iran, his administration largely adhered to restrained military engagement, relying instead on economic coercion, targeted strikes, and symbolic displays of force ^(8) . This apparent contradiction reveals that while the rhetoric of restraint was abandoned, the structural imperatives of limited intervention remained intact. The shift was therefore semantic rather than substantive, translating patience into unpredictability without expanding U.S. strategic capacity.



The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy recontextualized this trajectory by integrating restraint into a broader framework of “values-based leadership” and global competition ^(9) . The resulting hybrid model—sustained military minimalism in the Middle East coupled with strategic reallocation toward the Indo-Pacific—reflects an effort to reconcile moral leadership with strategic efficiency. RAND analysts interpret this as a “positive-sum adaptation,” whereby reduced exposure in the Middle East enables deeper investment in “sustainable partnerships” elsewhere, aligning limited engagement with global rebalancing ^(10) . Yet, the coherence of this model remains contingent on whether restraint functions as an active doctrine of prioritization or merely as a passive outcome of strategic fatigue.

THIRD REQUIREMENT: POLICY DRIFT AND STRATEGIC INCOHERENCE

Despite the normative appeal of restraint, the practical manifestation of U.S. policy in the Middle East often exhibits signs of policy drift—a gradual divergence between strategic intent and operational reality. Policy drift occurs when institutional inertia, bureaucratic fragmentation, or domestic political divisions prevent the translation of strategic vision into coherent practice. One assessment observes that U.S. engagement in the region remains characterized by “long-term military presences and base agreements” that persist without clear political objectives or exit mechanisms ⁽¹¹⁾ . This structural continuity reflects a failure to institutionalize restraint as policy, leaving the U.S. simultaneously disengaged in rhetoric yet entangled in practice.

Other analyses similarly characterize post-2011 American behavior as a “retreating role,” driven less by strategic design than by cost-benefit constraints ^(12) . In this view, the absence of a clearly articulated doctrine has produced a pattern of selective involvement—protecting core interests such as energy security, Israel's defense, and counterterrorism—while lacking an integrative regional vision. This “piecemeal pragmatism,” as it is described, limits the ability of U.S. policy to adapt dynamically to evolving regional orders.

Further commentary extends this critique by identifying a deeper cognitive pathology described as threatism—a persistent fixation on managing immediate dangers, such as ISIS resurgence, Iranian proxies, or regional instability, without articulating a constructive vision for regional order ^(13) . The emphasis on reactive containment over proactive engagement perpetuates a cycle of crisis



management that substitutes tactics for strategy ^(14) . Consequently, the boundary between patience as deliberate restraint and patience as inadvertent paralysis becomes increasingly blurred. The U.S. risks confusing prudence with passivity, leading to a situation in which strategic patience devolves into strategic incoherence—a posture defined not by the discipline of waiting, but by the absence of decisive direction.

FOURTH REQUIREMENT: COMPARATIVE DOCTRINAL CONTEXTS

Situating strategic patience within the broader landscape of American grand strategy illuminates its hybrid character and intellectual lineage. While the concept is often treated as a distinctive doctrine of the Obama era, its underlying logic intersects with several other schools of strategic thought—namely offshore balancing, strategic ambiguity, retrenchment, and strategic restraint. Each framework captures a dimension of how the U.S. manages the tension between global commitments and domestic constraints, yet strategic patience uniquely integrates these elements through its temporal and psychological dimensions.

Offshore balancing emphasizes the prioritization of great-power competition while delegating regional security responsibilities to allies and partners. It relies on indirect management, using diplomatic and economic tools to shape regional balances without committing to extensive forward deployments ^(15) . This approach is largely compatible with the post-2020 U.S. posture in the Middle East, which privileges partnerships and burden-sharing while reallocating strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific. Offshore balancing thus supplies the structural foundation upon which patience operates—limiting exposure while preserving influence through coalition-based deterrence.

Strategic ambiguity, by contrast, operates through the deliberate cultivation of uncertainty to deter adversaries and reassure allies. It maintains flexibility by withholding explicit commitments, compelling regional actors to anticipate U.S. reactions without clear red lines ^(16) . This approach has been particularly evident in Washington's dealings with Iran and Turkey, where calibrated uncertainty reinforces deterrence without requiring escalation. The logic of ambiguity—central to President Biden's deterrence language—reflects a modern iteration of strategic patience, in which restraint itself becomes a signaling device.



Retrenchment represents the structural dimension of strategic patience: the conscious reduction of overseas costs and the reprioritization of commitments^(17). It is visible in the gradual U.S. withdrawals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as the reduction of forward bases and troop levels across the region. This retrenchment reflects both fiscal pragmatism and political necessity, serving as the operational backdrop for a doctrine that seeks to sustain influence while minimizing risk.

Finally, strategic restraint embodies the liberal-internationalist variant of patience, emphasizing diplomacy, multilateralism, and rule-based order-building^(18). Rooted in both the Obama and Biden National Security Strategies, it envisions restraint not as disengagement but as disciplined leadership through institutions and values. While offshore balancing and retrenchment derive primarily from realist premises, strategic restraint infuses patience with normative legitimacy, linking prudence to the preservation of liberal order.

Each of these frameworks contributes to the broader strategic transition underway in U.S. foreign policy, yet only strategic patience explicitly couples restraint with temporal calculation—the recognition that time itself can function as an instrument of power. As the Obama administration’s National Security Strategy implied, waiting for local balances to stabilize and for adversaries to exhaust their own capacities can, in itself, serve as a form of strategic influence^(19). In this sense, patience is not passive but performative: a calculated endurance that turns delay into leverage, transforming time into a strategic resource.

FIFTH REQUIREMENT: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

To evaluate whether post-2020 U.S. policy in the Middle East constitutes a coherent doctrine of strategic patience or reflects policy drift, this study employs a tripartite analytical framework grounded in strategic theory. This framework assesses strategic consistency, operational continuity, and doctrinal articulation—three dimensions that together capture the coherence, sustainability, and communicative clarity of U.S. grand strategy.

The first dimension, strategic consistency, concerns the alignment of political objectives (ends), methods (ways), and available resources (means). Coherent strategy requires congruence among these elements to ensure that ambition does not exceed capacity. The 2022 National Security Strategy’s emphasis on



“integrated deterrence” illustrates this logic, seeking to synchronize military, economic, and diplomatic instruments to advance U.S. interests without overextension ^(20) . In the Middle East, such consistency would manifest in calibrated engagement—maintaining deterrence against adversaries like Iran while avoiding renewed large-scale military commitments.

The second dimension, operational continuity, measures the persistence of guiding patterns across successive administrations. Continuity underwrites credibility: when policies fluctuate between expansion and retrenchment, partners lose confidence and adversaries exploit ambiguity. RAND analyses describe a historical oscillation between “overreach and neglect” as a chronic impediment to American strategy in the region ^(21) . Evaluating operational continuity thus involves tracing whether the post-2020 posture represents a stable institutionalization of restraint or merely the latest iteration of cyclical disengagement.

The third dimension, doctrinal articulation, pertains to the explicit presence of a guiding narrative in official discourse. Strategic doctrines acquire coherence not only through practice but also through articulation—how leaders frame their principles, priorities, and justifications. While the Obama administration codified restraint under the term “strategic patience,” subsequent strategies, including those of the Trump and Biden administrations, have avoided the term altogether ^(22) . This rhetorical omission may indicate a conceptual drift: the persistence of restraint in behavior but its absence as an articulated doctrine. Without clear expression, strategic patience risks devolving into an implicit habit rather than a consciously guided strategy.

A coherent doctrine of strategic patience, therefore, would demonstrate alignment between ends and means, consistency of practice across administrations, and explicit articulation within public strategy. Conversely, policy drift becomes apparent when these elements fall out of sync—when rhetoric and reality diverge, when short-term contingencies displace long-term vision, and when restraint degenerates into inertia rather than calculated discipline. The following chapters apply this analytical framework to the cases of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan to determine whether contemporary U.S. policy in the Middle East represents an intentional model of limited engagement or the residual inertia of a superpower in gradual retreat.



THE SECOND TOPIC: THE POST-2020 STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The Middle East after 2020 has been redefined by a convergence of domestic, geopolitical, and systemic transformations that together reshape the logic of U.S. engagement. The end of the “forever wars” narrative, the intensification of great-power competition, shifting regional alignments, and the global disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic have collectively produced what might be termed *strategic minimalism*: a posture that blends selective engagement with structural retrenchment. While successive administrations have justified this recalibration as a form of *strategic patience*—a deliberate exercise in prioritization and prudence—it can equally be interpreted as a symptom of policy drift, reflecting adaptation without coherent design. The following subsections examine the primary contextual forces shaping this environment and their implications for the coherence of U.S. strategy in the region.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: THE END OF THE “FOREVER WARS” NARRATIVE

President Biden’s decision to complete the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 stands as the most visible and consequential manifestation of American restraint in a generation. The move symbolized the culmination of two decades of interventionism and was publicly justified as a correction to strategic overextension, echoing earlier concerns expressed by President Obama that the U.S. had become “over-weighted” militarily in the Middle East while “under-weighted” in the Indo-Pacific ⁽²³⁾. The decision reflected a broad consensus that protracted counterinsurgency campaigns had yielded diminishing returns relative to their human, fiscal, and geopolitical costs. Yet, the execution of the withdrawal—marked by the chaotic evacuation of Kabul and the swift resurgence of Taliban control—exposed the fragility of translating restraint into coherent policy.

RAND analysts observe that while the withdrawal “reduced short-term costs, it generated long-term uncertainty about U.S. reliability as a security guarantor” ⁽²⁴⁾. The episode revealed the structural dilemma of strategic patience: how to disengage without signaling decline. Domestically, the decision enjoyed substantial bipartisan support, reflecting the consolidation of a pacifist voter coalition fatigued by the human and financial toll of endless conflict ⁽²⁵⁾. The administration sought to reconcile this public sentiment with the imperatives of deterrence by emphasizing “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism capabilities, diplomatic re-engagement, and intelligence coordination. This recalibration—



balancing domestic exhaustion with external vigilance—illustrates the broader pattern of constrained leadership that defines the post-2020 strategic environment.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: GREAT-POWER COMPETITION AND STRATEGIC REPRIORITIZATION

The 2022 National Security Strategy situates U.S. foreign policy within a global contest “to shape the future of the international order,” explicitly naming China and Russia as systemic competitors ⁽²⁶⁾. This reframing has effectively reclassified the Middle East from a central theater of intervention to one of managed risk. While the document reiterates that the U.S. “will not leave our future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share our vision,” it devotes its principal attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions ⁽²⁷⁾. The implication is a strategic reprioritization rather than withdrawal—a recalibration of commitments in service of long-term competition.

RAND interprets this shift as a transition from “threatism,” characterized by reactive and crisis-driven policymaking, toward a model of “strategic investment” premised on sustainability and selectivity ⁽²⁸⁾. Nonetheless, the Middle East remains an arena of indirect great-power rivalry. Russia’s military entrenchment in Syria and its energy diplomacy across OPEC+, alongside China’s economic inroads through the Belt and Road Initiative, continue to challenge U.S. influence and complicate retrenchment efforts. This dynamic is considered as the paradox of permanence: despite repeated vows to pivot away, enduring bases in Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain remain indispensable to maintaining global flexibility ⁽²⁹⁾. Under these conditions, strategic patience functions less as disengagement and more as standby containment—a posture that preserves presence while deferring confrontation.

THIRD REQUIREMENT: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS: IRAN, THE GULF, AND TURKISH ACTIVISM

The regional landscape since 2020 has undergone its own transformation, characterized by competing ambitions, shifting alliances, and emergent multipolarity. U.S. strategy has had to navigate these changes while managing its own diminished appetite for intervention, producing an uneasy blend of deterrence and delegation.



Washington's post-2020 approach to Iran reflects a dual-track strategy combining revived diplomacy—centered on efforts to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—with continued sanctions and targeted containment of proxy networks. Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq and Syria have persistently tested U.S. red lines, exposing the limits of deterrence under conditions of reduced military engagement. Analysts describe this pattern as “threat-based and episodic,” a reactive cycle that substitutes crisis management for strategy^(30). Another assessment similarly critiques this as policy without end state, noting that the absence of a defined political objective undermines coherence^(31). Strategic patience in this context risks degenerating into strategic ambivalence: waiting without shaping outcomes.

The Abraham Accords (2020 onward) illustrate a new mode of diplomatic burden-sharing, enabling Washington to sustain influence indirectly through normalization between Israel and Gulf states. This architecture of delegated stability aligns with the principle of patience—outsourcing security responsibilities while maintaining overarching influence. Yet, as one critique cautions, entrusting regional order to partners with divergent interests risks generating strategic incoherence^(32). The accords strengthen U.S. leverage in the short term but may entrench competitive rivalries among signatories in the long run, particularly amid shifting Gulf threat perceptions toward Iran and intra-GCC competition.

Turkey's expanding regional role underscores the diffusion of power that accompanies American restraint. In Syria, Libya, and Eastern Mediterranean energy politics, Ankara has pursued what one analysis terms an “autonomous and aggressive energy diplomacy,” positioning itself as a hub linking the Middle East, Russia, and Europe^(33). This activism, facilitated by perceived U.S. retrenchment, epitomizes the region's growing multipolarity. While Turkey remains a NATO member, its assertive behavior complicates alliance cohesion and challenges U.S. influence. From this vantage point, strategic patience not only enables local agency but also invites regional contestation, as secondary powers exploit strategic vacuums to advance their interests.

FOURTH REQUIREMENT: COVID-19, ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS, AND RESOURCE REALLOCATION

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the inward turn of U.S. grand strategy, catalyzing a renewed focus on domestic renewal as the foundation of international leadership. The fiscal and social disruptions of the pandemic, coupled with



growing demands for investment in infrastructure, public health, and industrial policy, constrained the political and economic bandwidth for costly foreign commitments. The 2022 National Security Strategy encapsulates this linkage, asserting that “American strength abroad springs from our strength at home”⁽³⁴⁾. One analysis interprets this as the culmination of a “retreating role” driven by economic prudence rather than ideological realignment⁽³⁵⁾.

In practical terms, these constraints have accelerated a shift from direct intervention toward what is conceptualized as “sustainable partnerships”: capacity-building, selective engagement, and burden-sharing with capable regional actors⁽³⁶⁾. This model promises efficiency but carries its own structural risks. As another critique warns, over-reliance on arms sales, basing rights, and transactional partnerships—without corresponding political investment—recreates the dependency cycles that strategic patience was intended to transcend⁽³⁷⁾. The pandemic thus reinforced restraint but also magnified the challenge of converting it into coherent strategy: a foreign policy that is fiscally sustainable yet strategically purposeful.

THE THIRD TOPIC: CASE STUDIES: STRATEGIC PATIENCE OR POLICY DRIFT?

This section applies the evaluative framework developed earlier—strategic consistency, operational continuity, and doctrinal articulation—to three critical theaters of U.S. engagement in the post-2020 era: Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Each case illustrates a distinct manifestation of strategic restraint and, collectively, reveals the blurred line between *deliberate patience* and *inadvertent drift*. Through comparative analysis, this section examines how the U.S. has managed its reduced footprint while seeking to preserve influence, highlighting the extent to which restraint functions as coherent doctrine or as reactive minimalism.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: SYRIA: STRATEGIC PATIENCE OR STRATEGIC VACUUM?

Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) by 2019, U.S. forces in Syria were drawn down to roughly 900 troops, concentrated primarily in the northeast in partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Their missions include counterterrorism operations, intelligence collection, and



protection of key oil and logistical infrastructure ⁽³⁸⁾. This minimalist footprint embodies the operational logic of strategic patience—a reliance on local partners, an avoidance of escalation, and the maintenance of tactical deterrence with limited exposure. Analysts describe this as a damage-limitation exercise rather than a strategic project, underscoring the disjunction between tactical efficiency and strategic vision ⁽³⁹⁾.

In terms of strategic consistency, U.S. policy in Syria aligns narrow means to narrowly defined ends—preventing ISIS resurgence and protecting limited economic and security interests—but lacks a corresponding political horizon for conflict resolution or reconstruction. Operational continuity has been maintained through mechanisms such as deconfliction channels with Russia and coordination with the SDF, ensuring local stability but without progress toward a durable settlement. Doctrinal articulation, however, remains minimal: the 2022 National Security Strategy refers to Syria only tangentially, suggesting a rhetorical marginalization that mirrors practical neglect ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

The relative absence of U.S. strategic engagement has created an opening for regional and extra-regional actors. Russia has entrenched its military and political presence; Iran has expanded its network of militias and logistical corridors; and Turkey has pursued unilateral cross-border operations justified as counterterrorism but motivated by its broader security agenda. One analysis observes that Ankara’s “assertive energy diplomacy and military posture” signify Turkey’s transformation “from a regional actor to a geopolitical agenda-setter” ⁽⁴¹⁾. Consequently, the U.S. posture—though tactically prudent—risks devolving into a strategic vacuum, wherein restraint cedes initiative to more assertive actors.

Tactical patience, strategic ambivalence. The U.S. preserves limited local stability but abdicates meaningful regional leadership, illustrating the difficulty of sustaining coherence amid minimalist engagement.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: IRAQ: FROM STABILIZATION TO CONTAINMENT

In December 2021, Washington formally declared the end of “combat operations” in Iraq, retaining approximately 2,500 troops under a mission redefined as “advise, assist, and enable.” This transition represents the operationalization of what has been conceptualized as “sustainable partnerships”—a shift from direct intervention to a framework of capacity-building and advisory engagement ⁽⁴²⁾. The approach reflects strategic patience in its reliance on local



partners, calibrated deterrence, and symbolic presence designed to sustain influence without major escalation.

The Iraq mission today occupies an ambiguous middle ground: it must deter Iran-backed militias while avoiding entanglement in renewed hostilities. One assessment characterizes this posture as a form of strategic inertia—a condition in which the persistence of deployments serves reassurance and access more than it advances a clear political or strategic end state ^(4 3) .

In Baghdad, nationalist forces and pro-Iranian factions have intensified calls for sovereignty and the removal of foreign forces. In Washington, fiscal prudence and public war-weariness constrain further engagement. The result, as another analysis observes, is “a retreating role with selective interest protection”—a pattern that prioritizes crisis containment over long-term stability ^(4 4) . The U.S. presence thus endures as both symbol and necessity: a demonstration of commitment sufficient to prevent collapse, but insufficient to shape Iraq’s political trajectory.

In evaluative terms, U.S. policy in Iraq demonstrates moderate strategic consistency, with objectives and resources narrowly aligned around deterrence and stability maintenance. Operational continuity remains high, as the mission has persisted across three administrations with limited variation. Doctrinal articulation, however, is weak; the policy is primarily pragmatic and technocratic, lacking explicit strategic framing. Taken together, the result is managed disengagement with residual deterrence—an approach that institutionalizes restraint, but largely as a matter of political convenience rather than doctrinal conviction.

THIRD REQUIREMENT: AFGHANISTAN: WITHDRAWAL AND ITS DOCTRINAL IMPLICATIONS

The withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the definitive end of America’s longest war and the culmination of a gradual process of retrenchment initiated under President Obama and formalized in the 2020 Doha Agreement under President Trump. President Biden justified the decision by declaring that “the U.S. cannot and should not fight a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight” ⁽⁴⁵⁾ . The move has been assessed as a strategic inflection point—one that reduced immediate operational burdens but “inflicted reputational costs that will shape deterrence for a generation” ⁽⁴⁶⁾ .



Two major interpretations dominate the analytical debate. The first sees the withdrawal as coherent prioritization: a calculated effort to reallocate strategic resources to the Indo-Pacific and renew domestic strength, consistent with the 2022 National Security Strategy’s imperative to “invest in America’s core strengths”^(4 7). The second views it as strategic exhaustion: a policy failure driven by operational collapse and loss of political will. According to one critique, “restraint without credible deterrence becomes uncertainty,” inviting opportunism among adversaries and erosion of allied confidence^(4 8).

The chaotic nature of the withdrawal—culminating in the rapid Taliban takeover of Kabul—damaged U.S. credibility and raised doubts about its reliability as a security partner. Analyses conclude that “operational discontinuity overwhelmed strategic intent,” producing a reputational deficit that will reverberate across multiple theaters^(4 9). The strategic vacuum left by the U.S. exit has been partially filled by China’s diplomacy, Russia’s outreach to the Taliban regime, and renewed Iranian and Pakistani influence^(5 0). The episode thus exemplifies how restraint without transition planning can invert the logic of patience—transforming calculated disengagement into strategic abdication.

In evaluative terms, the Afghanistan withdrawal exhibits mixed strategic consistency: it aligned with domestic objectives but contradicted external expectations and execution. Operational continuity was weak, as the abrupt and chaotic implementation disrupted long-term planning cycles. Doctrinal articulation was moderate—restraint was expressed rhetorically but not institutionalized as a strategic principle. Overall, the case demonstrates abrupt retrenchment with reputational costs, illustrating how policy drift can eclipse strategic patience when restraint lacks procedural coherence and diplomatic foresight.

FOURTH REQUIREMENT: CROSS-CASE FINDINGS

The comparative evaluation of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan underscores a consistent pattern of strategic minimalism: the pursuit of limited objectives through constrained means under the banner of sustainability. Yet the coherence of this restraint varies across contexts. In Syria, U.S. policy exhibits tactical patience but lacks strategic design; in Iraq, it demonstrates institutional continuity but minimal doctrinal articulation; and in Afghanistan, it reveals operational rupture despite rhetorical justification.



Across these three cases, U.S. behavior falls into a clear set of patterns. In Syria, the U.S. practices tactical patience marked by strategic ambivalence. In Iraq, it follows a model of managed disengagement that preserves residual deterrence. In Afghanistan, the abrupt withdrawal generated significant reputational costs. Taken together, these dynamics reveal a broader tendency: restraint without doctrine. The U.S. continues to operate with prudence but without an integrated strategic narrative linking restraint to renewal. As one assessment emphasizes, the core challenge lies not in the logic of patience itself, but in its institutionalization—“transforming episodic restraint into an enduring strategy of sustainable engagement”^(5 1). Until such a transformation occurs, post-2020 U.S. policy in the Middle East will remain suspended between discipline and drift, between the art of waiting and the risk of withdrawal.

THE FOURTH TOPIC: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A comparative examination of U.S. conduct in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan provides a critical lens through which to assess whether post-2020 restraint constitutes a coherent strategic orientation or a pattern of context-driven improvisation. By analyzing cross-case patterns, evaluating coherence through structured criteria, identifying the structural sources of drift, and assessing whether these practices amount to an implicit doctrine, this section demonstrates how the variation and commonalities across the three theaters illuminate the underlying logic—and limitations—of contemporary U.S. strategy. Together, these requirements reveal the extent to which American behavior is guided by intentional design or shaped by external pressures, institutional legacies, and shifting geopolitical priorities.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: CROSS-CASE PATTERNS

The Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan cases collectively reveal a recurrent pattern in post-2020 U.S. conduct: American behavior embodies elements of coherence and drift in unequal and context-dependent measure. Coherence is most apparent where restraint is deliberate—anchored in clearly circumscribed objectives, calibrated use of force, and structured coordination with allies and local partners. Drift emerges where restraint is primarily reactive—driven by domestic fatigue, ad hoc crisis management, or institutional inertia, and unaccompanied by a positive strategic design.



Across all three theaters, three behavioral themes recur with notable regularity: tactical patience, managed disengagement, and abrupt retrenchment. In Syria, tactical patience manifests through a small residual presence focused on counterterrorism and deconfliction, yet lacking an articulated political end state. In Iraq, managed disengagement has produced a stable but fragile advisory posture that preserves residual deterrence without generating momentum toward long-term resilience. In Afghanistan, abrupt retrenchment—climactic rather than planned—has amplified reputational costs and opened space for external competitors.

This underlying tension is captured succinctly in assessments concluding that U.S. strategy in the Middle East “remains driven by threat-based paradigms and legacy frameworks rather than a positive regional vision”^(5 2). Rather than a coherent regional doctrine, U.S. behavior appears as a set of adaptations to risk, cost, and domestic constraint—adaptive in the short term, but structurally under-theorized.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: EVALUATING COHERENCE

Applying the three evaluative criteria—strategic consistency, operational continuity, and doctrinal articulation—yields a differentiated but generally ambivalent picture. When assessed across Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the pattern can be summarized narratively as follows. In Syria, strategic consistency is weak, in Iraq it is moderate, and in Afghanistan it is mixed, producing a partially coherent overall record. Operational continuity is moderate in Syria, strong in Iraq, and weak in Afghanistan, generating an uneven aggregate pattern. Doctrinal articulation is absent in Syria, weak in Iraq, and moderate in Afghanistan, resulting in a generally limited level of doctrinal clarity.

In strategic consistency, Syria fares poorly: the narrow counter-ISIS mission is not embedded in a broader political or regional strategy. Iraq demonstrates moderate consistency, as ends—limited stabilization and deterrence—and means—an advisory presence and constrained force protection—are reasonably aligned. Afghanistan presents a mixed picture: although the withdrawal aligned with domestic priorities and global reprioritization, it conflicted with long-standing commitments and alliance expectations.

In terms of operational continuity, Iraq stands out as comparatively strong, with a mission that has persisted—albeit under shifting labels—across multiple



administrations. Syria reflects moderate continuity, maintaining deconfliction channels and stable partnerships but with little substantive evolution. Afghanistan, by contrast, exemplifies operational discontinuity: a long-term presence gave way to a rapid and chaotic exit that disrupted planning cycles and institutional expectations.

Doctrinal articulation is weakest across all three cases. Syria is effectively absent from high-level strategic discourse; Iraq is framed largely in functional terms—training, advising, counterterrorism—rather than as part of a coherent regional approach. Afghanistan receives greater rhetorical emphasis, particularly in arguments about “ending the forever wars,” yet even here the framing is mostly justificatory rather than doctrinal, aimed at defending a decision rather than embedding it in a durable strategic framework.

The 2022 National Security Strategy emphasizes “integrated deterrence” and “values-based leadership” as central principles of U.S. grand strategy but leaves the Middle East only lightly theorized, treating it primarily as a space for risk management rather than a core arena of order-building^(5 3). One assessment argues that this omission “precludes articulation of a sustainable regional order,” because it fails to explain how restraint, partnerships, and selective engagement are meant to cohere into a long-term strategic vision^(5 4). The result is a pattern of partial coherence: consistent in form—restraint, partnership, limited exposure—but inconsistent in purpose and narrative.

THIRD REQUIREMENT: STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF DRIFT

The unevenness observed across the three cases is not purely contingent; it reflects deeper structural drivers that condition U.S. behavior in the Middle East. Three such drivers are particularly salient:

Firstly: Domestic Political Fatigue and Institutional Inertia.

Two decades of interventionism—spanning Afghanistan, Iraq, and broader counterterrorism campaigns—have generated bipartisan reluctance to embark on new large-scale military commitments. Public opinion, budgetary constraints, and elite discourse converge around a shared aversion to “forever wars.” Yet assessments emphasize that the institutional architecture of U.S. defense policy—long-term basing, security cooperation frameworks, and entrenched bureaucratic



interests—resists full withdrawal ⁽⁵⁵⁾. This tension between political fatigue and organizational inertia produces a default posture of minimal but persistent presence: enough to avoid abrupt vacuums, but insufficient to build a coherent regional strategy.

Secondly: Competing Global Priorities.

The strategic elevation of the Indo-Pacific and the renewed emphasis on Euro-Atlantic security in response to Russia's assertiveness have absorbed a disproportionate share of U.S. strategic bandwidth. The 2022 National Security Strategy identifies China as the “pacing challenge” and Russia as an acute threat to the international order, relegating the Middle East to a secondary theater of “managed risk” ^(5 6). This reprioritization encourages cost-cutting and risk-avoidance in the region but does not articulate what form of residual engagement is necessary to sustain long-term stability. As a result, U.S. policy in the Middle East often becomes derivative of other priorities rather than designed on its own terms.

Thirdly: Regional Multipolarity and Autonomous Agenda-Setting.

Empowered middle powers—Turkey, Iran, the Gulf monarchies, and increasingly non-Arab actors—have shifted from being mainly security consumers to autonomous agenda-setters. Analyses note that states such as Turkey have transitioned into “agenda-setters rather than dependents,” leveraging energy infrastructure, military capabilities, and diplomatic activism to advance independent strategies ^(5 7). This growing multipolarity complicates U.S. efforts to impose coherent regional frameworks and incentivizes reliance on local actors as proxies or partners. Yet such delegation often fragments strategy, as each partner pursues interests that do not necessarily align with U.S. goals.

These structural dynamics foster a context in which restraint is easier to practice than to theorize: the U.S. reduces its footprint and exposure but struggles to translate this reduction into a clear and durable doctrine.



FOURTH REQUIREMENT: THE “DOCTRINE WITHOUT DOCTRINE”

The cumulative outcome of these trends is what may be characterized as a “doctrine without doctrine.” In behavioral terms, the U.S. has adopted a recognizable pattern of restraint, selective engagement, and burden-sharing. However, it has not codified this behavior into an explicit doctrinal framework with defined principles, thresholds, and objectives.

Obama’s “strategic patience”—articulated in the 2015 National Security Strategy—provided at least a nominal label for restraint, linking it to multilateralism, diplomacy, and the recognition of limits. Biden’s pragmatic minimalism, as reflected in the 2022 National Security Strategy, preserves much of the same behavior (reduced presence, reliance on partners, prioritization of other theaters) but without the unifying rhetoric of patience or a clearly stated Middle East doctrine^(5 8). The behavior persists; the conceptual vocabulary attenuates.

RAND calls for the articulation of a clearer narrative centered on “sustainable partnerships” to replace reactive threat-containment and legacy frameworks^(5 9). Without such a narrative, restraint risks being interpreted—as by allies and adversaries alike—not as a disciplined strategy, but as evidence of indecision, fatigue, or decline. In this sense, the U.S. is practicing a de facto doctrine of limited engagement while remaining reluctant to name and formalize it—a doctrine, as it were, without doctrine.

THE FIFTH TOPIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. STRATEGY AND THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

As the U.S. recalibrates its role in the Middle East, the implications extend far beyond regional politics, touching the foundations of U.S. grand strategy and the evolving international order. The post-2020 period of restrained engagement has generated both opportunities and vulnerabilities, raising critical questions about how well current practices align with Washington’s long-term strategic objectives and its capacity to operate in an increasingly competitive global environment. Understanding these implications requires examining several interrelated dimensions—ranging from great-power competition and regional multipolarity to alliance credibility, the sustainability of limited engagement, and the normative logic underpinning U.S. statecraft. Together, these requirements clarify whether



strategic patience represents a viable doctrinal model or merely a transitional posture shaped by constraint.

FIRST REQUIREMENT: ALIGNMENT WITH GREAT-POWER COMPETITION

In broad terms, post-2020 restraint in the Middle East aligns with the economy-of-force logic associated with offshore balancing. Proponents argue that the U.S. should conserve resources for managing peer competitors in key industrial regions—most notably the Indo-Pacific—while relying on regional partners to shoulder more of the burden for local security⁽⁶⁰⁾. The reduced U.S. footprint in the Middle East, coupled with a sustained minimal deterrent and enduring basing rights, broadly reflects this principle.

However, as RAND analysts caution, economizing is not synonymous with strategizing. Resource efficiency, while necessary, “cannot substitute for strategic clarity”⁽⁶¹⁾. A posture that focuses solely on cost reduction without specifying long-term political objectives or regional order-building risks producing a series of tactical savings at the expense of strategic coherence. The implication is that alignment with great-power competition is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a sustainable Middle East strategy: restraint must be embedded within a positive framework for regional stability, not merely justified by the demands of other theaters.

SECOND REQUIREMENT: REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES: MULTIPOLARIZATION AND LOCAL EMPOWERMENT

The gradual decline of uncontested U.S. primacy in the Middle East has accelerated trends toward regional multipolarization. Analyses show how Turkey’s energy diplomacy, infrastructure initiatives, and expanded security role—alongside Iran’s proxy networks and the increasingly autonomous foreign policies of Gulf states—are filling parts of the vacuum left by American retrenchment⁽⁶²⁾. These developments redistribute both risks and responsibilities: they reduce the



immediate burdens on Washington while simultaneously eroding its leverage over norm-setting, conflict resolution, and crisis management.

On one level, this diffusion of power could be seen as consistent with strategic patience: allowing regional actors to assume greater responsibility while the U.S. intervenes only selectively. Yet, in practice, the empowerment of local actors does not inherently generate stability. Instead, it can entrench rivalries, foster competitive alignments, and complicate diplomatic coordination. The risk is that U.S. restraint facilitates not a self-sustaining equilibrium, but an increasingly fragmented order in which multiple actors pursue unilateral agendas.

THIRD REQUIREMENT: ALLIANCE CREDIBILITY AND DETERRENCE

The manner of the Afghanistan withdrawal, combined with the ambiguity of U.S. commitments in Syria and Iraq, has had significant implications for alliance credibility and deterrence signaling. Allies and partners—including those outside the Middle East—have interpreted these developments as indicators of U.S. willingness to absorb political costs in order to exit protracted engagements. While some partners welcome this shift toward national self-reliance, others fear abandonment.

The warning that “restraint without credible deterrence becomes uncertainty” is particularly salient in this context ^(6 3). When restraint is not clearly framed as a choice born of strength—linked to prioritization, capability, and calculated discipline—it risks being interpreted as a sign of incapacity or inconsistency. Restoring and sustaining alliance confidence therefore requires the U.S. to demonstrate that strategic patience is not synonymous with strategic withdrawal: that it retains both the capability and the political will to act decisively when core interests or explicit commitments are at stake.

FOURTH REQUIREMENT: THE MIDDLE EAST AS A TEST CASE FOR LIMITED ENGAGEMENT

The Middle East now functions as a proving ground for a nascent model of limited engagement: one that combines diplomacy, selective use of force, reliance



on partners, and long-term capacity-building instead of large-scale intervention. RAND argues that this model could be sustainable if—and only if—U.S. partnerships are carefully aligned with clearly defined interests and embedded in explicit policy design rather than left to ad hoc evolution ⁽⁶⁴⁾.

In this sense, the region serves as a laboratory for testing whether strategic patience can be institutionalized as a doctrine of sustainable engagement—a middle path between hegemonic management and outright withdrawal. If successful, such a model could inform U.S. behavior in other regions experiencing similar dynamics of diffusion and contestation. If it fails, the Middle East may instead exemplify the dangers of under-theorized retrenchment: vacuums, misperception, and escalating regional competition.

FIFTH REQUIREMENT: NORMATIVE AND STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

Whether post-2020 U.S. policy in the Middle East ultimately constitutes a coherent doctrine of strategic patience or a pattern of policy drift hinges on the question of *institutionalization*. Coherence requires more than recurring patterns of restraint; it demands that such restraint be codified as strategy—linked to conflict prevention, regional order-building, and multilateral diplomacy, and articulated clearly in official documents and elite discourse.

If restraint continues to be driven primarily by crisis management, domestic fatigue, and budgetary pressures—without accompanying doctrinal clarification—it will remain a form of reactive drift, vulnerable to reversal under new shocks or leadership changes. If, however, the U.S. succeeds in integrating its practices of limited engagement into a broader narrative of sustainable partnerships, calibrated deterrence, and shared responsibility, the Middle East could emerge as the first region in which a mature doctrine of strategic patience is fully realized.

In this respect, the Middle East functions as a mirror reflecting America's broader struggle to reconcile ambition with limitation. It reveals both the necessity and the difficulty of crafting a foreign policy that recognizes the constraints of the post-unipolar era while still seeking to shape, rather than merely endure, the international order.



Conclusion:

The evolution of U.S. strategy in the Middle East after 2020 reveals a posture defined more by cautious recalibration than decisive doctrinal shift. The cases of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan show that restraint has become the dominant mode of American engagement, yet it remains only partially theorized, inconsistently applied, and insufficiently institutionalized. Strategic patience exists in practice but only incompletely in doctrine; the result is a foreign policy suspended between deliberate discipline—the conscious management of limits—and policy drift shaped by fatigue, domestic constraint, and global competition.

This duality reflects a broader transformation in U.S. grand strategy. The logic of the current era is one of strategic economization: aligning commitments with finite resources while prioritizing the Indo-Pacific. In the Middle East, this has translated into partner-centered security arrangements, intelligence-driven deterrence, and selective diplomacy. Although this approach promises short-term sustainability, it risks long-term incoherence unless supported by stable coordination mechanisms and a clearly articulated conceptual framework. As RAND warns, “resource efficiency cannot substitute for strategic clarity.” The U.S. has learned how to limit exposure, but not yet how to convert restraint into durable influence.

From a theoretical standpoint, strategic patience can mature into a coherent doctrine only when three conditions are met: strategic consistency, linking restraint to prioritized ends; operational continuity, institutionalized across administrations; and doctrinal articulation, expressed through clear narratives that frame patience as strategy rather than retreat. Absent these conditions, restraint risks degenerating into fragmented policy drift, vulnerable to adversarial exploitation and partner misperception.

Middle Eastern states should respond to the evolving U.S. posture by diversifying and modernizing their strategic partnerships, reducing reliance on any single external power and cultivating balanced ties with the U.S., Europe, and emerging global actors. At the same time, the gradual decline of direct U.S. intervention underscores the need for regional security frameworks capable of addressing shared challenges—including maritime protection, counterterrorism, and energy infrastructure security—through cooperative mechanisms rather than unilateral action. Strengthening domestic resilience through economic diversification, governance reform, and institutional capacity-building is equally



essential for navigating a more uncertain strategic environment. To maintain constructive engagement with Washington, regional governments should align their cooperation with areas central to U.S. global priorities, such as counterterrorism, energy stability, technological governance, and maritime freedom of navigation. Finally, as regional multipolarity intensifies—with Turkey, Iran, and Gulf states expanding their influence—Middle Eastern actors must invest in diplomatic coordination and confidence-building measures to prevent miscalculation and avoid the escalation risks that often accompany shifts in external power involvement.

The Middle East has become the principal testing ground for whether a superpower can maintain influence through selective, sustainable engagement rather than through occupation or compellence. Whether the emerging model evolves into a coherent doctrine of strategic patience—or remains a form of strategic liminality caught between intervention and restraint—depends not only on Washington's choices but also on the ability of regional states to adapt, coordinate, and seize opportunities in an era of great-power reprioritization. Future research should thus examine how restraint can be institutionalized as an operational principle of twenty-first-century statecraft—how diplomacy, defense, and development instruments might converge to sustain influence without overextension. Comparative analysis with U.S. approaches in the Indo-Pacific, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America would clarify whether strategic patience represents a regional anomaly or the prototype of a new global paradigm. In that determination rests the answer to the study's central question: whether America's post-2020 posture in the Middle East marks the birth of a coherent doctrine of strategic patience, or the continuation of policy drift under another name.

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