The U.S. national security community’s growing focus on China and Russia is raising questions about the future of America’s role in the Middle East region. Can the U.S. pull back from the broader Middle East and expect other actors to contain the threats building in the region? ISW Director of Innovation and Tradecraft Colonel (ret.) Ketti Davison tackles this question and how America should think about its strategy.

Maseh Zarif:
This is Overwatch. A podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I’m your host for this episode.

One of the issues we’ve tackled on the show is how the broader Middle East region fits into the set of global challenges the United States must contend with. America’s national security strategy since 9/11 has placed an emphasis on the broader Middle East, whether it’s jihadist and their networks or hostile state actors like the Iranian Regime. This region has presented numerous threats to U.S. interests and therefore been a primary area of focus.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy began to challenge that notion. That document, which is produced by the Department of Defense stated that the central challenge to U.S. prosperity insecurity is the reemergence of longterm, strategic competition with revisionist powers, namely China and Russia. The National Security Community has, as a result, been grappling with what the U.S. needs to do in the Indo-Pacific and Europe regions to defend its interests.

That discussion has raised a question. How should us strategy in the Middle East evolve to account for the unfolding global threat environment? Amidst this debate, there’ve been proponents of the notion that the U.S. should scale back its involvement in the Middle East region and let other regional and international actors assume a larger role there. The aim underlying this notion would be for the United States to do just enough to ensure that the region’s problems stay contained.

ISW Director of Tradecraft and Innovation, Ketti Davison, a retired us army colonel is thinking through the basis for this idea and its viability. She joins the program to discuss what it would mean in the real world dynamics of the region.

Ketti Davison:
What comes to mind when you think in the middle East? Fanatics. Terrorists. Conflict. Well why don’t we contain them? It worked for the cold war, and it is a very appealing idea to just be able to contain all this mess the way that we’ve done before. The problem is as appealing as this idea is, it’s an illusion with the Middle East and actually with the globe as well, but especially with the Middle East. We can’t keep things in. We can’t keep things out, and we can’t simply turn our back without assuming an unacceptable level of risk. We see the great powers, they’re doing what they can get away with in the Middle East in ways that threatened to U.S. interests. We have foreign fighters that are coming in. We’ve got defeated fighters and disillusioned fighters that are leaving, and we have desperate refugees that are moving out as well.
If you just look at what’s in the news today, just as an example, the plight of the Syrian Kurds, you had Turkey and Russia that coordinated the invasion and occupation of parts of Northern Syria. In order to keep Europe quiet about this, Turkey, in essence, blackmailed Europe threatening to send waves of refugees into Europe if they took too strong of a stance. This is just one example of how containing the Middle East just isn’t going to work for American interests.

I’ve heard a number of these arguments before. Let’s just leave this mess for Iran and Russia and Turkey to handle. Let’s pull out and watch them get bogged down in fighting against the jihadist groups, propping up weak governments and cobbling together local forces. Let them spend their blood and treasure while we watched from the sidelines. This isn’t the Cold War, and as much as we would like it to be a simpler world where we could just focus on one or two major threats of our choosing and dismiss the rest, that simply isn’t the world we live in today.

Walls that may have been a viable solution decades ago, they just won’t work in the Middle East. What is it about the Middle East that we can’t contain? What we can’t keep things out, specifically great powers and foreign fighters. Those are the two that impact on national security interests the most right now. If you look at great powers, Turkey has already invaded Syria three times. It’s established structures and intends on a longterm occupation. Turkey has threatened to invade Iraq as well. None of this is aligned with U.S. National interests. Russia has come in with a permanent presence in Syria, making it a significant Mediterranean power now. The airports and seaports that it is established, not only give it the ability to threaten NATO’s southern flank, it can do it almost at will. It even shares intelligence and advises operations in Iraq along with other regional countries. This is not working for the United States.

China’s strategic vision for the Middle East and for much of the globe is it’s one belt, one road concept or initiative. What about one road runs straight through the Middle East and it does that because the Middle East is central to global trade, transit and resources. We can’t just leave these to China. China in order to secure its own interest is negotiating for basing and access across the goal. This kind of security is a high priority for China, which is why we see Chinese naval vessels participating in counter piracy operations. We cannot leave the security of these global trading routes to the Chinese.

As we’re trying to leave other great powers are moving in to fill the vacuum that we are creating. This puts us at a global disadvantage. It might be fine if the cumulative effect of the great powers moving in and interacting with each other was stabilizing, but the problem is it’s not. They’re adding to an already unstable region and it’s leading to bigger problems for the United States.

Just as we can’t keep great powers from moving in, we also can’t keep foreign fighters from moving into the Middle East. We’ve seen tens of thousands of foreign fighters move into Iraq and Syria when Al Baghdadi established his Islamic State and called for fighters to emigrate to help protect it and defend it. These were generally Sunni jihadist who answered the call to immigrate. Some of those foreign jihadist were killed in the fight. Others, hundreds of them, still in detention centers and prisons, but there are thousands that are still unaccounted for. Sunnis are not the only foreign fighters coming into the Middle East. Iran has brought in Pakistanis and Afghans to fight alongside Iraqi and Lebanese Arabs with the idea of exporting Iran’s version of its Islamic revolution. What Iran is doing is organizing these foreign fighters into what is, for all intents and purposes, an Iranian Foreign Legion.

What this allows Iran to do is export its revolution and expand its control of the region at the cost of the foreign fighters who are taking the casualties, allowing Iran to limit the casualties that it is taking. What we are seeing is the Shia foreign fighters dying for Iran’s cause and Iran is able to limit the amount of casualties that it is taking in the region.
Now, it’s more than just as Islamic fighters that are coming into the Middle East to fight. The Kurdish causes drawn in dozens of foreign fighters as well. In this case, many of these fighters just happened to be westerners and some of them have military background. We’ve got everything from individual fighters to great powers moving into the Middle East and interacting with each other, each for their own purposes and with their own agendas. They’re bringing in ideas with them that don’t coexist well together.

Turkish President Erdogan’s vision of this much more expansive neo-Ottomanism idea clashes with Putin’s vision of reestablishing Russia as a global power on par with the United States. Back in the days where the world was simpler and we just had the two super powers. China’s trying to come in as a harmonious competitor, but the way that it’s trying to advance harmony and competition is occurring in a region where harmony and competition do not go hand in hand. It is very unlikely that these great powers are going to work well together and share influence and resources when they don’t have a strong history of doing it anywhere else. All of this is layered on top of your Sunni versus Shia dynamics and your ethnic tensions with your Kurds and your Turks and your Persians and your Arabs. None of this is contained to the region. All of it spills over.

Why don’t we leave the great powers there and the foreign fighters there and let them fight it out in the Middle East and we’ll deal with whoever wins. The problem with that is what moves into the Middle East is also able to move back out. Turkey is expanding its presence and influence in Northern Africa and in the Eastern Mediterranean in a way that is increasing tension and spreading instability in those other regions and among our friends, partners, and allies.

China’s one belt, one road initiative doesn’t stop in the Middle East either. It moves right through it and goes through Africa and parts of Europe as well. Russia’s presence in the Mediterranean, now the largest it’s been since the Cold War, is able to stay that way and threaten NATO thanks to the basis that they have in Syria and the way that they’re able to operate out of Egypt with the apparent intent to do the same thing in Northern Africa when you look at Libya.

The foreign fighters, that we have, are essentially using the Middle East as an extremist training ground, honing their skills, building their reputations, and solidifying their networks before they go home. When they go home, they are going to present a significant threat that spans the globe. This is because they came from so many different nations to begin with. If you look at Russia,

Russia’s concerned that it’s going to have these battle-hardened Chechens come home after being grained in this fight. They’re going to inspire others to emulate them. They may even come back and establish movements of their own and potentially upsetting the delicate balance that Russia has worked so hard to establish in Chechnya. Russia is also worried about jihadist from its former Soviet States such as Tajikistan in Uzbekistan, whose return could destabilize Russia’s interests in its nearer broad.

China worries that the uyghurs, its own jihadist, that are fighting in Syria are going to live and be able to come home and take this fight back to the province that China is working so hard to keep quiet right now.

This is one of the reasons that we’ve seen Chinese counter-terrorism forces in Syria, and this isn’t just a Russia problem or Chinese problem. These foreign fighters who came to the Islamic State and actually for other jihadist causes too, came from over a hundred countries. Now that the Islamic State is territorially defeated, many of these fighters will try to go home or join other causes.

It’s not just the fighters that won’t stay in the Middle East. All of this instability and conflict is causing refugees
to leave too. The Middle East is producing waves of refugees that are moving into other regions and often staying there permanently. Over four million Iraqi refugees left during the Sectarian Conflict that came in the wake of the U.S. invasion. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled the Civil War in Yemen that is still ongoing. Right now, what we see with the Syrian refugee crisis, it’s considered to be the largest refugee crisis of our time.

Nearly seven million have left that country so far, and the fighting is still ongoing there. Many of them went into Europe and arguably destabilized the Western Liberal Order and triggered a rise in protectionism and populism that is eroding the stability of our friends, partners and allies in Europe. It’s making them turn inward to be able to address this domestic issue and the strain on their resources instead of maintaining an outward focus and helping the United States address larger global issues. The more unstable the Middle East is, the more refugees will leave and be unwilling or unable to return. The more this instability is going to spread than the less we are going to be able to deal with it. Again, this is not something we can simply turn our back on.

This brain drain of refugees hurts the region when it comes to continuous development because so much of his talents is choosing to leave and not come back.

Of course it places such an enormous strain on the States that are trying to take them in. Now, many of these refugees have a difficult time assimilating because of course they speak a different language, practice a different religion or adhere to a different culture. Again, increasing the challenge that they present or they pose to the States that they move into. Now if you want an example of what happens to large population segments that are displaced from their homelands in conflict, they’re uprooted from their stabilizing social structures for long periods of time, just look at the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban grew up in the refugee camps in Pakistan that developed after the years of conflict that Afghanistan endured. The last thing that the world needs is for more groups like this to emerge.

What do we do about the Middle East since we can’t contain it? Well, the first thing we need to do is we need to change our mindset. This is not a single problem to solve, but a complex set of problems that we need to manage over time. We need to show some strategic patience here. We need to think in terms of systems, not discrete problems. Open systems have energy or forces that move in it, move out of it and move through it.

The next thing we need to do is we need to seek to understand the region as a system. Then understand how the regional system fits into the larger global system, where the system seems to be going, and most importantly, where we want it to go. Then, we’re going to be able to take deliberate and thoughtful action to be able to shape the trajectory. We’ll be able to evolve the system over time to a more acceptable state. We need regional and global approaches that integrate and reinforce each other and not undermine each other.

What happens when you have a short term focus instead of a longterm focus? When you break the pieces of the problem into small individual parts and you solve those parts separately is what we have happening right now between the Kurds in Syria and the Turkish invasion of Northern Syria. For years, the U.S. main effort in the middle East was using Syrian Kurdish fighters as the defeat mechanism for the Islamic State. This made complete sense when you looked at just that of the problem set. These are the most capable fighters. They were very dependable partners, and they were willing to work with us.

If you looked at what the U.S. was trying to do with Europe, the U.S. main effort was keeping Turkey on our side and NATO as a counterbalance to Russia. The short term focus that we had in arming the Kurds that we knew or an existential threat to Turkey has caused this longterm problem that we have right now where we undermined both national interests that we were trying to achieve. Turkey is now closer to Russia and the Kurds are now more focused on survival than on helping us maintain the enduring defeat ISIS.
Another argument I’ve heard is, “If we had never entered the Middle East to begin with, none of this would be our problem.” Well, so at the risk of going down a counterfactual road, which is always dangerous, there’s a strong possibility that if we had not gone into Iraq for the invasion that we did in 2003 and left Saddam in power, that Saddam would have faced the same kind of Arab Springs that Yemen experienced and that Syria experienced. Both of those States are still in a state of civil war that is producing humanitarian crises and waves of refugees. We would have had a different problem had we not gone into Iraq in 2003, but I’m not sure it would have been less of a problem. We could have also chosen to not partner with the Kurds and let the Islamic State exist as a state and control territory and implement Sharia law and be a beacon to every other jihadist movement out there who then might’ve been inspired to take territories and establish physical provinces in other regions.

I can’t imagine how that would be a better situation for the United States than the way that we went in at low cost for the United States and territorially defeated ISIS. This is why it’s so important that we don’t look at containing complex problem sets like the Middle East, but we move to understanding them and doing deliberate engagement over time, that is informed by this larger idea of where we want the system to go so we can move it in a way that reinforces U.S. national interest.

*Maseh Zarif:*

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