
US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case for Continuity

By Bledar Prifti

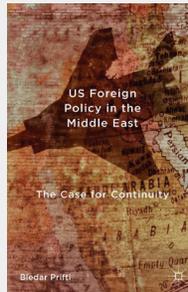
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In *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case for Continuity*, Bledar Prifti makes a case for the recurring pattern of offshore balancing as the preferred U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. In order to support this central argument, the author discusses the five American foreign policy doctrines: the Truman Doctrine, the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine, the Carter Doctrine, and the Reagan Doctrine (pp. 10, 61). Historical references to the statements of U.S. Presidents are mentioned to emphasize the continuity of the U.S. offshore balancing policy in the Middle East.

While discussing the main impetus of American foreign policy, Prifti asserts that the U.S. seeks to prevent any other great power from becoming a potential regional hegemon, since such an occurrence could eventually pose a threat to the U.S. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan are cited as the main examples of U.S. insecurity (p. 11). The problem with this line of argument, however, is that it justifies American intervention in states on the basis of pre-emption. The U.S. dominance over the flow of oil in the Middle East and the safeguarding of its alliance with Israel are secondary U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Middle East (pp. 14, 15).

In Prifti's view, American foreign policy concerns itself with preserving the contemporary



power structure. In other words, maintaining America's position in the international power hierarchy is one of the U.S.' imperative objectives. This objective is driven by the U.S.' geostrategic position and military capability (p. 11). For the author, the uncertain nature of the international system augments the significance of status-quo power such as the U.S.' as a stabilizing factor. Speaking of the Russian and Chinese potential to challenge U.S. power, the precarious relations between the two emerging powers facilitates U.S. status in the international arena. In other words, challenger powers prefer bypassing rather than directly confronting the U.S. (p. 14).

For Prifti, the outlook of American foreign policy is grounded in the fear of encirclement and the emergence of regional rivals (pp. 18, 146). It adopts the strategy of offshore balancing, which involves buck-passing as a first option and direct balancing as a second choice. In other words, when Washington fails to obtain its objectives by buck-passing strategy, it resorts to direct balancing in the Middle East. For example, the U.S. bypassed the authority of the UN to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War (p. 98). Similarly; the strategy of bypassing is substituted for direct balancing to achieve the desired objectives when the former fails in the Middle East. Theoretically, the assumptions of offensive realism are applied so as to make sense of the foreign policy of the

U.S. in the past few decades as well as future prospects (p. 54). For instance, the absence of a centralized authority in international politics, the military power of challenger states and the resulting fear renders the U.S. reliant on self-help and power maximization (p. 188).

The author seems to discount the role of ideology and the beliefs of leaders at the individual level and their impact on American foreign policy doctrines (p. 62). However, if one delves into Trump's 'America First' policy, the travel ban, for instance, targeted individuals based on their faith or ideology rather than mere realist assumptions. Hence, the tendency of the author to overemphasize the role of American foreign policy doctrines while downplaying the role of ideology is one of the book's weak areas. Indeed, the ascending role of right wing factions in the U.S. polity proves the impact of beliefs in shaping political choices.

Interestingly, the U.S. role in the Iraq war is dubbed as a "brilliant strategic policy" (p. 109); however, if one considers the dynamics of power politics in Iraq, they clearly show that the U.S. 'strategy' for achieving American interests is weak compared to the increasing power of Iran and Russia in Iraq. Similarly, the power vacuum in Iraq has created more room for the proactive role of Turkey, which may directly threaten U.S. interests, as the trilateral alliance of Russia, Iran and Turkey has made major strides in curbing the Kurdish secessionist movement.

While speaking of the future prospects of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the author claims that it is likely to remain unchanged, based on the theory of offensive realism, unless there is a change, in term of influence, in the territory as the maritime power or regional hegemon status of the U.S. (p. 188). This may sound persuading if one follows the

arguments of the author grounded in offensive realism; however, current political developments in the form of the emerging trilateral alliance of Russia, Turkey, and Iran seem to pose a challenge to the continuation of the American policy to pursue offshore balancing in the Middle East. Similarly, the increasing role of China is another factor that was overlooked in this context.

The author claims that the role of China as a challenger to U.S. power is likely to increase, which appears true if one looks at the country's economic growth and military strength.¹ China's increasing military strength and its implications for the U.S. is often not discussed by American authors. For example, Joseph Nye expresses reservations about the rising power of China, and this book has taken that factor into consideration, which helps to explain the dynamics of future relations between the U.S. and China (p. 198).

In sum, the book provides valuable insights into U.S. foreign policy in terms of comparing various foreign policy doctrines. The consistent patterns embedded in the U.S. policy of offshore balancing facilitate the identification of main drivers as well as in the discernment of the changes taking place in international affairs. However, the predisposition of the author to defend the U.S.' meddling in the affairs of the Middle East could be objectionable for some experts on the basis of legal and humanitarian grounds, as it stirs the debate on powerful states intervening in the affairs of smaller or weaker states.

Endnote

1. Andrew Moran, "The United States: Finding a Role in the Post-Cold War and Post-9/11 Eras" in Peter Hough, Shahin Malik, Andrew Moran and Bruce Pilbeam (eds.), *International Security Studies: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 339-347.