

The Transformation of U.S. Hegemony in West Asia: Insights from Realist Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the dominant assumption that America is withdrawing from the West Asia. Such assumption increased after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and Afghanistan in 2021. Furthermore, Donald Trump expressed such opinion repeatedly during presidential election campaign during 2023-24. Nonetheless, after reviewing America's policy toward to West Asia it appears that America is pursuing its national interest of making broader grand strategy aiming to contain both China and Iran from the region. In this background, this study aims to seek answer: Why is the United States increasing its interventionist policies in the West Asia despite the widespread public perception that America seeks to reduce its military commitments and overseas engagements worldwide? Under the realist framework, America is forming alliance especially with Israel to expand its interventionist policy in region. Military operation against Iran in 2025 onward comes under this broader framework. This study is largely analytical in nature and based on secondary sources. Study of this nature is highly essential because the strategic significance of the West Asia for stability of World.

Key words: United States; West Asia; China; Iran; Military Intervention

Introduction:

In the post-Cold War era, America emerged as the sole superpower in the world. Infact, America also continued to play as superpower role in the international politics while carrying forward role of security surety to many of its allies including NATO, Japan and many of its West Asia friendly countries (Mead and Suri 2004). During this period, there has been a serious debate within American politics of massive financial burden on the American taxpayer for playing such bigger role in military and security role in the international politics. In addition to this, security surety to many of its friendly countries is stretching the American economy and such burden is pushing back the American economy with respect to China (Richter 2016; Simón 2016). In this

background there has been serious thinking in the US policymakers to reduce its role in providing security to its allies. America withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and Afghanistan in 2021 is seen in this background. Trump administration decision to cut down substantially in its financial and military role in Ukraine-Russia war is also considered in this line (Walker 2025).

On the other hand, Trump administration, on the other hand, joined hand with Israel in military operation against Iran in 2025 onward which appears to contradict America's revisionist and reductionist policy in the post-Cold War era. It now ample clear that Trump administration is leading in military operation against Iran and while doing this, it appears that America is stretching its military obligation aiming a policy to contain China in the world politics (Cafruny 2019) while Iran in the West Asia. After careful analysis of America policy in the post-Cold War era, it appears that US is very much following policy of national interest seeking the bigger role in world politics as guided by the realist perspective. In this background, this study seeks to answer the question: Why is the United States increasing its interventionist policies in the West Asia despite the widespread public perception that America seeks to reduce its military commitments and overseas engagements worldwide? It hypothesizes that U.S.-Israel military actions against Iran are part of a realist strategy aimed at containing Iran's regional influence and limiting China's growing geopolitical and economic presence in the region. Hence, objective of this study to analyses the US changing policy with respect to West Asia and to investigate China growing presence in the West Asia. Further, the study will analyze Iran's policies with respect to its nuclear program, its role in the West Asia, and its relations with the United States and China. A study of US foreign policy is very important due to its greater implication for world peace and stability. US-Israel-Iran war has already impacted on the petroleum price. During the war price of petroleum rose substantially, which has very severe implications for the economic stability of the world.

Theoretical Framework:

This study applies the theoretical framework of realism, one of the important approaches to a study international relation. The realist framework says that every country in the international system pursue its national interest by its maximizing power and security in the international arena which is anarchic in nature. Within this framework the accumulation of power and increasing military capability in relation with others country become the most important national interest of a country (Sørensen, Møller, and Jackson 2022). At present America is facing one of the greatest challenges since the end of the Cold war from rising China in several accounts including in economic and military power. To maintain its relative power over China, America has gone to redesign its presence in the West Asia while launching military operation in collaboration with Israel against Iran in 2025. In this way, US policy towards West Asia is not guided by rhetoric commitment but based on a strategic compulsion to contain China and Iran in

the region. Hence, the realist perspective provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding America's activities in the West Asia which is in response of containing China and Iran. Both of them are directly are directly posing threat to the US dominant role in the region (Hoffman 2021).

Findings

The Limits of American Withdrawal: Despite widespread perceptions of American retrenchment from the West Asia following the military withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has not abandoned the region. Rather, it has adapted its strategy by maintaining and, in some areas, expanding its forward military presence in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region (Colley 2023). Although the United States formally closed its major military bases in Iraq by 2011, it continued to exert influence through a softer security footprint consisting of private military contractors, embassy personnel, intelligence networks, and special operations forces. This approach allowed Washington to contribute to Iraq's stability while preserving its ability to shape regional power dynamics. Historically, the U.S. military presence in the West Asia emerged as part of the broader Cold War effort to contain Soviet influence. In the contemporary period, however, American engagement has been driven by a different set of challenges, including the rise of China as a strategic competitor, concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the persistence of terrorist organizations (Gause 2019).

Between 2009 and 2015, U.S. strategy sought to reconcile domestic war fatigue and financial constraints with the perceived necessity of maintaining a forward military presence in order to preserve the regional balance of power. Consequently, rather than pursuing complete disengagement, Washington shifted toward a model that emphasized military partnerships, burden-sharing arrangements, and technological superiority. As large-scale deployments declined, the United States increasingly focused on strengthening security cooperation with regional allies and investing in advanced military capabilities, including autonomous and unmanned weapons systems. Even during the Trump administration, which often projected an isolationist rhetoric, competing strategic considerations continued to support sustained American involvement in the region. The Department of Defense has consistently maintained that U.S. engagement in the West Asia remains essential for protecting American interests and supporting the security of its regional allies and partners (Zimmermann 2025). Therefore, while the form of American military involvement has evolved, the evidence suggests that the United States continues to view the West Asia as a strategically important region and remains committed to maintaining a significant security presence there (Batyuk 2024).

Iran's Expanding Regional Influence: Over the past two decades, Iran has established itself as one of the most influential actors in the West Asia (Morady 2011). Its rise has been supported not

only by its vast energy resources but also by its strategic location at the crossroads of the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the broader West Asia. Possessing significant oil and natural gas reserves, along with a large and relatively educated population, Iran has sought to translate its economic and demographic strengths into regional political influence. While international sanctions and economic difficulties have constrained its growth, they have not prevented Tehran from pursuing an active regional agenda. The political upheavals that followed the Arab Spring created new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence across the region (Ahmadian 2021). As state institutions weakened in several countries and old political arrangements came under pressure, Tehran strengthened its relationships with a range of state and non-state actors in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine. Through these networks, Iran has sought to project power beyond its borders and secure strategic depth against external threats (Kidwai 2020). Nuclear enrichment program of Iran also projects how the West Asian region may see shift of the balance of power from Israel-US to Iran. America understands this strategy of Iran. Hence, Washington is trying level best do a stop Iranian enrichment program.

Iran's regional strategy has also evolved over time. Before 2011, much of its foreign policy was directed toward challenging a regional order largely supported by the United States and its allies. In the years that followed, however, Tehran increasingly focused on preserving its gains and countering the influence of regional competitors such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. At the same time, Iran has attempted to balance its relations with major powers, including Russia and China, while avoiding excessive dependence on any single partner. This pragmatic approach has enabled it to maintain a degree of strategic flexibility despite mounting international pressure. What is particularly noteworthy is Iran's resilience. Despite economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and repeated efforts by regional and international actors to limit its influence, Iran has remained a central player in West Asian politics. Its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, cultivate regional alliances, and exploit geopolitical opportunities has ensured that it continues to play a significant role in shaping the region's security and political landscape.

China's Expanding Presence in the West Asia: China's expanding presence in the West Asia is driven primarily by economic interests, energy security needs, and strategic objectives related to the Belt and Road Initiative (Imam and Tijjani 2024; Zhu 2024). The region has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central component of China's national security calculus, serving as a major energy source and key node in China's westward expansion strategy (Scobell and Nader 2016). China's engagement operates across three dimensions: economic, strategic, and cultural, with Beijing carefully avoiding entanglement in regional politics while regional countries generally welcome its involvement (Zhu, 2024). Rather than being merely a "security free-rider" or "business-seeker," China functions as a major economic partner, low-profile mediator, and modest security provider (Jin 2017; Zhang and Xiao 2019). Since 2000, China has rapidly

expanded its trade with Africa and the West Asia, overtaking the United States as the leading trading partner for many countries in both regions. China–Africa trade grew from about \$14 billion in 2000 to nearly \$296 billion in 2024, while China’s trade with the West Asia more than doubled between 2017 and 2022, driven largely by energy imports and infrastructure investment (Hoffman 2021). Although the United States remains a major investor and security partner, China now plays the more prominent role in trade and economic engagement across both regions. This growing Chinese presence challenges traditional U.S. dominance and reshapes regional geopolitical dynamics, though China is unlikely to seek dominant regional control in the foreseeable future.

U.S.-Israel Military strike against Iran: The ongoing U.S.–Israel military operation against Iran represents the most serious direct confrontation among the three countries in recent decades. Israel, in the most surprising way, attacked on against Iranian nuclear facilities, military installations, and senior military personnel in May 2025. Later on U.S. also joined in the attack by conducting airstrikes on key Iranian nuclear sites at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan, arguing that the attacks were intended to curb Iran's nuclear capabilities. This conflict, further, escalated sharply on 28 February 2026, when the United States and Israel launched coordinated air and missile strikes against Iranian military, missile, and nuclear-related facilities, arguing that the operation aimed to weaken Iran’s strategic capabilities and regional influence. Reports indicate that nearly 900 strikes were carried out within the first 12 hours, targeting military infrastructure, air-defense systems, and senior leadership networks. Iran responded with missile and drone attacks against Israeli territory, U.S. military assets in the Gulf region, and key maritime routes linked to the Strait of Hormuz, raising concerns over global energy security and regional stability.

A conditional ceasefire was announced in April 2026, but hostilities have not fully ended. Sporadic military exchanges, Israeli operations against Iran-backed groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, and limited U.S. strikes on Iranian military assets have continued despite ongoing diplomatic efforts. Recent reports show that the United States has conducted additional “self-defense” strikes on Iranian radar and drone facilities, while Iran has claimed retaliatory attacks on U.S.-linked bases in the region. At the same time, negotiations mediated by regional actors are attempting to secure a broader ceasefire, reopen shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, and reduce the risk of renewed escalation.

As of June 2026, the situation remains fragile. Large-scale combat has declined compared with the initial phase of the war, but tensions remain high, sanctions continue, military forces remain deployed across the region, and both sides accuse each other of violating ceasefire understandings. The conflict has had significant geopolitical and economic consequences,

including disruptions to global oil markets, maritime trade, and regional security arrangements, while diplomatic negotiations continue without a final political settlement.

Israel Military Strike in Gaza, West Bank and Lebanon: Since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, Israel has also conducted extensive military operations across Gaza, the occupied West Bank, and Lebanon, arguing that its actions are aimed at dismantling militant groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah and preventing future attacks on Israeli territory. In Gaza, Israeli air, ground, and naval operations have targeted Hamas infrastructure, tunnels, command centers, and weapons facilities, while large parts of the territory have come under varying degrees of Israeli military control. By May 2026, reports indicated that Israeli forces were seeking to expand control over roughly 70 percent of Gaza, creating what Israeli officials describe as security buffer zones along key areas of the enclave. The humanitarian impact has been severe, with widespread destruction, mass displacement, and civilian casualties of at least seventy-four thousand reported by international organizations. In the occupied West Bank, Israeli military raids, arrests, settlement expansion, and operations in refugee camps have intensified, particularly in northern areas such as Jenin and Tulkarm, while international bodies have expressed concern over rising displacement, demolitions, and settler-related violence. In Lebanon, Israel also started airstrikes and ground operations against Hezbollah positions. Historically, Lebanon based Hezbollah as an organization was established in 1982 against Israeli occupation. Since then, Hezbollah adopted the strategy of guerrilla warfare against Israel. Once Israel started military operation in Gaza Strip, Hezbollah started firing rockets on northern Israel. As a result, Israel started military operation against Hezbollah in a massive scale which is still going on. During 2026, Israeli forces expanded operations in southern Lebanon, carrying out targeted strikes, destroying Hezbollah infrastructure, and advancing beyond previous front lines, including the capture of the strategic Beaufort Castle, marking Israel's deepest incursion into Lebanon in more than two decades. These simultaneous military campaigns have transformed the conflict into a multi-front security confrontation, with Israel maintaining that the operations are necessary for national defense, while critics and international organizations warn of escalating humanitarian consequences, regional instability, and the risk of a prolonged conflict across the West Asia.

America plays a very important role in supporting Israel's military operations in Gaza and Lebanon. The United States provides Israel with military aid, weapons, intelligence, and diplomatic support. This assistance helps Israel maintain its military strength and continue its operations against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The U.S. also supports Israel in international organizations and often defends Israel's security concerns. American military presence in the region helps discourage other countries and armed groups from expanding the conflict. U.S. support also strengthens Israel's position against Iran and Iran-backed groups. As a

result, America's military, financial, and political support remains a key factor behind Israel's ability to conduct prolonged military operations in the region.

Discussion

In the post-Cold War phase, the world has undergone substantial changes in the global power order. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America emerged as the sole superpower of the world. However, over time, the international order gradually moved from a unipolar order towards a multipolar power structure. In this development, China emerged as the most significant challenger to American dominance. Chinese power has expanded globally, including in the West Asia and Africa, and China's economic activities have reached a level comparable to, and in some areas surpassed, those of the United States in the region. Similarly, China's engagement with oil-producing countries, particularly Iran, has increased substantially in the post-Cold war phase. On the other hand, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has remained one of the most important challenges to American policy in the West Asia. Iran has not only challenged the U.S. presence in the region but has also projected itself as one of the few countries actively supporting the Palestinian cause. Following the 1978 Camp David Agreement, many Arab countries gradually reduced their direct confrontation with Israel (Quandt 1986), while Iran increasingly positioned itself as a defender of Palestinian interests (Alavi 2019). In this context, Iran directly challenged Israeli interests in the region. Additionally, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear programme has been perceived by both the United States and Israel as a challenge to the existing regional power structure. Although Iran has consistently maintained that its nuclear programme is intended for peaceful purposes, the level of uranium enrichment achieved by Iran has led many observers to argue that it possesses the technical capability to develop nuclear weapons if it chooses to do so. Such a development would significantly alter the strategic balance in the West Asia and challenge the dominance of both the United States and Israel.

With American power being challenged by both China's growing influence and Iran's regional ambitions, it was unlikely that the United States would withdraw completely from the West Asia. As a global power, America developed strategies to counter both Chinese and Iranian influence in the region. These strategies included strengthening relations with Arab monarchies (Wight 2022) and deepening strategic cooperation with Israel (Zanotti 2022). The United States has continued to rely heavily on Israel as its principal regional partner. Due to the close cooperation between Israel and American political and security establishments, successive U.S. administrations have provided extensive diplomatic, military, intelligence, and technological support to Israel. Donald Trump was no exception in this regard. In the military operation in Gaza and Lebanon, America's support to Israel in several respects are very important. Such supports Israel is getting due to a very close tie between both countries.

At the same time, America has strengthened its ties with Arab monarchies through defence cooperation and arms exports. Although public opinion in many Arab countries remains skeptical of American policies, ruling regimes in the region have generally maintained close relations with Washington. These governments understand that American military, economic, and diplomatic support contributes significantly to their security and political stability. During the Arab uprisings of 2011, several monarchies faced serious public unrest, and American support played an important role in maintaining regional stability. Furthermore, extensive business, financial, and security links between ruling elites in the Gulf and the United States have reinforced these close relationships. As a result of these dynamics, the United States has maintained a unique and influential position in the West Asia through a network of complex and often discreet relationships. This strategic environment enabled the United States to facilitate the Abraham Accords in 2020, which further strengthened Israel's position and recognition within the region (Lazin 2023).

The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 significantly altered the political and security landscape of the West Asia. For both Israel and the United States, the attack created both opportunity and concern to expand their strategic engagement in the region while simultaneously seeking to contain both Iran and Chinese influence (Fraihat and Hedaya 2024). Israel in coordination with America got an opportunity to establish its military supremacy in the region through the military operation in the entire region. Following the attack, which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,200 people in Israel, the Israeli government launched one of its largest military operations in decades in Gaza and later expanded military activities into Lebanon. The military campaign resulted in extensive destruction and a very large number of civilian casualties in Gaza. The conflict also intensified in the West Bank, where military operations increased significantly. As the conflict expanded, Hezbollah in Lebanon started attacks on Israel, prompting large-scale Israeli military responses against targets in Lebanon. The resulting violence caused significant loss of life and further destabilized the region. Throughout Israel's ongoing military operation, American support has been crucial, and the United States has continuously helped in every possible manner.

In this broader military context, American support for Israel became critically important. From a strategic perspective, the United States viewed Israel as a key partner in maintaining regional influence and countering rival powers. Continued American engagement through military, diplomatic, and intelligence support reflected its long-term commitment to preserving its strategic position in the West Asia. Iran remains one of the principal challenges to American policy in the region due to its support for groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, as well as its nuclear programme (Roosevelt Jr 2025). Iran also maintains close relations with China (Saleh and Yazdanshenas 2024) and increasingly with Russia. In this context, the United States has

sought to contain Iranian influence through sanctions and diplomatic pressure. However, many analysts argue that sanctions alone have not achieved their intended objectives. The ongoing regional conflict has created circumstances in which both Israel and the United States see an opportunity to weaken Iran's strategic position. In 2025, Israel launched military strikes against Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure, and the United States later joined by targeting key nuclear facilities. In 2026, the two countries conducted a massive military operation as joint campaign after diplomatic efforts over Iran's nuclear program collapsed. Iran responded to both operations with missile and drone attacks against Israeli and U.S. targets in the region. Nevertheless, the conflict remains highly complex. While the United States and Israel possess significant military advantages, Iran's missile and drone capabilities, its network of regional allies, and its strategic partnerships with Russia and China complicate any effort to achieve a quick or decisive outcome. Iran's long history of enduring prolonged conflicts also makes any confrontation more difficult than many policymakers initially assume.

It is now very ample clear that America's decision of withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, some analysts, argued that America wanted to withdraw from the West Asia largely due massive expenditure burden on the American taxpayer. Such argument got further strengthen after seeing the election campaign agenda of Donald Trump where he repeatedly said to the public that once he comes to the power, he will review the American military presence outside country. His major call was to cut down the military expenditure country and fully concentrate on enhancing economy of the country. This proposition got further strengthen after Donald Trump reduce America's role in ongoing Ukraine Russia conflict. Such arguments are not sustainable in case of America's presence in the West Asia and ongoing conflict with Iran. Reducing its presence in the West Asia, America could reduce its superpower role, and it would compromise its national interest (Wolf 2020). No government including Donald Trump is not ready to do this. Donald Trump is carrying forward larger America policy towards West Asia which clearly demonstrate that America is not reducing its activities in the region rather it's refolding its position and trying to capture the major role in the region. Otherwise, China and Iran could easily replace America's position in the region. Such finding clearly supports the paper's hypothesis that America's presence in the West Asia is being extended in pursuit of its national interests, contrary to the public perception that Donald Trump would significantly reduce U.S. involvement in the region.

Significance of Understanding of America's policy towards West Asia is far more important for every country including developing countries like India. World major energy supply comes from this region. After the war started, petroleum prices have gone up from average price of \$70 per barrel to now \$100 per dollar which is costing the life of common people globally. Price rise and supply of essential commodities have been largely affected globally. In addition to this, the supply of fertilizers was also affected. This has had a direct impact on farmers around the world,

including those in India. The ongoing conflict has also emerged as a new arena of competition between the United States and China for global influence. Therefore, understanding U.S. policy toward the West Asia helps policymakers, scholars, and the public comprehend how regional conflicts and strategic decisions in the region shape global political and economic developments.

Conclusion:

This study found that America foreign policy is not shrinking its role and function in the international arena in the post-Cold war era. Since 1991 America's national interest is being redefined aiming to strengthen its position in the changing circumstances while addressing the new challenges coming before it. There is little doubt that China's rise in the international system, particularly as an economic powerhouse and an increasingly capable military actor, has become a significant strategic concern for the United States. On the one side, American foreign policy is addressing how to retain its supremacy in the economic affair in the world while on the other hand retaining its superpower role in the international politics. That is the reason America redesigning its role and function in the post Cold War era adjusting its security provider role for its allies while in some places it is reducing its role like in Ukraine war but in West Asia, America is, infact, increasing its presence. America's larger role in the region is mainly due to the strategic importance of the West Asia. A key objective of this engagement is to contain the growing influence of China and Iran, both of which are seen as challenging America's position and interests in the region. Military operations against Iran can be understood as part of this broader strategy. The study of U.S. foreign policy and its role in the West Asian region is highly important because developments in this region have direct implications for global peace, security, and economic stability. A very severe effect of war in the region has already started to emerge as price of petroleum is increasing and it is going to impact on the poorest section of world the most. A deeper study of U.S. and Chinese policies in the region is necessary to better understand developments in the region and their potential impact on the world.

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