

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2021/22

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## The US "Pivot" to East Asia: Potential Implications for the East Mediterranean If It Were Implemented

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In late 2011 and early 2012, the Obama administration announced its "Rebalancing" (commonly labeled "Pivot") strategy toward East Asia.<sup>1</sup> Its intention was to concentrate US forces in East Asia and specifically in the South China Sea in order to balance China's rise, that is, containing it and reassuring US allies in China's vicinity.<sup>2</sup> Michael Mandelbaum spells out the "Pivot's" link to the Middle East: "America would devote greater attention and resources to Asia and, by implication, less of both to the Middle East."<sup>3</sup> However, this seems to have remained an unfulfilled intention at the time of writing (November 2021). While its attention has tilted toward East Asia, the United States cannot ignore events in the Middle East, therefore it cannot fully pivot. The August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan and a renewed nuclear deal with Iran – if one is attainable – serve the cause of pivoting to East Asia. Nevertheless, the Biden administration has been floating this issue more than the Trump administration had (with whatever terminology each administration used to refer to this issue).<sup>4</sup> The final withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the new tripartite alliance with the United Kingdom and Australia from September 2021 can be viewed as indications in this direction.<sup>5</sup> The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal)

<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011; "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense", January 5, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> William Mayborn, "The Pivot to Asia: The Persistent Logics of Geopolitics and the Rise of China," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 15, no. 4 (2014): 76–101; Michael Lumbers, "Whither the Pivot? Alternative U.S. Strategies for Responding to China's Rise," *Comparative Strategy* 34, no. 4 (2015): 311–329; G. John Ikenberry, "From Hegemony to the Balance of Power: The Rise of China and American Grand Strategy in East Asia," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): 41–63. One of the planners of the strategy, Janine Davidson, debunks some of the common myths, as she calls them, concerning the strategy, including its nature as a pivot, which implies pivoting away from other regions. Janine Davidson, "The U.S. 'Pivot to Asia,'" *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 21, special issue (June 2014): 77–82.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 351.

<sup>4</sup> Michal Kolmaš and Šárka Kolmašová, "A 'Pivot' that Never Existed: America's Asian Strategy under Obama and Trump," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2019): 61–79.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Myre, "Long Promised and Often Delayed, the 'Pivot to Asia' Takes Shape under Biden," NPR, October 6, 2021. See also Elise Labott, "Can Biden Finally Put the Middle East in Check and Pivot Already?" *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2021.

can also be seen as part of the effort to abate tensions in the Middle East and lay the infrastructure for a more orderly region, allowing the United States to redeploy military forces to East Asia. Thus, the question is if the United States is seriously preparing to pivot toward East Asia and how this would impact the Middle East. This article focuses on the naval arena, and therefore looks at how the pivot might affect security in the Mediterranean Sea and impact US regional allies.

The United States' presence in the Mediterranean Sea goes back to the 1950s, after the decline of the British Empire and its naval power. Ever since, the United States has been the dominant naval power in the region and its Sixth Fleet is permanently deployed in the Mediterranean. This is both a power-projection action and a reassuring feat for all users of the sea lanes—particularly US allies—that the United States defends free navigation, provides general security on the high seas, and protects the shipping of oil to the West and to the United States itself, although this latter issue is far less significant in recent years. The Sixth Fleet had regularly been visiting ports of friendly countries for services and a show of a (friendly) flag. Since 1979, it had visited Israel's Haifa Port numerous times.<sup>6</sup>

The possible redeployment to East Asia would include the US naval forces. This raises questions about the future defense of the Mediterranean Sea and more broadly, raises concerns of US allies about future relations, especially in the defense realm. This seems to be exacerbated by the growing involvement of China in the region, including in ports, which alarms the United States.<sup>7</sup> The US-China rivalry is becoming very real in the Mediterranean Sea. In Israel, the new port in the Haifa harbor is run by a Chinese company and the United States limited the Sixth Fleet's visits to the Haifa port due to its concerns with a Chinese presence so close to their vessels.<sup>8</sup>

China's rise has been steady since the early 1990s. The US administrations since then—Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43, Obama, Trump, and Biden—have been deeply concerned with China's growing power and influence.<sup>9</sup> The great concern has been

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Gotter, "Haifa: Action to Return Sixth Fleet Sailors", *ynet*, November 9, 2003 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> Natan Sachs and Kevin Huggard, "Israel and the Middle East amid U.S.-China Competition," Brookings Institution, July 20, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ehud Gonen, *Geo-strategic Aspects in the Operation of the "Chinese" Port in Haifa* (Haifa: Chaikin Chair in Geostrategy, 2020), 22–23 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Robert J. Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 3 (2010): 359–391; Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30, no. 2 (2005): 7–45; Christopher Layne, "A House of Cards: American Strategy toward China," *World Policy Journal* 14, no. 3 (1997): 77–95; Michael Beckley, "China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure,"

that China would surpass the United States as the largest economy in the world, which indeed is happening. But the issue with China is not merely economic. Economic power allows countries to invest in their militaries, and with their growing military and economic power, such countries would increase their influence in their regions—becoming regional hegemony if they are not stopped—and then beyond their immediate region, becoming global powers.<sup>10</sup> China is no exception, and the United States has detected its rise as most threatening to the US hegemony.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it was logical for Washington to plan to shift its military attention toward China in order to contain it.<sup>12</sup>

The Pivot was the result of several mostly unrelated processes: China's continuous rise in power, which needed to be addressed; the growing US energy independence that devalued the Middle East in Washington's mind; the general fatigue of the US population with combat in the Middle East that made this policy popular; and the need to invest more time and money on domestic issues by avoiding Middle Eastern affairs as much as possible. The Pivot strategy appears to focus US attention on what really matters to its global standing, as well as shift its attention away from less than critical matters at this time.

However, shifting forces to East Asia has to come at the expense of other regions with permanent US presence and engagement. The Mediterranean Sea is one of these regions, and is perhaps the most sensitive due to its unpredictability. A US withdrawal from anywhere—a country or a region—creates a power vacuum that

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*International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011–12): 41–78; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower: Why China Won't Overtake the United States" *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2016): 91–104.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Kennedy made the powerful argument that links economic growth with military buildup. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 381–396.

<sup>12</sup> There is a scholarly debate regarding the prospects of war between the United States and China. A leading scholar who argues that it is inevitable is Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). Among those who argue such a war is avoidable are Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations"; Joshua Shiffrin, "The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory and US National Security: Reasons for Optimism?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 175–216. For recent discussions of the Sino-American conflict, see Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (2021): 10–20; Peter Rudolf, "The Sino-American World Conflict," *Survival* 63, no. 2 (2021): 87–114; Dominic Tierney, "The Future of Sino-U.S. Proxy War," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 2 (2021): 49–73.

cannot remain unfilled. Obviously, in a volatile region like the Middle East, this is highly risky. The players that could potentially fill the vacuum are all hostile to US interests and US allies. Therefore, the fact that the United States had yet to pull out most of its forces comes as no surprise. Nevertheless, at least some regional instability already exists because of the Pivot strategy. The most important US allies in the Middle East—Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—have all been wary of the Pivot since its announcement a decade ago. All rely on the United States for their security. All have an interest in keeping the US forces close by, thus their concern with the Pivot strategy is sensible.

The discussion about redeploying to the Asia-Pacific had already caused these allies to think of their future alignment because they understood that the United States was losing interest in the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> This can partly explain the rapprochement between several of the US allies in recent years, including Israel and Saudi Arabia and even Israel and Turkey recently. The Israeli-Saudi tacit relations apparently emerged due to their concerns with Iran's nuclear program, but could include additional aspects.<sup>14</sup>

The vacuum that a US withdrawal would create could be filled by several powers, all hostile to the United States and its interests. The first is Russia that had already returned to the Middle East because of the civil war in Syria.<sup>15</sup> It had reestablished its naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, although it is far inferior to the United States' navy, but with the greatest motivation among the great powers to increase its influence. The second is China, as part of its growing impact across the globe, and in this case, in Arab countries as well as in Israel. However, the Chinese navy is not present in the region and would likely be blocked by the United States from coming near the region. Russia would also prefer not to have China challenging it in the region. The third power is Iran, the rising regional power that had already established a strong footprint in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and its navy had already

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of the US Middle East policy since 2009, see Brandon Friedman, "US Engagement and Disengagement in the Middle East: Paradox and Perception," *Strategic Assessment* 24, no. 1 (2021): 136–153.

<sup>14</sup> See Omri Eilat's article in this volume about the Turkey-Israel possible rapprochement. On the Israeli-Saudi relations, see Jacob Abadi, "Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement with Israel: The National Security Imperatives," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 3 (2019): 433–449; Jonathan Rynhold and Michal Yaari, "The Transformation of Saudi-Israeli Relations," *Israel Affairs* 26, no. 6 (2020): 799–818.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention," *Survival* 55, no. 1 (2013): 35–41; Vassilis Kappis, "The Bear Learns to Swim: Russia's Re-Emergence in the Mediterranean," *Eastern Mediterranean Geopolitical Review* 2 (2016): 29–49.

been in the Eastern Mediterranean in recent years and is going through a significant buildup.<sup>16</sup> Obviously, Iran would be the most hostile to US regional allies and would be more concerning than Russia or China, thus it might encounter strong opposition from its regional rivals. Alternatively, these US regional allies—particularly the moderate Sunni countries—might opt for a rapprochement with Iran if they do not sense that the United States has their backs. There are several signs that this is already occurring.<sup>17</sup>

Ten years since the Pivot was announced, the US withdrawal from the Middle East seems on the one hand not going to happen because of the abovementioned concerns, while on the other hand, the growing power of China in the East Asian theater increases the pressure to balance it with additional US forces that most likely need to come from the Middle East. This would include Navy vessels. It is impossible to disconnect the land and sea arenas, but focusing on the sea, a US withdrawal or redeployment of naval forces, even if partial, will open the Mediterranean to serious competition that will have impact on the naval security of all the countries in the region. Russia would likely benefit most as it is already present in the Mediterranean. At this time, and despite its investment in its navy, China does not seem to have a powerful enough navy to attempt to take over the Mediterranean; nevertheless, at least hypothetically, if the United States withdraws and China senses that its maritime trade is not safe, it might consider a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, and as unlikely as it currently seems, if China manages to dominate the South China Sea despite the heavy US naval deployment, its appetite could grow. And it is important to note that no other country could stand up to the Russians.

The key question is whether the United States views the Mediterranean Sea as important enough not to leave to Russia's domination. Thus far, the answer seems positive, but the growing pressure in the East—most recently the increasing tension between China and Taiwan that might flare into hostilities<sup>18</sup>—might force the US administration to make a hard decision with relatively short notice. The result could be disastrous to US allies and to the US standing in the region while it is not stable and war-prone. A massive rearmament of its allies could be a reasonable solution for the US dilemma. Having its most trusted allies supplied with state-of-the-art weaponry to secure their ability to take care of their own security and interests

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<sup>16</sup> On Iran's naval power, see Sholmo Guetta and Motti Elharar's article in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Zvi Bar'el, "Tehran-Riyadh Détente Could Mark the End for Israel's anti-Iran Coalition," *Haaretz*, October 14, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Sammy Westfall, "What's Behind Escalating China-Taiwan Tensions?" *Washington Post*, October 7, 2021.

could ease much of their wariness. To this, the United States can add understandings about how these allies could look out for US interests as well, thus entrusting in them some key matters. If so, the regional allies may be convinced that the United States might reduce its physical presence, but still has their backs. The alternative is that the allies would seek substitutes to the United States. Among the US allies, Israel might find it hardest to find one due to its heavy and longstanding dependence on the United States.

Meanwhile, Israel has only strengthened its ties with the United States military. In mid-January 2021, several days before President Joe Biden was inaugurated, the Trump administration decided to transfer Israel from the European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), which geographically speaking is much more reasonable, making the Middle East arena more coherent for the US military strategy and planning.<sup>19</sup> And on 30 September 2021, while conducting his first working visit to Bahrain, Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid visited the USS *Pearl Harbor* at the headquarters of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and met with Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, Commander of the Naval Forces of CENTCOM's Fifth Fleet. He emphasized that the United States, Israel, and Bahrain have "similar interests in the region."<sup>20</sup> Several days later, Vice Admiral Cooper visited in Israel and met with senior officials, including Defense Minister Benny Gantz, Chief of Staff Lt. General Aviv Kohavi, and commander of the Israeli Navy, Vice Admiral David Saar Salama, who said that "[t]he Fifth Fleet [...] is an important strategic partner of the [Israeli] Navy. The Fifth Fleet and its people are committed to the security of the State of Israel, and we are mutually committed to them." Cooper said, "Our commitment to Israel is unwavering and this visit highlighted the importance of our decades-long strategic relationship. The recent alignment of Israel to US Central Command opens new opportunities to deepen our naval ties and enhance regional maritime security and stability."<sup>21</sup>

Striking the right balance between the need to deploy more naval forces in East Asia while not deserting the Mediterranean Sea could be impossible for the United

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<sup>19</sup> Assaf Orion and Udi Dekel, "Winds of Change: Israel Joins the US Central Command Area," *INSS Insight* no. 1432, January 20, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Times of Israel Staff, "Lapid's Visit to Bahrain Includes a Trip to a US Navy Base, Off Iran's Coast," *Times of Israel*, October 1, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Ahronheim, "Head of US Navy's 5th Fleet Concludes Visit to Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, October 9, 2021.

States.<sup>22</sup> Being effective in fulfilling their operational missions in both arenas is easier said than done. It seems that the new US-UK-Australia alliance could assist the United States in maintaining sufficient numbers of vessels in the Indo-Pacific for containing China at this time. However, it might be harder to create a similar alliance in the Mediterranean with the regional actors, who have conflicting interests. Therefore, ten years since the Pivot was announced but not fully implemented, it can be assessed that the United States prefers not to leave the Mediterranean, and instead form a stronger alliance around China. How sustainable would such a strategy be? It is hard to tell.

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<sup>22</sup> One idea of how to do this appears in David W. Barno, Nora Bensahel, and Travis Sharp. "Pivot but Hedge: A Strategy for Pivoting to Asia While Hedging in the Middle East," *Orbis* 56, no. 2 (2012): 158–176.