



## All About Access: Solving America's Force Posture Puzzle

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# All About Access: Solving America's Force Posture Puzzle

The Biden administration has promised to revise US global force posture and alter the vast constellation of overseas forces, bases, and capabilities that underpin America's ability to deter adversaries, counter threats, and protect allies. It has signaled an intent to reduce US presence in the Middle East to make it more commensurate with the region's relative strategic importance (i.e., "right-size" forces) and bolster its posture in the Indo-Pacific, much like previous administrations attempted to do.<sup>1</sup> To this end, the administration has a Global Force Posture Review underway and has already drawn down US combat forces in Afghanistan, effectively ending the almost 20-year US presence in the country.<sup>2</sup>

This impulse to remake the US global footprint reflects a desire to address a new era of strategic competition with China and to expend finite resources and taxpayer dollars more efficiently. It is not the first push to revise US force posture. The Trump administration also attempted to make changes, including controversial plans to draw down forces in South Korea and Germany, while simultaneously seeking to stand up a new base and enhance US troop numbers in Poland.<sup>3</sup> Such moves were, in theory, intended to correct US global posture to be more in line with the Department of Defense's refocus on preparing for a future conflict with China and Russia.<sup>4</sup>

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**Almost no one is  
happy with the  
status quo**

Both the Trump and Biden administrations' attempts to change posture have prompted extensive debate over how the United States should secure its global

interests using military power. Advocates of restraint, or "offshore balancing," have called for dramatic cuts to US military presence in most theaters, arguing that the costs of forward-based forces outweigh the purported benefits and that "over-the-horizon" air and naval forces are sufficient.<sup>5</sup> Critics of offshore

balancing, on the other hand, argue that forward-based forces serve a vital role in deterring adversaries and that "both US influence and international stability are thoroughly interwoven with a robust US forward presence."<sup>6</sup> Yet, even proponents of forward presence recognize that the current arrangement of forces is unlikely to adequately meet emergent US security needs. On one point there is agreement between the two camps: almost no one is happy with the status quo.

The posture review currently underway has major implications for US grand strategy. Forward presence has historically served three fundamental objectives: to deter adversaries from dominating regions of vital interest to the United States; to bolster US ability to defend its interests and allies; and to reassure allies that the United States is, in fact, committed to their defense.<sup>7</sup> These objectives remain relevant today, but current forms of posture are increasingly vulnerable to physical contestation as great-power adversaries enhance their military capabilities and operational concepts. Moreover, states hosting US forces and bases are also vulnerable to political and economic coercion, which could have implications for US posture. Future efforts must therefore focus on achieving a resilient, combat-credible force posture. But as previous administrations have sought to make changes to relatively stagnant US global posture and failed, what could make the Biden administration's attempt to revise posture successful?

Most discourse around this question focuses on proposed adjustments to US forces and bases; in this article, we look instead at another critical and underappreciated element of posture: *access*, or how the United States can use its forces and overseas bases to achieve military ends. Changing forces and bases, and the activities undertaken by and from them, hinges on changing access. A resilient posture does not necessarily mean a larger footprint. In both the Indo-Pacific and Middle East—two regions that the administration has flagged for change—a more resilient posture may need fewer forward-deployed forces, but it will require the administration to retain and expand access in key regions. Given its importance, acquiring access is an administration and Pentagon imperative. But it is arguably the hardest part of posture to secure.

In this article, we unpack US global force posture and outline access dilemmas that must be managed to successfully reshape posture. Because these dilemmas

can vary with the type of access sought, we explore the implications in two regions of interest to the Global Force Posture Review: the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East. We conclude with recommendations for how the United States might secure greater access from its allies and partners to improve the resiliency of its global posture and enhance American security.

## Unpacking Posture

US global force posture traditionally includes three components: forces, footprint, and international agreements.<sup>8</sup> Forward-stationed or rotationally deployed forces and the footprint of bases and infrastructure that supports them overseas represent visible manifestations of US forward presence. Accordingly, we refer to these together as “presence.” Because of their visibility, troops and bases—which range from major operating bases to “lily pads” or “warm” facilities that support small or episodic deployments—can attract significant political attention inside both the United States and host countries. US policymakers have called the network of bases “the skeleton of national security,” in part because they enable US “command of the commons”—the land, sea, space, and air domains—as well as global power projection.<sup>9</sup>

International agreements shape how the United States can use its forces and footprint to achieve military ends; in other words, the level of access. Forms of access range from minimal, such as overflight rights, to maximal, such as garrisoning troops in major operating bases. Access also varies across peace and wartime, but it undergirds US military operations in both.<sup>10</sup> Peacetime access often focuses on rights to military facilities and the status of forces,<sup>11</sup> while contingency access—most common during crisis or wartime—often involves permissions to operate from territory during a particular military operation.<sup>12</sup> Put simply, access covers the rules by which forward US forces can and cannot operate. Such rules are generally well-established during peacetime but need to be delineated during crises or contingencies.

Access matters because of the norm of sovereignty; whoever owns the territory retains the right to control its use. This norm requires the United States to secure advance permission for using territory and/or facilities for operational purposes during contingencies.<sup>13</sup> Although the United States acquired its early network of overseas bases through imperial arrangements, including military occupation, these bases were eventually renegotiated on terms favorable to the hosts.<sup>14</sup> These terms typically require host consultation or authorization prior to the United States using bases in support of operations. The United States and other great powers can attempt to ignore sovereign claims—as in the ongoing dispute over Diego Garcia, a contested British territory in the Indian Ocean that represents

an important hub for US power projection—but once sovereignty has been acknowledged, it is hard to claw back.<sup>15</sup>

Posture thus has physical and political dimensions. The physical dimensions of posture—forces, capabilities, and basing infrastructure—are subject to contestation by potential adversaries. Competitors, especially China, increasingly possess “anti-access/area denial” (A2/AD) capabilities including cruise and ballistic missiles, submarines, and air defense systems that seek to erode US power projection capabilities and render forward-deployed US military assets highly vulnerable.<sup>16</sup> Here, US presence in the form of forces and bases are most at risk, as opposed to access.

Because partners get a vote in how the United States uses their territory, posture also has a political dimension that primarily affects access. Partners can greenlight, restrict, or refuse US military operations involving their air-, land-, and sea-space. Turkey’s refusal to allow US forces to use its territory during the 2003 invasion of Iraq illustrates this point.<sup>17</sup> As long as the United States recognizes the norm of sovereignty, it is inevitably beholden to partners’ preferences. This political dimension of posture means that sovereign states are subject to political and economic pressures that create counterincentives to limit US military access.<sup>18</sup>

## Access Dilemmas

**Access is subject to three underappreciated dilemmas that policymakers and planners must navigate**

The success of US attempts to change its presence depends on its ability to simultaneously alter levels of access. For instance, current calls to “right-size” the US presence in the Middle East demonstrate the intent to *reduce presence* but *retain access* to critical infrastructure in case a contingency requires US military power. In other cases, such as the “pivot” to Asia during the Obama administration, policymakers have signaled the desire to *enhance presence* by moving additional forces into a

country or region, which requires new or augmented access deals. But access is subject to at least three underappreciated dilemmas that policymakers and planners must navigate to create a resilient and robust posture.

### Peacetime Access Does Not Guarantee Contingency Access

The first dilemma is that peacetime access and contingency access rarely move in lockstep; the presence of the former does not guarantee the latter. Physical

peacetime presence tells us surprisingly little about whether wartime or crisis access would be forthcoming as contingency access is contextual and rarely developed in advance—even for the contingencies wherein the United States expects to fight.

Host restrictions on access can often cause operational vulnerability and force adjustments to strategy. For instance, authorization for US airstrikes from Al Udeid Air Base against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014 were not immediately forthcoming from the Qatari government, although the United States had previously secured permission for non-lethal air operations. This led to a hasty workaround where Qatar-based forces identified targets, but the actual strikes were launched from a US carrier—demonstrating that peacetime presence does not necessarily translate to contingency access.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, crises are precisely when adversaries will attempt political and economic coercion to deny the United States access, revealing weaknesses in access arrangements that might otherwise go unanticipated or unnoticed. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, for example, European allies buckled under threats of an oil embargo from the Gulf states to deny the United States overflight and basing rights to airlift supplies to Israel, leading Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger to call for a posture review in light of the “lack of allied cooperation.”<sup>20</sup> The following year, a Pentagon study reported that “the principal problem we face with regard to our current network of bases, facilities, and operating rights is not its adequacy but rather its reliability in those less-than-general war contingencies in which the interests of the United States and of the host country are not in harmony.”<sup>21</sup> This problem remains salient as it becomes increasingly clear that less-than-major war contingencies comprise the majority of US operations, not only against terrorist networks and “rogue states,” but also in great power conflicts characterized by low-intensity and hybrid warfare.

### **Presence Can Help or Hinder Access**

A second dilemma arises because the type of presence on offer can influence whether partners provide access and to what degree. Sometimes, presence encourages partners to provide more access, but sometimes presence backfires and leads to reduced access instead.

On one hand, presence can enable access. Forward-stationed or deployed forces can both increase US ability to defend a given territory and signal US willingness to act as a tripwire and incur costs on the partner’s behalf. In the absence of a visible commitment to their defense (as forward-deployed forces represent), some partners may be reluctant to provide access that opens them up to retaliation from adversaries. At a minimum, it can affect the package of incentives that the United States has to offer in exchange for access.

A byproduct of presence is the continued maintenance of military facilities. This has particular implications for contingency operations where the United States seeks to retain access in case it needs to go back in rapidly to respond to a crisis or bolster deterrence. For example, after Saudi Arabia rescinded US access to Prince Sultan Air Base in 2003, base infrastructure, including runways, fell into disrepair. When the United States regained access to the base in 2019 amid heightened tensions with Iran, it had to make significant improvements to make the base operationally usable.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, presence can exacerbate local and national tensions, leading to reduced access. Local populations may resent pollution caused by bases, crimes committed by US service members, or the symbolic infringement on state sovereignty.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, domestic political challenges have led to curtailed US access in numerous cases. The Philippines, for example, evicted the United States from its base in Subic Bay in 1992. And in 1962, Arab nationalist displeasure over US presence on Saudi soil led the government of Saudi Arabia to let the US access agreement to Dhahran airfield lapse.<sup>24</sup> In this example, domestic pressures made the potential cost—regime stability—too great and led the Saudi government to revoke access.

### **It's a Political, Not a Military, Issue**

A third dilemma is that the military, despite being the primary consumer of access, has the least ability to actually secure it. Host nation relationships and agreements are fundamentally political, and access negotiations involve diplomacy and multiple levers of national power. Even the means that the US military uses to secure access—security guarantees, base rents, arms transfers, and preferential procurement<sup>25</sup>—are not within its control to offer or manipulate. Those are political decisions susceptible to political pressures, particularly by US adversaries. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, Russia successfully applied political and economic coercion and large aid packages to induce the Kyrgyz government to expel the United States from Manas air base in 2014, despite escalating US base rents and economic incentives.<sup>26</sup>

All of these dilemmas render military concepts of operations that involve complex types of access (that may or may not materialize in a crisis) problematic. New operational concepts touted by the US military represent advances in thinking about how to reduce some of the physical risks to US posture. Examples include the US Marine Corps' Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and the US Air Force's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concepts. The problem is that the type of island-hopping envisioned in EABO and the network of expeditionary airbases required to carry out the ACE concept relies on a degree of contingency access that existed in World War II but may not

be forthcoming in a future conflict.<sup>27</sup> More often than not, access is assumed to be forthcoming during a contingency or war by military planners, while today's geopolitical realities suggest that this is a poor planning factor.

Washington's ability to enhance or preserve access is therefore often far from assured. How, then, could access impact efforts to create more resilient force posture in the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East, two regions where the Biden administration has signaled its intent to revise posture?

**Today's realities suggest that assuming contingency access is forthcoming is poor planning**

### Enhancing Access in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is arguably the most vital region in the world today for US national interests outside of the US homeland. Washington's objectives in the region are coalescing around strategic competition with China, a direction signaled first under the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and 2018 National Defense Strategy and more recently reinforced in the 2021 Interim National Security Strategy Guidance.<sup>28</sup> This strategic direction calls for maintaining US primacy in the Indo-Pacific or, at a minimum, denying primacy to China and preventing it from dominating the region militarily.<sup>29</sup>

In line with this guidance, current US military strategy in the Indo-Pacific emphasizes deterrence by denial,<sup>30</sup> which seeks to dissuade adversary aggression by making it difficult for their actions to succeed, thus eroding the adversary's confidence.<sup>31</sup> This strategy requires the ability to swiftly detect and respond to adversary aggression to prevent a fait accompli.<sup>32</sup> Responsiveness is usually directly related to forward posture and requires either forces in place that can rapidly undertake operations or access that quickly enables other forces to flow into the region.<sup>33</sup> As a result, deterrence by denial strategies are undergirded by fairly robust posture involving forward-based forces and capabilities or expansive access arrangements.

In practice, the US strategy focuses on denying a fait accompli conquest of Taiwan, defending the so-called first and second island chains, and limiting China's power projection within and beyond the East and South China seas. The Biden administration has connected deterrence and defense with presence, calling for its "most robust" presence in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>34</sup> To date, the United States has demonstrated its presence to enhance deterrence in the Indo-Pacific through its existing network of bases, freedom of navigation operations, joint and multinational exercises, and enhancing security cooperation activities with allies and partners. But administration officials have noted that current US



posture lacks the type of forces and the required capabilities to adequately deny China's regional primacy. A recent DoD effort to develop new strategies and operational concepts to address the China challenge has emphasized the need to improve US force posture and management.<sup>35</sup>

Creating a robust US posture in the Indo-Pacific requires developing and maintaining a continuous rotational presence that is dispersed and capable of defense in depth.<sup>36</sup> China's heavy investment in anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles as well as other A2/AD capabilities threatens US control of the air and sea, calling into question the US ability to effectively respond to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or other provocations in the East and South China Seas. Almost all of the new operational concepts envision solutions to the A2/AD problem by dispersing forces and assets to multiple locations in the event of an escalation with China.<sup>37</sup> The current emphasis on dispersal sites for air and naval forces and dispersed precision-strike capabilities seeks to over-

come the physical challenges to US regional posture, enhance its resiliency, and ensure the survivability of forces.<sup>38</sup>

Dispersal requires enhanced access to arrange new facilities and bases while gaining permission to position alternate forces and capabilities for effective deterrence or for combat, should deterrence fail. However, the United States does not currently have the enhanced access it desires,<sup>39</sup> and the prospects

**The US does not currently have the enhanced access it desires in the Indo-Pacific**

for enhancing access to create a more resilient force posture in the region are unclear. Whether regional partners will be willing to provide access depends on a range of factors that are not fully within US control, including threat perception and economic interests.

Washington's hope is that partners' threat perceptions will converge with its own. By this logic, as partners perceive an increasing security threat from China, they will be more likely to offer access, casting their lot with the United States to balance against China for self-preservation. The type of US presence on offer may affect whether access is forthcoming, as partners may be looking for American "skin in the game" to assuage doubts over the degree of US commitment. To the extent that the United States demonstrates presence, it may receive more access in a self-reinforcing cycle.

But even so, there is presently little appetite for hosting large, permanent bases or forward deployments of troops. Not only do domestic political pressures in many countries militate against offering permanent basing rights, there are other reasons to question future contingency access. First, while the United States is thinking about deterrence and defense regionally, partners are focused

on their country's own vital interests. The US vision of launching operations from facilities across Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other partners to defend Taiwan presumes that those countries will be willing to incur the risks of Chinese retaliation in the absence of a direct threat.

Second, US interests in the region are overwhelmingly focused on security, but for most of its partners, including treaty allies like Australia and South Korea, their main economic partner is China. While Washington discusses basing access with Indo-Pacific partners, Beijing is knocking on the door with lucrative commercial and investment packages, often through its Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>40</sup> Partners balance equities across a complex range of issues, and US security imperatives are just one of them. For regimes facing economic or electoral consequences for hosting increased US presence or enhancing US access, self-preservation might indicate hedging—not balancing.

Regional experts note that as partners attempt to navigate the US-China competition, they are showing cautious willingness to offer the United States access short of bases during peacetime competition.<sup>41</sup> The United States has gained incremental access to places like Singapore, where an access agreement was renewed in 2019, and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, which now allows port visits. But such places do not offer the United States persistent presence or, importantly, the ability to use those facilities in a contingency against China. This is a start, but a gulf remains between today's access and the extensive authorities required for island-hopping deterrence by denial. In the absence of sweeping inducements or iron-clad security guarantees—neither of which is likely to be forthcoming from Washington—these sorts of short jumps forward in access are the best-case scenario.

The picture brightens a bit in the second island chain, which includes US territories—Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa—and the Pacific Freely Associated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau. The United States maintains Compacts of Free Association with these states, which give it military access in exchange for security guarantees. Even here, however, the United States might find it surprisingly difficult to enhance access if China uses propaganda and economic inducements to frighten and entice local governments into curtailing US expansion.<sup>42</sup>

## Retaining Access in the Middle East

The interim NSS calls for “right-sizing” US force presence in the Middle East, arguably in recognition of the region's diminished importance to critical US security interests.<sup>43</sup> The Biden administration's intent to reduce US presence in the Middle East is apparent not just through its rhetoric, but also through

decisions to launch a global posture review, withdraw US forces from Afghanistan,<sup>44</sup> and remove the overseas contingency operations fund—largely viewed as a “slush fund” for US military activities in the Middle East—from the president’s budget request.<sup>45</sup>

The US footprint in the Middle East swelled exponentially with military operations in the decades following 9/11. These operations, including the wars in Afghanistan as well as Iraq and the fight against ISIS, expanded not only the number of forces in theater, but also the sprawling US basing architecture that has become representative of US presence in the region since the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1990–91. Tensions with Iran in late 2019 and early 2020 further expanded the US footprint, with the United States flowing additional forces and capabilities to the region and returning to Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia to “reestablish deterrence” with Iran.<sup>46</sup>

Right-sizing will likely include shifting key capabilities to other regions, like the Indo-Pacific, or returning deployed forces to the United States to rebuild readiness. It is also likely to result in transitioning certain bases back to host nations. But the US military will need to still conduct operations related to key US interests including protecting the homeland, ensuring the free flow of oil and commerce, preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and protecting key regional allies and partners.<sup>47</sup> Being able to carry out the necessary operations or respond to crises with fewer forward-based forces, capabilities, and infrastructure places considerable importance on preserving access to flow forces into the Middle East responsively to enhance deterrence.<sup>48</sup>

Deterring Iran and its extensive proxy network from impinging upon US interests—whether by obtaining nuclear weapons, creating maritime chokepoints through aggressive maneuvers and attacks, or by launching attacks on US personnel or regional partners—remains a security priority.<sup>49</sup> Thus far, US defense strategy has emphasized a mix of continuously present forward forces to deter Iran by denial, while retaining the flexibility to rapidly flow forces into theater to reinforce deterrence if necessary.<sup>50</sup> But Iran has made significant investments in its missile capabilities and now possesses precision missiles capable of targeting US forces operating from large bases in the Middle East.<sup>51</sup> The intent behind Iran’s buildup is to impede the US military’s ability to operate from forward bases, destroy hard-to-replace capabilities, and enhance its A2/AD bubble.

In response, US officials have stressed the need to embrace a distributed basing architecture in the Middle East to create a more robust posture.<sup>52</sup> Like the Indo-Pacific, this would allow for the consolidation of forces and capabilities to existing bases, such as Muwaffaq Al Salti Air Base in Jordan, or their dispersal to new, smaller bases outside Iran’s worst threat rings.<sup>53</sup> It would also require US usage of ports, airfields, and infrastructure held and maintained by host nations, in line with the military’s new operational concepts.<sup>54</sup> The end result would be a

more resilient force posture centered around “expeditionary basing”<sup>55</sup>—reducing regional presence but requiring shifts in access, whether in the form of negotiating contingency access to bases returned to the host nation in case deterrence fails or creating new access agreements for the expeditionary bases that undergird a more dispersed posture.

But changing the nature of US access in the Middle East will have its own challenges. Leaders of regional states aligned with the United States tend to want presence because it is a demonstration of US commitment to their security, making posture reductions or changes potentially difficult to navigate.<sup>56</sup> Previous attempts to shift the US focus from the Middle East to Asia during the Obama administration’s “pivot” led to fissures in the diplomatic relationships between Washington and its Middle Eastern partners and doubts over US extended deterrence commitments.<sup>57</sup> The insecurity felt by US partners in the region has manifested in hedging behavior, which may be intensified as Washington tries to further revise its posture. This includes engagement with the United States’ competitors, China and Russia, to seek alternative security arrangements, largely in the form of arms sales.<sup>58</sup> It may also include regional states undertaking more assertive or independent military operations that run counter to US interests, like Egyptian and Emirati air strikes in Libya in 2014 and the ongoing Saudi-led air war in Yemen.<sup>59</sup>

**Regional states in the Middle East aligned with the US tend to want presence**

Washington hopes to reduce presence in the region without upsetting regional partners, but shrinking its military footprint may reinforce perceptions of US retrenchment and abandonment to the very partners that the United States will need to approach for new basing, overflight, and access arrangements. These partners may not be incentivized to preserve US access, particularly as doing so may require hosts to incur more financial costs to maintain the bases that the United States turns over to their control. It may also produce strategic and operational risk as several Middle Eastern states, particularly US Gulf partners, lack strong militaries due to coup-proofing concerns and may not be capable of defending their territory.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, because US efforts to revise its military footprint hinge on obtaining favorable access arrangements, regional states can wield access as a bargaining chip to extract incentives or more favorable outcomes. In absence of presence, Washington may find itself striking unsavory political bargains with autocratic regimes, to include turning a blind eye to regime repression of its citizens. The United States has already made this bargain in places like Bahrain in return for access and basing, and such a dynamic may be exacerbated when contingency access needs to be negotiated.<sup>61</sup>

In return for renewed access agreements, states may also seek material incentives such as arms sales, including high-end weapons such as armed drones and next-generation aircraft that the United States often resists selling to lower-capability partners.<sup>62</sup> For example, a reported condition of the United Arab Emirates joining the Abraham Accords and normalizing relations with Israel was the United States agreeing to sell F-35 fighter jets and MQ-9 Reaper drones after previously denying Abu Dhabi these capabilities.<sup>63</sup> A similar arms-for-access quid-pro-quo could emerge as America's regional partners push to extract benefits. As partners such as Saudi Arabia have requested US support for their recent military operations in Yemen—particularly the provision of capabilities they lack, like aerial refueling—this may become an access prerequisite in the absence of the security blanket of US presence. These dynamics may result in greater access for the United States but may ultimately fuel regional instability, contribute to domestic opposition in the United States, and place US posture reductions at risk over the long term.

Ultimately, US efforts to produce a more resilient posture in the Middle East hinge on reshaping access relationships with regional partners. Whether such access in light of a reduced US presence will be forthcoming remains to be seen. And while the United States may be able to negotiate advantageous access deals with regional states, the strategic cost to US interests and reputation may be higher than it wishes to incur and should prompt a rethink about whether the costs may outweigh the access benefits.

### **Toward a More Resilient and Calibrated Force Posture**

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In an era of fiscal constraints and changing force structure, the US military is facing increased physical and political challenges to its global posture. Today's permanent forward presence may not be sustainable or credible to meet tomorrow's threats. Yet, the United States will still need to project combat power globally, balancing the operational risks of forward-based forces against the need for presence to deter adversaries and reassure allies.<sup>64</sup> Finding this balance will require creative changes to posture and, above all, changes to access that will enable the United States to retain command of the commons in a more resilient manner without the large, permanent footprint that has been the hallmark of US posture.

Reducing forces and capabilities in the Middle East and distributing the remainder frees up resources to bolster presence in the Indo-Pacific, creating more credible and sustainable postures in both regions. Retaining access is needed to do more with less in the Middle East; for the administration's plans to succeed, partners will need to grant access for a different force posture than today—one that does not emphasize continuous deployments or major operating bases. In the Indo-Pacific, enhancing access is required to bolster deterrence, and

partners will need to grant more access to support a range of operational scenarios including contingency access for a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan and beyond. Creating a more resilient US overseas posture will be determined by the level of access.

Securing this access will require navigating the political and relational dilemmas outlined above. US policymakers and planners must find ways to translate peacetime access into contingency access; it's the latter that matters most. This is particularly challenging when dealing with partners who have divergent threat perceptions and who must balance an array of complex political and economic imperatives in the heat of a contingency. Such partners may not know how a future conflict will affect their interests, and even stalwart allies may be subject to political and economic pressure in a crisis. As a result, partners are often reluctant to negotiate contingency access in advance, which complicates US planning for power projection and introduces operational vulnerability.

**The US must find ways to translate peacetime access into contingency access**

Senior US decisionmakers, diplomats, and military planners have long desired to negotiate contingency access with partners in advance to ensure the speed of US response and reduce the need for extensive negotiations during crises, but directly translating peacetime access into contingency access has proven difficult. This reluctance often reflects the political access dilemmas, whereby states may be wary of domestic backlash, retaliation by the adversary, or becoming embroiled in a larger fight. Despite these challenges, Washington should still seek to negotiate contingency access in advance whenever possible. Doing so will require providing partners with a general understanding of the major contingency scenarios in which the United States may seek to use force from their sovereign territory.

In such conversations, the United States can encourage partners to clarify and articulate their core interests in these scenarios in advance, rather than assuming or hoping that interests will align. Moreover, there are incremental steps that the United States and its key partners can take to align their strategic and operational interests and objectives in major contingencies. These include conducting joint planning and wargaming, as the United States and Japan recently conducted that examined a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. In addition to enhancing interoperability, such efforts have led to discussions about the types of access required for specific scenarios, beginning the process of negotiating contingency access in advance.<sup>65</sup> While we recognize that this approach is likely restricted to the most serious scenarios the United States plans for in each region, as opposed to every contingency, it nevertheless provides a useful starting point for US policymakers to potentially gain greater contingency access.

While translating peacetime to contingency access will remain difficult, a useful approach is to treat the process as evolutionary, rather than a binary “on-off” switch. Using bases in different ways across peacetime contexts can foster flexibility and expand the range of acceptable uses with partners that may facilitate crisis adaptation. Moron Air Base in Spain provides an illustrative example. Over time, Washington has successfully evolved the peacetime access it initially secured to subsequently use the base for a number of contingency operations and conflicts, including the First Gulf War and air operations in Afghanistan and Libya.<sup>66</sup> The United States has also varied the operational status of Moron over time while still retaining access, transitioning Moron from a Cold War joint Spanish-American base to a “warm” base primarily run by the Spaniards in 1971, eventually evolving to a permanent US presence in 2015.<sup>67</sup> Should the level of access that the Pentagon envisions not be forthcoming, incremental steps that fall short of basing or unfettered agreements—such as Washington’s recent agreements with Singapore and Vietnam—may offer a temporary solution.

However, Washington needs to beware of partners applying the same type of incremental strategy to pull the United States in where it does not need to be. The United States must be sure to demonstrate strategic discipline in locations where it does not need expanded access and refrain from being bogged down by partners who may seek to incentivize a more permanent presence, as several countries in the Middle East have sought to do. Some partners might even pour the concrete themselves, as Qatar did in 1996, building Al Udeid air base in hopes of attracting a US presence, despite not yet having its own air force.<sup>68</sup>

Washington should also work with partners to identify what sorts of measures (other than forward-deployed forces) can increase confidence in the strength of

**Implementing military, economic, and political CBMs could improve US access**

US security commitments and deterrence. Partners will desire assurances that cooperating with the United States will not be ruinous to their security or economy. They may also require incentives to incur the risks associated with hosting a US presence. While offering incentives can bear potential financial and reputational risks for the United States, implementing military, economic, and political confidence building measures (CBMs) would improve Washing-

ton’s ability to secure access.

Military CBMs would include security cooperation activities such as joint exercises, training, transfers of arms and equipment, and the joint planning and wargaming activities described earlier. In some cases, particularly in a



region like the Indo-Pacific where the United States is looking to bolster its posture, establishing a robust rotational presence may be appropriate. Security cooperation activities build partner confidence through a number of mechanisms, including increased partner warfighting capacity and interoperability with US forces. As noted earlier, such activities may even serve as a starting point for contingency access negotiations.

Security cooperation not only provides the United States with opportunities to cultivate influence with partner forces; it also represents a sought-after incentive for many partners.<sup>69</sup> Presence, even in the form of rotational forces performing security cooperation activities, may provide regional partners with reassurance and benefits of US presence at lower cost. By temporarily hosting US forces, partners can derive the economic benefits of locally stationed forces along with the advantages of strategic cooperation—including the deterrence of a tripwire presence—without the burden of justifying why they are hosting a permanent foreign force to their domestic publics.<sup>70</sup> There are also operational benefits to the United States, as these forces help enhance interoperability and may develop local knowledge and infrastructure that could prove useful in the event of a contingency.

Non-military CBMs could address specific economic concerns by increasing foreign direct investment or entering into trade agreements with key strategic partners. The goal with such measures would be to offset concerns over punitive economic sanctions from China in event of a conflict—or even in event of providing the United States with expanded access during peacetime. In 2016, for example, China punished South Korea for hosting the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system by imposing trade sanctions. While the system stayed, the sanctions generated significant domestic opposition to the deployment.<sup>71</sup> And in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands—a US territory—China leveraged its extensive resort and casino investments to pressure against expansion of a US military training facility on Pagan Island.<sup>72</sup>

Crucially, confidence-building activities must be in line with US interests and not merely activities for activities' sake. In other words, security and economic cooperation must be carefully harnessed to political ends, as opposed to arms transfers for the sake of moving metal, for example. Activities should also be tailored and conditional on partner behavior, as this will help insulate the United States from partners seeking to leverage access as a means to extract incentives that undermine US interests and security.

Completely shielding partners from economic repercussions from China is not a feasible goal, particularly when China is the primary trading partner for nearly every state in the Indo-Pacific. But the United States has a large and powerful economy with many economic tools of statecraft at its disposal. Washington should carefully evaluate how it uses these tools to compete with China



economically, not only for the economy's sake, but also in support of its security objectives and access. The United States has experimented with economic incentives to obtain access in Central Asia and Africa in recent years. Evidence of effectiveness is limited, in part due to insufficient oversight, monitoring, and evaluation.<sup>73</sup> Evaluating these policies to see what, if anything, has worked might yield insights for economic policy innovations to retain and enhance access in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific respectively.

In the end, while enhancing contingency access is crucial to future US security in an era where there are a variety of demands both to bring US troops home and to counter threats to the US-led international order, securing these access agreements is not the military's bailiwick, even though the military depends on them to operate effectively and efficiently. Instead, the United States needs to leverage the diplomatic and economic tools at its disposal to foster holistic relationships with partners. This dovetails with the administration's desire to right-size the US military and put it in support of diplomacy, just as it seeks to right-size its global military footprint. To the extent that Washington manages these dilemmas and marshals all its instruments of statecraft to negotiate access, it will be better positioned to enhance US security.

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