



## **US Military Pivoting From Mideast**

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### **Abstract**

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The recent CENTCOM drawdown from Al Udeid, Qatar, may presage a shift in the security footprint from American to EU dominance. Viewed in conjunction with US troops withdrawal in Syria, President Trump's notion of US withdrawal from NATO, and current trans-Atlantic divide over NATO member Turkey's assault on the Kurds in Syria, internal strife in NATO may eventually pave way for the rise of an EU army to be the new security guarantor of the Euro-Mediterranean region.

### **About ISPSW**

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The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

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## Analysis

On September 28, in an unannounced military exercise, Washington transferred the command and control center of its air operations in the Middle East from Al Udeid base in Qatar back to the US.<sup>1</sup>

Personnel at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina temporarily took over from the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Al Udeid in what amounts to a “dress rehearsal,” but which some surmise may be a harbinger of the US pivoting away from the Mideast.<sup>2</sup>



An empty Combined Air And Space Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base on September 28, 2019.  
Photo: Sean Campbell/US Air Force

Journalist Abdulrahman Al-Rashed immediately wrote a column in *Asharq al-Awsat* titled “Will the Americans quit Al-Udeid?,” while the former director of the US Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, Yossef Bodansky, observed in an ISPSW (Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy) report that Riyadh was reaching out to Tehran to de-escalate tensions over fears of a US withdrawal from the region.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, this exercise precipitated the announcement of the withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria a week later on October 6, and along with President Donald Trump’s January announcement that the US may withdraw from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it does appear that the US is steadily reducing its footprint in the Euro-Mediterranean region.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Binnie, “AFCENT command moves from Qatar to U.S. to increase resilience”, *Janes Defence Weekly*, 2 October, 2019, <https://www.janes.com/article/91651/afcent-command-moves-from-qatar-to-us-to-increase-resilience>

<sup>2</sup> “Air Force shifts Middle East command center from Qatar to South Carolina”, *Stars and Stripes*, 29 September 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/air-force/air-force-shifts-middle-east-command-center-from-qatar-to-south-carolina-1.601074>

<sup>3</sup> Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, “Will the Americans Quit Al-Udeid”, *Al-Awsat*, 2 October 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1928651/abdulrahman-al-rashed/will-americans-quit-al-udeid>; Yossef Bodansky, “The Specter of an Israel-Iran War”, *Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung ISPSW*, Issue No. 651, October 2019, [https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/651\\_Bodansky.pdf](https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/651_Bodansky.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Juliane E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, “Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia”, 14 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>

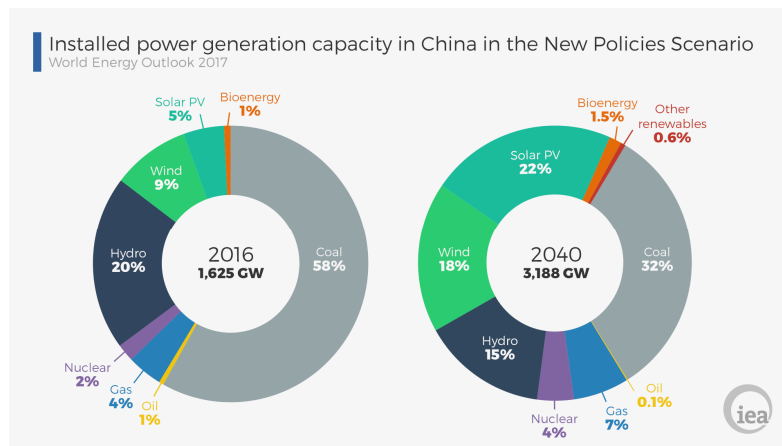
### Changing US security interests

Many observers have been quick to surmise that it would be against US interests to do so. For example, Rashed, argued that the US cannot withdraw from the Middle East, “which is the energy key to the world including US competitors like China,” and that a reduction in the US military footprint would be offset by increased Iranian military activities.

Indeed, Mideast energy sources are important for energy-importing countries, but it no longer applies to the US, which is now a net energy exporter. With the advent of new technologies to exploit shale oil and gas elsewhere and the push toward alternative energy sources over climate-change concerns, Mideast fossil fuels may become less relevant over time.

Additionally, while China does import oil from the region, its growing energy needs are increasingly met by renewables, natural gas and electricity according to the International Energy Agency.<sup>5</sup>

By disaggregating the data of China’s energy consumption, one sees that oil only comprised 1% of the total electrical-generation mix in 2016, with coal remaining the largest component at 58%, followed by hydro at 20% and wind at 9%. The forecast for China’s electrical-energy mix in 2040 puts oil at only 0.1%.



However, for South Korea, India and Japan, petroleum comprises larger percentages, at 44%, 25% and 3.7% respectively.<sup>6</sup>

As such, just as then-US president Jimmy Carter issued the Carter Doctrine and set up CENTCOM in the 1980s to protect oil interests in the Persian Gulf, now it may be Asian countries’ turn to set up their own CENTCOM.

Back in June, President Trump called on Asian oil-importing countries such as China, Japan and South Korea to step up and help contribute to Gulf security, while others have floated the idea of an Asian-led security bloc for the Arab Gulf states.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “World Energy Outlook 2017: China”, International Energy Agency, <https://www.iea.org/weo/china/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.php?iso=KOR>; <https://www.worldcoal.org/role-coal-india's-energy-ambitions>; <https://www.isep.or.jp/en/717/>

<sup>7</sup> Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Forming New Persian Gulf Plan, Enlisting Other Countries to Keep Watch”, 27 June 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-forming-new-persian-gulf-plan-enlisting-other-countries-to-keep-watch-11561656030>;



Thus, rather than just having Iran offset a reduction of the US military footprint in the Middle East, it seems more likely that other actors such as China, the European Union, Russia, Turkey, Iran and others would collectively step up burden-sharing for regional security.

Finally, the US needs to restructure priorities and address its US\$22 trillion debt bomb<sup>8</sup> that is growing at \$1 trillion a year, with \$1.5 billion in daily interest payments alone.

As Gal Luft and Anne Korin point out in their book *De-dollarization*, the promiscuous use of US sanctions is also provoking a coalition of alienated countries to establish alternatives to challenge the dollar-based financial system, which would impact US ability to continue underwriting a large military footprint abroad.<sup>9</sup>

And if the EU is stepping in while the US steps out, where does this leave trans-Atlantic relations?

### Trans-Atlantic division of labor

Trans-Atlantic relations would likely evolve into a new division of labor, with the EU assuming more responsibility for its eastern and southern neighborhood, while the US focuses on the Asia-Pacific rim.

This is due to increasing divergent interests and a threat-perception gap, which was recently punctuated at the United Nations, where the US and Russia blocked an EU-drafted resolution on NATO member Turkey's invasion of Syria.<sup>10</sup>

The rift was also highlighted as European Parliament President David Sassoli called Turkey's invasion "an act of war carried out by a NATO state" and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte warned that the EU cannot accept Turkish "blackmail" to weaponise refugees, while Trump touted Turkey as a long-standing NATO ally and that the Kurds are no angels.<sup>11</sup>

In the face of internal strife with an aggressive neo-Ottoman Turkey, a transactional US, and potential Greco-Turkish and Cypriot-Turkish conflicts over the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, NATO is beginning to tear at the seams.

And as the US continues to pivot away from the Mideast, one ponders if the stage is set for the EU army, perhaps more so than Iran, Russia or others, to rise up as the new security guarantor for the Euro-Mediterranean region.<sup>12</sup>

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Narayannappa Janardhan, "Asian Led-Collective Security for Gulf Arab States", *Stratfor*, 4 October 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/asian-led-collective-security-gulf-arab-states-saudi-arabia-uae-china-japan-india>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.usdebtclock.org>

<sup>9</sup> Gal Luft and Anne Korin, *De-dollarization: The revolt against the dollar and the rise of a new financial order*, August 26, 2019, <https://twitter.com/GalLuft/status/1168694148381253635>; Gerald F. Seib, "The Risks in Overusing America's Big Economic Weapon", *Wall Street Journal*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-risks-in-overusing-americas-big-economic-weapon-11557750009>

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Rettman, "EU stands alone against US and Russia on Syria", *EU Observer*, 11 October, 2019, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/146242>

<sup>11</sup> Rachael Kennedy, "EU Chief Sassoli says Turkey operation in Syria is 'an act of war'", *Euro News*, 17 October 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/17/eu-chief-sassoli-says-turkey-operation-in-syria-is-an-act-of-war>; "EU cannot accept Turkish 'blackmail'—Italian prime minister", *Reuters*, 11 October 2019, <https://in.reuters.com/article/syria-security-turkey-italy-id|NR1N22B010>

<sup>12</sup> Katie Harris, "EU Army: Verhofstadt insists 'high-time' Europe 'takes matters into own hands'", *Daily Express*, 18 October 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1192419/eu-news-Guy-Verhofstadt-eu-army-european-army-trump-syria-turkey>



**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published in *Asia Times* on October 20, 2019.

### About the Author of this Issue

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