

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

Why wait five to 10 years to leave?

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The idea of withdrawing from the Middle East is gaining steam. It is terrific to see Eugene Gholz throw his hat in the ring alongside Patrick Porter and David Blagden and this writer. One particular reason is because our arguments relied on work that Eugene has been doing for decades, on strategy, oil and national security, and other related issues.

I read this article as receiving the baton from the 2020 Quincy report on “ending America’s misguided policy of domination” in the region. That report, having defined U.S. interests in the region as preventing the rise of a hegemon in the region and ensuring the region’s oil makes it to market, mostly left open the question what military strategy is needed to protect those interests. Gholz answers: not much of one. “No country can plausibly establish hegemony in the Middle East, nor can a regional power close the Strait of Hormuz and strangle the flow of oil.” The body of the paper bends over backward to show policymakers that these two claims are true.

He sprinkles in useful policy suggestions, such as focusing U.S. arms sales on “weapons that generally make it harder for armies to move in open territory,” something required of a country trying to establish hegemony in the region. Similarly, if the United States worries about Iran trying to close the Strait of Hormuz, it could invest a bit more effort in mine warfare. But in both cases, Gholz asserts persuasively that there just isn’t much to worry about here.

Because agreement is boring, some quibbles: Gholz asserts that “while a full military withdrawal from the region is possible on military grounds, political and other factors render it infeasible in the short run.” Why? Which political and other factors? Any policymaker willing to accept Gholz’s characterization of the dangers posed by the region is likely to have surmounted most of the political and other factors already. It seems like a passive-voice way of trying not to be too edgy, which isn’t something I’ve ever associated with the Gholz oeuvre.

Similarly, his suggestion that the United States withdraw “over a period of five to ten years” seems like a plan for never leaving. In our “discussions with regional powers,” they will launch a

fusillade of ingenious hysteria, and eventually one of their nightmare scenarios will persuade Washington policymakers. If our interests don't require our being there, we should leave. As soon as possible, which is far sooner than five to ten years. Change my mind.

Finally, Gholz suggests that if the United States withdraws, "a more sustainable regional order" may be the result. I doubt it.

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