

# American Unilateralism and Wars in West Asia

Alireza Abootalebi <sup>1</sup> 

Short Article

## Introduction

The period following the Cold War has been marked by escalating conflicts, with the United States increasingly adopting a unilateral stance in global governance. While U.S. expansionist policies during the Cold War were moderated by the ideological competition with communism, the post-Cold War era has seen these policies take new forms through economic neoliberalism, military interventions justified by the ‘war on terror,’ and the strategic use of sanctions. NATO’s expansion since the 1990s has contributed to heightened tensions with Russia, culminating in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, in West Asia, U.S. support for Israel following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack has facilitated significant violations of international laws and humanitarian norms. This unchecked support for Israeli policies, alongside a broader pursuit of unilateralism, challenges global stability and the prospects of a multilateral, law-based international order.

## U.S. Interventionism and Regional Impact

Since 2001, the U.S. ‘war on terror’ has led to extensive loss of life, predominantly among Muslim populations, and displaced nearly 38 million people across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines. Military campaigns in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), Syria (2014), and Yemen (2015) have frequently violated international law and destabilized regional power structures. These conflicts have also benefited Israel by diminishing potential adversaries. At the same time, Iran has emerged as a powerful regional player despite facing stringent U.S. and UN sanctions, leading to the development of an ‘Islamic Resistance Front’ opposing U.S. and Israeli dominance while advocating Palestinian rights.

Received:  
31 January 2025Revised:  
4 March 2025Accepted:  
10 April 2025Published:  
8 May 2025

PP. 1-4

1. Professor of Middle East Studies and World Politics, Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice, University of Wisconsin, (UWEC), [Abootaar@uwec.edu](mailto:Abootaar@uwec.edu) ORCID ID:0000-0001-9668-2568

U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Middle East have remained relatively consistent since World War II, although strategies have shifted over time. During the Cold War, American policy was largely shaped by anti-communism, whereas in the post-Cold War period, the fight against terrorism has played a central role. In 1953, the U.S. orchestrated a coup in Iran to install the Shah, largely due to concerns over Soviet influence in the region. The success of this operation encouraged further covert interventions, including in Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973). The assertive U.S. foreign policy of the 1990s—often described as its ‘hegemonic moment’—failed to account for major geopolitical transformations, including the rise of China and the re-emergence of Russia as a significant power.

Following the First Gulf War (1990-91), U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia fueled radical Islamist opposition, resulting in attacks such as the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 USS Cole attack in Yemen. These events culminated in the September 11, 2001, attacks, leading to an aggressive and prolonged U.S. military response that reshaped global security policies. The Iraq War, in particular, created long-term instability, deepening sectarian divisions, empowering extremist factions, and expanding Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria.

The Obama administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’ aimed at countering China’s growing influence but inadvertently strengthened diplomatic ties between Russia and China. This shift contributed to widespread regional instability, a surge in refugee displacement, heightened NATO-Russian tensions, and emboldened Israeli expansionist policies. The end of the Bretton Woods system in 1971 further reinforced U.S. financial control, enabling the U.S. to use the dollar’s dominance as a coercive economic tool. Restricting access to global financial networks such as SWIFT has allowed the U.S. to exert pressure on adversarial states like Iran, Russia, and Venezuela, though this approach has also created friction with allies wary of American overreach.

## **Sanctions, Unilateralism, and Global Consequences**

Sanctions have become a core component of U.S. foreign policy, particularly after the Cold War. Designed to weaken adversaries such as Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela, these measures allow Washington to exert pressure without direct military involvement. Secondary sanctions—measures that punish third parties for engaging with sanctioned states—have expanded U.S. influence by compelling international actors to comply. However, the widespread reliance on sanctions has drawn criticism for their disproportionate impact on civilian populations and their limited success in achieving broader political objectives.

The U.S. has also strengthened its economic partnerships with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, securing arms deals and energy trade agreements while using financial leverage to control terrorism financing and limit Iranian influence. This strategy has helped sustain American dominance in regional economic and security frameworks, even as Gulf states seek alternative alliances. The growing dependence on sanctions, combined with military interventions, has provoked resistance to U.S. policies worldwide, encouraging new trade agreements that reduce reliance on the dollar and seek alternatives to American financial control.

Since 2001, the U.S. unilateral approach has squandered the geopolitical leverage it had in the 1990s, instead engaging in costly military interventions. The erosion of the liberal international order has accelerated, particularly in the wake of the U.S. and Israeli response to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack. Israel's military actions in Gaza and the West Bank—resulting in large-scale civilian casualties and war crimes as recognized by the ICJ and ICC and a host of humanitarian and human rights groups and nongovernmental organization—have drawn widespread condemnation. Yet, U.S. support for Israel continues under the justification of 'self-defense.' This persistent approach has intensified global divisions, leading even long-time U.S. allies to question the sustainability of American leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Great power diplomacy remains vital for resolving conflicts and preventing further escalation. The United States failed to use its post-Cold War dominance to establish a viable two-state solution or a multilateral security system in the Persian Gulf. Instead, its repeated military interventions have emboldened Israel's far-right leadership, allowing for unchecked aggression against Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza. Meanwhile, NATO expansion miscalculations have fueled Russia's invasion of Ukraine, further destabilizing the global order. Rising tensions between Israel and Iran, as well as direct confrontations between NATO and Russia, highlight the urgent need for diplomatic recalibration.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2009 vision of a multipolar world order has, in practice, resulted in expanded NATO influence and aggressive Israeli policies rather than cooperative global governance. A renewed commitment to multilateralism and diplomacy is necessary to resolve regional conflicts, reinforce international stability, and avert the risks of large-scale war.

## Endnotes

- Atlantic Council. (n.d.). (January 2025), *The U.S. Dollar and Global Financial Dominance*. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>
- Brookings Institution. (n.d.). *Economic Sanctions and Humanitarian Impact*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/>
- Econofact. (n.d.). (2025), *Economic Sanctions and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from <https://econofact.org/>
- Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). (2021), *U.S. Economic Sanctions: Effectiveness and Consequences*. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-05-12/us-economic-sanctions>
- Global Investigations Review. (n.d.). (2025), *Sanctions Compliance and Enforcement*. Retrieved from <https://globalinvestigationsreview.com/>
- Cato Institute. (n.d.). *Iran Sanctions: History and Impact*. Retrieved from <https://www.cato.org/>
- Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *North Korea: Sanctions and Diplomatic Strategies*. Retrieved from <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>
- International Monetary Fund (IMF). (n.d.). (2021), *Bretton Woods System*. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2021/Bretton-Woods-System>