Examining Theater Realities: Informing CENTCOM's Planning

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Key Points

- The new U.S. administration has adopted a strategy of "dollar deal diplomacy," and a "carrot-and-stick" approach to advance national interests. This strategy comes with geo-political surprises and shocks.
- The U.S. troop drawdowns in the Middle East, combined with its extensive involvement in the region and shifting priorities elsewhere, create a paradox. This puts USCENTCOM in a particularly uncomfortable position regarding the development of its military strategy in the Middle East and the alignment of its resources with the required mission.
- The Middle East that is wanted is rarely the Middle East that is. All the observed trends suggest that if the U.S. aspires to shape events for outcomes which most benefit national interests, more, not less, posture will be required in the CENTCOM AOR.
- USCENTCOM is caught between policy strategic directives and realities on the ground, charged with advancing three critical lines of effort despite limited resources and rapidly shifting, volatile dynamics. It is crucial to recognize emerging regional trends as these factors significantly impact USCENTCOM operations.

Introduction

The publication of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) provides an updated strategic context for USCENTCOM. While the NSS offers broad national guidance, the complexity of the command's operational environment continues to be characterized by immediate and persistent challenges. These range from support to the 20 Point Plan to end the Gaza conflict, continued tensions over Iran's nuclear ambitions, the persistent and enduring threat of violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and pervasive encroachment in the region by China.

This paper presents the outcome of CSAG analysis of the events, factors, and drivers that result in ten emerging regional trends. Presented within a DIME (Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy) framework, this analysis evaluates the associated risks and opportunities to inform USCENTCOM's planning.

The Identified Trends
Diplomatic Domain

1.   New Way of Diplomacy
2.   Changing Dynamic of Power

Information

3.   Utilization of Cyber and AI to Supercharge Instability
4.   Weaponized Information
5.   Upscaled Extremist Recruitment Online

Military

6.   From U.S. Security Guarantor to Security Integrator
7.   Underestimated Threats
8.   Changing Way of Warfare and Warfighting

Economy

9.   Competitive Multipolar Economic Order
10.   Fragmented Energy Transition & Economic Realignment

Diplomacy Domain (Trends 1, 2)

1.   New Way of Diplomacy

The new U.S. administration has adopted a strategy of "**dollar deal diplomacy**," characterized by transactional engagements and a "**carrot-and-stick**" approach that leverages economic incentives and penalties to advance national interests. This framework creates "**strategic surprises and shocks,**" often catching the world off guard with its abrupt maneuvers, in an attempt to yield immediate benefits, securing favorable trade agreements, resource access, and geopolitical concessions that bolster the U.S.'s global leverage.[1]

Fallout from October 7, 2023, attacks have profoundly **eroded trust in the United Nations (UN)**, exposing its limitations in upholding the rules-based international order and fostering greater **non-alignment among nations**.[2]

The aftermath of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) snapback is continuing to strain Iran–West relations and fueling nuclear anxieties.[3] The Pakistan–Saudi defense pact, perhaps made all the more likely by the Israeli attack in Doha, has raised speculation about a Pakistani nuclear influence in the Middle East, signaling weakening non-proliferation norms.[4]

2.   Changing Dynamic of Power

The Middle East remains a central arena for **global and regional power competition**, particularly among the U.S., China, and Russia. However, the dynamic is changing with more actors asserting their influence via

bold approaches and actions (e.g., HTS taking over Syria, Israel pager attack, Israel starting 12-day war, Iran retaliating on U.S. base in Qatar). At the same time, the U.S. has been recalibrating its regional presence and is increasingly favoring bilateral agreements over multilateral coalition-building, reflecting a broader strategy to minimize entanglements in the Middle East and reallocate resources.

Russia continues to assert itself both militarily and diplomatically, especially in Syria and through **its close ties with Iran.**[5] Türkiye is also emerging as a significant diplomatic actor, particularly in Syria.[6] Israel's deepening diplomatic isolation, driven by its role in regional conflicts, is reshaping normalization efforts and complicating U.S. ties with the Arab world. In addition, rising organizations (e.g., BRICS), state and non-state actors are exploiting the shifting security landscape, and raising doubts about trust and long-term partnerships in the region.

Information Domain (Trends 3, 4, 5)

3.   Weaponized Information

The information environment is **increasingly contested**. The "**weaponization of information"** fuels polarization and distrust, which is fueled further by a generational shift (e.g., Gen Y and Gen Z) in how information is accessed and used.[7] Adversaries such as Iran, Russia, and VEOs exploit this fractured landscape with **coordinated disinformation campaigns** deepening confusion and undermining efforts to tackle regional challenges. It is difficult to discern fact from misinformation and disinformation, creating a "**fog of war**" in the information domain. As audiences face constant streams of competing, often biased narratives that blur fact and opinion, they suffer from "**information obesity**," in an overwhelming deluge of data, posts, and videos.

4.   Utilization of Cyber and AI to Supercharge Instability

Cyberattacks on critical Middle East infrastructure, energy, military, and government targets are increasing, threatening national security and economic stability.[8] In response, regional partners are boosting cybersecurity to protect vital assets from hostile exploitation. **Rapid AI advances** are escalating cyber competition, empowering VEOs and state adversaries to access sensitive intelligence and refine tactics. AI tools also fuel the weaponization of information through, for example, deepfakes that blur truth and fiction, fueling misleading narratives.[9]

5.   Upscaled Extremist Recruitment Online

Extremist groups like ISIS are increasingly using sophisticated **social media campaigns and encrypted platforms to recruit, radicalize**, and adapt their strategies to offset military setbacks. These tools allow them to reach global audiences and amplify their messages, while algorithms often reinforce echo chambers that hinder counter-narratives.[10]

Military Domain (Trends 6, 7, 8)

> 6.   *From U.S. Security Guarantor to Security Integrator*

In developing a new approach toward the Middle East, the U.S. is shifting its role from a security guarantor to a security integrator. Drawing on the doctrine of **peace through strength**, this approach manages the increasing complexity of great power competition in the Middle East by prioritizing a smaller, more specialized footprint while encouraging regional partners to take greater ownership of their own defense.[11] Furthermore, it seems that the U.S. is stepping back from coalition-building, promoting bilateral agreements instead (e.g., Iraq). This strategy also reflects a desire to reduce U.S. commitments in the region to focus on other priorities, like Homeland Security and China.

7.   *Unaddressed and Underestimated Threats*

Threats in the region stem from Iran's deepening strategic partnerships and **asymmetric capabilities**. In September 2025, Iran and Russia inked a deal to construct four nuclear power reactors, with a subsequent November agreement expanding this to eight additional plants, ostensibly for civilian energy but raising alarms over dual-use technology transfer that could accelerate Iran's path to weapons-grade uranium production.[12] This partnership not only evades international sanctions but also embeds **Russian expertise in Iran's atomic infrastructure.**

Another unaddressed threat is **China's covert material support for Iran's ballistic missile program**, which enhances Iran's ability to project power and threaten U.S. assets. Since the 12-Day War, Iran has procured large amounts of sodium perchlorate (a key propellant ingredient) from Chinese suppliers.[13] Iran created sophisticated **smuggling networks (weapons and oil (utilizing a ghost fleet))** that circumvent sanctions and sustain its **proxies.**

Non-Iran related **VEO's** (e.g., Al Qaeda, ISIS-K) **could also pose significant risks to U.S. homeland security**. While these groups often operate under the radar from security vacuums (from Afghanistan to West-Africa), their capabilities and intentions are evolving.

> 8.   *Changing Warfare and Warfighting*

The CENTCOM AOR is increasingly shaped by the rapid proliferation of unmanned systems among state, proxy, and terrorist actors. **Drones** enabled by automation and AI combined with targeting algorithms, enhance surveillance, reconnaissance, and precision-strike capabilities available at low cost and high adaptability. Their integration into decision-making processes accelerates the Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop and allows adversaries, even those with limited resources, to react and strike faster. Existing air defense networks, designed for larger and faster conventional threats, remain poorly suited to detect and counter small, low-flying drones. This growing capability gap sustains a persistent asymmetric threat and challenges regional stability.

Economic Domain (Trend 9, 10)

   9.   *Competitive Multipolar Economic Order*

The Middle East is increasingly enmeshed in a competitive multipolar economic landscape, where **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, including its Digital Silk Road, competes with U.S.-led digital finance and infrastructure efforts.[14] This rivalry has been amplified by the rapid expansion of the **BRICS** bloc, which in 2025 now incorporates key regional players including Iran, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia. BRICS offers alternative financing mechanisms, trade corridors, and **de-dollarization tools** that enable member states to diversify partnerships and mitigate risks from over-reliance on any single power.

Exemplifying renewed U.S. vigor under President Trump's second term, his May 2025 Gulf tour yielded landmark deals, including a potential 1 trillion-dollar investment commitment from Saudi Arabia in American energy and defense sectors. Alongside the Saudi agreement, the tour secured 200 billion dollars in UAE agreements accelerating a prior 1.4 trillion-dollar pipeline for AI, semiconductors, and data centers, collectively unlocking over 2 trillion dollars in bilateral flows that reinforce the **U.S.'s economic foothold against China's advances**.[15]

   10.   *Fragmented Energy Transition & Economic Realignment*

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are accelerating economic diversification through renewables, hydrogen, and green infrastructure, propelled by national visions like Saudi Arabia's **Vision 2030** and the UAE's **Net Zero 2050 strategy**. The GCC aims to invest 60 billion dollars from 2025 to 2030, targeting an additional 102 GW of renewable capacity to supplant fossil fuel dependencies.[16]

Risks and Opportunities

Risks

- **Transactional Diplomacy:** If the U.S. continues relying on transactional diplomacy and short-term deals over traditional more stable alliances, regional actors may seek certainty by strengthening ties with China, Russia, and other powers through a series of bilateral relationships or forums such as BRICS, eroding U.S. influence and strategic leverage.
- **Erosion of Trust in UN:** The UN has long been central to managing international crises, by providing mandates for humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and reconstruction efforts. However, its credibility and authority are increasingly under strain. Longstanding divisions, especially in the UN Security Council, and increasing perceptions of bias have eroded trust in the UN's ability to act impartially or effectively. This loss of confidence threatens to weaken the legitimacy of UN-backed operations and could undermine international cooperation in future crises, where coordinated and trusted leadership is most urgently needed.
- **Escalation of Nuclear Proliferation:** Strains from JCPOA snapback, Russian expertise in Iran's atomic infrastructure, and pacts like Pakistan-Saudi Arabia could normalize nuclear technology

sharing, heightening risks of arms races or accidental escalation in the Middle East, directly threatening U.S. non-proliferation goals.

- **Escalation Through Proliferation:** The rapid proliferation of relatively cheap drones made more capable and lethal leveraging AI among non-state actors might normalize advanced tech in conflicts, complicating attribution and increasing the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

Opportunities

- **Allies and Partners:** Strengthen military cooperation with allies and partners for monitoring and countering proxy and VEO networks. This enhances U.S. situational awareness, enables preventive action, and improves local capacity through shared security frameworks.
- **The UN:** Aligning U.S. interests with a stronger, more effective UN, and leveraging the UN in specific circumstances (e.g., Gaza mandate) the U.S. would not only enhance global cooperation but also solidify its role as a leader in fostering stability, promoting multilateralism, and counterbalancing the influence of rival powers like Russia and China.
- **Gaza Reconstruction:** Launching a U.S.-backed Gaza reconstruction and stabilization program, coupled with a phased, conditioned normalization process between Israel and Arab states tied to Palestinian political progress, would enhance U.S. credibility in the region, reduce extremist threats, and strengthen America's standing as a key peace broker.

Campaigning in a Paradox

The ten converging trends highlight the geopolitical paradox of the U.S. in the Middle East. On one hand, the U.S. is announcing troop reductions and a strategy of "retiring leadership," in line with its "security integrator" doctrine. This has led to doubts (justified or not) among U.S. allies and partners about the U.S.'s actual willingness to honor its commitments in the event of a major crisis. On the other hand, in the context of defending its national interests, the U.S. remains compelled to secure strategic energy chokepoints (such as Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz), manage Iran's nuclear ambitions, prevent the growth of the terrorist threat, and contain China's expansionist strategy, all while simultaneously holding back the emergence of regional powers with ambitions that diverge from U.S. interests.

This strategic paradox puts USCENTCOM in a particularly uncomfortable position regarding the development of its military strategy in the Middle East and the alignment of its resources with the required mission. In the current context, the U.S. military strategy can only be defensive, organized around a minimal footprint and the principle of deploying rapid reaction forces "ready to act." In the long term, this strategy will leave a degree of freedom of action, and therefore the initiative, to U.S. adversaries in the region, who will find it easier to deploy their own strategies. This represents a serious medium- to long-term threat to U.S. interests in the region, necessitating the determination of the minimum force requirements to maintain effectiveness and freedom of action.

To deter any conflict, the U.S. must demonstrate a credible and sustained capacity to conduct protracted campaigns. However, questions persist regarding the depth of planning, the maintenance of capabilities, and the timeliness of effective response. Furthermore, peace efforts in Gaza are absorbing the attention and resources of USCENTCOM, and Israel remains an unpredictable actor capable of unilateral actions with

significant international impact. This context further complicates the equation for implementing the concept of U.S. deterrence in the region and increases the likelihood that the U.S. will be drawn into an escalation with unpredictable strategic consequences.

Iran remains an unresolved strategic problem for the U.S. It will most likely remain so for the next decade. Since the 12-Day War, the question of the Iranian nuclear program has become more complex, with the Iranians revising their strategy for acquiring nuclear materials and accessing proliferation technologies. The development of the Russian-backed civilian nuclear program and the Chinese-backed space program are particularly concerning, especially since there is currently no dedicated oversight mechanism and limited means of intervention to prevent them.

To counter VEOs, coalitions offer greater effectiveness through the sharing of responsibilities and the organization of a network of interconnected resources. Bilateral commitments are easier to implement in the short term, but their global coherence proves far more complex and risks strategic failure in the long term. Indeed, they require tailored diplomacy, considerable coordination efforts, and the sharing of intelligence and integration of plans according to intricately complex procedures. Without multilateralism, it is likely that the global war on terror will be more complicated and less well-coordinated among nations in the future. Consequently, the opportunities for terrorist groups to develop operationally and financially, will be more numerous, more efficient, and therefore more difficult for USCENTCOM to counter.

At the same time, innovations in asymmetric warfare are strengthening non-state actors and terrorist groups using drones and the mass effect they can produce on the battlefield. This saturation tactic will create the strategic surprise of modern times in terms of human and material losses. Currently, few effective means of defense exist for protecting very low-altitude airspace. Reducing this vulnerability in the future must be a priority particularly regarding the protection of military installations and personnel, naval vessels at berth, and air bases.

Competing with China will be USCENTCOM's most ambitious mission. The military aspect to this challenge will necessarily sit within the framework of a comprehensive strategy in conjunction with other levers of national power. Ultimately, USCENTCOM will need to rethink its forward presence to counter China's growing influence in energy corridors and infrastructure, as well as the possibility of a future Chinese "Great White Fleet" and its carrier strike group in the region. The first military competition and testing ground between the two major powers will undoubtedly be naval and air power, focused on maritime air dominance in the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and later the Gulf and Red Sea. This will then raise the issue of the permanent presence of a U.S. naval task force, as well as the question of its survivability in the face of new, more lethal, automated threats that exploit the effects of mass and saturation.

Furthermore, the art of war is increasingly extending through social networks, which can now be considered as the sixth battleground of operations. "Info obesity" creates a new fog of war, polarization, and mistrust among the masses. The sociological outcomes of this are yet to be clear enough for those in power in the region to navigate effectively through the challenges posed by this. In fact, the destabilization of certain governments in the Middle East is considered likely, leading to a redistribution of power in the region.

Hope for the Best, Plan for the Worst

In a paradoxical world, USCENTCOM finds itself in a delicate situation, torn between high expectations, limited resources, and ever-changing realities in the Middle East where trust between nations remains fragile. It is predictable that in this current context, USCENTCOM's strategy will be more reactive than proactive in the future, which will challenge the implementation of strategy through operations in the region.

The Middle East is often different from what one would like. All observed strategic trends will very likely require an adaptation of the American posture in the region in the future, running counter to the current deflationary trend in military capabilities. The turning point in American strategy will depend on the ability of the United States' adversaries to combine and coordinate their interests and strategies in the region. In this regard, the alignment of China, Russia, and Iran, as well as their allies, and the speed of its implementation are particularly important to monitor, especially in the context of Iran's nuclear strategy.

In parallel, during this transition phase, the idea of replacing humans, with so-called "intelligent" machines in the art of war is gaining ground. Can these technological approaches fully compensate for the lack of qualified staff personnel and replace a significant military presence in the region to enable USCENTCOM to accomplish its mission? The question remains open and uncertain. Consequently, caution remains essential, and investment in human capital, its training, and its preparation for real-world combat remains fundamental to ensuring victory in the face of tomorrow's challenges.

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ANNEX 1, Dynamics and Trends

The diagram below illustrates the ten trends organized in a DIME framework that are formed by significant factors and events. The identified trends will have an impact on USCENTCOM operations in the (near) future.
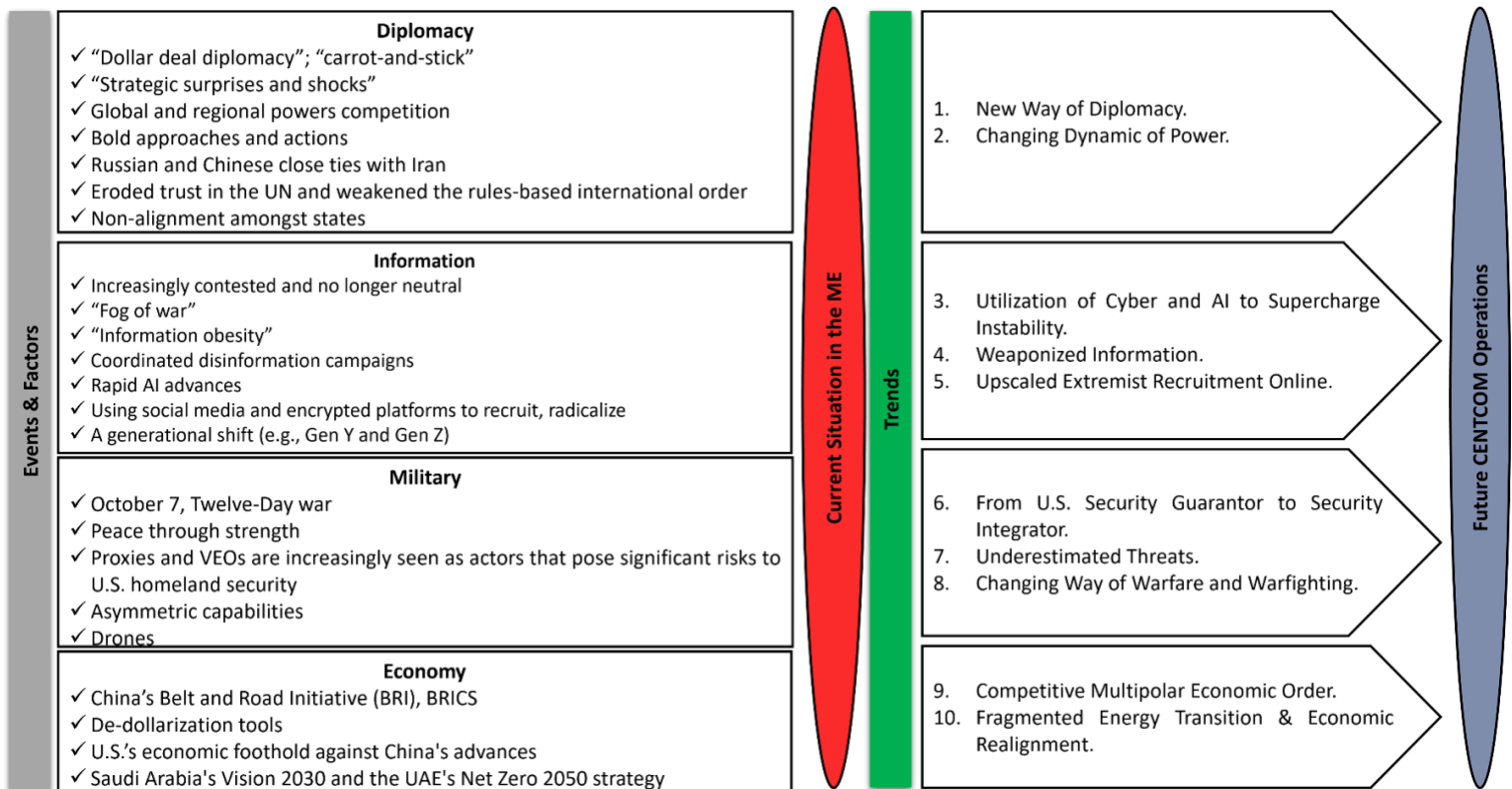

Figure 1: Dynamics and Trends. Graph Made by Authors.

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