CENTCOM Smart Power in The Middle East

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Key Points

- CENTCOM uses smart power in the Middle East to promote regional stability and advance U.S. interests.
- Smart power is the combination of military and non-military means to achieve national objectives.
- CENTCOM's smart power approach in the Middle East is represented in its strategic approach.
- "People" are the greatest asset in CENTCOM as an organization, while "Partners" involves working with regional partners and allies to achieve common goals, and "Innovation" involves using technology and new approaches to enhance security and stability.
- Challenges and obstacles facing CENTCOM's smart power approach in The Middle East include political and cultural differences, regional conflicts, terrorism, and extremism.
- To enhance its smart power approach, CENTCOM should prioritize cultural understanding, strengthen regional partnerships, leverage technology, focus on human security, and build on its successes.

Introduction

This year USCENTCOM celebrates the 40th anniversary of its establishment; one of its significant tasks is to achieve and enhance security and stability within its area of responsibility (AOR). USCENTCOM AOR includes 21 countries.[1]

The Middle East (ME) region is one of the most important subsets of CENTCOM AOR because of its geostrategic importance to the whole world. In addition, the ME is the very location of strategic competition, where we can see some indications of changing the global order caused by the recent Chinese mediation between KSA and Iran.[2] The regional countries in the ME are seeking to implement a new policy supporting their agendas, much like the new KSA foreign policy towards its neighbors following the statement of "zero problems" with neighbors to achieve the 2030 vision.

According to international relations and political science, when relations between countries are volatile and murky, there are many theories and approaches to apply with this issue to preserve the common interests between states, allies, and partners. One of them is applying smart power tools as a "vaccine". This is what CENTCOM is trying to implement this in the Middle East. Consequently, the topic "**CENTCOM Smart Power in The Middle East**" is worth examining. It covers the following aspects:

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[1] - Congressional research service, CRS reports, IF11428, United States Central Command, Washington DC, Updated December 16, 2022, available at: https://crsreports.congress.gov/

[2] - Mersiha Gadzo, Changing global order': China's hand in the Iran-Saudi deal, Aljazeera, march 11th,2023, available at: https://www.aljazeera.com

- The main types of power in international relations.
- Smart power and CENTCOM's approach.
- The challenges facing CENTCOM's approach.
- Conclusion.
- Recommendations to enhance CENTCOM smart power in the ME.

The main types of power in international relations

Power is a central concept in international relations. It refers to the ability of one actor, such as a state, to influence the behavior of another actor, either through coercion or persuasion. Power can be both tangible and intangible, and it can take many different forms, including military, economic, political, cultural, and technological. Hard power, soft power, and smart power are concepts that have been developed by different theorists in the field of international relations.

Hard power: this concept refers to the use of military and economic coercion to achieve strategic goals. It is often associated with realist theorists such as Hans Morgenthau[3] and Kenneth Waltz,[4] who argue that states are driven by a desire to maximize their power and security, and that military force is a necessary tool for achieving these goals.

Soft power is a concept that refers to the ability to influence the behavior of others through attraction, persuasion, and legitimacy, rather than coercion. It is often associated with liberal theorists such as Joseph Nye,[5] who argue that states can achieve their goals through cooperation and the use of non-coercive means such as diplomacy, cultural exchange, and international institutions.

Smart power: this concept refers to **the combination of both hard and soft power**, using a strategic and integrated approach to achieve foreign policy goals.[6] It is often associated with the Obama administration, which emphasized the importance of using both military and non-military means to achieve US foreign policy objectives.[7]

While different theorists have emphasized different aspects of power, many argue that a combination of hard and soft power is necessary for effective foreign policy. For example, Nye argues that soft power is more effective in the long term, but that hard power may be necessary in certain situations to deter aggression or protect national security.

Recently, state governments are using smart power tools to achieve their foreign policy goals, integrating, and balancing different types of power resources to create a more effective and sustainable approach.[8] USCENTCOM's approach relying on people, partnership, and innovation can be seen as supporting smart power objectives by promoting collaboration, engagement, and creative problem-solving in the Middle East.

Smart power and CENTCOM's approach

Smart power is a concept that refers to the coordinated use of both military and non-military tools to achieve strategic objectives. It recognizes that military force alone is not sufficient to achieve desired outcomes, and that an approach is needed that combines hard power (military force) with soft power (diplomacy, economic engagement, humanitarian assistance, etc.)[9]

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[3] - Morgenthau, Hans J. (1978). "Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace." McGraw-Hill Education, 2006

[4] - Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979). "Theory of international politics." 1st edition, Waveland Press, Jan,2010.

[5] - Nye, Joseph S. Jr. "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics." 1st edition, Public Affairs, New York, 2004.

[6] - Nye, Joseph S. Jr. "The Future of Power." Public Affairs, New York, 2011.

[7] - Nye, Joseph S. Jr. "Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era." Princeton University Press, 2012.

[8] - Feigenbaum, E. Smart Power in US Foreign Policy: Myth or Reality? International Affairs Review,2014, 89-112.

[9]- Explaining smart power, Joseph S. Nye, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, available at: https://www.defense.gov

CENTCOM's approach to promoting regional stability and advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East is based on the three pillars of "People, Partners, and Innovation" as a milestone in CENTCOM approach,[10] so when we connect this approach with smart power theory, CENTCOM smart power will be the key.

The "People" pillar should not only focus on the staff in CENTCOM and its units, but also should focus on building relationships with local populations in the region, understanding their needs and concerns, and working with them to address shared security challenges. This includes activities such as supporting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, engaging with local communities through civil affairs and other programs, and promoting regional stability through diplomatic outreach. However, during the USCENTCOM Commander's weekly radio announcements Monday and Friday, when he discusses the People component of his People, Partners, and Innovation triptych, he focuses almost exclusively on how the people pillar of CENTCOM is seen to be focused on the American people and not the people of CENTCOM AOR. Moreover, in daily news clips published by CCCI, you may find CENTCOM AOR country-related news or articles that do not reflect the official country view or deal with the issues from a limited or narrow perspective. Everything mentioned within the people pillar should include people in the US and partners in the CENTCOM AOR.

The "Partners" pillar emphasizes the importance of building and sustaining partnerships with regional and international actors to address shared security challenges.[11] This includes coordinating military operations, sharing intelligence, providing training and capacity building assistance to partner military and law enforcement forces, and promoting regional stability through multilateral forums.

The "Innovation" pillar recognizes the need for new and creative approaches to addressing complex security challenges in the region and the importance of leveraging emerging technologies and operational concepts to enhance effectiveness.[12] CENTCOM applies many resources to this pillar such as "Task Force 59, Task Force 99, and Task Force 39."[13]

The challenges facing CENTCOM's approach

CENTCOM's approach to promoting regional stability and advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East using a way of smart power tools through three pillars "People, Partners, and Innovation" faces many challenges and obstacles. Some of the main challenges include:[14]

a. Political instability: Many countries in the Middle East are facing political instability, including ongoing conflicts and civil wars (Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue) which can make it difficult to implement and sustain stability-promoting initiatives.

b. Terrorism and extremism: as this issue is one of CENTCOM's priorities connected with Deter Iran as another priority. The region is facing a significant threat from terrorism and extremism, even supported, or sponsored by the Iranian regime[15] or not. Those proxies, including groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS and Hezbollah, have carried out numerous attacks and targeted civilians, government officials, and military personnel, which can undermine efforts to promote regional stability and advance U.S. interests.

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[10] - Commander's priorities and strategic approach, CENTCOM HQ, March 8th ,2023.

[11] - Ibid.

[12] - Ibid.

[13] - General Michael E. Kurilla, Commander, U.S. Central Command ,Telephonic Press Briefing, December 22, 2022, available at: https://www.state.gov/telephonic-press-briefing-with-general-michael-e-kurilla-commander-u-s-central-command-2/

[14] - Chuck Hagel, Ryan C. Crocker, Howard Berman and Linda Robinson ,Current Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy in the Middle East, RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy ,September 28th,2021, available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CFA1864-1

[15] - Committee on foreign affairs, US house of representatives, Iran's support for terrorism worldwide, March 4th,2014, available at: http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/

c. Limited resources: Implementing smart power initiatives requires significant resources, including personnel, funding, and technological capabilities. However, resources are limited, particularly in times of budget constraints or when resources are diverted to other priorities as we see in US budget 2023-2024;[16] also, the Biden Administration has put China at the top of the priority list.

d. Geopolitical tensions: The Middle East is a region of significant geopolitical tensions. Some of these are the struggle in Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Iranian influence in the region; all of these issues create some degree of geopolitical tensions in the region; also, U.S. involvement in the region can be viewed with suspicion or outright hostility by some actors.[17]

e. Public opinion: Public opinion, both in the Middle East and in the United States, can also present challenges to CENTCOM's approach to promoting regional stability and advancing U.S. interests. In some cases, public opinion may be hostile to U.S. involvement in the region, while in others it may be difficult to generate support for specific initiatives.

f. Strategic Competition in ME: Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East can potentially impact CENTCOM's smart power approach. Both countries have been increasing their diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in the region, and this has raised concerns among some U.S. policymakers and military officials.[18]

Conclusion

CENTCOM's approach to promoting regional stability and advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East using smart power with the three pillars of "People, Partners, and Innovation" is facing significant challenges and obstacles. These include political and cultural differences, regional conflicts, terrorism, and extremism, in addition to the notable Chinese and Russian influence because of the perceived decline of U.S. influence in ME.

To strengthen its smart power approach in the Middle East, CENTCOM should prioritize cultural understanding, strengthen regional partnerships, leverage technology, focus on human security according to the Middle East's perspective, and build on its successes such as its efforts to counter ISIS and innovating through a variety of technological task forces. By taking these steps in addition to raising the American administration's awareness of the Middle East's strategic importance, CENTCOM can promote greater stability and security in the region, advance U.S. interests, and build stronger relationships with its partners and allies in The Middle East.

Recommendations to enhance CENTCOM smart power in the ME

a. Increase focus on cultural understanding: As one of the key components of smart power, cultural understanding is essential for building relationships and trust with people and partners in the region. CENTCOM could invest in more language and cultural training for its personnel to improve communication and cooperation with local partners and communities.

b. Strengthen regional partnerships: CENTCOM should prioritize building and strengthening partnerships with key regional actors like KSA, UAE, and Egypt, including support that provides the allies with their needs and

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[16] - Department of defense , 2024's Budget of the U.S. Government , The US White House, march,2023 available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/budget_fy2024.pdf

[17] - David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, the Middle East, and the United States: History, Politics, and Ideologies, 6th Edition, Routledge, 2018.

[18] - Jonathan Fulton and Li-Chen Sim Great power projection in the Middle East, Atlantic Council, March 16, 2022, available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/

sharing information. This can help create a more coordinated and effective approach to regional security challenges.

c. Leverage technology: As part of the innovation pillar, CENTCOM should continue to explore the use of new technologies and artificial intelligence, to enhance its smart power approach and share with allies and partners. The more you provide your allies with new technology as "know-how", the more you strengthen regional partnerships.

d. Focus on human security: In addition to traditional security concerns, CENTCOM should find a common ground with the U.S. administration to prioritize human security issues according to ME perspective, such as access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

e. Build on successes: Finally, CENTCOM should build on its successes in the region, such as its efforts to counter ISIS and innovating through a variety of technological task forces. By highlighting these successes and using them as a foundation for further progress, CENTCOM can demonstrate the value of its smart power approach and win over more partners and supporters in the region.