Strategic Autocracy:
American Military Forces and Regime Type
by
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Abstract
What effect do American military forces have on domestic regimes where they are hosted? America's unparalleled global position is well studied, but less attention has been paid to the effect of its global military presence on governance. We argue that American forces have an autocratizing effect on host nations in strategically valuable regions. In ambiguous or unfavorable information environments, the key driver of American policy is the strategic value of the location to American interests. American and host interests align in these cases, supporting regime survival where the location is critical to the United States and its global system of trade and military preeminence. This alignment produces increasing autocracy rather than simple regime stability. We test this hypothesis with data of American force deployments since 1950, and illustrate the causal mechanisms with case study analysis.

Introduction

What effect does the American military have on regimes in host countries? The presence of American military on foreign soil has been one of the defining features of the international system since the end of WWII. It is a critical way in which the US projects power around the world. We argue that an American military presence has the potential to restructure the domestic incentives within host regimes; however, not all host countries are equally situated, and this potential is unlikely to be "activated" in all scenarios (Cooley and Nexon 2013). We hypothesize that an American presence can lead to increasing autocracy in places the US sees as highly strategic, *in combination with* a situation where American planners are uncertain of the military's ability to withstand regime change. This combination of elements is present in the areas surrounding many globally significant chokepoints. We thus hypothesize that the American presence in these strategically valuable locations will have an autocratizing effect.

A strand of the literature on this topic argues that US foreign policy has a unidirectional effect (i.e. either autocratizing or democratizing), while others make qualitative arguments about which hosts make better, less politicized partners (Autocratizing: Blum 2003; Carpenter & Innocent 2015; Kirkpatrick 1979; Vine 2015. Democratizing: Ikenberry 2011; MacDonald 1992, Steinmetz 1994, Wohlforth 1999. Also, National Security Strategy 1994**.** Qualitative argument: Cooley 2008). Importantly, some have shown that the American presence can foster or inhibit democracy depending on the population's views of the US (Lake 2013). We accept that the popularity of American forces plays a key role, but we add the crucial variable of *strategic value* of the location. American foreign policy has prioritized regime continuity in these regions, because of the necessity of maintaining military access in these critical areas. These factors produce American support for autocratic hosts where consolidated democracies do not already exist.

The host regime also prefers to maintain an American presence because of the benefits it provides to the regime's survival.[1] These include military support, economic benefits, and political cover to host regimes. The presence of American forces creates incentives to oppose challenges to the host regime, where the opposition is openly opposed to US presence, or where their position is unclear. These common incentives produce increasingly autocratic governance over time through the provision of coercive tools, the cooptation of opposition, and the lending of legitimacy from an outside power. Thus, increasing autocracy benefits both the continued US military presence and the host regime.

In other areas, we argue that regime change is less threatening to American foreign policy, because of lower strategic value. In past cases of US withdrawal, the effect of regime change on the basing structure was not immediately clear, or American strategy in the region did not rely heavily on that location. In many critical regions, regime change necessarily means the removal of unpopular American forces. Withdrawal would come with diminished American influence over strategically valuable regions (McDaniel 2013). This combination of high strategic value *and* low popularity has produced an overriding American preference for the persistence of pro-American autocrats.

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[1] We define strategic value in reference to seven global shipping chokepoints outlined by the US Energy Information Administration (http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=18991). Many other works on the strategic importance of sea lane chokepoints support these choices, such as Valencia and Marsh (1985), Harkavy (1989), Sandars (2000), Kurth (2007), Lake (2009), Newmeyer (2009), and Tessman and Wolfe (2011). Finally, we are not comparing the strategic importance of one base vs. another. Instead, this is a matter of the particular type of strategic importance that certain bases represent, in comparison to losing that base.

In regions with ambiguous information environments, the population's views of the US are ambiguous. This creates a situation where the key driver of American policy toward host regimes is the strategic value of the location. In highly strategic areas, this American preference produces a need for the host regime to suppress opposition, in order to maintain perceived stability and entrench its domestic position. This increases the level of authoritarianism over time.

Lastly, this paper argues that chokepoints are critical, while recognizing other strategic considerations. Global powers have considered chokepoints vital to the maintenance of hegemony for centuries. Thus, while other areas may be strategic, their loss does not necessarily imply a fundamental change in the distribution of global power (Kennedy 2010; Kennedy 2017). For instance, a loss in American access to the Strait of Hormuz implies a loss of hegemony and influence in the Middle East. Military planners take this seriously; one planner stated that "the impacts of a potential closure – and how you prevent this – are key to the viability of any decent planning effort" (Plieninger 2018).

Contrarily, a loss of an important US base in Germany does not have the same implications for America's global position, as exemplified by the voluntary loss of many such bases after the Cold War. Bases near chokepoints tend to be closer to the "tip of the spear," whereas many other important bases around the world, in places like Japan and Germany, are highly logistical in nature, especially in recent years. They serve to project force forward, not necessarily use force to protect a vital area or present a deterrent force.

In this paper, we first demonstrate the puzzle that arises from the relevant literature. We then present our theoretical framework and hypothesis, followed by case studies of Bahrain and Qatar, which serve to illustrate the causal mechanisms in our theory. Fourth, we present statistical tests of our hypotheses. Lastly, we conclude with the potential implications of our results.

The Puzzle

The literature on foreign influence in domestic politics shows diverging trends. In some studies, Western patronage is considered generally positive in its impact upon regime type through foreign aid (Finkel et al 2017), coercion, or indirect support to oppositional forces (Gleditsch and Ward 2006). Transition to democracy is also more likely in the first place where Western "linkages" are widespread and Western "leverage" is more prevalent (Levitsky and Way 2010). On the other hand, direct military interventions have been linked with drastic declines in subsequent levels of democracy (Easterly et al 2008; Pickering and Peceny 2006). But this literature does not consider the other ways in which Western involvement has an "autocratizing" effect on the state of democracy, outside of such military intervention.

More recently, scholars have started to examine the countervailing effects of foreign patronage in relation to the patron's own regime type. McKoy and Miller's study shows that a democratic patron can perpetuate autocracy if democracy in the host is perceived to threaten the alliance. The key attribute in this study is the foreign patron's beliefs regarding the continuation of alliance good provision following democratic transition. Lake similarly outlines the implications of American patronage, pointing out that involvement can have mixed implications depending on preexisting regime type and perceived legitimacy of the US among the subordinate power's population (Lake 2013). But, we have seen many cases where American policy did not support the repression of a population that was opposed to its continued military presence. We argue that this variation can be explained only by assessing strategic value of the host state to the US, which varies according to the country's geographic placement.

Specifically, we focus on American military presence as the salient aspect of American involvement. Such a presence has large ramifications on both political and economic dynamics within host countries (Holmes 2016). On this topic, Cooley's main conclusion is that democracies are qualitatively better basing partners than other kinds of states, because of their ability to depoliticize the basing arrangement (Cooley 2008). Our study differs from Cooley's on two dimensions – the inclusion of a general statistical model and the strategic value variable.

An American military presence can drive political developments in host states by providing resources to a regime's coercive apparatus through military aid, bolstering of the treasury, or shifting public opinion towards democracy (Bellin 2004; Yom and Al-Momani 2008). This comes in addition to numerous other benefits to the economy, social development, and human rights (Allen, Flynn, and VanDusky-Allen 2016; Bell, Clay, and Martinez Machain 2016; Biglaiser and DeRouen 2007; Biglaiser and DeRouen 2009). Negative interactions with western nations can have a deleterious effect on the attractiveness of democracy for the common citizen, especially when the US sends mixed signals (Amaney 2012). In addition, in situations of particularly heightened strategic priority, the US has often withheld support for democratic movements to maintain strategic alliances with autocratic regimes.[2]

Lake and others suggest that foreign patronage may interact with regime type depending on the popularity of the US. This is indeed the case, but we argue that American bases have an effect through a different, two-step causal chain. First, American bases alter the domestic security situation in host states. Second, these alterations affect the strength of the host government's coercive apparatus. This changes the structure of domestic politics by shifting the balance of power

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[2] The Iranian case with the election of Mosaddegh is one such example.

between citizens and host governments. American presence thus changes regime conditions at the structural level by changing the distribution of power in the domestic sphere.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

American military strategy is predicated on the ability to project forces anywhere (Weigley 1973). Rather than frontal assaults, the military looks to maintain control of strategic nodes and use naval/air power to win wars of attrition. This entails the ability to maintain a ready military force around strategic areas.[3] The US has been able to win wars through its ability to project power far from American shores, without concomitant consequences at home.

This is the conception of American strategy that we use here: naval predominance allows for warfare at a time and place of American choosing and maintains a global hierarchy. Access to these strategic nodes allows for the enforcement of the rules of international conduct in the American-led international order (Lake 2009). Without the freedom to move both military and economic goods through them, the US would not be able to enforce international order.

Mechanisms

We accept the theories presented by others that the popularity of the US plays a large role in determining American policy towards particular regimes. Their argument is rather straightforward: where the people of a country generally see the American presence as legitimate and beneficial, the US need not subvert democracy. This leads to Lundestad's famous "empire by invitation" that exists in many areas, including Japan and Western Europe (Lundestad 1986).

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[3] This is also corroborated by the latest statements on military strategy (Assessing Military Strategy Hearing 2017, pg 4).

However, if the US is to receive the benefits of its basing arrangement in areas where the American presence is unpopular, it necessarily needs a pliable autocratic ruler.

However, we argue that public opinion is not the only determining factor, or often the most important consideration, because not all countries are of equal strategic value. The US maintains a basing presence in many countries since the end of WWII, but it has respected the local country's wish to withdraw in many cases. In other cases, the US pursued a "wait and see" strategy during a regime transition. Many authors have hypothesized a consistent tension between American values and strategic interest (Desch 2008; Hunt 2009; Lind 2006). This tension is responsible for some of the confusion in the literature as to whether American involvement leads to democratic movement. Those expecting to see democracy hypothesize that American values win out, whereas those expecting autocracy predict that strategic interests win out. Our answer is that it depends upon the freedom of American decision makers to act on ideals over strategic interest.

Where strategic value is high, we should expect the prioritization of stability over ideals. In these scenarios, the US will behave more as a traditional empire acting through local intermediaries by shoring up support for its preferred government. Where strategic interests are less pronounced, the US is free to promote democracy or simply ignore local politics (Cooley and Nexon 2013). Strategic considerations will be at their highest where American presence is crucial to enforcing the global order. The loss of control over strategic passageways could fundamentally challenge American military preeminence (Mahan 1949; Weigley 1973). Thus, it is not just a matter of the perceived legitimacy of the US in the eyes of the host's populace.

We can therefore break out our expectations in a two-by-two table based on the perceived legitimacy of the American presence, and strategic value of the location.

Table 1

In Table 1 above, we can see that popularity can define the ends of the spectrum between American support for democracy or autocracy in clear information environments, but the key determinant to American support for a regime is the strategic value of the location. As others have noted, it is often incredibly difficult to determine the popularity of the American presence, particularly in situations where free speech and expression are stifled (Calder 2007; Cooley 2008). However, the strategic value of the location is intimately known to American planners, and it is likely to make the difference between withdrawal or support for a friendly regime in an ambiguous information environment.

Deepening Autocracy

The interests of the American military and the host regime coincide in the presence of regime challenges in highly strategic areas, with both supporting the status quo. How do the interests of each side produce changes within the regime? We argue that American support for stability does not simply lead to stagnation in the preexisting level of autocracy. Instead, it produces incentives for *strengthening* authoritarianism.

First, American support reduces the likelihood of a challenge to the regime. Military support enhances the host's coercive apparatus and dissuades potential rivals. A stronger state with greater repressive and surveillance capabilities will require a larger opposition to defeat it, which makes it more difficult for the opposition to gain the requisite support needed for a challenge. Moreover, in the event that opposition arises, they recognize that they face the regime *and* the US. Thus, coordination amongst opposition groups is much less likely.

The regime can also use the economic support provided by the American presence to target "swing" groups. For example, regimes can dictate where American bases are located within the

country and which groups have the right to supply the base. In this way, the regime can buy off undecided groups. This ties risky individuals/groups and their economic fortunes to the continuation of the status quo. One of these key swing groups is the host military itself. The placement of an American military base within a country often comes with an agreement to provide military equipment to the host military. This arrangement can help alleviate some tension between the government and military, as the military suddenly has an influx of new resources at its disposal.

This relationship with the military also has two other components. First, if the military aspires to overtake the government, it must gain the acquiescence of the US if it wishes to continue to receive benefits from the basing relationship. Second, because of this necessity, government officials may be more willing to follow policies that run afoul of the military, as civilian leaders know that the military is tied to the status quo if it wishes to continue receiving the benefits of hosting US forces. However, this also could leave the host government in the position of relying even more on the US military, if the support of its own military is simply based on a transactional relationship. This ties the US and the host regime together even further.

Additionally, autocratic regimes do not derive their political legitimacy from the consent of the governed. Oftentimes, these regimes gain legitimacy from an outside source. As Cooley showed in the case of South Korea before democratization, the presence of American forces can be a powerful tool of legitimacy (Cooley 2008). Their presence indicates support for the regime and its legal right to rule, in addition to implying a danger to the population from outside sources. The regime can use this as justification for cracking down in the interest of security, and the American presence implies that this security threat exists.

These factors can increase authoritarianism in host states. However, they must exist in connection with the two pathways listed above: the idea that an alternative regime will withdraw

US basing rights in an area of high strategic value. If the US is confident in continued presence after regime change or has a low strategic value in the area, it can use its leverage over the regime in the presence of human rights abuses. The US can also confine military equipment to items that generally cannot be used against domestic populations or question the legitimacy of the regime. Without popular support for US presence and a strategic necessity, the US will make no such limitations on support, and autocratic hosts will become more autocratic over time.

In times of acute crises, autocratic states must repress dissent in order to reassure the foreign patron and maintain the appearance of stability. Any incorporation of the opposition which may oppose basing will also threaten to undermine the presence of the American military and its benefits. In these instances, bargaining with the opposition is tantamount to bargaining over the sources of power, and it will only undermine the regime further down the line (Chadefaux 2011). When the American military is present in a highly strategic autocratic country, and where that presence is unpopular, both the US and the host are locked into a cycle that strengthens autocracy. The US must support the existing regime, as its ouster would mean a loss of influence and flexibility in a crucial region. The host must support basing, as its loss would undermine the base and subsequently the regime's ability to stay in power.

There are a number of mechanisms at play here. First, the US can provide monetary support if opposition forces have undermined the regime's economic stability. Second, the US can provide weaponry for suppression of the opposition. Third, continuity in US presence can indicate tacit support for the regime. As Cooley notes in reference to the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea, a continued basing relationship in the presence of repression often comes across to dissenters as American support for repression. This implies that opposition forces must defeat both the regime and its foreign patron. Over time, such conditions of repression will make the expression of

opposition more costly, polarize society internally (into pro- and anti-status quo camps), and inhibit coordination between groups overall.

The US also has the ability to deny assistance to the opposition. With its agenda-setting power on the international stage, the US can often dictate whether the UN addresses regime repression, and keep the issue off international media's radar (Towns 2012). Lack of support from an international audience can deprive an opposition movement of the oxygen it needs to continue. The simple fact that American policy aligns with the regime means that the opposition cannot appeal to the US for assistance, as many successful opposition forces have. The result is likely to be weakened opposition that can be repressed easily.

Therefore, our theory contains two key components: popular support among the population and strategic value. The presence of *both* high strategic value *and* low popularity, American support for the current regime becomes *necessary* if access to the area is critical. Our key contention relates to the aspect of strategic value; thus, our hypothesis is that the American military presence in strategically crucial regions has an autocratizing effect.

Mechanisms in Practice

How do these mechanisms look in practice? In Table 2, we show instructive cases for each scenario described above. We particularly focus on the row where the American presence was unpopular, with varying levels of strategic importance. In each case, the strategic value of the location determined whether the US pursued a hands-off policy, or one of autocratic support. There is little public opinion data on the popularity of the American presence to use in the empirical section. This mandates a look at some critical cases that demonstrate how strategic considerations take precedence over popularity.

Low Strategic Importance and Low Popularity

In Libya in 1969, an anti-American government took over following the coup against King Idris. Libya had hosted American military personnel since the end of WWII, yet the US did nothing to prevent Idris's downfall. This presented no ideological conflict for the US, as Gaddafi's government was arguably even more autocratic than that of King Idris and more pro-Soviet in its inclination. Further examples are easily found in Spain and Portugal, where the American presence was highly unpopular and American officials assumed US military bases were "as good as lost" (Caneiro and Bueso 2007: 17; Navarro 2007; Good 2012: 387). In Portugal, Kissinger openly conceded that he expected the regime to defect directly into the Soviet camp. Yet, the US did not back its autocratic ally at all costs. These examples show cases where movements against the American presence were not met with the kind of support for pro-American governments that present theories would predict (Lake 2013; McKoy and Miller 2012).

In a more recent example, the US maintained a large presence at the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan that supported operations in Afghanistan. In 2005, unrest broke out and the US condemned the ensuing repression. This led to demands for American withdrawal. In this particular scenario, American backing of the movement against the Uzbek government necessitated the removal of its military forces from the country, no matter the level of US popularity. In reprimanding the Karimov regime, Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice specifically downplayed the strategic necessity of Uzbekistan in the American decision of speaking out against the regime's human rights abuses (Wright 2005). This case in particular shows that the issue of strategic importance was a crucial factor in American decisions. Thus, American popularity within

the host state is not always the deciding factor. In locations that are less strategically valuable, US forces have exited without much pushback.

In cases with high strategic value, stability is paramount for American foreign policy, and continuation of the basing structure often coincides with autocratic perpetuation. The necessity of maintaining military access to, and commercial transport through, strategically crucial regions can override American ideals. Strategically critical regions have not seen the "hands-off" attitude that has prevailed in cases where publics have been opposed to the American presence. The variable of strategic value is thus necessary to understanding the effect of an American military presence.

The many benefits of forward-deploying American equipment and personnel have been examined in detail elsewhere (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2013; Davis 2011; Harkavy 1989; Ikenberry 2004; Ikenberry 2011; Keohane 2005; Lake 2009; Lake 2013; Sandars 2000). What is important is that American forces generally arrive in host countries via a negotiated process. Thus, to a certain extent, the US is always tied to the survival of the inviting regime. As shown previously, when regime change does not threaten the US, there is little incentive to back the existing regime to the point of repression. Only when there is little hope for a continuation of the basing regime *and* high strategic value is it necessary for the US to support autocracy.

High Strategic Value, Low Popularity: The Cases of Bahrain and Qatar

Bahrain stands as a useful case for elucidating both variables at work: low popularity and high strategic value. It sits in perhaps the most strategically valuable location in the world – in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, less than 400 miles away from the Strait of Hormuz. We will focus on Bahrain before and after the Arab Spring, to elucidate the manner in which the US, in the presence of *both* high unpopularity *and* strategic necessity, increased authoritarianism.

The US considers access to Bahrain "critical," and therefore does not look for alternatives in terms of placement for the Fifth Fleet, or its policies towards the Bahraini regime (Pecquet 2015). Even those within Congress that attempt to turn defense policy away from such a dependency recognize that "there are no good options" to the US relationship with Bahrain. American military planners have openly stated that there is "no Plan B" if basing in Bahrain is jeopardized, and American decision makers have made it clear that the success of the Bahraini opposition poses a risk to their own involvement in the country (McDaniel 2016).

The US has long maintained an interest in Bahrain and its foreign policy. They took over the British naval base in 1971, and established the Fifth Fleet there in 1995. This placement served American interests to a large degree by providing the US with a strategic location to monitor Iran, as well as maintain "regional stability." For Bahrain, this has translated into support for the regime itself. American military involvement, and its effect on political and economic dynamics, has provided the regime cover to ratchet up its repression. As a result, and as evidenced by qualitative data and measurements like the Polity score, Bahrain's level of authoritarianism has increased over time.

The American military presence has increased authoritarianism using political and economic mechanisms. Economically, the presence of US military installations extends benefits to the local population through jobs related to upkeep (Holmes 2016). The selective nature of the benefits from these installations is also used by the regime as a form of segmented clientelism. The US military has recently committed to spending approximately $2 Billion on expansion of naval facilities in Bahrain (Katzman 2016). These expansions encompass joint US-Bahraini ports and facilities, providing economic benefits to the Bahraini population involved. Most importantly, this gives the regime options for cooptation. Finally, the US provides the Bahraini military with

arms sales that it has used to repress protest movements, which creates a dependency between the US military presence and the regime's durability (McDaniel 2016).

Politically, the US acquiesced to the status quo of Bahraini domestic politics before the Arab Spring, especially regarding sectarian policies that disenfranchised large portions of the population. After the uprising, the US played a crucial role in providing political support to the government (Ambrosio 2010). American officials gave the green light for Saudi intervention, and did not take a moderate position towards the protests. Instead, they characterized the uprising as being "used by Iran for its own nefarious purposes." President Obama released a statement "welcoming" the Bahraini government's attempts at reform, even as crackdowns ensued (Statement by the President 2011; Louer 2013). Two days following the Defense Secretary's visit to Bahrain, Saudi troops moved in to quell the protest movement. Yet, the White House spokesperson claimed, "This is not an invasion" (Bohan 2011). The US has clearly prioritized stability over democracy because of the strategic necessity of the island. Thus, the Saudi invasion worked in line with US policy to maintain the status quo by supporting the regime (Hassan Oz 2015).

Such support shielded the regime from further action internationally, and ultimately allowed it to emerge unscathed from the regional unrest. These forms of support also reduced the likelihood of successful challenges to the regime by creating difficulties for the opposition to garner international action. Finally, it polarized society internally. While divisions have historically existed within Bahraini society, the regime has attempted to capitalize on these divisions using divide-and-conquer strategies, exacerbated by the American military presence (Alshehabi 2013).

For example, at the beginning of the uprising, the regime immediately claimed the opposition was sectarian and controlled by Iran. Then, the regime targeted opposition figures and cracked down on street protests, with the assistance of the Saudi invasion and US support. Finally, the regime expanded its repression to include even those who were not politically active, as a means to discourage opposition in the future (Tetreault 2011).

This repression led to preference falsification, as those opposed to the regime were unable to express such opinions publicly (Kuran 1991). This then lead to an inability to coordinate. Indeed, in the face of repression, opposition in Bahrain has become increasingly defined by sect, rather than politically motivated positions (Gengler 2015). Since the democratic opposition had been neutralized, sectarian networks were all that remained to a majority of the population. As the government became more flagrantly sectarian, it also encouraged a similar reaction amongst the public (Louer 2015).

Furthermore, repression has polarized Bahraini society into two "camps": increasingly radical Shia groups, versus Sunni groups tied to the regime. This polarization makes it difficult for those who oppose the regime to coordinate effectively, which is why the opposition in Bahrain today is unable to achieve levels of mass support akin to the 2011 uprising. When mass mobilization is not a credible threat, authoritarianism becomes further entrenched. Such a dynamic could not have been accomplished without the Bahraini regime's crackdown, which was facilitated by US support. This stands in stark contrast to the critical American response to the Uzbek government's killing of protestors in the Andijan incident.

Today, this dynamic has empowered the Bahraini regime to continue increasing repression (Katzman 2016). The regime has taken steps to suspend Shiite organizations and target opposition figures (Stratfor 2016). Overall, the regime has been insulated from actually negotiating with its

opposition, and has made the possibility of a viable opposition in the future more unlikely. The regime has used polarization as a calculated tactic, comfortable with the fact that their international patron would not take action.

This same dynamic is identifiable throughout the region. For instance, Qatar hosts American forces at the al-Udeid Air Base. By some accounts, this is America's most important Middle Eastern base.[4] It lies at the heart of the Arabian/Persian Gulf within easy striking distance of the Strait of Hormuz. Because Qatar maintains an open diplomatic strategy (i.e. maintaining relationships with the US and its allies, in addition to relationships with organizations opposed to the US), previous administrations have sought a way to decrease dependence on Qatar. However, with every attempt at decreasing dependence, the US military has discouraged administration officials from pursuing this option. One of the main reasons for this resistance is that any single alternative is unlikely to provide all of the advantages that Qatar provides, and the US would have to come to separate accommodations with multiple countries, many of which are much further from the Strait (Assessing the US-Qatar Relationship 2017).

When a number of Arab countries launched a blockade against Qatar, citing their disapproval of Qatar's open diplomacy, the US did not support this action despite agreeing on many of the key points, and despite the president himself speaking out against Qatar's alleged activities (Smith 2017). In the end, because the US is tied to the survival of the regime in Qatar, it had to recalibrate its position and support mediation and a swift end to the blockade. By some

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[4] One expert described al-Udeid as "essentially our forward operating base for Central Command" ("Assessing the US-Qatar Relationship" 2017, pg 4). In another instance, General Votel of Central Command described the area as representing "the nexus for many of the security challenges our nation faces" ("Military Assessment of the Security Challenges in the Grater Middle East" 2017, pg 2).

reports, the US was even instrumental in staving off a Saudi-led military invasion (Jacobs 2017). Moreover, US support of the Qatari government has helped the regime take action on policies deeply unpopular to the Qatari people, such as connecting with right-wing pro-Israel groups and withdrawing citizenship of dissenting tribes (Al-Arabiya 2017; The National 2017).[5] Despite deep-seated differences in foreign policy, the American need to maintain al-Udeid has empowered the Qatari regime, both internally and externally.

This dynamic is not unique to Qatar. Throughout the region, the ability to protect the Strait of Hormuz from any attempt at an Iranian-forced closure is paramount across military and civilian planners. Iran is repeatedly described as the primary threat in the CENTCOM region, and one of the reasons for this characterization is its ability to attack shipping and American military movements in the Strait.[6] Through the placement of strategic deterrents and military equipment, the US has attempted to counter these Iranian threats (Addressing the Iran Nuclear Challenge 2012). As CENTCOM General Votel notes, the US "must have a credible, ready, and present force" to provide access to chokepoints across the region, including the Strait of Hormuz. Building a strong deterrence posture through military bases is thus the American military's first priority.

Testing

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[5] Prominent Qatari voices on Twitter denounced the visits by pro-Israel groups to the country, as did the "Qatari Youth Against Normalization" group and BDS Gulf.

[6] One official notes that Iranian forces engage in over 300 incidents near the Strait of Hormuz every year, with 15% of those incidents considered aggressive or abnormal according to the US military ("Military Assessment," pg 9).

Our expectation is that when the US has a presence in a highly valuable autocratic country, the result will be further autocracy. To test this, we use a dataset comprised of all US bilateral partners since 1950. We expect that strategic considerations take precedence over levels of popularity. In addition, our theory hypothesizes that American planners are not always sure of its popularity or future decisions on basing, and thus base their decisions primarily on the strategic value of the location.

Our dependent variable is a measure of Polity *movement.* We use the Polity IV dataset, which assigns a value to a country's regime type on a -10 (fully autocratic) to 10 (fully democratic) scale. We subtract the Polity score at *t-1* from the score at *t* to create a lagging indicator of the movement in the Polity score from the previous year.[7] We believe the Polity measure remains a useful measure, as the most commonly utilized tool of regime measurement. This will make comparisons with the literature more direct (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). We also run a series of models using the *Varieties of Democracy* measure of regimes. Results are in Table 4 below.

Part of the key independent variable is the American military presence. While there are a number of dimensions to an issue as complicated as "presence," we utilize the logged number of

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[7] We do not include Polity at *t-1* as an independent variable, because Polity at *t-1* is part of the data generating process. Including it as an independent variable, through simple subtraction on both sides of the equation, changes the nature of the data generating process and the value of the dependent variable. Further, it has been shown that including a lagged dependent variable as an independent variable create biased coefficients. The method for correcting this problem is an autoregressive distributed lag model, which is inappropriate for panel data. For more on these issues, see Achen (2000); Huber and Stephens (2001); Plumper, Troeger and Manow (2005); Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan (2002); LewisBeck (2006); Lewis-Beck, Nadeau and Elias (2008); Carson et al. (2010)

American military personnel deployed in each country as the observable variable of interest.[8] This data has been published by the US Department of Defense on a quarterly basis since 1950. We use the Tim Kane dataset that compiled the number of American personnel in each country through 2005, and we extended it through 2014. Other measures of presence, such as permanence, legal basis, military infrastructure and spending, and the autonomy of US forces in the host nation, are all important. However, many of those measures are difficult to quantify, and data is unavailable or sketchy at best.

An examination of the alternative measures makes it clear that personnel are the best available measure of "presence." Base Structure Reports (BSRs) supposedly contain accurate reporting of military infrastructure investments abroad, but BSRs are fraught with problems. The DOD has produced BSRs on an annual basis since 1999, but only in years 2004 and 2005 does Qatar (home of the massive regional CENTCOM HQ) even appear in the database. Kuwait is also listed as having *zero* American personnel, when it routinely hosts upward of 25,000 American personnel.

Other databases attempt to count American "bases." This is equally problematic, because there is no common definition of what constitutes a "base." While many would consider the American presence around Wiesbaden, Germany as one single base, the BSRs consider them *seven* (military housing, hospitals, training grounds, etc). Since BSRs separate structure by service branch and utility rather than geographic proximity, finding counts of bases is largely impossible. In addition, there are the complicating factors of joint ownership or local ownership. There are also dozens of secret bases scattered around the world, plus those that the American military

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[8] The distribution has a long "right tail" with a secondary mode for countries like Japan and Germany that have a huge American presence through the whole of the dataset. Logging normalizes this distribution.

reserves for access rights but do not use on a consistent basis. Thus, personnel data are the best measure available.

The second key aspect of the main independent variable is a constructed measure of distance to the nearest global chokepoint. The US Energy Information Administration defines seven globally significant chokepoints (US Energy Information Administration 2014). The Department of Defense further classifies these seven areas as "US Lifelines and Transit Regions." The world's oceans account for nearly 90% of all international commerce, and these particular chokepoints are therefore highly critical to the perpetuation of the American-led world order (Global Security).[9] Moreover, American status as a hegemon largely rests on the idea that it guards the global commons, which includes these highly strategic areas. We *do not* argue that these are the only strategic areas that matter, but they are particularly important for the continuation of the free flow of energy and American military hegemony, to enforce its global order.

We constructed a measure of the distance from each country's centroid to each chokepoint, and then created a variable representing the distance to the closest chokepoint among the seven. We then took the reciprocal of this distance to create a measurement that rises as the distance to a chokepoint reduces, to make statistical inference more intuitive. We interacted this variable with the log of the American military presence to create our main independent variable. We expect this to have a strong negative effect on the dependent variable, as the US will support autocracy in areas of the highest strategic value.[10]

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[9] "The DOD defines eight, but we use the narrower and easier to classify version from the EIA.

[10] We find insufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the strategic distance variable and the log of US forces variable are linearly related. Therefore, models including this interaction term cannot be said to violate

This measure captures a certain aspect of "outside options," i.e. available alternatives in the region. The closer the host is to a strategic choke point, the less likely there are to be hosts that can adequately compensate. For instance, Singapore stands at the entrance to the Strait of Malacca, and loss of access to military basing there would be a key loss. While US forces may be able to move to Malaysia or Indonesia, Singapore itself is by far the most crucial location because of its position at the very point that allows denial of access to the strait. In addition to this issue, captured in our measure, there are aspects that cannot be quantified for statistical analysis. First, the willingness of nearby states to accept a redeployed American military force is a political choice that changes based on public opinion, ideological orientation of leadership, ability of the state to pay for redeployment, the US's willingness to pay for changes, etc. Thus, we do not claim that distance is the *only* issue that matters, but it is certainly a highly salient issue that can drive events.

The majority of the remaining independent variables come from the Correlates of War (COW) dataset, and we chose them for their hypothesized effect upon regime movement. The first is a total count of the number of democracies in the world, accounting for diffusion effects. A higher number of democracies make democracy more likely (Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006). Likewise, fewer democracies may make it easier for autocracies to survive. Pevehouse showed that international organizations/alliances often have the greatest ability to pressure countries into changing internal governance, so we include a converted alliance measure from the COW dataset.[11]

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the linearity assumption of interaction terms. Demonstration of this is contained in Appendix B, based off tests by Hainmueller, Mummolo, Liu, and Xu (2016).

[11] 1 being a military alliance and 0 being all other types or no alliance; Pevehouse (2002).

Energy usage is the third control variable, since development and democratization are positively correlated (Boix 2011; Boix and Stokes 2003; Lipset 1983; O'Donnell 1973). This measurement indicates how much energy the country uses, as a proxy for development (Lee 2005). As energy usage increases, we should see polity movement in the positive direction. Fourth, we include measurements of both the level of imports and the level of exports. Both measures indicate how much interaction the country has with the outside world, and the degree to which others can utilize economic means as a form of pressure. This variable also partly proxies for outside options, as the US is more willing to move to states that actively participate in burden sharing (HR 334; HR 4425). One Pentagon planner referred to redeployment from strategic locations as "impossible" without the US being offered "buckets of cash" by the new host (Plieninger 2016). Higher levels of development enable us to capture this dynamic.

Lastly, we include measures of conflict and militarization. MIDs have the tendency to move the regime in an autocratic direction (Chiozza and Goemans 2011). We also include a dummy variable for when the country is at war specifically with the US. American foreign policy has previously espoused regime change as an objective, and we wish to distinguish between states at war with the US from ones that simply host American forces. Further, we include a variable that measures the amount of the host country's military spending. This variable indicates how militarized the state is, which can have the effect of protecting the regime in place.

We also constructed several measures of our own. First, we created a binary measure of "oil wealth" that applies to large oil-producing states. Many studies have shown that oil wealth disrupts the social contract between citizens and the state, and thereby undermines democratization (Beblawi 1990; Friedman 2006; Huntington 1991; Luciani 1987; Mahdavy 1970; Ross 2001). Second, we construct two binary measures for countries that were either

"conquered" or "liberated" by the US. Some have argued that the US was able to reconstitute governments in these countries to suit American foreign policy objectives (Coyne 2008; Kinzer 2007; McDonald 2015; Suri 2011; Wagner 2007). For instance, the US refashioned the governments in Germany and Japan as liberal democracies and protected them using the American military. Because of these factors, conquest and liberation by American forces puts the US in a unique position to either support the existing government, or refashion it as American foreign policy dictates. [12]

A discussion of the public opinion component is warranted here. While we accept the previous theories hypothesizing its role in determining American support for autocratic governments, there is currently no cross-national or inter-temporal data available on it. A few agencies, i.e. Gallup and Pew, poll global public image of the US, but their temporal and cross-national coverage is sporadic and unfit for use in statistical analysis. In addition, global public opinion of the US appears to wax and wane in relation to the president (Pew 2017). Prominent scholars have noted the woefully inadequate nature of data on the topic, and they argue that it is currently impossible to use global public opinion of the US in statistical analysis (Lake 2013; Nye 2008). Nevertheless, we account for it in the theory and illustrative examples.[13]

We formulate a time series cross-sectional model where the inclusion of a measure for the country's distance to the chokepoint acts as a country fixed effect. We use panel-corrected standard errors, and we lag the independent variables one year to help address endogeneity concerns. We

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[12] Full list of countries coded as oil rich, liberated, and conquered in Appendix.

[13] If more rigorous data on public opinion of the US becomes available in the future, we will revisit the topic and incorporate it into the statistical analysis. As it stands, strategic location is important enough to warrant independent examination.

also run a generalized estimating equation (GEE) model with the same variables and with panel-corrected standard errors. GEE helps model a possible unknown correlation between outcomes by modeling the mean response *across* subjects rather than within. This helps to reduce the impact of any potential omitted variable bias, which is particularly important given the lack of public opinion data.

Table 3

Table 4

In both the random effects (Model 1) and GEE (Model 2) models, the interaction terms between strategic distance and the log of American forces is significant and negative, as expected.[14] This indicates strong support for our hypothesis that strategic value plays a critical role in autocratization, when combined with the importance of the basing presence.[15] Many of the control variables perform as predicted, which indicates a relatively good model fit. The democracy count variable is positive and highly significant, which supports the generally accepted notion of diffusion since 1950. Second, as expected, the alliance variable is positive and significant, which corresponds to previous research that shows alliance and international organization conditionality can have a positive impact on democratization. Third, the variable for states conquered by the US is significant and negative, which is expected given the states coded as conquered include ones like Cuba, Libya, and others that became autocratic long after American intervention, rather than the ones that became stable democracies like Japan and Germany.

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[14] Coefficient results on standardized variables with means of 0 and standard deviation of 1 are included in Appendix D.

[15] It is important to note here that the strategic distance variable itself is not significant, only when interacted with the variable representing US presence.

We can see the substantive effects of the interaction term against the fitted values of the dependent variable in the graphs below. The first is a linear fit, which is consistent with the model that we estimate here. The second is a quadratic fit to show that the findings within the linear regression are not confined to linear modeling. This movement gets decisively negative as the variable represents more forces, closer distance to strategic points, or both.

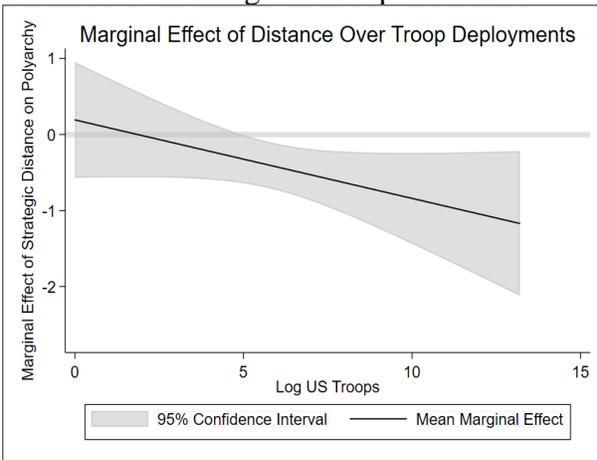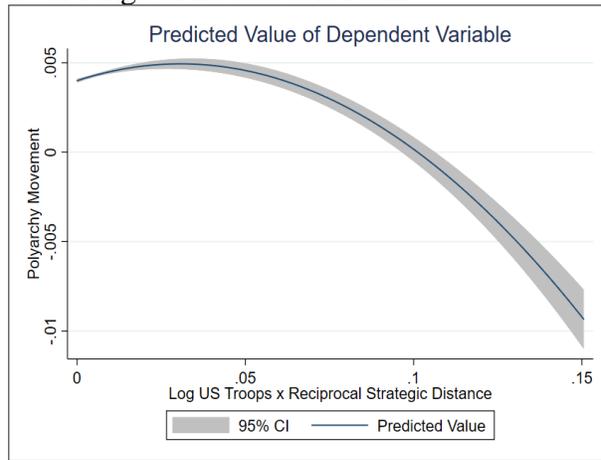**Figure 1**: Marginal Effect of Strategic Distance Over Range of Troop Outcomes

Figure 2: Predicted Polyarchy Movement Over range of Interaction Term

Lastly, the variable for the log of US troops by itself is positive and significant, indicating that, independent from the strategic considerations we consider here, the American presence has a general democratizing effect. This is important, and it may explain some of the previous contradictory findings. Without the inclusion of variables that adjust for the strategic importance of countries, the overall effect of American military forces is insignificant. The countries with lower strategic importance gain democratic traction and those in vital locations increase in autocracy.[16]

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[16] Robustness checks are omitted for space considerations. They include sequential dropping of variables, testing for Cold War affects, dropping individual strategic choke points, and splitting the sample into democratic, anocratic, and autocratic subsets. Our results remain robust to all of these tests. Furthermore, we run a robustness

Conclusion

An American military presence has an autocratizing effect in particular regions of strategic importance. This contrasts with the relatively little evidence of an effect on regimes elsewhere, where the US can simply remove its forces and look for alternatives. We hypothesize that this effect is due to the confluence of incentives between the US and its hosts in these regions, as both seek stability in the presence of unpopularity or a murky information environment. This finding is important to policymakers involved in basing decisions. While basing in particularly strategic areas can give the US an advantage, American policy can become locked into supporting autocratic regimes. In turn, this has the effect of actually strengthening the very forces that American rhetoric intends to oppose, and the forces responsible for many of the security concerns the American military faces today.

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check by dropping all cases in which host military spending equals 0, because of a missingness issue in the data. No changes in the results occurred.

Table 1

	Strategic high	Strategic low
Perceived popular	Maintain/support democracy	Hands off
Perceived unpopular	Support for autocracy	Hands off

Table 2

	Strategic high	**Strategic low**
Perceived popular	Thailand	Iceland
Perceived unpopular	Bahrain, Qatar	Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Libya

Table 3: Effects On Regime Type

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Log US troops	*0.0242	*0.0186
	(0.0096)	(0.0088)
Democracy count	***0.0058	***0.0054
	(0.0010)	(0.0010)
Alliance	*0.0762	**0.0903
	(0.0314)	(0.0285)
Energy use	$7.76e^{-08}$	$1.32e^{-07}$
	$(1.58e^{-07})$	$(1.56e^{-07})$
Oil rich	-0.0508	-0.0503
	(0.0332)	(0.0318)
Imports	$-2.72e^{-06}$	$-1.85e^{-06}$
	$(2.11e^{-06})$	$(1.93e^{-06})$
Exports	$1.50e^{-06}$	$5.33e^{-07}$
	$(1.91e^{-06})$	$(1.79e^{-06})$
Ongoing MIDs	0.1710	0.0756
	(0.2570)	(0.2016)
War with US	-0.2675	-0.1307
	(0.1869)	(0.1773)
Military expenditures	$-1.49e^{-09}$	$-3.17e^{-09}$
	$(3.89e^{-09})$	$(4.00e^{-09})$
Conquered by US	**-0.1782	*-0.1574
	(0.0677)	(0.0623)
Liberated by US	-0.0370	-0.0300
	(0.0511)	(0.0492)
Strategic Distance	15.5550	21.4272
	(13.7504)	(15.6825)
Log US troops x Strategic Distance	*-4.8366	*-5.8929
	(2.3349)	(2.6588)
Constant	***-0.2643	***-0.2256
	(0.0635)	(0.0627)
N	6007	6007

(Notes: Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.
Two-tailed significance tests used:
* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$)

Table 4: Effects on Regime Type (Polyarchy Measure)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Log US troops	*0.00069	*0.0006
	(0.0003)	(0.00027)
Democracy count	***0.00017	***0.00016
	(0.000033)	(0.000034)
Alliance	*0.0021	**0.0027
	0.00096	0.00083
Energy use	$4.29e^{-09}$	$5.79e^{-09}$
	$(7.08e^{-09})$	$(6.23e^{-09})$
Oil rich	-0.00077	-0.00061
	(0.0010)	(0.00095)
Imports	$3.84e^{-08}$	$6.06e^{-08}$
	$(1.03e^{-07})$	$(8.85e^{-08})$
Exports	$-7.35e^{-08}$	$-1.01e^{-07}$
	$(9.63e^{-08})$	$(8.23e^{-08})$
Ongoing MIDs	-0.00028	-0.0022
	(0.0032)	(0.0030)
War with US	-0.0047	-0.0048
	(0.0030)	(0.0039)
Military expenditures	$8.51e^{-12}$	$-2.66e^{-11}$
	$(7.65e^{-11})$	$(7.26e^{-11)}$
Conquered by US	*-0.0053	*-0.0052
	(0.0022)	(0.0021)
Liberated by US	0.00040	0.00065
	(0.0021)	(0.0021)
Strategic Distance	0.368	0.503
	(0.345)	(0.424)
Log US troops x Strategic Distance	*-0.136	*-0.163
	(0.0632)	(0.0732)
Constant	***-0.0059	***-0.0054
	(0.0017)	(0.0017)
N	6064	6064

(Notes: Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.
Two-tailed significance tests used:
* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$)

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