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# **Colonel Douglas MacGregor and a Critical Reassessment of U.S. Military Engagements: A Strategic Realist Perspective**

## **Abstract**

Colonel Douglas MacGregor represents a distinctive and often controversial voice within contemporary strategic thought. His work reflects a sustained critique of interventionist foreign policy and prolonged military engagements, emphasizing the interaction between geopolitical ambition, institutional inertia, and the structural constraints of military power. This article examines his analysis of U.S. involvement in conflicts such as Ukraine and the Middle East, focusing on his interpretations of strategic decision-making, external influence, and evolving conceptions of the “America First” doctrine. It argues that his perspective reinforces the continuing relevance of realism, strategic restraint, and coherence between political objectives and military means.

## **Introduction**

Colonel Douglas MacGregor occupies a distinctive and often polarizing position within contemporary Western strategic discourse. As a former military officer and later public commentator, he has consistently challenged interventionist doctrines and questioned the strategic logic underpinning prolonged U.S. military engagements. At a time when prevailing narratives often equate military

capability with political success, MacGregor offers a contrasting perspective that emphasizes the limits of force, institutional constraints, and the unintended consequences of geopolitical overreach (MacGregor, 2022).

Drawing on both operational experience and strategic analysis, his work highlights a persistent tension in modern U.S. foreign policy: the gap between military power and political outcomes. It is within this gap that contemporary conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and the Middle East, can be analytically situated.

## **External Influence and Policy Formation**

MacGregor suggests that U.S. foreign policy outcomes are not solely determined by conventional national interest calculations but may also be shaped by networks of institutional and external influence capable of exerting sustained pressure on decision-making processes (MacGregor, 2022).

Within this framework, he has argued that certain strategic alignments in Middle Eastern policy—particularly regarding Iran—reflect overlapping geopolitical objectives involving both domestic and external actors. While such interpretations remain contested within mainstream scholarship, they highlight broader concerns in international relations theory regarding the complexity of policy formation.

## **Realism and Strategic Overreach**

MacGregor's analytical framework is grounded in the realist tradition of international relations, which emphasizes state interest, power competition, and systemic constraints. From this perspective, he argues that disregarding the security concerns of rival powers can generate instability and unintended escalation (Mearsheimer, 2011).

Within this context, he has been critical of NATO expansion and broader U.S. strategic posture. He contends that policies detached from regional dynamics and historical sensitivities risk undermining long-term stability. Rather than equating power solely with military capability, he emphasizes the need to integrate political, economic, and social dimensions into strategic planning (Kagan, 2003).

## **The Middle East as a Strategic Impasse**

MacGregor characterizes ongoing conflicts in the Middle East as strategically unresolved, reflecting the difficulty of achieving clear and achievable political objectives. He argues that such engagements often produce prolonged instability rather than decisive outcomes (MacGregor, 2022).

One of the most significant risks identified in this context is the potential disruption of global energy and trade routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz. As energy analyses indicate, sustained disruption in this region would likely result in severe global economic consequences, including sharp increases in oil prices (BP, 2023).

## **Reassessing the “America First” Doctrine**

MacGregor’s critique extends to the interpretation of the “America First” doctrine. He argues that, in practice, U.S. foreign policy has at times diverged from strict prioritization of national interest due to ideological and institutional pressures (MacGregor, 2022).

His position emphasizes that strategic clarity requires consistent alignment between stated political objectives and actual policy implementation. In his view, deviations from this alignment risk producing incoherent and overextended foreign commitments.

## **Contestation and Intellectual Significance**

MacGregor’s perspectives remain subject to significant debate. Critics argue that his analysis may align too closely with alternative geopolitical narratives and that it may underemphasize legal and humanitarian dimensions of conflict. Supporters, however, view him as a dissenting voice highlighting structural inefficiencies, institutional inertia, and the risks of strategic overextension.

Regardless of perspective, his work contributes to ongoing debates within strategic studies by challenging dominant assumptions about the relationship between military capability and political success.

## **Conclusion**

Colonel Douglas MacGregor's contributions extend beyond the substance of his critiques. He symbolizes a fissure within Western strategic and policymaking circles, representing an approach grounded in realism, caution, and a critical assessment of power. His work provides a framework for understanding the limitations of military force, the consequences of institutional inertia, and the influence of external actors on national strategy. In an era of complex geopolitical rivalries, rapid technological change, and persistent structural constraints, MacGregor's perspective offers invaluable lessons for scholars, policymakers, and military strategists. By emphasizing prudence, clarity, and a realistic appraisal of both domestic and external factors, his analysis provides a crucial corrective to overly ambitious or interventionist strategies.

Beyond MacGregor's framework, however, a broader analytical perspective suggests that current U.S. entanglements with Iran may suffer from a limited appreciation of the deep historical resilience of Iranian civilization. For millennia, Iran has demonstrated a persistent determination to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty, resisting external powers from the era of classical empires to modern geopolitical pressures. This long-standing civilizational continuity shapes strategic behaviour in ways that cannot be fully understood through short-term military or political calculations alone.

At the same time, the United States—whose historical development is rooted in expansion and external projection of power—may underestimate the extent to which such civilizational identity informs Iran's resistance to perceived external pressure. Any strategy that fails to account for this dimension risks misreading both the intentions and the likely responses of Iranian actors.

Furthermore, in my view, the continued U.S. alignment with Israel as a central pillar of its Middle East policy raises significant political and societal questions. Over time, this alignment may invite growing scrutiny from the American public regarding the political, financial, and military costs of such commitments. Issues related to international law, United Nations resolutions, and broader perceptions of fairness in U.S. foreign policy are likely to shape public discourse and influence future policy directions.

In this context, both domestic opinion within the United States and wider global perspectives are likely to play a growing role in shaping the sustainability and

legitimacy of American strategic choices. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics requires moving beyond narrow strategic frameworks and incorporating historical, civilizational, and societal factors into the analysis of contemporary international relations.

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