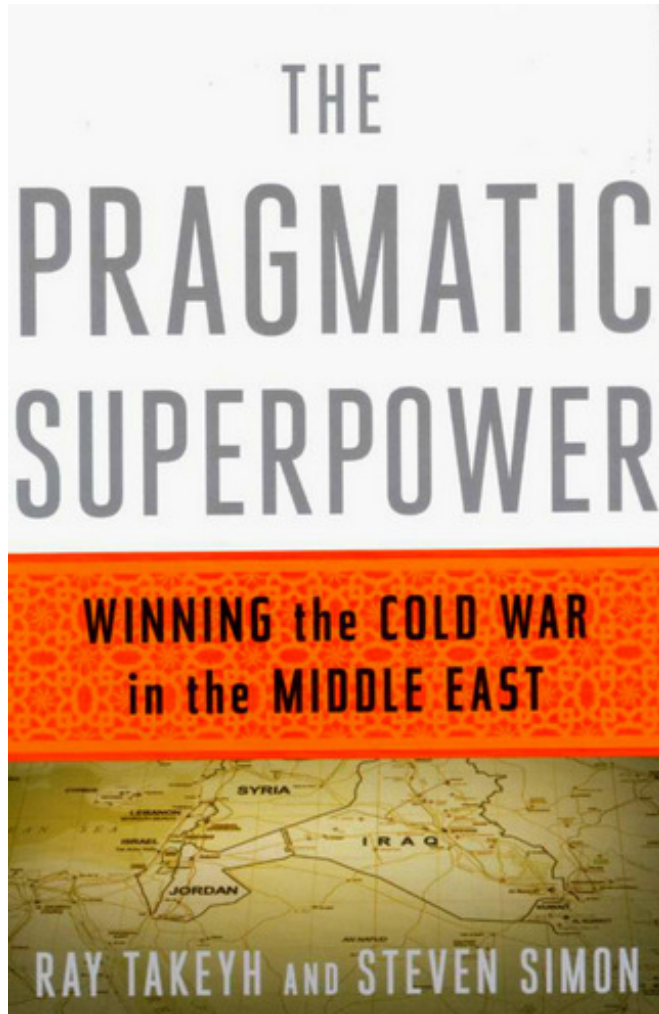


# ‘Superpower’ tries to untangle mess

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*“The Pragmatic Superpower: Winning the Cold War in the Middle East” by Ray Takeyh and Steven Simon. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016, 320 pages, \$27.95.*



“The Cold War came to the Middle East early,” Ray Takeyh and Steven Simon note near the beginning of *“The Pragmatic Superpower: Winning the Cold War in the Middle East,”* their recently-released attempt to explain the ongoing dynamics of one of the world’s most volatile regions. “In 1946, the Soviet Union laid claim to the Iranian province of Azerbaijan, precipitating the first of many confrontations with America. As it entered the region, the United States’ principal objective was to ensure stability.”

“It is the argument of this book that although America’s objectives in the region may have been uncomplicated, they were hardly modest,” they continue. “Washington sought to prevent Soviet infiltration of the region, preserve its considerable petroleum wealth for the West and resolve the conflict between a Jewish homeland and the Arab states. In this context, stability had its virtues and a reliable ruling class had its share of benefits.”

“*The Pragmatic Superpower,*” the first collaboration between Takeyh and Simon, is extraordinarily well-researched, with thirty-six pages of source notes after the prologue, ten chapters and a conclusion comprising the main

text. Basically, the manuscript attempts to explain the current confusion in the Middle East by carefully dissecting ten key crises that unfolded in the region during the Cold War.

Although they devote a distinct chapter to each of these conflicts, they are careful to point out how nothing happening in the Middle East can truly be seen within a stand-alone context. In this vast expanse of the world, everything is connected – and usually on multiple levels. Political ideologies and their associated social movements must always be assessed against relevant cultural, religious, economic and strategic criteria, which tend to frustrate any attempt to simplify the significance of anything occurring in this somewhat isolated but deceptively critical geographic area.

Through a detailed and critical discussion of the policies and initiatives of a number of U.S. presidents, beginning primarily with Jimmy Carter, the authors paint a vivid and often disturbing

portrait of good intentions gone awry. Combined with the lack of consistency and continuity necessarily embodying a form of government in which the executive branch undergoes an often significant metamorphosis every four to eight years, what we are witnessing is really not very surprising. Again, the links Takeyh and Simon uncover between seemingly unrelated events – at least at first glance – can be both uncanny yet profoundly enlightening.

Takeyh is a Senior Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations; he specializes in Iran, political reform in the Middle East and Islamist movements and parties. He has a doctorate from Oxford and his previous books include “Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs,” “Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic” and “The Origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine: The United States, Britain and Nasser’s Egypt, 1953-1957.” Simon is also a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who focuses on U.S.-Iraqi relations, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and the ongoing efforts to defeat terrorism. A visiting lecturer at Dartmouth, he has degrees from Princeton, Harvard and Columbia. His previous books include “After the Surge: The Case for U.S. Military Disengagement from Iraq,” “The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting it Right” and “The Sixth Crisis: Iran, Israel, America, and the Rumors of War” with Dana H. Allin.

In the final analysis, Takeyh and Simon come to the more or less inescapable conclusion that the implosion we are witnessing in the Middle East is simply the inevitable result of a perfect storm blowing across the societies populating the region for the last seventy years. And while they admit intervention by the West (and particularly the United States) has exacerbated tensions between the key actors, ultimately most of the blame for the unrest lies with the Arab leadership and their lack of movement toward a more stable and desirable future.

“Still, whatever miscalculations America may have made, the principal cause of the region’s disorders are its leaders and the choices and decisions they have made,” Takeyh and Simon assert near the end of the book. “They cannot be absolved of responsibility or forgiven because their region played a central role in the great powers’ competition. Once the Cold War ended, Arab leaders could have focused on the rehabilitation of their nations, instituting economic reforms and creating inclusive governments.

“The Arab ruling class knew that it was presiding over a region marred by vast corruption, demographic disaster, environmental degradation, infrastructural decay and so on,” they add. “Instead of reforming their societies, they chose to nurture their conflicts, engage in a costly arms buildup and ignore the pleas of their citizens for better governance. No external actor, even one as powerful as the United States, can compel a ruling elite to alter its ways and adapt to new circumstances.”

As I was reading “The Pragmatic Superpower” I could not help but think about how much it complements “And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East,” the volume by Richard Engel that was reviewed in the Daily News on May 1. Both deal with similar subject matter – although Engel approaches the evolving circumstances in the Arab countries from a much more personal perspective. Whereas Engel talks about what it’s like on the ground, Takeyh and Simon provide an aerial panorama. In order to get a more complete sense of what the world is up against in trying to untangle the complicated mess characterizing the region, I highly recommend spending some time reflecting on both accounts.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*