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STEP-BY-STEP PEACE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A U.S.-CENTERED MIDDLE EAST ORDER, 1973-1975

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Abstract

This article argues that Henry Kissinger's diplomacy after the October 1973 War formed part of a deliberate United States grand strategy aimed at constructing an American-centered regional order in the Middle East. It shows how U.S. wartime primacy enabled Washington to dominate the postwar diplomatic arena through Kissinger's step-by-step disengagement approach, which privileged limited bilateral agreements over comprehensive settlement and marginalized both multilateral mechanisms and Soviet participation. The study further demonstrates that this strategy extended beyond Arab-Israeli diplomacy into Persian Gulf policy, where U.S. mediation was reinforced through institutional and economic arrangements, including the UN buffer framework and the U.S.-Saudi Joint Economic Commission. Methodologically, the article employs theory-guided process tracing, deriving observable implications from the grand strategy hypothesis and evaluating them against archival material, especially declassified Foreign Relations of the United States volumes, alongside contemporary accounts and the secondary literature. Particular attention is given to evidentiary standards through the use of hoop tests and the search for smoking-gun documentation. The findings indicate that the sequencing of agreements, the restriction of diplomatic forums, and the creation of new mechanisms of U.S. brokerage were not ad hoc responses to crisis but components of a broader effort to institutionalize American leadership. Alternative explanations, including crisis management, bureaucratic rivalry, domestic political pressures, and structural Cold War dynamics alone, do not adequately explain the coherence of the pattern observed. The article concludes that Kissinger's post-1973 diplomacy helped establish a durable, yet asymmetric regional order anchored in U.S. mediation, with long-term consequences for both American hegemony and Middle Eastern political order.

Keywords: Henry Kissinger, Middle East Order, Grand Strategy, Shuttle Diplomacy, Persian Gulf Policy

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Adım Adım Barış: ABD-Merkezli Orta Doğu Düzeninin Kuruluşu, 1973-1975

Öz

Bu makale, Henry Kissinger'ın Ekim 1973 Savaşı sonrasındaki diplomatik pratiğinin, Orta Doğu'da ABD-merkezli bir bölgesel düzenin tesisi ve tahkimi yönünde kurgulanmış bilinçli bir Amerikan grand stratejisinin mütemmim bir bileşeni olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Çalışma, savaş esnasında ABD'nin elde ettiği stratejik üstünlüğün Washington'a savaş sonrası diplomatik sahayı belirleyici biçimde tahakküm altına alma kapasitesi sağladığını; bu kapasitenin ise Kissinger'ın, kapsamlı bir nihai uzlaşma yerine sınırlı ve ardışık ikili ayrıştırma anlaşmalarını önceleyen, çok taraflı diplomatik mekanizmaları ve Sovyet katılımını sistematik olarak marjinalize eden tedrici disengagement yaklaşımı üzerinden icra edildiğini göstermektedir. Araştırma ayrıca söz konusu stratejik yönelimin Arap-İsrail diplomasisiyle sınırlı kalmadığını; Birleşmiş Milletler tampon düzenlemeleri ile ABD-Suudi Ortak Ekonomik Komisyonu gibi kurumsal ve iktisadi tertibatlar aracılığıyla Amerikan arabuluculuğunun tahkim edildiği Basra Körfezi politikasına da teşmil edildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Yöntemsel düzlemde makale, grand strateji hipotezinden türetilen gözlemlenebilir çıkarımları, başta gizliliği kaldırılmış Foreign Relations of the United States ciltleri olmak üzere arşivsel malzeme, dönemin tanıklıkları ve ilgili ikincil literatür karşısında sınayan teori-yönelimli süreç izleme yöntemini benimsemektedir. Analiz boyunca kanıt standartlarının titizlikle işletilmesine, özellikle hoop testleri ile smoking-gun mahiyetindeki belgesel kanıtların tespitine hususi önem atfedilmektedir. Bulgular, anlaşmaların sekanslanmasının, diplomatik forumların bilinçli biçimde daraltılmasının ve ABD'nin arabuluculuk kapasitesini kurumsallaştıran yeni mekanizmaların inşasının, krize verilmiş konjonktürel ve ad hoc tepkilerden ibaret olmadığını; bilakis Amerikan liderliğini bölgesel düzlemde kurumsallaştırmaya matuf daha geniş ölçekli bir stratejik tasarımın bileşenleri olarak işlediğini göstermektedir. Kriz yönetimi, bürokratik rekabet, iç siyasal baskılar yahut tek başına yapısal Soğuk Savaş dinamikleri gibi alternatif açıklamalar, gözlemlenen örüntünün iç tutarlılığı ve süreklilik arz eden mantığını açıklamakta yetersiz kalmaktadır. Makale sonuç olarak, Kissinger'ın 1973 sonrası diplomasisinin, ABD arabuluculuğuna yaslanan kalıcı fakat asimetrik bir bölgesel düzenin teşekkülüne katkıda bulunduğunu ve bunun hem Amerikan hegemonyasının yeniden üretimi hem de Orta Doğu siyasal düzeninin yapılması bakımından uzun erimli sonuçlar doğurduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Henry Kissinger, Orta Doğu, Grand Strateji, Mekik Diplomasisi, Basra Körfezi Politikası, Arap-İsrail İhtilafı

Introduction

Why did U.S. policy after the October 1973 War take the form of sequential shuttle negotiations rather than an immediate comprehensive settlement? This article argues that Henry Kissinger's postwar diplomacy was a deliberate strategy for converting wartime leverage into durable American primacy. Kissinger made clear that the postwar objective was to fragment the Arab coalition, separate issues, and

make Washington indispensable; as he put it, “the Arabs would have to come to us” (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 31, 1974). Sequential diplomacy thus functioned not only as a negotiating technique but also as a means of preserving U.S. leverage, restricting Soviet re-entry, and keeping the diplomatic process under American control. Although Quandt regarded incrementalism as tactically effective, he also warned that it could not by itself produce a final peace settlement (Quandt, 2005, pp. xi-xii). Yet the wider pattern suggests a broader purpose. Alongside disengagement diplomacy, U.S. officials developed institutional arrangements with Saudi Arabia under Kissinger’s “day-to-day political guidance and coordination” (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 19, 1974). The combination of issue separation, bilateral sequencing, and institutional consolidation therefore points more convincingly to a grand strategic project of regional order-building than to ad hoc crisis management alone.

Existing scholarship on Kissinger’s post-1973 Middle East diplomacy has largely focused on diplomatic narrative, bargaining technique, and the immediate effects of disengagement rather than theorizing the episode as a case of regional order construction. Quandt’s foundational account reconstructs the shift from war crisis to step-by-step diplomacy and treats procedure, sequencing, and bargaining structure as central to the outcome (Quandt, 2005, pp. 104, 150, 164-165). At the same time, his warning against “procedural gimmicks” and his conclusion that “a strategy based on incrementalism will be a waste of time” indicate that even the strongest historical account did not interpret incremental mediation primarily as a durable order-building project (Quandt, 2005, preface, pp. ix-x). By contrast, this article interprets the same sequence through the lenses of grand strategy and order formation. On this reading, Kissinger used American wartime indispensability to separate issues, limit Soviet influence, and make the parties dependent on U.S. mediation across both Arab-Israeli and Gulf arenas (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 31, 1974; Brands, 2014, pp. 3, 4; Lake, 2009, pp. 18, 43).

The article makes three principal contributions. First, it shows that Kissinger’s post-1973 diplomacy linked means to ends within a coherent grand

strategic design rather than through a series of short-term fixes or reactive tactical adjustments. Second, it strengthens historical explanation methodologically by specifying observable implications, applying theory-guided process tracing across the connected arenas of Arab-Israeli diplomacy and Gulf policy, and testing rival explanations including crisis management, bureaucratic politics, domestic pressures, and Cold War structure. Third, it recasts Middle East diplomacy from 1973 to 1975 as a case of American-led regional order construction. Step-by-step mediation did more than stabilize a volatile postwar environment. It also institutionalized U.S. brokerage, constrained rival influence, and helped produce a durable but asymmetric regional order sustained through diplomatic, strategic, and economic mechanisms. Taken together, the article argues that Kissinger's postwar diplomacy is best understood as an exercise in grand strategy aimed at shaping both the regional balance and the rules of political mediation beyond the immediate conflict, rather than as an improvised response to crisis.

1. Theoretical Framework and Contribution

Grand strategy is treated here as the coordinated use of diplomatic, military, and economic instruments to pursue long-range political objectives rather than as military planning in a narrow sense. Brands defines it as the “intellectual architecture that gives form and structure to foreign policy” and as a “coherent body of thought and action geared toward the accomplishment of important long-term aims” (Brands, 2014, pp. 3, 4). Silove sharpens the concept by distinguishing among “grand plans,” “grand principles,” and “grand behavior,” while noting broad agreement that grand strategy is “long-term in scope, related to the state's highest priorities, and concerned with all spheres of statecraft” (Silove, 2018, pp. 27, 35). Lake's definition of hierarchy as “the extent of the authority exercised by the ruler over the ruled” is useful because it shifts attention from formal equality to structured asymmetry in political order (Lake, 2009, p. 9). Read together, these formulations provide the conceptual basis for treating Kissinger's post-1973 diplomacy not simply as crisis

management but as an effort to convert wartime leverage into a durable regional order centered on U.S. authority.

Within that framework, step-by-step diplomacy appears less as a temporary expedient than as the operational method of that strategy. Rather than pursue an immediate comprehensive settlement, Kissinger favored limited, sequential agreements that kept the pace, agenda, and diplomatic format under U.S. control. Quandt describes the post-1973 process as a gradual incremental strategy marked by a distinct American procedural bias (Quandt, 2005, pp. 1, 11). Contemporary critics saw the same pattern. Sheehan argued that the diplomacy left “the major issues of the conflict unresolved,” especially the Palestinian question (Sheehan, 1976, pp. 3-4). Perlmutter likewise characterized Kissinger’s diplomacy as crisis management, highlighting how sequence, timing, and bargaining procedure became central instruments of policy (Perlmutter, 1975, pp. 316-317). Sequential mediation therefore did more than facilitate disengagement. It preserved U.S. agenda control, narrowed the diplomatic arena, and deferred the most difficult political issues into a future that Washington could continue to manage (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 31, 1974).

This logic also clarifies the importance of brokerage power. Mediation was not politically neutral. Bercovitch notes that mediators bring “their own agenda and interests” to negotiations and that parties may retain control over outcomes “if not always over the process” (Bercovitch, 2011, p. 22). Goh similarly argues that institutions can function as “instruments of domination by great powers” and can “institutionalize or perpetuate” asymmetrical influence over time (Goh, 2011, p. 377). Applied to the Middle East after October 1973, the implication is straightforward: if U.S. primacy was the objective, Washington would be expected to organize diplomacy in ways that made itself indispensable while reducing the role of competing brokers. The archival record fits that expectation. In addition to his March 1974 emphasis on separating issues, Kissinger later stated that the strategy was designed “to reduce Soviet influence,” proceed “on a piece-by-piece basis,” and

avoid overreliance on Geneva (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 160, 1975). U.S. brokerage, then, was not simply a mechanism for obtaining agreements. It was a way of structuring the postwar diplomatic field so that further movement remained dependent on continued American management.

The Gulf dimension extended the same ordering logic eastward. After the British withdrawal, NSDM 92 endorsed Iranian-Saudi cooperation while explicitly recognizing “the preponderance of Iranian power” and strengthening U.S. links to the smaller Gulf states (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 91, 1970). In practice, this produced a hierarchical arrangement in which Iran served as the principal regional security pillar and Saudi Arabia occupied a secondary but still essential position. Alvandi shows that between 1969 and 1972 Nixon and Kissinger moved away from a more balanced conception of the Gulf and toward “Iranian primacy,” a shift enabled by the removal of most restraints on arms transfers to the Shah (Alvandi, 2012, pp. 338, 365).

After the oil shock, however, Iran alone could not anchor the system. Saudi ties had to be institutionalized through economic and security channels, a logic reflected in the 1974 interagency study on joint U.S.-Saudi cooperation and in the subsequent Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation, which the GAO later described as promoting “closer political ties” while channeling U.S. expertise, goods, and services into the kingdom (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 19, 1974; U.S. GAO, 1979, pp. 4, 11). Seen together, Arab-Israeli shuttle diplomacy and Gulf security policy point to the same strategic design: a regional order in which local partners carried differentiated roles, but the United States remained the ultimate guarantor, broker, and system manager.

2. Methods and Research Design

A process-tracing reading of Kissinger’s post-October 1973 diplomacy suggests that he pursued order-building through controlled, sequential bargains rather than a comprehensive settlement. Quandt describes the postwar diplomacy as a “step-by-step” process in which procedure and sequence were integral to outcome,

not mere administrative details (Quandt, 2005, pp. 150, 164-176). The sequence fits that logic. U.S. mediation produced the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement in January 1974 and the Syrian-Israeli disengagement in May 1974, indicating a strategy of staged agreements rather than a single summit framework. Forum control was also central. In February 1975, Kissinger noted that Israel saw “Geneva as a terrible forum” and preferred “the step-by-step approach,” reflecting support for tightly managed U.S.-led negotiations that limited Soviet influence (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 169, 1975). Security provisions were built into the agreements. The Syrian disengagement accord specified that forces “will be separated,” while the later Sinai arrangements pushed the United States into an implementation role as well as a mediating one (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 88, 1974; Quandt, 2005, pp. 238-247). In the Gulf, the same logic appeared in the linkage between Iranian military weight and institutionalized U.S.-Saudi cooperation (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 91, 1970; FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 111, 1974).

Each implication is tested against documentary evidence through hoop tests and smoking-gun evidence, following the standard process-tracing typology of evidentiary tests (Collier, 2011, pp. 824-826). If Kissinger’s diplomacy were merely reactive crisis management, the record should show a preference for ceasefire stabilization without sustained efforts to produce additional agreements or reshape regional alignments. That is not what the documents suggest. A key hoop test, therefore, is whether U.S. policy continued to press for follow-up disengagement agreements after active fighting had ended. If it did, the crisis-management alternative weakens. The stronger test is smoking-gun evidence, namely explicit statements linking diplomatic tactics to wider strategic aims. One such statement appears in Kissinger’s own assessment of an interim Egyptian-Israeli agreement: success, he argued, would keep the United States as “the central element in future peacemaking efforts” (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 148, 1975). That language does not describe diplomacy as short-term firefighting alone. It links interim agreements to a

broader objective of preserving U.S. centrality in the regional order, which is more consistent with a strategy of order-building than with narrow crisis termination.

Triangulation structures the evidentiary base of this study. Primary materials include declassified U.S. government records, above all the Foreign Relations of the United States series, which the Office of the Historian describes as the “official documentary historical record of major foreign policy decisions and significant diplomatic activity of the United States Government” (U.S. Department of State), together with memoranda, telegrams, and transcripts preserved in presidential libraries and National Archives record groups cited within those volumes. Where useful, contemporaneous reporting is used only when it can be checked against documentary records. The secondary literature is employed not as a substitute for archives but as a means of corroboration and contextualization. Alvandi’s study, for example, explicitly draws on “American, British, and Iranian sources,” making it useful for cross-checking U.S. claims against non-U.S. evidence and for reconstructing Gulf strategy beyond Washington’s internal memoranda (Alvandi, 2012, p. 337). Methodologically, the standard is corroboration across different source types: if a Kissinger memorandum indicates deliberate sequencing, the claim is tested against additional U.S. documents, memoir evidence where appropriate, and non-U.S. materials or reliable secondary works based on Israeli, Arab, British, or Iranian records. When the documentary trail is incomplete, especially where Soviet evidence is thin, the gap is identified explicitly rather than filled with conjecture.

The case selection tests whether Kissinger applied a consistent strategic logic across two linked but distinct arenas: Arab-Israeli diplomacy and Persian Gulf policy between 1973 and 1975. Both unfolded in the post-October War setting and both were under Kissinger’s direct influence. Their contrast makes comparison analytically useful. One case concern postwar disengagement in the Arab-Israeli arena, the other regional security and alignment in the Gulf. If the grand strategy argument is correct, similar patterns of U.S. initiative, diplomatic control, and power-leveraging should appear in both. In the Arab-Israeli case, the sequence runs

from the 1973 ceasefire through the Sinai and Golan disengagements to Sinai II in 1975, a process built around successive agreements rather than a comprehensive settlement, a logic reflected in Kissinger's later defense of the "step-by-step approach" against Geneva (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 169, 1975). In the Gulf, the analysis follows U.S.-Saudi and U.S.-Iranian relations after the war, including arms transfers and institutional coordination. Here too the record suggests a managed ordering strategy: NSDM 92 endorsed "promoting cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia" while "recognizing the preponderance of Iranian power," and the interagency paper on Saudi cooperation placed the joint enterprise under Kissinger's "day-to-day political guidance and coordination" (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 91, 1970; FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 19, 1974). Comparing these cases therefore tests whether the aim of maintaining U.S. primacy shaped policy coherently across both domains.

Finally, the analysis explicitly weighs rival explanations against the documentary record. If Kissinger's policy was only crisis management, one would expect a preference for ending hostilities without sustained efforts to secure further agreements. Yet Kissinger argued that an interim Egyptian-Israeli agreement would preserve U.S. centrality in future peace-making, language that ties follow-up diplomacy to a wider strategic objective rather than to ceasefire maintenance alone (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 148, 1975). If bureaucratic politics were decisive, the record would be expected to show persistent fragmentation overriding strategic coherence. Instead, the documentary trail contains clear evidence of a coordinated executive rationale behind step-by-step diplomacy, even if routine internal disagreement remained present (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 160, 1975). Domestic politics is also considered by comparing diplomatic timing with electoral and public pressures, while Cold War structural explanations are tested by asking whether the same pattern of U.S. control and initiative persisted even when direct Soviet involvement was limited. The aim is not to dismiss these alternatives in advance, but

to determine which explanation best fits the sequence, rationale, and consistency of the decisions recorded in sources.

3. Results

3.1. Arab-Israeli Diplomacy: Step-by-Step and U.S. Primacy

After the October 1973 ceasefire, Kissinger moved quickly to turn military stabilization into a diplomatic process directed by Washington. In the January 23, 1974 Cabinet meeting, he argued that “only the United States had the leverage on Israel” and that Washington had to show that others could posture but “only we could deliver” (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 18, 1974). That formulation captured more than a tactical preference. It defined the political logic of the postwar moment. Kissinger understood that the transition from battlefield crisis to negotiation would determine not only the terms of de-escalation but also the identity of the power that would manage the next phase of regional diplomacy. He therefore pursued the negotiations through intensive bilateral shuttling between Cairo and Jerusalem in January 1974 rather than through a reconvened multilateral forum, allowing Washington to control both pace and procedure. Memoranda of conversation, trip reporting, and White House memoranda show Kissinger moving repeatedly between Jerusalem and Cairo, framing proposals and reporting to Washington as the broker capable of converting battlefield stabilization into an interim agreement (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Docs. 9, 16, 19, 1974; Quandt, 2005, pp. 168-176). The method was to combine direct bargaining between the parties with American management of proposals, timing, and guarantees, so that the United States remained indispensable to every step of movement. In that sense, the diplomatic process was designed not simply to record concessions already made, but to make further movement itself dependent on continued American mediation.

The Egyptian Israeli disengagement of 18 January 1974 created a buffer zone monitored by UNEF and imposed limitations on forces on either side of the canal, thereby converting a ceasefire line into an externally supervised interim order (Quandt, 2005, pp. 170-176). Its significance was therefore political as well as

military. By institutionalizing separation under international monitoring, the agreement reduced the immediate risk of renewed fighting, but it also gave concrete form to a phased process in which diplomacy would move through partial arrangements rather than a comprehensive settlement. Kissinger later described the broader logic of such interim agreements in strategic terms, presenting them as a way to preserve American centrality and constrain renewed Soviet influence (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 148, 1975). Sinai I therefore did more than stabilize the battlefield. It combined separation, monitoring, and American brokerage in ways that institutionalized Washington's central role in Arab Israeli diplomacy. The agreement showed that military de-escalation could be organized through a structure in which the parties remained formally sovereign, yet progress depended on U.S. guarantees, U.S. drafting, and U.S. control over the next diplomatic step.

The lifting of the Arab oil embargo in March 1974 cannot be reduced to a single cause, but its timing suggests that Arab leaders increasingly linked energy decisions to the broader course of U.S.-led regional diplomacy. A State Department telegram before Kissinger's March visit instructed the embassy in Saudi Arabia to emphasize the importance Washington attached to closer bilateral cooperation, the establishment of joint mechanisms for economic, technological, and military collaboration, and consultations on production and prices (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 104, 1974). Saudi reporting after the visit indicated that expanding U.S.-Saudi cooperation was being pursued amid Saudi sensitivity to the politics of the embargo and to reactions within the Arab world (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 106, 1974). Subsequent high-level discussions and reporting linked the emerging U.S.-Saudi framework to wider peace diplomacy, oil stabilization, and political coordination (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Docs. 111, 120, 1974; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979, pp. 4, 11). Kissinger's later assessment of an interim Egyptian Israeli agreement made the wider strategic linkage clearer by treating continued diplomacy as a way to keep Egypt on a moderate course, limit renewed Soviet influence, and preserve U.S. centrality in the negotiating process (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 148,

1975). What emerges from these sources is not a simple transactional exchange between oil and diplomacy, but a broader political pattern in which Arab moderation, energy policy, and American-managed negotiation were becoming increasingly interconnected. The embargo's end thus mattered not only for energy politics but also for the consolidation of a regional order in which Washington appeared as the central broker capable of linking movement on Arab Israeli issues to wider questions of political and economic stability.

In May 1974, Kissinger shifted to the Syrian front and again relied on shuttle negotiations rather than a broad multilateral forum. The issues at stake included Quneitra, nearby hill positions, and the scope of force limitations. Memoranda from Jerusalem, trip reporting, and White House updates record how Washington narrowed the issues and repeatedly recalibrated proposals in order to prevent collapse of the talks (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Docs. 46, 57, 71, 91, 1974; Quandt, 2005, pp. 188-201). The final State Department record of the agreement shows that the settlement placed Quneitra under Syrian administration, created a UN-supervised area of separation, and established equal limitation zones on both sides (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 88, 1974). The Syrian Israeli disengagement of 31 May 1974 thus reinforced the same pattern visible in Sinai: de-escalation was achieved through a U.S.-managed bilateral process that tied military restraint to continued American brokerage. The importance of the Golan track lies partly in the fact that it involved a more difficult negotiating environment, with sharper hostility and less room for symbolic compromise. Even there, however, the basic method held. Washington retained control over proposals, deadlines, and the language of acceptable movement, demonstrating that the step-by-step model was not confined to one bilateral pair but could be extended across fronts as a general mechanism of diplomatic management.

Kissinger's diplomacy during and after the October 1973 war was shaped by a clear effort to keep the Soviet Union from becoming an equal manager of the settlement and to preserve U.S. control over the transition from war to negotiation.

In his conversation with Huang Zhen, he stated that “our strategic objective is to prevent the Soviet Union from getting a dominant position in the Middle East” and described Israel, for Washington, as “a secondary, emotional problem having to do with domestic politics here” (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Doc. 114, 1973). These remarks framed the war not simply as a military emergency but as a strategic contest over who would shape the diplomatic outcome. Other October conversations show the same logic. Kissinger sought a ceasefire formula that would preserve Washington’s room to manage the next diplomatic phase from a position of leverage rather than cede initiative to Moscow or to the United Nations (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Docs. 116, 123, 131, 1973). In that sense, he did not treat the war simply as a crisis to be frozen. He treated it as an opportunity to shape the diplomatic baseline and pace of the postwar settlement in ways that maximized American leverage and limited Soviet influence. That interpretation is consistent with United Nations Security Council Resolution 338, which called for a ceasefire “in the positions they now occupy,” while also requiring the start of negotiations immediately and concurrently with the ceasefire, and with the subsequent move toward negotiated disengagements under U.S. management (UNSC, 1973, para. 1; Quandt, 2005, pp. 168-176). The anti-Soviet dimension therefore operated not merely at the level of rhetoric or superpower rivalry. It was built into the architecture of the negotiating process itself. The more successfully Washington monopolized the channel through which disengagement proceeded, the less space remained for a coequal Soviet role in shaping the region’s diplomatic future.

The Arab Israeli sequence fits the grand strategy argument because Kissinger treated the ceasefire not as an endpoint but as the foundation for a controlled diplomatic process that would preserve U.S. leverage. In his March 1975 assessment of an interim Sinai agreement, he warned that shifting prematurely to Geneva would “badly strain our relations with Egypt” and place Washington in a much weaker diplomatic position (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 148, 1975). That logic also helps explain why he narrowed the agenda in the Sinai and Golan negotiations,

postponing Palestinian and Jordanian questions in favor of bilateral disengagements that Washington could manage directly. The broader geopolitical setting pointed in the same direction. During the October war itself, Kissinger told Huang Zhen that “our strategic objective is to prevent the Soviet Union from getting a dominant position in the Middle East,” which framed ceasefire diplomacy as part of a larger contest over regional order rather than simple crisis termination (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Doc. 114, 1973). Taken together, these sources support a clear causal chain in which wartime leverage was converted into procedural control and then into a temporarily American-led diplomatic order. What emerged from the postwar diplomacy was therefore not only a set of interim agreements but a method of regional management. Military stabilization generated diplomatic access, diplomatic access generated control over sequencing, and control over sequencing reinforced Washington’s position as the indispensable external actor in Arab-Israeli negotiations. That is why the post-October process is best understood not as a series of disconnected settlements, but as a coherent strategy for transforming battlefield crisis into an order centered on American primacy.

3.2. Persian Gulf Order Construction

Before 1973, U.S. policy in the Gulf was formally cast as cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but internal planning documents already placed Iran in the dominant position. NSDM 92 called for “promoting cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia” while also “recognizing the preponderance of Iranian power,” which makes clear that the so-called twin pillars framework rested on hierarchy rather than parity (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 91, 1970). Roham Alvandi similarly argues that between 1969 and 1972 Nixon “gradually adopted a policy of Iranian primacy” and that the shift moved U.S. policy away from balancing and toward a one-pillar structure centered on Tehran (Alvandi, 2012, pp. 337, 339; Alvandi, 2014, pp. 28-64). Andrew Scott Cooper’s reconstruction of U.S.-Iranian-Saudi relations likewise situates the Shah as Washington’s principal Gulf security partner and leading regional arms client even before the oil shock reweighted the Saudi

connection (Cooper, 2011). Taken together, these sources indicate that even before the October War, Washington regarded Saudi Arabia as important but increasingly saw Iran as the principal security instrument in the Gulf. The larger significance of this early hierarchy is that it anticipated a broader American method of regional order-building. Rather than treating the Gulf as a space to be stabilized through equilibrium between equal local partners, Washington was already moving toward a differentiated system in which Iran would carry the main strategic and military burden while Saudi Arabia would contribute political influence, oil leverage, and financial weight inside an American-defined framework.

Kissinger's diplomacy after 1973 reinforced this pattern rather than reversing it. Gulf policy remained centered on Iran's strategic weight even as Saudi Arabia retained major political and oil importance. During Prince Fahd's June 1974 visit, Kissinger told the Saudi delegation that Washington considered 'the security of Saudi Arabia as central to the security of the Middle East and especially of the Persian Gulf area' while also seeking a new framework of bilateral cooperation beyond the oil issue (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 111, 1974). Later reporting to President Ford from Kissinger's 1974 trip showed that the Saudi relationship was being managed at the highest level and linked to wider U.S. peace efforts, oil stabilization, and cooperation with regional moderates (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 120, 1974). The clearest conclusion is that U.S. Gulf strategy was not about preserving symmetry between two equal pillars. It was about consolidating Iranian primacy while maintaining Saudi cooperation as part of a broader American regional order (Alvandi, 2012, pp. 339-341). What changed after 1973 was therefore less the structure of hierarchy than the scope of the system into which that hierarchy was inserted. Saudi Arabia's role expanded, but in a way that complemented rather than displaced Iran's superior security function, allowing Washington to connect Gulf security, oil stabilization, and wider regional diplomacy under a single strategic umbrella.

As Washington strengthened Iran's security role, it also tied Saudi Arabia more closely to an American-led regional order through institutionalized economic cooperation. In June 1974, Kissinger described the new bilateral framework as a "new relationship" with Saudi Arabia and the Arab world that would go "beyond the Arab-Israel problem" (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 111, 1974). The interagency paper that prepared the program placed the enterprise under Kissinger's "day-to-day political guidance and coordination," showing that it was treated as an instrument of high policy rather than a technical side project (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 19, 1974). A GAO review later found that the Joint Commission "fosters closer political ties," helped Saudi development, and "facilitates the flow to Saudi Arabia of American goods, services, and technology" (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1979, p. i). Taken together, these sources suggest that JECOR was not just economic assistance. It institutionalized American technical, administrative, and commercial involvement in Saudi development and thereby served as a durable channel of U.S. influence in the Gulf. In longer perspective, this mattered because it extended American influence beyond episodic crisis bargaining and into the routine workings of state-building and development. U.S. primacy was expressed not only through arms and high diplomacy, but also through technical cooperation, procurement channels, and the institutionalization of bilateral dependence.

Kissinger's Gulf strategy combined regional partnerships with efforts to secure an independent U.S. logistical foothold in the Indian Ocean (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 13, 1969). In a 1969 guidance paper sent to Kissinger, U.S. planning noted that, because "Reopening of the Suez Canal cannot be counted upon for the next two years, or even longer," "the importance of Diego Garcia and COMIDEASTFOR increases" (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 13, 1969). Subsequent U.S. planning gave Diego Garcia a more explicit operational role, describing it as a site for "low-profile support" and, if access to Asmara were lost, "the only foreseeable site" from which the United States could preserve command-and-control capacity "in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East" (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 39, 1970). This

evidence suggests that U.S. order-building in the Gulf rested not only on Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also on American-controlled infrastructure that reduced dependence on Arab or Pakistani bases (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 13, 1969; FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 39, 1970). That logistical dimension is important for understanding the growth of American primacy over time. Regional partners gave the system political reach and local legitimacy, but U.S.-controlled facilities gave it operational autonomy. Together, they made it possible for Washington not merely to influence Gulf politics from afar, but to sustain a standing strategic position from which it could manage crises, reassure partners, and project power across connected theaters.

Persian Gulf policy after 1973 can be read as an effort to deepen an already unequal regional order rather than to preserve a genuinely balanced twin-pillars framework. The documentary basis for that hierarchy predated the October War. NSDM 92 directed the United States to promote “cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia” while also “recognizing the preponderance of Iranian power,” which made clear that Washington did not treat the two states as equivalent strategic actors (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 91, 1970). After 1973, that asymmetry persisted. At the same time that Washington retained Iran’s superior security role, it moved to tighten Saudi Arabia’s political and institutional connection to the United States through security consultations, joint working groups, and the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (FRUS, Vol. E-9, Part 2, Doc. 111, 1974; U.S. GAO, 1979, p. 11). Read together, these sources support the argument that post-1973 Gulf policy consolidated Iranian primacy while integrating Saudi Arabia through economic and political cooperation, producing an asymmetric regional order under American direction. The longer-term implication is that this was not simply a temporary arrangement for the mid-1970s. It helped establish a wider pattern in which Gulf security became increasingly legible through American guarantees, American mediation, American arms relationships, and American-controlled infrastructure. Even as later regional alignments changed, the basic form of order built in this period continued to point toward the same outcome: local states retained agency, but the United States

occupied the decisive external position in organizing security, coordinating escalation management, and defining the terms within which regional cooperation would occur. In that sense, the post-1973 Gulf framework did more than reinforce Iranian primacy. It helped convert U.S. influence into a more durable regional primacy.

4. Discussion

The findings support the argument that Kissinger's post-1973 diplomacy functioned as a strategy of order construction centered on American control of process, sequencing, and guarantees. In the Arab-Israeli arena, ceasefire was treated not as a final settlement but as the first stage of a U.S.-managed diplomatic order. In the Gulf, the same logic appeared differently. Washington preserved what NSDM 92 called the "preponderance of Iranian power" while deepening Saudi institutional dependence through arrangements such as the Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (FRUS, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 91, 1970; U.S. GAO, 1979, p. i). This order lasted into the Ford administration and helped create conditions for later Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. It was also clearly asymmetric. The United States kept the central mediating role, while regional actors operated within procedures largely set by Washington. What became clearer after 1975 was that this pattern had outgrown its immediate wartime origins. It was no longer only a technique for crisis control, but an organizing principle of regional diplomacy. By then, movement on the main Arab-Israeli and Gulf questions increasingly depended on American mediation, American guarantees, and American decisions about the pace of negotiation.

These evidentiary limits remain substantial because the surviving record is still weighted toward U.S. documentation and toward episodes that entered formal memoranda, telegrams, or later documentary compilations. Kissinger himself described the post-October 1973 strategy as one built on separating issues rather than lumping them together, a formulation that captures the logic of sequenced diplomacy and phased bargaining (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 31, 1974). The record also shows that many crucial exchanges moved through highly restricted channels, including

presidential memoranda of conversation, backchannel messages, and telephone transcripts, which makes the broad direction of policy easier to reconstruct than every narrower tactical choice (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Docs. 114, 123, 1973). Secondary literature points in the same direction. Quandt emphasizes sequencing and procedure as the key mechanisms of postwar diplomacy, while Sheehan stresses secrecy and partial agreements as defining features of the process (Quandt, 2005, pp. 164-176; Sheehan, 1976, pp. 3-4). For that reason, the argument here is limited to what the surviving evidence can sustain. That caution is especially important for the post-1975 dimension of the argument because the emergence of U.S. primacy is more visible in the cumulative pattern than in every discrete tactical decision. Even with those limits, the surviving record is sufficient to show that controlled sequencing did not end with the first disengagements but widened into a framework that made Washington the principal broker of regional order.

Alternative explanations such as crisis management alone do not fully account for the pattern. If Kissinger had aimed only at terminating the immediate emergency, a narrow ceasefire would have been sufficient. Instead, on 6 October 1973 he argued that “a simple ceasefire is (a) short sighted in the present circumstances” because battlefield change would soon transform the political context (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Doc. 114, 1973). That logic points beyond one-off fire suppression. It treated the ceasefire not as an endpoint but as an instrument within a broader diplomatic design. Contemporary and later analyses reach a similar conclusion: the repeated shuttles and institutionalized interim agreements were not administrative afterthoughts but central elements of the diplomatic strategy (Sheehan, 1976, pp. 3-4; Quandt, 2005, pp. 164-176). The post-1975 trajectory sharpens the point. A policy aimed only at stopping the war would not be expected to generate lasting dependence on American brokerage after the battlefield emergency had passed. Yet the structure created by the disengagement agreements did precisely that, tying further movement to U.S. mediation and making

Washington the channel through which security assurances and incremental concessions were organized.

A bureaucratic politics explanation captures part of the story, but it does not fully explain the pattern. Kissinger did centralize decision-making and often bypass normal departmental channels. Yet the record points less to ad hoc interagency struggle than to a durable strategic line that continued across the Nixon-Ford transition and survived setbacks. After Rabat, Kissinger told Ford that “the best opportunity for progress in the Middle East was during the past summer” and that Israeli “stonewalling of the negotiation process prevented us from making progress,” framing the problem in strategic rather than merely bureaucratic terms (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 114, 1974). The same continuity appears in March 1975, when Kissinger explained to congressional leaders that the step-by-step strategy had been designed both to reduce Soviet influence and to protect Israel from being forced into immediate final-status decisions (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 160, 1975). The documents therefore suggest that bureaucratic rivalry shaped the instruments of policy, but not its central objective. This continuity matters for the post-1975 argument because a regional order centered on U.S. primacy could not rest on improvisation alone. The key development was that Washington’s control of the process became durable enough to outlast immediate bureaucratic contests and to reproduce itself as a wider regional practice.

A domestic politics explanation is weaker, though it should not be dismissed entirely. The timing further weakens this interpretation. The first Egyptian Israeli disengagement agreement came in January 1974, which was before Nixon’s resignation on 9 August 1974, not after it, and Sinai II was signed on 1 September 1975, before the 1976 primary defeats were settled. More importantly, the documents suggest that domestic considerations were present but usually subordinate to strategic aims. In January 1974, Kissinger framed disengagement in military and diplomatic terms, stressing reduced risk of renewed war and the opening created by Israeli movement on Sinai, not electoral advantage (FRUS, Vol. XXVI,

Doc. 1, 1974). The better conclusion, then, is not that domestic politics were absent, but that they did not define the basic sequencing logic of the policy, which remained tied to leverage, forum control, and continued U.S. centrality (Quandt, 2005, pp. 164-176). The persistence of that logic after 1975 further weakens a primarily domestic reading. Electoral pressures affected the margins of policy, but they do not adequately explain why the United States emerged as the indispensable broker of subsequent diplomatic movement.

A Cold War explanation matters, but it does not by itself account for the sequence of agreements. Newly available scholarship has argued that the Soviets “had tried hard to work with the Americans” and “very much wanted to avoid a new Middle East war,” which cuts against any claim that Moscow simply drove events and Washington merely reacted (Jackson & Trachtenberg, 2021, pp. 555-556). The U.S. documentary record points in the same direction. In his report after Geneva, Kissinger emphasized “realistic negotiations between the parties themselves” and identified “early disengagement of forces as an essential first step,” signaling a move away from sustained coequal superpower management and toward an American-controlled incremental process (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Doc. 415, 1973). Jackson and Trachtenberg go further, arguing that if Washington had been “more willing to work with the Soviets” after the war, events “might well have run their course in a very different way” (Jackson & Trachtenberg, 2021, p. 570). The stronger conclusion, then, is that the Cold War set the outer context, but Kissinger did not simply react to it. He used that context to narrow Soviet participation and to structure disengagement on terms more favorable to the United States (FRUS, Vol. XXV, Doc. 415, 1973). After 1975, the significance of that choice became even clearer. Soviet exclusion was no longer only a tactical outcome of the war’s aftermath. It had become part of a regional diplomatic structure in which Washington increasingly defined the legitimate path to negotiation.

A grand strategy interpretation best fits the pattern of U.S. behavior. The sequential agreements are not well explained as isolated responses to separate crises.

They are more plausibly understood as connected steps in a broader effort to consolidate American diplomatic primacy after October 1973. Kissinger stated this logic with particular clarity in March 1975 when he argued that the process itself made “the difference between our managing things and not being able to manage them” (FRUS, Vol. XXVI, Doc. 160, 1975). That language points beyond tactical improvisation. It frames continued U.S. control over the peace process as a strategic objective in its own right. Secondary scholarship supports the same reading. Jackson and Trachtenberg argue that postwar diplomacy was not structurally predetermined and that, had Washington been “more willing to work with the Soviets,” events “might well have run their course in a very different way” (Jackson & Trachtenberg, 2021, p. 570). The implication is that U.S. officials, and Kissinger in particular, were not merely reacting to crisis but actively shaping the diplomatic architecture. On that evidence, the guiding thread of the causal narrative is a sustained effort to keep the United States at the center of Arab-Israeli diplomacy and to translate wartime leverage into longer-term political influence.

The post-1975 period shows the broader consequences of that strategy. By then, step-by-step diplomacy had turned American mediation from a useful tool into a basic condition of regional politics. In the Arab Israeli arena, the key result was not simply that interim agreements lowered the risk of renewed interstate war. It was that further negotiations increasingly seemed possible only through U.S. sponsorship, U.S. guarantees, and U.S. control over sequencing. In the Gulf, the combination of Iranian predominance and Saudi integration into American security and economic frameworks produced a comparable hierarchy in which local actors retained agency but operated within an order heavily shaped by Washington. Considered together, these two arenas suggest that Kissinger’s diplomacy helped recast the Middle East as a regional system structured by U.S. primacy. That primacy did not imply complete control or the disappearance of regional agency. Rather, it meant that the United States became the actor best placed to link diplomatic movement, security reassurance, and political timing across the region’s principal

conflict zones. The central achievement of the diplomacy of 1973-1975 was therefore larger than the agreements themselves. It was the creation of a regional order in which American brokerage became the indispensable mechanism for managing conflict, constraining escalation, and setting the pace of change.

Conclusion

Kissinger's post-1973 diplomacy is best understood as the construction of a U.S.-centered regional order through controlled sequencing rather than comprehensive settlement. Its central achievement was not peace in a substantive sense, but the institutionalization of American brokerage as the indispensable mechanism through which major regional disputes would be managed. In the Arab Israeli arena, successive disengagement agreements reduced the likelihood of renewed interstate war while placing Washington at the center of negotiation and deliberately postponing final-status questions. In the Gulf, U.S. policy paired political support for Iranian primacy with deeper Saudi incorporation into American security and economic structures. The resulting order was neither fully hegemonic nor fully balanced. It was instead a hierarchical system in which regional actors retained agency, but the United States acquired the decisive position in managing escalation, distributing security assurances, and defining the pace and scope of diplomacy.

The strength of this order lay in its immediate strategic effectiveness; its weakness lay in the narrowness of its foundations. It stabilized state-to-state relations, constrained Soviet influence, and gave Washington unusual diplomatic leverage across both the Levant and the Gulf. Yet it depended on continuous American management and on local partners whose domestic legitimacy was often fragile. Its logic was therefore fundamentally deferralist. It did not resolve the Palestinian question, reconcile the tension between regional security and domestic authoritarianism, or eliminate the structural volatility of Gulf politics. It organized these problems, contained them, and postponed their reckoning. In that sense, the diplomacy of 1973-1975 demonstrated the capacity of grand strategy to transform

crisis into order, but also revealed that an order built through incremental bargains and selective exclusion can remain durable only so long as its suppressed contradictions do not return with greater force.

Seen from 2026, the longer afterlife of Kissinger's strategy is striking. The present crisis suggests that the order constructed after 1973 has neither disappeared nor matured into a self-sustaining peace. Its core logic still structures regional politics: Washington remains the outside power expected to manage escalation, reassure Gulf partners, and determine whether diplomacy will proceed through limited sequencing or broader negotiation. Yet the same crisis also exposes the cumulative cost of deferral. In the Arab Israeli arena, the unresolved Palestinian question has repeatedly returned as the point at which procedural control ceases to generate political legitimacy. In the Gulf, a security order built around asymmetric partnerships and the containment rather than incorporation of Iran has proved capable of organizing power, but not of producing a stable and inclusive regional equilibrium. What the wars of the present moment reveal, therefore, is not simply the collapse of Kissinger's order, but its contradiction in sharper form: an order highly effective at managing interstate diplomacy, yet far less capable of resolving the underlying political conflicts that later reappear as wider and more dangerous crises. The broader implication is that grand strategy can buy time, create hierarchy, and impose diplomatic discipline, but it cannot indefinitely substitute controlled process for substantive settlement. Once deferred questions accumulate across arenas, the mechanisms that once stabilized the region risk becoming instruments of recurrent crisis management rather than foundations of durable order.

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