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Abstract

The Melting Point by General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie provides an authoritative, first-hand examination of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), chronicling its historical evolution, key operational engagements, and future prospects within the broader context of the Great Power Competition (GPC). Drawing on his experience as a combatant commander, McKenzie provides insights into U.S. military strategy in the Central Region, focusing on civilian oversight, the combatant commander's unique role, and leadership's impact on strategic decision-making. *The Melting Point* significantly contributes to scholarship on recent U.S. military interventions and the evolving global geopolitical landscape. This review identifies five significant contributions of the book: (1) a historical analysis of USCENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR); (2) a nuanced examination of Iran's strategic role in the region; (3) key lessons drawn from the Afghanistan conflict; (4) an exploration of the Central Region's strategic significance; and (5) an analysis of the future dynamics of Great Power Competition.

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***The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century.* Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., USMC (Ret.). Foreword by Gen. James Mattis, USMC (RET.) and 26th Secretary of Defense. 1st ed. La Vergne: Naval Institute Press, 2024.**

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Introduction

The Melting Point by General (Ret.) Frank McKenzie offers a unique, first-person analysis of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), examining its complex origins, defining missions, and future outlook. Through a precise and candid narrative, McKenzie provides a critical account of major developments in international conflict from his perspective as a combatant commander during USCENTCOM's most pivotal operations. His detailed descriptions of key events and influential figures offer profound insights into the challenges of leading this crucial command within the broader context of the Great Power Competition (GPC). The book traces USCENTCOM's trajectory from its inception to its final harrowing days in Afghanistan. It offers a rare and cogent analysis of the often-overlooked factors contributing to the strategic failure of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan.

The book critically explores key issues, including U.S.-Iran relations, lessons from Afghanistan, and the Central Region's strategic role in the Great Power Competition (GPC). Three central themes emerge: the primacy of civilian oversight in U.S. foreign policy and military operations, the distinct responsibilities of a combatant commander, and the pivotal role of leadership in decision-making. The text's clarity and accessibility render complex military and strategic concepts understandable, offering readers a comprehensive account of recent U.S. military engagement in the region. The book's incisive insights into major geopolitical inflection points make it a vital resource for policymakers and scholars of regional security issues.

The following review focuses on five key contributions of the book: (1) the historical analysis of USCENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR); (2) a nuanced examination of Iran's strategic role in the region; (3) key lessons drawn from the Afghanistan conflict; (4) an exploration of the Central Region's strategic significance; and (5) an analysis of the future dynamics of Great Power Competition, especially between the United States and China. The review emphasizes the Afghanistan chapters, which comprise the bulk of the book.

Historical Analysis of USCENTCOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR)

The Melting Point provides a comprehensive historical account of the origins of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), highlighting the strategic rationale behind its establishment. Initially focused on addressing security challenges in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and Central and South Asia (CASA), USCENTCOM's creation was primarily driven by the geopolitical upheavals of the Cold War, the Iranian Revolution, and the former Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan, which collectively heightened regional instability. McKenzie places the founding of USCENTCOM within the context of these events, noting the significant initial resistance to its creation that foreshadowed inconsistencies in U.S. policy in the region.

The detailed chronology of USCENTCOM's evolution illustrates the complexities of aligning military objectives with broader civilian political strategies. McKenzie references President Carter's Persian Gulf Security Framework as a precursor to USCENTCOM, describing it as a strategic vision for a "string of peripheral U.S. bases around the region," which faced significant "push back from the joint chiefs."¹ He writes, "In this case, the civilians in the department were far-sighted, able to grasp future combinations and possibilities, while senior military leadership remained mired in bureaucratic friction, unable to see the far horizon."² This example underscores McKenzie's central argument on the primacy of civilian control over military operations.

McKenzie elaborates on USCENTCOM's critical role in coordinating regional coalition efforts. He emphasizes the challenges posed by coalition work abroad, particularly the need for "constant interaction at all levels of

the chain of command” amid language and cultural barriers, as well as the strategic differences between civilian and military actors.³ The author highlights how conflicting public messaging can disrupt such efforts, as illustrated by the events of October 7, 2020, when National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien suggested a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, only for President Trump to tweet later that same day that troops “should” be home by Christmas.⁴ McKenzie reflects on the impact of these mixed signals, writing, “With the speech and, more significantly, the Tweet, we had just blindsided our coalition partners—who now outnumbered us on the ground in Afghanistan.”⁵ These real-world examples, abundant throughout the book, provide critical insights into the operational and strategic challenges facing USCENTCOM amidst rapidly shifting domestic and regional dynamics.

Iran's Strategic Role in the Region

The Melting Point provides a comprehensive analysis of Iran's historical and contemporary role in shaping regional perceptions of the United States as a security partner. McKenzie traces the evolution of Iran's strategic posture from its 1979 revolutionary fervor to its emergence as a significant regional power and persistent U.S. adversary. This historical overview is crucial for understanding the complexities of Iran's current geopolitical agenda and its influence on regional dynamics and U.S. foreign relations.

McKenzie examines the contemporary challenges posed by Iran to U.S. interests, including its nuclear ambitions, ballistic missile program, and support for proxy groups throughout the region. The author offers detailed insights into the implications of U.S. sanctions, drone threats, and Iran's expanding military capabilities, providing a nuanced view of the strategic calculus confronting both Iran and the United States. He warns that “the Iranian drone threat has evolved rapidly, while regional responses have often been lethargic. As a result, the gap is widening, and the threat grows every day.”⁶ McKenzie emphasizes the necessity of building a collective security architecture, exemplified by initiatives like the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), which aims to ensure the free flow of commerce and deter aggressive actions in critical waterways and chokepoints.

Furthermore, the book explores Iran's influence on regional perceptions of the United States as a security partner amid the regime's relentless drive for dominance. McKenzie reflects on the September 14, 2019, drone attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia, noting the deterioration of U.S.-Saudi relations in the aftermath. He observes, "The Saudis continued to say that we weren't doing enough. This attack, and our response, marked the beginning of a deterioration in relations with the Kingdom at the military level that we have not yet recovered from."⁷ McKenzie's critical examination of Iran's objectives and capabilities provides essential insights into the trajectory of regional relations and their broader implications for U.S. partnerships and global security.

Lessons Learned from Afghanistan

McKenzie provides a rare and authoritative insider account of the U.S. military experience in Afghanistan, highlighting the lack of policy coherence and strategic vision that defined America's longest war, including its tumultuous final days. His narrative delivers a sobering account of the challenges and missteps that undermined the prolonged U.S. mission, from the initial invasion to the chaotic withdrawal. A central theme throughout McKenzie's examination of Afghanistan is the primacy of civilian control over foreign policy and military operations, a critical perspective for understanding the broader implications of U.S. foreign policy and the necessity of aligning military intervention with a coherent and long-term strategic vision.

A stark example of the disconnect between civilian decision-making and regional socio-political realities is the failure of U.S. nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. McKenzie describes a fractured and demoralized Afghan government and military, plagued by a lack of direction and unity amid growing ideological divisions between urban and rural populations. Despite well-intentioned efforts, the imposition of Western governance structures proved ineffective against Afghanistan's deeply entrenched tribal and ethnic dynamics. McKenzie writes:

“... [the imposition of Western-style governance] bred massive corruption, inefficiency, and disaffection, because it never even remotely aligned with the tribal and ethnic structures that were at the core of the

concept of Afghanistan as a state—even if this vision of a state did not align with what Westerners thought it should be. We continued to pour vast wealth into Afghanistan in an attempt to create a society with at least some Western values. These decisions, again, were not military ones. At the same time, we did not attempt—or allow—any meaningful outreach to the Taliban in 2002 or in the years immediately after to see if they could be coopted into the government. This was a policy error.”⁸

McKenzie’s analysis sheds light on less explored yet vital factors that contributed to the strategic failure of the U.S. mission, stressing the importance of understanding local sociopolitical dynamics and the limitations of externally imposed solutions. His examination of Afghanistan highlights additional missteps in U.S. strategy, such as the failure to recognize Pakistan's crucial role or to coopt the Taliban during the early stages of intervention. Reflecting on this missed opportunity, McKenzie observes that “at a time when the Taliban were literally on the ropes, we had an opportunity to continue to go after them, aiming for a complete elimination of their threat, or we could have attempted to coopt them through a political approach. That we did neither is a profound indictment of our interagency decision-making process—but it was not a military error.”⁹ McKenzie's inside perspective brings significant value to the discourse, offering insights often overlooked in public analysis.

The Afghanistan chapters serve as a poignant reminder of the complexities inherent in foreign intervention, underscoring the critical need for strategic coherence and adaptability. McKenzie’s critical analysis is particularly relevant for policymakers and military strategists, offering invaluable lessons for future engagement. The book emphasizes the necessity of a holistic approach to foreign intervention, one that considers a country's political, religious, cultural, economic, and social dimensions while ensuring short-term actions align with long-term strategic objectives. McKenzie highlights the importance of flexibility in foreign policy, particularly in conflict zones with deeply rooted local social dynamics.

The Central Region's Strategic Significance

McKenzie offers a detailed analysis of the Central Region's pivotal role in U.S. security, geopolitical, and economic interests. The region's wealth of natural resources, strategic trade routes, and complex political environment make it central to global stability. McKenzie outlines the ongoing threats posed by sectarian conflicts, power vacuums, and non-state actors like ISIS-K, which continue to destabilize the region. He argues forcefully against isolationism, stressing the indispensable role that international alliances and partnerships play in maintaining regional stability and countering malign influences. Through this lens, McKenzie provides a comprehensive assessment of the challenges and opportunities the Central Region presents for U.S. interests, particularly in light of China's growing influence and the prospects for great power cooperation amid competition.

McKenzie also explores the strategic consequences of the U.S.'s reduced presence in the region, warning of the potential dangers of ceding influence to rising powers, particularly China. He notes that "[China's] strategy has been to use economic inducements with a variety of countries in order to gain a foothold in the region. Bases inevitably follow as we have seen in Djibouti and potentially in the UAE."¹⁰ China's approach, which combines economic investment with non-interference, proves particularly effective in resource-rich countries like Afghanistan, where U.S. and Western isolationist policies due to cultural and religious practices create openings for Chinese influence. McKenzie emphasizes the need to recalibrate U.S. policies, advocating for a renewed focus on building a collective security architecture to mitigate these challenges. This section of the analysis highlights the importance of proactive regional engagement, arguing that the United States must leverage soft power and international cooperation to advance its strategic interests and promote stability in the Central Region.

Future Dynamics of the Great Power Competition

McKenzie addresses the increasing strategic importance of the Central Region within the context of an intensifying Great Power Competition (GPC), particularly as the United States grapples with China's expanding influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, which seeks to enhance connectivity and economic integration across the region, also

serves as a tool for China to exert political influence. McKenzie explores the strategic advantages China can gain from this initiative, including access to critical natural resources, control over key trade routes, and establishing potential military bases.

The author examines the broader implications of China's expanding footprint in the Central Region, analyzing the potential effects on regional stability, economic development, and the security architecture. He notes that, "Underpinning all these activities is the entry of China. The Belt and Road runs through the Central Region. At the same time, a significant fraction of China's hydrocarbon imports come from the Central Command area. In many ways, the region is the cockpit of strategic competition with China."¹¹ McKenzie argues for a recalibrated U.S. approach to regional engagement that effectively employs "soft power" to counterbalance China's BRI and foster a stable, prosperous region.

Conclusion

The Melting Point presents a compelling vision of the United States' high stakes in navigating the complex security landscape within USCENTCOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR). McKenzie emphasizes the necessity of robust and adaptable strategies to maintain USCENTCOM's effectiveness in the face of rapidly shifting regional dynamics. He advocates for a more coherent U.S. approach to regional partnerships, calling for a proactive and integrated strategy that utilizes all elements of national power.

By providing rare insights into critical military operations, McKenzie demonstrates the vital role of civilian leadership in shaping USCENTCOM's strategic direction, while illustrating the complex responsibilities of combatant commanders in managing dynamic regional environments. The text's clarity and insider perspective make it an invaluable resource for policymakers and military strategists. McKenzie's candid reflections offer practical guidance for enhancing USCENTCOM's effectiveness and ensuring its continued relevance amid the evolving Great Power Competition (GPC).

While the book reaffirms the primacy of civilian control in foreign policy and security operations, it also raises several critical questions: Will U.S. policymakers assume responsibility for the failures in Afghanistan? What

is the strategic significance of Afghanistan to U.S. national security, and how should America approach re-engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan? What might such re-engagement entail in practical terms? Furthermore, how does Afghanistan fit within the broader framework of the Great Power Competition (GPC)? These questions, especially those related to accountability to the Afghan people amid ongoing terrorism concerns, human rights issues, and humanitarian crises, prompt readers to consider the ethical and strategic imperatives that should guide future U.S. engagement in the region. Rather than offering simplistic solutions, McKenzie encourages readers and policymakers to engage in a deeper and more nuanced reflection on these complex and essential issues.

Ultimately, *The Melting Point* offers unprecedented and invaluable insights into USCENTCOM's operations and the Central Region's critical role in U.S. strategic planning. Its unique perspective provides essential lessons for policymakers and researchers, making the book highly relevant for shaping U.S. foreign policy over the short, medium, and long term. With its detailed historical context, firsthand narrative, practical observations, and incisive analysis, the book stands as an indispensable resource for understanding the future of U.S. engagement in the Central Region and beyond.

The author would like to thank Sarah White for her contribution.

¹ McKenzie, Kenneth F, and James N Mattis. *The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century*. 1st ed. (La Vergne: Naval Institute Press, 2024), 16.

² McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 16.

³ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 141.

⁴ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 140

⁵ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 140.

⁶ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 30.

⁷ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 39.

⁸ McKenzie, Kenneth F, and James N Mattis. *The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century*. 1st ed. (La Vergne: Naval Institute Press, 2024), 265.

⁹ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 265.

¹⁰ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 282.

¹¹ McKenzie, *The Melting Point*, 282.