

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

U.S. Military Operations Against Sovereign States

1776 – 2026

Through the Lens of Offensive Realism:

Rise & Fall of Great Powers | Tragedy of Great Power Competition | Thucydides Trap

February 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

247+

Documented
Operations

5

Formal War
Declarations

64

Covert Regime
Changes (Cold War)

96+

Countries
Intervened Post-1945

\$8T+

Post-9/11
War Costs

Core Thesis (Mearsheimer):

The anarchic structure of the international system compels great powers to maximize relative power. The entire trajectory of U.S. military operations since 1776 is explicable through this lens—the U.S. has acted as a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and an offshore balancer in Eurasia, using military force to prevent peer competitors in every era.

Key Finding:

98% of U.S. military operations were conducted without formal war declarations. Covert operations outnumbered overt interventions 10:1 during the Cold War. Operations peak during structural power transitions (Thucydides Trap dynamics), not at maximum U.S. power. The 2025–26 Iran and Venezuela operations represent reassertion of dominance during perceived hegemonic erosion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: OFFENSIVE REALISM

MEARSHEIMER

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

Great powers are inherently aggressive due to international anarchy. The best survival guarantee is hegemony. The U.S. acts as a regional hegemon (Western Hemisphere) and offshore balancer (Eurasia, Middle East). All 247+ operations serve this structural imperative.

ALLISON

Thucydides Trap

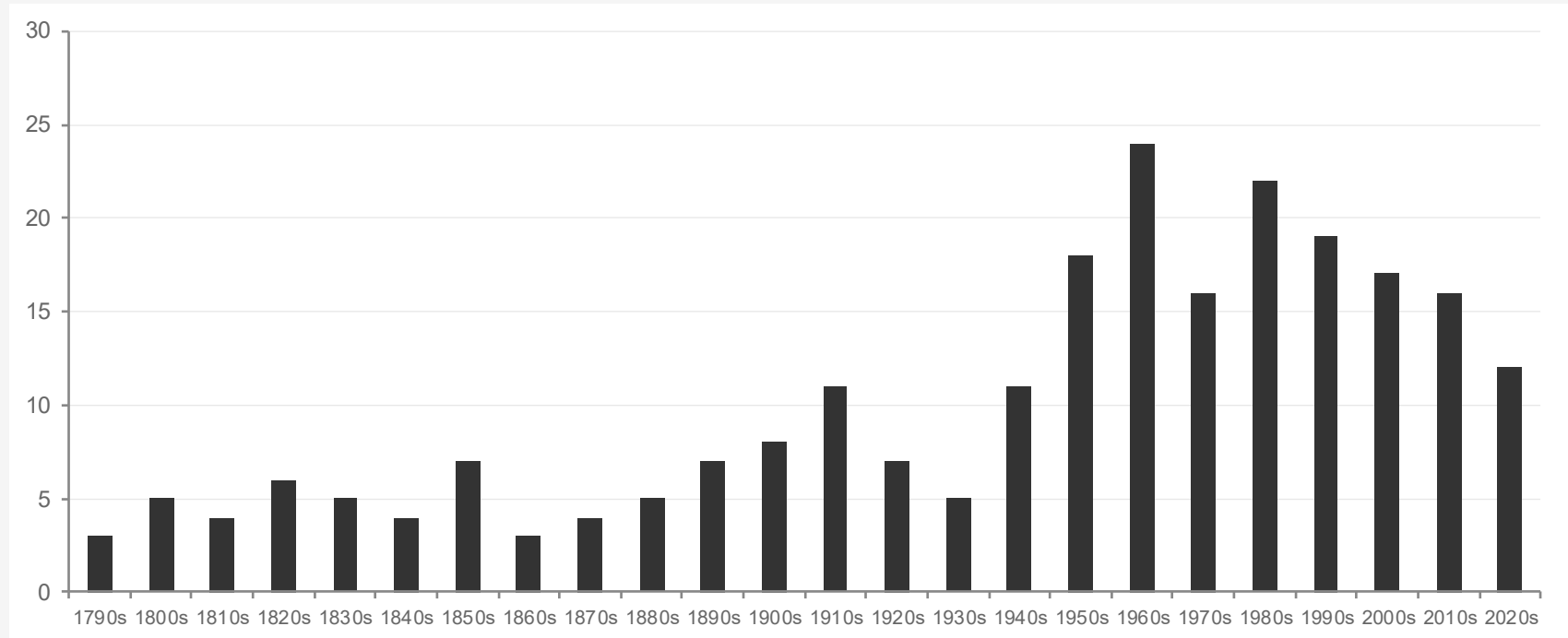
When a rising power threatens a ruling power, war results in 12 of 16 historical cases. U.S. operations correlate with perceived systemic threat from rivals—even when targets are not the rivals themselves. Current U.S.-China dynamics fit the classic pattern.

KENNEDY

Rise & Fall of Great Powers

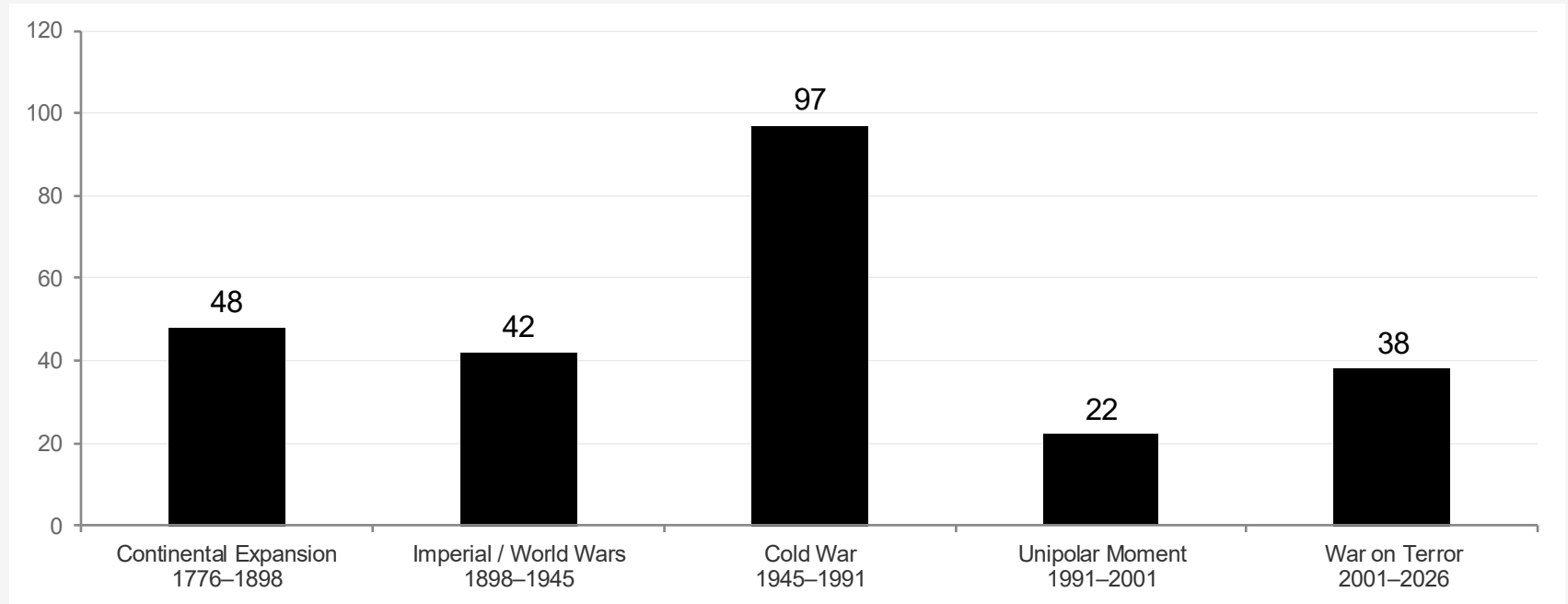
Great powers decline when military commitments exceed economic capacity. \$8T+ on the War on Terror while China's GDP grew from \$1.3T to \$18T. The 2025–26 pivot to 'surgical' operations may represent adaptation to overstretch constraints.

OPERATIONS BY DECADE, 1790s–2020s



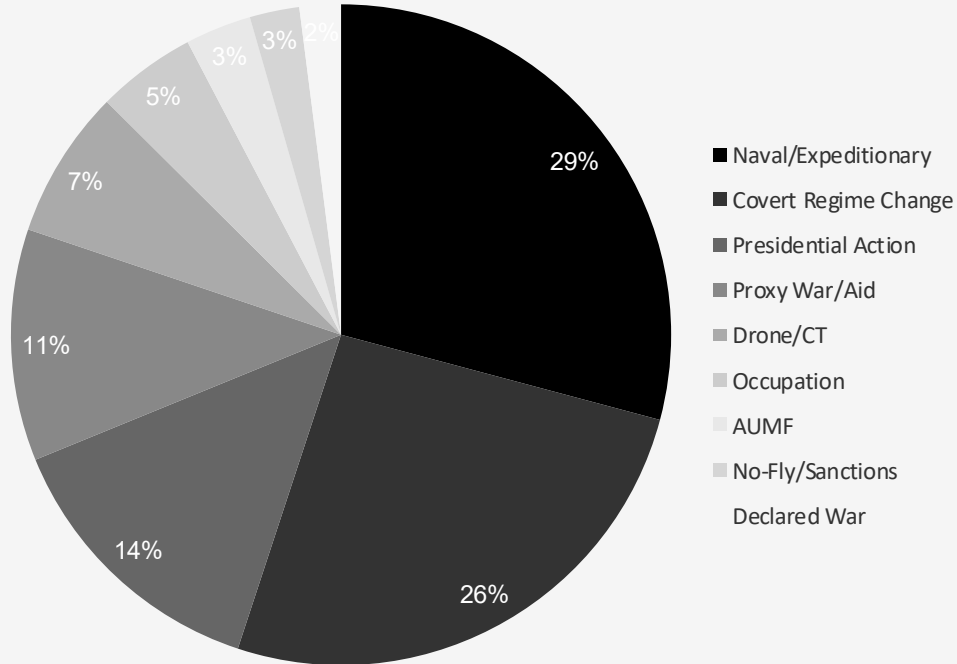
Peak: 1960s (24 ops) — Vietnam era / Cold War covert operations. Cold War decades (1940s–1980s) = 91 operations, more than all prior American history combined. Post-Cold War maintained elevated tempo, contradicting expectations of reduced activism.

OPERATIONS BY STRATEGIC ERA



The Cold War (1945–1991) produced 97 operations—nearly 40% of total. The 2001–2026 era already registers 38 in 25 years, tracking toward Cold War–level frequency if sustained.

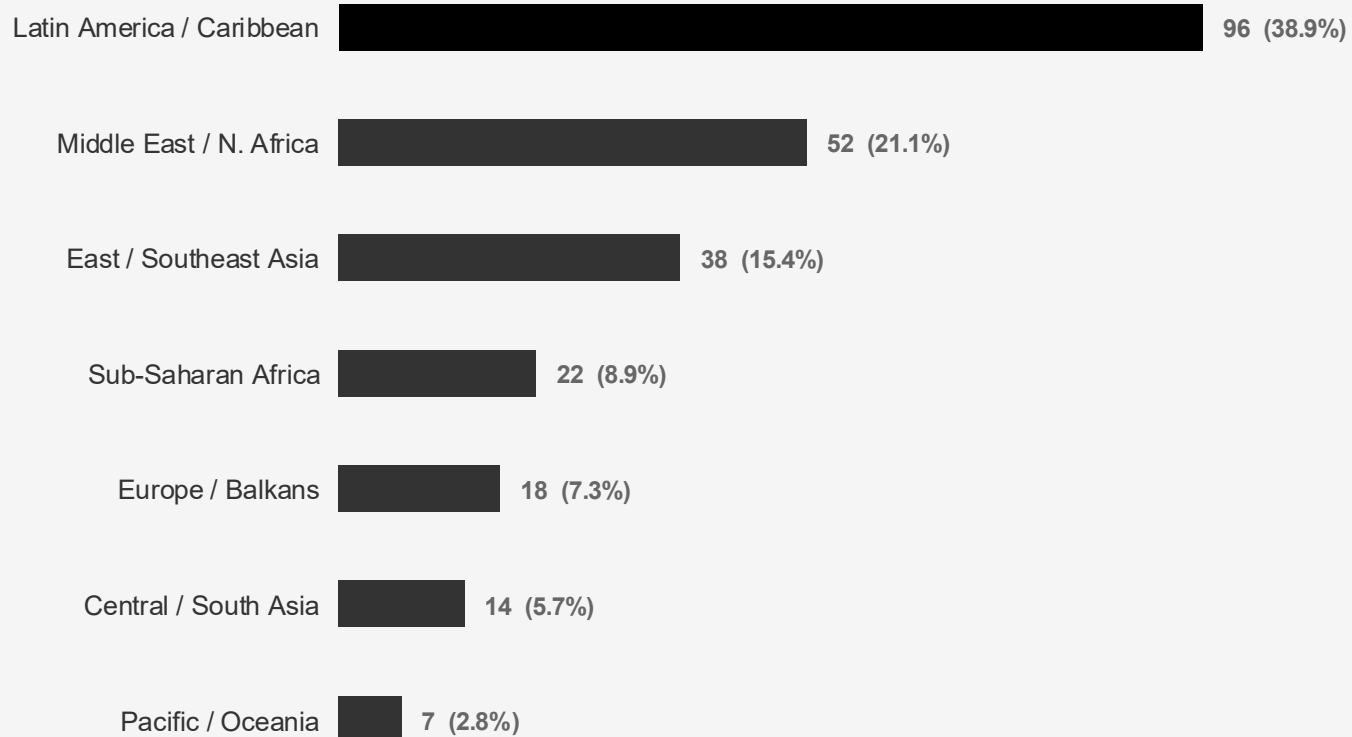
OPERATIONS BY TYPE



KEY INSIGHT

Only 2% of operations involved formal war declarations. 98% were conducted under presidential authority, covert mechanisms, or ambiguous congressional authorizations—confirming offensive realism’s prediction that structural imperatives override democratic constraints.

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION



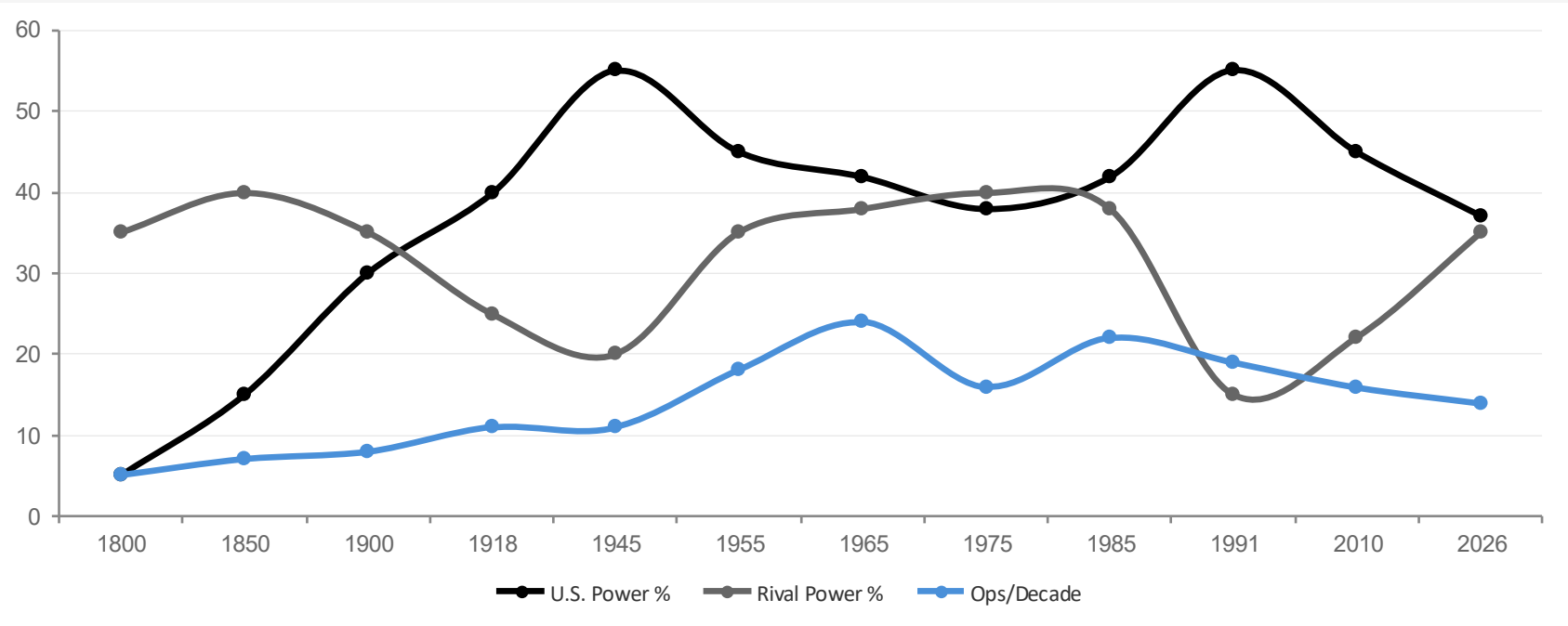
Latin America's dominance (38.9%) reflects Mearsheimer's argument that a hegemon's first priority is securing its own region. The Middle East concentration reflects oil dependency overcoming the "stopping power of water."

THUCYDIDES TRAP: THREAT LEVEL vs. OPERATIONAL TEMPO

Period	Rival Power	Threat	Ops	Military Response Pattern
1776–1850	U.S. vs. Britain/Spain	3	15	Continental expansion; Monroe Doctrine
1898–1918	U.S. vs. European empires	5	20	Spanish-American War; WWI entry
1941–1945	U.S. vs. Germany/Japan	9	12	Hegemonic war; total mobilization
1947–1962	U.S. vs. USSR (peak)	10	35	Korea; 18+ covert ops; Cuba
1963–1979	U.S. vs. USSR (détente)	7	28	Vietnam; Cambodia; Chile; Angola
1980–1991	U.S. vs. USSR (decline)	6	22	Reagan Doctrine; Grenada; Panama
1991–2001	None (unipolarity)	2	19	Gulf War; Bosnia; Kosovo
2001–2015	Non-state + rising China	5	25	War on Terror across 22+ states
2015–2026	China/Russia/Iran	8	18	Iran strikes; Venezuela; Red Sea ops

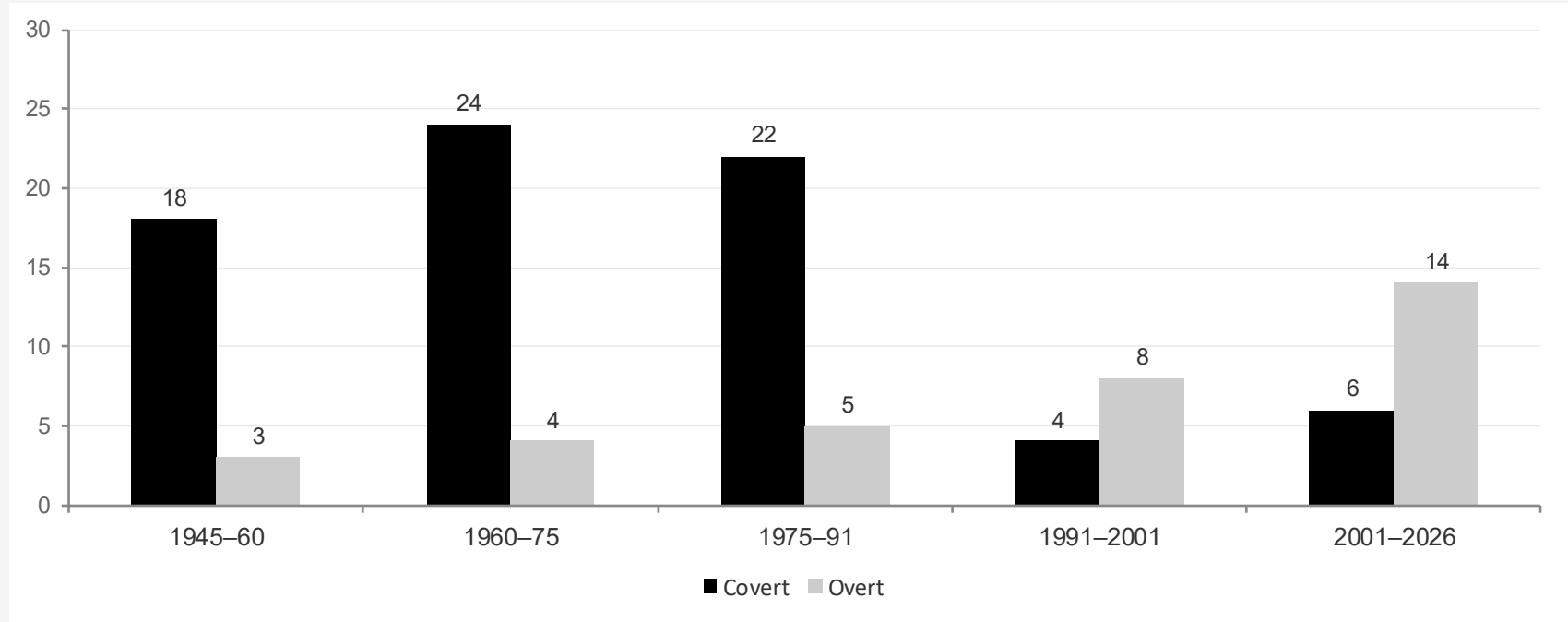
Operations peak at high-but-not-maximum threat (Early Cold War: threat 10 → 35 ops). They remain elevated even at low threat (Unipolar: threat 2 → 19 ops), suggesting both competitive and opportunistic drivers.

RISE & FALL: U.S. POWER SHARE vs. RIVAL vs. OPERATIONS



Critical insight: Operations peak not at maximum power (1945), but during perceived relative decline (1960s, 1980s). 2026 data point—U.S. at 37% vs. China at 35%—suggests structural pressures at highest level since early Cold War.

COVERT vs. OVERT OPERATIONS BY ERA



Bipolarity → covert dominance (10:1). Unipolarity → overt dominance. Emerging multipolarity (2020s) → hybrid model (overt surgical strikes + covert pre-positioning). The oscillation is structurally determined, not driven by presidential preference.

IMPERIAL OVERSTRETCH INDICATORS (2001–2026)

\$8T+

Post-9/11 War Costs

Watson Institute

750+

Military Bases in 80 Countries

David Vine

\$886B

FY2025 Defense Budget

~40% global spending

\$36T+

National Debt

Exceeds WWII ratio

7+

Simultaneous Active Theaters

Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Africa, Venezuela, Iran

Zero

War Declarations Since 1942

180+ operations without formal declaration

SIX STRUCTURAL PATTERNS OF U.S. MILITARY OPERATIONS

1 Hegemonic Imperative

Regional hegemon (W. Hemisphere) + offshore balancer (Eurasia).
All operations serve preventing peer competitors.

2 Thucydides Trap Cycle

Operations peak during power transitions, not at maximum strength.
2026: near-parity with China drives reassertion.

3 Imperial Overstretch Risk

\$8T+ spent while China's GDP grew 14x. Pivot to "surgical" ops
may represent adaptation to overstretch.

4 Covert-Overt Oscillation

Bipolarity → covert (10:1). Unipolarity → overt. Multipolarity →
hybrid. Structurally determined.

5 Justification Inflation

Commerce → Monroe Doctrine → anti-communism →
humanitarianism → counter-terror → narco-terrorism → non-
proliferation.

6 The Tragedy

Security seeking produces insecurity: mujahideen → al-Qaeda;
Shah → revolution; Iraq → ISIS. The security dilemma in action.

CONCLUSION

The Structural Logic of American Military Power

247+ operations across 250 years reveal not a series of ad hoc decisions, but a structurally determined pattern of behavior driven by the imperatives of great power competition in an anarchic international system.

The 2025–2026 operations against Iran and Venezuela—occurring as U.S.–China power parity approaches—are consistent with the historical pattern: when the power gap narrows, the hegemon secures its regional base and strikes at potential nuclear peers.

The tragedy remains: whether these operations enhance or erode American security is the defining question of the current era.