The United States and a Gulf Security Architecture: Policy Considerations

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 3 (March 2004)

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Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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This article was initially prepared for presentation at a workshop on "Security Architectures in the Post-Saddam Middle East: Choices and Opportunities" at the Center for Naval Analyses, 9 February 2004. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect those of the National Defense University or the Department of Defense.

As we think about what kind of security architecture the United States would like to see take root in the Persian Gulf, and the role that the United States may end up playing in that architecture, we have to start from two fundamental questions:

- What do we — the United States — want such a regional security architecture to achieve?
- What is the political basis for cooperation among the governments comprising the architecture?

Defining "Architecture"

Before addressing any of those questions, I should say a word about what I mean by "architecture." It is not an ideal term, but alternatives like "structure" or "framework" seem to me to be worse. We need to be careful about prejudging the institutional form of the region's post-Saddam security arrangements and therefore to avoid using language that *automatically* implies a rigid set of formal organizations and rules. I intend "architecture" to refer generically to a collection of arrangements — formal, informal or both — that operate coherently with each other to achieve our security objectives. Perhaps the analogy is with landscape architecture — an intentionally shaped environment, not a fixed building. In other words, the pre-war Gulf security architecture could be said to have comprised the Gulf Cooperation Council, U.S. bilateral agreements with and presence in the GCC states, the U.S.-U.K.-enforced no-fly and no-reinforcement zones in Iraq, UN sanctions against Iraq, bilateral relations between various Gulf states and Iran, and so on.

Objectives: What do we want to achieve?

Historically, we have thought about Gulf security predominantly in terms of threats *to* the region, whether we were talking about the USSR, Nasser's Egypt, Iran, or Iraq. Despite 9/11, we still have to consider such conventional threats. The people of the world still depend on Gulf oil and gas supplies for their well being and development. 9/11 did not change that.

What 9/11 did do was to highlight that in addition to the threats to the Gulf, there are also threats emanating *from* the Gulf. Terrorism is the most obvious of these, but also proliferation, especially with increasing ranges of delivery systems.

One would assume we would want security architectures that could cope with all of these challenges — conventional military threats, proliferation, and terrorism. And if the fight against terrorism ultimately depends on democratic political development in the Middle East, as President Bush contends, then we should seek security architectures or arrangements that foster that development, or at least do not hinder it.

This is directly relevant to the question of what kind of U.S. military presence is desirable. It is important to remember that President Bush did not endorse the view that freedom will be brought to the Arabs at the point of American bayonets. On the contrary, he said, "The democratic progress we've seen in the Middle East was not imposed from abroad, and neither will the greater progress we hope to see. Freedom, by definition, must be chosen, and defended by those who choose it."

So if the U.S. armed forces are not the instrument of choice for carrying out the reshaping of the domestic political order in the countries of the Middle East, then we have to ask whether the presence of military forces advances or retards the reform process. I believe it tends to retard it, for the following four reasons, all of which are borne out by recent experience:

1. Having U.S. combat forces in a country magnifies the United States' already considerable interest in the host country's "stability" — stability in the sense of maintaining public order and keeping the current regime in power. Domestic political turmoil places access to facilities at risk. Public disorder and extremist dissent can raise issues of force protection. Similarly, U.S. officials are constrained from frank exchanges with the host government on issues like human rights and political reform because of the priority they place on preserving the good relations that allow access.
2. In the eyes of the host country — both rulers and ruled — the presence of American forces often constitutes an implied endorsement of the ruling regime and an implied commitment to guarantee its survival not only against external threats but against domestic ones as well. They often assume the existence of a tacit quid pro quo: we give them bases, they think, and they give us protection. A regime that might otherwise be inclined to introduce reforms in response to domestic social and political pressures can be encouraged to "hang tough" if it believes the Americans are committed to rescue it in extremis.
3. As reflected in a number of Osama bin Ladin's pronouncements, as well as in the 1992 "Memorandum of Advice" to King Fahd from a group of conservative Saudi clerics, the presence of U.S. forces in a country can delegitimize its government by calling into question the regime's ability to provide for the common defense. How U.S. military presence affects the popular legitimacy of the government will be a growing issue in Iraq as well — constantly calibrating the needs of security against those of legitimacy will be a crucial task for the Administration for as long as U.S. forces remain in Iraq.
4. The U.S. military presence itself becomes the hot button issue of national political debate — particularly if such questions as host nation support costs or concessional status of forces terms become issues of public debate. This is not unique to the Gulf — witness the political hay that Okinawan politicians have been able to make from the criminal conduct of U.S. military personnel on the island. The heat generated over these issues drives out discussion and addressal of the more fundamental issues facing the polity.

Before 9/11 and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States essentially sought a Gulf security architecture that guaranteed regional stability for the purpose of securing the flow of energy supplies to world markets at reasonable prices. While we did not guarantee the political tenure of the regional regimes, and even criticized their more egregious violations of international human

rights standards, we would have been more than satisfied by any arrangement that kept the Iranians out, the Iraqis down, and the Americans in, to paraphrase Lord Ismay's famous comment about NATO in the 1950s. In the new Persian Gulf, it is hard to imagine that Washington will believe that is enough.

Political Basis for Cooperation

The lack of an enduring political basis for cooperation has been the Achilles heel of previous efforts to construct a formal regional security structure in the Gulf. Experience suggests that the countries of the region perceive the areas in which their interests conflict with one another as outweighing those in which they coincide. In Europe after World War II, the downside of cooperation among historic competitors was offset by the dire threat presented by the Soviet presence to the East. In the Gulf, however, even the imminent threat posed by Iraq immediately after the invasion of Kuwait could not fully overcome the rivalries and mistrust among members of the Gulf Cooperation Council or the reservations that many of them had regarding cooperation with outside forces.

Internecine competition, rivalry, and mistrust among the GCC states have not been the only political obstacles to intraregional cooperation. The states of the region also have sharply different threat perceptions. Over the past ten years, Kuwait was naturally most immediately concerned about the threat from Iraq; several hundred miles down the Gulf, the UAE saw little threat from Baghdad but was deeply concerned about its offshore territorial dispute with Iran. None of the other GCC members, with the possible exception of Oman, have shared Saudi Arabia's concerns about Yemen; none except Kuwait have shared Riyadh's visceral antipathy toward Jordan. Qatar and Oman have each entered into informal, low-level interaction with Israel, something that remains anathema elsewhere in the region.

In the present environment, the Gulf states are even less likely than in the past to share one another's policy agendas or threat perceptions, particularly if we add post-Saddam Iraq or a sporadically evolving Iran to the regional mix. At some point, Iraq will once again be a major player in the region. Ultimately oil money will begin to flow; ultimately U.S. and international constraints on Iraqi capabilities will be lifted. Even assuming our efforts to instill democratic rule in Iraq are successful, the GCC states will still find themselves with militarily superior and politically alien force to their north; will they perceive this renascent Iraq as a friend or as a potential foe? Even apart from likely divergences on the ever-crucial issue of oil production policy, what common ground will militarily weak Sunni-dominated conservative monarchies find with a relatively strong Shia-dominated, multi-ethnic democratic republic?

The problem of finding common political ground is only magnified if we consider the United States as part of the regional security equation. True, the U.S. and each of the Gulf states have common enemies in terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to countries like Iran presents a challenge to their interests as well as to ours. But it is certainly not clear that they and we will have common approaches in how to deal with these problems. It has never been out of the question that the Saudis, for example, will respond to Iranian acquisition of WMD by seeking countervailing capabilities of their own — they did so in the case of missiles nearly two decades ago — or that the smaller Gulf states will find appeasement of Iran less costly than cooperation with the United States. As to terrorism, if the United States' prescription is a democratic revolution throughout the region, it is quite possible that current rulers such as Sultan Qaboos of Oman and the al-Nuhayyans of the UAE will find our proposed cure worse than the disease.

Conclusion

Where does this bleak assessment lead us?

I do not think it leads to the conclusion that the Gulf region does not need or can never have a functional security architecture. Every region has at least a de facto security architecture, whether it is an unstable balance of power, single state hegemony, formally structured collective security, or something in between. The United States continues to have a vital interest in the stability of the Gulf region, provided that we understand "stability" as being capable of a dynamic interpretation and not just a static one. The external threats to the Gulf as well as the threats to the rest of the world emanating from within the Gulf can still jeopardize the lives of American citizens, disrupt energy markets, and more broadly generate tension and conflict throughout the Middle East.

However, it does suggest several points that should be kept in mind in crafting such an architecture:

1. Regional states will be very leery of binding formal agreements that lock them into relationships in which there is no underlying trust. Institutional structures will have to grow out of habits of cooperation, not the other way around.
2. Given the absence of universally shared interests, objectives, or threats, these habits of cooperation must develop in the context of less-than-universal relationships. The implication is that we should be looking at a multitude of overlapping vehicles for cooperation, formal and informal, in which regional states learn to work together on more narrowly focused functional concerns.
3. The United States needs to think very carefully about what kind of role it can best play in promoting the evolution of such an architecture, both diplomatically and militarily. Habits of cooperation developed under U.S. tutelage and pressure are not habits of cooperation. A major purpose of any undertaking in this area should be to encourage the states of the region to take more responsibility for their own security futures. This does not mean disengagement, but it may mean exerting a lighter diplomatic touch.
4. I have already discussed the down-side of U.S. military presence. That does not mean U.S. military presence should go to zero, but we need to look long and hard at how big a presence, how visible, where, and with what kind of forces. Clearly we need to maintain the capability to respond to major conventional and WMD threats to our interests and, perhaps more importantly, to be able to strike quickly and decisively against terrorist threats that states in or near the Gulf region are unable to deal with. But it is also clear that in the post-Saddam environment much of this can be done without a highly visible force footprint.

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Prior to joining NDU, Mr. McMillan served in a series of civilian positions in the Department of Defense, beginning in 1978 as a program analyst in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, with subsequent assignments in the Defense Logistics Agency, the Defense Security Assistance Agency, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He has more than 15 years of experience

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Mr. McMillan holds a B.A. in political science from the University of Alabama, did his graduate work at Vanderbilt University, and is a 1992 distinguished graduate of the National War College. He was a career member of the Senior Executive Service and is the recipient of the Defense Meritorious Civilian Service Medal with Bronze Palm and the Defense Exceptional Civilian Service Medal. He has published a number of articles and book chapters on foreign and security affairs. He is a native of Montgomery, Alabama. His wife, Lorraine Hricik McMillan is assigned to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy. They have two children, Alexandra (12) and John (10).