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The Postwar Gulf: Return to Twin Pillars?

DAVID O. SMITH

Operation Desert Storm, the military campaign that liberated Kuwait, constitutes a watershed in Middle East politics comparable in magnitude to the founding of Israel in 1948. Political, social, and economic forces have been set into motion which will profoundly influence the region for decades. As leader of the 28-nation coalition victorious against Iraq, the United States will be viewed as responsible both for the success of military operations and for shaping the postwar environment. A common danger of war is that military victory often contains the seeds of future conflict. Therefore, the United States must implement a postwar regional strategy recognizing that the existing security structure has been shattered beyond repair, and that it must be replaced with a sturdier framework capable of protecting the Gulf from future threats.

Every US President since World War II has recognized vital American interests in the Gulf, but we have tended to rely on others to protect those interests while concentrating ourselves on the global Soviet threat. Until its 1971 withdrawal from "east of Suez," Britain policed the area. Afterward, to fill the resulting void, the Nixon Administration promulgated what came to be known as the "Twin Pillar" policy of relying on two moderate regional states—Iran and Saudi Arabia—to do the job. The Iranian Revolution effectively eliminated the stronger pillar, Iran; now, a decade later, the Iraqi invasion demonstrated the inability of the other, Saudi Arabia, to deter regional aggression. The present postwar flux affords an opportunity to implement a new regional strategy firmly rooted in emerging political reality and based on two sturdier pillars: an increased US military presence in the Gulf and the creation of a new regional balance of power.

What We Have Learned

The Gulf War has highlighted several lessons relevant to formulating a new regional strategy. The first concerns the singular importance of US

political and military leadership in what President Bush has characterized as the New World Order. The post-Cold War era may be multipolar in an economic sense, but the response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait demonstrated that the United States was the only power with the will and the ability to project massive military power rapidly to the Gulf. The key to building and sustaining the global consensus to confront Iraqi aggression was American resolve, patience, and, above all, the willingness to exercise political leadership. Militarily, we can expect a number of our allies to maintain large, modern military establishments, but none will have more than a modest capability to deploy forces rapidly and sustain them. Therefore, while some allies may contribute small forces and others may assist financially, the United States must be expected to bear the burden of political and military leadership should deterrence fail once again.

The second lesson concerns the role of the Soviet Union. Despite its economic and domestic political problems, we can expect the Soviet Union to remain a military superpower with the will and ability to project strong military forces anywhere in Asia well into the foreseeable future. However, despite occasional expressions of Soviet concern over the extent of US bombing of Iraq,¹ the Cold War may be essentially over in the Gulf. Mikhail Gorbachev seems to have decided very early in this crisis that Soviet economic and security interests dictated support for US policy objectives. Accordingly, he abandoned his patron-client relationship with Iraq, revised his regional security assistance policy, and voiced support for US diplomacy and military actions, including war. The Bush-Gorbachev summit in Helsinki in September 1990 further suggested that an opportunity may now exist to achieve a true commonality of superpower interests in other areas as well.

Similarly surprising has been the positive role played by the United Nations. In the first international crisis of the post-Cold War era, this formerly moribund organization demonstrated that it was no longer hostage to superpower politics or radical rhetoric. Faced with a clear-cut case of aggression, and not hamstrung by Soviet vetoes in the Security Council, it acted quickly and decisively to throw a mantle of legitimacy over US actions. Given the glowing success of the war, the UN can be expected to be a prominent diplomatic player in any future crisis.

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Finally, the always fragile Arab consensus on regional issues has been weakened severely, if not destroyed altogether. Although nearly every Arab state opposed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, many of them believed that the subsequent internationalization of what they saw as a purely intra-Arab dispute was worse. The prolonged bombing campaign against Iraq seemed to heighten such sentiments. Those who oppose future US policy in the region will be able to exacerbate this split in three ways: first, by inciting poorer Arab states to unite against the wealthy Gulf monarchies which, they will maintain, have sold out to the West in a frenzied effort to retain their undeserved oil wealth; second, by portraying Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm as American neo-colonial interventions at Israeli behest; and third, by linking the crisis to the Palestine issue. All three themes already resonate strongly in the Arab world. Even states that support us now may find themselves constrained in the future by their domestic popular opinion.

Not all the lessons are new; some already known have been reinforced. For example, despite the massive Reagan military buildup, Operation Desert Shield demonstrated graphically that the United States still has insufficient strategic air and sea lift to move forces quickly to the Gulf. Because of this, the bulk of the ground forces initially deployed—airborne and light infantry—were not properly equipped to confront a well-armed regional opponent. The first American units in Saudi Arabia were at great risk from Iraqi armor and mechanized forces for several weeks until the first heavy units arrived from the continental United States. Also relearned was the lesson of the 1973 and 1979 oil crises—that what goes on in the Gulf affects not only us but all members of the interdependent global economy. Even in the unlikely

event that we substantially reduce our oil imports, either through conservation or by embracing alternative energy strategies, our economic health and that of the rest of the world will likely remain tied directly to Gulf oil production well into the next century.

Things We Have Yet to Learn

Having learned this much, there is still much we need to know. The first major question mark is Israel. How can we insulate our commitment to Israel from the relationship we seek to build with moderate Arab states? Our past relationship was based in large measure on the perception that Israel would be a strategic asset in a global confrontation with the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era, this may no longer be a relevant consideration. As the Gulf War amply illustrated, Israel will continue to be a minor hindrance at best, a major impediment at worst, to closer relations with the Arab world. Of course, if Israel is provoked into taking unilateral military action against an Arab state, any regional framework we seek to build may quickly come apart.

A second major question is what role the Western allies and Japan will play in the postwar Gulf. In the war itself, with the exception of Britain and France, they played relatively minor military roles, though the financial contributions pledged by Japan and Germany are quite substantial. Should the allies prove unwilling to shoulder what the American people perceive to be a fair share of the burden or prove reluctant to become fully engaged in the region, a strong potential will exist for strains in other, perhaps more vital, aspects of the alliance.

Next, how will we finance our future strategy? The war diverted attention from what may well be our most important long-term security interest—the economic health of the nation. As President Bush has already observed in another context, we may have more will than wallet. We have already forgiven a \$7 billion military debt for Egypt. Although we have not yet done the same for Israel, we can expect continued pressure to do so. The final monetary cost of Desert Storm appears to be in the neighborhood of \$70 billion, possibly less.² If the wealthy Gulf states and our allies fail to pay a reasonable share of this staggering financial burden, the budget may become the chief obstacle to building a viable regional framework regardless of the risk to vital national interests.

Will we be constrained by membership in international organizations in the future? In the past, the UN and other international organizations have been little more than forums for public diplomacy. However, the UN has played a positive role in this crisis and we have stressed repeatedly the importance we attach to compliance with its resolutions. In so doing, we may have created a precedent that could tie our hands in the future. With the Gulf War now behind us, we will be under intense pressure in the UN from Arab members of the international coalition to resolve the issue of Palestine. There

might also be resolutions concerning other issues which, if we choose to ignore them, could rekindle Cold War passions, provoke alliance controversy, or create domestic discontent.

Finally, why did deterrence fail for Kuwait and succeed for Saudi Arabia? From a military standpoint, there was little reason for the Iraqi army to halt at the Saudi border. We must carefully examine both our pre-crisis diplomacy and deterrent responses. While it's clear that Saddam Hussein made an error of the first magnitude, we must find out why he was not deterred. The last thing we need is a witch hunt over "Who lost Kuwait?" However, past errors of either omission or commission must be analyzed to ensure that future aggressors do not again misperceive our regional commitment.

Long-Term Regional Interests and Threats

To be successful, a regional strategy must be based upon correctly identified interests and a realistic threat assessment. Our interests in the Gulf in the next decade generally will remain unchanged and can be summarized as threefold: Western access to a reliable source of oil; overall stability in the region and particularly within the moderate Arab states; and security for Israel. Historically, our greatest challenge has been to reconcile the contradiction between the first two objectives and the last while maintaining our credibility in the region. This will be no easier in the postwar environment where four major threats will continue to exist. Of these, two are direct military threats while two are longer-term political threats.

Iraq. The exact nature of the future Iraqi threat is only speculative. Will Saddam Hussein continue to survive? Will he be able to eventually reconstitute his military capability? Will he regain a nuclear weapons capability? We have certainly diminished his position in the Arab world and swept away much of his potential to attack the legitimacy of the Gulf states, support terrorism, threaten Israel, or intimidate OPEC. Yet Saddam remains on the Middle East stage. And even his fall from rule would not necessarily clarify Iraq's future role. An irredentist successor state might well seek revenge and redressment of perceived wrongs, and, as a minimum, retain the ability to commit terrorist acts.

Iran. Though weakened militarily and economically by eight years of war, Iran may pose the greater long-term threat. It has gained much from the Gulf War. Having received unexpectedly from Saddam a favorable war settlement, and benefiting economically from the upward fluctuation in oil prices, Iran may recover much faster than anticipated and seek to regain a dominant position in the Gulf. Iran also may have the capability to develop a nuclear and chemical arsenal within a decade.

The Palestinian Problem and Israel. This issue will dominate the postwar Gulf political agenda. Our habitual tendency has been to put Palestinian

and Gulf problems into separate compartments and act as if they are not related. Arabs make no such distinction. Most fail to see the difference between Iraqi aggression in Kuwait, which we condemned and confronted, and what they perceive as Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people, which we continue to excuse or ignore. A cardinal tenet of US policy in the prelude to Desert Storm was to deny any such linkage. Now, however, the pressure from other parties in the international coalition to deal with it more forthrightly will be enormous. Successful long-term regional political and military cooperation with the Gulf Arab states may well be held hostage to positive movement on this issue.

Instability in the Arab Monarchies. We cannot yet gauge the long-term political and social impact on the Arab world of the massive Desert Shield deployment and the use of US military force against Iraq. Resentment in certain sectors of the population of these states can be expected to persist and be susceptible to Iraqi or Iranian manipulation, particularly if our postwar military presence is intrusive or perceived as inordinately large for the threat. While the Gulf monarchies are at risk in the longer term, Jordan, though not a coalition member, is especially vulnerable now. Hitherto a staunchly moderate regime, King Hussein's actions have already resulted in reduced remittances from his expatriate workers in the Gulf and a cut-off of economic aid from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. His survival may depend on a much closer accommodation with the political aspirations of Jordan's Palestinian majority, which appears to remain even now pro-Saddam, and on distancing himself from US objectives in the region. In formulating policy for dealing with King Hussein, we should remember that fallen moderate Arab regimes tend to be replaced by more radical successors hostile to Western policies.

Postwar Political Framework

Our postwar regional strategy must therefore be designed to offset the political vulnerabilities of the Gulf states while deterring military threats to the region. We must forestall further development of weapons of mass destruction in the region, fully engage our allies in regional security matters, and resolve those issues which have in the past greatly complicated relations with Arab states. These goals can be accomplished first by continuing an embargo on arms, spares, and high-technology exports as well as trade and credit restrictions pending Iraqi acceptance of international controls on nuclear and chemical technology. This measure eventually could be expanded to include other states which do not adhere to adequate international inspection and controls. Next, we should encourage NATO to address the need to undertake out-of-area missions when necessary to protect vital alliance interests such as access to Gulf oil. Even if this is not possible, allies such as Germany and Japan can do more within their constitutional limits—for example, building and maintaining dedicated sealift, contributing to regional

development initiatives, or providing in-transit support for US forces in future contingencies. The Gulf monarchies should be encouraged to set up a regional "Marshall Plan" for poorer Arab states.

Above all, we must make a genuine, concerted effort to resolve Palestinian and West Bank issues. Failure to do so may, in the long term, destroy the political foundation necessary to build a stable regional framework. If we believe that our interests in the Gulf are truly vital, we must summon the political will to persuade Israel to participate in a meaningful dialogue with representatives of the Palestinian people. We must likewise be sensitive to Israel's concern for security and be prepared to meet its anticipated defense requests. While expensive in the short term, it will be cheaper than another war. At best, Israel will continue to be the unknown variable in our regional calculus, and failure either to consult closely with its leaders or to address its perceived security needs may lead to unilateral action destructive of our policy objectives.

The First Pillar: US Presence

Undoubtedly the most controversial element of our postwar regional strategy will be the scope and nature of US military presence in the region. Historically the Gulf has been an "economy of force" region for the United States. First Britain, then the Shah, and finally the Saudis have borne the major military burden to safeguard our (and their) interests. Clearly this policy has failed, and an expanded US military presence—the first pillar of our postwar strategy—is the price we must pay. The Gulf monarchies traditionally have desired only a minimal US presence, and in the past we have been limited to a small naval presence in Bahrain, a relatively large training establishment in Saudi Arabia, periodic ship visits and aircraft deployments, shared surveillance and intelligence assets, and consultations during the periodic crises of the Iran-Iraq war. Our future presence will be dictated by the type and magnitude of the threat which the Gulf monarchies perceive. At the very minimum we should be able to make modest increases over past levels. With the Iraqi military devastated, our military task will be simplified greatly. Initiatives we should pursue are these:

- A CENTCOM Forward Headquarters in the Gulf, possibly within the present composition of our naval task force in Bahrain.
- In conjunction with our allies, a greatly enhanced security assistance effort aimed at improving the military capability, training, and interoperability of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Coupled with this could be a robust effort to expand maintenance facilities, operating bases, and warehouses for spare parts to facilitate future contingency deployments. Israel will of course view such steps as a security threat, and we must be prepared to increase its military capability proportionally.

- Periodic short-term deployments of US and other allied or Arab forces within the Gulf Cooperation Council Peninsula Shield or CENTCOM Bright Star framework to utilize the facilities and equipment referred to above.

If Iraq seeks to reconstitute an offensive military capability, regional states can be expected to be more accommodating to an increased US presence. We should then be prepared to do the above plus:

- Stock afloat in maritime pre-positioning ships sufficient equipment for at least two armor or mechanized brigades. One could be stationed in the Indian Ocean and the other in the Mediterranean to permit rapid reinforcement in the Gulf with both if necessary or reinforcement of Israel with one.

- Pre-position two heavy division sets of equipment in Italy or Turkey. Should this not be possible because of CFE considerations, one set could be pre-positioned either in locations controlled by our allies—Djibouti or Akrotiri in Cyprus for example—and the other on the Arabian peninsula in a facility financed and maintained by the Saudis. The final possibility would be to pre-position them at East Coast ports in the United States, ready for immediate sea-loading.

- Seek Saudi approval and funding to construct a regional training center for Arab or GCC forces to use in conjunction with Peninsula Shield exercises.

- Build motorized ground forces that have more anti-armor capability than light forces, and more and heavier artillery, but which are more rapidly deployable than heavy forces. As an absolute minimum, we must buy more strategic air and sea lift.

- Maintain a surface action group in the Gulf and a carrier group in the North Arabian Sea at all times, even at the risk of reductions elsewhere.

A number of other initiatives may be desirable from a military point of view, but may threaten the Gulf monarchies in the long term and therefore should *not* be considered. These include:

- Attempting to build a formal treaty organization along the lines of NATO or an invigorated CENTO. This action would play directly to Iraq's accusation that the Gulf monarchies are illegitimate governments existing only at the sufferance of Western masters. We have already demonstrated forcefully our commitment to the Gulf states. An Arab collective security arrangement without a formal US role is far more palatable to regional public opinion.

- Forward-basing large air or ground forces on the peninsula. It is difficult to conceive of any Gulf state, with the possible exception of Kuwait, wishing to host a long-term US military presence in the future. And even if Kuwait would invite us, a US ground presence should be as small as possible consistent with the threat so as to avoid becoming the focus of regional animosity.

- Pre-positioning a massive amount of equipment on the peninsula. While useful in a Gulf contingency, it would be unavailable for an Israeli or non-Gulf contingency.

The Second Pillar: A New Regional Partnership

Since the foregoing will result in a US military presence in the region that remains more over-the-horizon than forward-based, the second element of our strategy should be a more credible regional military counterweight to Iran and Iraq. It should aim to deter future aggression and, should deterrence fail, be capable of defending long enough to allow US military force to be brought to bear. In the past, three states have comprised the Gulf balance: Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Even though Iraq emerges tremendously weakened from the Gulf War, Saudi Arabia alone, with its vast territory to defend and small population, cannot cope with the worst-case threat, a combination of Iraq and Iran. Neither can the Gulf Cooperation Council states together match them; their population is too small, and their military forces are too weak, nonstandard, and likely to remain so for years.

The second pillar of our postwar strategy, therefore, should be a strategic partnership between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This would be a symbiotic relationship with Saudi Arabia providing money, basing, and armaments, while Egypt provides the bulk of Arab military forces defending the peninsula. The GCC and other Islamic states could also participate in this defense, but Egypt with its large population and modern armed forces would play the paramount role. Since Egypt is a noncontiguous Arab state, such an arrangement would be preferable from the Saudi point of view to an increased US military presence in the Kingdom.

Why not Syria instead? Syria has played a positive role so far, both diplomatically and by its decision to commit troops to the multinational ground force in Saudi Arabia. We should be very cautious, however, about rushing headlong into a closer relationship with Syria. In many ways Hafez Assad is a mirror image of Saddam Hussein: a harbinger of terrorists, a ruthless dictator who eschews democratic principles, and a human rights abuser. We should refrain from repeating the mistake we originally made with Iraq, adopting the cynical and expedient policy—so common to the region—of believing that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The benefits of the concept outlined above are many. It would permit a nearly complete withdrawal of US military forces from the Arabian peninsula and therefore would be far less costly in dollars, domestic public opinion, and regional consequences. The Gulf states could offset hostile propaganda by portraying the new regional balance of power as an Arab solution to an Arab problem. It would preserve US freedom of action and military flexibility in a contingency involving Israel; it would contribute to solving Egypt's

massive economic problems; and, perhaps most important, its reliance on regional Arab states would be less destabilizing to the Gulf monarchies.

Nevertheless, the difficulties involved in building such a relationship should not be understated. While a Saudi-Egyptian partnership may make sense to us, making it a reality could be difficult. Memories are long in the Middle East, and the Saudis are not likely to forget that they have been invaded only twice previously in their history—both times by Egypt. Further, Egypt may be a more slender reed than it now appears. While the war may have appeared to Mubarak to be an opportunity to fulfill Egypt's destiny to lead the Arab world, he may be running grave risks domestically. Like Sadat, he may be too far in front of public opinion. Many issues raised by Saddam—Palestinian justice, inequitable sharing of Arab wealth, Western presence on Arab soil, and Arab solutions to Arab problems—appeal strongly to many segments of Egyptian society. Should the economy fail to improve soon, he may suffer Sadat's fate.

To Conclude

None of these objectives will be gained easily. Maintaining peace and stability in the Gulf will be extremely problematic, but we can no longer afford the risk of relying on regional surrogates to protect vital US interests. At the same time, we must be sensitive to the realities of regional politics. We cannot impose either a military presence or a security framework; whatever structure we seek to build must have strong regional support. In the short term and from a strictly military standpoint, it may be more desirable to deter aggression in the Gulf ourselves than to depend on regional allies; however, to do so risks a long-term catastrophe if our presence serves only as a catalyst to topple the feudal monarchies which now own and protect the oil.

We do not necessarily need to aim for symmetry as we construct our pillars. We must be both patient and flexible. Ideally, a strong regional counterweight with only a relatively slight increase in US military presence would best serve our interests. However, should the regional pillar prove to be weak, we must then build a larger US deterrent capability in spite of the risks outlined above. In the post-Cold War era, the Gulf will be the most vulnerable, and therefore the most dangerous, point on the globe. Our future strategy must reflect this basic fact.

NOTE

1. See Serge Schmemmann, "Gorbachev Warns Against Exceeding U.N. Mandate," *The New York Times*, 10 February 1991, pp. 1, 19; and David Remnick, "Hard-liners Criticize Gorbachev on Gulf," *The Washington Post*, 13 February 1991, pp. A21, A25.

2. "Gulf War Price Tag Moderate," *The Baltimore Sun*, 10 March 1991, p. E1.