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Beyond Containment: Defending U.S. Interests in the Persian Gulf

About this report

This report summarizes the key judgments and recommendations of a forthcoming NDU Press book entitled *The United States and the Persian Gulf: Redesigning U.S. Forces for the Post-Containment Era*. The report was drafted by Richard D. Sokolsky, distinguished research fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at NDU. Other contributors include Richard L. Kugler, distinguished research fellow, INSS; Kenneth Pollack, Director of Research, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution; Joseph McMillan, distinguished research fellow, INSS; Eugene B. Rumer, senior research fellow, INSS; and Judith S. Yaphe, senior research fellow, INSS. Mr. Sokolsky can be contacted at (202) 685-2249 or sokolskyr@ndu.edu.

Key Points

With or without regime change in Iraq, the U.S. military posture toward the Persian Gulf will require significant adjustments over the next decade. The future of Iraq—and the outcome of U.S. efforts to effect regime change and Baghdad's compliance with United Nations Security Council resolutions—will be the key driver of the size and character of these changes. Regardless of how regime change occurs in Iraq—whether it happens quickly and decisively or is protracted and messy—and whatever type of post-Saddam regime finally emerges, the United States will need to diversify its dependence on regional basing and forward

presence, as well as reduce the visibility and predictability of its forward-deployed forces.

In the long term, eliminating Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbors and destabilize the region is the sine qua non for success in guaranteeing the security of the Gulf while reducing the political costs that the U.S. military presence imposes on other American interests and Gulf partners. Unless and until a stable, moderate, and nonexpansionist regime assumes power in Baghdad, significant American forces will be strategically “fixed” in the Gulf area, performing the containment mission. The United States will need to redesign its forward presence in the region through transformed capabilities and operational concepts that provide improved combat capabilities while reducing dependence on forward-deployed forces in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region.

However, even successful regime change in Iraq does not mean that the United States can safely end its military engagement in the Persian Gulf, given its strategic location, role in global energy markets, and vulnerability to other potential threats. In short, removing Saddam is no panacea. There is no escaping the U.S. role as a guarantor of Gulf stability. Thus, the United States needs a viable concept for its future forward presence that can be sustained over the long haul. There are three broad options: long-term access to the lower Gulf with reduced ground and air presence; an over-the-horizon presence, as existed pre-1990 with diversification of bed-down locations; and a combination of reliance on other regional partners and U.S. capabilities.

Changes Ahead

Significant changes lie ahead for U.S. security strategy in the Persian Gulf after almost a decade of stasis. In the decade between the Gulf War and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the strategy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran was a key driver of U.S. military planning and force posture for the region. The overriding American concern was preserving access to Gulf oil at reasonable prices and keeping the region secure from threat or invasion. The U.S. strategy benefited from the facts that both Iraq and Iran possessed a limited ability to project power and influence beyond their borders; the Gulf States acquiesced in a significant U.S. military presence on their soil despite the domestic costs; and the United States was reasonably successful, at least until the second Palestinian *intifada* in September 2000, in insulating U.S. relationships with key Gulf States from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At the end of the Clinton administration, it seemed safe to assume that the regional security environment would continue to evolve more or less on its present trajectory, and the challenge confronting the United States was how to manage its forward presence for the long haul under increasingly stressful conditions. This premise is no longer valid. Most importantly, the strategy of dual containment, which is just barely alive, will expire in one way or another—in all likelihood because the United States decides to end Saddam's rule. U.S. success in engineering a regime

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change in Baghdad will require a substantial increase in U.S. forward-deployed forces, probably followed by a multinational occupation of Iraq that is likely to include a significant U.S. military component.

Even if regime change does not occur in Iraq, other factors are likely to put pressure on the United States to alter the shape of its military posture toward the region. The enduring long-term campaign against global terrorism will still demand a closer look at U.S. policies toward the Persian Gulf that undermine this effort, including the U.S. military presence. Political and social trends in Saudi Arabia will make the ruling family even more wary of U.S. forces on their soil. Iran and Iraq are likely to improve their conventional capabilities and, more importantly, to deploy chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons and longer-range ballistic missiles to threaten U.S. access and force projection capabilities. In addition, the demands of the war on terrorism, and U.S. defense strategy more broadly, could make it increasingly difficult to sustain current military operations in the region.

With or without a regime change in Iraq, the U.S. military posture toward the region will become increasingly brittle unless it adapts in creative ways to these looming changes. If the Gulf security environment stays on its present course—continued deterioration and eventual collapse of dual containment and no American effort to reorder the geopolitical landscape—the central dilemma facing U.S. policymakers will be reconciling the military requirements of a containment strategy with the political imperatives of reducing the American military profile in the Gulf. By the same token, the elimination of Iraq as a strategic threat or the installation of a new but equally antagonistic regime would confront the United States with a number of complex and novel policy choices: the role of Saudi Arabia in U.S. regional security strategy, the degree to which a friendly and pro-American Iraq could become the focus of U.S. regional defense strategy, and the type of military presence the United States should maintain in the region if the removal of the Saddam regime ushers in a period of prolonged instability and disorder inside Iraq and beyond.

Regional Dynamics

In thinking about alternative U.S. force postures in the region under a variety of circumstances, a key question is how changing

security priorities and threat perceptions will affect Gulf State attitudes toward U.S. presence. If the geopolitical status quo continues, the key factors influencing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) defense and security policies are likely to diverge from those of the United States in several important ways.

From the GCC perspective, neither Iraq nor Iran is seen as a major or imminent danger to regional security. Iraq has been effectively weakened and contained, Iran has been tamed, and concerns about Iraqi or Iranian weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation take a back seat to addressing domestic difficulties.

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U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has eroded U.S. influence in the Gulf and increased the sense of vulnerability of Gulf Arab regimes. Furthermore, public opinion in the GCC states is wary of the U.S.-led war on terrorism, viewing it mainly as an anti-Islamic campaign. In this climate, many Gulf State rulers see their ties to the United States as a growing political liability.

Support for sanctions against and isolation of Iraq has evaporated. Saddam has gained the backing of most Arab and Muslim states for an end to sanctions and opposition to a unilateral U.S. military attack. He has also been able to mend fences with Saudi Arabia and paper over tensions with Kuwait. United Nations (UN) agreement on reshaping sanctions to ease their impact on the Iraqi population will not restore support for sanctions among GCC governments or populations.

The preference of GCC governments is to restore a balance of power similar to the one that existed prior to Operation *Desert Storm*—a balance maintained by de facto partnership with a regional power and backed by a less visible U.S. military presence. The realization of this vision will require a delicate balancing act between maintaining a necessary U.S.

military presence, gradually improving relations with Iraq and Iran, and moderating domestic discontent over American policies. Regardless of how the Gulf States cope with this dilemma, they will remain at odds with the United States over their willingness to reach an accommodation with a weakened Saddam and a cautious, internally divided Iran, even as both countries acquire WMD and long-range ballistic missiles. This fault line is unlikely to prompt the Gulf States to seek a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces or to leave the U.S. security umbrella. However, when coupled with popular outrage at U.S. support for Israel, it will lead GCC governments to distance themselves further from U.S. policies and reduce their cooperation with U.S. military forces.

Deteriorating Status Quo

The future survival of Saddam Husayn's Iraq will be the most critical variable in determining the evolution of the U.S. military presence in the region. As long as Iraq constitutes a threat to U.S. interests in the Gulf, the United States has little choice but to maintain the capability to deter or defeat that threat with a combination of in-theater and rapidly deployable forces. The decision of previous administrations to deal with Iraqi defiance of UN Security Council resolutions through a policy of containment has until now driven the United States to maintain the status quo in its force presence rather than adopt a more sustainable concept of Gulf security at reduced levels of presence, as was envisioned immediately after *Desert Storm*. Under present conditions, therefore, the U.S. military footprint in the Gulf is determined by the military concept of operations for the region's defense against Iraq.

A decision not to use U.S. military force to evict Saddam in favor of continuing long-term containment must confront three realities: first, sanctions are already almost impossible to enforce; second, Iraq will eventually possess and deploy WMD and longer-range ballistic missiles; and third, the U.S. military presence in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, is a source of growing resentment and a mounting domestic liability for the ruling families of host countries. Hence, the political and military risks to the U.S. force posture in the region are likely to grow, and efforts to maintain the status quo will only exacerbate these dangers. Containing a hostile Iraq under these circumstances over the long term would require a

much larger and open-ended U.S. military presence than we currently maintain—one that might be more than the local traffic will bear in most of the GCC states.

Redesigning Forces

Consequently, if the United States decides to maintain a strategy of containment, it will need to think creatively about how to sustain it over the long haul. The challenge is to create a new posture for peacetime presence and wartime reinforcement that supports the execution of U.S. defense strategy without creating an unsustainable footprint in the region or draining the overall U.S. force posture of too many forces and resources. This tension can be effectively managed by realigning U.S. forces in the Gulf States, taking advantage of new basing concepts, enhancing the combat capabilities of forward-deployed forces, diversifying patterns of deployment, giving higher priority to expanded prepositioning, and investing new energy into expanding multilateral security cooperation. Equally important, the successful creation of a spearhead force and other improvements in U.S. rapid force projection capability would help to alleviate pressures to continuously maintain larger combat forces in the Gulf as well as to reduce dependence on large, inflexible reinforcement plans if the Iraqi and Iranian military threats continue to grow.¹

Realigning Forces. While the U.S. forward presence cannot and should not be eliminated or even significantly reduced as long as a hostile Iraqi regime remains in place, it can and should be made less visible, and less seemingly permanent, than it is today. In the short term, to minimize political risks, changes in the size and configuration of U.S. forward-deployed forces will need to be carried out incrementally, since technological advances in U.S. force projection capabilities will not be in hand for some time. In the longer run, as the U.S. military transforms and political constraints on large stationed forces grow in intensity, it should be possible to accelerate the pace of change because the United States will be able to bring overwhelming force to bear on the battlefield without having to rely on a substantial permanent presence in the theater. At the same time, bringing U.S. military posture in the Gulf in line with the overall direction of transformation will entail adjustments in U.S. relations with the Gulf States that need to be carefully thought through.

The focal point of force realignment is inevitably Saudi Arabia, given its central role in U.S. regional strategy, its size and importance, and the considerable discontent in both the United States and Saudi Arabia over how the U.S. military presence there is handled. A key question with Saudi Arabia is, how much reduction is enough? The United States operates out of only one major base in the Kingdom, which constrains realignment options. Are less tangible ways of underscoring our commitment to Saudi security available that would not concurrently compromise deterrence and U.S. combat capabilities?

Herein lies a central political paradox: the need to reduce the U.S. footprint in Saudi Arabia without abandoning the country. This

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longstanding conundrum has no simple solution. Regardless of the outcome of the Iraq scenario, the United States will need to maintain forces in the region, and Saudi Arabia will continue to play an important role in its forward-deployed posture. Withdrawing from Saudi Arabia would send the inaccurate political signal to regional players and domestic opponents of the Saudi regime that the United States was washing its hands of the Kingdom. At the same time, however, the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia is having deleterious consequences for regime stability. In time, this circle can be squared by projected improvements in U.S. force projection capabilities and new operational concepts.

Undoubtedly, more can be done in other GCC countries, although political and physical limits exist on how much of the military burdens they can pick up from Saudi Arabia. In the immediate future, the United States is wisely pursuing Qatar as the most attractive alternative to Saudi Arabia for additional prepositioning and regular deployments of U.S. strike aircraft. Over the longer term, possibilities could be pursued with Oman. None of

these locations, either singly or in combination, could ever replace Saudi Arabia entirely, and there are grounds for questioning whether shifting more of the political and military burdens of supporting U.S. military strategy to the smaller Gulf States is sustainable in the long haul. Nonetheless, deemphasizing the military component of the U.S.-Saudi relationship could have a positive effect on political development in the Kingdom. Moreover, while the United States should diversify the countries upon which it depends and create redundant capabilities in multiple locations, it should do so out of political and military prudence, not as a step toward jettisoning the relationship with Saudi Arabia. That relationship needs to be repaired, not trashed.

New Basing Concepts. The Persian Gulf region is a good place to explore the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of mobile offshore basing. In the near term, a particularly useful step would be to create command and control capabilities afloat to improve combat redundancy and eliminate the ability of any regional state to veto U.S. operations by blocking access to command facilities. Rotating forces in and out of locations outside the Gulf, such as the Red Sea littoral and South Asia, could be worthwhile, particularly if the U.S. presence was periodic rather than continuous at any location. Militarily, this concept will become increasingly practicable as force transformation creates capabilities to deliver decisive force from longer range. In the more distant future, a mobile offshore base might be large enough to accommodate aircraft that currently fly out of Saudi locations.

Enhanced Combat Capabilities. Reducing the number and visibility of forward-deployed forces while maintaining necessary military capabilities will require qualitative improvements of forward-deployed capabilities. There are several priorities for force enhancements. First, defense against missile attacks should be bolstered; additional Patriot advanced capability units and high-tech aircraft for rapid strikes against WMD targets should be stationed in the region; forces deployed in the Gulf should have first claim on next-generation ballistic missile defense systems; and the Gulf should be used as a test-bed for early deployment of emergency missile defense capabilities and for maintaining a continuous presence of these assets in the region. Second, steps should be taken to lessen the vulnerability of local bases and infrastructure to enemy

missile strikes and related antiaccess/area denial threats. In addition to improved missile defenses, ports, airfields, and command posts should be hardened and diversified, and consequence management capabilities should be stationed in the region. Finally, efforts should be accelerated to create the spearhead force for the Gulf that will be capable of rapid deployment and employment without the benefit of prepositioned combat forces.

Deployment Patterns. The continuous presence of U.S. land-based forces at five or six major fixed locations has undesirable political and operational consequences. The United States should reduce the visibility and predictability of such fixed deployments by adopting a rotational peacetime posture that relies on regular movements of Army, Air Force, and Navy units in and out of a wider variety of locations for operations and training and exercises with local forces. Critical infrastructure would be replicated at multiple locations, enabling forces to be positioned in a number of possible configurations depending on the contingency and political circumstances. The Air Force should regularly deploy strategic bombers to the region for joint and combined exercises; afloat, the Navy and Marine Corps should fully fund programs that would permit early deployment to the Gulf of expeditionary strike groups/forces that would improve their ability to strike land targets from augmented Marine amphibious groups and carrier groups.

Prepositioning. Prepositioning of heavy and bulky equipment remains the key to rapid reinforcement of the Gulf region and therefore to the eventual reduction in the number of regularly deployed forces. While substantial progress has been made in this area, there is room for improving the flow rates for arriving U.S. forces. Additional base sets should be located at various airfields in the region as well as additional Army brigade sets of equipment; the Navy and Marine Corps should be directed to invest more heavily in equipment that would be prepositioned afloat in the region. For example, the Navy and Marine Corps should be encouraged to invest more heavily in research, development, testing, and evaluation of the maritime prepositioning force and the sea-based logistics concept, which together would improve deployment times, reduce the U.S. footprint ashore, and improve the ability of U.S. forces to operate in an antiaccess environment. Because of both political and operational factors, an expanded

prepositioning program would be most successful if Saudi Arabia granted approval to place critical war reserve stocks in the Kingdom. Although the Saudis have rejected these proposals in the past, with some U.S. prodding they could come to see the political and military advantages of trading forces-in-place for prepositioned material.

Regional Security Cooperation. Overcoming obstacles to improving regional security cooperation will be difficult, but it is one of the most practical steps the United States could take to reduce its continuing profile in the Gulf. It is unrealistic to expect the Gulf States to defend the region against major aggression without U.S. military intervention. But this is

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the wrong standard to apply; it is not unreasonable to expect them to provide forces to delay a major attack and inflict costs on an aggressor and to be capable of handling minor regional contingencies (for example, raids on offshore oil installations) without relying on U.S. forces. In other words, the mountain the Gulf States have to climb to improve their military effectiveness is not as high as commonly portrayed, partly because they do not need to be held to Western standards and partly because the United States has not made a serious and sustained effort in this area, its sales of sophisticated military equipment notwithstanding. Indeed, when the United States has made such a commitment, as in the case of Kuwait, there have been measurable results. There are a number of steps that could be taken to redress shortfalls in GCC capabilities. For instance, the United States could:

- discourage the Gulf States from focusing their attention on unrealistic and ineffective standing multilateral forces like Peninsula Shield at the expense of developing force specialization and niche capabilities.
- recognize formally the GCC as an international organization, which would permit the United States to provide enhanced training and supplies.
- adjust the U.S. Central Command exercise program to encourage intra-GCC cooperation;

instead of trying to develop U.S. exercises with the GCC as a group, priority should be given to developing trilateral and quadrilateral exercises with forces from the United States.

- encourage the GCC to adopt selected NATO standardization agreements to promote interoperability. The GCC states lack the capability to replicate the NATO standardization process, but this is not a standard to which they need be held.

- explore ways of developing a combined GCC professional military education system to raise the standard of command and staff work, promote common doctrine, and build personal links among officers.

Coalition Forces. The United States should also try to improve extraregional contributions to Gulf security. The GCC states are unlikely to accept a major peacetime role for non-Gulf Arab countries in regime security, which would put their survival at the mercy of the vagaries of inter-Arab politics. Nonetheless, there would be substantial political, if not military, benefits if larger or more capable forces from Islamic countries (for example, Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan, and Morocco) could play a more meaningful part in the Gulf security equation in an emergency. As in 1990–1991, the presence of Islamic forces in an international coalition would strengthen the perceived political legitimacy of bringing outside forces into the region in a crisis. The United States could facilitate improved extraregional contributions to defense of the Gulf without resorting to the formal arrangements that have proven ineffective in the past. For example, the United States could:

- restructure the U.S.-Egyptian security assistance program to emphasize the capability to deploy a significant Egyptian force using U.S. (or allied) lift in a regional crisis
- exercise Egyptian, Jordanian, and other capabilities to deploy small heavy forces to hotspots, including refocusing the biennial *Bright Star* exercise with Egypt
- create a Gulf security fund within the U.S. foreign military financing program to underwrite the development of expeditionary capabilities of regional powers so that, in extremis, they could contribute more effectively to the defense of the Gulf.

When Saddam Goes

Looking beyond a change of the Iraqi regime, the military and political calculus about the continuing U.S. presence that might be required in the longer run will depend on how that change takes place—with or without a U.S. military intervention or occupation of

Iraq—as well as the damage inflicted by the change itself, and what kind of government succeeds Saddam Husayn.

If regime change occurs without direct U.S. military involvement, the U.S. presence required in the region will depend to some extent on what kind of government replaces Saddam. Given the weakness and disorganization of the ostensibly democratic Iraqi opposition, the most likely successor would be another strongman emerging from the existing political milieu and sharing its fundamentally hostile orientation. Somewhat less likely, but also plausible, would be a weak government focused primarily on resolving internal economic and political problems.

Depending on which of these comes to pass, the new regime may recognize the futility of continuing defiance of the international community and redirect resources from offensive programs, including WMD, effectively limiting its capabilities and allowing the United States to restructure its deterrent capability in the region. The problem is that judging what kind of regime we are dealing with is apt to be difficult, since even a hostile leader may find it tactically useful to play along with the international community by accepting WMD inspections, renouncing territorial claims, and taking whatever other steps are necessary to secure the end of sanctions and buy time to consolidate power. This uncertainty will be all the more serious should civil strife follow the collapse of the Ba'athist machinery of repression. In the face of such uncertainty, the United States will want to proceed cautiously before substantially reducing its quick-response capabilities. Moreover, there will be a high risk that the United States will be called on by Iraq's worried neighbors to play a military role in the post-Saddam transition—at best, to provide humanitarian assistance; at worst, to intervene to prevent the collapse of the Iraqi state if order begins to deteriorate.

If regime change comes about as a result of U.S. intervention, we will face a somewhat different set of demands. In the near term, a substantial U.S. military presence is very likely to be required in Iraq, either as an occupation force or to assist the new regime in getting control of and rebuilding the country. On the positive side, such a presence will allow the United States to satisfy itself that Iraqi weapons programs are totally and completely dismantled and to shape the new government and the new Iraqi army to the greatest possible degree.

Furthermore, as long as U.S. forces are present in Iraq, the necessity of defending neighboring states against Iraq will cease to exist. On the negative side, the challenge of pacifying and policing the country should not be underestimated, nor should that of building rule of law and a functioning civil society where neither has existed for many years.

Finally, neither of these alternatives—an internally driven succession or one achieved through U.S. intervention—leads easily to a stable, sustainable, legitimate outcome. A successor regime that comes to power by force and controls the country through a more or

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less effective continuation of the historic pattern of authoritarian repression will share not only the present regime's methods and attitudes but also its lack of legitimacy. Conversely, a regime installed by U.S. military force could be viewed as a tool of neoimperialism and an American puppet regime. Groups that supported the U.S. intervention would be looking for a payoff afterward that in some cases would be contrary to the interests that the United States was trying to protect, such as the territorial integrity of Iraq. The steps that could be taken to mitigate those perceptions and disappointments, such as full enfranchisement of the entire population (that is, elections that resulted in political dominance by the 65 percent Shi'a majority in a democratic state and formal autonomy for the Kurds), would pose problems of their own.

The precise permutations are thus practically unlimited. Nevertheless, it is reasonable, in thinking through U.S. responses to these differing outcomes, to identify three alternative models:

■ The European or East Asian model, under which the United States is viewed as the only credible and acceptable stabilizing force for a critical region. This assumes that either Iraq or Iran, if not both, would continue to present a threat to U.S. interests even under less objectionable regimes and that the GCC states would be unable or unwilling to develop their own capabilities to meet those threats.

Under this alternative, the United States would seek long-term access to bases in the lower Gulf for a robust but reduced ground and air presence—probably about a composite air wing and a heavy battalion task force—that would continue in the foreseeable future. In addition, this alternative would envision the presence in the Gulf of a carrier task force most if not all the time.

■ An over-the-horizon presence, similar to the normal pre-1990 arrangement but with greater diversification of bed-down locations. The United States would attempt, through diplomacy and other means, to ensure that Iraq and Iran balance each other in such a way that neither of them is strong enough to challenge vital U.S. interests. Meanwhile, the United States would attempt to strengthen friendly forces and ensure through a combination of prepositioning, exercises, transformed military capabilities and operational concepts, and assets to counter the antiaccess/area denial capabilities of Iraq and Iran, that U.S. and coalition forces could return rapidly in a crisis.

■ A combination of reliance on local and U.S. capabilities, based on the assumption that the regional situation would not tolerate a continuing U.S. military presence at anything resembling current levels. Enhancements to local forces would be combined with active encouragement of regional cooperation, continued improvements in U.S. rapid deployment capabilities, and a continuing force presence well below that currently in place, maintained through a series of deployments shifting among various locations.

In sum, while more aggressive efforts to unseat Saddam would not be cost-free, neither would be the alternatives. Either a continuation of the policy of active containment or a policy of retrenched defense and deterrence would require the maintenance of a significant military presence in the Gulf, with all its attendant political and security risks for both the Gulf Arab countries and the United States. Moreover, the longer the United States needs military access to the Gulf States to deal with a continuing Iraqi threat, the longer it will be identified with resistance by some Gulf states to political evolution.

Whither Iran?

The second key variable that will determine U.S. success in bringing peace and stability to the Persian Gulf over the coming decade is how Iran's political evolution plays out and is reflected in Iranian foreign policy. Iran's political factions are gridlocked, and

neither side is likely to emerge the victor any time soon. U.S. criticisms of Iran's lack of cooperation in the war on terrorism have strengthened internal elements opposed to dialogue with the United States and driven both factions into an unwanted embrace at U.S. expense. Nonetheless, it is not inconceivable that the United States and Iran might someday normalize relations. Realistically, however, change in Iran will take years to play out and is unlikely to yield a regime that is fully responsive to U.S. interests. Indeed, any Iranian government will see itself as the dominant power in the Gulf—a role that any U.S. administration will be loath to accept. Thus, even under optimal conditions, there inevitably will be tension between Washington and Tehran over the structure of regional security—and conditions are likely to be far from optimal, as Iran continues its quest to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In short, while it is likely that Iran's political evolution will eventually allow the United States to adjust its commitments and deployments in the Gulf, it is unlikely that it will be able to shed them altogether, let alone soon.

Nonetheless, Iran should not be seen as the major determinant of U.S. military presence in the Gulf region—especially land-based presence—under foreseeable circumstances. It is true that Iran has upgraded its military capabilities in the past several years, but primarily in the areas of naval forces, air defense, and ballistic missiles. Iran's amphibious warfare capability is extremely limited, and it has no plausible way of bringing significant land force to bear against the GCC states. Iran could more seriously challenge U.S. interests through heightened support for terrorism and renewed support for subversion, as well as through the threat or use of WMD or conventional missiles, airstrikes against critical petroleum infrastructure, closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and interdiction of seaborne movement of naval forces or commerce. The Gulf Arab states are quite capable, however, of dealing with the possibility of airstrikes, just as the U.S. Navy can handle any attempts to close the sealanes. Otherwise, none of the other threats would require the presence of significant U.S. land-based forces, with the possible exception of missile defense units. They certainly would not require a presence beyond that already required to deal with Iraq.

Domestic Change

The third critical variable in determining U.S. success in bringing peace and stability to the Persian Gulf and in uprooting terrorism from the region is how effectively regional governments respond to pressures for domestic change. Regardless of the ultimate fate of the Saddam Husayn regime or the strategic character and intentions of a successor regime, fighting terrorism needs to become a central element in the redefinition of U.S. security strategy in the Gulf with one important caveat: the relationship between political reform and terrorism—or “reform to forestall revolution”—is extremely complicated and needs to be approached with great caution.

September 11 graphically illustrated that any strategy aimed at defeating terrorism must focus heavily on the region, where so many of

the consequences of greater pluralism in most Gulf countries would be governments that are much less friendly to the United States than the current regimes

the terrorists originated and so many ideas and attitudes that motivate terrorist behavior have sunk deep roots. Devising a coherent antiterrorist strategy poses a serious conceptual challenge. In recent decades, the American people have come to expect national strategy to be driven by a conjunction of vital interests and core values. In the Persian Gulf, however, U.S. security relations with regional states are not built on shared values, of which there are few, but on shared interests, of which there are many. Managing the divergence between interests and values will only grow more difficult in the coming decade.

Suppressing terrorism on a long-term basis will require addressing the conditions that breed it, principally political repression, failed economic liberalization and reform, and lack of political reform, including popular participation in governance. Hence, achieving political stability and ending terrorism in the Gulf will depend to some extent on political, economic, and social reforms, particularly responding effectively to popular demands to

open the political system. It is therefore in the interest of the United States to encourage political pluralism, good governance, transparency in decisionmaking, and economic liberalization.

But how hard should the United States press for an agenda of democratization, respect for human rights, and expanding civil liberties and economic opportunities? Although Saudi Arabia and other countries in and around the Persian Gulf share some measure of the blame for the climate that breeds anti-Western terrorism, dealing with this problem presents dilemmas. On the one hand, the United States will be accused of imperialism if it pressures regional governments to make democratic reforms and improve their human rights performance. Perhaps more importantly, applying such pressure could be counterproductive. For many countries, for instance, abandoning repressive practices could have unintended and undesirable consequences—among which is allowing at least a short-term flourishing of radical movements, including those that preach and practice violence against America and the West. Likewise, granting full freedom of expression to media that already sanction vitriolic anti-American sentiments could increase rather than diminish such rhetoric. Still more worrisome, liberalization could unleash passions that are difficult to control or to channel into orderly and meaningful political change.

In short, the consequences of greater pluralism in most Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, would be governments (and foreign policies) that are much less friendly to the United States than the current regimes. Indeed, it is difficult to pressure local rulers to change domestic political arrangements that have served them well, especially when the United States is asking them to take risks on other issues—for example, supporting a U.S. invasion of Iraq. These regimes would not have any easier of a time supporting contentious U.S. policies if their political systems were more pluralistic.

On the other hand, if the United States does not apply pressure for reforms, it will be criticized for propping up regimes that are seen by their opponents as corrupt and oppressive and thus will remain a lightning rod for anti-American violence. This dilemma underscores an important point about U.S. interests and military presence in the Gulf. The objective of U.S. involvement in the region is stability, not preservation of the status quo. America

has no interest in the kind of stability that results from immobility, and structures that try to remain rigid are apt to be overwhelmed by the currents swirling around them. The U.S. presence in the Gulf is primarily intended to maintain the flow of oil by preventing a hostile power from establishing hegemony over the region; it is not designed to shield regimes—however friendly to our interests—from having to deal constructively with the implications of a changing world.

Nonetheless, over the course of 3 centuries Islamic societies have sought to confront the challenges of Westernization and modernization by alternately imitating and rejecting them, with neither option providing satisfaction. The results of this failure are visible throughout the Islamic world. Moreover, political and social Westernization that failed when it was embraced by indigenous elites is even less likely to succeed if it is foisted upon the region by outside forces. To be successful and survivable, political reform must develop organically, adapting the region's traditional religious, political, and cultural practices to modern realities. Thus, the best course of action for the United States is to encourage evolutionary adaptation. This is necessarily a delicate task, and whether it is feasible remains an open question.

Conclusion

For the United States, there is no escaping the role of security guarantor of the Gulf for the foreseeable future. But trying to guarantee that security through a large-scale, visible, and permanent-looking U.S. presence will erode security, undermine security relationships with key Gulf States, impede needed political reforms, stir domestic opposition within Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, and feed anti-American Islamic extremism. In the absence of successful regime change in Iraq, the transformation of military capabilities provides a way to guarantee security while reducing the military footprint, but the adjustment of the U.S. profile will need to be carried out before the promise of transformation can be realized. Unfortunately, time is not on the U.S. side: if left to his own devices, Saddam will become more threatening in the years ahead. Thus, until Saddam disappears from the scene and Iraq is no longer a menace to U.S. interests and regional security, there is scope for reengineering the U.S. force posture, but it would be

foolhardy to make significant reductions in U.S. forward-deployed forces.

If the continued survival of the Saddam Husayn regime (or a hostile successor regime) extracts huge costs for regional security, success in removing him and his circle would yield an enormous payoff. It would not eliminate all problems from the region, but it would drastically reduce the requirement for U.S. military forces to deal with the problems that remained. It would give Iraq the opportunity to develop, for the first time in decades, a

time is not on the U.S. side: if left to his own devices, Saddam will become more threatening in the years ahead

system of government that would not depend on a permanent state of hostility with its neighbors to justify its domestic power structure. It would allow the United States and the Gulf Arabs to return their relationships to a more normal footing, free of many of the irritants that inevitably arise from the presence of foreign forces in an alien culture. Most importantly, it would provide the opportunity for the Gulf States and others in the Middle East to develop and nurture new institutions and processes, firmly rooted in the religious and cultural legacy of the region, that will allow their people to thrive and prosper in the 21st century. Only by doing so can they hope to escape the cycle of warfare, repression, and terrorism that was the lot of so many throughout the previous century. Simply put, the status quo has its own costs and is not sustainable over the next decade. The costs of going to war with Iraq have been fully aired and are well understood. The costs of not going to war are far less appreciated.

The potential benefits of toppling Saddam will need to be carefully weighed against the substantial costs to the United States if it has to occupy Iraq indefinitely to ensure an orderly transition, preserve territorial integrity, and protect the new regime. With or without regime change in Iraq, however, the United States needs to fashion a post-containment strategy that reduces the political, diplomatic, and military burdens on both the United States and its Gulf State partners of meeting America's security responsibilities. Saudi Arabia needs to remain an important pillar of U.S. security strategy for the region, but one that the United States puts less weight on in the future.

Note

¹ A spearhead force for the Gulf would be the lead element of a larger U.S. reinforcement plan for warfighting. Configured to deploy swiftly within a few days, its mission in defending Kuwait against an Iraqi invasion, for example, would be to gain control of the early battle (the halt phase) by carrying out early strike operations, thus setting the stage for bigger operations later. To accomplish this mission, it would also need to be capable of gaining access against area denial threats and securing key infrastructure. A spearhead force would be composed of joint assets, would possess sophisticated technologies, and would be an early candidate for transformation. It might include, for example, airborne warning and control systems and joint surveillance and target attack radar systems, two or three fighter wings backed by strategic bombers, an expeditionary strike group and/or expeditionary strike force, and two or three ground brigades with enough tanks, attack helicopters, and self-propelled artillery for high-speed, lethal maneuvers.

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