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STRATEGY IN THE REFLAGGING AND ESCORT OF KUWAITI TANKERS

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Report Documentation Page

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The reflagging and escort of Kuwaiti tankers in 1987-88 was a good example of overstated and obscured political objectives. US military objectives were likewise overstated but the operations which were actually conducted really reflected what the objectives should have been -- not as broad, more limited in scope. For the most part the operations were successful but the process which brought the operations to fruition was filled with innuendo, hidden objectives and political constraints.

If one is to analyze the military strategy employed during the Kuwaiti tanker escort operations, one must look at the reasons why the US wanted to conduct the operations in the first place. Recall that in November 1986, the revelations of the Iran-contra affair were just becoming known. After eight years of remaining officially neutral in the Iran-Iraq War, it was revealed that the US had been involved in the supplying of war material to one of the belligerents. Iran, disliked by regional Arab nations, was the secret beneficiary of arms to be used against Iraq.

Up until this time Arab states in the region respected the US as an honest broker in trying to resolve the long and costly Iran-Iraq war. News of our supplying arms to Iran was not taken lightly in the Gulf. Our Arab friends berated us incessantly for being duplicitous. The Iran-contra affair was not something that would create a permanent schism in our relations with Gulf nations but it posed an aggravation for our foreign policy in the region and weakened our credibility. Politically, our objectives had long been to ensure stability in the region, and to ensure the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. Our efforts to arm Iran certainly gave the local Arab nations reasons to question how this action contributed to stability in the region.

Not only were we suffering politically but the Iran-contra affair also became an irritant in trying to further our military objectives in the region -- one of which was to strengthen the defense capabilities of Gulf nations against an Iranian threat; another was

close military cooperation with the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) states to foster a receptive attitude on their part should we ever have need to deploy additional forces to the Gulf to protect US interests there.

The US needed to take the initiative in reestablishing our credibility among the GCC states. Emissaries were sent from the State Department, the Joint Staff and from USCINCCENT headquarters but from most reports their assurances to our GCC friends were greeted coldly and with skepticism. The visits were helpful but the US needed something else to restore Arab confidence in our friendship and in our pronouncements to remain committed in to the region. Help came from an unexpected quarter. Unwittingly the Soviets facilitated the process.

From the start of the war, Kuwait had been a major transshipment point for arms to Iraq and for Iraqi oil to the international oil market. In November–December 1986, Iran increased the frequency of attacks on shipping going in and out of Kuwait. Then in December 1986 the Kuwaitis approached the US ambassador there as to how one would go about placing a ship under US flag and would that ship then be protected by US naval forces in the Gulf. Unbeknown to us at the time, the Kuwaitis made a similar request to the Soviets. In formulating a response, the US assumed that the Kuwaiti request was solely an initiative to counter Iranian attacks against Kuwaiti shipping.

I am of the opinion that the Kuwaiti request had a much broader motivation with far-reaching implications. Up until that time both the US and the Soviets had issued periodically lamentations over the waste of human lives in the war but neither side was actively or aggressively engaged in attempting to end the conflict. I believe that Kuwait, probably in consultation with other regional powers saw the Iranian attacks as a catalyst to either engage the superpowers in seeking an end to the war or to have them take an active role in opposing Iran militarily.

Our response to the Kuwaitis was exceptionally cautious. We stated that defense should be the collective responsibility of the GCC nations and that we encouraged their greater involvement. There was also extreme reluctance within the DOD to become engaged in a situation requiring a large increase in force in the region. One probable reason was that reflagging and escort would be an open-ended commitment without a definitive end. Another was that we knew the Arab nations would be reluctant to host the sizeable force that we thought would be required to defend against an experienced Iranian force. A third was probably because we knew it would be difficult to sell to the American people and Congress without a commensurate commitment of allied assistance to the effort.

This remained the US position for the next two months, January-February 1987, as Kuwait continued to ask hypothetical questions involving US protection for shipping using Kuwaiti ports. In late February 1987, the US learned that Kuwait had approached the Soviets two months before and that the Soviets had responded positively by saying that they would be willing to charter three Soviet tankers to Kuwait. Kuwait had 11 tankers which it wanted to reflag. The Soviets were willing to reflag all 11 but we do not know the terms concerning protection. Kuwait then asked if the US was willing to reflag and escort six of the 11 tankers while the Soviets would reflag and escort the other five.

Faced now with a possible growing Soviet naval presence in the Gulf, the wheels of the US bureaucracy turned into high gear. The combination of possible Soviet involvement in the Gulf and the need to reestablish US credibility there prompted immediate action. We responded to the Kuwaitis that we would reflag and escort all 11 tankers, which they accepted in principle in March 1987. Although the US acknowledged that denial of Soviet access to the Gulf was a principal reason for our accepting the reflagging proposal, there was never a publicly acknowledged link with the Iran-contra affair. I believe there was a

strong linkage and that the credibility issue was a prime motivator, if not the principal one, for the actions we took subsequently.

In reviewing political motives for the reflag and escort operations, the US acknowledged objectives were to:

- (1) deny the Soviets access to the Gulf,
- (2) ensure the continued flow of oil from the Gulf,
- (3) ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf.

I would argue that there was a fourth, unstated political objective of diverting attention from the Iran-contra affair and reestablishing our credibility in the Gulf. The first stated objective was a reasonable objective, given our historical goal of keeping the Soviets out of the region as much as possible. The Kuwaiti request to the US and the Soviets seemed to be something we could not ignore if we were to continue with denial as a goal. The second and third objectives were simply overstated. How could we assign these as political objectives when we were talking of protecting only 4% of the oil trade in the Persian Gulf represented by the 11 Kuwaiti tankers? The fourth objective, I would argue the principal one, was a proper and correct objective but it was one that the US could not realistically acknowledge in public.

On the Kuwaiti side, we misread Kuwaiti political objectives as being simply ensuring the continued flow of shipping to/from Kuwait under increasing Iranian attacks. In fact their principal objective seemed to be either involving the superpowers more in settling the war or getting both involved in military operations opposing Iranian attacks in the Gulf. The parallel with Anwar Sadat's motives for the 1973 war with Israel are striking. By attacking Israel he hoped to get the US in particular to breathe new life into the moribund peace process. Had we been more suspicious of Kuwaiti political objectives upon

learning of their parallel approach to the Soviets, we might have achieved our and Kuwait's objectives without the commitment of more US forces in the Gulf. Quite possibly we could have joined the Soviets, at the time under Gorbachev's leadership, in pushing harder for a resolution to the war without the issue of tanker reflagging and escort ever entering the picture.

What were the Soviet political objectives? One can only surmise, but these events were transpiring at the same time that the Soviets were grappling with the notion of withdrawing from Afghanistan. The Soviets paid a heavy price in relations with the Islamic nations by invading Afghanistan. Certainly the Soviets could not have been interested in a military confrontation with the US over escorting Kuwaiti tankers. Nevertheless, I believe that the Soviets were and still are interested in somehow extending their influence in the Persian Gulf and want to be a player in the region. They may have seen this as a cheap method of achieving their aims. Whatever their objective, the Soviets backed away from confronting the US militarily or politically and ended up not involved in the escort operations.

How were the military objectives crafted to support the political objectives? I would argue that it was difficult for military objectives to be formulated which would fully achieve the three stated objectives. Take the first -- denial of Soviet influence -- the US had essentially achieved this objective when Kuwait and the US agreed that the reflagging and escort operations would be a US show. The role of the military was nothing more than an implementer of the agreement -- much like the multinational peacekeeping force in the Sinai or Golan Heights. Nevertheless, the prime military objective was to protect the designated Kuwaiti tankers in and out of the Gulf.

The second and third stated objectives -- free flow of oil and freedom of navigation -- were not fully achievable militarily given the small percentage of tanker shipping we were actually protecting. Nevertheless, these political objectives also were the military

objectives. These two objectives should have been more narrowly defined as they applied to Kuwait. US policymakers probably retained the broad wording of these two objectives as a carryover from the longstanding reasons for our naval presence in the Gulf. Taken quite literally, the military would have had to deploy an enormous force to the Gulf to ensure the free flow of oil and freedom of navigation for all ships. As it was, with the force we had there, we could only attempt to achieve the objectives.

In fact, political restrictions on the use of military forces in the Gulf prior to the escort operations kept the US military from ever achieving either of these two objectives. First, our recognition of the declared Iranian and Iraqi war zones in the Gulf led US policymakers to restrict US forces from entering these zones. By this action we were de facto acknowledging a political barrier to freedom of navigation. Second, the politically-driven rules of engagement prohibited US forces from coming to the defense of ships under attack unless they were US ships. In essence then, US forces were prohibited from firing a shot in defense of, say, a British registry tanker under Iranian attack. We could only offer humanitarian assistance to the survivors after the attack was over. Toward the end of the tanker escort operations, these rules were relaxed whereby US forces could assist any ship requesting assistance, except those ships engaged in active military support to either Iran or Iraq.

This is not to say that our naval presence in the Gulf both before and during the escort operations was ineffective in ensuring the flow of oil or freedom of navigation. Through 1986 there were 272 attacks on Persian Gulf shipping, yet this represented about 1% of the total amount of shipping in the Gulf. It is impossible to measure how much our naval presence deterred a greater number of attacks. We do know that both Iraq and Iran scrupulously avoided attacking merchant shipping when they knew a US warship was near the targetted ship.

Given the military objectives -- protect 11 Kuwaiti tankers, ensure the flow of oil and freedom of navigation -- could the US military muster the proper forces to accomplish the mission? Certainly, if there were no restraints on our forces the US could overwhelm the area with its military capabilities. But there were constraints.

The GCC states had long been sensitive to granting basing rights to US forces. The five ship Middle East Force in the Gulf and the USAF ELF ONE AWACS operation in Saudi Arabia had heretofore been the limits on US military presence. So US force deployment planning had to take these constraining sensitivities into account.

Military support from friendly and allied nations would have been extremely valuable. Support from GCC military forces turned out to be very limited. Each nation could defend their own territory to some extent but few except for Saudi Arabia had the resources to join in an effort which encompassed a good portion of the Gulf. Defense of territorial waters was the most US planners could expect of GCC states. Support from our NATO allies would be especially valuable since the British and the French navies already had a presence established in the area and were accepted by the GCC states. An integrated NATO multinational force would be the optimum force for accomplishing this mission but NATO was traditionally opposed to involvement in operations outside NATO's geographical boundaries. In the end though many NATO countries deployed important naval capabilities to the Persian Gulf during the escort operations but not under NATO sponsorship and not under a NATO command structure. Rather, forces from the UK, France, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands operated in the Gulf, independently of one another, yet coordinated their operations with each other. In retrospect this disassociated but coordinated approach probably gave the US more latitude in carrying out eventual attacks against Iranian oil platforms and naval forces. Had this been an integrated NATO operation, these attacks would very likely have not been carried out or, if carried out unilaterally by the US, would have caused unnecessary friction between us and NATO.

What forces were available to conduct the escort operations and what was the threat? In structuring the US force package, planners had to take into account the lack of basing rights which meant that the predominant force would be naval. At the beginning of the operations it appeared that we could not count on allied support, although as mentioned before, this changed later. The threat was from the Iranian air force, limited in capability but because we were unable to base any TACAIR fighters in the Gulf, the air threat became a larger problem than it normally would have been.

Iranian surface ships ranging from small zodiac boats to naval combatants were another serious threat. US ships, with HARPOON anti-ship cruise missiles, were more than a match for the Iranian combatants but the zodiac boats and the Swedish boghammer speedboats presented a unique threat against which the USN had limited experience. Army and USMC attack helos were added to the package to deal with this threat and they performed superbly.

The mining threat had always been problematic and heretofore had been talked about only in scenarios involving Iranian mining of the Strait of Hormuz to stop shipping in and out of the Gulf. At the time, the US had very limited minesweeping capability in the Navy inventory and none of it in the region -- ships in the Reserve forces and minesweeping helicopters based in CONUS. Plans had always envisioned deploying the helos if and when Iran mined the Strait of Hormuz, but not before. Unfortunately we paid for this approach to mineclearing in the Gulf when a Kuwaiti tanker struck a mine on the first escort mission and later when a US frigate was severely damaged by a mine in the southern Gulf. Clearly minesweeping capability should have been a part of the force package from the beginning of the escort operations.

A final serious threat appeared just before the escort operations started -- Silkworm anti-ship missiles, especially those adjacent to the constricted Strait of Hormuz. The Kuwaiti tankers and USN ships were extremely vulnerable to this threat. US ships had

some defensive and deceptive capability but it turned out that our principal tool for dealing with Silkworm threat was deterrence. Our retaliatory capability against a Silkworm launch was formidable and probably was the reason why no Silkworms were launched in the Strait of Hormuz. A Silkworm fired from occupied territory in Iraq did hit a reflagged Kuwaiti tanker in Kuwaiti territorial waters. This attack was followed immediately by a US attack against an Iranian oil platform in the Gulf. This was the one and only Silkworm firing.

The plan used to escort the Kuwaiti tankers was simple and effective. It involved forming convoys of 2-5 tankers and escorting the ships between Kuwait and the Gulf of Oman. AWAC's and P-3's stationed in the Gulf conducted EW and maritime patrol support. As the convoy would approach the Strait of Hormuz carrier-based aircraft from the Gulf of Oman provided additional air support. Except for the aforementioned mining incident and Silkworm attack from Iraq, none of the Kuwaiti tankers were attacked during the escort operations.

In summary, what were the strengths and weaknesses of our objectives and our strategy in escorting the Kuwaiti tankers and how well did the strategy accomplish the mission? The political objectives were, on the one hand, not well stated and, on the other, did not include what I believe was the real and most important objective -- improving our post-Iran-contra credibility with Gulf nations. On this, I believe that our escort operations proved our commitment to stability in the Gulf and did restore our credibility. The other political objectives were not well stated in that ensuring the free flow of oil and freedom of navigation implied much broader requirements than protecting just 11 Kuwaiti tankers and, taken literally, would have required a very large force and the lifting of operating constraints on US naval forces in the Gulf. The US was prepared to do neither, politically. The overstatement of these two political objectives in turn carried over into the military objectives. Here our actions did not match the objectives. Yes, we

did protect the Kuwaiti tankers but no protection was extended to other tankers in the Gulf, other than passively through their proximity to our forces. This is not intended to criticize military planners. Except for the shortsightedness in late deployment of minesweeping capability, military planners did all they could have done within the political realities of the situation, i.e. limited basing rights, constrained operating areas and no formal NATO participation.