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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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The Gulf Cooperation Council as a Regional Partner in Deterrence

by

Bridget M. Rourke

COL, US Army

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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27 October 2008

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Abstract

It is imperative that the United States develop a more effective nuclear deterrence strategy with regard to the Iranian desire to obtain a nuclear weapon. Recent U.S. approaches have been ineffective as Iran progresses in its nuclear development activities. The United States cannot expect a change in results without a change in strategy. Promoting the GCC as the lead diplomatic face of the nuclear deterrence effort would be a significant change in strategy. This paper outlines the ability of the GCC to serve as the regional lead in conducting nuclear deterrence. It explains the requirement for the GCC to have a nested strong conventional military capability within the gulf region as part of the overall deterrence effort. Finally, this paper draws conclusions concerning the ability of the GCC to act as the lead agent and makes recommendations for supporting U.S. theater security cooperation activities to enable a GCC deterrence effort.

Introduction

Iran's strategic ambitions as a regional power in the Middle East constitute one of the most significant security concerns for the United States in the foreseeable future. Our greatest concern is that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons capability with which to threaten the United States, our allies and other friendly nations. In fact, regarding the threat of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. National Security Strategy states, "We face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran."¹ Iran also presents challenges to the United States in its support of terrorists and in support of militias in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian occupied territories. Iran directly threatens Israel with asymmetric capabilities and also intimidates its neighbors in the Persian Gulf region with its significant conventional forces.

While Iran's current leadership seems to view the state of Israel as the greatest scourge upon the face of the earth, the regime concurrently views the United States as their most formidable enemy. It is imperative that the United States develop a more effective nuclear deterrence strategy with regard to the Iranian desire to obtain a nuclear weapon. This nuclear deterrence strategy must also account for the possible eventuality of a nuclear armed Iran. However, the United States is only one of many countries seeking to develop effective deterrent strategies to counter and blunt Iranian ambitions. To this point, the United States has taken on the public leadership role in this deterrence effort. Unfortunately, many in the world persistently look upon any U.S. initiative with skepticism and suspicion of a hidden agenda.

¹ U.S. President, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: White House, 2006).

Who can assume the leadership role in this deterrence effort and let the United States fade into the background? Our key allies in Europe have, to date, been relatively ineffective in their efforts to curb Iran's nuclear development despite the negative impact of their collective actions on the Iranian economy. Additionally, people in the Middle East so strongly view the United States as the leader of the West that any European efforts are perceived as U.S. led. Russia is certainly not going to help the United States in this matter as it prefers that we remain focused on the Middle East while they pursue their own interests in Russia's "near abroad." China will not significantly pressure Iran. As of 2006, China was the second largest importer of Iranian oil and Iran was the third largest provider for China's oil needs.² Israel, though the most threatened of all nations, cannot take the lead for fear of alienating every Islamic country in the process.

One aspect of the best U.S. strategy to deter Iranian nuclear ambitions would be to facilitate an Islamic nation, or nations, in taking the lead in the regional deterrence efforts, nested within an overall U.S. global and regional strategy. The author will argue that the United States government should promote the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as the lead diplomatic effort in nuclear deterrence and the GCC defense capabilities as a primary theater-level military deterrent to Iranian aggression in the gulf region. The GCC is a strong political and economic alliance with a resident baseline military capability. The GCC and the United States have multiple converging security interests with regard to Iran allowing for a mutually supporting strategy. Lastly, the GCC is an inherently Islamic organization seeking to promote Islamic interests and they "live in the neighborhood." Their agenda and efforts will

² Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Briefs," <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs> (accessed, 11 September 2008).

have more legitimacy with the people of the Middle East, and specifically the citizens of Iran, than will an effort perceived as directed by the United States.

In a recent article in *Joint Force Quarterly*, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen called for a new, post cold war, model for deterrence theory which specified three required aspects: high standards of U.S. nuclear preparedness, a credible conventional military capability to include coalition conventional capabilities, and a means to address violent extremists.³ Effective deterrence influences the state of mind of your potential adversary and is based on two primary criteria: actual capability to impact your potential adversary and a perception by that entity that you have the will to respond to provocations. An effective nuclear deterrence strategy also relies on a nested strong conventional military capability as was shown by the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. In examining the prospects for the GCC as a lead agent in the regional deterrence efforts, we must determine first that they are strong enough to be a persuasive factor in the region. Second, we must examine the level of motivation of the GCC countries to accept this role. Lastly, the United States should determine specific security cooperation efforts that we should pursue in the region to ensure the GCC possesses the requisite nested conventional military capability necessary to effectively communicate to Iran that Iranian conventional forces would not be allowed to operate with impunity in the gulf region even if Iran obtained a nuclear weapon.

The GCC as a Lead Agent in the Middle East

The regional leader in any deterrent effort must itself be strong in order to effectively persuade the decision maker of that entity they seek to deter from taking undesired courses of action. Since its inception in 1981, during the Iran-Iraq war, the GCC has developed into a

³ Michael G. Mullen, "It's Time for a New Deterrence Model," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 4th Quarter, 2008, 2-3.

cohesive alliance integrated across military, economic, political, social and cultural endeavors. The GCC countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates already shared a common political system, culture and vision of their destiny as gulf countries. The GCC members have established effective governing mechanisms and governing bodies to keep the alliance coordinated and moving forward on all axes of development and integration.

Arguably the greatest strength of the GCC lies in its economic integration, and the power derived collectively from this integration. Most of that power is based on the global dependence on oil from the Middle East with Saudi Arabia as the largest oil exporter. Regionally, one venue through which the GCC countries wield this power is through their collective influence within Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Besides the sheer magnitude of the oil revenues and leverage of the market share, the GCC countries are strengthened by the level of integration of their economic and monetary policies, systems and programs in the areas of trade, industrial and agricultural development, natural resource exploitation, infrastructure development, education and scientific research and development, and other venues. Already having established such entities as a Common Market and Customs Union and trade agreements, the GCC countries are now working towards a common currency.⁴

Diplomatically and politically, the GCC countries almost invariably speak with one voice on major issues. Often, diplomatic statements representing the consolidated position on all matters of regional importance are released following the routine councils of representative ministers. GCC countries have maintained a united front on issues as varied

⁴ The Cooperation Council for Arab States of the Gulf, "Secretariat General," <http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/> (accessed 1 September 2008).

as the response to the crisis in Darfur, the Middle East Peace Talks, violence in Lebanon, progress in stabilizing Iraq and foreign relations with Iran. All GCC countries are stable monarchies with no serious internal threats to their stability. Again representative of the strength of the alliance, the GCC countries are now working towards a common identification card system.

Perhaps the most important aspect of GCC strength to this analysis is the military strength of their alliance. Military cooperation on a higher level started in 1984 with the formation of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF). The PSF was a mechanized division with two combat brigades commanded by a Saudi Brigadier General. Saudi Arabia provided one combat brigade and the other was a composition of units from the remaining GCC countries. This unit was based in northern Saudi Arabia. The PSF deployed for the Persian Gulf War in 1991 but did not see action. The PSF deployed to Kuwait again in 2003 as a defensive force as the U.S. forces were preparing to invade Iraq. The PSF was disbanded as a standing force in 2006 due to the decreased threat of any ground attack from the north with the defeat of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Currently the PSF Headquarters and the Saudi combat brigade remain stationed at Hafr El-Batin in Saudi Arabia with the remaining brigade designated as a rapid reaction force provided by the United Arab Emirates.

The GCC countries signed a formal mutual defense pact in 2000 and have made significant strides in integrating all aspects of their military capability. All GCC countries have largely focused acquisition efforts through U.S. and European nations enabling a level of compatibility of equipment commensurate with that of the NATO alliance. They have developed common doctrine and tactics in the employment of their capabilities and routinely conduct joint and coalition exercises. Notably, the GCC countries have integrated two key

operational functions across their alliance, a secure command and control structure and an Integrated Air Defense System to provide early warning and tracking of aircraft across the peninsula.⁵ Though the GCC forces have weaknesses, they continue to work to overcome these through acquisition and training. Their operational forces are proven and capable in numerous key areas and continue to improve.

The GCC has the requisite diplomatic, economic and military capabilities to form a comprehensive regional deterrent strategy to accomplish their strategic objective of maintaining sovereignty over their territories and the ability to exploit their natural resources. The GCC also maintains the required steering committees within their alliance governing structure to effectively integrate these elements of power in furtherance of that strategy.

GCC National Security Interests and Operational Military Capabilities

U.S. and GCC interests in deterring Iran converge along three primary paths. First, the threat of conventional military conflict weighs heavy in the region. This area of the world has become embroiled in three major military conflicts in the last 30 years and many of the underlying tensions remain unsettled and unsettling. King Abdullah of Jordan summarized the unease felt across Jordan and the GCC countries in an interview for the Washington Post in 2004, "If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, he (King Abdullah) said, a new "crescent" of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to

⁵ "Armed Forces, Saudi Arabia," *Janes Sentinel Security Assessment – The Gulf States*, 12 December 2007, <http://jmsa.janes.com/JDIC/JMSA> (accessed 25 August 2008).

U.S. interests and allies.”⁶ The allies that King Abdullah was speaking of included not only Jordan but also the GCC countries, all governed by Sunni leadership.

In examining the ability of the GCC forces to deter conventional military threats, it is useful to evaluate their military capabilities and requirements within the context of the operational factors of space, time and force. “Control of space, time, and force and their interrelationship is the chief prerequisite for success in the planning and execution of any military action; balancing these factors is the core of operational warfare.”⁷ The operational objective of the GCC military is to prevent foreign occupation of GCC national territories and ensure the free flow of shipping through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, the GCC military forces have assumed a defensive posture.

Within this defensive posture, the center of gravity for GCC operational forces is the air force. The air forces provide the primary operational maneuver, fires, force protection and intelligence capabilities for the GCC military. The GCC countries have placed primacy in the development of modern and highly capable air forces partly due to the vast expanses of land, long borders and long coastlines on the peninsula. With a collective population of only 38 million people, the GCC countries do not have the human resources available to man large standing armies capable of patrolling their borders and defending their territories. In fact, many of the GCC armies have significant percentages of foreign nationals in their ranks. The air forces provide the capability to rapidly respond to a threat from any direction occurring anywhere on the peninsula and the surrounding territorial waters, providing time for the ground forces to maneuver to defend the nation.

⁶ Robin Wright and Peter Baker, “Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran,” *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004, sec. A.

⁷ Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* (Newport, RI: United States Naval War College, 2007), III-60.

Even with the modern and highly capable air forces, GCC countries are aware that their military forces could only defend against a concerted ground attack for a matter of days or hours. In order to compensate for the lack of adequate ground and naval force capability to defend their sovereign territories, GCC countries have entered into defense agreements with the United States, leveraging U.S. dependence on the health of the world economy, which is dependent on the oil that GCC countries export. “The cornerstones of U.S.-Gulf defense relations are broad bilateral defense pacts between the United States and each Gulf state except Saudi Arabia. The agreements, largely adopted after the 1990-91 Gulf crisis, provide not only for facilities access for U.S. forces, but also for U.S. advice, training, and joint exercises; lethal and nonlethal U.S. equipment pre-positioning; and arms sales.”⁸ These pacts do not require the United States to come to the military defense of any GCC country. However, the United States does have a semi-permanent military presence on multiple facilities throughout the region and has demonstrated in the past willingness to use military force in the defense of GCC countries in time of significant regional aggression. U.S. forces being stationed in the GCC territories provide the required rapid reaction should the United States determine that a military response is in the best interests of the United States. In providing the U.S. forces with facilities, the GCC countries are better balancing possible available forces that can respond to emergencies in a timely manner.

It is most likely that Iranian military aggression in the region will take place within the Persian Gulf itself. The center of gravity of Iranian operational forces is their naval force. Although Iran, at nearly twice the population of the GCC countries, does have a large army, it is not capable of significant force projection. The Iranians also have a very old air force

⁸ Congressional Research Service, *CRS Report for Congress – The Persian Gulf States: Issues for U.S. Policy*, 2006, (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, January 2006), 10.

experiencing significant readiness issues. On the other hand, by investing in diverse surface, mine warfare, submarine and anti-ship cruise missile capabilities, Iran has developed a naval force capable of significantly impacting GCC interests in the gulf. One complicating factor for the GCC is the terrain within the gulf. Their territorial waters encompass oil and gas fields, drilling platforms, pumping stations and processing/loading facilities, ports, islands, fisheries and the sea lanes themselves. With a large array of opportunities to disrupt GCC economic activities, and relatively small GCC naval forces, GCC countries are again reliant on the U.S. presence to ensure the free flow of oil through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

While it is true that the United States would take action in the event Iran significantly impacted the flow of commerce through the Persian Gulf, either by disrupting sea lanes internal to the gulf or by attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz, Iran could still seriously impact the economies of the GCC countries. A report recently published by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University assesses that if Iran were to mine the Strait of Hormuz, U.S. actions to clear the strait “could take many weeks, even months, to restore the full flow of commerce, and more time still for the oil markets to be convinced that stability had returned.”⁹ Iran’s naval mine capability is a critical enabler to its naval influence in the gulf. The GCC navies must be able to counter this mine threat better than their current mine countermeasure capabilities allow.

Iran also has the option of conducting aggressive actions below the threshold that would trigger a U.S. military response. There has been a long running diplomatic dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates as to the legal sovereignty of the three islands of

⁹ Caitlin Talmadge, “Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Straight of Hormuz,” *International Security Journal* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008) 85.

Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb. Iran has occupied the islands, strategically positioned at the western entrance to the Strait of Hormuz. Abu Musa also has oil reserves to exploit. Despite ongoing diplomacy, Iran continues to build its infrastructure on Abu Musa and shows no signs of relinquishing its claim. There are other areas of the gulf where similar aggressive actions could occur. Iran is currently contesting its drilling rights to the Dorra gas field in the northern gulf, shared with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Iran is also contesting drilling rights to the North oil field, shared with Qatar. It is possible that Iran could attempt to take by force, a larger share of these oil and gas fields and then enter into diplomatic negotiations while concurrently exploiting the resources.

As the sanctions currently in place by the United Nations over Iran's lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continue to affect Iran's economy, Iranian leadership could be motivated to seek out new resources. "Iran's oil production has been declining steadily from its pre-revolution peak of six million barrels per day to its present four million barrels per day. This is mainly caused by the ongoing effects of war, sanctions, low investment and depletion. Meanwhile, the country's consumption of petrol has increased at 11 per cent per year. If this trend continues, Iran will become a net importer of petrol by 2015."¹⁰ The GCC navies must be able to defend their territorial seas, and assets therein, from Iranian aggression and defend their ports and assets from terrorist attacks. The GCC navies need to particularly concentrate on countering those threats that would potentially fall below the threshold of U.S. national interests and U.S. military intervention. Saudi Arabia is particularly challenged in this area because of their split focus of their security interests between the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. This imbalance of force

¹⁰ "Executive Summary, Iran," *Janes Sentinel Security Assessments – The Gulf States*, 19 June 2008, <http://jmsa.janes.com/JDIC/JMSA> (accessed 4 September 2008).

capabilities should be a primary issue addressed in U.S. theater security cooperation activities.

The GCC countries are also working to improve their operational force protection capabilities. In the event that any conflict within the gulf escalates, the Iranians have a formidable ballistic missile force. The GCC's Integrated Air Defense System will provide effective operational force protection against any Iranian air escalation. The GCC air forces also have an offensive capability to strike ballistic missile sites if an imminent threat is detected and verified in time to take preemptive action. A number of GCC countries also have the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) missile for missile defense. However, their missile defenses are not currently adequate to provide theater-level operational force protection. Theater-level operational force protection is necessary to provide the GCC leadership with the latitude to take strong action in the gulf in the event of Iranian aggression. The United Arab Emirates is now looking to purchase the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system from the United States.¹¹ The combination of the PAC-3 and THAAD systems would provide the required overlapping coverage to counter the range of Iranian ballistic missile threats.

For the conventional military threats that are of current greatest concern to the GCC countries, they have the requisite baseline military capability to counter those threats. However, the GCC countries do need to continue upgrades to their littoral naval capabilities in order to best deter aggressive actions in the gulf. The GCC also needs a theater ballistic missile defense capability better equipped to handle medium and long range ballistic missiles. Without this force protection of their homeland, the GCC countries will not be willing to use their navy and air forces to their best capabilities.

¹¹ Reuters, "U.S. Plans Missile Sale Worth \$7 Billion," *Boston Globe*, 9 September 2008.

The second path of convergence of U.S. and GCC interests is in the regional counterterrorism fight. The GCC countries are concerned with Sunni extremist terrorism to some extent. However, their primary concern is the potential for emboldened Shiite communities and dissidents within the GCC countries to foster instability within their territories. Every country within the GCC, with the exception of Bahrain, has Shiite minority populations. Although Bahrain does have a Shiite majority population, the ruling monarchy is Sunni. The GCC countries are concerned that rising Iranian prestige and power in the region could lead to feelings of empowerment within their Shiite populations. There is also the concern that Iran could take direct action in supporting Shiite anti-government activities in GCC countries with money, materiel, training and organizational assistance much as Iran has provided to Hamas in Palestine and the Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹²

Terrorism is largely a problem mitigated through law enforcement and good governance vice military action. Still, for the GCC countries to remain effective leaders in the regional conventional deterrence effort, they must remain stable. It is within the U.S. best interests in the region to maximize intelligence and information sharing in an effort to keep U.S. partners focused on countering the external threat and not to be distracted with internal threats to their national security.

The third path of convergence of U.S. and GCC interests is nuclear deterrence. It is within both parties interests that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapons capability and that, if acquired, Iran does not choose to use its nuclear weapons capability. While the United States possesses the power to strike Iran if it were to employ a nuclear weapon, directly or through a third party, deterrence via the threat of punishment, the GCC countries possess complementary capabilities to concurrently exercise deterrence through persuasion. The

¹² Marie Colvin, "Hamas Wages Iran's Proxy War on Israel," *The Sunday Times*, 9 March 2008.

GCC countries have diplomatic powers within the region which could be used through venues such as bilateral relations with other concerned neighbors, bilateral relations with Iran and through political entities such as the United Nations and the Organization of The Islamic Conference. The GCC countries can also influence Iran economically through their input to OPEC decisions pertaining to the price of oil which directly impacts the Iranian freedom of movement.

Conclusions

The U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy to deter Iranian ambition must include an approach integrating all elements of national power. The GCC should be the diplomatic face of the nuclear deterrence effort in the region, allowing the United States to fade into the background. Within the element of military power, the strategy must include a nuclear and a conventional military approach. Within the overall conventional military deterrence strategy, the United States must have a nested regional conventional military deterrence capability. The United States should leverage the capacity of the GCC to serve as the lead agent in the regional conventional military deterrence. As Admiral Mullen puts it very succinctly, “Coalition military cooperation and integration can and do have a tremendous impact on an adversary’s perception of the political will of the United States and its allies.”¹³ The GCC has the military, political and economic strength and the motivation to be a regional deterrence leader. The GCC also has a number of strengths to bring to the table in this effort to counterbalance weaknesses of the United States.

First, the GCC leadership has a cultural advantage in exercising deterrent actions. Deterrence, above all else, is based upon effective communication. Deterrence is focused on

¹³ Mullen, “New Deterrence Model,” 3.

influencing decision makers. The more cultural affinity the deterring agent has with the opposing agent, the more likely that the deterring agent will be able to assess what that opposing agent values and how he is likely to react to changing situations. Also, the more cultural affinity that the two agents have, the more likely that communications between the two will be accurately understood. This cultural affinity will pay dividends in efforts throughout the Middle East related to influencing Iranian actions and policy.

Second, nuclear deterrence is normally a long term effort. Unlike the U.S. leadership and policies, which are subject to change every 4-8 years, GCC country leaders usually change only upon the death of a monarch. GCC leadership would bring consistency to the communication effort within the deterrence strategy. Again, this consistency of leadership better enables communication with all interested parties in the Middle East, not just with engagement with Iran.

Those who disagree with positioning the GCC to take the lead in this deterrent effort have two primary arguments. First, requesting the GCC to assume this leadership role will come with a price. Any partnership necessarily limits freedom of action. The GCC countries will expend a significant amount of political capital in assuming the leadership mantle. The United States will need to balance the interest of Israel to maintain qualitative advantages with the interests of the GCC in enhancing their conventional capabilities. The United States may also be requested to ease back on diplomatic pressures on the GCC countries to support U.S. initiatives in the Middle East Peace Process. Additionally, the GCC countries could use this request as leverage to influence the United States to limit highlighting of human rights violations in the GCC countries.

Second, it is arguable that deterring Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons is too important to the United States to rely on others to take the lead. However, to date U.S. efforts have failed to attain the desired results. It is generally accepted that Iran has the programs in place to achieve nuclear weapons status within the next 5 years. The IAEA continues to report a lack of cooperation from Iran in their efforts to monitor and evaluate Iranian activities in the nuclear arena.¹⁴ The United States cannot expect a change in results without a change in strategy. Promoting the GCC as the lead diplomatic face of the nuclear deterrence effort would be a significant change in strategy.

Recommendations

Every nuclear deterrence strategy must account for the possibility that efforts to deter a nation from gaining a nuclear weapon fail. While conventional military deterrence capabilities are important in attempting to deter a potential adversary from committing the resources necessary to acquire nuclear weapons in the first place, it becomes even more critical once that potential adversary has acquired a nuclear weapon. While U.S. nuclear capability will deter Iran from using a nuclear weapon, GCC conventional military strength will deter Iran from attempting to use conventional military actions under the threat of nuclear escalation. In order to ensure that the GCC countries have the requisite military capabilities, the United States should focus on the following within Central Command's Area of Responsibility:

- Encourage Foreign Military Sales investments in a robust Theater Ballistic Missile Defense capability.

¹⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007) and 1803 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (Vienna, Austria: IAEA, 15 September 2008).

- Encourage Foreign Military Sales investments in naval forces focused on mine countermeasure capabilities and fast attack littoral capabilities vice blue water platforms which some GCC countries currently seek.
- Coordinate for exercises with the GCC countries which will highlight capabilities and resources required for defense of GCC interests in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz in the absence of U.S. involvement.
- Maximize intelligence sharing in three areas; counterterrorism, general situation development and Indications and Warning.
- Ensure no spillover of extremist militias or factions from Iraq as security, stability, transition and recovery operations in Iraq continue.
- Maintain a military presence within the GCC countries even after the drawdown of forces and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to reinforce their conventional capabilities when U.S. national interest is at stake.

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