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The United States And The Persian Gulf In The Bush Administration

by Professor Bernard Reich
and MAJ Stephen H. Gotowicki, U.S. Army

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The United States is a relative newcomer to the Persian Gulf sector of the Middle East (sometimes referred to as Southwest Asia) and has been an active participant in its activities only in recent decades, primarily since the British withdrawal East of Suez. During this time the United States' perception of its interests and the policies it has adopted in support of those interests has varied considerably.

Several overriding factors have dominated the United States' approach to the Persian Gulf since World War II: concern about possible Soviet domination of the region; access to oil; the stability and security of friendly states and moderate regimes; the relationship of the previous factors to other concerns in the broader Middle East region (i.e., the Arab-Israeli conflict) and, more recently, concern over weapons proliferation. The policies and priorities developed in response to these interests and concerns have varied with each administration. There has been a desire to ensure the maintenance of open sea lanes for transporting the oil and the development of political and economic cooperation with the Arab world. The U.S. has also sought to limit regional conflicts (such as the Iran-Iraq war) that might affect other interests. Another closely linked concern has been the preservation of an independent and secure Israel. Although there has been widespread agreement on these interests, there has been little agreement on their priority. ¹

Policy Development

Until the British Government announcement in January 1968 that "we have also decided to withdraw our forces from the Persian Gulf by the same date (i.e., by the end of 1971)" the British special relationship with the Gulf states and the British presence in that sector served, to a significant extent, as a proxy for the United States. ²

The British generally represented United States interests and created and fostered conditions of calm and stability. The British role in the Gulf coincided with a period in which the United States did not take a major position in the political/security affairs of the sector and focused its activities in unofficial, nonpolitical and nonstrategic spheres that might best be described as philanthropic, missionary, humanitarian, educational, cultural, and commercial in nature.

At the time that Prime Minister Wilson announced the accelerated British withdrawal east of Suez, the United States posture in the Gulf had evolved considerably from the very limited individual and commercial dealings that had characterized its involvement in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to those focused heavily on increased commercial activity involving oil. Although the sector was not seen as vital to the United States there was a growing realization that there were important United States' interests and a potential Soviet threat which, combined with the British withdrawal, led to the need for a reevaluation of United States' policy and the assumption of new commitments and obligations for the area. The British withdrawal seemed to create a vacuum in a sector of importance at a time that Soviet influence appeared to be growing in the broader Middle Eastern region in such places as Egypt, Iraq and South Yemen. This, combined with Soviet activities elsewhere and a declining American desire to serve as the world's policeman, led to the promulgation of what later became known as the Nixon Doctrine.

We shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us. . . we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its own defense. ³

The adoption of the Nixon Doctrine led to a Persian Gulf policy which sought to create and support surrogates to ensure regional stability. The "two-pillar policy" focusing on Iran and Saudi Arabia was partially perceived to be responsive to a potential threat from the Soviet Union and its allies. Although the Nixon Doctrine was not designated specifically for the Middle East, it was applied to the Gulf sector and authorized the Shah of Iran a virtual blank check for the acquisition of U.S. military equipment to build Iran's strength and capability to help ensure stability and security in the Gulf. The Shah of Iran was particularly pleased with this concept since it comported well with his view that Iran could and should play the dominant role in the Persian Gulf with the withdrawal of the British and that there was no power vacuum because of Iran's presence and capability. Saudi Arabia moved more circumspectly at the outset and was ill-suited to the role as a pillar of United States policy given its military capability and policy inclination.

The policy of the United States as delineated by the Nixon Doctrine was carried into the Ford administration and the early days of the Carter tenure which focused its initial attention on the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution. ⁴ Carter's secondary focus on the Gulf sector shifted with the Iranian revolution, the ouster of the Shah, the taking of American hostages, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In sum, these changes undermined the concepts underlying the twin pillar policy and the Nixon Doctrine and raised new concerns about Soviet intentions and policies at the same time that Middle Eastern oil was becoming more important both as a natural resource and a source of western financial strength. Regional tensions and instability seemed to be growing.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979 dramatically altered American thinking and policy because it involved direct Soviet military action. The Soviet move raised questions not only about Afghanistan, but also about the potential threat to the Persian Gulf, as well as the Arab-Israeli sector. The invasion convinced President Jimmy Carter that the Soviet Union was a hostile, rather than a benign, power that sought regional domination and whose threat had to be countered.

The United States' reaction to the altered regional situation developed into the Carter Doctrine. It asserted that the Gulf was vital to the United States and its allies and that all action necessary, including military force, would be utilized to protect that interest from a Soviet threat. In his State of the Union Address to the Congress on January 23, 1980, Carter said the Soviet move in Afghanistan threatened a region of great strategic importance which contained more than two thirds of the world's exportable oil. He stated the United States' response (dubbed the Carter Doctrine) in these terms:

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force. ⁵

To Carter, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented but one more step in a broader Soviet move toward the Persian Gulf. The Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis supported the USSR's achievement of this goal by reducing American influence in the area and by distracting the administration from the immediate threat posed by the USSR to American interests in the region. The problem complicating the doctrine's implementation, however, was operational: the United States lacked the capacity to put it into practice effectively.

The Carter Doctrine was accompanied by the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida on 1 March 1980. This was a permanent military force designed to deploy rapidly into the region to respond to contingencies threatening U.S. interests, specifically threats to Persian Gulf oil. The RDJTF evolved from a planning concept which was then called the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). The RDF had been in the planning stages since 1977 when initially directed by Presidential Directive 18 (PD-18) which called for the formation of a "deployment force of light divisions with strategic mobility." ⁶ At its inception, the RDJTF (commonly referred to as the Rapid Deployment Force) was frequently criticized as a "paper tiger" lacking the force structure and firepower to engage effectively projected Soviet forces in the region and facing severe problems in strategic mobility to get them into the battle. The RDJTF would later become the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) during the Reagan Administration.

When Ronald Reagan became President in 1980, he maintained Carter's emphasis on the Persian Gulf-Arabian Peninsula sector, but his approach to the Middle East and its problems derived from a different set of assumptions. The Reagan administration held a broader and more negative view of the Soviet challenge worldwide (including the concept of an "evil empire"). Reagan believed that the fundamental threat to peace and stability in the region was not from the Arab-Israeli conflict (especially since Egypt and Israel were moving toward implementation of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty as scheduled) but the Soviet Union and its policies. Unlike Carter, he assumed the main focus of American interest in the Middle East to be in the Persian Gulf sector. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented a direct threat to the security of the Gulf. Reagan's policy toward Afghanistan maintained that while the United States would employ no military force (given, in part, that it was unable to secure the support of its allies), it would nonetheless provide aid to the Afghan rebels to pressure the Soviet Union to withdraw its forces.

The Reagan administration introduced the concept of "strategic consensus," which called for the regional states, from Pakistan to Egypt, to cooperate with Washington and amongst themselves

to oppose the common Soviet threat. The challenge for the Reagan administration was to convince the regional states that their primary security threat came from the Soviet Union. Strategic consensus required access and a regional network of support facilities for U.S. military forces. A principal incentive of strategic consensus was to be the expansion of U.S. arms sales to cooperative countries. For this purpose the Reagan administration supported the sale of 60 F-15 and 5 AWACs aircraft to Saudi Arabia. Except for Israel, none of the regional states embraced the concept. Regional and domestic concerns were perceived by them as greater threats than those from the Soviet Union.

In January 1983, the RDJTF formally became CENTCOM. CENTCOM was organized as a unified command with a broad and continuing mission focused on an Area Of Responsibility (AOR) that includes the Northern Tier from Iraq to Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, Jordan, and the Horn of Africa including Kenya and Sudan. CENTCOM has responsibility for all military activities and crisis military operations within its AOR. Major forces available to CENTCOM to respond to regional contingencies include five Army divisions and two separate Army brigades; one Marine Expeditionary Force (comprising a Marine division and an air wing) and a Marine Expeditionary brigade; 21 Air Force tactical fighter squadrons; three carrier battle groups and one surface action group; B-52 squadrons; and five squadrons of maritime patrol aircraft.⁷ The availability of these forces remains dependent on the absence of a concurrent crisis in another area of the world as most of these units are earmarked for multiple contingencies.

The Reagan administration was also concerned by the negative effects of the Iran-Iraq war and it adopted the view that U.S. interests in the region would not be served by a decisive victory by one side or the other. A victory by Iraq, might encourage a Soviet military intervention into Iran. A victory by Iran would risk the spread of Iranian Islamic fundamentalism into the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. As the Iran-Iraq war expanded into the Gulf and attacks against non-belligerent shipping increased in 1987, the U.S. agreed to the reflagging of Kuwaiti oil tankers and providing them with U.S. naval protection in Operation Earnest Will. Force levels of the Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR) which has been operating in the Persian Gulf since the 1940s, routinely with a flag ship and four surface combatants, were substantially increased in size with the deployment of the Joint Task Force Middle East (JTFME) in support of Earnest Will. At the height of the protection action, as many as 40 U.S. naval vessels were operating in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.⁸

The last years of the Reagan administration and the advent of the Bush administration coincided with the accession to and consolidation of power in the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev. This, in turn, led to a modification of American perceptions of the evil empire and, later, of the cold war. The Bush Administration began its tenure in office as developments in the region and world moved in directions previously unexpected. These major developments included: the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan; a cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war; the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe; developing Soviet internal political and economic transformation; an assessment of diminished Soviet military capability to threaten the Southwest Asia region; and increasing U.S. and allied dependence on Persian Gulf oil. These and related developments led the Bush administration to reassess its perspectives of the Gulf and of related Middle Eastern issues.

Oil remains an element of United States strategic/political concern in the region and as United States oil dependency grows so does the significance of the Persian Gulf. The United States has had a gradual increase in oil and energy consumption in recent years and with it have come increases in net oil imports. Because of declining American reserves and production, as well as a price that has not been sufficiently high to promote alternative energy sources and development of new oil finds in the United States, there is a growing need to import oil from abroad. The increasing dependence on imported oil necessarily links the United States to a growing need for Middle Eastern (i.e., essentially Persian Gulf) oil since this is where most of the world's oil reserves, excess production capacity, and available oil for export are located. Some estimates suggest that in the coming decade the increased dependence of the United States on imported oil will grow to between 50% and 60% of its total oil consumption and the Gulf will become the primary source for that oil. The United States requires "secure stable sources of energy supply." Thus, the United States has "a stake in the stability of the Persian Gulf and the moderation of Gulf oil policies over the long term." ⁹

The stability of the moderate regional states has been a concern of previous administrations in light of Islamic fundamentalism, expatriate Palestinians, terrorism and the minority ruling elites in some of the region's states. With a cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war, the Bush administration has been concerned with the potential for instability in the region created by Iran and Iraq, the sector's most dominant powers. Iraq now has the largest and most battle experienced military force in the Arab world and has the capability to create significant tensions in the region. Iran, although militarily defeated in the latter months of the Iran-Iraq war, continues to possess the capability to disrupt maritime traffic in the Persian Gulf, and to destabilize regional states through its support of terrorism or the export of its Islamic revolution. The Gulf Cooperation Council is not strong enough to confront effectively either Iran or Iraq without external assistance.

Despite perestroika and glasnost, the Bush administration has also been concerned about Soviet diplomatic advances in the region. The Soviet Union maintain embassies in four of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates and there have been growing contacts with Saudi Arabia despite the absence of formal diplomatic links. While increasing its diplomatic relationships with the moderate Arab states, Moscow continues to maintain a military presence and influence in Ethiopia, Libya, Iraq, Syria, South and North Yemen. In June 1989, the Soviet Union formalized its developing relationship with Iran during the Moscow visit of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, then speaker of Iran's parliament. During Rafsanjani's visit, formal economic and military agreements were signed between the two countries. ¹⁰ The military agreement was undertaken by the Soviet Union with "the explicit understanding that this will not injure the security of third countries nor make for a change in the power balance in the region." ¹¹

The Bush administration's enunciated interests in the Persian Gulf sector, in light of these factors, include the security of the oil and its free passage out of the Gulf, the security and stability of friendly regional states, and because of uncertainty concerning Soviet intentions, there remains the need (generally unstated) to contain Soviet advances. These interests do not deviate substantially from those of earlier administrations, but U.S. goals appear to reflect the changed circumstances in the region and beyond. Stated goals include maintaining stability in the

region; preventing either Iran or Iraq from dominating the region; preventing the spread of radical Islamic fundamentalism; and reducing the threat of terrorism from and in the region.

Diplomatic Strategy

The Bush administration has continued to rely on both diplomatic and military approaches in its Gulf strategy. The Gulf sector poses a number of interrelated policy issues in the political-military arena for the United States. These tend to revolve around America's past and future relationship with Iran and Iraq and their roles and activities in the region.

Iraq-U.S. relations remain a dilemma. Iraq's poor human rights record, American concerns about its development of weapons of mass destruction, and its use of chemical warfare weapons during the war with Iran and against dissident Iraqi Kurds have contributed to problems that have been heightened by the execution of Farzad Bazoft, an Iranian-born journalist living in Great Britain accused of spying on Iraq, Iraq's attempt to acquire krytons (nuclear trigger devices), ¹² and Saddam Hussein's threats to retaliate against an Israeli strike on Iraq with chemical weapons.

Baghdad's drive to acquire weapons of mass destruction and other sophisticated systems has become a particularly sensitive issue. Iraq is believed to be one of the largest producers of chemical warfare agents in the Third World and far less dependent on foreign assistance in its chemical weapons program than any of the other regional states. It could soon have a largely indigenous chemical warfare production capability. ¹³ Iraq also has a capable arsenal of short range ballistic missiles with its 650 kilometer *Al Hussein*, a locally modified Soviet SCUD-B, the 900 kilometer *Al Abbas*, and the recently claimed 2,000 kilometer *Al Tamuz*. ¹⁴ All of these systems currently use conventional explosive warheads and have poor accuracy. This gives them only limited military utility, their most optimum use being as "citybusters." Iraq demonstrated few reservations in using either its chemical weapons or ballistic missiles during the Iran-Iraq war. Added to these concerns is Iraq's potential nuclear development program. Although Iraq is a signatory to the Non-proliferation treaty and allows International Atomic Energy Agency safeguard inspections of its nuclear facilities, Washington is increasingly concerned that Iraq may seek to develop a nuclear weapon in the future. The spring 1990 U.S./U.K. seizure of krytons destined for Iraq heightened this concern.

Bush administration policy has been to try to alter Iraq's behavior and to seek to influence Iraq to move in a more positive direction rather than to penalize it. "Our policy toward Iraq has been to attempt to develop gradually a mutual beneficial relationship with Iraq in order to strengthen positive trends in Iraq's foreign and domestic policies." ¹⁵ On 12 April, a delegation of United States Senators lead by Senator Robert Dole visited Iraq to talk to Saddam Hussein and lessen the tension between the two countries. Reflecting the administration's approach, Senator Dole said "there might be a chance to bring this guy around." ¹⁶

The U.S.-Iran relationship revolves around a range of issues that include the restoration of diplomatic and other relations, the Iranian threat to regional (and other) states, Iranian support of international terrorism, and the Iranian role in the continued captivity of American hostages in Lebanon. The adversarial role of the United States during the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War remains a factor in poor relations. To limit Iran's ability to pursue the Iran-Iraq war, the United

States initiated Operation Staunch with its allies to embargo the flow of weapons to Iran. These sanctions were to continue in force until Iran had accepted UN resolution 598 and renounced terrorism as a state policy. The sanctions remain in place and Iran sees these continued war-related sanctions as evidence of U.S. hostility toward Iran.

The U.S. has little leverage on Iran and there is little prospect for improved relations in the near term. The Bush administration appears to have accepted that it can do little but wait until the Iranians decide that the time is right to reestablish relations with Washington. It is still widely assumed that Iran's need for Western technology and investment will eventually drive it toward closer relations with the West. The Bush administration seeks to contain Iran's Islamic fundamentalism to keep it from spreading to the Arabian Peninsula and to convince Iran to end its support of international terrorism. It remains a longstanding and public policy that the United States government is prepared to engage in a dialogue with any authorized representative of Iran to discuss the issues that divide the two governments with no pre-conditions. Improved relations, however are conditional on Iran stopping its support for terrorism and on using its influence to bring about the release of the U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon. On 15 August 1989, President Bush said ". . . we don't have to be hostile with Iran for the rest of our lives. We've had a good relationship with them in the past. They are of strategic importance. They would be welcome back into the family of law-abiding, non-terrorist-sponsoring nations."¹⁷ In Washington's view, U.S. interests would best be served by a strong, prosperous, non-aligned Iran. The emerging Iranian-Soviet relationship works against this prospect.

The members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates) generally have positive relations with the United States. These were enhanced by the United States' role during the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War and particularly by the United States' reflagging of Kuwaiti ships and actions to assure of freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Continued expansion of the relationship remains a goal of the United States as it seeks to assure the security of these states, their stability, and the flow of oil from the region to the United States and its allies. Nevertheless, the Gulf states will probably continue to be reticent concerning basing and access for U.S. forces.

On the international level, Washington has been seeking to expand responsibility for the security of the region. It has strongly supported United Nations peacekeeping activities in the region. Another initiative toward this end has been what Secretary Baker refers to as creative responsibility-sharing. This concept is based on the success of allied cooperation in Earnest Will which included British, French, Italian, and Dutch naval forces as well as American. Responsibility-sharing is a broader concept than burden sharing and calls for a division of responsibility for a wider range of security needs between America's friends and alliance partners.

*We must learn to pool our various strengths. Countries having different capabilities, experiences, and know-how can lend each of these capabilities, experiences, and know-how toward meeting the security challenges which we together face.*¹⁸

Secretary Baker specifically related this concept of responsibility-sharing to protection of vital shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf, coordinated responses to terrorism and to building barriers to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Military Strategy

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, on February 8, 1990 outlined a U.S. peacetime military strategy that encompasses 'three pillars': security assistance, U.S. presence, and combined exercises. ¹⁹

Underlying these three pillars is the continuing U.S. efforts to increase access for its military forces in the area.

Security assistance is the transfer of arms, services, training and provision of economic assistance to strengthen the capabilities of friendly governments. Security assistance is also beneficial to enhance bilateral relations, increase access for U.S. training and support personnel, and to demonstrate U.S. resolve and determination to support friendly states. The countries of the Persian Gulf region generally have been cash customers for U.S. weapons systems for which they express a preference. However, in recent years, U.S. Congressional refusals to sell weapons to the Gulf countries has reduced their confidence in U.S. reliability as an ally and forced them to turn to other sources such as Great Britain, France, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Congressional inhibitions seem to be changing. In July 1988 Congress approved the sale of 40 F/A-18 fighters and 300 Maverick air-to-surface missiles to Kuwait worth \$1.9 billion. ²⁰ It previously agreed to sell F-16 fighters to Bahrain. Systems under consideration in 1989-1990 include 40 F/A-18 fighter aircraft for the United Arab Emirates, ²¹ 200 M-1A2 tanks for Kuwait and 315 M-1A2 tanks (valued at \$3 billion for Saudi Arabia.) ²² The Saudis are also expected to seek replacements for their aging fleet of 110 F-5 fighter aircraft in the near future and may ask the U.S. to purchase F/A-18s or F-16s. ²³

With no permanently assigned forces based in the region, U.S. presence is limited to the JTMFE. Since the Iran-Iraq cease-fire, the U.S. has been quietly drawing down the naval forces in the JTFME in the Persian Gulf to the levels of the pre-1987 Middle East Force. This force will remain in the area as a symbol of America's continued commitment to the region and to support deployment of larger U.S. forces into the area as necessary. As for exercises, CENTCOM will continue to sponsor and conduct major combined exercises with the countries of the region. Exercise BRIGHT STAR is one such example. As General Schwarzkopf told the Committee, these exercises foster increased cooperation, interoperability, and demonstrate U.S. resolve and commitment to the host country. They also bolster American access and allow U.S. combat forces to train in the unique terrain of the region.

In addressing wartime military strategy, the Department of Defense has undertaken a major shift in its approach to Southwest Asia. This is reportedly reflected in the instructions contained in the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), a classified publication which provides strategic planning guidance to the military services and the Joint Staff for the period 1992-1997. ²⁴ The DPG directed that contingency planning be focused away from a possible Soviet invasion of Iran or the Arabian Peninsula to defense of the Middle Eastern oil fields from a range of regional threats. Planning would continue to consider the contingency of a Soviet attack, but at a lower priority. General Schwarzkopf told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he had directed his planners to put the contingency plans for facing a Soviet invasion onto the back burner. His

primary planning focus in the future was the defense of the Peninsula's oil fields and to respond to interstate conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq war, which could spill over into the Peninsula. This reorientation in Department of Defense thinking has developed over several years and is based in great part on assessments of Soviet military failures in Afghanistan. In attacking Iran, the Soviets would face terrain as difficult as Afghanistan but in an area twice as large with three times the population. Other disincentives for the Soviet Union would probably be the loss of the political momentum it has achieved with the moderate Arab regimes in the region; a setback in its improving relations with the United States and Western Europe; and the high probability of an increased U.S. military presence in the area, if not a direct U.S. military response to the Soviet invasion. Such a Soviet attack would incur great cost for little benefit.

Despite these disincentives, Soviet military operations in the region cannot be totally discounted. The Soviets maintain up to 30 divisions in its Southern Theater of Military Operations (STVD) in the North Caucasus, Transcaucasus, and Turkestan military districts. ²⁵ Soviet BACKFIRE bombers staging from bases in the South-Central Soviet Union could threaten oil facilities in the Gulf and U.S. naval forces in the Gulf and Arabian Sea. ²⁶ In the naval sphere, the Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron (SOVINDRON) operates in the Arabian and Red Seas from anchorages off the island of Socotra, and facilities in Aden, South Yemen and the Dahlak Archipelago of Ethiopia. SOVINDRON strength routinely averages 12-17 ships, which generally includes only 2-3 surface combatants. ²⁷ SOVINDRON is essentially no match for the U.S. and Western naval forces steaming in the area, it is faced with shortfalls in air defense, logistics support, and anti-submarine warfare capability. ²⁸ Thus, the Soviet naval presence in the region would seem to imply that Moscow is either unwilling or unable to challenge Western naval supremacy in this sector.

In addressing a regional threat, CENTCOM must focus its attentions on Iran and Iraq. The populations of both Iran and Iraq are war-weary and unlikely, in the near term, to support aggressive adventures. Nonetheless, CENTCOM must plan against their capabilities. Iran's military, decimated by Iraq in the last months of the war, will be incapable of a major regional ground offense for some years to come, although its naval and air forces will provide it with sufficient capabilities to pose a threat to maritime traffic in the Persian Gulf. This threat is enhanced by its possession of Chinese Silkworm missile which it has deployed abreast of the Strait of Hormuz in permanent sites such as Kuhestak. ²⁹ Iran's possession of, and willingness to use, its chemical warfare and ballistic missile capabilities must also be included in any assessment of potential regional threats. Iraq's military strength coupled with its former hegemonic designs make it a potential threat in the region as well as to U.S. interests. With the Gulf war cease-fire, Iraq is freer to pursue its regional objectives, but it still needs to repair its economy, repay at least part of its massive war debt, and rebuild its war-damaged cities, so it is unlikely to want to antagonize its Arab neighbors in the near term.

Prospects

The future of the United States' approach to the Persian Gulf as well as other policy areas will depend to a significant degree on its assessment of the Soviet Union and its intentions. The Bush administration has already undergone a substantial metamorphosis on this question although it seems not yet to have reached its final conclusion concerning the nature and intent of Soviet

policy in the Middle East as elsewhere. Noteworthy is the absence in most recent statements and policy surveys of references to the Soviet Union as a threat in the Southwest Asia sector, although the concern about the continued Soviet role, if not presence, in Afghanistan remains as does a lingering suspicion of Soviet motivation and intent. Nevertheless, the focus of policy concern seems to be associated more with regional developments and the need for resources than with a Soviet military threat.

In addressing a military strategy for Southwest Asia without a Soviet military threat, the U.S. faces some crucial problems. It must convince the regional states to cooperate in contingency planning and increased basing and access for U.S. forces. Washington failed to do this with "strategic consensus" and probably has less potential to accomplish it with only local threats on the horizon in the near term. Because of the compact geography of the region and the heightened military readiness of Iraq, Israel, Syria and, to a lesser degree, Iran, warning of an impending attack in the region might be too short for the U.S. to respond adequately. ³⁰ This situation is complicated by the low readiness of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states, the heavily armored threat forces in the region and the hesitance of regional states to request or allow deployment of U.S. combat forces until attacked. ³¹ Under these conditions, the capability of the United States to transport quickly sufficient heavy forces some 6,500 to 8,000 nautical miles by air, or nearly 12,000 nautical miles by sea ³² to oppose effectively a major regional power is problematic.

Domestic considerations will also serve to limit America's strategy in the Persian Gulf. The mounting U.S. government debt and Congressional calls for a "peace dividend" as a consequence of the "end of the cold war" suggest cuts in the U.S. force structure, overseas deployments and major improvements to strategic mobility. There is significant discussion of shrinking the force and canceling, scaling back or stretching out major programs. The populations of both Iran and Iraq are war-weary and unlikely, in the near term, to support aggressive adventures. Nonetheless, CENTCOM must plan against their capabilities. If the suggestions of former Secretary of the Navy John F. Lehman Jr. strike a chord in Congress, critical worldwide naval deployments could be reduced. In testimony before the House Armed Services committee on 27 March 1990, Lehman recommended that the Navy reduce its operational tempo throughout the world. Lehman proposed abandoning the six-month deployment cycle for naval battle groups, mothballing older ships, and increasing reserve manning of vessels. The end result would be a fleet sufficient in the latest technologies and large enough to deter the Soviets, but with longer times to mobilize. ³³ A reduced naval presence in the region would make it even more difficult to respond to fast developing crises in the Gulf.

America's interests and goals have changed little over the years, but the Bush strategy has changed to respond to the perceived contemporary realities in the region. ³⁴ The Bush administration has moved away from but not totally abandoned the cold-war focus on containing the Soviet Union and has begun to approach the Middle East and the Persian Gulf more on their own terms, than as a subset of the global East-West competition. To a great degree, it appears that the United States lacks a grand strategy for the region; policies are oriented bilaterally rather than regionally, and tend to be reactive rather than active. The Gulf balance of power centers around Iran and Iraq and the Bush administration will continue to seek improved relations with both of these countries. Logically and fiscally, the administration's initiatives on burden-sharing

and allied involvement in the region are appropriate to this approach. Nevertheless, several major problem areas remain: the anti-Islamic appearance of U.S. policies in the region will hinder expansion of its influence; ³⁵ the U.S. orientation toward defending the status quo risks antagonizing successor generations to the detriment of relations in the longer term; and U.S.-Israel relations and progress in the peace Arab-Israeli process will continue to influence its broader relations throughout the region.

Endnotes:

1. For further discussion see Bernard Reich, "United States Interests in the Middle East," in Haim Shaked and Itamar Rabinovitch, Editors, *The Middle East and the United States: Perceptions and Policies* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, England: Transaction Books, 1980), pages 53-92.[BACK](#)
2. For further details of United States policy in the period prior to the British withdrawal see Bernard Reich, et. al., *The Persian Gulf* (McLean, Virginia: Research Analysis Corporation, 1971).[BACK](#)
3. See "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen, July 25, 1969" in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard M. Nixon 1969*, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), page 359; and "Annual Foreign Policy Report, 18 February 1970", in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Richard M. Nixon 1970*, pages 118-19.[BACK](#)
4. See Bernard Reich, "United States Middle East Policy in the Carter and Reagan Administrations," *Australian Outlook* 38:72-80 (August 1984); Bernard Reich and Alexander J. Bennett, "Soviet Policy and American Response in the Middle East," *Journal of East and West Studies* 13:79-112 (Fall-Winter 1984); Bernard Reich, "United States Middle East Policy in the Carter and Reagan Administrations," *Middle East Review* 17:12-23, 60-61 (Winter 1984/1985); and Bernard Reich, "The United States and the Middle East," in *The Political Economy of the Middle East* (U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, 1980), pages 373-399.[BACK](#)
5. State of the Union Message by President Carter, January 23, 1980, in *Department of State Bulletin*, February 1980, page B (special insert).[BACK](#)
6. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), page 177. [BACK](#)
7. See Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power: Prospects for Change 1989*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), page 122.[BACK](#)
8. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Richard W. Murphy interview on NBC-TV's "Meet the Press" on August 23, 1987 in *Department of State Bulletin*, October 1987, pages 44-45. [BACK](#)
9. Statement of Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs John H. Kelly before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Committee on

Foreign Affairs, February 28, 1990. "Toward Stability in the Middle East and Southwest Asia," *Current Policy* No. 1259, Department of State, March 1990, page 3.[BACK](#)

10. USSR Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, "The Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Activity of the USSR (April 1985-October 1989)," *International Affairs* January 1990, pages 5-111, at page 93.[BACK](#)

11. Ibid.[BACK](#)

12. On May 8, 1990 Saddam Hussein asserted that Iraq had acquired a secret electronic device that could detonate a nuclear bomb and it was able to make the detonators itself. See Paul Lewis, "Iraq Says It Made an Atom 'Trigger'," *New York Times* May 9 1990.[BACK](#)

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19. Testimony of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf before the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 8, 1990. See elements of General Schwarzkopf's testimony in Patrick E. Tyler, "Soviets Said to Be 'Pouring' Arms, Equipment Into Afghanistan," *Washington Post* February 9, 1990, page A 21.[BACK](#)

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