

Looming Challenges for U.S. Security Strategy in the Persian Gulf

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Brief Analysis

One year ago last week, Iraq's military buildup near its border with Kuwait triggered the deployment of nearly 30,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen to the Persian Gulf. This robust reaction to threatened Iraqi aggression underscored the high degree of commitment, flexibility and readiness that characterizes U.S. defense policy in the region. However, changing regional realities are likely to challenge the foundations of U.S. defense strategy in the region in the coming years.

U.S. Defense Strategy in the Persian Gulf

U.S. defense strategy in the Middle East rests on three pillars: engagement, forward presence and rapid response. In the Persian Gulf, engagement aims to improve friendly nations' self-defense capabilities, promote inter-Arab defense cooperation, and improve U.S. and allied forces' ability to deploy and fight in a coalition.

To achieve these aims, having forces in, or close to the region is paramount. Since the Gulf War, the U.S. has maintained a forward presence of over 200 aircraft, twenty ships, and nearly 20,000 personnel both afloat and ashore in the region. These forces, in conjunction with U.S. forces in Turkey, deter Iraq and Iran, enforce North and South "no fly" zones over Iraq, and help police international sanctions on Baghdad.

However, even with this significant forward presence, the ability to rapidly dispatch forces to the region is essential. The key to accomplishing this is through prepositioning equipment in the region, ensuring that the requisite strategic air and sealift capabilities exist, conducting joint exercises with Arab Gulf allies, and obtaining access to host country facilities.

The U.S. maintains prepositioned materials to support the rapid introduction of additional Marine, Air Force and Army units; the latter has a heavy brigade set of equipment in Kuwait and an additional set is planned for Qatar (each with over 120 tanks, 150 infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, and logistics support for over 4,000 soldiers). In addition, Marine and Army equipment aboard ships permanently stationed in the Indian Ocean can outfit and support an additional heavy Army brigade and 17,000 Marines for thirty days.

The Defense Department is committed to improving strategic airlift by procuring up to 120 C-17 transports and possibly some Boeing 747 aircraft to replace the 240 C-141s now in service. In addition, to enhance sealift

capabilities, the Defense Department will procure nineteen large, medium speed roll-on/roll off ships (LMSRs) over the next six years.

Exercises with host country forces enhance interoperability, facilitate military cooperation and improve readiness. Such exercises promote the rapid deployment of forces to familiar host nation facilities. U.S. forces rotate through the region on a near continuous basis creating a "virtual" permanent presence in the region while avoiding the pitfalls of permanently stationing troops there.

Finally, the U.S. and all Gulf Cooperation Council states, except Saudi Arabia, have signed formal defense cooperation or access agreements; the Saudi agreement is an informal verbal agreement. These agreements form the basis for prepositioning, exercises, U.S. equipment sales, and in some instances host-nation burden-sharing of the cost of regional defense.

Strategy Assessment

The U.S. strategy has twice demonstrated its efficacy: in October 1994, when the U.S. responded to the Iraqi threat to Kuwait, and again in August 1995, when U.S. deployed forces in support of Jordan and Kuwait following the defection of Husayn Kamil. These responses demonstrated how prepositioning, forward deployment of forces, and recurring exercises with allies have enabled the U.S. to cut deployment times from weeks to days for ground combat forces and from days to hours for the air combat arm. But can the strategy adapt to the changing policy and threat environment of the Persian Gulf?

Presence: If Saddam departs the scene, will some Arab Gulf allies request a less substantial U.S. on-shore presence? For instance, will Saudi Arabia continue to allow the composite Air Force wing in Dhahran (with over 60 combat aircraft) to stay, even if Iraq is no longer perceived as a threat? Is there another potential site for this force, or is an additional aircraft carrier available to take up the slack? (The U.S. is finding it difficult to secure temporary on-shore access for thirty aircraft to replace the presence of the carrier *Independence*, which is slated to leave the Gulf this week) This element of the U.S. forward presence is vital, not only for deterring Iraq but also for deterring Iran. And while Arab allies will probably uphold existing equipment prepositioning agreements, some may not be as willing to host operational units under changed circumstances. Finally, resentment over U.S. support for ruling elites, economic problems caused by declining oil revenues, and unrequited demands for greater political openness, could fuel unrest that could affect U.S. access in the future.

Response: Can Arab Allies Grant Access Quickly? The next war will not resemble Desert Storm, in that a future aggressor will not allow a six-month American buildup. He is much more likely to strike before U.S. reinforcements arrive. Thus, rapidly deploying a large force early in a potential crisis or conflict is crucial. Accordingly, the Arab Gulf states must be willing to grant the necessary access for deploying forces despite a possibly ambiguous threat environment. If access is delayed, unmanned forward deployed equipment such as the brigade set in Kuwait may become a tempting -- and vulnerable -- target of opportunity for an aggressor.

Arab Defense Cooperation: Programs to improve the regional self-defense capabilities of the Arab Gulf states are ongoing but constrained by economic and demographic realities. These states, due to their small size, will never be able to defend themselves against their larger neighbors, Iraq and Iran, and they will remain dependent on U.S. defense assistance for the foreseeable future. And defense cooperation among the Arab Gulf states -- never good -- is not likely to improve, as old animosities have resurfaced since the Gulf War. Many are based on unresolved border claims, inter-clan squabbles, and the distrust the smaller Gulf states feel toward Saudi Arabia.

Emerging Threats -- Nonconventional Weapons: The next war is likely to feature the threatened or actual use of chemical, biological, and perhaps even nuclear weapons. At the same time, the threat environment is increasingly uncertain. At the outset of a crisis or war, the U.S. may not know what kind of nonconventional capabilities an

adversary possesses. Short of deterrence, there is no effective counter to biological or nuclear weapons at this time. Accordingly, the U.S. will have to become increasingly aware of how its deterrent posture is perceived by potential adversaries, and increasingly sensitive to how nonconventional threats may affect the resolve of its regional allies. At the very least, the proliferation of nonconventional weapons is liable to limit the freedom of action of the U.S. and its allies in future crises, and raise the potential risks and costs of military intervention.

Conclusion

The U.S. will inevitably need to adjust its regional defense strategy to account for changing regional realities. Assuring continued U.S. access, reconciling divergent threat perceptions among its allies, promoting inter-Arab defense cooperation, stemming possible domestic unrest in the Arab Gulf states, and dealing with nonconventional weapons proliferation will pose difficult challenges to U.S. and Arab Gulf defense planners in the coming years. The current difficulty in securing a Persian Gulf site for thirty additional combat aircraft, just a year after the rapid U.S. deployment to deter Iraqi aggression underscores the need to address these issues now, so that the U.S. will not be handicapped in securing its regional interests.

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