



Lessons from the Helm of Central Command (CENTCOM)

Jul 11, 1994



Brief Analysis

On July 6, 1994, General Joseph P. Hoar, CENTCOM commander-in-chief, addressed a session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Introduction

When General Hoar became chief-of-staff in 1988, Central Command's focus was on the Soviet Union. Operations and contingencies were planned to counter possible Soviet military intrusions into the Gulf region. At that time, Pakistan, considered a bulwark against Soviet designs, received about \$250 million in annual aid. Egypt was slowly regaining its position in the Middle East as a regional leader. The Gulf states were skeptical of the American commitment to their security, though this was somewhat eased by the United States having re-flagged Kuwaiti tankers during the Iran-Iraq War.

With Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the eventual end of the Cold War, it became clear that the United States needed to redefine its interests in the region. The Gulf War opened up the door to closer relations with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC understood that it could not provide for all its defense needs on its own, and American military assistance would be crucial. Moreover, the U.S. role in the Gulf War made clear -- especially to the Gulf countries skeptical of past American resolve -- that the United States was willing, able, and dedicated to defending its interests in the region.

U.S. Regional Concerns

The United States currently sees three major issues as paramount concerns in the Middle East. The first is the Arab-Israeli conflict, where a meaningful and lasting peace is desired. The second is the ongoing evolution of political Islam, whereby radical Islam increasingly conflicts with the gradual movement more toward participatory societies, in which religious institutions and democratic values blend evenly. Third, is nuclear proliferation. The United States must take the lead in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons throughout the Middle East and the world. While Middle Eastern countries that pose potential threats are probably not equipped with nuclear weapons as of yet, it is entirely possible that without diligent efforts to prevent the spread of technologies, materials, and persons affiliated with nuclear programs, especially from the former Soviet Union, countries like Iran and Iraq could acquire and produce nuclear devices.

Vital Interests

These concerns are based on two vital American interests in the Middle East. One is the maintenance of Israel's territorial integrity. There need to be reasonable assurances that Israel's security needs are being met. In the post-Cold War era, the American relationship with Israel is no longer simply dictated by evolving strategic interests, but

by regard for Israel as a permanent democratic ally.

The second is the stability of the Gulf and uninterrupted supply of oil to the West. Iran and Iraq continue to pose considerable threats to U.S. allies. Despite a severe reduction in Iraqi offensive capabilities as a result of the Gulf War and UN economic sanctions, Iraq still maintains a large and potent army that poses a regional threat to its neighbors. It retains an ability to wage limited offensive operations, deploy SCUD missiles, and promote terrorism.

Iran will become increasingly problematic in the future. That country seeks hegemony in the Gulf, an objective only possible with the removal of American power in the region. Despite any internal economic and political problems Iran may have, it can still exert substantial political and military power in the region. At any given time, Iran could close the Straits of Hormuz without warning. Iran will continue to move toward acquiring nuclear weapons. With a porous former Soviet Union and money to spend on weapons programs, without strenuous nonproliferation efforts it is only a matter of time before Iran may have nuclear capabilities.

CENTCOM in 1994 and the Future

The challenge for CENTCOM is to develop adequate American military contingencies for maintaining peace and stability in the region. Oil must continue to flow from the Middle East and the security of our friends in the region must be ensured. Furthermore, the U.S. needs to recognize the importance of its partners in the region, namely Egypt and Turkey. Egypt is indispensable to the military's ability to project power into the region. Turkey is likewise critical and deserves a greater welcome from the European Community commensurate with its strategic role.

Military force coordination is based on a three-tier approach. The first tier is each country's own defensive capabilities. The GCC's collective defense of its member states is the second tier. The third tier is a coalition of the United States, European, and possibly regional countries (e.g., Egypt, Turkey) that provide support for the Gulf nations.

America's military posture is predicated on promoting peace while preparing for possible crisis. The former is built on deterrence, where aggressor countries know that they will encounter the military resolve of the United States if they threaten the regional balance. The latter requires ready access to strategic facilities in the region to provide the United States with the ability to meet military challenges in a timely fashion.

These objectives require a forward presence and a military exercise program with regional states. The United States maintains naval forces in the region, thus reducing the need for permanent bases, and prepositions military equipment on the ground in order to reduce mobilization time. It conducts extensive combined military exercises with other regional forces in order to enhance readiness. These programs have increased seven-fold since the Gulf War. Initially bilateral, they have increasingly taken on trilateral and multilateral dimensions to include training with the GCC, the Egyptians, and the Syrians.

Conclusion

The United States needs to address the legitimate military needs of regional actors. The defense of U.S. interests in the Middle East is dependent on bold and effective American leadership, including early decision-making, extensive consultation with the regional actors, Congressional coordination and interaction, and the support of the American people.

This report was prepared by Peter I. Belk. ❖

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