

# The Royal College of Defence Studies



## RCDS 2008 – CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ISSUES

### Can The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States Overcome Their Historic Mistrust And Cooperate Effectively In Collective Security Arrangements? How Dependant On The US Must They Remain? Do They Have A Realistic Choice?

**Mark Anderson  
Goran Desancic**

October 2008

## RCDS 2008 – CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ISSUES

***Can the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States overcome their historic mistrust and cooperate effectively in collective security arrangements? How dependant on the US must they remain? Do they have a realistic choice?***

### Key Judgements

- Despite a dangerous shift in threat, directly arising from the US-led invasion of Iraq, most GCC states will continue to prioritise individual US bilateral security arrangements over their collective security.
- While the removal of the threat of Saddam's Iraq is welcomed, it also removed the existing balance to Iran in the region, making continuing US military presence essential if, to varying degrees, uncomfortable for GCC states.
- Underlying mutual distrust, particularly of the influence and power of Saudi Arabia, will see the smaller GCC states host large-scale US basing on their soil, as further assurance of their national independence and to bolster the ruling parties, despite the security risks this presence entails.
- Saudi Arabia alone has rejected US presence and does not have a US bilateral security arrangement and so will lead calls for greater collective GCC defence cooperation, which will be largely unsuccessful.
- Oman, more directly facing the threat from Iran, will tread a careful line – facilitating a large military capability in the region, while avoiding being seen to substantially host it.

### Discussion

1. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 shattered the security landscape of the Gulf region by removing the existing counter balance to Iranian hegemony and by releasing the Shiite majority in Iraq from Sunni domination. The seven states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman) are left facing a completely new strategic environment, which their dependence on US security guarantees and traditional mutual distrust leave them ill equipped to face collectively.

2. We examine the changes in the strategic landscape following the last Gulf Conflict, explore the current GCC military and technical dependence on the US, consider the prognosis for improved GCC cooperation and speculate on the likely US strategy for the region. We then draw upon this analysis to make the judgements called for.

### A Changed Security Landscape for the GCC

3. The Threat of Shiite Insurgency? For the Gulf States adjacent to Iraq, the elimination of the threat posed by Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a welcome development; yet many in the region felt the action itself was unnecessary. The first Gulf Conflict had seriously impaired the Iraqi military capability and the North and South “No Fly Zones” effectively held the aggressor in check, while leaving it to balance Iran and contain the Shiite majority. Instead, the questionable threat of large-scale armoured incursion from the north has been replaced by fears of a resurgence of Shiite power in Iraq, emboldening opposition and aggression from the GCC's own Shiite minorities. This has uncomfortable echoes of the calls for overthrow of the Arab monarchies that have emanated from Iranian Shiite clerics

since the overthrow of the Shah. Bahrain has a large Shiite population with close ties to Iran. But these fears are most evident in Saudi Arabia, where an arguably marginalised 10% of the population is Shiite (mostly located in the oil-rich eastern province) and where security incidents, such as the attack on the USAF at Dhara in 1996, have sustained continuing doubts about the extent of Iranian involvement in Shiite activities. In short, Saudi believes the US has effectively handed power in Iraq to the Iranians through their mismanagement of the post-conflict period. Iran is seen as steadily insinuating itself into the Iraqi security services, politics and commerce, while the US and Britain watch and applaud the emergence of a false democracy. Thus, the threat builds in the north and fans domestic instability. It is telling that Saudi Arabia is unwilling to send an Ambassador to Baghdad because they believe he will be kidnapped or assassinated.

4. Terrorism. The oil and gas producing GCC states must also be awake to the increased threat of terrorism to their energy related infrastructure, as well as the threat to their monarchies. While AQ once expressed the view that hydrocarbon wealth should be preserved for all good Muslims, it now judges the benefits of such economic warfare outweigh the loss. Sustained attacks on oil and gas pipelines and facilities in Iraq and elsewhere in the broader Middle East and Central Asia demonstrate this change of strategy.

5. Iran. For the lower Gulf, Qatar, the UAE and Oman, the main threat is an unconstrained Iran, freed by the US from the counter threat of an aggressive Iraq and seemingly set on achieving regional dominance by humiliating, undermining and finally expelling US presence, largely through third-party activity. The US has proved unable to contain wide spread Iranian influence and its support to groups opposed to US objectives. Without an effective regional security structure, the GCC states remain dependant on US military might to deter and contain Iran. But to express this too openly would be to invite criticism of over-dependence on a US despised by Arab populations and so encourage internal opposition to the ruling elites.

#### GCC Dependence on US Security Guarantees

6. One certainty would appear to be the US will to remain militarily engaged in the region. While political leaders may talk of ending US dependency on Gulf oil, the strategic importance of this supply to the global economy on which the US depends will keep them militarily committed to the region in strength. Yet US presence is a two-edged sword. While GCC states welcome the powerful security guarantee it offers, a strong domestic anti-Americanism, coupled with broad resentment across the Muslim world of signs of close association with such a resented power, makes a significant US footprint on GCC soil a risk in itself. A balance of risk that finally led Saudi Arabia to ask the US to withdraw its forces from within its borders. Equally, those GCC states still hosting US forces must consider their vulnerabilities to Iranian retaliation to any strike or even military miscalculation involving, or appearing to involve US forces or support, that may bring attacks upon their US targets in their own country, or even against their own national infrastructures. There are signs the US is increasingly aware of these issues and may adjust or harden its footprint accordingly.

#### The Prognosis for Improved GCC Security Cooperation

7. US/GCC Bilaterals and Regional Presence. Given the shifting strategic context and sensitivities over US actions and presence, the GCC might be expected to draw more closely together to seek mutual support and defence. Yet every GCC state except Saudi Arabia maintains a bilateral defence cooperation treaty with the US that retains clear

priority, in terms of scale, scope and activity, over the enhancement of the collective military capacity of the GCC itself. Kuwait provided the launching platform for the invasion of Iraq and still hosts major forward support facilities. Bahrain has long hosted the naval and marine command and support elements of CENTCOM, and is a favoured location for R&R and families. The UAE hosts the main regional ISTAR hub at al-Dhafra airbase and the US Navy at Jebel Ali. Following the palace coup in 1985, Qatar has turned completely to the US, offering to host a vast airbase at al-Udeid (including the regional CAOC and SOF HQ), pre-positioned equipment and stores, and a huge military presence of up to 10,000 personnel, both as a means of securing its own defence and to bolster its new ruler's independence. This has replaced the previously large US presence in Saudi Arabia, which was no longer tenable for either party. Oman, which in 1979 was second only to Saudi in the number of US military personnel it hosted, now confines itself to stowage of US war materiel and facilitation. Under an access agreement, last extended for 10 years in 2000, the US can access Oman's airfields, while bombs and other lethal munitions are forward located in airbases at Muscat, Thumrait and Maisrah Island. Collectively, this huge US military presence and entry capacity, ever more firmly entrenched in expensive, resistant and comprehensive facilities, outmatches anything the GCC could achieve collectively. Broader regional US military presence, including sea based strike capacity, provides the counter to Iran that the GCC would be unwilling to mount overtly, allowing them to take a more cautious line. It also provides the smaller GCC states with assurances for their independence in the face of their larger Arab neighbours and bolsters the ruling factions; a "free good" that clearly outweighs the security concerns such US presence entails.

8. US Equipment and Technology. GCC military procurement also reflects priority of US and foreign capability over the generation of a coordinated joint defence capacity, with a level of burden sharing. Fierce independence and historic rivalry seems to prize individual military acquisition and reliance on external military assistance over collective effort. The US encourages this dependence with extensive loans for use in buying US equipment and privileged access to high-end technology, such as the latest F-16 fighter variant, M1A1-MBTs, AWACS aircraft and JDAMS munitions. Indeed, the UAE will buy 80 F-16/E Desert Falcon aircraft that exceed the specification of the US aircraft they will fly alongside. Even Oman is buying 12 F16 A/B aircraft, with Harpoon and AIM weapons and training packages, at a total cost of \$800million; in part to keep pace with its Gulf neighbours procurement of F-16s. Some in Congress and the Pentagon doubt the ability of these states to operate and sustain such sophisticated capabilities, yet the equipment keeps coming.

9. GCC Collaborative Efforts. In contrast to the burgeoning expenditure on largely US military equipments and a growing US military footprint in the smaller Gulf states, collective security arrangements have largely stagnated. The 5000 strong GCC "Peninsular Force", hosted by Saudi Arabia at Hafr al Batin, is no larger today than it was when formed in the late 1980s. No regional air defence capacity exists outside US control, despite US encouragement and 20 years of discussion. Procurement faces the needs of individual GCC states, with no collective burden sharing arrangements, resulting in distinct shortfalls in logistic capacity, including lift and reach. GCC forces look highly sophisticated and capable but they are logistically limited to operations mainly within their own borders. A proposal, made by Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, to increase the "Peninsular Force" to a 22,000 rapid reaction force would draw upon forces based in their home countries. Yet the described lack of logistic support, interoperability and collective training make it difficult to see how such a dispersed force would be effective. The Saudi proposal, dependant on establishment of a new command structure based in Riyadh, is seen by many as a Saudi bid for influence and control over its less wealthy neighbours. Public

agreement was given in Jan 08 but no timetable was set. The preference for bilateral US arrangements, that serve to check such influence and so assure independence of the minor states, remains the clear preference. During the regional tour, we found it telling that no GCC nation seemed willing to offer some of their quite capable forces for UN peace-keeping roles outside their boundaries, if only to temper their capabilities with operational experience. The Arab mindset seems to be to stay within one's own borders.

### The Role of the US.

10. Iran vs the US. Iran continues to challenge US interests across the wider region, primarily through support to third parties, such as Hizbollah, the Shiite militias in southern Iraq and even the Taliban. The US will wish to retain the ability to counter Iranian aggression and avoid its dominance over such a strategic region. It will, therefore, retain US basing in GCC states to allow forward positioning and large-scale theatre entry, including the bilateral guarantee arrangements that underpin this ability.

11. US Gulf Strategy? The US will need to continue to support Iraqi internal and external security for some years to come, under bilateral arrangements currently being negotiated. This will probably entail their withdrawal to a smaller number of major bases, at distance from centres of population. They will wish to retain a substantial theatre entry capacity, air basing and pre-positioned land capabilities that can counter Iraq and support regional security. However, they can be expected to rationalise their footprint to fewer robust sites in less sensitive locations – that is, the smaller Gulf States. Much of the immediate striking force will be sea based. They will encourage collective training and capacity building by the GCC, through exercises and training, but under US leadership.

### Conclusions

12. While the rhetoric may indicate otherwise, the GCC will not progress toward a substantive collective defence capability, with the necessary levels of interoperability and burden sharing. Most GCC states are too focussed on their own independence and mistrust Saudi influence. Instead, they will remain reliant on US bilateral arrangements that bolster their individual identity and secure the ruling regimes. The security risks that arise from hosting large scale US forces are outweighed by the benefits.

13. Regionally, Iran is seen as the major threat, particularly a nuclear armed Iran, together with a Shiite resurgence. Only the US can provide the military capability necessary to counter the Iranian threat, yet overly close alignment with the US only serves to encourage domestic Shiite opposition. Generally, GCC actions clearly demonstrate a continued dependence on a US security umbrella.

14. This necessarily close relation with the US will be uncomfortable for the Arab states, given the disdain many of its citizens, and the wider Muslim world, have for the US. This will be more evident in Saudi Arabia, who has removed a previously large US military presence from its soil and in Oman. Yet all view any sign of US weakness in its handling of Iran, for example in the publication of the recent NIE on Iran's nuclear weapon programme, with grave concern. The GCC states understand they have no choice but to remain dependent on US military capacity for their individual and collective security.

Mark Anderson

Goran Desancic

October 2008