

US STRATEGY IN THE GULF

*Shaping and Communicating US Plans for the
Future in a Time of Region-Wide Change and
Instability*

By Anthony Cordesman

April 14, 2011

Anthony H. Cordesman
Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
acordesman@gmail.com

During the course of the next year, the US must fundamentally reshape its strategy and force posture for the Gulf. This involves challenges which would require it to decide on how to restructure its entire force posture in the Gulf as it leaves Iraq, and deal with steadily increasing strategic competition with Iran. It also, however, involves challenges that go far beyond the military dimension. For what may well be the next half-decade, the US will have to deal with a new, uncertain, and constantly changing mix of regimes and regional politics. It will need a civil-military strategy and one geared towards uncertainty and change.

Meeting New Politico-Military Challenges on Every Front

Even if the Iraqi government seeks some form of continued US troop presence, this will be at token levels with very limited facilities, stockpile, and military capability. The US presence in Iraq will largely be one designed to help Iraq deal with counterinsurgency and its internal tensions. It is Iraq that must develop the ability to defend and deter against Iran, albeit with the aid of US advisors and arms sales. And so far, Iraq has not decided how it wants to turn its Strategic Framework Agreement with the US into functioning plans and capabilities, what direction its future force plans will pursue, and what level of US advisory efforts and arms transfer it will want.

The US may or may not be able to create a stable and well-defined strategic relationship with Iraq over the next 12 months. It seems unlikely that this can happen given the level of instability and tension within Iraq, and the fact that the US will now have to struggle with Iran for strategic and political influence. It is more likely that the US will now have to use a State Department-led mix of political, economic, and military aid efforts to compete with Iran indefinitely into the future – almost regardless of any formal arrangements reached under the Strategic Framework Agreement.

At the same time, the US now faces new major uncertainties in the Southern Gulf. The wave of political unrest affecting the entire Middle East has affected both US efforts to cooperate with the Southern Gulf states in dealing with Iran, and efforts to deal with terrorism and violent extremists. The most critical examples to date are Bahrain – the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet, and Yemen. Sunni-Shi'ite tension in Bahrain has reached the level of open violence, and progress towards a peaceful and stable solution has failed to materialize so far. Yemen seems likely to pass from a declining near-dictatorship to years of instability.

This, however, is only part of the problem. There have been serious demonstrations in Oman, and at least token demonstrations in Saudi Arabia. Kuwait's awkward mix of royal, Islamic, and self-seeking service politics has become less stable. Sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite have increased in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and

Yemen as well as Bahrain. The crisis in Bahrain has triggered anger and increased sectarian tensions in Iraq and Lebanon, giving Iran further local and regional fracture points to try to exploit. The upheavals in Egypt are far from over, and Egypt's future role in the peace progress as well as a strategic partner of the US is uncertain. Jordan and Syria are facing their own problems, and Turkey's tensions with Israel, goals in Iraq, and links to Iran create a further set of problems.

The US will have to rebalance its relationships with every Southern Gulf state, restore their confidence and trust that the US will stay engaged in the region in spite of calls for budget cuts. The US will also have to restore their trust that it will support them in dealing with key security issues at a time when some regional leaders feel the US effectively abandoned Mubarak. At some level, the US will also have to establish a new approach to balancing its strategic interest with efforts to help each Southern Gulf state deal with the need for reform and a reduction in internal political tensions. Such efforts may work best as the result of quiet, low profile work by the country teams in each embassy, but the US cannot simply be passive and focus on security.

It will have to try to find some way of both helping Yemen achieve stability and strengthening Omani and Saudi capabilities to deal with a Yemen that may become far more divided, with much stronger radical and Al Qaida elements – with far greater efforts on the part of Yemenis to emigrate across borders. The US also will have to deal with the risk that both terrorism and piracy can take new forms, and new linkages may develop between extremists in Somalia, Yemen, and other parts of the region.

Gulf security will be sharply affected by developments in every area around the Gulf, but particularly by Egypt and the Levant. The US will have to deal with a radical new mix of uncertain politics and security alignments affecting Egypt and Jordan that may impact US access to the Gulf. The US must find some new way to try to work with a Lebanese government absent many post-2005 local allies, at a time when Hezbollah continues to expand its political influence.

It must juggle its desires for reform in Syria and to reduce Iran's influence, against the need for Syrian and Lebanese stability. It will also have to deal with major new complications in the search for an Arab-Israeli peace process driven by Egypt's uncertain politics, Israel's divided politics and new fears driven by Syrian instability, divisions in Lebanon, Palestinian divisions in Gaza and the West Bank and a growing Arab feeling that only treating Palestine as a sovereign state can push Israel towards some solution.

US leverage over all of these issues will be uncertain at best, but there is no issue where the US can afford to stand aside from or ignore the need to try to find some mix of diplomatic, aid, and security efforts that can make things better. This will not be easy at a time when far too many Americans focus so much on domestic politics

and economic issues, and where there is so much resistance to new foreign aid efforts and spending, and so much ignorance as to how small these efforts now are.

“Aid” and “nation building” have become four letter words in some parts of US politics, and respect for the military and calls for military spending does not imply any insight as to what military efforts in support of international security partnerships with given states really means. Such efforts cannot be successful except as part of a partnership with the State Department and at least some efforts to provide focused aid in improving governance, political capacity, economies, the rule of law and human rights. Even counterterrorism experts are only beginning to realize that success now means dealing with reform and improved justice systems. The days when this critical aspect of US policy could rely on regime stability and excessive security measures are over.

The fact is that the US must make new country-by-country politico-military efforts a critical aspect of its plan to reshape its strategic posture in the Gulf, as any solely military efforts will fail. This requires strong support at the national level in the White House, NSC, State Department and Department of Defense. It is even more important, however, that the US creates a clear strategy for a civil-military regional effort by the key desks in the State Department and by USCENTCOM, and builds up its country teams in each embassy and gives them more funding and latitude to deal with local information programs, exchanges, and aid.

This does not require changes in US strategy – almost every strategy document issued in the Bush and Obama Administrations has recognized such needs. It does, however, require new resources, money and personnel. It requires far better planning, funding, and management of efforts to execute such strategies. Most demandingly, it requires two fundamental changes in the operations of the US government.

- *First, it requires a fully integrated and well-managed effort by State, DoD, USAID, the various agencies involved in counterterrorism, and other federal agencies.* It means real integration of civil-military plans, programs, and budget and manpower resources – none of which have been fully achieved in either Iraq or Afghanistan after ten years of war. It requires someone to be in charge rather than the past reliance on ineffective coordination and good intentions. It requires State to come to grips with its dismal failure to produce a workable QDDR, and the weakness of USAID's top leadership.
- *Second, it requires a new kind of partnership between the Congress and the Executive Branch at a time when American politics are moving in precisely the wrong direction.* The Executive Branch needs to present the kind of plans and reporting that show there are realistic integrated civil military plans to justify all expenditures and programs. It needs to provide honest reporting, rather than vague, ritual justifications copied from last year's reports. It

needs to demonstrate effectiveness, and not rely on spin, exaggerate claims, omissions, and calls for trust. The Congress needs to focus on key national security needs and find some other area for partisan extremism and political advantage. It needs to look beyond narrow areas of jurisdiction, one-year budgets, and competing ideological slogans and gross oversimplifications. It needs to focus on ensuring that money is well spent, and not on budget cuts or efforts to give the military precedence over civil programs without regard to cost-benefit and need.

There may also be a third task. Both the Executive Branch and the Congress need to become far more realistic about the strategic importance and priorities of Gulf and MENA energy exports. The US government has been issuing vacuous, failed calls for energy independence ever since the Nixon Administration. It did this again during the Bush Administration – although the Bush Administration never got beyond the domestic side of policy or attempted to develop a meaningful plan. The Obama Administration has issued yet another call for such independence without flagging the fact that it will be decades -- if ever -- before the US can possibly achieve such results.

The reality is that the modeling and forecasts by the Energy Information Agency of the Department of Energy, and by the International Energy Agency, all project continued US dependence on energy imports through 2035, even given very favorable assumption about alternative energy. The US is as dependent as every other importing nation on the world price of energy imports, regardless of where imports come from, and the flow of supply from the Gulf dominates that price.

Moreover, the US is equally dependent on whether Europe and key nations like Japan, South Korea, and China get a reliable flow of affordable petroleum and gas. Globalism means dependence on the overall health of a global economy. It also means massive indirect imports of petroleum in the form of manufactured goods from other countries.

US strategy must be based on the security of global energy exports and they are driven by exports from the Gulf. Unless the Executive Branch and Congress accept this reality, they may never be able to agree on giving the region the priority and funding that vital US security interests require.

Dealing with Key Military Tasks

That said, there is a range of specific military tasks that the US does need to perform. Many are ones the US is already involved in, but it is often still unclear how the US intends to deal with given tasks. US overall strategy is unclear, and at some point in the near future it needs to go far more public in order to reassure its friends in the region and deter and contain potential threats.

To be specific, a new US strategy, force posture, and set of security partnerships in the Gulf region must address the following issues:

- *The US must do everything it can to shape a lasting strategic partnership with Iraq at the military level, and one that will rebuild the capability of its military forces to deter any outside threat from Iran or any other neighboring state.*

This does not mean rebuilding Iraq's conventional forces to their past levels, or some quick crash effort. Iraq needs to concentrate on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, rebuilding forces at a pace that can absorb modern equipment, and funding other priorities like unity and development until its export revenues increase. Iraq does, however, need to make a beginning. It needs to see it can trust and rely on the US to help, and that it can rely on US power projection in an emergency without becoming dependent indefinitely into the future.

The US also needs to fully fund near-term State and Defense efforts to build up the Iraqi armed forces, the security forces and police, and do so in ways that minimize ethnic and sectarian tensions. The combined State and Defense budget request for FY2011 and FY2012 will put the US on the right track, but they represent the minimum level needed and they need to be fully funded as soon as possible to allow them to be properly implemented in the face of a highly demanding US schedule for withdrawal. If Iraq does ask for a limited continuing US troop presence of the kind Secretary Gates has discussed, this too should be funded. It will be far, far cheaper to succeed in Iraq than to fail and turn military victory into a strategic defeat.

- *The US cannot afford any strategic illusions about Iran, or hope that regime change will somehow eliminate the need for a major and continuing US strategic presence in the region.*

The US must treat Iran as a potential nuclear power even if Israel conducts some form of preemptive strikes. It has simply moved too far, and diversified too much in expanding its nuclear technology base and long-range missile capabilities. It also will retain both chemical and biological options.

The US should not change its efforts to persuade Iran to accept arms control, but it needs to work closely with the Southern Gulf states and Iraq to examine missile defense options – and integrated approaches to an air and missile defense system using advanced systems like THAAD and the SM-2. The US should continue to repeat that it is offering extended regional deterrence and work with each state to convince them that this US guarantee is both real and offers more security than their own effort to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

The US must also, however, maintain a strong naval and air presence, and some form of land presence while it rebuilds a new form of prepositioning. It must make it clear that it will work with Iraq and the GCC states to build capabilities that deny Iran options for intimidation or military action in either a conventional or asymmetric form. This may well require stronger efforts in working with Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to develop cooperative capabilities to deal with the naval/air/irregular warfare threat to both the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman/Indian Ocean area.

The US must also work with its friends and partners to help them with intelligence on Iran's efforts to use its military, the IRGC, Al Quds force, and intelligence services like the Savak to infiltrate their security forces, exploit sectarian and ethnic tensions, carry out covert operations and sabotage, and win other forms of influence. It must help them create the kind of Special Forces, mobility, and security efforts that can deny Iran success in any such attempts.

The US goal should be to create a high degree of regional capability to act without the US – both for its own interests and to make it clear the US does not seek some form of regional dominance – although creating steadily stronger partners will take years and success may ultimately require a fundamental change in the character of Iran's regime and ambitions.

- *The US must assure its partners in the Southern Gulf that it will stay in the region, and maintain a strong and active presence in the bases and facilities the US is allowed to use in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman.*

The US should reinforce the fact that it does not want to leave any key facility or access capability in the Gulf. It should not leave any fears that it will not make use of such facilities to protect the host country, and it should – wherever possible – seek to work as a partner with host country forces, rather than turn to a US-only approach.

- *The US must continue to work with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to help them build up strong forces to contain, deter, and defend against Iran, deal with terrorism, and deal with new potential threats like instability in Yemen.*

The US already has proposed important arms transfer programs to strengthen its partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As is the case with every friendly regional state, the US should make such arms transfer an effective part of friendly forces, show it is a reliable source of training and support, and emphasize building up host country capabilities to lead and minimize dependence on the US. It should use the models provided by USMTM and the SANG advisory group in Saudi Arabia as models, and

maximize joint training, exchanges, and the use of IMET and other training opportunities in the US.

- *The US must continue to work with each state in the region to help them develop their counterterrorism capabilities, and quietly emphasize improvements they may find politically difficult. At the same time, it must now emphasize tying internal security and the rule of law to reform, and efforts to win over and reeducate potential and current extremists and terrorists.*

The US already has a strong counterterrorism effort in friendly countries in the region. It now needs to be far more careful to emphasize the limits that should be placed on such efforts, the importance of human rights and the rule of law, and the value of the kind of cooption and reintegration developed by Saudi Arabia and other regional states.

The US does need to recognize the fact that US-trained or US-equipped forces may at some point be used against civilians. This occurred a number of times during the Cold War in Latin America. In practice, however, US sales and advisory efforts have done much to help educate friendly military forces as to their responsibilities in avoiding civilian casualties and in serving the people of their country. Most of the equipment security forces are likely to use in such cases are also light and specialized, are held by specially trained security forces, and are bought from other countries or through uncontrolled commercial sales. Most major US arms sales to the Gulf (FMS or DCS) include standard end-use monitoring agreements that preclude the use of systems in anything but a national defense capacity. The US already has very active monitoring programs for this (Blue Lantern for DoS and Golden Sentry for DoD), however it may need to do a better job of advertising this fact.

At a different level, the US needs to put even more effort into advocating education reform and the kind of measures several states are taking to break down religious barriers, and educate their clergy. At the same time, it needs to be far more careful to make it clear that the US respects Islam, the Arab and Islamic worlds, and rejects the actions of its own religious extremists. This is an area where the US military cannot succeed on its own. It absolutely requires an effective civil-military partnership in the US effort at the national, interagency, command, and country-team levels.

- *The US must develop a strategy to deal with Yemen, Somalia, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.*

There are no good options for dealing with Yemen, but the US must make every effort to help a post-Saleh government develop the most effective security capabilities it can. A strong US advisory mission, and quiet aid in counterterrorism will be critical steps in this process. At the same time, the

US should work with Saudi Arabia and Oman to develop an effective approach to border surveillance and security, and examine options like the security fence plans Saudi Arabia has already developed.

More generally, the US not only needs to work with all friendly states and navies to check the threat of piracy and terrorism in Somalia and other states in the Horn, but to ensure that similar threats do not develop from other Red Sea countries. It needs to work with Saudi Arabia to strengthen its Red Sea fleet, air, and IS&R capabilities. These are areas where France, Britain, and Egypt can all play a significant role.

- *The US needs to treat Egypt and Jordan as critical security partners, in that they provide access to the Gulf and secure it from the West..*

The US should not try to cover the entire Middle East and North Africa region – although it scarcely should withdraw from parts of it. It must, however, recognize that the strategic importance of Egypt and Jordan goes far beyond the Arab-Israeli peace process and directly affects the security of world energy exports as well. Egypt and Jordan are critical parts of the US strategy in the Gulf, and US aid and security efforts need to recognize this fact.

- *The US must continue to support the Arab-Israeli peace efforts, reassure Israel, and help the Palestinians move toward full sovereignty as a state.*

The search for a just and lasting Arab-Israeli peace has all of the joys (and near-term prospects for success) of the labors of Sisyphus. It is, however, necessary. No matter how difficult the effort may be, the US needs to make it clear that it will continue to push for a peace while both helping Israel ensure its security and showing the Palestinians that the US is sincere in seeking to give them dignity, sovereignty, and a working state and security effort.

At the same time, the US must continue to make it clear that it is not offering any form of “green light” for a unilateral Israeli action against Iran. It must help Israel deal with the risks Iran poses through the same kind of measures like extended deterrence, missile defense, aid, and arms transfers that it will use to protect key Arab friends and allies.

- *The US needs to work closely with Britain, France, and Turkey to maintain a broader strategic partnership to secure the region.*

It is easy to neglect key allies on the fringes of the region. That neglect, however, could lead Britain and or France to react to their own budget crises by reducing their role in the region. It is also critical that the US recognize Turkey’s steadily expanding role and influence, and do as much to strengthen

its military partnership with Turkey outside the boundaries of NATO as possible.

- *At a technical level, the US needs to develop coherent plans for cooperative intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R), missile and air defense, mine warfare, and arms transfer efforts in the region that emphasize partnership on a broad cooperative level.*

There is no way the US can hope to impose standard military architectures on a region with so many conflicting national interests and priorities. It can, however, update its efforts develop its own architectures that cover key military tasks in the region, which give friends and allies an incentive to cooperate in the form of enhanced capability, reduce the burden on US forces, and prepare for added cooperation when contingencies alter the willingness of partner states to work together.

Setting Broader Strategic Priorities

Finally, it is far from clear that the US does have to make hard choices between its current strategic priorities. Its direct defense expenditures are still close to 4% of its GNP – far lower levels than during the demanding periods of the Cold War. Even if one adds in all related State Department and aid expenditures, and all of the foreign aspects of Homeland security, the total is under 5%. This would still be true if the US funded all of the necessary enhancements on the civil side of its security posture in the Gulf and the broader MENA region, and the cost will drop far below 5% if the US can largely end its troop presence in Afghanistan after 2014.

The US also has allies and partners in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Gulf. While all have limits, all do help sharply reduce the burden of US commitments, and many could be stronger partners – and reduce US budget costs – if the US made a properly funded and more effective effort to work with them. The currently proposed US arms transfer to Saudi Arabia and the UAE are cases in point.

If the US does have to make choices, however, it should give priority to the Gulf and Asia, and pay close attention to some of the advice from Secretary Gates about the merits of a major land conflict in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan and Pakistan is both extremely costly and offers only a marginal chance of enduring US grand strategic success. The US has yet to find a reliable partner in the Afghan government, and its role in Pakistan remains even more uncertain. Moreover, even if the US can lead ISAF and the ANSF to a successful implementation of a “clear, hold, build, transition” strategy it is unclear that it will have a lasting impact once US and ISAF forces are gone.

More broadly, the US is now in central and south Asia because of 9/11, and not because it has clear and lasting security interest that require it to be there.

Geography means that Central Asia will always be more of a focus for powers like Russia and China, and the US has no clear military reason to try to affect the balance between Pakistan and India – as distinguished from encouraging both states towards peace. If trade-offs have to be made – and it is far from clear that such trade-offs are necessary – the US needs to reexamine its priorities for being in – or staying in – a region where the best way to win the new “Great Game” may well be not to play it. The Persian Gulf is a different matter entirely. Iran cannot be allowed to dominate the region, and the continued safety of energy exports from the Gulf is a core US National Security priority. Afghanistan is a war of choice – defending the Persian Gulf is a necessity.

The Burke Chair in Strategy has released a number of reports on the current situation and future trends of the Gulf and the wider Middle East. Please find their links below:

Stability in the Middle East and North Africa: the other Side of Security

This report examines the range of indicators that do seem to underlie the current unrest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area.

<http://csis.org/publication/stability-middle-east-and-north-africa-other-side-security>

Understanding Saudi Stability and Instability: A Very Different Nation

This commentary discusses the recent unrest in the region in regards to Saudi Arabia.

<http://csis.org/publication/understanding-saudi-stability-and-instability-very-different-nation>

GCC Security, Risk Assessment, and U.S. Extended Deterrence

This report details the security dynamics of the Gulf region.

<http://csis.org/publication/gcc-security-risk-assessment-and-us-extended-deterrence>

US, Gulf and Israeli Perspectives of the Threat from Iran

This report examines the perspectives Israel, the US and Iran have on their strategic competition.

<http://csis.org/publication/us-gulf-and-israeli-perspectives-threat-iran-part-1>

U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

This report analyzes the nature of the competition between Iran and the US in each Arab Gulf country, paying special attention to Saudi Arabia’s major role.

<http://csis.org/publication/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition>

U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Iranian Views of How Iran's Asymmetric Warfare Developments Affect Competition with the US and the Gulf, Sept. 2010 – Feb. 2011

This report examines press statements from Iran on their asymmetric capabilities

<http://csis.org/publication/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition-1>

US Strategic Competition With Iran: Energy, Economics, Sanctions, And The Nuclear Issue

This report examines how energy, economics, trade, and sanctions all interact with the nuclear issue.

<http://csis.org/publication/us-strategic-competition-iran-energy-economics-sanctions-and-nuclear-issue>

U.S. And Iranian Strategic Competition: Competition between the US and Iran in Iraq

This report examines the competition for influence between the US and Iran inside Iraq.

<http://csis.org/publication/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition-0>