46. *Persian Gulf* **Policy**

The U.S. government should

- terminate formal and informal U.S. security commitments to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates;
- abandon the "dual containment" policy directed against Iran and Iraq;
- end U.S. participation in Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Southern Watch;
- withdraw U.S. military personnel and prepositioned equipment associafed with U.S. security commitments to the southern gulf countries;
- encourage the southern gulf states to take responsibility for their own security by bolstering their national self-defense capabilities and enhancing regional defense cooperation through the Gulf Cooperation Council;
- provide limited U.S. assistance, especially advice on enhancing the effectiveness of national force structure and integrating southern gulf military capabilities, to the southern gulf states individually and to the GCC; and
- end its policy of trying to manage Persian Gulf security and instead act only as a balancer of last resort if developments in the region pose a serious threat to vital U.S. national security interests.

Since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Washington has assumed almost total responsibility for Persian Gulf security. The twin pillars of U.S. Persian Gulf strategy are the deeply flawed "dual containment" policy—which seeks to contain Iran and Iraq simultaneously—and U.S. security commitments to the southern gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait,

Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It is a risky and expensive strategy that threatens to embroil the United States in myriad conflicts (including civil wars) in the perennially unstable gulf region. The strategy also is probably unsustainable over the long term.

U.S. Interests in the Persian Gulf Region

The United States has no vital national security interests at stake that justify attempting to manage Persian Gulf security. The end of the Cold War has reduced the strategic significance of the gulf region, and there is considerable disagreement about the nature and importance of the remaining American interests there. Proponents of an activist U.S. policy usually cite Persian Gulf oil as the primary reason to maintain current policy.

Unhindered access to gulf oil is desirable, but it is not so essential to the American economy that it rises to the level of a vital interest. The United States currently buys only $11 billion worth of gulf oil per year, yet U.S. taxpayers spend $40 billion to $50 billion (some analysts estimate as much as $70 billion) per year to defend the region. During the Cold War, the possibility that the Soviet Union could gain control of gulf oil was a formidable threat. Regional powers, however, depend too heavily on oil revenue to withhold supplies altogether and could raise prices only modestly. Moreover, Western Europe and Japan are much more dependent on gulf oil than is the United States; to the extent that outside powers should be concerned about regional contingencies, the West Europeans and the Japanese should play a leading role.

Dual Containment

Martin Indyk, the U.S. ambassador to Israel and the architect of the dual containment policy, set forth the following conditions in 1993 as essential to the pursuit of dual containment:

- cohesion of the gulf war coalition;
- cooperation of Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other GCC states in U.S. efforts to preserve a regional balance of power favorable to the United States;
- continued U.S. military presence in the region; and
- successful restriction of Iraqi and Iranian military ambitions.

By the end of 1996, two of those conditions were clearly absent. The gulf war coalition began to unravel years ago, but its demise was undeniable

after September 1996, when the United States launched cruise missiles against targets in Iraq in response to Iraqi participation in attacks against the Kurdish city of Irbil. Great Britain was the only enthusiastic backer of the U.S. action; Israel, Germany, Japan, and Kuwait offered only belated and lukewarm endorsements. All of the other gulf war allies either refused to endorse the operation—as such key U.S. allies as France and Saudi Arabia did—or denounced it outright—as Russia and China did.

The ability of the United States to rely on the cooperation of its major allies in the region (except perhaps Israel) to support U.S. efforts to influence the regional balance of power is likewise a thing of the past. Not only did U.S. regional allies fail to endorse Operation Desert Strike, but Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan refused to allow the United States to use air bases within their territory to conduct the operation.

Two of the four prerequisites for dual containment no longer exist, and the other two are increasingly precarious. The extent to which the United States has succeeded in restricting Iranian and Iraqi military ambitions is unclear. And the U.S. military presence in the region is increasingly the target of violent opposition, as the 1996 bombing in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and the 1995 bombing in Riyadh (which together killed 24 U.S. troops) suggest. In the conservative and xenophobic southern gulf societies, the American military presence is often a lightning rod for discontent.

Moreover, dual containment is a bad policy in any event. Though it seeks to avoid previous ill-fated attempts to cultivate one regime to counter the influence and power of the other, it invites even more problems. The consequences of isolating Iran and Iraq for the United States could be grave. An anti-U.S. alliance between Tehran and Baghdad is not inconceivable. And in the event of either regime's breakdown, many forces in the gulf region will seek to exploit the ensuing chaos, making a regional war—which the United States will have little hope of avoiding—nearly inevitable.

U.S. *Security Commitments in the Southern Gulf*

The other pillar of U.S. Persian Gulf policy is the network of formal and informal security commitments to the southern gulf states. The southern gulf is effectively a U.S. military protectorate. Regional sensitivities prohibit the United States from permanently basing U.S. military personnel in the gulf countries, but approximately 10,000 to 15,000 troops associated with the Fifth Fleet and rotational air force deployments in Saudi Arabia are in the region at any given time, plus troops participating in exercises.

The United States also has large amounts of prepositioned equipment in Kuwait and Qatar and is negotiating for permission to move additional equipment to the United Arab Emirates. Guaranteeing southern gulf security, however, is a risky undertaking and may ultimately prove an unsustainable policy.

There are numerous disputes between U.S. allies in the region. Although the U.S. military presence in the gulf is ostensibly intended to protect friendly countries from Iran and Iraq, many of the southern gulf countries fear threats from one another more than they fear Tehran's mullahs or Saddam Hussein. The smaller states are suspicious of Saudi Arabia. Ongoing feuds between the smaller states—Bahrain and Qatar, Oman and the UAE, and others—are also a source of tension.

The southern gulf monarchies also face serious internal problems. The fall in oil revenues has severely strained the region's cradle-to-grave welfare states. That economic pressure has tremendous political implications in countries where corrupt and authoritarian rulers have long relied on state largesse to pacify restive populations. Consequently, gulf monarchs face increasingly serious internal security threats. Major disturbances in Bahrain, for example, have prompted some experts to speculate that Bahrain may become the "next Iran." The comparison with Iran has also been applied to Saudi Arabia, where internal discontent also often has a strong element of anti-Americanism, as attacks on U.S. military installations in the kingdom have indicated.

Burden sharing is yet another major—and growing—problem. The American public has little tolerance for paying for the security of oil monarchies (or for transforming U.S. troops into mercenary forces at the service of sheiks, for that matter). Yet the southern gulf monarchies are increasingly unwilling or unable to pay the United States to defend them. The United States, if it is determined to continue guaranteeing gulf security, must plan on covering much, probably most, of the costs. Those costs are at least $40 billion per year and rising—an expense U.S. taxpayers cannot afford and should not be asked to pay.

A Way Out of the Persian Gulf Morass

Instead of devoting tremendous resources to a strategy that is probably unsustainable, the United States should rethink its Persian Gulf strategy. No policy will be risk free, but a lower profile and a more realistic strategy would probably be less risky and would certainly be less costly.

The United States should abandon the dual containment policy. According to the criteria set out by its own author, it is no longer a realistic policy (and many experts would argue that it never was). And instead of acting as the guarantor of Persian Gulf security, the United States should make clear to the southern gulf monarchies that they, not Washington, are primarily responsible for their own security.

That would restore the incentive for the GCC states to think seriously about security cooperation—not only with one another but perhaps with other Middle Eastern powers as well. The United States would still have the option to intervene in the region in the event of a threat to U.S. vital security interests, but U.S. involvement in regional crises would not be automatic. Unraveling the current tangle of U.S. security commitments to the southern gulf states would restore the full range of policy options instead of steering the United States into regional or civil wars.

Suggested Readings

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—Prepared by Barbara Conry