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Increasing Security in the Persian Gulf

Until 1970, Washington thought of the Middle East almost solely in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But then the Persian Gulf became—quietly at first, noisily after 1978—the United States' central concern. The Persian Gulf hitherto had been considered to be safely in Western hands, in part because of the British presence there, in part because no one threatened it. When the British withdrew from Aden in 1967 and from the Trucial States in 1971, while the Soviet Union expanded its navy into the Indian Ocean in the late 1960s, the Persian Gulf was transformed from a Western preserve into a power vacuum. At the same time, oil became a more scarce and valuable commodity, enhancing the importance of the region during the 1970s. The Persian Gulf's new uncertainty and its new value together made the guarantee of steady supplies from the area a primary American concern. The alternative, Soviet hegemony over the region, could imply economic depression, the collapse of NATO, and a fundamentally changed international political order to the disadvantage of the United States.

Though slow and faltering, U.S. responses to the dangers in the Persian Gulf have developed along two clear lines, military and political; in current parlance, the solutions are labeled the "Rapid Deployment Force" and "strategic consensus." These efforts are tightly intertwined: bases for American forces near the region require political agreement with local governments, while finding allies depends in part on Washington's willingness and ability to project force to protect its clients. The United States has tried to win various rights from friendly governments near the Persian Gulf, including the stocking of pre-positioned equipment, building intelligence facilities, acquiring overflight and landing permission, docking rights, and so forth. Ideally, of course, Washington seeks naval and air bases, but these are hard to come by. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has pursued parallel policies.

The United States has worked hard to win such friends in the Middle East, devoting massive resources to the effort. A majority of all U.S. foreign aid in recent years has gone to the Middle East; Middle East governments have had special access to U.S. weapons, including such advanced equipment as F-15s and AWACS; U.S. support for the Camp David accords made it possibly the first subsidized peace treaty in history; and successive administrations have encouraged regional coordination efforts, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council formed in 1981.

A decade since the rise of the Persian Gulf to prominence, the record of U.S. attempts to win allies in the Middle East calls for appraisal. How much steady and full support has the United States gathered for its

goals in the Persian Gulf? How many states share U.S. concerns about the Soviet Union and are willing to facilitate a way for the United States to deal with Soviet power? The record is unimpressive. Only three states, Iran, Oman, and Israel, have fully aligned themselves with Washington on Persian Gulf issues; otherwise, Middle East governments are reluctant to participate in the "great game." Moscow encounters this hesitancy, too.

A survey of relations between Middle East governments and the superpowers in the past decade suggests two patterns: (1) close alignment with a superpower increases opposition, internal or external, to the Middle East government involved; and, as a consequence, (2) few Middle East governments align with a superpower.

While Sadat warmly espoused Western interests, he rejected U.S. attempts to secure bases in Egypt, allowing only "facilities" for pre-positioned equipment. Egyptian officials indicated that long-standing sensitivities to foreign soldiers, dating from the days of the British and Soviet presence, would make the presence of Americans in uniform in Egypt very unpopular. Even so, one factor in Sadat's assassination was his cooperation with the United States. While Turkey is a member of NATO, it refuses to allow the use of U.S. bases in Anatolia in connection with the Persian Gulf or Iran—a decision that clearly shows the distinction drawn between cooperation on strategic issues and regional ones. Saudi Arabia enjoys a "special relationship" with the United States dating back to the 1930s and involving such diverse components as oil sales, technical assistance, and military training. Despite this relationship, U.S. troops are emphatically unwelcome in Arabia, and efforts to convince the Saudis that they need American protection have failed. Riyadh chooses to rely on its own manpower, however thin, and spends extraordinary sums on its military (\$25 billion in 1981-1982). The Saudis are so eager to keep the Arabian peninsula clear of American soldiers that they pressured Sultan Qabus of Oman to deny bases to the Rapid Deployment Force and offered him \$1.2 billion as an inducement, replacing the sum he would have received from the United States. Bahrain has restricted U.S. access to its docking facilities, also with Saudi prodding.

Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi viewed Soviet intentions in the Persian Gulf with a suspicion similar to Washington's. He armed Iran with an eye to blocking Soviet expansion and built a navy to fill the void created by the British withdrawal. The Shah accommodated America too much for both his own good and America's; he became so closely identified with U.S. interests that his enemies could convincingly portray him as a puppet of Washington, a ruler who sold out to foreign interests. This accusation acquired great importance in the late 1970s and contributed directly to the success of the revolution. Large-scale U.S. military co-

operation with Pakistan is just now beginning with the sale of advanced fighter aircraft. Although Pakistan is seen primarily in the context of resisting the Soviet assault on Afghanistan, its proximity to the Persian Gulf may tempt American planners to press it for help with the Rapid Deployment Force. The Pakistani government will probably reject these requests, for to accept them would inevitably arouse domestic opposition.

Israel, of course, stands in unique relation to the Persian Gulf. Perceived as the outstanding enemy of the Arabs, it has no reason to court Saudi or Kuwaiti good will while having every reason to stand up to the Soviet Union in order to make itself useful to the United States. Unlike the Muslim countries of the Middle East, Israel, by cooperating closely with the United States, does not create domestic problems. (If a thoroughly Christian state emerged in Lebanon, it too could ally whole-heartedly with the West.) Israel can offer the immense military advantages of the strongest force in the region and a strategic location; but, of course, relying on Israel has severe political and economic costs for the United States and could mean losing all the Arab allies it now has. It is therefore not surprising that Washington has taken up Israeli offers of help with extreme caution.

Moscow suffers from similar difficulties when it attempts to win useful allies in the Middle East. If anything, its troubles are even worse than Washington's, for Middle Eastern leaders frequently use a Soviet connection only to balance Western influences, not out of genuine sympathy for Soviet goals. For example, Qaddafi broke Libya's military ties to the West and turned to the USSR for arms; he even threatens occasionally to join the Warsaw Pact. But he abuses Marxists with relish and pursues his own policies around the globe (which at one point included giving aid to the Afghan rebels). Iraqi leaders act in like manner; having signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1972, they periodically assert their independence from Moscow by executing local communists, buying arms from the West, and airing charters that call for the expulsion of all non-Arab forces from Arab lands. For twenty-five years, Russia supplied Egypt with generous help—the Aswan Dam, a rebuilt military after 1967, excused debts, wide political support—but has little to show for it. Nasser and Sadat took what they could and gave minimally in return.

Sharp local reaction often follows close alignment with the Soviet Union. Syrian leaders agreed, after years of acrobatic nonalignment, to sign a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1980, and they began to toe Moscow's line more closely (for example, voting with the Soviets on Afghanistan at the UN). These concessions came from the Asad regime at a time of weakness, when economic woes, internal opposition, overcommitments in Lebanon, poor relations with Iraq and Jordan, and

tension in Israel made it hard to resist Soviet demands. Violent anger against these close relations has grown within Syria, leading to the assassination of high-ranking Soviet officers and spurring antigovernment disturbances. When the pro-Soviet Afghan government that took power in 1973 drifted toward neutralism, Moscow had a key role in arranging for a more friendly regime to take over in 1978. Afghans showed massive opposition to the new government through the *mujahidin* rebellion. The more Kabul relies on Moscow for assistance (now nearly 100,000 troops), the less support it can mobilize at home; by now, the Afghan government's army has virtually disappeared.

In the entire Middle East, South Yemen alone acts as a secure and reliable friend to the Soviet Union, both internationally and on Persian Gulf issues. This pro-Soviet stance presumably provokes domestic opposition, but we know next to nothing about developments within South Yemen.

The Soviet inability to win close allies confirms that the poor American record in finding assistance for the Rapid Deployment Force is the result of the political culture of the Middle East, which so strongly disapproves of associations with outside powers—and not because of American incompetence. Iran since 1979 provides an extreme example of this unwillingness to get involved: despite great pressures and concerted superpower efforts to win influence in the country, the government has maintained its antagonism toward both the United States and the Soviet Union. Eventually, if the current government has to choose sides, it will probably provide the barest minimum to its patron.

This pattern of reluctance to help the superpowers makes the Middle East unlike other regions of the world. Nonaligned nations exist everywhere, but what makes the Middle East unique is that even the *aligned nations hold back*, unwilling to aid the United States or the Soviet Union more than they have to. Contrast the reluctance of Saudi Arabia and Iraq with the actions of aligned nations in other regions, say the Germanys, the Koreas, Thailand and Vietnam, Mozambique and Zaire, El Salvador and Cuba. American or Soviet attempts to induce greater involvement generally fail in the Middle East in the face of domestic opposition to collusion with the superpowers. This opposition will exist in the future as well; how can U.S. plans for Persian Gulf security, by taking it into account, become more effective?

Two tracks look promising. First, Washington can seek alternatives to bases in the Muslim countries of the Middle East by building up its own military self-sufficiency and by finding bases elsewhere. A program of naval expansion gets around the intricacies of Middle East diplomacy but at a prohibitive cost; placing aircraft carriers and battleships in the Indian Ocean would probably require unacceptable cutbacks in other

areas of the military budget. The search for bases outside the Middle East should go on, even if such ports as Diego Garcia, the Comoro Islands, Réunion, Simonstown, and other Indian Ocean locations are remote from the Persian Gulf.

Second, Israel provides the United States with powerful diplomatic leverage. Hints that Washington intends to turn to Israel for help with Rapid Deployment Force planning will upset the Arab countries and possibly spur them to cooperate more closely with the United States. Not wanting to see the strengthening of the U.S.-Israel axis might counterbalance domestic pressure against helping a superpower. In this way, the United States can turn its friendly relations with Israel from a liability vis-à-vis the Arab states into a source of influence. Washington must not demand too much—remember the shah—and it must handle this assignment with the utmost subtlety and tact, for the plan can easily backfire; but if it does it right, Washington should be able to prod such countries as Saudi Arabia to be more forthcoming, perhaps to provide help no less than the “facilities” in Egypt. The United States has the advantage of having a virtual monopoly on good relations with the most powerful state in the Middle East; with intelligence, this can be used to overcome Israel’s enemies’ reluctance to help the United States ensure the security of the Persian Gulf.

DANIEL PIPES