

The Persian-Arabian Gulf and the Revolution in Military Affairs

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As in most regions in the world, observes in Persian Gulf states do not view the United States as being in the middle of a “revolution in military affairs,” (RMA) but rather as the world’s sole remaining superpower. To these defense planners, the United States emerged from the Cold War and the Gulf War with a major advantage in conventional forces, military technology, power projection capability, and nuclear forces. The Gulf states also do not think of U.S. military capabilities in isolation from the regional balance of power. They think of the United States as the fourth player in a regional balance shaped also by Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. However, other smaller Gulf powers, peripheral states, and the major external powers like China, Britain, France, and Russia can also play a significant role.

As a result, it is dangerous to attempt to force Gulf motives and behavior into the context of U.S. terms like the “revolution in military affairs.” The game of nations that shapes the struggle for power in the Gulf is a much broader one, driven largely by the threat posed by Iranian and Iraqi strategic ambitions, Saudi Arabia’s need for status and security, and the desire of the smaller southern gulf states to find some way to create the balance between the larger powers in the Gulf that provides the most security, status, and freedom of action. Military power is an important element in this game, but only one element among many.

The Current Military Balance in the Gulf

The region's armed forces are the product of a military build-up that is now well over a quarter of a century old. They are the products of an arms race that began long before the revolution in military affairs and which is driven by many other factors. It owes its origins to the Cold War, Nasserism, the fall of the Hashemite dynasty in Iraq, the Arab-Israeli War, British withdrawal from the Gulf, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and a host of minor regional quarrels.

At the same time, the current arms race does react to regional perceptions of U.S. military superiority and shows no signs of ending. Arms purchases ensure a steady flow of new arms and technology diffusion. Iran and Iraq retain major warfighting capabilities, and the problem of proliferation not only can reshape the military balance but introduce whole new forms of terrorism. The southern gulf states have done little to create effective deterrent and defense capabilities and have pursued their national "glitter factor" over regional cooperation, leaving it vulnerable if the United States and its allies should weaken their presence and power projection capabilities. "Creeping" or not, the problem of proliferation has already arrived.

The Iranian and Iraqi Challenge to the U.S.

Iran and Iraq seek to break out of containment, counter the U.S. military advantage, increase their power and strength in the region, and obtain some degree of hegemony. Both Iran and Iraq are also well aware of U.S. power and have developed a keen appreciation of Western military technology. Both states have experienced military defeat by the United States: Iran in the "tanker war" of 1987-1988, and Iraq in the Gulf War and in a long series of encounters like Operation Desert Fox that continue to this day.

While Iran and Iraq may not formally articulate this aspect of their policies, both nations are also clearly aware that there are six potential ways to defeat the U.S. advantage in conventional forces, military technology, power projection capability, and nuclear forces:

- *Conventional build-up:* They can attempt to compete directly with the United States by building up the quality and quantity of their conventional forces to the point where they can deter or defeat U.S. action, or raise the cost of U.S. action to an unacceptably high level.
- *Proliferation:* They can seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction as a deterrent to U.S. military action, to create a capability to destroy critical regional and allied capabilities before the United States can react, and to threaten U.S. forces, allied territory, and even U.S. territory with covert or proxy attacks.
- *Asymmetric warfare:* They can attempt to exploit methods of warfare where the United States does not have a clear advantage. These include terrorism and the use of proxies; covert attacks; low intensity and highly political conflicts where the United States lacks the political justification to escalate; armed support of opposition, ethnic, and insurgent movements in other countries; the use of civilians and civilian facilities as shelters and sanctuaries; and forms of warfighting like mine warfare and threats to the shipping channels in the Gulf where the United States faces major problems in dealing with the kind of conflict involved. They also include terrorist attacks on U.S. forces, allies, and territory.
- *Diplomatic “warfare:”* Iran and Iraq can seek to use diplomatic means to limit U.S. military action, force reductions in the U.S. presence in the region, and force or persuade U.S. allies and potential coalition partners to limit their ties to the United States. This “warfare” includes efforts to manipulate the southern gulf states, key peripheral states like Turkey, and outside powers like China and Russia, and the United Nations.
- *Confrontations and Wars of attrition and endurance:* Iran and Iraq can attempt to engage the United States in prolonged confrontations, low-level conflicts, and episodic crises where the United States cannot take active advantage of its military superiority or

escalate, and is trapped into a indefinite, costly, and frustrating process of containment that it cannot terminate or “win.”

- *Adaptations of technology to areas of U.S. vulnerability:* So far this threat seems to consist largely of information warfare and areas like cyberterrorism.

The recent history of the Gulf is to some extent the history of Iranian and Iraqi efforts to exploit these techniques, although Iran and Iraq have faced continuing problems because of their past defeats, sanctions and containment, and limited resources. These problems have been most severe in the case of Iraq.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, it was the dominant regional military power in the Gulf. It had decisively defeated Iran during the spring and summer of 1988, in battles that cost Iran some 45%-55% of its inventory of major land force weapons. Furthermore, the United States and the United Kingdom had inflicted major losses on the Iranian Navy in the “tanker war” of 1987-1988, leaving it with little ability to challenge Iraq. Iraq had the only modern, combat effective armored and mechanized forces in the Gulf and an air force that was emerging as combat effective for the first time. It had massive missile forces and chemical warfare capabilities, was beginning to deploy large numbers of biological weapons, and was making substantial progress in developing a nuclear capability.

Iraq has managed to rebuild and reorganize its forces that survived the Gulf War, but it now has only about half the land and air capability it had when the air campaign began. It has not had any significant imports of arms or military technology since the summer of 1990, and has had no real opportunity to react to many of the lessons of the Gulf War. Most of Iraq’s missile, chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities were dismantled by the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and there have been no visible signs of major new efforts to proliferate since UNSCOM and the IAEA left in December 1998. Iraq’s efforts to acquire new military technology and develop its military industries have been severely limited by the impact of seven years of UN sanctions. Iraq’s

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regime, however, has not changed and it remains a significant threat to all its neighbors. It is likely to be a revanchist state as long as Saddam Hussein is in power, and will seek to rebuild its military power as soon as it can do so.

Iran in contrast, has partially recovered from its defeat in the Iran-Iraq War, and is again a major military power by Gulf standards. However, Iran is scarcely a modern military power by U.S. standards. Many of Iran's post-Gulf War arms imports have done little more than offset the steadily greater obsolescence of its Western-supplied equipment, and it has had only limited imports of modern aircraft and armor.

Iran has reacted by developing military capabilities that are carefully focused on potential weaknesses in U.S. capabilities. The massive infantry-artillery dominated forces of the Iran-Iraq War are being replaced by forces shaped for specific missions. It has developed a substantial capability to threaten shipping through the Straits of Hormuz and the rest of the Gulf, and has developed a substantial capability for unconventional warfare that it can project into the Gulf and throughout the region. It has steadily increased its missile, chemical, biological warfare capabilities, and is seeking nuclear weapons.

Unlike Iraq, however, Iran is in the middle of considerable political change. The election of President Khatami in May 1997, has revealed a major split between Iran's "moderates," "traditionalists," and extremists. The elections to the Majlis in the spring of 2000 indicate that the "moderates" are now winning. While Iran continues to develop long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction, Iran has given its economy a higher priority than arms and has reduced its support of terrorism and has steadily improved its relations with its southern gulf neighbors. There is at least some prospect that the United States and Iran can reestablish diplomatic relations over the next few years, although no one can predict the future course of the Iranian revolution and how "moderate" Iran will really become.

The Role of Saudi Arabia and the Southern Gulf States

In contrast, the southern gulf forces have tended to maintain the status quo. For all the rhetoric surrounding the Gulf Cooperation Council, the southern gulf states remain as divided as at the start of the Gulf War. Their arms purchases reflect the same lack of effective standardization, interoperability, and focus on key missions as was the case before the Gulf War.

Some southern gulf countries have made significant improvements in individual aspects of their military capabilities. The Saudi Air Force is a case in point. However, no southern gulf state can boast of a cohesive effort to modernize all of its forces, or take advantage of the revolution in military affairs. southern gulf military planning remains dominated by politics and petty rivalry, and far too many arms purchases focus on new technology and the “glitter factor,” rather than effective war fighting capability.

Far too little real progress per dollar has been made in the effective defense of Kuwait and the Saudi border with Iraq, and in dealing with mine warfare and the Iranian naval threat in the lower Gulf. Far too little emphasis has been placed on training and sustainability and many of the arms purchases made since the Gulf War have done little to improve military effectiveness. In many ways, the security the United States provides through its revolution in military affairs has allowed the Gulf states to pursue their own separate interests without creating either effective national forces or cooperative security efforts.

The Future Trends in the Gulf and the Revolution in Military Affairs

There are four major trends in regional stability and the regional military balance that seem likely to shape the Gulf’s reaction to the “revolution in military affairs” well into the twenty first century.

First, the Gulf states have made little progress since the Gulf War in dealing with their structural economic problems and political divisions. Iraq, whose economy had largely collapsed during the

Iran-Iraq War, experienced a full collapse in 1991. Its Sunni, Shi'ite, and Kurdish factions are held together by one of the most repressive regimes since Nazi Germany. Iran's per capita income has fallen to the levels Iran had in the mid-1970s, and it is unclear what Iran's long-term prospects for development will be. The southern gulf has talked reform, but has failed to act, and its rapid population growth has cut per capita incomes far below the days of the oil boom. Ethnic, political, and economic problems have already helped lead to extremism and violence in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. If the Gulf states finally act on their promises of reform, there is no reason to assume their current problems will lead to significant civil unrest and violence. If they do not, internal civil conflict may become as serious a threat as Iran and Iraq.

Second, the Gulf War has triggered a race in tactical technology, based in part on lessons drawn from the rapid U.S. dominance of Iraq, and the revolution in military affairs. It is a race, however, that lacks consistency and cohesion. UN sanctions have limited Iraq's ability to purchase new weapons and advanced technology, and Iran has faced major constraints in terms of resources and access to imports of advanced weapons. The southern gulf has so far focused on buying individual weapons with a high glitter factor, without proper regard for training, sustainability, maneuver capability, and joint warfare. It has stressed the national competition for the most prestigious arms over any aspect of interoperability.

Nevertheless, some Gulf forces are beginning to focus on the “revolution in military affairs” and on acquiring mission-oriented packages of advanced technology, rather than on building up force numbers to the degree they emphasized in the past. For example, Gulf naval forces now provide the mine warfare capability needed to supplement the capabilities of the US and British task forces in the Gulf. While the concept of integrated air defenses goes back to 1982, and the GCC still failed to approve implementation plans at its meetings in 1999, there now is at least a clear plan and systems architecture for moving forward, and there are now secure communications links at the command level that allow each GCC country to communicate with the others.

Third, the Gulf War has left a heritage of southern gulf dependence on U.S. power projection capabilities. This dependence is reflected in strengthened U.S. prepositioning, improved deployment facilities, and in a series of bilateral and multilateral training exercises that are far more advanced than those carried out as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This dependence, however, creates growing doubts within the southern gulf states as to the cost-effectiveness of national defense efforts and arms purchases. It makes the United States a natural target for dissidents and extremists, and has the critical weakness that the United States has not been able to preposition land equipment in Saudi Arabia—the most urgent area in terms of southern gulf vulnerability.

Fourth, the Gulf War and “dual containment” have slowed the missile race and efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Instead, the Gulf seems locked into a process of “creeping proliferation” in which Iraq attempts to preserve the remnants of its pre-war capabilities, carry out new covert programs, and develop a “break out” capability for the time when UN sanctions are limited. Iran, in contrast, is actively pursuing the development and/or deployment of long range missiles. It is deploying chemical weapons and is carrying out covert biological and nuclear weapons programs, but at a slow and steady pace of development, rather than in the grandiose manner that Iraq pursued before the Gulf War. No southern gulf state has followed up Saudi Arabia’s purchase of obsolete long-range missiles from China, or shown signs of developing weapons of mass destruction. Several countries are, however, beginning to explore theater missile defense and civil defense options. The United States increasingly focuses on counterproliferation, and the “creeping proliferation” in the Gulf inevitably interacts with proliferation in the India-Pakistan arms race, the Arab-Israeli arms race, and the search to find a counterbalance to the conventional technology of the U.S. military.

Given these trends, it seems likely that neither Iran nor Iraq will pose near-term challenges to the capabilities the revolution in military affairs has given U.S. forces. A combination of U.S., British, and southern gulf military forces should be capable of defeating

virtually any war fighting threat from either state in the near-term if the United States and the southern gulf states act with sufficient speed, unity, and determination.

The only near term developments that could rapidly alter this balance would be:

- a major cutback in U.S. power projection capability or southern gulf support;
- the institutionalization of a significant low level internal conflict in a southern gulf state that Iran or Iraq could exploit and which would confront the United States with the fact that it cannot save a Gulf government from its own people;
- Iranian or Iraqi acquisition of biological weapons of demonstrated lethalties approaching those of small nuclear weapons; or
- The sudden transfer of a nuclear weapon or sufficient fissile material for a “break out” in building a bomb—a development that could radically change U.S. and southern gulf perceptions of the risk in taking military action.

It should be clear from the preceding analysis, however, that Iran and Iraq clearly understand the potential gaps and weaknesses in the RMA, and that the situation may be less favorable in the mid-to-long term. Certainly, the United States must look beyond conventional military threats, and give high priority to dealing with proliferation, asymmetric warfare, diplomatic “warfare,” and confrontations and wars of attrition and endurance. It is also almost axiomatic that Iran and Iraq will intensify their pursuit of these options in direct proportion to the extent that the United States maintains or widens the “edge” that the revolution in military affairs now gives it in conventional warfighting capability.

This leads to several recommendations for US policy:

- **The US should reconsider its policy towards Iran. It should maintain its efforts to prevent the transfer of dual-use technologies and advanced conventional arms, but its present policy of blocking all trade and investment and applying economic sanctions is having no effect on Iran's efforts to proliferate or support of anti-Israeli movements. It prevents the US from reaching out to Iran's moderates and creating incentives that might persuade Iran to integrate itself into a stable structure of regional deterrence. It is unclear that Iran can ever be a friend or partner, but it may well be possible to create a modus vivendi in which Iran minimizes the challenge it presents to Southern Gulf and US military capabilities.**
- **There are no current prospects of moderation in Iraq, and there will be none as long as Saddam Hussein or any similar leader is in power. The US must continue to do everything possible to enforce UN sanctions that deny Iraq's access to arms and dual use technology. At the same time, the US needs to reinforce its regional coalitions in containing Iraq, and this means changing its policy towards "oil for food" to further ease the hardships of the Iraq people. The US needs to modify sanctions to create a long-term basis for the regional containment of Iraq.**
- **The US needs an "engagement" strategy with each Southern Gulf country that tailors US forces in the region, and US power projection forces, to achieve an effective coalition warfare fighting capability with partner countries. This strategy should emphasize the development of the critical mission capabilities each partner country can best perform while tailoring US C⁴I/SR/battlement management capabilities and tactics to emphasize integration coalition warfare capabilities. At the same time, the US should tailor its use of the RMA to provide the kind of capabilities that Southern Gulf states cannot develop for themselves.**

- **This “bilateral” or “multilateral” engagement strategy should place equal emphasis on creating a GCC-wide mix of capabilities for coalition warfare in which regional states perform critical missions like internal security, maritime surveillance, defense against low-level asymmetric warfare, urban defense, mine warfare. It should develop regional coalition capabilities for air defense and offensive air operations, and larger-scale naval operations. The US should emphasize the creation of a collective US-Kuwaiti-Saudi-Bahraini capability to defend Kuwait and the Saudi border against Iraq, mixing the strengths the US draws from the RMA with enhanced capabilities from coalition partners.**
- **The US must work with the Southern Gulf states to deal with the areas where the RMA currently offers only limited military advantages. These deal primarily with asymmetric warfare. At the lower threshold, this means an emphasis on defense against terrorism, covert attacks, and efforts to destabilize friendly states or to exploit ethnic and religious issues.**
- **At the higher level, it means coming to grips with the fact that neither Iran nor Iraq currently seem likely to be deterred from acquiring weapons of mass destruction and long range delivery systems. This may well mean supplementing the conventional warfighting strengths provided by the RMA with a new form of extended deterrence that would convince Iran and Iraq that any use of weapons of mass destruction would be met by conventional strikes that would be far more costly than the limited use of such weapons would justify. It would also mean that major attacks with weapons of mass destruction on Southern population centers, critical infrastructure, or troop concentrations would be met with crippling strategic bombing or even the use of US nuclear weapons. The US should also develop a matching defensive strategy that could include theater missile defenses when these become available and cost-effective and similar civil-defense capabilities and protection for Southern Gulf military forces.**

In making these recommendations, it should be stressed that the Gulf does not change overnight, and that they make take over a decade to implement – if they are possible at all. It should also be stressed that whatever advantages the US may draw from the RMA, they are not a substitute for treating allies as equals, for true partnerships in coalition warfare, and for recognizing the fact that developing a collective capability to deal with asymmetric warfare and proliferation is at least as important as developing US capabilities to refight another Gulf War.