The Gulf and US National Security Strategy

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This paper by Dr. Lawrence Korb, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress, Washington DC, has been published in 2005 by The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), P.O.Box 4567, Abu Dhabi, UAE as Emirates Lecture Series 58 (ISSN 1682-1238; ISBN 9948-00-728-X). It has been published with special permission from ECSSR. Copyright © belongs to The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. All rights are reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this material, or any part thereof may not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher.
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Published by
The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research
This publication is based on a lecture presented on June 6, 2004. The views expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect those of the ECSSR.

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First impression 2005
ISSN 1682-1238
ISBN 9948-00-728-X

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Introduction

No region of the world currently has a larger influence on US security strategy than the Persian Gulf. The importance of Gulf oil and the struggle against terrorism and religious extremism would guarantee the region a prominent place in American strategic planning even if the Bush administration had not decided to invade and occupy Iraq. With this occupation, the Gulf now hosts the largest concentration of American troops in the world, and the region will be central to American security strategy in the near future. This invasion may seem to have fundamentally altered the Gulf’s landscape by putting a decisive end to half of the imperatives that shaped the previous administration’s policy of the “Dual Containment” of Iran and Iraq. However, numerous strategic features of the region persist, posing crucial questions for American policy makers. This study considers how the Gulf, in the post-Iraq invasion scenario, fits within American security planning by first reviewing the major security issues and then examining how the United States would confront these issues under three different approaches to national security strategy.

General Strategic Features of the Gulf and American Interests

The avowed goal of US national security strategy is to take advantage of its unique situation as the lone superpower in

This article was prepared with the assistance of Eric Tam.
the wake of the ending of the Cold War and to “translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty” for the entire world. This goal is not as altruistic as it first appears: America has become the world’s lone superpower by exporting its democratic ideals and amassing great wealth by creating an environment suitable to its formidable economic competitiveness. It therefore lies directly in US national interest to extend a peace that it regulates through its military power and to expand the world markets from which it reaps its wealth. Given these overall goals, it may be considered which of the Gulf’s features are strategically salient before exploring the formation of American security strategy in more depth.

Energy

The Gulf’s most prominent strategic feature is its vast stock of natural energy resources. The region contains over half of the world’s proven reserves of oil and one-third of the world’s proven reserves of natural gas. Industrialized economies and societies rely heavily on the ready availability of petroleum products at reasonable prices. This is absolutely crucial to the healthy functioning of the American and global economy. Of the approximately 20 million barrels of oil consumed per day by the American economy in 2003, 2.8 million barrels were imported from the Gulf region. Even if the United States were somehow able to radically and quickly reduce its dependence on foreign oil – a prospect that is highly unlikely in the short term – the deep interconnection between the health of the American economy and the health of the overall world economy means that it could not ignore Gulf oil security as long as other major
economies were still dependent on it. And all major trends – most notably the rapid industrialization of Asia and especially China – point to the world’s economies becoming more dependent on Gulf oil imports in the next 20 years. The emergence of the importance of natural gas only reinforces this trend, because the Gulf has a large proportion of the world’s reserves of this resource as well. Finally, the Gulf is important not only because it possesses most of the world’s largest oil reserves, but also has the developed capacity to produce it and bring it to market efficiently. The cost of producing oil, as well as expanding production, is much lower in the Gulf than in any other region in the world. Large discoveries elsewhere, such as the Canadian tar sands, Caspian Sea and Orinoco region, require years of development and investment to bring production online, and in some cases, exploitation may never be economical enough to make extraction worthwhile. In the same vein, the Gulf’s production capacities currently make it the only oil-producing region that can maintain the surplus production capability that allows it to act as a swing producer to meet crisis demand.

The crucial contribution that the Gulf’s energy exports make to the world economy is by itself sufficient to place the region’s security at the top of the US list of strategic priorities, because even temporary disruptions in the supply of oil flowing from the Gulf or increases in oil prices can cause lasting damage to the American and global economy by boosting inflation and depressing growth, investment and employment. While American strategists may differ on many aspects of Gulf security policy, there is a broad consensus that the United States must ensure that no rival power exercises hegemonic
control over the region and its energy supplies. This consensus has extended to the presidential administrations of both major American political parties since the United States effectively assumed responsibility for the Gulf’s security in the late 1960s. President Jimmy Carter declared that, as a result of the region’s role in energy exportation, an assault on the Gulf would be viewed as “an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and [that] such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” President Bill Clinton’s Middle East security strategy defined the US “paramount national security interest in the Middle East [as] maintaining the unhindered flow of oil” from the Gulf to world markets at stable prices. And even following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration’s Quadrennial Defense Review report of that year viewed the protection of energy exports as the first security priority of the United States in the Middle East.

Transportation and Navigation

Navigation in the Gulf is crucial to the transportation of energy supplies. Upwards of 90 percent of the Gulf’s oil exports – or some 40 percent of the world’s oil exports – passes through the Strait of Hormuz daily, rendering it a critical maritime choke point for the world’s economy, as there are no comparably efficient alternatives to shipping oil. Moving oil by pipeline and trucks is inflexible and far more expensive, and forced circumvention would impose serious economic cost. For this reason alone, keeping maritime navigation in the Gulf and through the strait free of disruption is a strategic priority. The Gulf states are also in close proximity to the choke points at each end of the
Red Sea, the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandab, which allow the free flow of goods between Mediterranean and South Asian waters.

Access to the Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz is also important to the American military presence and power projection within the region, which depends significantly on the ability of carrier battle groups to launch air and cruise missile strikes, as well as the ability to rapidly reinforce and resupply its troops using sealift. Long-standing agreements with Bahrain, which hosts the headquarters of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, along with access to ports and facilities in other Gulf states, are very helpful in this regard. Maintaining access within the Gulf and through these various choke points presents a special challenge, because it requires relatively little in the way of military resources to disrupt shipping in crucial waterways. Mines, antiship missiles and unconventional attacks against ports are generally cheap compared to the countermeasures necessary to defeat them or to the staggering economic costs that any disruption would entail.

The Gulf’s air lanes also allow efficient routes between US bases in Turkey and southern Europe, and central and southern Asia. Access to bases and airfields, such as the major air base at Al Udeid, Qatar, are even more useful. Central Asia will remain an area of key interest in the near future due to the continuing campaign of the United States against Al Qaeda and Taliban elements in Afghanistan. American and Western presence in that country will continue at least for the next three to five years, because the industrialized countries have recognized the importance of preventing it from collapsing once again into a failed
state and becoming a ready haven for anti-Western terrorists. And Central Asia also has the makings of a key strategic region because of the potential of the Caspian Sea’s oil and gas reserves. Finally, maintaining ready access to overflight rights, temporary bases and airfields in the Gulf can contribute to power projection efforts in the East Asian littoral—the other region besides the Middle East in which the United States most expects to be involved in a major war. Efficient flight paths, stopover points for troops from Europe, and more Gulf-based options from which to draw reinforcements can boost US capacity to support a campaign in the vast East Asian region.

**Conventional Military Balance**

Given the great importance of Gulf energy supplies to the world economy, it is not surprising that the United States has for some time invested deeply in ensuring this region’s security. The occupation of Iraq will last for some time. Moreover, even when the 140,000 American forces conducting stability and security operations in Iraq withdraw, the United States is likely to remain the dominant military force in the Gulf. Prior to the invasion, Iraq’s military posed the most significant conventional threat to regional stability, but its security forces are now in flux after their dissolution by the Coalition Provisional Authority in May 2003. Predicting the new Iraqi military’s effectiveness and strength, if and when its reconstitution under the new Iraqi regime is completed, is quite uncertain, although it is in America’s interest that a democratic and pro-Western Iraq develop a military that is large enough to provide for its own security but would not threaten the
other Arab Gulf states. Assuming that Iraq remains friendly, Iran is the only regional power that poses a substantive security challenge for the United States. Iran has large ground forces, although their equipment is becoming obsolete. Instead, Iran has decided to concentrate its limited funds on sea denial capabilities such as submarines, mines, antiship missiles (the consequences of blocking the Strait of Hormuz even temporarily have already been outlined) and programs of weapons of mass destruction (WMD, which will be addressed later). These are the two areas that are causing problems for the United States.7

Due to their reliance on outside powers to provide security, small size, military constraints and limited regional security cooperation, the Lower Gulf states have historically had difficulty in providing for their own defense. Fiscal constraints resulting from low oil prices during the 1980s and 1990s and booming populations have not helped the situation. Although, with a great deal of American encouragement, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia greatly increased the capabilities of their armed forces after the First Gulf War, it is unlikely that they would have been able to defend against an Iraqi invasion on their own. Although Saudi forces are equipped with state-of-the-art military equipment, they are hindered by inadequate training and command limitations, with the exception of its fighter pilots. Kuwait has done much better in both equipping and training a balanced military force, but its small population creates an absolute constraint on its size. Although they have made some impressive weapons purchases, size remains a constraint, and none of the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states possesses a
massive trained military force. Consequently, even prior to the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, American forces maintained a posture that would enable them to mobilize quickly to defend the Lower Gulf countries against the possibility of an Iraqi ground invasion and to keep the Gulf waters clear for shipping.

**Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Controlling the proliferation of nuclear, radiological, biological and chemical weapons, as well as the long-range missile systems that make them a credible threat to far-off population centers, has been a first-order strategic priority for the United States for many years. The presence of such WMD in the Gulf and the Middle East are especially problematic. Due to the region’s frequent conflicts, historical tensions and extreme multipolarity, the spread of WMD throughout the Middle East is a worrying prospect. WMD are an especially attractive and cost-effective alternative for countering US influence. As they provide an asymmetric deterrent threat, WMD enable states that are otherwise unable to compete with the vast superiority of American conventional forces to level the strategic playing field and resist coercive diplomacy.

Although the previously festering (and overestimated) threat of proliferation posed by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq has been eliminated, Iran is another Gulf state with the potential to develop and use WMD to threaten the interests of the United States and its allies. Iran is the number two state on the US list of proliferation threats, immediately behind North Korea. Unlike the regime of Saddam Hussein, Iran’s more disciplined strategy in acquiring
WMD and long-range missiles appears to be paying off. Iran demonstrated its ability and willingness to deploy chemical weapons during the Iran–Iraq War and is assumed to have sizeable stockpiles of chemical weapons and an active biological weapons program.\textsuperscript{10} American analysts are unsure whether Iran is capable of producing these weapons in a form that can be effectively delivered via ballistic missile warheads, but they assume that it is developing this capability. It has already developed and successfully tested a ballistic missile that can reach targets throughout the Middle East – the Shahab-3, which has a range of 1,300 km – and possesses an array of shorter range missiles that threaten the Gulf region.

The direction of Iran’s nuclear program is also a source of concern to American analysts. Iran, which has been suspiciously coy in the face of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), announced on September 21, 2004, that it had begun processing 37 tons of yellowcake (milled uranium) into a gas as part of a process to produce a compound that can be used in nuclear power plants but that also can be a precursor of highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{11} Iran’s rapid development of a nuclear program for non-peaceful purposes seems more plausible in the wake of recent admissions by Pakistan’s top nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan that he and scientists from his laboratory, along with a number of Pakistani diplomats and intelligence agents, sold nuclear weapons plans to states, including Iran, and played a role in international nuclear procurement networks in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{12}
This brings us to the most worrying possibility for the United States regarding WMD in the Gulf: the possibility of WMD being acquired by terrorist groups, who could then deliver them to an American population center via unconventional means. Although American analysts do not think it is likely that the Iranian government would knowingly transfer hard-earned WMD materials to terrorist groups, even the outside possibility that such materials could find their way into the hands of such organizations – whether as a result of theft, mishap, black market swaps or regime instability – is enough to constitute a major strategic concern. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, many American strategic observers have become more concerned with suitcases and backpacks than with ballistic warheads when considering the WMD delivery systems most likely to pose a direct threat to American citizens.

**Global Terrorism and Religious Extremism**

Since the end of the Cold War, American strategists became aware that the unmatched might of the United States as the globe’s lone superpower has rendered it more, not less, likely to be targeted by non-state actors employing asymmetric and unconventional tactics. American strategists and some political leaders had therefore recognized the serious nature of the threat of terrorism and extremist religious ideologies for some time prior to September 11, 2001. The attack did, however, frame the struggle in dramatic and existential terms for the American public and provided the political leadership with sufficient motivation to take decisive action. Along with rogue and failed states, which are dangerous partially because of the
opportunities they offer to terrorists (which will be discussed further), “terrorists of global reach,” such as the organizations of Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, now constitute a first-order strategic concern for the United States.\textsuperscript{13} Using a mix of high-tech means (publicly available scientific information, Web-based software applications, and commercial airline flights) and low-tech resources (local tribal, religious and cultural knowledge and support networks), these actors are able to travel, coordinate their activities, and harvest support in countries around the world, whether friendly or unfriendly to the United States. These groups therefore pose a distinctive strategic challenge in requiring the United States to mobilize a wide range of diplomatic, law enforcement, administrative, cultural and military tools to combat them effectively.

One of the factors that unites the primary form of international terrorist threat confronting the United States is a link with some sort of anti-modernist, extremist Islamist ideology.\textsuperscript{14} The Bush administration has only strengthened this linkage by tying the invasion of Iraq to the effort to fight international terrorism. This is where the Gulf plays a crucial role. As the historical and cultural center of gravity of the Muslim world, the Gulf is a main front in the struggle against terrorism. Due to a mix of socio-cultural and economic reasons, certain fringe elements of Gulf societies could possibly serve as producers and exporters of terrorist recruits, supplying funding, training sites and ideological reinforcement. Many American analysts believe that such a support network enabled the September 11 attacks, an operation predominantly executed by citizens born in certain Gulf
states. One factor that American policy makers find especially problematic is the tendency of some regimes in the region to tolerate and even support the dissemination of anti-Western ideologies. American policy makers also emphasize Iran’s alleged attempts to sponsor terrorist groups and its supposed efforts to export revolutionary Shi’ite Islam, which resulted in the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996. Although Iran claims that it has moved away from attempts to export Shi’ite Islam and the country no longer appears to provide significant support for terrorist groups operating outside the region, its recent behavior on this issue is at best mixed. Although Iran was relatively cooperative in the campaign against the Taliban, it has been suspected of sending agents to support terrorists and insurgents in Iraq and perhaps even sheltering Al Qaeda members who have planned attacks against Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, its support of anti-Israeli militants and reluctance to acknowledge all of these activities are continuing problems.

American analysts concede that some of the previous and current strategic US choices within the Gulf and surrounding regions have either contributed to or exacerbated the rise of these terrorist networks and extremist religious ideologies. Among other factors, the cost of various policies in support of regional stability and energy security in the Gulf has been to catalyze and provide fuel to these movements. Certainly, the United States has long recognized that stationing forces in the region to secure its energy supplies – especially in proximity to religious sites – can produce a sizeable cultural and political backlash, providing a strong incentive for the United States to keep its peacetime onshore force footprint as compact as
possible. More recently, the United States has come to recognize that its political and military support of some Gulf states potentially ties it to their citizens’ perception of internal problems within these states.

America’s continuing diplomatic and military support for Israel also creates a similarly negative association throughout the Muslim and Arab world. Moreover, the intervention in Iraq is incurring a number of strategic risks and costs: it fuels the contention that the United States is engaged in a worldwide conflict against Islam in general rather than against extremist terrorism; it creates in the region a target-rich environment for those looking to harm Westerners and US forces; it provides a ready flow of small arms and other weaponry left over from Saddam Hussein’s arsenals and not secured by the coalition or Iraqi security forces; and it has created an unstable environment that is an ideal venue for recruiting and organizing anti-Western militants.

While Gulf states may have come under the spotlight due to the issue of terrorism, they are also a large part of any solution. The United States cannot succeed in tracking down and stopping terrorists and drying up their material and financial support without a great deal of assistance from the intelligence, law enforcement and administrative resources of the Gulf states. Perhaps more important, the United States needs to turn the tide of public opinion in Gulf societies in its favor, and Gulf governments, civil society groups, non-governmental organizations and media sources are all crucial to this effort. As Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion and the dominant religion in large portions of the developing world, the United
States has a strong interest in encouraging the formulation and dissemination of moderate interpretations of Islam that are consistent with democratic, gender-egalitarian, mixed-market societies. Gulf societies are again central to this endeavor due to their historical, cultural and geographic position in the Islamic world. And although the United States has made many mistakes in its inability to broker the Israel–Arab dispute, some leaders in the region have exacerbated this problem. Solving this dispute is likely to prove a key condition to achieving lasting reconciliation between the West and the Arab world, but a successful resolution requires the Arab world – and importantly, the Gulf states – to enable and buy into it. Finally, as will be discussed further, the success or failure of the Iraq venture is likely to have a powerful influence on the attitude that Muslims and Arabs around the world have toward America.

Social and Political Development

In the wake of the September 11 attacks and the effort to root out the Al Qaeda terrorists who had made Afghanistan’s failed state their haven, the American strategists revised upward their estimation of the costs of allowing states to descend into social and political incapacitation. The US government now recognizes that fact:

>T]he inability of some states to govern their societies, safeguard their military armaments, and prevent their territories from serving as sanctuary to terrorists and criminal organizations can also pose a threat to stability and place demands on U.S. forces...[and] that potential threats can grow out of the weakness of governments as much as out of their strength.\textsuperscript{18}
Viewed from this perspective, there are a number of common trends within the Gulf states that are of concern. Generally, they lack diversified economies with strong economic growth or investment; have been unsuccessful in attracting much foreign investment outside of the energy sector; and since there is little investment in domestic markets, capital-owning nationals choose to invest much of their money abroad. For the most part, the Gulf states with large oil reserves preside over single-resource economies, and the rulers distribute oil revenues to support a large segment of society.19 Nearly all of them have high unemployment levels among their permanent resident populations due to a heavy reliance on foreign labor, inadequate technical and scientific education and inadequate higher educational and work opportunities for women in general.20 Most of the states have taken some positive steps toward responsive government, but there are limited outlets for political expression. Finally, with the exception of Iran, the Gulf region’s population growth rate is among the world’s highest, which has already started to produce a large demographic shift, pushing the population’s mean age downward at an accelerating rate.21

Cumulatively, these trends raise a number of strategic concerns. First, these economic problems result in an underdevelopment of energy production and exportation. Second, the combination of economic stagnation and explosive population growth raises the prospects of skyrocketing costs in social services and massive unemployment, especially among young adults. While rising oil prices can keep the Gulf states fiscally afloat in the current economic environment, another significant drop in the price of oil would be potentially crippling, as
the oil crash of the 1980s (and, for Saudi Arabia, the massive cost of financing the First Gulf War) depleted these states’ reserve funds and drove them into debt. Furthermore, high unemployment combined with a paucity of outlets for effective and open political expression are likely to cause widespread social discontent and provide ready fuel for instability, as well as extremist and anti-Western movements.

**Major Variables: Iraq and Iran**

The two most uncertain and far-reaching variables in the Gulf are the circumstances of its two strongest powers: Iran and Iraq. Both nations will potentially undergo significant changes in the near future, and the results could fundamentally alter the region’s strategic picture.

**Iraq**

The future state of Iraq is intimately bound to US actions and fortunes in the Gulf, as a result of its attempt at remaking Saddam Hussein’s Iraq into a friendly, stable, free-market democracy. It is worth considering how a range of scenarios or outcomes would affect the US position in the region.

**1-Democratization Scenario**

Some of the invasion’s more optimistic supporters cited numerous strategic spillover benefits from removing Saddam Hussein’s regime and replacing it with a free-market democracy. As liberal democratic governments tend to settle their disputes diplomatically instead of
resorting to force, a democratic Iraq would cease to be a threat to its Gulf neighbors and might eventually take over the US role in leading security efforts in the region. It was argued that a successful transition to a free-market liberal democracy by a major Arab Islamic country might lead to decisive political and social reform around the region. Some thinkers had even gone as far as to predict a “domino effect,” whereby Iraq’s successful, democratization would cause a tide of free-market liberal democracy to wash across the Gulf and the Middle East, solving most of the social, political, religious and economic problems previously described.\textsuperscript{22}

American observers are now aware that Iraq’s prospects for achieving a stable democratic regime are highly uncertain. Even the invasion’s most optimistic supporters have sharply ratcheted down their expectations for achieving democracy in Iraq in the short term.\textsuperscript{23} Yet even if Iraq is unlikely to become a model Jeffersonian democracy, a relatively stable, unified and responsive Iraqi government is still a possibility. Admittedly, the challenges that the transitional government and the United States face are daunting. Among others, they have to disarm all of the independent militias; rebuild the Iraqi security forces; restore and develop the infrastructure necessary to deliver basic services like electricity, water and health care; reduce unemployment to a manageable level; obtain an arrangement of long-term political institutions that satisfies all three major ethnic groups while ensuring basic human rights; and set up reliable and fair judicial and electoral institutions, as well as a free press.
However, from the US perspective, the rewards would be worth the effort. Any Iraqi government that sincerely renounced aspirations to regional aggression and the pursuit of WMD would be very helpful in improving the Gulf’s security situation. Such an Iraq, even if somewhat fragile or authoritarian, would provide the United States with a major alternative security partner besides Saudi Arabia, isolating Iran as the only Gulf state that constitutes a potential threat to regional stability. Of course, an Iraq capable of providing for its own security needs would by itself improve the US strategic situation significantly, as it would allow it to withdraw many of the troops presently fighting the insurgency. Even if a reconstructed Iraq might not catalyze a democratic chain reaction throughout the region, the restoration of a free, stable, sovereign and non-abusive government to Iraq might in the long run help to improve the standing of the United States in the Gulf and among Muslims and Arabs around the world.

2-Partition Scenario

It is an open question whether enough of a post-Hussein Iraqi national identity exists to support the continuation of a unified state. The breakup of Iraq along the lines of its three major ethnic groups, whether resulting from negotiations or violence, is a real possibility. The United States is working hard to prevent such an eventuality, as it brings a number of negative consequences. Any partition would be accompanied by territorial disputes and likely ethnic cleansing—some such activity has already occurred, for example, in Kirkuk. An independent Kurdish state opens up the possibility of confrontation with Syria, Iran and especially Turkey, all of which have had historic
tensions with their Kurdish minorities and who might invoke the threat of a “Greater Kurdistan” to intervene. The United States would have to commit a substantial amount of resources in helping to maintain a fragile peace, and it would draw the region’s scorn for sundering Iraq.

3-Civil War Scenario
American analysts view the eruption of sectarian violence and disorder in Iraq as a serious threat due to the country’s ethnic, religious and tribal divisions. The ready availability of arms and the rise of numerous independent militias provide conditions that would enable Iraq’s peoples to renew their history of violent conflict. If the divisions between Kurd and Arab, Sunni and Shi’a, and the multiplicity of fissures among local tribes descend into large-scale violence, the United States would have to decide how far it will go in supporting the central government or any particular faction with force. Besides setting back reconstruction, the likely possibilities following such a conflict are not promising: a central government viewed by one or more major ethnic groups as illegitimate, a patchwork of warlords similar to Afghanistan or ethnic partition (as previously mentioned). The United States might have to contend with a host of potential negative consequences: its reputation in the region could hit a nadir; the American public could lose its remaining appetite for supporting the conflict; Iraq could require much more effort from the United States and international community to achieve security; Iraq’s energy production could sharply decline; Iran and Turkey could obtain more opportunities to intervene in areas suffering from a power vacuum; and the Gulf region could experience more uncertainty and instability.
Another possibility that the United States would very much like to avoid is the rise of an Iraqi government dominated by an extremist faction of the Shi’ite majority. Although the United States is quite willing to support an Islamic republic, a theocratic regime would be problematic, especially one dominated by Islamic revolutionaries who view their interests as being in harmony with that of Iran. (Note that it is possible that such a regime might arise through roughly democratic means: a partitioned or very weak federalist state would allow a radicalized majority Shi’ite population to impose such a regime within the extensive territory it controlled via the ballot box). The prospects of the two most powerful states in the Gulf collaborating to counterbalance the United States would be seriously troubling. Even a mutual defense agreement between Iran and Iraq would create major concerns for the United States and force it to invest heavily in containing the two states and ensuring the Gulf’s security. Other possibilities that might arise as a result of such an arrangement include cooperation in WMD research and the renewal of the Iranian policy of attempting to export revolutionary Islam to neighboring regimes. This last possibility would be especially threatening to Saudi Arabia.

**Iran**

Unlike the situation in Iraq, the results of Iran’s internal struggles between reformers and conservatives have the potential to produce unexpected benefits for the United States. Also unlike the situation in Iraq, the actions of the United States are not likely to have a major direct impact
on the outcome in Iran. As with the Islamic Revolution, the US government and most American strategists failed to predict the rise of the reform movements in the 1990s. Nor have American policy makers crafted an adequate response since the revolution’s inception. While Dual Containment may have been a reasonable strategy for preventing Iran from acquiring destabilizing WMD and other arms, it offered little by way of support for the nation’s reformist elements. Moreover, congressionally mandated unilateral sanctions are likely to have hurt, not helped, the reform efforts by playing into conservatives’ rhetorical strategy of demonizing the influence of the Western world. On the other hand, not much evidence exists that European strategies of engagement have produced much success.

Certainly, there are American actions that might be indirectly helpful to the Iranian reformers’ efforts: achieving peaceful and orderly solutions to the situations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel, and maintaining a reasonable level of rhetoric and a non-threatening profile would reduce conservatives’ ability to play the “Great Satan” card and help reformers to keep the political conversation focused on the current regime’s economic and social shortcomings. It is unclear, however, whether moving toward détente would help consolidate the power of the dominant conservative elements or be viewed by the people as a sign that Western rapprochement is attainable through adequate reform. More direct efforts to support liberal Iranian factions and civil society groups are potentially counterproductive due to historically grounded mistrust of the United States and foreign interlopers in general. In any case, American strategic analysts tend to
view the likely short-term security gains resulting from the most probable positive outcome of gradual social liberalization as limited.\textsuperscript{26} The ascension of more liberal political elements would be likely to allow a formal resumption of diplomatic relations and some economic openness between Washington and Tehran and reduce the likelihood of regional confrontation. A more moderate regime would also be less likely to support terrorism. However, even if reformist factions wrestle power away from the hardliners in Iran, American strategists perceive a reformed Iranian government as unlikely to depart radically in the short term from the present regime’s development of WMD, its position against the Arab–Israeli peace process, or its desire for more leverage in the Gulf.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{National Security Strategies and the Gulf}

The features previously described make the Gulf a key strategic region for the United States, and they are the inputs to the security strategy that any American administration will pursue in the near future. They do not by themselves determine American security strategy, however, as policy makers have a range of alternatives for contending with these challenges. Consider the three broad strategic priorities that the Bush administration identified in its 2002 \textit{National Security Strategy} as relevant to pursuing the general goal of preserving and extending the peace and sustaining a “balance of power that favors freedom” in the post–Cold War/post–September 11 world:

- Fighting terrorists and tyrants
- Building good relations among the great powers
- Encouraging free and open societies on every continent.\textsuperscript{28}
These goals are relatively uncontroversial, and it is likely that any administration would share somewhat similar objectives. However, the details involved in the Bush administration’s strategic perspective have been more provocative. In the wake of September 11, 2001, there existed a broad consensus in the US that international terrorists must be viewed as first-order security threats. The nexus between Al Qaeda and the Taliban’s Afghanistan vividly illustrated that encouraging responsive and competent government and preventing states from falling into abject failure or tyranny is an imperative of vital national interest, not just a humanitarian concern. Most Americans would also agree that preemptive and unilateral action is justifiable in a limited range of cases: to avert imminent attack, as a reprisal to states sponsoring terrorism, or to prevent the imminent acquisition of a nuclear weapon by a sworn enemy of the United States. Yet the Bush administration has gone well beyond this consensus to pursue what I would call a strategy of American dominance and preventive action. This strategy may be considered first before turning to two alternatives.

**Dominance and Preventive Action**

Many of the administration’s statements and actions in the last three years – especially those related to the occupation of Iraq – point toward a “Bush doctrine” involving three key attributes:

- Maintaining US military dominance as the world’s only superpower
- Not allowing the United States to be tied down by international agreements and institutions when considering
preventive and preemptive action against terrorists and tyrants who support them or try to acquire WMD

- Working aggressively to establish free-market democracies around the globe.  

The Bush administration has stated that it views these three components as tightly woven together. Aggressive efforts to replace what the US considers tyrannies and terrorist states with free-market democracies would be hindered if the United States were constrained by bureaucracy-laden international institutions dominated by states wishing to constrain its power. Maintaining military supremacy is considered a prerequisite for a strategy that emphasizes preemptive attack without the reliable support of fixed alliances. On the other hand, the US assertion of its military power outside of international institutions would hopefully be viewed as justifiable and sustainable because other countries recognize that this power would be used to promote universal democratic ends rather than narrow imperialist ones. It is envisaged that this recognition would allow friendly nations to accept that the United States possesses both unique responsibilities as well as unique prerogatives of action on the international stage as a result of its status as the world’s first modern democracy and sole superpower.

It is no accident that the Bush administration first put the preemption component of this doctrine to the test in the Gulf theater. It is deeply linked to a particular perspective on the fundamental strategic challenges that the region poses. From this vantage point, many of the compromises that the United States previously made in the region to maintain stability are seen as being no longer effective. It
was believed that undemocratic states would ultimately inflict much greater security costs by giving rise to terrorism, social misery and religious extremism. Although energy security is important, the US could not expect to achieve it by allowing “Axis of Evil” states like Iraq and Iran to develop WMD, fund terrorists, encourage religious extremism and otherwise threaten US allies and interests. The only way to ensure stability and energy security in the long term is to transform the entire region by replacing such so-called “rogue” regimes with democratic states – with the assertion of US preeminent military power, if necessary – and by putting real pressure on US allies in the Gulf to move toward more responsive government.

Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former operative in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), has suggested that President Bush’s primary lessons from 9/11 were that previous US support for some ineffectual governments in the Middle East “was an essential element in the development of the holy-warriorism of Al Qaeda,” and that only the spread of democracy would eliminate the religious fundamentalism that has been transformed into political action. While countries and international organizations might object to the idea of preventive military action, their concerns are of limited relevance to the US, as they contribute little to maintaining the region’s security. Moreover, it was thought that even if some US allies presently opposed such use of American power, they would appreciate US efforts to transform the region in the long run.

If the US administration pursues this strategic option, then its plan in the Gulf would begin with doing whatever it
takes to achieve a functional democratic state in Iraq. Since the stakes in Iraq are so high, it is imperative to invest the resources necessary to complete this project. Assuming that the reconstruction succeeds, the United States could then use the momentum resulting from the successful establishment of a democratic state in an Arab Islamic country to encourage other states in the region to move toward reform. In the Gulf, the two highest priorities would be Iran and Saudi Arabia (if we included the entire Middle East, then Syria and Egypt would fall somewhere in between). With Iran, the United States would then work to isolate the regime by maintaining its sanctions and attempting to get other nations to adopt them, and make clear its willingness to use preemptive military force in response to evidence of support for international terrorism or further development of its nuclear weapons program. At the same time, it would provide support to Iranian opposition and civil society groups and might even consider methods of covertly assisting efforts to fundamentally reform or overthrow the current regime. With Saudi Arabia, the United States could possibly reduce its military funding to the kingdom and make further support conditional upon concrete improvements in human rights and responsive government.

However, it is likely that the Bush administration will not pursue this option as robustly or consistently as it has in the past. Factions within the administration – most notably, career professionals within the military and the Department of State – have advocated opposing views, and with regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq proving more arduous than the supporters of preventive action expected, these opposing views have gained much more
influence.\textsuperscript{35} The administration has already begun to move away from emphasizing preventive action, as it is apparent that this strategy’s advocates overestimated the capacity of the United States to topple and democratize hostile and failed states without much help from allies. As a result, the administration has demonstrated increasing willingness to defer to international institutions and allies, and has become less aggressive in promoting democratic change.\textsuperscript{36}

I would therefore consider two alternatives to a strategy of dominance and preemption that this or future American administrations might choose to pursue.

**Stability, Deterrence and Containment**

This option takes the strategic outlook that has been traditionally advocated by a wide swath of the American foreign policy establishment but makes some marginal adjustments to confront the new threat of terrorists and other non-state actors. It cleaves to the tested methods of stable deterrence and containment for promoting national security interests, emphasizing the judicious use of pragmatic diplomacy, coalition-building around shared interests and clear and credible signals regarding the use of force. Although it recognizes the benefits of spreading democracy and free markets, as well as the importance of preventing some states from lapsing into failure, it emphasizes that democratization is not a first-order national security priority and should be put on the back burner if it conflicts with more traditional security priorities. This strategic outlook is willing to employ preemptive military action for the sake of self-defense – certainly, the threat of preemption is necessary for robust deterrence – but views it as a mistake to elevate preemption to a
doctrine and does not view preventive warfare for the purpose of promoting democracy to be at all worthwhile or prudent. Finally, this view considers military dominance to be instrumentally useful for advancing national security interests but does not think it should be viewed as an end in itself. Efforts to pursue military dominance for its own sake are very costly and may unnecessarily arouse discomfort and hostility in both friends and rivals.

With regard to the Gulf, this perspective favors a security strategy consistent with the policies that administrations employed prior to the invasion of Iraq—and arguably with the policy direction in which the Bush administration has been heading since the occupation has become more difficult than expected. It would view energy security, regional stability and cooperation in fighting terrorists as its main priorities. An administration taking this strategic approach would settle for any stable Iraqi regime not actively hostile to its Gulf neighbors and the United States, and would aim to reduce the number of American forces stationed in Iraq as much as practicable without risking destabilization. The most plausible way to achieve this would be to return to the Iraqis complete and general sovereignty – that is, full control of its political, military and economic affairs – as quickly as possible, accept any reasonable demands required by the international community to obtain the necessary peacekeeping forces and concentrate aid on training Iraqi security forces. It would combine any assistance with constant dialogue to ensure that the new Iraqi regime did not revert to its former aspirations of regional domination and quickly negotiate agreements permanently limiting its development of WMD and other destabilizing weaponry.
With Iran, the United States would use all of its available tools of deterrence and containment to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. It would continue to be vigilant in interdicting Iran’s attempts to import prohibited weapons and WMD material, but it would also reassess the effectiveness of its economic sanctions regime. It would also signal its intention to respond with swift and devastating military action to any credible evidence of Iranian support for terrorism against American targets or the deployment of nuclear weapons. American policy actors would recognize their options for encouraging domestic democratic reform to be limited and would prefer those with the lowest risk of causing a backlash: exchange trips involving students and civil society groups.

An American administration with this strategic perspective would maintain amicable relationships and open dialogue with Saudi Arabia and the Lower Gulf states on defense and energy issues, although it would also insist that they show concrete results in cooperating in the struggle against terrorism, as well as in discouraging anti-Americanism and religious extremism. It would promote gradual political liberalization, emphasizing civil society and non-governmental initiatives while being careful to balance the concerns of current authorities against the need to address the persistent economic and social problems in these states. It would maintain a significant presence in the Gulf, cognizant that other countries would be unable to replace the US role in securing this critical strategic region in the near future.

There are many indications that the present administration has moved toward a more traditional strategic perspective
in the wake of the difficulties in stabilizing Iraq. It has shifted power away from the more doctrinaire proponents in the Pentagon, who advocate fundamentally transforming the Middle East, namely, the National Security Council staff and the Vice President’s office, and toward the State Department’s career foreign service officials. It has publicly lowered expectations concerning the democratization of Iraq and the time line for reconstruction. It has also demonstrated some willingness to begin talking to Iran (as well as North Korea, the other Axis of Evil state) and has ceased publicly musing about launching more preventive wars.

Most strikingly, in recognizing that more international security assistance would be very helpful to stabilize Iraq, the US administration has demonstrated a renewed willingness to defer to the international community on a number of matters relevant to reconstruction—most notably when it withdrew support for Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress and put the selection of the interim government in the hands of UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. This last action is especially significant, considering the disregard the administration previously demonstrated toward the role of international institutions in security matters. Although it is unlikely that the current administration would swing much further toward a security strategy that promotes action through international institutions, the possibility of a change in government makes it worth considering what such a strategy might look like.

**Cooperative World Order**

This strategy emphasizes America’s great influence in “soft power” spheres. Considering the United States as
ascendant economically, culturally and diplomatically, this strategy maintains that it is appropriate to consider using these strengths before resorting to military force. Also, according to this view, because America possesses the world’s preeminent military, a great deal of its strength stems from the legitimacy conferred by international institutions and international law that it has taken the lead in creating. This strategy affirms that promoting democracy and markets is crucial to a lasting peace but asserts that the best way to do so is through a steadily expanding web of stable and cooperative international institutions and agreements, such as the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank. Given the amount of influence the United States wields in shaping and acting within the evolving system of international institutions, this perspective argues that America should be able to achieve almost any agenda worth pursuing through these institutions.

This strategy therefore rejects emphasizing preventive action – which in many circumstances is at odds with international law – and views the worries about being constrained by international institutions and agreements as being misplaced. The United States may in very limited situations need to act preemptively, but there are great limits on what military force can achieve, especially when deployed without the support of allies and the stamp of international legitimacy. If the United States eschews a doctrine of preventive military action and commits to pursuing its interests through international cooperation in a serious manner, then it no longer needs to invest the resources necessary to maintain military dominance. As
with preventive action, publicly expressing the intention to maintain military dominance only alienates friends, provokes rivals and makes the task of American diplomats more difficult. Instead, this strategy advises using the money the United States saves from reducing defense budgets to prevent terrorist attacks through cooperative law enforcement and intelligence-sharing efforts, and to target terrorism’s root causes by funding projects that promote democracy, the rule of law and economic and social development in troubled regions.

In the Gulf, this strategy implies bringing international agencies and troops into Iraq as quickly as possible to assist with reconstruction and to minimize the American profile in security operations. The foreign contribution to security in Iraq would fall entirely under the aegis of a NATO or UN peace enforcement mission. On Iran, the United States would reconsider its unilateral sanctions policy and instead work with the European Union (EU) and other concerned nations to forge a united front to prevent proliferation. This group would ideally take the position of a willingness to engage in dialogue, but with the understanding that the verification of non-proliferation agreements via IAEA inspections would be necessary to avoid targeted sanctions.

This strategy would advocate multilateral arrangements for ensuring energy security, for example, accelerating the transformation of the GCC into an effective regional security partnership with an eye to offering membership to Iraq and encouraging other friendly entities such as the EU and Japan to contribute resources to maintaining Gulf security. This could allow the US forces in the region to
return to the “over the horizon” status they had prior to the First Gulf War. The main face of the US presence in the region would be its diplomatic presence and non-governmental organizations. Their efforts to promote political reform and economic development would be assisted by significantly increased program funding, as well as conditions on military and development aid that would require regional regimes to make substantive improvements in governance and human rights. Finally, the United States would accompany its efforts to promote democratic reform with active and sustained engagement in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. Although peace between the Arab nations and Israel will not be sufficient to resolve the deep tensions of the Middle East, it is necessary to achieve a lasting peace.

Conclusions

By preemptively invading Iraq, the United States attempted to fundamentally reshape the political and strategic environment of the Gulf. Whether the democratization of Iraq will be successful remains to be seen, and the outcome will have a major effect on future US prospects in the Gulf. The struggle of Iran’s reformists will also have a major impact, although American actions have far less influence here. Yet regardless of the outcome of these variables, it is clear that the United States will be deeply involved in contending with their implications. Future administrations have a spectrum of choices in deciding how the United States will wield its power and deal with the global security situation, ranging from approaches that emphasize the use of unilateral military force to those that prefer
channeling American influence through diplomacy and international institutions. None of these approaches, however, can afford to ignore the central importance of the Gulf to the goal of preserving and extending the peace. As long as energy and terrorism are at the top of the American security agenda and the United States remains the world’s preeminent military power, the interests of the United States and the Gulf will be deeply intertwined, and this region will remain the focus of any national security strategy.


7. Iranian weapons purchases boosting its sea-denial capabilities since the Gulf War include: “CSS-2 Silkworm and CSS-3 Seersucker surface-launched antiship missiles, C-801 and C-802 sea- and air-launched antiship missiles, SA-5 SAMs, 3 Kilo-class diesel submarines, MiG-29


9. Prior to the buildup for the invasion of Iraq, the US military presence in the Gulf totaled approximately 10,000 men ashore and 10,000 to 14,000 afloat in the form of a carrier battle group and an amphibious ready group. The troops ashore consisted of a Patriot battalion, support infantry units, and the equivalent of a fighter wing. The main headquarters were the Central Command joint operations center in Riyadh and the Fifth Fleet’s headquarters in Manama. The United States also deployed two prepositioned heavy brigade equipment sets ashore and one afloat, as well as a Marine brigade-sized set afloat at Diego Garcia. See Richard Kugler, “U.S. Defense Strategy and Force Planning,” in Richard Sokolsky (ed.) The United States and the Persian Gulf, 89–116. <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/books/books_2003//Persian_Gulf/08_ch05.htm>


11. For the International Atomic Energy Agency’s assessment as of June 2004, see IAEA Board of Governors, Report by the
The Gulf and US National Security Strategy


14. The United States faces a much more diverse set of terrorist threats at the domestic level, ranging from white nationalists to survivalists to extremist political activists. However, the organization and scope of these groups’ activities is on a significantly lower order than the threat posed by international Islamic terrorists.


16. For example, the Clinton administration’s Middle East security strategy notes the importance of carrying out US security responsibilities in a region “without formal alliances or permanent basing arrangements that are familiar elsewhere in the world.” US Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy in the Middle East*, op cit.


21. In 2000, Iraq and the GCC countries had a combined population growth rate of 2.76 percent, compared to the world’s overall growth rate of 1.22 percent. The percentage of the population under 15 years of age ranged from 25 to 26 percent in the UAE and Kuwait, to 35 percent in Iran, and a stunning 41 to 42 percent in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. By comparison, persons under 15 years of age comprised 18 percent of the population in industrialized countries. Figures compiled from data from the UN Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision Online Database. <http://www.esa.un.org/unpp/>

22. Former administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority Paul Bremer’s description of the expectations is representative: “Once our work is over, the reward will be great: a free,

23. A prominent supporter of the war against Iraq observed in May 2004 that “even the administration's strongest supporters, including fervent advocates of the war…and even some who could be labeled “neoconservatives,” are now despairing and looking for an exit. They don't put quite that way, of course. Instead, they say that seeking democracy in Iraq is too ambitious; we need to lower our sights and settle for stability. But this is probably just a way station on the road to calling for withdrawal, for it ought to be clear that even establishing stability in Iraq will require a continued American military occupation and continued casualties for quite some time to come. Faced with that reality, conservatives and even neoconservatives can be heard muttering these days that if the Iraqis won't take responsibility for their own country, we should leave them to their fate.” Robert Kagan, “Lowering Their Sights,” *Washington Post*, May 2, 2004, B07.


25. In November 2003, the United States estimated that there existed in Iraq at least 50 poorly secured major weapons depots containing “650,000 tons of weapons such as rifles, missiles, ammunition, and other war material.” Rachel Stohl, “Iraq Small Arms Are a Big Threat,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 5, 2003, 9.

26. See, for example, Mark Gasiorowski, “Iran: Can the Islamic Republic Survive?” in Judith Yaphe (ed.) *The Middle East*

27. For example, President Mohammad Khatami, Iran’s most prominent moderate reformer, has taken a forceful line against the United Nations and the West in negotiations over IAEA scrutiny of its nuclear program, declaring that if talks failed, Iran would have “no moral commitment...to suspend uranium enrichment.” Karl Vick, “Iran Threatens to Resume Nuclear Activity,” Washington Post, June 24, 2004, A24.


29. Compare presidential challenger John Kerry’s description of his proposed foreign policy outlook: “Americans deserve a principled diplomacy...backed by undoubted military might...that commits America to lead the world toward liberty and prosperity.” John Kerry for President campaign web site. <http://www.johnkerry.com/issues/foreignpolicy/>


31. “Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization. Throughout history, freedom has been threatened by war and terror; it has been challenged by the clashing wills of powerful states and the evil designs of tyrants; and it has been tested by widespread poverty and disease. Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom’s triumph over all these foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission” (George W. Bush, op. cit., vi). The Bush administration
furthermore expects “solidarity and cooperation from other democracies” in its leadership of that mission (Ibid., 4).


34. Because the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq as well as Afghanistan has cost more resources and political capital than expected, the Bush administration has backed away from statements about effecting regime change in Iran through military action, and has instead chosen to push regime change through “a very hard line on the nonproliferation issue and [increased] support for dissident elements inside Iran.” Carol Giacomo, “Bush, Kerry Have Different Approaches to Iran,” Reuters, July 14, 2004. <http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=politicsNews&storyID=5672810>


36. Some examples include: the concessions in obtaining a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the reconstruction of Iraq; the delegation of responsibility to UN envoy Brahimi for selecting the composition of Iraq’s transitional administration; the attempt to place some of the security responsibilities in Iraq under NATO command; and the multilateral interventions in Haiti and Liberia. Also, the cessation of public statements about the possibility of further unilateral preemptive invasions of states that the United States considers “rogue states,” such as Syria and Iran.

37. The Clinton administration, for example, stated that the United States’ principal and enduring concerns in the Middle East were
“oil…extremist groups that use terrorism to pursue goals hostile to U.S. interests …proliferation of weapons of mass destruction…[and] repeated conflict,” while its general strategic approach for managing these concerns was “promoting stability and peaceful change.” US Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the Middle East*, op. cit.

38. Kenneth Pollack suggests a “security condominium,” a continuous suite of confidence-building, arms control and security cooperation forums and agreements that would involve the United States and all of the Gulf nations, including Iraq and Iran. See Kenneth Pollack, “Securing the Gulf,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003), 2–16. In an even more multilateral vein, Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser advance a self-styled unorthodox view of the United States’ security imperatives in the Gulf, arguing for the feasibility of a significant devolution of security responsibilities to the international community. See Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser, “Persian Gulf Myths,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 76, no. 3 (May/June 1997), 42–52.


— “Securing the Gulf.” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2003).


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