

## Containment of Iran: Elements of a Post-Iraq-Withdrawal Security Architecture

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The American withdrawal from Iraq is presenting the Obama Administration and America's allies in the region with a set of worries that could shortly become nasty headaches. The



withdrawal cannot be ignored as simply a redeployment of troops after their official mandate has expired (31/12/2011), but as a strategic move that could have adverse effects by putting the Islamic Republic of Iran in control of a corridor of states that extends to the Mediterranean Sea. However, it is still possible for an American-Iraqi security arrangement to be reached. Bearing this in mind, it is hoped that strategic

thinkers in the United States, the Arabian Gulf, and NATO have planned for a post-withdrawal security architecture that can reasonably contain Iran and ensure stability and peace in the Gulf and the wider environment.

It is likely that American officials already have military solutions to the problem created by vacating Iraq. US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta indicated as much on a visit to Asia last October when he announced that the United States military will have 40,000 troops in the Gulf region, 23,000 of which stationed in Kuwait, while 100,000 other troops are in Afghanistan. Needless to say, the American naval presence in Bahrain and on ships in the Gulf,



the al-Udaid air base in Qatar, and the 1994 Strategic Defense Agreement with the United Arab Emirates allowing the pre-positioning of equipment and the docking of large naval assets at UAE bases are major 'aces-in-the-hole'. Additionally, the American Africa Command in Djibouti and major bases, in the Indian Ocean can provide more than emergency deployments in case of trouble.

For their part, the Arab Gulf states have been active over the last decade in addressing their security concerns. While unable to fully resolve their security dilemma vis-à-vis Iran which continues to present the greatest danger to their stability and prosperity, they have been strategic in their choices for weapons acquisitions. Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states have been keen on acquiring the latest technologies and weapons systems, especially from the United States, and have worked hard within the military bodies of the Gulf Cooperation Council to coordinate their efforts, integrate command and control systems, and resolve *extant* interoperability issues. Since 2000 and well into the 2020s, these countries have acquired and will purchase over \$200 billion in US and other equipment. Indeed, the response GCC states had to the developments in Bahrain earlier this year, showed an assertive collective foreign policy that is augmented by a feeling of military security.

What the dual arrangement of American-GCC military cooperation and coordination may need, is a partner that could provide the strategic depth and commitment that long-term containment demands. Despite the tribulations besetting NATO members in Europe regarding their sovereign debt, an uncertain Euro, and slow growth, the alliance still can be such a partner. As a central actor within the alliance, Turkey has no doubt that the Islamic Republic is a rival, despite its assertions about friendly relations with its neighbour. (Incidentally, Turkey's diplomatic approach to Iran did not prevent

the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Air Force threatening to attack NATO's missile shield stationed on Turkish soil in the case of a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.)



Moreover, some NATO members already have good military ties with the Gulf states. France has a strategic understanding with the United Arab Emirates according to which it has a naval base in Abu Dhabi that could house 500 soldiers and naval assets. Britain has good political and military relations with Oman and deploys troops there, while Germany aspires to be influential in the Gulf. The first two, and other NATO members, participated in the aerial campaign against the late-Libyan leader Moummar Qaddafi's forces pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1973. That also was the campaign that saw active participation by the air forces of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, both members of the GCC and increasingly taking a hard line with Iran.

The elements of this tripartite security architecture could provide the immediate and long-term functional requisites for an

effective strategy for containing Iran. But they cannot be seen as the only ones. Indeed the limitation of this architecture is in the fact that it seemingly ignores the potential contributions that the Arab countries, especially Egypt, and even non-Arab Pakistan can add. But the political realities in today's Egypt necessitate allowing it to put its house in order before committing it to a strategic mission that requires a stable political system. In Pakistan's case, both ongoing security concerns attending its battle with terrorism and its turbulent relationship with the United States – exacerbated by the friendly-fire incident some days ago (26/11/2011) – mitigate against considering it an immediate and constant contributor to the plan. Still, however, both countries remain potential participants.

Finally, this architecture will benefit from *extant* conditions that help both to mitigate Iranian attempts at meddling in the affairs of its neighbours and actually contain its ambitions. First, the domestic political and economic crises facing the Islamic Republic are increasingly making it more conservative and less rational in pursuit of internal peace and stability. Second, the gradual and creeping control by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps of political and economic activities in the country are creating resentment among moderate and modern sectors of society. Third, the prospects of a collapse of the Ba`athist regime in Syria are real, which will deal the Iranian clerical system a blow that will deprive it of an essential and strategic

partner. Fourth, Iran's dwindling list of friendly states around the world was only made shorter by the recent attack on the British Embassy in Tehran (29/11/2011). Such conditions may simply ease the mission of containment that the hoped-for security architecture can achieve.



*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

Iran image:

[http://www.faa.gov/air\\_traffic/publications/ifim/country\\_list/media/ir-map.gif](http://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/ifim/country_list/media/ir-map.gif)

US aircraft carrier on patrol in the Arabian Gulf image:

<http://infowars.net/pictures/jan07/150107B-Carrier.jpg>

Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant image:

<http://www.virginmedia.com/images/Bushehr-nuclear-431x300.jpg>

Syria-Iran flag image:

<http://images.huffingtonpost.com/gen/61185/thumbs/s-IRAN-AND-SYRIA-FLAGS-large.jpg>

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