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# ARTFUL BALANCE

Future US Defense Strategy and Force Posture in the Gulf



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A strategic review of US defense strategy and force posture in the Gulf is long overdue. A number of factors suggest the need for a comprehensive reassessment of the strengths and weaknesses of US political-military designs in the Gulf, including: uncertainty over Iran's nuclear ambitions; the US departure from Iraq in 2011 and subsequent return in 2014; President Barack Obama's determination to withdraw the last US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016; new and significant fiscal constraints on the US defense budget; and widespread turmoil and violence in the broader Middle East, including the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, Washington appears slow to adapt to these ongoing changes, instead basing its approach to that strategically vital region on dated assumptions and misplaced notions of stability.

The outcome of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the US-led group of nations known as the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) is the one variable that will most significantly affect US defense strategy and force posture in the Gulf and the broader Middle East. If a nuclear-armed Iran were to become a reality, it would constitute an extraordinarily significant shock to the politics and security of the region, and would necessitate a complete overhaul of the US agenda in the Middle East. Yet, even if all sides reached a diplomatic agreement guaranteeing that Tehran will not acquire nuclear weapons, Washington would still need to introduce important changes to its force posture in the Gulf—updating it to meet new circumstances and to reassure its regional partners that a nuclear deal with Iran would lead neither to US disengagement from the region nor to a diminution of those partners' security interests.

US defense strategy in the Gulf has rested on four pillars of varying levels of importance: deterrence, reassurance, counterterrorism, and political development. The first three are and should remain key elements of the strategy because they have served long-term US goals in that region well. However, political development—which, for a long time, Washington has not treated as a real

priority because of its focus on short-term stability and security—should occupy a much more prominent place in the US portfolio for the Gulf. Washington's years of neglecting the critical issue of political development in the Gulf causes its defense strategy in that region to be unsustainable. Last but not least, the strategy is insufficiently dynamic and does not adequately cope with burgeoning regional and global trends.

Because all four pillars of US defense strategy are inherently linked, Washington should seek to attain higher levels of synergy among them, with the help of its regional partners. The stationing of powerful US military assets in the Gulf has aided in providing security assurances to regional partners and in fighting terrorists in and from the region. These forward-deployed US weapons systems and units are also assumed to have helped in deterring Iran from attacking or coercing its neighbors. But some of those assets are not well-suited to effectively deal with the growing asymmetric threat that Iran poses to collective interests in the region. That consists of Tehran's ability, which it has honed for decades, to create and work through local, nonstate proxies in order to expand its reach in the region, while also undermining the internal stability of key US regional partners. Stealth aircraft and missile defenses are strong deterrents against Iran's conventional military capabilities, but these tools do not guard against its asymmetric threat.

The basic principle of any future US force posture in the Gulf, regardless of what happens on the Iranian nuclear front, should be the continuation of US *military access* to the Gulf. Indeed, instead of fixating on force structure, Washington should focus on identifying measures that help maintain and enhance military access, and it should not be shy about explaining to its Gulf partners why the latter is more strategically significant and mutually beneficial than the former.

Successful realignment of US force posture in the Gulf, and elsewhere, also must emphasize military capability. Indeed, any serious discussion of this topic should not be

bogged down with numbers. While capacity is certainly an important factor in the deterrence and reassurance equation, it should be neither the guiding principle nor the main criterion, especially under circumstances where the principal adversary—in this case, Iran—has inferior conventional military capabilities. To put it simply, when thinking about the reconfiguration of US military assets in the Gulf, the key question should not be “how much more, or how much less,” but instead “what and where?”

Because Iran poses a multidimensional challenge—directly through its controversial nuclear program as well as its evolving missile arsenal and other weapons systems, and indirectly through local, nonstate proxies—the United States should seek to find the right balance between, on the one hand, the means to deter Iran from attacking and coercing its neighbors and potentially acquiring nuclear capabilities, and on the other hand, the means to counter its successful asymmetric approach. Those are two very different sets of tools, where the former is focused on external defense, and the latter on internal security.

If Iran abandons what many suspect is a military nuclear path, and instead signs an agreement with the P5+1 that verifiably restricts its nuclear program, US defense strategy would be relieved of an enormous military burden and a source of political stress. The United States could then focus on dealing with more manageable, but still challenging problems, including Iran’s asymmetric threat and potential violation of the nuclear deal.

In this environment, the United States could best protect its interests in the Gulf and those of its partners if it undertook a series of incremental improvements to its force posture to make it more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, politically sustainable, and tactically robust. Among many others, the authors make the following recommendations:

- propose and then negotiate an offer of a mutual defense treaty with willing Arab Gulf states
- reduce the visibility, predictability, and vulnerability of US forces in the Gulf by further dispersing them, diversifying patterns of deployment, and exploring new basing concepts
- emphasize the maritime character of future US force posture in the Gulf by improving maritime defenses, anti-fast attack and craft capabilities, mine countermeasure capabilities, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities
- intensify security cooperation with Gulf partners, in order for them to improve their self-defense capabilities and carry a greater share of the burden

- bolster defenses against Iranian missile attacks, and work toward higher levels of ballistic missile defense (BMD) integration among Gulf partners

In the event Iran does acquire a nuclear weapons capability, the United States would have to undertake much more drastic changes to its defense strategy and force posture than the ones listed above. The following recommendation would help the United States more effectively deter and contain a nuclear-armed Iran:

- create incentives for countries outside the region, including NATO allies and partners, to contribute military resources to ensure Gulf security

The Middle East has been enormously challenging and costly for the United States during the past two decades, in terms of blood, treasure, and international reputation. Despite this, Washington can afford neither to lessen its involvement nor address the problems of the region only from afar.

The Pentagon should not continue to delay the development and implementation of a strategically driven redesign of its force posture in the Gulf. With so many evolving global demands and complex, multifaceted, and unpredictable security challenges, the United States cannot afford to waste its efforts on less-than-core strategic priorities.

Thus, it is more critical than ever that US defense strategy in the Gulf be designed around reassuring partners, deterring adversaries, continuing to conduct counterterrorism missions, and advancing needed political development to help dry up the sources of extremism and promote internal stability. Underwriting a new force posture in the region to support that strategy effectively is just as important. Such a posture could better assist US military efforts in protecting and advancing US interests in an increasingly fragile and dangerous region by placing a continuing premium on access, while also building more robust maritime capabilities, enhancing missile defenses, ensuring diversification and unpredictability, and increasing the sharing of burdens.

Most importantly, Washington’s defense strategy and force posture should alert its partners and adversaries alike that the United States is in the Gulf to stay, and that it seeks to build longer-term and deeper relationships with its closest partners, some of whom have shed blood in distant operations alongside their US military counterparts. It should be clear that under almost any scenario that could unfold, the United States will retain strong interest in the security of its partners in this strategically vital region.



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Saab has more than a dozen years of experience working as an analyst, adviser, and corporate manager on the Middle

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Saab served as the Founding Executive Director and Head of Research of the Washington, DC office of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, responsible for directing the strategic operations,

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Prior to joining Brookings, Saab served as Chief Officer and Editor of the Middle East Desk at the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews, where he was a British Council Scholar. Previously, he worked at the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies in Beirut and managed numerous research projects on good governance in the Arab world, including Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Before that, he conducted research on political and economic development in the Middle East at the Middle East Institute and on post-conflict reconstruction in Iraq at the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), both think tanks based in Washington, DC.

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**Barry Pavel** is Vice President and Director of the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council, focusing on emerging security challenges, defense strategies and capabilities, and key European and global defense issues.

Prior to joining the Atlantic Council, he was a career member of the Senior Executive Service in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy for almost eighteen years. From October 2008 to July 2010, he served as the Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Defense Policy and Strategy on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, serving both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. In this capacity, Pavel led the development of five of the first eight Obama Administration Presidential Study Directives. He was the initiator and architect of the NSC's first-ever National Security Priorities Review and a key contributor to the President's 2010 National Security Strategy; led the NSC's oversight of the four Defense Department strategic reviews (the Quadrennial Defense Review, Nuclear Posture Review, Ballistic Missile Defense Review, and Space Posture Review), including the President's September 2009 decision on European missile defense and all presidential decisions on nuclear policy and posture; co-led the development of the President's June 2010 National Space Policy; and contributed to the President's policies on Europe and NATO, Korea, cyberspace, Defense Department operational plans and activities, military family policy, and other matters.

Prior to this position, Pavel was the Chief of Staff and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities. He helped then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Vickers develop policy on the capabilities and operational employment of special operations forces, strategic forces, and conventional forces. His main areas of work covered strategic capabilities policy, including development of the first Defense Department cyber deterrence strategy and better aligning the department's approach to cyberspace

activities and capabilities with defense strategy and policy.

From October 1993 to November 2006, Pavel led or contributed to a broad range of defense strategy and planning initiatives for both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. He led the Clinton administration's development of the Defense Planning Guidance and the defense planning for the first round of NATO enlargement. He also contributed to President Clinton's National Security Strategies and the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). As the principal director for strategy, he also played a leading role in the conduct of the 2001 QDR, the global defense posture realignment, and the development of the 2005 US National Defense Strategy. Other main work areas included: the Secretary of Defense's Security Cooperation Guidance and the first Interagency Security Cooperation Strategy Conference; the Unified Command Plan; post-9/11 deterrence policy (including deterrence of terrorist networks and regional nuclear powers); strategies for reducing ungoverned areas; and a long-range planning construct that accounts for trends and "strategic shocks" that could significantly change DoD's role in national security.

Pavel holds an MA in security studies and an MPA in international relations from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, and a BA in applied mathematics and economics from Brown University. While at Princeton, he was a founding editorial board member of the *Journal of Public and International Affairs*. He also served in the Office of the Defense Advisor, US Mission to NATO, and as a consultant to the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment.

Prior to Princeton, Pavel served in the Strategy, Forces, and Resources Division of the Institute for Defense Analyses, where he specialized in research on force planning and coauthored numerous IDA reports and publications.

Pavel received a Presidential Rank Award in 2007 in recognition of his career accomplishments. He also has served as a key advisor to policy leadership on civil service professional development and mentorship. He is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and speaks and writes on a wide range of foreign and security policy issues. He also is a Member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



A strategic review of US defense strategy and force posture in the Gulf is long overdue. A number of factors suggest the need for a comprehensive reassessment of the strengths and weaknesses of US political-military designs in the Gulf, including: uncertainty over Iran's nuclear ambitions; the US departure from Iraq in 2011 and subsequent return in 2014; President Barack Obama's determination to withdraw the last US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016; new and significant fiscal constraints on the US defense budget; and widespread turmoil and violence in the broader Middle East, including the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, Washington appears slow to adapt to these ongoing changes, instead basing its approach to that strategically vital region on dated assumptions and misplaced notions of stability.

The outcome of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the US-led group of nations known as the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) is the one variable that will most significantly affect US defense strategy and force posture in the Gulf and the broader Middle East. If a nuclear-armed Iran were to become a reality, it would constitute an extraordinarily significant shock to the region's politics and security, and would require a complete overhaul of the US agenda in the Middle East. Yet, even if all parties involved reach a diplomatic agreement guaranteeing that Tehran will not acquire nuclear weapons, Washington would still need to introduce important changes to its force posture in the Gulf—updating it to meet new circumstances and to reassure its regional partners that a nuclear deal with Iran would lead neither to US disengagement from the region nor to a diminution of those partners' security interests.

US defense strategy in the Gulf has rested on four pillars of varying levels of importance. Deterrence, reassurance, and counterterrorism are and should remain three key elements of US defense strategy in the Gulf because they have served long-term US goals in that region.

However, political development<sup>1</sup>—which, for a long time, Washington has not treated as a real priority because of its focus on short-term stability and security—should occupy a much more prominent place in the US portfolio for the Gulf. The ineffectiveness of the old US approach was evident in 2011, with the eruption of the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere. How to integrate political development effectively into US defense strategy without upsetting or overwhelming other important security objectives, however, is the most pertinent question. Answering it represents the most difficult US undertaking in the Gulf and in the broader Middle East, now and into the future.

Because all four pillars of US strategy—deterrence, reassurance, counterterrorism, and political development—are inherently linked, Washington should seek to attain higher levels of synergy among them, with the help of its regional partners.<sup>2</sup> For example, the stationing of powerful US military assets in the Gulf has helped provide security assurances to regional partners and in fighting terrorists in and from the region. These forward-deployed US weapons systems and units are also assumed to have helped deter Iran from attacking or coercing its neighbors. But some of those assets are not well-suited to effectively deal with the growing asymmetric threat that Iran poses to collective interests in the region. Such a threat consists of Tehran's ability, which it has honed for decades, to create and work

1 As political scientist Lucian W. Pye explains in a classic treatment of political development, the term can mean many things. Political development in this context consists primarily of institution-building and citizenship development, not mass political participation. Lucian W. Pye, "The Concept of Political Development," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 358, no. 1, pp. 1-13.

2 Caitlin Talmadge correctly states that "...posture decisions involve carefully balancing competing objectives rather than fully maximizing any single goal." Caitlin Talmadge, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Now? Assessing U.S. Force Posture in the Persian Gulf," in Charles Glaser and Rose Kelanic, eds., *Crude Calculus: Reexamining the Energy Security Logic of America's Military Presence in the Persian Gulf*, draft manuscript (2015).



through local, nonstate proxies in order to expand its reach in the region, while also undermining the internal stability of key US regional partners. Stealth aircraft and missile defenses are strong deterrents against Iran's conventional military capabilities, but these tools do not affect or guard against its asymmetric threat.

The US military presence in the Gulf, no matter how robust and useful it is for deterrence purposes, also cannot forever constitute the ultimate security reassurance for Arab Gulf states or serve as an alternative to self-defense. Simply put, although the United States and its Gulf partners see eye to eye on most issues that affect the region's future, there is no substitute for significant contributions to self-defense in an increasingly dangerous and fast-paced neighborhood. Over the years, most Arab Gulf states have boosted national defense spending, acquired the latest weapons, and intensified their training and cooperation with the United States and other international powers—all primarily for the purpose of improving their own defensive capabilities. Yet the accumulation of effective military power is a long-term endeavor that will require defense and security reforms, which inevitably carry political and social implications for governance systems in the Gulf that are generally resistant to change. Even so, current US force posture in the Gulf impairs US efforts to urge regional partners to lessen their security dependency on the United States and initiate greater defense and security reforms.

The presence of significant numbers of American soldiers in the Gulf has also been blamed for stimulating Islamist radicalization and promoting terrorism, which inevitably detracts from US counterterrorism objectives. Former al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden specifically used the US military presence in Saudi Arabia to justify his jihadist cause (although jihadist terrorism has complex roots—some personal, others structural—and some believe that dire local conditions such as closed politics, poor governance, failed economics, and social alienation are also influential).

This does not suggest that the United States should move to a standoff force posture in the Gulf, one that would operate primarily from outside the Gulf region. Despite its political attractiveness in Washington, and perhaps among segments of the American public that are increasingly fed up with conflict in the Middle East, a standoff posture would increase the costs and reduce the effectiveness of deterring and containing Iran. In addition, it would indirectly invite other major powers, such as Russia and China, to enhance their relative positions in the region at the expense of US interests—and possibly regional security—and prompt US

regional partners and adversaries to further question Washington's commitment and resolve.

As is often the case, a more desirable alternative can be found somewhere in the middle. The key is to preserve those aspects of the current US military posture in the Gulf that have proven their worth for decades, along with those that are best suited to address Iran's asymmetric threat and other challenges—but also to identify areas that could be improved to simultaneously meet all four tenets of US defense strategy in the Gulf. However, it would be a mistake for Washington to discuss military reconfiguration without substantial consultations among its regional partners. One of the main reasons the United States often has struggled to achieve its goals in the Middle East is because it has spent less time listening to and coordinating with its partners, who typically have deeper knowledge of regional circumstances.

To keep up with historic changes and developing trends in Washington, the Middle East, and across the globe—and to prepare for all contingencies with regard to Iran's nuclear ambitions and address its asymmetric threat—the Pentagon needs a more flexible and dynamic force posture in the Gulf. To achieve this, the United States should make a series of incremental improvements to its current posture to increase its geographical distribution, operational resiliency, political sustainability,<sup>3</sup> and tactical robustness. This paper provides specific recommendations for US officials to make these necessary adjustments.

This paper benefits from the views of participants in an April 22, 2014 workshop held at the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. The event featured Central Command (CENTCOM) leadership and other senior US officials from the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the National Security Council. The paper also draws on recent conversations held by the authors over a seven-month period with senior Arab Gulf and US officials in Washington, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Riyadh, and Muscat.

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3 The first three attributes were mentioned by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates when describing US force posture in the Asia-Pacific. Robert Gates, speech given at International Institute for Strategic Studies Conference, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, June 5, 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1483>. An effective US force posture in the Gulf should have these same qualities, in addition to tactical robustness.

In his March 2013 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, US Marine Corps Commander Gen James N. Mattis briefly described the requirements of a future US force posture in the Middle East. James N. Mattis, statement before the House Armed Services Committee on the Posture of US Central Command, Washington, DC, March 2, 2013, [http://fas.org/irp/congress/2013\\_hr/socom2.pdf](http://fas.org/irp/congress/2013_hr/socom2.pdf).



## TRENDS AND DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Tightening fiscal constraints in Washington, evolving US global priorities, worsening security challenges in Europe, and increasingly worrying trends in the Middle East all hamper the military effectiveness and political sustainability of the US force posture in the Gulf. Specifically, a downsized US military and an increasingly constrained US defense budget—along with closer US diplomatic attention and commitment of more resources to the Asia-Pacific region—are likely to restrict Washington’s plans and freedom of action in the Gulf. That, in turn, will force the Pentagon to think more creatively about ways to protect collective interests using fewer military resources.

Another set of complex regional challenges is likely to strain Washington’s force posture in the Gulf: Iran’s continuing modernization of its missile inventory and its ongoing development of other asymmetric and cyber capabilities; the resurgence of jihadist terrorism and radicalization in the region as a result of the security vacuums caused by the Iraq-Syria and Libya zones of conflict; concerns about several Gulf partners’ political stability; and the proliferation of lethal and disruptive defense technologies.

***US Rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific:*** In his 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, Obama proposed a US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region,<sup>4</sup> but Washington’s desire to shift its attention to that part of the world preceded the Obama administration. President George W. Bush had no public plans for aggressive engagement and democracy promotion in the Middle East until the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, which forced him to focus his foreign policy on the region. If the 9/11 attacks had not happened, the Bush administration most likely would have centered its foreign policy on managing the rise of China.

The topic of US global rebalancing has generated a debate that has been neither calm nor nuanced. Middle Eastern partners, and specifically Gulf partners, continue to see the proposed rebalancing as an indicator of US intentions to disengage. Many US analysts have ridiculed or expressed doubt about the pivot, seeing it merely as an attempt by Washington to put China on notice, and arguing that the United States is staying put in the Middle East due to the region’s enduring strategic significance. To repair the damage caused by the pivot announcement and to reassure Washington’s Gulf partners, Obama had to instruct his top political and military advisers to refute all accusations of US disengagement from the region. Perhaps the most important speech toward this end came from Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in Manama, Bahrain, in December 2013. Hagel categorically denied any US intention to leave, providing evidence to the contrary and citing efforts to devote additional military resources to the region, increase training of and coordination with the Gulf partners’ armed forces, strengthen political ties, and boost other security cooperation programs.

But in reality, the US rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region is neither a China-related ploy nor a plan for an imminent departure from the Middle East. Those belittling its importance and questioning its authenticity underestimate the American people’s fatigue with war in the Middle East and misread its serious intent to concentrate more on a rising Asia-Pacific that “features a \$20 trillion economy and military spending that now surpasses that of Europe.”<sup>5</sup> So while the United States is not about to send its troops back home and desert its friends in the region, the level of its military effort in the Middle East will be constrained. The United States has only a finite, and diminishing, amount of national resources it can commit to its foreign policy agenda worldwide. There is also a limit to how much a President and his or her staff can focus on three strategic

4 US Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: 2012), [http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf).

5 Robert A. Manning, *The Future of US Extended Deterrence in Asia to 2025* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, October 2014), [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Future\\_US\\_Ext\\_Det\\_in\\_Asia.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Future_US_Ext_Det_in_Asia.pdf).

regions simultaneously, now that European security has reemerged as a major concern in light of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and Russia's attempt to aggressively expand its influence in Eastern Europe.

***New European Security Challenges:*** With the Ukrainian crisis continuing to intensify since early 2014, the United States has had to adjust its plans of further reducing its European military presence. The reposturing effort began in earnest in 2004, when the Bush administration made a series of decisions to significantly revamp global posture with a focus on Europe, which had become a region of relative calm. As it became increasingly clear in 2014 that Europe had again become a theater of insecurity, the United States began realigning its European posture in order to reassure its Eastern European allies and deter further Russian coercion and aggression. This reassurance included the early 2015 announcement that the United States will: preposition a heavy brigade set of equipment in Europe, to go along with the two permanently stationed brigades in Germany and Italy; deploy its newest tactical aircraft units, the F-35s, into Europe; and sustain the higher level of rotational force presence, training, and exercises it had reached in 2014. Absent significant increases in the defense budget, this new era of European insecurity—and its first-order implications for US European strategy and posture—will undoubtedly further constrain any future US military posture in the Middle East.

***US Defense Budget Cuts:*** According to the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), US forces should be capable of “defeating a regional adversary in a large-scale multi-phased campaign, and of denying the objectives of—or imposing unacceptable costs on—a second aggressor in another region.”<sup>6</sup> In terms of US defense spending, which is expected to increase for the next few years, it “will exceed [that] of any other military power by several times, and be vastly larger than the spending of Iran and any combination of Gulf and Middle Eastern states.”<sup>7</sup>

These figures notwithstanding, the United States will spend substantially less on defense than it did during the period in which it was fighting two major-theater wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What this means for the United States, for the first time in a decade, is a reduced global military capacity at a time when the actual and potential demands on US military forces appear to be multiplying rapidly. The United States now faces significant threats in

three major regions. Europe is under the renewed threat of coercion and aggression by Russia. Asia is rife with potential flashpoints due to China's growing assertiveness in claiming disputed territorial waters in the East China and South China Seas. The Middle East includes the continuing challenge posed by Iran, the threat of violent extremists, the collapse of Syria, the likely fragmentation of Libya and Yemen, the fragility of Iraq, the deterioration of Egyptian security, and a range of other simmering crises that could boil over at almost any time.

In light of these demands, and in the context of history that has featured significant threats to US security emanating from the Middle East on a sustained basis, it is prudent to assume that the region will remain high on Washington's priority list, even as overall US capacity diminishes.

### ***Proliferation of Lethal and Disruptive Defense***

***Technologies:*** Trends in advanced technology sectors of the global economy are increasingly affecting both US and global security. Several technological revolutions now developing concurrently could have unpredictable consequences, and almost all advanced technologies intended for civilian or industrial use also have military applications. These dual-use functions give small groups and individuals new power to strategically and significantly affect events on the regional or global stage.

Advancements in big data, robotics, algorithms, biotechnology, and additive manufacturing—including 3D printing and 4D printing, the latter being the printing of self-reconfiguring responsive objects—are all happening rapidly. All these technologies have enormous positive and productive potential. For example, major new advances in biotechnology promise greater longevity and the treatment of major chronic diseases. However, they also have darker applications and appear almost certain to generate new, surprising, and significant security threats and challenges, for which many US government and military institutions may be unprepared. For example, coinciding advances in synthetic genomics and 3D printing have led to the ability for established and aspiring biologists alike to modify, produce, and print new strains of genetic code—including viruses—with relative ease, by loading 3D printers with genetic building blocks.

This biotech revolution has caused leaders in the field of synthetic genomics to warn the Obama administration that the process was easy and cheap enough for a new generation of biologists to play with DNA, as well as viruses.<sup>8</sup> The creation of new viruses becomes more troubling when one considers the information

6 US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington, DC: March 4, 2014), [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/20140302\\_FINAL\\_QDR\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_v13\\_CLEAN.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/20140302_FINAL_QDR_Fact_Sheet_v13_CLEAN.pdf).

7 Anthony A. Cordesman, *Improving the US-GCC Security Partnership: Planning for the Future* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 11, 2014), [http://csis.org/files/publication/140411\\_Improving\\_US-GCC\\_Security\\_Partnership.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/140411_Improving_US-GCC_Security_Partnership.pdf).

8 Laurie Garrett, “Biology's Brave New World,” *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140156/laurie-garrett/biologys-brave-new-world>.

THE UNITED STATES AND WESTERN POWERS HAVE BEEN UNDERSTANDABLY FOCUSED ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, BUT THEY HAVE PAID LESS ATTENTION ALL THESE YEARS TO TEHRAN'S CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND EXPANSION OF ITS MILITARY CAPABILITIES.

component. Once scientists have determined a virus's genetic code, they can embed the code in a seemingly innocuous source—al-Qaeda has previously embedded attack instructions within pornography videos<sup>9</sup>—and transmit it to anyone with the proper 3D printer. Further advances in commercial 3D and 4D printing could allow nonstate actors and individuals to eliminate key manufacturing and logistics problems by enabling them to print out spare parts and key pieces of equipment.<sup>10</sup> This essentially represents the democratization of production capabilities, which over time could enable state and nonstate adversaries to leapfrog niche military capabilities and present the US military with new, unexpected challenges. In addition to commercially available technologies, it is also unclear if US forces are prepared for an enemy's novel use of programmable

9 Nic Robertson, Paul Cruickshank, and Lim Lister, "Documents Reveal Al Qaeda's Plans for Seizing Cruise Ships, Carnage in Europe," CNN, May 1, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/30/world/al-qaeda-documents-future/>.

10 Shawn Brimley, Ben FitzGerald, and Kelley Sayler, *Game Changers: Disruptive Technology and US Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, September 2013), [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_Gamechangers\\_BrimleyFitzGeraldSayler\\_0.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_Gamechangers_BrimleyFitzGeraldSayler_0.pdf).

swarms of unmanned aerial vehicles, potentially using innovative operational concepts that play to their strengths and exploit US force vulnerabilities. In short, the multipurpose nature of a range of revolutionary technologies—in which developments in the commercial sector, in almost every case, will outpace applications in the military sphere—could call for a very different approach to US military posture in the five-to-ten-year timeframe.

***Iran's Growing Military Capabilities:*** The United States and Western powers have been understandably focused on Iran's nuclear program for more than a decade, but they have paid less attention all these years to Tehran's continuous improvement and expansion of its military capabilities, including its arsenal of missiles that could strike any target in the Gulf.

Iran spent much of the 1980s developing its arsenal of Shahab missiles, originally based on the Scud series.<sup>11</sup> These efforts culminated with the Shahab-3, a modified North Korean Nodong missile with the capacity to strike Israel. The missile can be launched from a mobile unit, and can carry a chemical, biological, or nuclear payload of approximately one thousand kilograms.<sup>12</sup> By 2007, this missile was further modified to produce the Ghadr, a longer-range iteration of the Shahab 3 with a range of 1,600 kilometers.<sup>13</sup> Iran also has significantly expanded its short-range capacity. Most notable among these developments has been the Fateh-110, with a range of 250 kilometers. A modified version, the Khalij Fars, is purported to be equipped with optical-guidance sensors, an enhancement that could allow for more accurate strikes on maritime targets.<sup>14</sup> Iran has also successfully tested the Sejil 2, a solid-propellant missile with a number of operational advantages.<sup>15</sup> This surface-to-surface missile has a range of approximately 2,200 kilometers.<sup>16</sup>

Iran's missile development historically has been hampered by its reliance on foreign components, but Iran has recently worked to expand its domestic production capabilities. This has been bolstered by university programs focused on providing research and support functions for Iran's missile-development and

11 Michael Elleman, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," United States Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>.

12 Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), *Iran: Missile* (Washington, DC: 2014), <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/iran/delivery-systems/>.

13 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2014* (London: 2014), p. 300.

14 Ibid, p. 301.

15 Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), *Iran: Missile* (Washington, DC: 2014), <http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/iran/delivery-systems/>.

16 Elleman, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program."

space programs.<sup>17</sup> This burgeoning domestic sector will likely have the greatest effects on Iran's unmanned aerial-vehicle program and Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) development efforts. In February 2009, Iran used a Safir-2 Satellite Launch Vehicle (SLV) to launch an Omid satellite into orbit,<sup>18</sup> raising concerns about the application of this technology for the long-term development of ICBMs.<sup>19</sup> Iran's drone capabilities have also rapidly advanced, as the Fotros has been likened to the US Predator drone and can be equipped with air-to-surface missiles that complement its reconnaissance capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Following the crash and subsequent capture of a US ScanEagle, Iran was able to reproduce a nearly identical model—an ominous development in light of Iran's 2011 capture of a US RQ-170 Sentinel, an advanced stealth drone.<sup>21</sup>

**Political Fragility of Some Gulf Partners:** Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>22</sup> countries have more or less weathered the initial storm of the Arab uprisings. Some of them have been able to maintain domestic order, as they always have, through a mix of repression, political tactics, and economic subsidies. But because the region is in such a state of flux and violence—and will most likely continue to experience upheaval in years to come given the deeply rooted nature of its problems—the long-term sustainability of some of the Gulf monarchies' approaches to stability is not assured. Today, larger segments of Gulf societies—particularly, but not exclusively, young people—are spiritedly calling for change. Meanwhile, jihadist mobilization and radicalization, Sunni and Shiite alike, is threatening the region, creating tremendous pressures on Gulf states to rebalance between security and openness.

Some US Gulf partners, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are economically better off and more politically stable than others, but even they are not immune to political unrest and social agitation. The UAE feels especially threatened by the potential spread of Islamist political activism at home, specifically the mobilization of political groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Along with Jordan, the UAE is one of Washington's closest Arab political and security

partners. Its stability, its contributions to US-led coalition operations, and its role in limiting Iranian influence, combatting terrorism, and countering the proliferation of nuclear materials is of crucial importance to the United States. The Pentagon has extensive training programs with and critical military assets in the UAE, including prepositioned equipment at Jebel Ali port, a few thousand US troops, and a robust complement of aircraft deployed at Al Dhafra Air Base and elsewhere.

Qatar does not face imminent threats to its political stability. But as it modernizes at an impressive speed, it might struggle with balancing the religious conservatism of its tiny society, efforts to invest heavily in Western-style education, and the need to cater to a growing expatriate population. The Qatari leadership also has pursued a high-stakes foreign policy that has made Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain uneasy. Doha recently addressed its neighbors' concerns about its alleged sponsorship of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, effectively ending its political feud with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama. However, given Qatar's preferences and distinct geopolitical position, political tensions with its neighbors might resurface. Qatar is another major US partner; the country hosts the largest US military base in the region at Al Udeid Air Base—the strategically vital Combined Air and Space Operations Center (CAOC), which coordinated US war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan—along with prepositioned materiel and other important US military assets.

Of all the Gulf monarchies, Bahrain is in the toughest spot politically (assuming Oman undergoes a smooth transition following Sultan Qaboos's departure). The country is at increased political risk, partly due to the government's continued resistance to granting full rights to a wider spectrum of the population. But to analyze politics in Bahrain primarily from the prism of a sectarian struggle pitting a Sunni-minority government against a Shiite-led opposition, as Western narrative often has it, is an oversimplification. There are Sunni locals who often criticize the government, and there are Shiite loyalists. Also underappreciated is Iran's subtle but active interference in the internal affairs of Bahrain, through elements of the Bahraini opposition. Manama claims it has evidence, which it says it continues to share with Washington, of the existence of several cells within the Bahraini opposition that have allegiance to and work closely with Iran. However, the Bahraini government's security-based response to Iran's destabilizing influence also has delayed a sustainable solution. By further postponing the implementation of real governance reforms and by not fully addressing the legitimate demands of nationalistic elements within the opposition, Manama has arguably made the situation worse. Bahrain's

17 Ibid, p. 4.

18 US Department of Defense, *Ballistic Missile Defense Report* (Washington, DC: February 2010), p. 4, [http://www.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630\\_for%20web.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630_for%20web.pdf).

19 Elleman, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," p. 3, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>.

20 Elias Groll, "Iran Is Deploying Drones in Iraq. Wait, What? Iran Has Drones?" *Passport* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2014, [http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/06/25/iran\\_is\\_deploying\\_drones\\_in\\_iraq\\_wait\\_what\\_iran\\_has\\_drones](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/06/25/iran_is_deploying_drones_in_iraq_wait_what_iran_has_drones).

21 Ibid.

22 The GCC countries are Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.





An E-2C Hawkeye takes off from aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* in the Gulf of Oman. Photo credit: US Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Nathan R. McDonald.

predicament worries Washington a great deal, particularly because the country hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. Washington cannot force Manama to open up politically; the most it can do is encourage peaceful resolution between the Bahraini government and the opposition. Another complicating factor is Saudi Arabia, whose influence over the Bahraini ruling family is not small. Riyadh sees overall Shiite empowerment in Bahrain as a threat to its interests and as a gain for archrival Iran. That explains why, in March 2011, Saudi Arabia sent hundreds of its own troops to Bahrain to crush local protests against the Bahraini government.

Saudi Arabia, the most important Gulf partner of the United States, has always struggled to reform because of its opaque political system and its rigid religious makeup, which is based on ultraconservative ideology. Today, Saudi Arabia finds itself at a critical juncture amid regional upheaval, Iranian advances in the region, and an uncertain relationship with Washington. The ruling family will continue to rely on its enormous financial capital and utilize its elaborate patronage systems to consolidate power and preserve domestic stability. But facing growing fiscal constraints, there is a limit to how much the kingdom can spend to silence domestic opposition while simultaneously propping up other Sunni governments,

including Egypt's. Meanwhile, young Saudis are growing restless, and societal demands for better healthcare, education, infrastructure, and jobs are intensifying. Domestic energy consumption, now estimated at less than a quarter of the kingdom's total annual production, will likely increase; by the late 2020s, Saudi Arabia is expected to consume more energy than it exports. And if the price of oil remains low over a prolonged period of time,<sup>23</sup> the regime could struggle to provide public goods and services, an outcome that could degrade its legitimacy. Last, but not least, while the political transition from King Abdullah to King Salman has been relatively smooth, the latter still has to effectively govern and lay the groundwork for the next generation of Saudi leadership.<sup>24</sup>

Oman may seem peaceful on the surface, but the country faces important economic and governance challenges as its population grows and oil revenues shrink. Politically, although most Omanis admire their

23 Bilal Y. Saab and Robert A. Manning, "Riyadh's Oil Play: Why the Kingdom Is Keeping Prices Low," *Foreign Affairs*, January 6, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142756/bilal-y-saab-and-robert-a-manning/riyadhs-oil-play>.

24 Bilal Y. Saab, "Saudi Arabia's Way Forward: Why King Salman Is the Past, Not the Future," *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142809/bilal-y-saab/saudi-arabias-way-forward>.



leader Sultan Qaboos bin Said, they remain anxious about what will happen after he is gone.<sup>25</sup> The seventy-four-year-old Qaboos is ill, and he might not be around for long. He has done much to develop his country and raise its regional profile since overthrowing his father in 1970. The problem is that he achieved these things almost singlehandedly, with a very small number of local partners and a select few trusted advisers—including his Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi. With no siblings or children to serve as heir to the throne, and with no credible, authoritative political institutions or parties to effectively manage the transition, analysts worry that Oman might experience post-Qaboos instability. Still, this concern should not be exaggerated. Oman does not have sectarian and religious divisions (the majority of Omanis are neither Sunnis nor Shiites; they are Ibadi Muslims, a sect theologically closer to Shiites). This reduces the chances of Oman experiencing severe political violence after Qaboos departs. However, the old wounds and economic disparities between north and south remain to some extent, and political turbulence could reemerge with new and opportunistic actors.

It is not in oil production that Oman is so vital to the United States and the global economy, but in its strategic geography, domestic tranquility, religious toleration and moderation, cosmopolitanism, and role as a regional mediator. Oman controls the southern half of the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 30 to 40 percent of the world's oil supplies pass (Iran controls the strait's other half). Even more critically, the main deep-water channels and shipping lanes in the strait lie in Omani waters. The United States also has significant military assets stationed in Oman, including at Masirah Air Base and Thumrait Naval Air Base for antisubmarine patrol planes, while the US Air Force also has access to Seeb International Airport. For Western powers, in particular, Oman will remain of key strategic importance to the security of the Gulf.

Kuwait is still trying to balance monarchical rule and political openness. The ruling Al Sabah family has smartly allowed limited parliamentary politics to stave off instability, yet the country's political volatility continues to impede economic development. Kuwaitis are socially discontent to some degree, resulting in anti-government demonstrations. Kuwait's continued relevance to the United States is based on its strategic location at the head of the Gulf, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, its oil production (likely to reach four million barrels a day by 2020) and net-export capacity

(which is expected to remain one of the world's most significant for the next fifteen years) and its useful, though hardly perfect, experience of political reform. The United States also has about eight thousand troops in Kuwait,<sup>26</sup> who conduct training exercises with Kuwaiti forces, carry out surveillance missions, and build partnership capacity. The Pentagon reportedly maintains fifteen military bases in Kuwait, almost half of which are still active. Kuwait will remain indispensable to the United States, as it continues to provide US forces with critical military access to the Gulf.

In sum, absent real governance reforms and effective institution-building, some US partners in the Gulf may become more politically fragile, presenting policy dilemmas for Washington. Should a Gulf partner's government collapse or be overthrown by anti-American elements, Washington could lose some of its military access rather quickly.

***The Endurance of Salafist Jihadism:*** As Obama affirmed in his 2010 National Security Strategy, he “bears no greater responsibility than ensuring the safety and security of the American people.”<sup>27</sup> The ability of al-Qaeda and its affiliates to attack the US homeland has been degraded by effective US counterterrorism operations that killed or arrested major terrorist leaders (including Osama bin Laden), foiled terrorist plots, and cut off terrorist financing. But if the January 7, 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris are any indication, the fight against the al-Qaeda movement and ideology is anything but over. The extremist threat has morphed, becoming more dispersed and complex—as evidenced by the rise of ISIS—making it much more difficult to defeat. US interests in the Middle East and the security of Gulf partners remain at risk because of Islamist extremism, which has proliferated since the start of the Arab uprisings. Moreover, as effective as the US counterterrorism campaign has been, nothing indicates that the ideologies of movements like al-Qaeda and ISIS have waned. Numerous regional crises have provided jihadist entities with strategic opportunities to regroup, expand, and establish new basing areas. These crises include Syria's ongoing civil war, Yemen's further descent into chaos, Iraq's unstable politics, Libya's lawlessness, and insecurity in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. In a nutshell, Salafist jihadism will survive so long as the root causes of its political violence are not addressed.

25 Bilal Y. Saab, “Silent Partner: How Oman Became the Middle East's Indispensable Nation,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 31, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142323/bilal-y-saab/silent-partner>.

26 Rosa Brooks, “Portrait of the Army as a Work in Progress,” *Foreign Policy*, May 8, 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/08/portrait\\_army\\_work\\_in\\_progress\\_regionally\\_aligned\\_forces\\_raymond\\_odierno](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/08/portrait_army_work_in_progress_regionally_aligned_forces_raymond_odierno).

27 White House, National Security Strategy, May 2010, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf).



# FUTURE US DEFENSE STRATEGY

For US defense strategy in the Gulf to be effective, Washington must clearly articulate its core interests in the region. US foreign policy specialists often debate what constitutes a core US interest in the Gulf (and, more broadly, in the Middle East), and the best means to preserve it. Some argue that US interests arise primarily, if not solely, from the energy resources concentrated in that part of the world. Any other interests are presumed to be secondary, or else related to the protection of global energy supplies and freedom of commerce.

The strategic importance of the region's energy resources cannot be overstated. Iraq, Iran and the six GCC states hold about 48 percent of the planet's proved oil reserves.<sup>28</sup> GCC states alone produce roughly 24 percent of all oil regularly traded on global markets.<sup>29</sup> While the US economy does not depend directly on the Gulf's energy resources—the region comprised only 20.5 percent of US oil imports as of 2013<sup>30</sup>—the global economy does rely on them. US dependence on energy imports will fall even more as new technologies to extract natural gas and oil from shale boost production in the continental United States. But because the market for oil is global, petroleum prices would jump if Gulf oil were to disappear from the market, and the United States would pay more for energy. This would harm the global economy, including that of the United States. Therefore, the notion that the United States can end its reliance on Middle Eastern oil is false. US energy self-sufficiency—a goal likely to be achieved by 2030<sup>31</sup>—should not be confused with energy independence, which is an unrealistic pursuit. Moreover,

28 British Petroleum, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* (London: June 2014), <http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/Energy-economics/statistical-review-2014/BP-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2014-full-report.pdf>.

29 *Ibid.* p. 8.

30 Statista, "U.S. Petroleum Imports from the Persian Gulf as a Share of Total Imports between 2000 and 2013," <http://www.statista.com/statistics/191254/percentage-of-us-petroleum-imports-from-persian-gulf-since-2000/>.

31 Meg Handley, "BP Projection: U.S. Will Be Energy Self-Sufficient by 2030," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 16, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/01/16/bp-shale-boom-key-to-us-energy-self-sufficiency>.

the United States is equally dependent on the ability of Europe and key economies like Japan, South Korea, and China to get a reliable flow of affordable oil and gas. Economic interdependence among nations is real in an age of continually increasing globalization.

However, energy is not the only factor affecting US strategic interests in the Gulf. At least three other US interests are vital: first, stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs); second, countering terrorist groups that target the US homeland and important US assets in the region; and third, ensuring the security of US regional partners. Should Iran proliferate, it would pose a major threat to regional security and a significant challenge to global order and the nonproliferation regime. Terrorism, especially that emanating from the broader Middle East, has cost thousands of lives, and disrupted political and economic life in the region and beyond. Finally, the security of Washington's Gulf partners is a long-standing and continuous concern for the United States partly because these partners uphold regional stability.

US defense strategy in the Gulf has rested on four pillars of varying levels of importance: deterrence, reassurance, counterterrorism, and political development. The first three are and should remain key elements of the strategy because they have served long-term US goals in that region well. However, political development—which, for a long time, Washington has not treated as a real priority because of its focus on short-term stability and security—should occupy a much more prominent place in the US portfolio for the Gulf. Washington's years of neglecting the Gulf's political development has caused its defense strategy in that region to be unsustainable. Last but not least, the strategy is insufficiently dynamic and does not adequately cope with burgeoning regional and global trends.

## Deterrence

US defense strategy in the Gulf should continue to strive to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, contain its regional reach, and deter it from attacking or coercing

its neighbors. Iran's nuclear future is the most critical variable in determining the evolution of US plans in the Gulf. The ideal scenario for the United States and the region—one that would require no fundamental change in US defense strategy, and less significant, albeit still important, adjustments to US force posture<sup>32</sup>—is a final agreement with Iran that verifiably curtails its nuclear program and stops it from acquiring the capability to build a nuclear bomb quickly.

US defense strategy in this scenario would still center on prevention, but the mission would be aided considerably by a nuclear deal that makes it very difficult for Iran to cheat without getting caught and punished. Even if Iran were to violate the agreement, it would no longer be capable of rushing to build a bomb, because of the technical restraints such a deal would presumably impose on its nuclear program. In the event Iran did violate such an accord, the US force posture in the Gulf—combined with expeditionary capabilities that could be deployed to the region—is sufficiently robust to let Washington credibly threaten Iran militarily and, if necessary, conduct punitive strikes to enforce Iranian compliance. Should things escalate and lead to a wider war, the United States would have sufficient time to bring in reinforcements from dozens of locations globally.

But the odds of reaching a permanent nuclear deal with Iran are only fifty-fifty, as Obama has stated. The failure of the two sides to solve the nuclear crisis stems from several factors, including technical difficulties, continuing mistrust, and domestic political obstacles in Tehran, Washington, and other Western capitals. Regardless of the reasons, should Iran acquire nuclear weapons,<sup>33</sup> the United States would have to completely revamp its regional plans and develop a much more assertive, multi-layered containment strategy.

Carrying out a comprehensive attack against a nuclear-armed Iran—with the aim of physically destroying its nuclear program, crushing its military, and possibly decapitating its political leadership—is not unthinkable.<sup>34</sup> But it is clear that the risks of such an operation would be extraordinarily high. Iran would initially possess a relatively small nuclear arsenal and would have no

assured second-strike capability for years, making it vulnerable to a disarming raid by the United States. Nonetheless, Iran's vulnerability also could complicate US military plans. Iran may be compelled to strike first in a crisis for fear of losing its few nuclear weapons, especially if it perceives that an attack is imminent. Furthermore, Iran's limited capabilities in command, control, communications, and intelligence could cause a hair-trigger reaction during a crisis.

Launching a disarming raid against a nuclear-armed Iran would be less risky and more feasible if Washington had precise intelligence about the number of Iran's nuclear warheads and their locations, and if it could ensure those weapons would not be moved or fired before a strike. The chance that US intelligence agencies would gather solid intelligence on all these targets is slim, especially if they failed to detect Iran's drive to the bomb in the first place. And because nuclear weapons can be hidden and relocated, Iran could create operational uncertainty and strategic ambiguity, causing Washington to think twice before launching an attack. Iran would only need one or two nuclear weapons to survive in order to hypothetically use them against US interests in the Gulf or to fire them at Israel. In sum, it is far from clear that a conventional US attack, no matter how massive and well executed, would physically eliminate all of Iran's nuclear weapons.

There should be no illusions about strategic stability in the Gulf if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons. This would be an escalation-prone situation fraught with the likelihood of multiple, dangerous crises—particularly if other regional states were to get the bomb as well. The ballistic missile flight times between Iran and Israel or Saudi Arabia are extremely short. Crisis instability would be extraordinarily acute, creating a potentially more volatile strategic balance than anything seen during the Cold War.

### Reassurance

Even if US-led diplomacy succeeds in restraining Iran's nuclear capabilities, decades of mistrust between the United States and Iran, along with historical tensions between Iran and its Arab Gulf neighbors, would not vanish overnight. The Arab Gulf states are deeply concerned over the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran, but their most immediate worry has always been Iran's asymmetric threat, which consists of its efforts to destabilize them by fomenting domestic unrest. Unless and until Iran starts behaving as a responsible, non-expansionist state, US forces must remain strategically positioned in the Gulf region, checking Iran and helping protect common interests.

To reassure its Gulf friends that a nuclear deal with Iran would not give Tehran license to expand its destabilizing influence in the region, and to help protect US interests,

32 Matthew Kroenig and Barry Pavel, "A Nuclear Deal with Iran: The Proliferation Challenge," *National Interest*, July 1, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/nuclear-deal-iran-the-proliferation-challenge-10794>.

33 Other scenarios could materialize as well. Iran and the P5+1 could fail to reach a final agreement, and the talks could drag on for a few more months (as they currently have), during which Iran could: 1) continue to negotiate in good faith and refrain from crossing any nuclear red lines, or 2) continue to negotiate while also advancing its nuclear program secretly.

34 Bilal Y. Saab, "No Hotline to Tehran," *National Interest*, February 10, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/no-hotline-tehran-6489>.

THERE SHOULD BE NO ILLUSIONS ABOUT STRATEGIC STABILITY IN THE GULF IF IRAN WERE TO ACQUIRE NUCLEAR WEAPONS. THIS WOULD BE AN ESCALATION-PRONE SITUATION FRAUGHT WITH THE LIKELIHOOD OF MULTIPLE, DANGEROUS CRISES—PARTICULARLY IF OTHER REGIONAL STATES WERE TO GET THE BOMB AS WELL.

the United States should retain robust military capabilities in the Gulf. But in an era of sequestration, the challenge for Washington will be to find the right balance between relatively subjective reassurance requirements, other US strategic interests in the region and around the world, and budgetary costs. Insufficient US deployment of effective military capabilities would increase the Arab Gulf states' sense of insecurity and their suspicion of Washington, and could send a message of appeasement to Iranian hardliners. Going too far in the other direction, however, with an outsized US military footprint, would incur financial and possibly political costs; undermine US efforts to encourage regional partners to initiate greater defense and security reforms; and offer no solution to Iran's asymmetric threat, which can more effectively be tackled through political, security, and economic measures that bolster the internal stability of regional partners.

### Counterterrorism

Since the 9/11 attacks, US counterterrorism operations have successfully reduced the global threat posed by al-Qaeda. But it is debatable whether those same efforts

will be equally effective as the terrorist threat continues to increase in complexity, tactical sophistication, and geographical scope. For example, the preferred US counterterrorism tool—using targeted aerial drone strikes to disrupt terrorist communications and activities—is as deceiving as it is alluring. This method often allows the United States to avoid deploying ground forces, diminishes the risk of US casualties, and arguably costs less than comparable missions.<sup>35</sup> However, its effectiveness (as evidenced in Iraq and Afghanistan) rests on superior intelligence collection and, in certain cases, upon simultaneous use of ground forces.<sup>36</sup> It has become increasingly difficult to target extremists in environments such as Syria and Iraq due to the lack of US ground troops,<sup>37</sup> and some senior US officials have argued that efforts to contain ISIS are likely to fail without ground support.<sup>38</sup> It is also possible that drone strikes radicalize the populations surrounding the terrorists they target,<sup>39</sup> although it is debatable that drone strikes alone cause an individual to become radicalized.<sup>40</sup>

Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups are generally undeterred by and oftentimes find purpose in a strong US regional military presence. In some instances, military capabilities provide vital support to counterterrorism efforts in the form of targeted drone strikes, US Special Operations Forces, intelligence gathering, and persistent surveillance.<sup>41</sup> Overall, however, counterterrorism requires a different military approach than that

35 Daniel L. Byman, "Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice," Brookings, July/August 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/06/17-drones-obama-weapon-choice-us-counterterrorism-byman>.

36 Katherine Zimmerman, "Obama's Counterterrorism Strategy Is Already Failing," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 11, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/debate-club/does-obama-have-the-right-strategy-for-the-islamic-state/obamas-counterterrorism-strategy-is-already-failing>.

37 Peter Schroeder, "Dempsey: Ground Troops Could Be Helpful in Fight against ISIS," *Hill*, October 12, 2014, <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/220512-dempsey-ground-troops-could-be-helpful-in-isis-fight>.

38 Brianna Ehley, "Boehner Says Defeating ISIS Means Using Ground Troops," *Fiscal Times*, September 28, 2014, <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/Articles/2014/09/28/Boehner-Says-Defeating-ISIS-Means-Using-Ground-Troops>.

39 Ibrahim Mothana, "How Drones Help Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/opinion/how-drones-help-al-qaeda.html>.

40 Madiha Afzal, "Drone Strikes and Anti-Americanism in Pakistan," Brookings, February 7, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/02/07-drones-anti-americanism-pakistan-afzal>; Brian Katulis, Hardin Lang, and Vikram Singh, *Defeating ISIS: An Integrated Strategy to Advance Middle East Stability* (Washington DC: Center for American Progress, September 10, 2014), <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2014/09/10/96739/defeating-isis-an-integrated-strategy-to-advance-middle-east-stability>.

41 US Department of Defense, 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, March 5, 2014, [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_Quadrennial\\_Defense\\_Review.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf).



mandated by deterrence efforts focused on Iran. Rather than benefiting from a large-scale, conventional military presence, US counterterrorism strategy benefits from a military posture focused on intelligence gathering, partner-capacity building (particularly in the development of police and internal security forces), and small-scale targeted operations in the Middle East.

### Political Development

Absent a serious push for political development in the Gulf, the threat of terrorism and Iran's asymmetric threat will probably not subside, and some of Washington's partners in the Gulf and elsewhere in the Middle East could become even more politically fragile.

**A MORE ACCURATE UNDERSTANDING OF WHY SOME ARAB GULF STATES ARE POLITICALLY FRAGILE IS CRITICAL FOR US DEFENSE STRATEGY AND ANY US EFFORTS TO PROMOTE STABILITY IN THOSE COUNTRIES.**

Political development might mean many things, and its definition ranges from modest political opening to fundamental nation-building. When political development is in acute shortage, as in places such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, locals and foreigners alike question the very legitimacy of the political system. Under such circumstances, the implementation of reforms, especially by a government perceived to be illegitimate, may not be sufficient. A new social contract between ruler and ruled might be in order.

In the Arab Gulf context, political development is also lacking, and reforms are undoubtedly needed. But it might be more useful to assess political development in that region by looking at deficiencies in institution building, state capacity, and citizenship development. While few citizens of the GCC countries question the rights of their leaders to rule, many are unsatisfied with their leaders' abilities to reform and deliver—especially when it

comes to providing basic social and economic services in rural areas. In short, whereas political legitimacy and performance are big problems in many Arab countries, performance alone is the main issue in some Arab Gulf states.<sup>42</sup>

These states struggle with meeting the needs of those living outside capital cities and other large urban areas. The disparity in development between the center and the periphery in Arab Gulf states, while by no means unique to that region, is significant. People in rural areas tend to be much poorer and more isolated, generally making them more susceptible to radicalization and political violence. Some Gulf countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, have implemented municipal reforms to boost development efforts in rural areas. Yet while such decentralization efforts have been helpful, they remain incomplete and disconnected from a broader development strategy.

A more accurate understanding of why some Arab Gulf states are politically fragile is critical for US defense strategy and any US efforts to promote stability in those countries. All GCC countries have tribal societal structures with unique political cultures. It is not that democracy is in conflict with their values, customs, and religion, but simply that they have their own versions of representative government, with their own rules and procedures founded on consensus. Contrary to conventional wisdom, US diplomats appreciate the history, social fabric, and political aspirations of their Gulf counterparts, but perhaps they should more effectively reflect that understanding in official policy.

However, none of this means Arab Gulf states should get a pass for restricting political life and violating human rights. Authoritarianism and excessive centralization are universally antithetical to development, be it social, economic, or political. Washington should continue to condemn all acts of government repression against Arab Gulf civilians for peacefully demonstrating, calling for reform, or simply expressing their opinions. However, the United States can be more sensitive to their real limitations and preferences, and should provide tailored assistance. This can only be achieved through a serious and sustained dialogue between the two sides. The White House should lead the conversation from the US side, aided of course by senior advisers and country specialists at the State Department, as well as expert staff at US embassies in the region. To that end, a more integrated US civil-military approach would be particularly useful.

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<sup>42</sup> Bahrain is an interesting case, because elements in the Shiite opposition often question the legitimacy of the Sunni-dominated regime. But more broadly in the Middle East, if performance continues to remain stagnant or worsens, issues of political legitimacy would likely become more prominent.



## FUTURE US DEFENSE POSTURE

The basic principle of any future US force posture in the Gulf, regardless of what happens on the Iranian nuclear front, should be the continuation of US *military access* to the Gulf. Indeed, instead of fixating on force structure, Washington should focus on identifying measures that help maintain and enhance military access, and it should not be shy about explaining to its Gulf partners why the latter is more strategically significant and mutually beneficial than the former.

Successful realignment of US force posture in the Gulf, and elsewhere, also must emphasize military capability. Indeed, any serious discussion of this topic should not be bogged down with numbers. While capacity is certainly an important factor in the deterrence and reassurance equation, it should be neither the guiding principle nor the main criterion, especially under circumstances where the principal adversary—in this case, Iran—has inferior conventional military capabilities. To put it simply, when thinking about the reconfiguration of US military assets in the Gulf, the key question should not be “how much more, or how much less,” but instead “what and where?”

Because Iran poses a multidimensional challenge—directly through its controversial nuclear program, as well as its evolving missile arsenal and other weapons systems, and indirectly through local, nonstate proxies—the United States should seek the right balance between, on the one hand, the means to deter Iran from attacking and coercing its neighbors and potentially acquiring nuclear capabilities, and on the other hand, the means to counter its successful asymmetric approach. Those are two very different sets of tools, where the former is focused on external defense, and the latter on internal security.

### If Iran Does Not Go Nuclear

If Iran abandons what many suspect is a military nuclear path, and instead signs an agreement with the P5+1 that verifiably restricts its nuclear program, US defense strategy would be relieved of an enormous military burden and a source of political stress. The United States

then could focus on dealing with more manageable, but still challenging problems, including Iran’s asymmetric threat and potential violation of the nuclear deal.

In this environment, the United States could best protect its interests in the Gulf and those of its partners if it undertook a series of incremental improvements to its force posture to make it more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, politically sustainable, and tactically robust. These improvements are outlined below.

#### » **Propose and then Negotiate an Offer of a Mutual Defense Treaty with Willing Arab Gulf States**

A few years ago, when hopes of reaching a nuclear deal with Iran did not look promising, US officials entertained the idea of a mutual defense treaty with Arab Gulf states. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested on July 22, 2009, that the United States would extend a “defense umbrella” to willing regional partners in the event Iran obtained nuclear weapons. US officials can make a strong case that the time for such a defense umbrella is not after Iran gets the bomb, but now.

Should Iran and the P5+1 sign a nuclear deal, it will have significant implications for the security and stability of a strategically vital part of the world. Such an accord would confer important regional security benefits, but it also would be fraught with significant risks. More specifically, it would prevent Iran from quickly producing nuclear weapons (at least for the duration of the deal, which, according to reports, does not seem open-ended), but it would most probably neither pacify it nor turn it into a responsible state that would respect its neighbors’ sovereignty.

Important regional partners of the United States, including Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, are much less uncertain about the outcome of what they see as a bad nuclear agreement that does not completely eliminate Iran’s nuclear capabilities. Such a deal, they strongly believe, would only give Tehran



## A MUTUAL DEFENSE TREATY BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE ARAB GULF STATES WOULD ESSENTIALLY UPGRADE THE LONG-STANDING SECURITY RELATIONSHIPS FROM PARTNERSHIP TO ALLIANCE.

license to dominate its neighbors and shape the region's politics to its favor, all at the expense of regional security and collective interests.

So while a temporarily nuclear-free Iran would reduce the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, it is not at all clear that it would make the region any safer. Anxious about their security and unsure about the future of their security relationships with the United States, Washington's regional partners would most likely hedge their bets, intensify their arms buildups, and compete much more aggressively with Iran in various strategic domains. This could likely create dangerous security dilemmas in the region, increasing the likelihood of war. Such a domino effect, which is not unthinkable, would severely harm core US interests in the region as well as international security.

To help guard against further regional instability broadly and any specific destructive dynamics that might result from a nuclear deal with Iran, the United States should make it abundantly clear to its regional partners that their security will remain a top mutual priority and that Iran will not be allowed to bully its neighbors. Toward that end, the United States should propose and then negotiate a mutual defense treaty with its most vulnerable regional partners: the Arab Gulf states. This would be an extremely difficult decision, and some members of the US Congress whose concerns about human rights abuses in the Gulf trump their security concerns may oppose such a treaty. However, without it, the alternative could very well be a more unstable and insecure Middle East, which would be much more deleterious for US interests.

Such a mutual defense treaty would essentially upgrade the long-standing security relationships between the United States and the Arab Gulf states from partnership to alliance. The difference is far from semantic.<sup>43</sup> If two or more countries are allies and thus share a mutual defense treaty, it means that one is legally committed to the security of the other and vice versa, and would contribute to the defense of the other if attacked. NATO is perhaps the most prominent example of such an alliance, where an attack on one member is treated like an attack against all. On the other hand, if two or more countries share a security partnership, typically they are not obligated to defend one another if either comes under attack, though they do engage in various forms of security cooperation. In most, if not all, cases, partners do not sign mutual defense pacts. This characterizes the current relationship between the United States and the GCC countries.

A mutual defense treaty with willing Arab Gulf states offers multiple strategic advantages for the region and the United States. Among other things:

- Such a treaty is a powerful signal to, and a deterrent against, Iran. By doubling down on its decades-long relations with Arab Gulf states, Washington would be clearly communicating to Iran its red lines in the region. Such clarity of intentions by the region's dominant military power is crucial for strategic stability.
- It is the ultimate form of security assurance to the Arab Gulf states. Confident that the United States would protect them from any Iranian contingency, these states would engage in more predictable and less risky behavior, which serves regional security.
- It could reinforce any legislative package from the Obama administration that would be included with the submission of the Iran nuclear agreement (if one is reached) for Senate ratification, as a necessary complement to assure Senate hardliners that the administration is dead serious about the Iranian security challenge.

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<sup>43</sup> In public policy debates, the words "partnership" and "alliance" often are confused and used interchangeably (we readily admit that we are also guilty of sometimes confusing the two, despite our strong appreciation of the differences between them). However, many might find the distinction between partnership and alliance irrelevant and overly legalistic. After all, if Israel, Jordan, Egypt, or any Arab Gulf country came under conventional or nuclear attack by Iran, the United States would not need a piece of paper to intervene militarily in defense of its friends. In many cases, it would take action. The 1990-91 Gulf War was a case in point. Kuwait did not have a mutual defense treaty with the United States. Yet when Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait, Washington—along with an international coalition that it had built—intervened forcefully and decisively, and expelled the Iraqi army from Kuwait.

- It could help respond to those who call for much larger US military deployments to the Gulf region to reassure Arab states following a nuclear deal with their archrival. While the Pentagon must sustain a robust posture and increase the agility and flexibility of its forces, under the umbrella of a mutual defense treaty massive new military deployments would not be cost-effective, especially in light of other global demands on the US military.
- » **Reduce the Visibility, Predictability, and Vulnerability of US Forces in the Gulf by Further Dispersing Them, Diversifying Patterns of Deployment, and Exploring New Basing Concepts**

US forces in the Gulf are heavily concentrated in a few key locations. A number are within range of currently deployed Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles,<sup>44</sup> including: the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain; the Al Udeid Air Base and the CAOC in Qatar (the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing at Al Udeid has more than one hundred aircraft supporting a wide range of missions);<sup>45</sup> the significant ground presence in Kuwait; and the Al Dhafra Air Base (which hosts the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing) and Air Warfare Center in the UAE. The hardening and diversifying of ports, airfields, and command posts can lessen the operational vulnerability of US regional bases and infrastructure to enemy missile strikes and related A2AD threats. The United States also should adopt a rotational peacetime posture that relies on movements of Army, Air Force, and Navy units in and out of a wider variety of locations for operations, training, and exercises with Gulf partner forces. In addition, critical infrastructure can be replicated at multiple locations, enabling forces to be positioned in a number of possible configurations, depending on the contingency and political circumstances.

The United States also should consider mobile offshore basing in selected situations. In the near term, a particularly useful step would be to greatly strengthen command-and-control capabilities afloat to improve C2 redundancy and eliminate Iran's ability to veto US operations by destroying or disrupting CENTCOM C2

facilities. Rotating forces in and out of locations near but outside the Gulf, such as the Red Sea littoral and South Asia, also is worthwhile.

- » **Emphasize the Maritime Character of Future US Force Posture in the Gulf by Improving Maritime Defenses, Anti-Fast Attack and Craft Capabilities, Mine Countermeasure Capabilities, and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Capabilities**

The poor suitability of aircraft carriers in a Gulf fight stems from the region's geographic features — particularly the narrow Strait of Hormuz—and Iran's declared military strategy in the event of conflict. Iran's strategy features layered attacks involving naval mines, fast-attack craft, and antiship cruise missiles. Iranian forces can deploy an arsenal of more than two thousand mines to slow down US naval assets operating in the Strait. This tactic facilitates the targeting of US surface ships through swarming attacks by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) fleet of small, fast-attack craft, armed with torpedoes, drones, rocket launchers, and other antiship weaponry. IRGC forces could preposition these small boats at the hundreds of littoral launching points that surround the Gulf, including small islands and coves, providing cover that would enable surprise attacks at short range. Concurrently, Iranian forces could begin launching land-based, antiship cruise missiles, taking advantage of slow-moving US vessels. The most lethal of Iran's antiship weapons, the Russian-made Sunburn missiles, fly at three times the speed of sound and can cruise at an altitude of only twenty meters, performing evasive maneuvers to effectively engage their targets. In the Strait of Hormuz, which is only twenty-one miles wide at its narrowest point, the Sunburn could reach any ship in minutes. Conducting counterforce strikes against these missile launchers, most of which are mobile, would be difficult, as Iran is aided by a mountainous shore facing the Gulf. This terrain provides easy cover and concealment of cruise-missile-launching sites and ideal vantage points for targeting enemy ships.<sup>46</sup>

44 Some might find this fact irrelevant and argue that Iran would never hit US assets in the Gulf for fear of massive US retaliation. While Iran would certainly think twice before attacking, doing nothing to decrease the vulnerability of US military assets negatively affects deterrence dynamics against Iran.

45 "This collection makes the 379th AEW a large hub for humanitarian airlift activity in Iraq and Afghanistan while providing mission-essential combat power, aeromedical evacuation, and intelligence support for multiple-theaters of operations. The wing operates the KC135 Stratotanker, B-1B Lancer, C-21A, C-20G, C-130 Hercules, E-8C Joint Stars and RC-135U Combat Sentry and RC-135V/W Rivet Joint aircraft." Taken from the homepage of the 379th AEW: <http://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/379thAirExpeditionaryWing.aspx>.

46 Bilal Y. Saab and Joseph Singh, "Forget the Second Carrier, It's Time to Rethink the Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf," *Defense One*, August 13, 2013, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2013/08/forget-second-carrier-time-rethink-fifth-fleet-persian-gulf/68633/>. The gravity of the Iranian asymmetric threat is not new to US strategic planners. In 2002, the US military ran a \$250 million war game dubbed "Millennium Challenge," an exercise "in which small, agile speedboats swarmed a naval convoy to inflict devastating damage on more powerful ships." According to reports on the war game, the exercise concluded in less than ten minutes, after which forces "modeled after a Persian Gulf State" had succeeded in sinking sixteen US ships, including an aircraft carrier. For US forces in the simulation, the sheer number and speed of the swarming attacks from rocket-equipped speedboats and land-based cruise missiles, overwhelmed the seemingly superior US ships.



Aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz*, deployed in the Gulf of Oman as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. Photo credit: US Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Nathan R. McDonald.

The Pentagon's decision to deploy a fleet of Cyclone-class patrol ships to the Gulf is a welcome move. They are harder to identify and target than larger combat ships like frigates and destroyers, and they can penetrate deeper into the littoral areas of the Strait to engage Iran's fleet of fast-attack craft. PC ships also could help promote deeper defense cooperation with those regional partners that maintain small navies dominated by comparably small ships. This would facilitate real burden sharing with partners in the region, permitting individual navies to specialize in particular missions, such as anti-mining operations. They also would save money compared to other, more expensive options.

The US Navy cut its planned order of littoral combat ships (LCS) from fifty-two to thirty-two, amidst concerns about both the vessels' offensive and defensive capabilities. The most notable criticism has been the low survivability of these ships in high-intensity combat, as they are only designed to a level-1 standard. In addition, the cancellation of the planned missile package degraded its offensive potential.<sup>47</sup> Critics further claim that trying to make the ships' weapons capable of many different missions through modulation made the ships

less effective at any one mission.<sup>48</sup> However, the Navy is continuously improving its LCS program, and its latest modifications are likely to increase the ships' fighting capabilities and enhance their survivability.<sup>49</sup>

ISR platforms that provide persistent, high-altitude coverage—such as Global Hawk and Predator—will continue to be especially important for US military strategy in the region. Forward deployment of these assets strengthens early detection of potential Iranian belligerent activity, such as mining the Strait of Hormuz and/or military attacks against neighbors or US interests. This boosts the Pentagon's ability to achieve deterrence.

» **Intensify Security Cooperation with Gulf Partners to Help Improve Their Self-Defense Capabilities and Facilitate Greater Burden Sharing**

The 2006, 2010, and 2014 QDRs emphasized building partnership capacity as a way to promote burden sharing

48 William D. Hartung and Jacob Marx, "It's Time to Sink the Littoral Combat Ship," *Defense One*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/08/its-time-sink-lcs/92378/?oref=d-dontmiss>.

49 Dan Parsons, "Littoral Combat Ship Will Be Modified, If Not Replaced," *National Defense Magazine*, August 2014, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2014/August/Pages/LittoralCombatShipWillBeModifiedIfNotReplaced.aspx>.

47 "LCS Marooned by Changing Vision of Future Threats," IHS Jane's, vol. 51, issue 27.

and assumption of greater security responsibilities by US regional partners. Aside from selling them high-tech weapons that enhance their deterrent posture and warfighting capabilities, the United States should work with its Gulf partners on concepts of operation (CONOPS) and on tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that seek to delay a major attack and inflict military, political, and economic costs on Iran—as well as handle less severe regional contingencies (for example, raids on offshore oil installations) without relying on US intervention. Partner capacity-building priorities should include creating counter-A2/AD networks with early warning radars, ballistic missile and air defense capabilities, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and frigates and corvettes. CENTCOM should adjust its training program to encourage intra-GCC cooperation, instead of focusing solely on US exercises with the GCC as a group. Interoperability should not be just a catchphrase; it should be seriously promoted by all sides to achieve greater defense integration. The United States also should adopt a more strategic approach to its Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program, and continue to reform its export control regime to make it consistent with the evolving needs of partners, as well as with regional and global trends.

» **Bolster Defenses Against Iranian Missile Attacks, and Work Toward Higher Levels of Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) Integration among Gulf Partners**

The United States has deployed sophisticated missile-defense systems in the Gulf. Gulf partners also have their own systems, which they purchased from the United States, including the short-range Patriot and long-range Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). But Gulf systems are not integrated with US systems, and Iran's missiles could overwhelm such defenses if launched in salvos, along with decoys, over a prolonged period of time.<sup>50</sup>

Despite sustained CENTCOM efforts and some progress, there remain significant, long-standing political challenges that constrain greater security cooperation among GCC countries, and specifically BMD integration. Indeed, real defense cooperation among Washington's Gulf partners will remain an illusion without greater trust and closer political relations within the GCC.<sup>51</sup> If Saudi

50 The assumption is that Iran would be foolish to launch a sustained missile attack against any such US or Gulf military assets because the US response would be swift and destructive. However, there are no guarantees, and there is always a risk of accidental strike or miscalculation.

51 Bilal Y. Saab, "Break Up in the Gulf: What the GCC Dispute Means for Qatar," *Foreign Affairs*, March 6, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141006/bilal-y-saab/break-up-in-the-gulf>; Bilal Y. Saab, "Why the Persian Gulf Isn't Ready for Joint Security," *Defense One*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/06/why-persian-gulf-isnt-ready-joint-security/86800/>.

**GULF MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEMS ARE NOT INTEGRATED WITH US SYSTEMS, AND IRAN'S MISSILES COULD OVERWHELM SUCH DEFENSES IF LAUNCHED IN SALVOS, ALONG WITH DECOYS, OVER A PROLONGED PERIOD OF TIME.**

Arabia and the UAE still worry about Qatar supporting anti-establishment political Islamists, then why would they trust Doha's willingness to cooperate on the most sensitive aspects of security, including missile defense? Imagine this hypothetical scenario: Iran fires a missile at Saudi Arabia, and the first Gulf country to intercept it is Qatar. Would the Qataris "take the shot," as Vice Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff, former Commander of the US Fifth Fleet, recently asked?<sup>52</sup> It is not entirely clear.

Many criticized Washington's bureaucracy for obstructing or delaying the pursuit of true interoperability between US and GCC forces. But even if Washington overhauls its export control regime, adopts a more strategic approach to foreign military sales, and provides all the software and hardware needed for developing its Gulf partners' command and ISR capabilities, Gulf politics are likely to continue to obstruct BMD integration. Effective missile defense in the Gulf requires, first and foremost, a fully integrated intelligence system and a shared early warning system. But GCC nations do not agree on what such a system should look like, and they do not share nearly enough information.

BMD integration also requires serious political commitment among the Gulf states to cooperative exercises, including high-level, tabletop, scenario-dependent gaming exercises involving the senior military leadership of each GCC member—preferably, in partnership with the United States. But none of that is happening today—in Washington or in the Gulf region—

52 *Ibid.*



WHETHER OR NOT WASHINGTON SHOULD WELCOME A MORE PROMINENT CHINESE ROLE IN THE REGION IS OPEN FOR DEBATE—AND EVEN IF CHINA AGREES TO CONTRIBUTE MILITARY RESOURCES, ITS CAPABILITIES ARE QUESTIONABLE.

and not just because of organizational and institutional challenges or analytical shortcomings. Besides a lack of trust, the real issue is that GCC members do not even perceive the Iranian threat in the same way. While none would be happy with a nuclear Iran, only Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain are truly concerned about Iran's destabilizing influence in the region. Qatar may not be very comfortable with a domineering Iran, but it can live with it, and Qatar is probably more concerned about threats to its internal stability coming from Riyadh than from Tehran. With regard to Oman, which has mediated between Iran and the West for years, it is no secret that Muscat is much closer to Tehran than any of its Arab neighbors.

#### If Iran Goes Nuclear

In the event that Iran does acquire a nuclear weapons capability, the United States would have to undertake much more drastic changes to its defense strategy and force posture than the ones listed above. The following recommendation would help the United States more effectively deter and contain a nuclear-armed Iran:

- » **Create Incentives for Extra-Regional Countries, Including NATO Allies and Partners, to Contribute Military Resources to Ensure Gulf Security**

A nuclear Iran would also constitute a significant threat to Washington's key European allies. Some of them, like the United Kingdom and France, already have long-standing

political and security relationships with Gulf partners, and could be expected to intensify those relationships should Iran develop nuclear weapons. However, severe budget cuts in the British and French militaries could greatly constrain such enhancements. In addition, NATO, led by the United States, already has agreed to deploy missile defenses under the "Phased Adaptive Approach," which is designed to deter and thwart increasingly capable Iranian ballistic missile attacks. With a nuclear weapons capability added on top of this noteworthy baseline, the United States would be on firm ground to help lead the Alliance—or at a minimum, key NATO members—to contribute more substantially to important new security and defense roles in the Gulf. This could take many forms, from increased security cooperation and strengthened military presence, combined exercises, and consultations, to more formal, structural linkages and commitments between NATO and the GCC, and between NATO and individual Gulf countries. However, as long as Russia presents NATO with new, significant security challenges, the Alliance as a whole would probably not commit to extending its nuclear umbrella to the Gulf. NATO already has a full plate in trying to develop a twenty-first-century deterrent to the multiple threats posed by Russia—which was the very reason many Eastern European members of the Alliance joined NATO in the first place. Thus, they would be unlikely to agree to divert NATO's attention to address the need to deter and contain a nuclear-armed Iran.

China is another strategic actor with enduring trade and energy interests in the region. Whereas the US reliance on Middle Eastern crude oil has been steadily shrinking in recent years, roughly half of China's imported oil now comes from the Gulf. Should that supply be disrupted due to regional insecurity, China's vital interests would be severely affected. But while China enjoys the benefits of energy security in the region, it is the United States that is committing military forces to ensure that security. Whether or not Washington should welcome a more prominent Chinese role in the region is open for debate. US officials have asked China for assistance in patrolling the Gulf, but Beijing has shown little enthusiasm. And even if China agrees to contribute military resources, its capabilities are questionable. While China has been active in maritime cooperation to fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden, it does not yet have the military might or expertise to police regional conflict zones on a sustained basis.

There are practical benefits to including China in the regional security architecture, but they would have to be weighed against the risks and costs, including regional partners' concerns and the relative US loss of geopolitical influence in the Gulf. A trilateral US-China-GCC strategic dialogue might be beneficial, but might also be premature due to the uncertainties in the US-Chinese bilateral relationship and the lack of clarity on Chinese intentions and capabilities in the region.



## CONCLUSION

The Middle East has been enormously challenging and costly for the United States during the past two decades, in terms of blood, treasure, and international reputation. Despite this, Washington can afford neither to lessen its involvement nor address the problems of the region only from afar.

The United States should no longer delay the development and implementation of a strategically driven redesign of its force posture in the Gulf. With so many evolving global demands and complex, multifaceted, and unpredictable security challenges, Washington cannot afford to waste its efforts on less-than-core strategic priorities.

Thus, it is more critical than ever that US defense strategy in the Gulf be designed around reassuring partners, deterring adversaries, continuing to conduct counterterrorism missions, and advancing needed political development to help dry up sources of extremism and promote internal stability. Underwriting a new force posture in the region to support that strategy effectively is just as important. Such a posture could better assist US military efforts in protecting and advancing US interests in an increasingly fragile and dangerous region by placing a continuing premium on access while also building more robust maritime capabilities, enhancing missile defenses, ensuring diversification and unpredictability, and increasing burden sharing.

Most importantly, Washington's defense strategy and force posture should make it clear, to partners and adversaries alike, that the United States is in the Gulf to stay, and that it seeks to build longer-term and deeper relationships with its closest partners, some of whom have shed blood in distant operations alongside their US military counterparts. It should be clear that under almost any scenario that could unfold, the United States would retain a strong interest in the security of its partners in this strategically vital region.

THE UNITED STATES  
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