

Consequences of US Policy for the Gulf Region

Fourth Annual Workshop

January 11-12, 2007 - Dubai



Discussion Seeks Collective Security Apparatus

The Gulf region must act independently, take stock of the regional situation, and design future security arrangements, without leaving everything for the US to formulate, according to experts attending the Gulf Research Center's fourth annual workshop in Dubai.

The discussion stressed that the US's "strategic blunder" in Iraq required urgent mending if the region's slide toward greater instability needs to be checked.

At the same time, the gathering storm over Iran's refusal to climb down on its nuclear program, its rhetoric reflecting an "expansionist" design, as well as the US insistence to limit those ambitions, was cited as a situation that was capable of going completely wrong without the rest of the region favoring it or having a role to play in it.

Many of the 75 experts from the region and outside felt that the problems of the United States in the region were self-inflicted, and not the result of any single or collective conspiracy. Among the other reasons cited for instability in the region were the lack of US efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and inadequate planning while pushing for political modernization.

On the other hand, the participants also highlighted the lack of a common policy among the Gulf countries, which has made it difficult to design a regional and institutional security apparatus.

Expressing skepticism about the current scenario, some participants sought a "new regional security architecture that defines a mechanism to tackle threat perceptions" and pushed for the "elimination of international troops in the region." Others favored incorporating "several international actors, especially from Europe and Asia, who could act as security guarantors of a regional security arrangement."

The discussion also focused on why the United States never managed to shape the region the way it intended to, why the region has been unable to achieve political and economic unity, and why the invasion of Iraq has not yielded positive results.

Among the recommendations to correct the US course in the region were "pursuing fewer and specific objectives," which would make prioritizing and tracking their performance easier; have a "proactive policy rather than adopt a reactionary approach"; devise "long-term plans, instead of aiming for short-term goals"; and "co-opt multiple partners as opposed to having unilateral or bilateral security arrangements."

The US made errors in assessing the situation in Iraq, and did not pay enough attention to a post-war strategy and ignored warnings on sectarian divisions, the experts said. The new Washington policy recognizes some of the failures of the past, but is not good enough to bring about radical change, they added.

"The US withdrawal from the region will not increase stability in the region; the future of Iraq lies in the hands of Iraqis, aided by a constructive political, social, economic and military package over five to seven years. At the same time, the US and the international community must strengthen the state institutions and encourage a power sharing mechanism in Iraq," the experts recommended.

The workshop concluded that the immediate threat to the region was the decline in respect for America because of the Iraq debacle, decline in the fear of the US, which was

reflected in Iran's approach, and a crisis of confidence in Washington's capabilities to handle crises because of the failures in Iran and Iraq. "This scenario could force the US to try to regain ground by getting 'adventurous', resulting in another war in the region, apart from sidelining moderates and reformists."

The workshop's first session entitled "Analyzing the Objectives: US Policy Goals in the Gulf" focused on why the United States never managed to shape the region the way it intended to, why the region has not yet achieved political and economic unity and why the invasion of Iraq has not yielded positive results. The following were some observations.

First, the US is simultaneously pursuing multiple objectives in the region and it is difficult to keep track of them and establish priorities – stability, counterterrorism, democracy, nuclear deterrence and energy security. Some of these objectives, like the push for democracy, are counterproductive, especially when, for example, many Iraqis believe that the current government did not assume power in a democratic way. Many Iraqis argue that the genesis of the current government took place under occupation and Shiite and Kurdish groups received preferential treatment in the election process. Though the Baath Party regime was ousted within weeks and Saddam Hussein hanged a few days ago, Iraq is far from stable – politically, economically, socially or in terms of security – and terrorism is rampant. There are also questions about the financial cost of war and its sustainability, and the human cost as well. While it is hard to put a price on human cost, the Iraq war has cost the US about \$360 billion at a time when its overall deficit is \$423 billion.

Second, the US never had a long-term Gulf strategy. Its policies in the region should not be assessed in a snapshot; instead, it should be judged using a historic and futuristic framework. It is important to consider US presence in the Gulf region since 1971, and not just since 2003. Further, the US has never had the chance to pursue a proactive Gulf policy and the time to implement it; rather it has adopted a reactionary approach after being confronted with crises ever since its presence felt in the region.

In the vacuum after British troops departed from the region, Americans became the centerpiece of security. Relying on Iran and Saudi Arabia as part of the twin-pillar policy in the 1970s, propping up Iraq to counter Iran as part of the balance of power approach in the 1980s; and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 have been confusing and reactionary policies. The American policies in the Gulf have not been as successful as the ones it adopted for post-World War Europe and Asia because the US never developed a collective security policy in the Gulf, like NATO did. Furthermore, the security arrangements that exist are mostly bilateral.

There is no common policy among the Gulf countries either (for example, on Iran's nuclear program), which makes it difficult to design a regional and institutional security apparatus. The region must take stock of the situation on its own, think about future security arrangements and act independently, without leaving everything for the US to dictate.

Third, while the US objective is stability in the region, others see it as the will to dominate. At the same time, the role of the external power in the region is contingent on the region's and its people's acceptance of the same. In the case of the US, that legitimacy is gradually diminishing. There is a need for regional security, but there is no alternative to the US. It cannot be the European Union or the United Nations, or the Arab League, and the US will not be willing to share power with Russia and China. So, it is very likely that the status quo will prevail in the medium term.

Fourth, democracy, stability, economic growth, and building of trust cannot be achieved overnight, and the US must not push its agenda according to such timetable. There are a number of insecurities associated with power, which is reflected in the absence of democratic structures in the region. It is the task of the external power to make democracy look attractive to the leaders of this region, but with US credibility waning, the most effective change will be that which comes from within and at its own pace. There could be external help, but not pressure, in the process.

The US has admitted underestimating the region and its internal struggles. While the region witnessed a decline in terrorism during 2006, it was overshadowed by US policies

in Iraq, which encouraged a more dangerous phenomenon in "sectarianism". In such a scenario, the Gulf countries need to put aside differences, and evolve a unified stance on their own. The irony, however, is that the lack of unity among Gulf countries is not as much of a problem as the region's diminishing faith in the US's strengths.

The workshop then moved to its second session on "Calculating the Costs of US Policy." Here, a number of points crystallized out of the presentations and discussions.

First, the US policy in the region is based on bilateral relationships with the Gulf States. While a multilateral security institution would not have been in the interests of the US as it would have strengthened the GCC States and weakened US influence in the region, bilateral US-GCC agreements as reflected in military cooperation have ensured America's position as a long-term partner in the Gulf.

The US dominance and its claim for supremacy in the Gulf region have further prevented other potential allies such as Britain from evolving as potential allies. However, in the long run, such allies are necessary to bring stability and security in the region as the US, on its own, will lack the resources.

At the same time, the GCC States' lack of trust, the present threat perceptions among the governments, their inability to defend themselves militarily or give security assurances and guarantees to their allies, undermine any possibility of cooperation to set up a security structure within the GCC framework and instead reinforce US influence and presence in the region.

Recent US policies in the region have exaggerated the existing political cleavages among the different Middle Eastern States. The US policy of exclusion reinforced the spread of radical Islamic groups and increased the popularity of Hamas, Iran and Syria among the Arab people. As a result, the Middle Eastern governments have to cope with growing opponents who are against any cooperation with the US and this makes it difficult for the GCC governments to justify any cooperation with the US even in necessary fields.

The US policy and attitudes brought local conflicts to a regional and global level, thereby intensifying and escalating the crises. For example, the US failure to condemn Israel for its recent military actions in Lebanon allowed the conflict to be internationalized involving Syria, Iran, the UN, and contributed to the negative image of the US and Israel in the region.

Second, the stability of the GCC States is important for the entire Gulf region. However, to ensure stability in the region, states such as the UAE should speed up the implementation of the democratic process.

In this context, the fact that US policy in the region is seen as a failure, results in mismanagement at the expense of its own interest and the interests of the GCC States. Therefore, the US needs to re-adjust its policy gradually so that it becomes less oriented to self interest and more considerate of the wishes, interests and needs of its allies, the GCC States. In this context, the US policies should demonstrate more continuity and be long-term. The US should also develop an understanding for the cultural uniqueness of the region including the different trends in Islam.

Third, the US policy in the region falls short on the moral, strategic and political front. Four years after the US invasion, Iraq is under double occupation – visibly, by the US and invisibly by Iran. Moreover, the state has to cope with two different kinds of terrorism: non-state terrorism, involving groups as Al-Qaeda, and state terrorism, involving Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mehdi Army or the government itself with coalition parties having been involved in terrorist activities in the past as well as being brought to and sustained in its power through its militias. Both state terrorism and non-state terrorism are in conflict with each other and threatening the stability of Iraq.

It was mentioned that the current Iraqi governing Dawa Party was involved in attacks in Lebanon in 1981, members of the Iraqi Parliament and Dawa Party were responsible for attacks on the US embassy in Kuwait in 1981 and for an assassination attempt on the Emir of Kuwait in 1985. Nine members of the current Iraqi Parliament were convicted but escaped from a Kuwait prison during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The same people who run Iraq today were thus convicted as terrorists three decades ago. This led to the question of what makes the Iraqi government different from other terrorist groups today and how is it possible that such people represent a credible Iraqi government and

governor? Meanwhile, Muqtada Al-Sadr, who is part of the state's Shiite coalition, is controlling the parliament and cabinet. He is responsible for the assassination of Sayyid Abdul Majid Al-Khoei in April 2003 and his Mehdi Army is reportedly responsible for attacks on Iraqi Security Forces, Coalition Forces and Iraqi civilians. As long as such groups are part of the Iraqi state institutions, and the government supports militias and allows the killing of hundreds of people every day, and does not prevent Iranian interventions, the government is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Equally relevant is that Iran is intervening in Iraqi state affairs on a political, religious and operational level. Members of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq are strongly inter-linked with the regime in Tehran, religious leaders in Iraq are influenced and supported by Iran, and the Iranian intelligence is allegedly involved in assassination operations in Iraq and supporting Al-Qaeda. The south of Iraq is under Iranian influence. According to statements made by Iraqi officials, the Iraqi intelligence service is unable to operate there as it is prevented by Iran from opening offices.

The workshop's third session focused on looking at the "Scenarios of Failure and its Implications: Iraq and the Regional Environment. Here, it was suggested that:

First, the implications of the war in Iraq have had a negative fallout across a wide spectrum of countries stretching from Africa to the Far East. However, the Gulf and the Middle Eastern countries are at a flashpoint, facing tumultuous upheavals not only politically and economically, but also socially and culturally. The US policies to bring about secularism and political reform have had an adverse impact too. Many groups belonging to varied political and ideological schools of thought feel threatened since both their traditional cultures as well as their beliefs and values face the danger of being defeated. The threat to use force, if necessary, to bring about desired US objectives to fruition has sent waves of anger across the Arab streets in the entire region. The American insensitivity to the region's cultural and ideological values has created a severe backlash.

This, coupled with the ongoing war in Iraq, has backfired on the strategy chalked out by the US in countering the "war on terror". As a result of the US's continued military presence in Iraq and the sectarian strife that was revived in Iraq and across the region, the Bush administration has been dealt a severe blow. The fact that terrorism against American interests is now more probable than before is mainly due to its policies in Iraq. Iraq has also become the breeding ground of more jihadist and extremist groups. The alarming new dynamic that has begun to grip the region is the rise of sectarianism of a particularly extremist and violent nature. This was directly attributed to the US policies of playing one group against another and instigating deliberate sectarianism and ethnic strife among the various groups vying for power in Iraq as well as in Palestine and other Arab Gulf States.

Meanwhile, it was argued that US President George W. Bush's new strategy and the decision to send in 18 more brigades had likely dispelled any chance for the US administration to redeem the situation in Iraq. The result instead has been a decline in and lack of respect for and fear of the US government and the erosion of confidence in US support in case of any external threat to a state. Moreover, as the security situation in Iraq is likely to deteriorate further and the situation is likely to become more complicated because of the justification used by the militias and opposition groups, the question that poses itself is: will the US stay in Iraq or just use it as a springboard to instigate conflict, sectarianism, and disintegration?

Such a situation has naturally also resulted in Iran assuming a hegemonic approach. It is likely that the purpose behind Iran's posturing was to get a comprehensive package from the US, including a decisive role in deciding Iraq's future. The GCC cannot provide a security umbrella to the states in the region in case of a security threat to any one state, as was the case of Iraq invading Kuwait.

The opinion among the GCC States on the threat perception from Iran is divided. However, Iran's nuclear program, its defiant posturing, and charade vis-à-vis its policies in Iraq and its support to Hizbollah have changed that threat perception, which is now felt by all the states. Had the US succeeded in creating a stable environment in Iraq

following the ouster of the Baath Party regime, Iran would never have adopted the current defiant posturing and blatant power politicking in the region.

A possible positive outcome from Iran's nuclear posturing could result in a united approach of the GCC States. At the Riyadh summit in December 2006, the GCC States stressed on cooperation to counter the Iranian nuclear program and even went so far as to commission a body to look at a collective nuclear program for the GCC under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.

Second, the Iranian perspective also held the US policies in the region, particularly the presence of its forces in Iraq, as the major reason for the current debacle. According to this view, the continued US military presence in Iraq had prevented the establishment of a stable government in Iraq and the further military presence in the region will not only prevent introduction of a regional security system, but will also stall the implementation of plans to free the Gulf of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). US's plans to bolster its military presence in Iraq and its direct involvement in the Iraqi government stands in contrast to the critical Baker-Hamilton Committee report which had confirmed the US failure in Iraq.

According to the Iranian perspective, the problem with Iran's nuclear program is that it is seen in the context of Israel's security. The US is using the UN Security Council as a platform to halt Iran's peaceful nuclear program by declaring it as a threat against international peace and security. Another point that was argued for was that the Greater Middle East Initiative aims to realize the security objectives of the US through economic and regime changes. Here, the US is engaged in promoting democracy among the countries in the Middle East and Gulf by the use of force to overthrow the existing political systems. This, in turn, has changed the situation in the region from cooperation-based action to defensive reaction in the form of integration into security systems that are extraneous to the region. Instead of establishing a broad-based regional security system in the Gulf and formulating a much-needed mechanism for cooperation and collective security, regional countries are seeking security guarantees from major powers outside the region. This has led to the biggest military build-up of foreign forces in the region. The presence of foreign forces in the Gulf is not only potentially threatening, but also prevents regional order and stability, as well as cooperation among other countries to shape trends that would enhance stability. Thus, the Gulf lacks a comprehensive regional security system.

To counter the above, the countries of the region should formulate a comprehensive regional security system and promote a collective security arrangement that will be the best security guarantor among them. Such a system will be based on cooperation on common grounds while challenging all the components that caused this war. A reduction in the presence of foreign forces in the region and a change in the US role " from a military role to one of helping in the establishment of a system of cooperation among regional states " will be welcomed by the people of the region. This system could significantly contribute to the strengthening of the infrastructure needed to eliminate underdevelopment, which is a major source of instability.

In the final session, the focus was on "Scenarios of Failure and its Implications: The US and the International Environment." The session opened with a stress on the asymmetric nature of the correlation of forces both in the Gulf region (between Iran and the GCC countries) and outside the region (particularly between the region and the United States).

Three key points were emphasized:

1. The importance of involving other regional powers in security arrangements with reference to Iraq, Iran and broadly the Gulf region. In particular, Turkey, India, and China could play a useful role. The leading role in any regional security arrangement, nevertheless, should belong to Saudi Arabia.
2. The source of violence " including terrorism " in the region is the Palestinian question. The pervasive sense of regional insecurity is linked to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As long as this remains unresolved, violence and instability will persist in the region.

3. Democratization is important and beneficial. People should shape their own destiny. Power sharing therefore is the key and ought to be promoted in the region.

An assessment of regional security from a European perspective and comparing it with the US, and the Gulf region brought out the following points:

1. Europeans are more institutionalists than Americans;
2. Europe is less state-centric than the US, or for that matter the Gulf region; and
3. Europe is decisively more secular than the US and the GCC countries.

Considering the role of the European Union, it was argued that the EU is currently absorbed with energy security issues, as well as with procedural problems associated with the absence of an EU constitution. High on the EU foreign policy agenda are Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear program, as well as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Iraq did not appear to be in the list of EU priorities. The fact that there is no consensus on how long foreign troops will be needed in Iraq makes it difficult to secure public consent on an Iraqi policy. Whilst the EU can moderate when parties have reached some kind of agreement, the EU cannot reach such agreement. In the given circumstances, the Gulf region should not expect too much from the EU.

From the Russian perspective, an American failure in Iraq will neither make the world safer for Russia nor the GCC countries. Nonetheless, since the definitions of success and failure vary, it could, therefore, be possible that success or failure in Iraq – as the case might be – will come in different shades. In case the US policy fails in Iraq, it might be useful to consider the experience of the USSR's failure in Afghanistan for similarities and/or contrasts. In the latter case, there was no fragmentation of the country (Afghanistan retained its territorial integrity). In the case of the USSR's failure in Afghanistan, a 6+2 formula which involved Afghanistan's neighbors as well as the USSR and the US proved workable. Considering the current security impasse in the Gulf region, achieving regional security is going to be difficult with or without Iran. In addition, no viable solution could be achieved without the involvement of Turkey. There is also the question of whether Israel would complicate or mitigate Gulf security.

On the issue of "The Middle East: US Action and Sunni-Shiite Divide," it was pointed out that the US-led war on terror, the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the US support for Israeli policies in Palestinian territories and Lebanon, the recent bombing of Somalia, and possible military actions against Iran over its nuclear program have had profound consequences for the US, the region, and the domain of Islam. One of the most significant consequences is the deepening and the widening of sectarian division (along the Sunni-Shiite lines). While the US and its allies have failed in Iraq, their efforts to rebuild Afghanistan and restrain Israel have proven inadequate. There is apprehension about the emergence of a powerful regional Shiite strategic entity linked to Tehran and a fear among many Sunni-dominated Arab states about what this might entail for them. While the Iranian regime is at loggerheads with the US and some of its allies on a range of issues, including its nuclear program, it has not found it altogether adversarial to its interests to see the Iraqi government having a kind of soft patron-client relationship with Washington as long as Tehran maintains necessary leverage to shape Iraq's political direction in conformity with its regional interests in the long run. No wonder the followers of Sunni Islam perceive – rightly or wrongly – that Washington and Tehran have made an anti-Sunni cause, despite their wider geopolitical differences.

The final discussion period highlighted the following points:

1. There is concern about who will fill the void if the US decides to leave the region to its fate. Whilst the GCC countries have tried to reach some common ground with Iran, the latter has not reciprocated in kind. History does not encourage regional states to trust Iran. Whereas Tehran talks tough against the US, the two have previously collaborated in Afghanistan, for example.

2. Turkey can play a constructive role in securing security in the region. It does not appear that Turkey intends to impose its will on the Gulf. Rather, Turkey's understanding of the people of the region and their culture places it in a suitable position to mediate and coordinate policy.
3. The huge cost of the Iraq war has led to expectations that the US dollar will weaken further and that the US deficit will continue to grow. This is likely to impact negatively on the world economy. In particular, in the European context, it brings to the fore the issue of managing the euro as the international currency.
4. In terms of external powers facilitating regional security and the building of regional structures, NATO is as an organization which could promise to deliver positive results.
5. The European Union could play a role in the region as it does possess useful instruments outside of military power. The GCC should thus aim to engage the EU in economic and soft-security issues.
6. However, if the meaning of regional security has been defined so far by outside powers, the time is ripe now for regional states to define for themselves what their security might mean and in what ways comprehensive regional security may be as achieved .
7. Humiliating the US will be profoundly counterproductive. The aim should be to enable the US find an honorable exit strategy in Iraq.

Both in Iraq, and the entire region, loyalties should be centered around the state; a concept of democracy should be promoted which while providing for the rule of majority does not undermine the rights of minorities; and civil society should be strengthened.

For more details of the event, [click here](#).