

THE GCC'S 21ST SUMMIT, PART TWO: DEFENSE ISSUES

By
John Duke Anthony

JANUARY 31, 2001

[Special to GulfWire - January 2001, Kuwait] GulfWire's Dr. Anthony was present for the GCC's 21st Heads of State in Bahrain. This week GulfWire is pleased to present the second installment of his three-part summary of what transpired. Part two is a preliminary report on defense issues. A supplemental report will be published when Dr. Anthony returns from a visit to the region in mid-February.

The first report, "The GCC's 21st Summit, Part One: Economic Issues," is available in the GulfWire archives at: [CLICK HERE](#)

Editor's Note: For background information on the 21st GCC Summit visit: [CLICK HERE](#)

* * *

THE GCC'S 21ST SUMMIT, PART TWO: DEFENSE ISSUES (A)

By

John Duke Anthony

Learning what happens or does not happen at a GCC summit regarding defense issues requires a different approach than determining what transpired on the economic, social, and political fronts. This is because of the far more sensitive nature of the subject. At each of the summits since the GCC's inception in 1981, the member-states' leaders have ordinarily been tight-lipped on the topic.

This summit was a modest exception. What excited many was summit host Bahrain Ruler Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa's call for a strategic defense pact among the members, a call that was quickly praised and supported by Kuwaiti Emir Shaikh Jabr Al Ahmad Al Sabah. This was echoed by Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Abdallah's remarks on a nearly identical theme. His and other summiteers' use of such phrases as "strategic oneness," and going forward in tandem with the potential of each member-state's respective "financial and human resources," seemed to signify that something entirely new and possibly revolutionary was afoot.

The leaders' additional references to the folly of their talk about collective defense in the absence of their having achieved a sense of political unity on various issues raised observers' curiosity further.

What is one to make of this? An international leadership gathering of such a magnitude is not to be taken lightly. The six countries control nearly half the world's petroleum reserves.

"Strengthening Defense Capabilities"

Any comments that the GCC leaders might make about "strengthening the member-states' collective defense capabilities" would ordinarily be of interest to a variety of people. Many would want to examine the possible implications of such pronouncements upon a variety of phenomena. These would include the member-states' citizenries, their international allies, and world energy and financial markets, to name but a few.

But in trying to determine whether a major breakthrough had been achieved on the defense front, many observers professed to being baffled by what it all meant. All some had to go on was their familiarity with what has occurred in previous summits. The ones of the past several years announced, inter alia, (1) the establishment of an advanced secure telecommunications system, (2) the installation of an improved air defense network, and (3) the need for a five-fold augmentation of the GCC's modest joint defense force, a goal that was reiterated for the fifth year in succession at this summit.

The 21st summit was one of the shortest in GCC history. One of the reasons was that, in contrast to many of the leaders' past gatherings, there was no immediately pressing crisis on their doorstep. A second reason, unstated, was that it was held right after the end of Ramadhan and the waning hours of Eid Al-Fitr, one of the most important religious and social events of the year, to which the leaders wanted to be able to return and enjoy with their families. A third reason, also unstated, was attributed to an unprecedented degree of "summit fatigue." In the two months' run-up to this gathering, most of the member-states' rulers had also attended summits of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the League of Arab States, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

This is the backdrop against which the Bahrain Summit began half a day sooner than usual and ended the following day hours earlier than any comparable meeting in quite some time. Even so, the summiteers had a full agenda. Following the customary format, they reviewed the previous year's activities and accomplishments as well as delays, and discussed ongoing developments in four fields of the GCC's work: economic, political, defense, and security.

* * *

The following report provides background, context, and perspective of how the GCC arrived to the present situation with regard to region-specific military strategies and policies. It also shares knowledge of what the region's defense leaders, for some time, have had under consideration. It does not analyze the text of their alleged collective defense accord nor an official summary of its most salient features, as neither has been released yet, although both are expected in "due course."

The report underscores a range of long-standing pan-GCC defense needs, concerns, and interests. Many of these phenomena have antecedents that are rooted in the era immediately prior to the GCC's establishment. Far from being historical artifacts of limited relevance to the present, an understanding of these antecedents provides a rich array of insight into current affairs. It also explains an important part of the rationale for the GCC's existence. Not least, it clarifies why the GCC's leaders have

elected to do certain things while eschewing others that outsiders have not been shy about advising them that they should or should not do on the regional defense front. Finally, it illuminates what the leaders are determined to see not recur.

* * *

Context and Circumstances

Instead of discussing and deliberating defense issues in detail, the summiteers endorsed an accord reached by their ministers of defense and armed services chiefs of staff at an earlier meeting in October. This away-from-the-summit manner of deciding military matters provides insight into the deep roots of the member-states' sensitivities with regard to an important how question: namely how they deal with defense issues in general.

The decision to hold annual meetings of the defense ministers in the fall, usually sometime between September and the end of October, dates from the early 1980s. It reflects pan-GCC defense desires and anxieties that, for the most part, are still in tact. The members remain determined to address such matters in as low key a manner as possible.

From the beginning until the present, the leaders have insisted that any in-depth consideration of military matters among them ought to transpire away from the glare of publicity. This has been their view not only with regard to the annual summits but, also, with regard to the quarterly meetings of the GCC's Ministerial Council. The latter body recommends policies to the GCC's Supreme Council, which is comprised of the six GCC heads of state. Significantly, being headed by the member-states' foreign and not their defense ministers, the ministerial council tends to take a broad geo-strategic and geo-political approach to issues related to the region's stability.

At the most recent summit, Bahraini Foreign Minister Shaikh Muhammad bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa became the new chairman of the ministerial council. Shaikh Muhammad is no ordinary foreign minister. In addition to being the dean of the GCC's foreign ministers, he is also the dean of the entire world's foreign ministers, having held the post ever since Bahrain obtained its independence in 1971.

Remains of the Day

Shaikh Muhammad was at pains to underscore the obvious: the member-states' commitment to an over-arching strategic military policy with regard to their collective defense remains in place. This component of the GCC's mission is not new, nor, for the past decade and a half, has it been unclear. As GCC officials were keen to stress to this writer, it does not in any way suggest that the position and role of the members' allies in the overall regional military equation is expected to change. On the contrary, all are in agreement that this role is necessary given the nature of the area's defense challenges.

Despite the limited achievements to date, there is no question that cooperation among the member-states' armed forces has been a high priority since even before the GCC was established. This may seem strange from a

reading of the GCC charter, for nowhere therein is there the slightest hint that the members intended to deal with military issues.

The context and circumstances in which the members launched their experiment explain why and shed light on ongoing GCC defense requirements and interests. At the time of the GCC's founding, a majority of the rulers were of mixed opinions as to whether they should tackle the topic in a public setting. To this day, most of them remain reluctant to do so.

Initially, one of the most basic reasons was that all six of the founding members are also members of the League of Arab States. Another was that various emotions were then riding high about what the GCC and other Arabs should and should not do in light of the war then underway between Iraq and Iran. For example, several GCC leaders then believed that, if they included this item on the agenda of their inaugural meeting, they might risk incurring the wrath of various League members. Equally portentous, they reasoned, they might inadvertently paint themselves into a corner from which they would find it difficult to exit.

Arabia's Once Forgotten Corner

As it was, in the eyes of numerous critics of the countries' regimes, the GCC's founding member-states were already waving, as it were, a red flag. Indeed, numerous non-GCC pan-Arabists were in a state of shock at the fact that these six countries had come together to form what was undeniably a new, albeit limited in size, Arab regional organization. At the inaugural summit in May 1981, they gave this analyst an earful about how they felt regarding what had happened. Almost all of their remarks and commentary was negative.

The assault upon the non-GCC leaders' sense of rectitude resonated. It was the greater because, from a radical political perspective, these were precisely the kinds of regimes that were supposed to have been overthrown long before. Only a decade earlier, most of the GCC member-states comprised one of the most forgotten corners of Arabia. It had not been long since when radicals had regularly described their regimes as "reactionary," "lackeys," "puppets," "running dogs," and so on.

But now, in effect, these very same regimes had upstaged everyone. All of a sudden, they were front and center-stage. Two Palestinian Intifadas, a lengthy Iran-Iraq war, periodic Israeli pounding on Lebanon, and the 1990-91 Kuwait crisis in the interim notwithstanding, there have been no intermissions since.

Envy Run Amok

Various spokesmen for Arab countries elsewhere were openly critical of what these kings, sultans, and emirs had done. Many, with scarcely veiled anger, asked, "What is this? Some kind of a rich men's club?" At root of the many put-downs by pundits from other polities was resentment that other countries, meaning theirs, had not been invited to join the GCC. Theirs was the wrath of the rejected suitor.

The following, dating from that period and the memory of it continuing to this day, guides a segment of pan-GCC strategic thinking with regard to

regional military issues. The three countries most peeved at being denied entrance into the GCC were, and still are, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen.

At the "opening day" ceremonies in Abu Dhabi on May 25, 1981, friends of the first two countries were unabashedly vocal in expressing their anger and disappointment. One among many indications of how long their pain of being rebuffed has lasted into the present is that Yemen, in effect, swallowed its pride a few years ago and formally applied to be admitted into the GCC. Its request was rejected.

Among a total of 88 less-developed countries that had received various forms of economic assistance from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE throughout the 1980s, these three non-GCC members, plus the Palestine Liberation Organization, formed the inner core of one of the greatest threats yet posed to the GCC as a whole. Before a decade had passed following the GCC's establishment, all four of these polities posed a major military threat to the GCC countries. Their spokespersons' denials and spin-doctoring notwithstanding, none of the four came to the aid of the GCC victims when Iraq's tanks rolled into Kuwait on August 2, 1990.

The Pain and Power of Memories

To be sure, much has changed in the intervening decade. Even so, Arabian memories tend to be lengthy, the memories of victims longer still, and the recollections of victims of rape longest of all. The repercussions of these four non-GCC polities' actions and inaction in response to the violation of Kuwait at the GCC's halfway point in its evolution continue to have implications for the member-states' strategies with regard to deterrence and defense.

Anyone in doubt as to the reasons need only consider that Baghdad insists to this day that Kuwait be displayed on maps as an integral part of Iraq. GCC member-states' relations with Jordan have improved, but Amman has yet to disavow the late King Hussein's famous "White Paper" in which he "justified" the Hashemite Kingdom's refusal to countenance the use of force to reverse the Iraqi aggression. And the PLO's leadership has also refused to apologize for its having sided with Iraq in the aggression. Only Yemen stands out for having repeatedly and credibly undertaken to make amends with the GCC countries.

Here, a significant part of the past spins fast forward. It becomes an ongoing part of the present. It remains intertwined with an important part of the contemporary situation while unable yet to break its links to what went before. The anger of the Arab countries that were not invited to join the GCC in 1981 could neither then nor nearly ten years later be swept under the rug. Of relevance to near- and longer-term GCC defense planning is that, even now, ten years further down the road, it has yet to be papered over. Within the family of Arab brotherhood and sisterhood, tears still trickle down the wings of doves.

Some GCC analysts make the case that history has proved the organization's founders to have been not only prescient but right. But within their number are those who respond less assuredly. Maybe so, they say. In other words, they are not so sure. And among their protagonists are outside analysts who raise a more metaphysical question: would the 1990-91 Kuwait crisis have occurred if Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen had been brought inside the tent in the beginning instead of being left to stand outside?

Pactophobia?

A more specific concern over the years has been the GCC leaders' wish to not want to seem as though they had agreed to something that superceded their commitment to a pan-Arab defense pact. The basis for this consideration was also real, as all six were signatories to such an accord that dated from the 1950s.

But when Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, both the earlier accord, and the remains of an informal Arab regional order that had evolved in the aftermath of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, were dashed to smithereens. Since then, no comparable Arab regional strategic framework has emerged in their place. The closest approximation, in the form of a potential blueprint or frame of reference for shaping a "new Arab order," is the de facto coalition comprised of the eight signatories to the March 1991 Damascus Declaration, i.e., the six GCC countries plus Egypt and Syria.

The latter configuration is often referred to as the "Six Plus Two," or the "Third Tier" of GCC defense strategy. Tier One consists of the individual GCC states, Tier Two is comprised of the combined GCC forces, and Tier Four is what remains of the United States-led Great Power Coalition that was cobbled together to reverse the Iraqi aggression.

An assessment of this Damascene dimension of GCC military planning is beyond the scope of this report. For the purpose of analysis herein, it is enough to say that the important geo-political strength that this grouping of eight Arab nations lends to matters pertaining to GCC defense tends to be given short shrift by many commentators.

Lessons Learned: NATO...

What has also long been important to the GCC member-states up until now is that any agreement that they might reach on regional defense issues not be seen as a binding accord akin to that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). From the GCC's earliest consideration of military matters, the members have had an almost allergic aversion to formal undertakings that would imply that they had formed a bloc counterpoised against other blocs. An even worse worry has been wrapped within the ongoing concern that, by their actions, they might provide the stimulus and *raison d'etre* for the formation of a bloc of countries explicitly opposed to what they represented, if not also to their very existence.

In early questioning on this topic, one of the GCC's foreign ministers used to say to me, "We do not constitute a pact. We have our defense agreements within the Arab League." But, as noted, this was before the notional sense of an intra-Arab order was blown to bits upon Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. And, no less significant, it was prior to most of the member-states' entering into defense cooperation agreements with most of the Great Powers in the early to mid-1990s.

The lack of a formal, published, and detailed GCC collective defense pact over the years has disappointed many strategic military planners among the member-states' Great Power allies. The absence of such an accord has also been the source of much international derision, particularly among western defense contractors, regarding GCC defense capabilities.

These include the many corporate representatives that have been frustrated by their inability to market their goods and services successfully within

the GCC region. Ideally, they would like to sell to an entity that encompasses all six GCC countries within a single military unit. Alternatively, just as valuable for their interests would be a grouping in which a central GCC agency were empowered with procurement authority for defense equipment and defense systems on behalf of all the members.

With success having eluded them on this front, many defense company marketeers tend to dismiss the phenomenon of pan-GCC defense cooperation as a lot of talk and little action. Were they to land a mega-buck contract, their assessment would, of course, be different, as though the GCC had hung the moon.

More charitable analysts will concede that, at best, the GCC consists of six separate and altogether modest military establishments edging their way towards greater jointness. The exceptions, the GCC "boosters," are those firms that have won contracts to build and maintain the member-states' aforementioned intra-regional air defense and secure telecommunications systems.

Since the GCC was established two decades ago, the number of western government and private sector critics of the GCC's reluctance to forge a binding collective defense pact has not diminished. If anything, it has increased. In contrast, non-GCC Arab governments, for the most part, have been pleased by the extent to which the GCC members have hitherto avoided declaring formally that they had formed an exclusivist military accord among themselves.

Whether what the GCC heads of state agreed to in their most recent summit represents a complete turnabout, a repackaging of earlier less formal consensuses, a hybrid of some kind, or something truly revolutionary remains to be seen.

One reason why the GCC has been reluctant for so long to proceed in this direction, at least officially, is that by their not doing so, they were able to achieve an important strategic objective: namely, avoidance of what, at the member-states' expense, would have possibly fueled the kinds of international polarization historically associated with military pacts. With the Cold War still alive at the time of the GCC's inception, and with Soviet fighter aircraft in Afghanistan but a two-hour flight time's distance from Oman, a NATO-like arrangement was precisely what most of the GCC members did not want, nor did they feel there was a compelling need, to emulate.

It needs to be said, however, that a great many western, and especially American, military strategists disagreed. To this day, they continue to disagree. GCC strategists and planners have all along been aware of this. But, in the beginning, they countered by asking their western colleagues whether they truly felt it would be wise to place all of their eggs, so to speak, in one basket.

Especially, they emphasized, given the extraordinary difficulty that Saudi Arabia, from April 1981 onwards, confronted in its efforts to purchase advanced U.S.-manufactured airborne warning and control systems (AWACS) equipment. Indeed, as the GCC heads of state gathered in Abu Dhabi a month later to declare their debut, it was anybody's guess as to whether the

Kingdom would be able, in this way, to help meet its defense needs against an Iran-Iraq war that showed signs of possibly spreading to the GCC region.

...The Baghdad Pact and CENTO

Of interest is that the roots of GCC's leaders' concerns in this regard stemmed from the same considerations that present-day military strategists and planners in Baghdad and Tehran also find troublesome about what the member-states' deliberated and agreed to most recently on December 31, 2000, Bahrain.

Contemporary western analysts may find the basis for these two non-GCC governments' concern a bit stretched. But, for the region's inhabitants, having had to live with the consequences of what has emanated from these two non-GCC capitals before, the relevance to present-day defense planning is clear and ongoing.

Senior defense advisers in all of the GCC countries hearken back to the ill-fated 1955 Baghdad Pact. Initially comprised of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, the ardently pro-western alliance drew firm lines around countries depending on whether they were closer to Moscow or Washington. The alliance's name was subsequently changed to the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). This occurred after the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in 1958, when the new regime in Baghdad denounced and withdrew from the pact.

Of great and ongoing concern to GCC strategic and defense planners is that Iraq's role in regional and international affairs since then has never been the same. Neither, for that matter, has Iran's since the ouster in 1979 of the Pahlavi Dynasty, which had been one of both pacts' strongest supporters.

The existence of these two pacts, Baghdad's and Tehran's respective high-profiles in them, and the United States' and Great Britain's formidable role in bringing them into being, were all major factors in fueling the successful efforts to overthrow these two regimes. Among the lessons that the future GCC states took to heart and that still resonate was the need, if at all possible, to avoid entering into such tightly wound defense agreements.

Perspective: Through a Looking Glass Seen Darkly

But that was then, and now is now. Then, the world was mainly bipolar. From time to time, as when the interests of Beijing and Moscow were more divergent than convergent - as, for example, over such Gulf-specific issues as to whether the soon-to-become GCC countries should be overthrown or recognized and courted -- it was multipolar. Today, it is unipolar. As such, this should theoretically make it easier for the GCC countries to declare that they have forged a formal collective defense pact. That is, it is clear that the reasons that drove their earlier reluctance no longer apply.

But would this make it easier? And is it really the case that the earlier reasons no longer apply? For example, if they do not apply to Moscow, Peking, and/or Washington, might they apply to others? In short, against whom is or might such a pact aimed? And how credible is the response of "No one" for an answer? This was the reply that one of the member-states'

senior officials gave this analyst and others immediately following the most recent GCC heads of state summit's conclusion.

If the existence of pacts in the past was viewed as a major source of regional tensions in the GCC and broader Gulf region, how is it that, as a first-time phenomenon, the word "pact" crept into the discussions among the GCC heads of state at their most recent meeting? And if its usage therein and on the sidelines of the summit, and in officially-sanctioned media reports afterwards, reflected merely several slips of the tongue, what is this supposed to mean? Is one to expect the imminent issuance of qualifying explanations, retractions, or statements to the effect that its usage was quoted out of context?

As of yet, there are as many questions as there are answers to what the GCC countries agreed to in their most recent heads of state summit with regard to collective defense issues. Insight into the reason for GCC spokespeople being coy about the members' motivations and objectives, while at the same time providing prima facie evidence of their likely intentions, follows in a subsequent report following this analyst's return from the region two weeks from now.

* * *

Dr. John Duke Anthony, Publisher of Gulf Wire, attended the most recent 21st GCC Heads of State Summit in Bahrain. He is President and CEO of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, and Secretary of the U.S.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee. All are non-profit and non-governmental organizations dedicated to educating Americans about U.S. interests in the GCC region, the broader Arab world, the Middle East, and the Islamic countries.