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THE ROLE OF THE GCC IN DEFENSE AND GEOPOLITICAL AFFAIRS

By

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That the GCC managed to stay out of the Iran-Iraq war for its entire eight years and emerged relatively unscathed from the conflict, in spite of its support for Iraq, will be the subject of study for years to come by analysts of diplomacy, deterrence, and defense. According to GCC Secretary-General Abdulla Bishara, "It wasn't easy. We had no choice but to become experts in crisis management. From the beginning of the conflict until the end, there wasn't a day when we weren't denigrated and vilified. The provocation was constant and extensive, but we took it in our stride."

Commenting on the GCC's efforts to combine pragmatism and persuasion with power to bring the war to an end, Bishara noted that "in no other place in the world was there a greater international drive to bring about peace than within the Gulf itself. To keep our own and others' feet to the fire, we met -- and still do -- every 90 days, and 12 additional times for emergency meetings, everyone of them related to the Iran-Iraq conflict. In the end, it worked. Cooler heads prevailed. We shunned adventurism."

Pan-Arab Consensus

An example of the GCC's ability to forge a regionwide consensus on the need to end the war and contain Iran was its success at a pan-Arab summit in Amman, Jordan in November 1987. The GCC managed to get all the other Arab countries to endorse its stand and, also, to obtain the summit's blessing for Kuwait's decision to enhance its security through the American ship-protection scheme launched the previous July.

This last feat was a milestone, representing the first Arab consensus in history in support of an American or any other foreign military presence in the region. The achievement was all the more remarkable in

light of the GCC's and other Arab countries' key positions and roles in the Non-Aligned Movement.

The GCC, throughout the war, was under no illusions about its capacity to defend itself against a neighbor whose citizens were four times as numerous as the entire GCC population. As one GCC strategist remarked, "We were fully aware that in pursuing consensus and consent, we could persuade others only up to a point, and that diplomacy without teeth is empty. As we didn't have sufficient power of our own, we had no choice but to borrow it. We have an ongoing need for friends who have it. We're not yet out of the woods. The neighborhood's still a dangerous place."

The combined contributions of outside powers aimed at ending the conflict helped immensely to sustain the evolving relations of the GCC. In the history of foreign involvement in the region, the level of burden-sharing in pursuit of common strategic and defense objectives among Western and other countries was exemplary. The GCC countries, Iraq, the U.S., Great Britain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, and, in the end, even the Soviet Union, collaborated uniquely. In this century's international relations, there's been nothing like it since the Second World War.

Global Containment Efforts

Yet it was the GCC's own quiet cooperation with the defense forces of these powers that was critical to their mission. Despite doubts about American capability stemming from Irangate, where the U.S. covertly sold weapons to Iran, the major menace to the region's political makeup, the GCC countries provided an extraordinary range of assistance to the U.S. and other countries active in the global effort to contain Iran.

In my own meetings with U.S. and other Western military personnel on the ground throughout the duration of the conflict, every one of them, year after year, said essentially the same thing: There was nothing requested that was not granted; cooperation was virtually always forthcoming.

Saudi Arabia, with the largest land mass and the GCC countries' most elaborate defense establishment, used its own AWACS to monitor and help protect the U.S. re-flagged tankers, flew its F-15 aircraft to provide protection for America's AWACS, and played a crucial role in sweeping mines from the path of U.S. and other countries' vessels.

All this protected not only the Kingdom's interests but those of the other GCC countries from Kuwait to Oman. It also protected the interests of more than a hundred additional countries whose individuals, institutions, investments and much else in the region were jeopardized by the same Iranian threats that were being hurled at the GCC countries.

Simultaneous to its efforts to forge a regional consensus on the need to end the conflict, the GCC never lost sight of the importance of Great Power consensus in support of the same objectives. It worked successfully to line up support in the UN Security Council and to persuade Europe and the international community in general to pressure Iran. In the end, with Ayatollah Khomeini saying that he would have preferred to drink poison,

Iran accepted UN Resolution 598, which called for a ceasefire. The unanimous Resolution marked the first time in 20 years that a country was compelled to accommodate collective international pressure.

Regional Activism

Beyond their political and diplomatic as well as defense cooperation with the Western armada that entered the Gulf to end the Iran-Iraq war, the GCC countries have also been active in efforts to resolve three other regional conflicts. For example, its heads of state and foreign ministers, and particularly King Fahd, worked as hard as any Arab leaders to bring about a rapprochement last year between Algeria and Morocco, previously at odds with one another for 13 years over the former Spanish Sahara territory. The rapprochement, in turn, paved the way for the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union -- a grouping of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, and Morocco -- and the recent pan-Arab summit in Casablanca. At the latter meeting, for the first time in years, every single Arab head of state was in attendance.

Another example of the emergence of the GCC as an effective force in regional affairs has been its success in getting Arab countries to adopt the option of an international conference to resolve the Arab-Israeli, and Israeli-Palestinian, conflict peacefully. Prior to the GCC's pressing the issue, first, at a pan-Arab summit in Fez in 1982, in what was then called the "Fahd Eight-Point Peace Plan," and again at the Amman summit in 1987, there wasn't any regional consensus on this question.

Moreover, after the assistance provided by Pakistan and the United States, the GCC countries, with Saudi Arabia in the forefront, stand third among those that hastened Moscow's decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. In strategic partnership with the United States and other Western nations, they funneled billions to the insurgents resisting Soviet occupation. At the same time, they annually continued to provide additional billions in economic assistance to such countries as Bangladesh, India, Morocco, North Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, and many other friends and allies of the West in the developing world.

Increasing Self-Reliance

Closer to home, the GCC has pioneered in the effort to construct a credible regional security structure based on deterrence. That it chose to move forward in this most difficult of all areas of regional cooperation at a time and in a place where a war was being waged literally minutes away, and frequently on its doorstep, was not the least of the challenges confronting the organization at its inception.

Indeed, the difficulties implicit in such areas as training in command, control, and communication; interoperability of equipment; standardization of logistics, management, and administration, as well as strategic and tactical doctrine; the presence of a plethora of foreign arms manufacturers' representatives with competing and often contradictory agendas; the frustration, owing to the effectiveness of the Israeli lobby in the American Congress, of being unable to purchase a broad range of defense equipment from the United States; etc. have been and will continue

to be formidable.

The founders of NATO, by comparison, had a much easier task. Several NATO members had previously cooperated with one another in the Coal and Steel Community; their economies had recently been devastated; there wasn't a war going on at the time; their infrastructures were comparatively well developed; and there was the added assurance of a formal American security guarantee in the event the members were attacked or otherwise threatened as they proceeded.

In the absence of comparable facilitative forces and factors, the GCC had no choice but to proceed with what it had and as best it could. One of the first steps in this direction was enunciation of a "GCC Doctrine." The Doctrine states that responsibility for the security of the member countries lies with the countries themselves and no one else. The context in which the Doctrine was forged was one in which there was a local and intra-regional imperative for the member countries to steer clear of two other Gulf-related but competing Great Power doctrines -- the Carter Doctrine and the Brezhnev Doctrine -- which had been in existence since 1980 following the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The options confronting the GCC in this setting were obvious and, at the time, also ominous. As one GCC strategist, quoting an African proverb, and referring to the uncertain interests and involvement of the Great Powers, put it: "When two elephants fight, it is rare, if ever, that one defeats the other. But what always happens is that the grass underfoot gets trampled. We must work very hard to ensure that we never find ourselves in such a situation."

Defense Cooperation

Given the exceptional circumstances in which the GCC began, the organization has achieved far more in this area of cooperation than many are aware. For example, following an agreement reached at its 1984 Heads of State Summit, the GCC established, and to this day has maintained, its own rapid deployment force, consisting of units from all six member countries' armed forces, at Hafr Al-Batin, a settlement near the Kuwait border.

In addition, beginning in 1983, all six of the members have participated in three different sets of joint military exercises and numerous bilateral maneuvers -- the first in modern Arab history. Recognizing the constraints of their limited populations to build and sustain large land forces, all six have focused instead on strengthening and expanding their air forces and achieving a more effectively coordinated air defense network.

Beyond the imperatives implicit in the GCC's quest for greater self-reliance is the objective of removing any needs or pretexts, regardless of the reason and whatever the guise, for intervention by outside powers. Among the GCC's achievements in this regard already is the extent to which it deterred Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. After June 1984, when Saudi Arabia's F-15 aircraft shot down an Iranian fighter flying towards the Kingdom's oil facilities, Iran chose not to test this component of the GCC's defense network again. "There's no doubt about

it," commented one military commander, "without the GCC, Iran would have interfered with us a lot more than it did."

U.S. Interests

The U.S. Ambassador to one of the GCC countries concurred and added: "As we look at the GCC from the perspective of U.S. national needs, our bottom-line interests both before, during, and subsequent to the conflict have been to keep the oil flowing and to keep the area, with its geostrategic importance, out of unfriendly hands. Its ongoing independence, the continuation of its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the perpetuation of its security, stability, and prosperity -- these are not just vital GCC interests. They're America's and our allies', too."

GCC strategists fully recognize the enormity and complexity of the task they have set for themselves in the defense and geopolitical arenas. Just as they acknowledge the uncertain prospects in this regard, so, too, would it be unrealistic for outsiders to expect the GCC to have moved farther or faster in these areas than it already has. Certainly in the short term, it appears unlikely that the GCC will be able to find quick solutions to the kinds of challenges inherent in regional security issues that, even now, forty years later, continue to elude NATO and other cooperative defense groupings.

Building an Arabian Shield

In the interim, planning for the future will proceed apace with progress measured in accordance with more modest criteria. In this context, a little noticed turning point has already occurred at the GCC's military academies and other defense training centers. In the core curriculum of these institutions, a common strategic and tactical doctrine for the GCC's armed forces has been taught for several years now. The first students trained in this fashion will be graduating this year.

Parallel to these far-reaching changes underway in the effort to build an impregnable "Arabian Shield" for the GCC's deterrence and defense, the same thing is happening in a host of other subjects being taught in each of the member countries' school systems. "Our children," says one GCC official who was present at the organization's creation, "believe there's always been a GCC. What's more important, they believe it's something very much worth protecting. As we chart our way towards a future of increasing self-reliance, we could hardly ask for a healthier sign."

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