Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 2

The United States and the Gulf: Towards a Reassessment of Gulf Commitments and Alignments?

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Abstract

There are currently indications that the United States government may be reassessing its commitments in the Gulf region. President Obama pronounces himself a "Pacific President," and the security concerns in the Western Pacific are clearly prominent in US strategic thinking. The new "pivot towards Asia" (or "rebalancing of defence policy towards the Pacific") provides some evidence of this. The balance of economic interest with regard to the Gulf, moreover, is changing: the development of the energy sector in the US is making it less dependent on Gulf oil; US trade with the Gulf constitutes a shrinking proportion of overall Gulf trade; and the significance and weight of the economic links between the Gulf States and the major Asian powers is increasing rapidly.

At the same time, however, there are many reasons why the US may maintain its existing security arrangements in the region. While the US itself may have less economic interest in the Gulf region than before, the Gulf's hydrocarbon resources will remain critical to

the global economy. The US cannot retain its superpower role without a significant presence in such an important region. Nor is the United States likely to abandon its concern regarding Iranian nuclear weapons or its long-term commitment to Israel (inevitably affected by wider regional developments). The US is, moreover, bound by the security commitments it is has given to some Gulf States. To break these would weaken confidence in the US's fidelity to agreements undertaken worldwide.

The workshop is intended to enable an open-ended discussion on how US policy in the Gulf may develop. Papers, however, will be invited not only on the likely shape of US policy but also on thekey issue of how other countries may react to future US policy (whether changing or not). Of interest, for example, will be how the different Gulf countries may fashion their policies in response to US policy, whether the European Union (or European countries individually) will seek a bigger role, and how the major Asian powers will seek to ensure the continued security of their increasingly-crucial supplies of Gulf hydrocarbons.

Description and Rationale

Perspective on the past

The workshop provides some continuity with previous workshops held at Gulf Research Meetings. In recent years, the workshops which cover relations between Gulf and Asian countries have considered the role which the major Asian powers could play in Gulf security if the US were to reduce its commitments to the region – or perhaps in a challenge to continuing US commitments. How realistic it is to imagine such a development on the US side has not been made central to the discussion. This workshop will seek to confront this critical question.

The US security role in the Gulf has been critical over the past four decades (at least). All major regional and international issues in the Gulf have been affected and shaped by this role – whether it has taken the form of support for key allies (the twin pillar policy of the 1970s), an over-the-horizon naval/military presence with direct involvement in specific conflict situations (the 1980s), military engagement in defence of regional allies (the 1990s and early 2000s), or the more diffuse military presence in evidence today. At all times, the US has acted to restrain/isolate/confront those states which it (and some of its Gulf allies) have seen as disruptive to the stability of the region – conceived within the framework of its own interests and principles. The dynamics of regional relations, and to some extent those of national polities, have been deeply affected (some would say engendered) by these policies.

Over this period, the United States has been explicit about the reasons for US engagement. Gulf oil has been seen as being of vital importance to the economy of the United States, whose industrial infrastructure would be seriously damaged by any major disruption in the supply of oil. As the world's largest consumer of oil (at some times consuming about one-quarter of all oil produced globally), and the world's largest importer of oil, the continued flow of oil was seen as a vital national interest. But it was more than that. The Western world as a whole was dependent on Gulf oil, and the US

position as the leading Western power required the US to act in defence of what was conceived as Western interests generally. The Gulf region was formally outside the geographical scope of Western security agreements and organisations, yet in practice the region was seen as integral to the security interests of the Western powers. The very absence of formal structures linking the Gulf to Western organisations enhanced the significance of the US role: acting on behalf of Western countries generally, yet able to take decisions and carry out engagements unilaterally.

Perspective on the Future

The fundamental economic assumption underpinning previous policy, at least as far as the US economic interests go, has now changed. In the future, the US will not be dependent on Gulf oil resources to any major extent in the supply of oil for its own purposes. While the impact of shale gas and tight oil on the international oil market has often been overstated, it is nonetheless true that the effect on US hydrocarbon imports will be very significant. This, moreover, is part of a wider pattern where the US will be producing larger quantities of energy based on sources other than traditional oil. Such sources include renewables, nuclear power, and hydropower. At the same time energy conservation measures in the US are expected to reduce the demand for "liquids" (oil of all types) from 18.5 mbd in 2012 to 16.5 mbd in 2030.[1] Overall, the result of these changes will be that, by 2030, US demand for imported oil will be some 70 percent less than it was in 2012. With regard to natural gas supply, the US will be producing enough to export substantial quantities. Taking the whole energy picture, the US is expected to be "99 percent energy self-sufficient" by 2030.[2] Such oil as the US will need to import in 2030 (perhaps 3-4 mbd) will, in any case, most likely be drawn from sources close to the US, especially from the Canadian oil sands and Brazilian conventional oil – both of which are expected to have increased production very substantially.

At the same time, the US ability and willingness to finance a continued strong naval/military presence in the Gulf may lessen. The combination of increased naval commitments in the Western Pacific and tighter overall defence budgets may encourage or force US governments to concentrate resources in the areas deemed most critical. East Asia and the Western Pacific are more likely to figure prominently among the latter than the Gulf.

Quite apart from the issue of whether the United States will have the immediate economic interest and financial ability to maintain a presence in the Gulf, therefore, there is the question of whether it will have the overall power – relative to that of other leading international actors – to maintain the global role which has required a presence in the Gulf. Assessing the likely future power resources of leading international actors is difficult, of course, but a report published by the US National Intelligence Council in

[1] BP

[2] This figure relates to overall energy supply/demand, where the exports in natural gas are balanced against imports of oil. The figure does not indicate, therefore, that imports of oil will not be needed. It does show, however, that the US can be more confident about its overall energy position.

December 2012 provides a basis for making such an assessment. The report is entitled *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, and its focus is on "the rapid and vast geopolitical changes characterising the world today."[3] It seeks to provide an understanding of "possible global trajectories over the next 15-20 years." The central theme of the report is that "with the rise of other countries, the 'unipolar moment' is over and Pax Americana – the era of American ascendancy in international politics which began in 1945 – is fast winding down."

The concept of "power" which the report uses is one which brings together a range of different military, social and economic variables. Four main variables have been used in the past to assess a country's basis of power: GDP, population size, military spending, and technology. The report makes some use of this paradigm, but also uses a more complex multi-component power index which includes a wider range of variables such as research and development, energy resources, human capital, and government revenue. The overall trends are common to both paradigms: a steady decline in the power of the US, the EU and Japan; steadily rising power of China and India; Chinese power exceeding that of the US; and Russia maintaining a low but relatively stable share of power. In the multi-component model, however, it is evident that the change in the power balances occurs at a rather slower rate: China surpasses US power around 2040 (rather than shortly after 2030, as in the four-component model); Indian power – despite increasing rapidly – remains below that of the US and the EU even in 2050. In the four-component model India surpasses the EU in 2035, and the US shortly before 2050.

There would seem, therefore, to be strong reason for the United States to be taking action in the short-term to prepare for a significant reduction in its ability to shape global politics. Yet there are also reasons why the scenario sketched out above may not hold true. It can be, and has been, pointed out that US interests are more complex and many-sided than can be conveyed by envisaging a simple transition from a focus on the Gulf to one on East Asia. Key points in this more complex pattern of security concerns are the following:

- US interests are global and strategic. They are not limited to short-term economic interest. Although the US may not itself be dependent on Gulf oil, many other countries (and allies of the US) are and will continue to be. For the US to maintain its leading position in global politics, it needs to guarantee that its friends and allies retain easy access to the oil supplies necessary for their economic well-being.

- Even in the *Global Trends2030* report, the United States is seen as holding a "first among equals" position, even though it will have lost its position of global leadership. A world-wide reach of some kind, therefore, is still feasible.

[3] US National Intelligence Council, *Alternative Futures* (Washington: National Intelligence Council). I am greatly indebted to Professor Steve Hook of Kent State University for having brought this report to my attention.

- The US remains committed to a global campaign to counter acts of 'terrorism', with primary attention focused on radical Islamist movements and activities. While such movements and activities may be active mainly outside of the Middle East rather than within, the ideological and financial linkages with Middle Eastern Islamic individuals and communities are seen as critical. A strong presence is deemed necessary to counter untoward Islamist activity. The Arabian peninsula is seen as critical to the struggle against radical Islamist violence while at the same time providing (in some countries) the facilities needed for intelligence, monitoring and, in some circumstances, engagement.

- The US has ongoing treaty obligations and understandings with Gulf governments. To withdraw from these obligations and understandings would damage the US's reputation for reliability – outside the region as well as within.

- US global policy seeks to restrict the spread of nuclear weapons, especially to governments which are deemed by the US to be in breach of international law, or globally-accepted norms and procedures (a category which some see as coterminous with that of governments inimical to US interests). Iran is one of the two countries where the US is currently most closely engaged in monitoring and restricting the development of such weapons. Withdrawal from the Gulf would signal a lessening of determination to confront Iran on the issue.

- The US has over the years shown an unwavering commitment to support the state of Israel. A US-friendly strategic environment in the Gulf has been seen by some key policy makers in the US as reducing the scope of security threats to Israel. Iraq and Iran have both been seen as possible sources of strategic threat to Israel. A strong US presence lessens the scale and likelihood of any such challenge.

- US intentions to rebalance towards Asia may be primarily geared towards shifting naval strength from the Atlantic to the Pacific, than with moving away from the Western Indian Ocean. The central objective, in this case, may be to press European countries to take on more responsibility for their own defence. The Gulf, moreover, is itself part of Asia so could be conceived as one element in the Asia pivot.

Key papers presented to the workshop will be expected to analyse these apparently contradictory influences on US foreign policy, balancing them against each other and reaching conclusions on what the likely outcome may be over the years ahead. The timescale over which predictive analysis is recommended is through to 2030, although there may be reason for choosing a different end-point.

Anticipated Papers

The papers sought for the workshop can be divided into three categories:

Papers Analysing US Energy and Security Policy
In the light of what has been written earlier, clearly a significant part of the workshop needs to deal directly with US foreign policy and its relevance to engagement in the Gulf region. Some of these papers may be general reflections on how US foreign policy may develop globally – so as to put the Gulf element in context. Others may be more closely focused on US policy in the Gulf.

Papers Analysing Policy Options of other Major Powers
These papers would examine how other leading powers would relate to, or react to, any change in US policy – or perhaps how they would relate or react to no change in US policy. Whether other powers would have an interest/ability to work together with the US in a shared strategic engagement would be one possibility, or whether they would seek a framework which might enable them to play a role independent of (and possibly contrary to) that of the US. Critically important would be the positions taken by China and India, and also the European Union (or perhaps one or more EU countries).

Papers Analysing Policy Options of Gulf States
These papers would consider how Gulf States would respond to future US policy – whether it remains the same or changes. The possibility should be considered that Gulf States may seek their own collaborative security arrangements in the region, with no intrusive external involvement (although perhaps with negotiated cooperation in particular fields). In the case of a reduced US role, or a withdrawal of any substantial US engagement, and if they did look towards external support of some kind, how would they see the different external possibilities? These questions can be considered at the level of individual Gulf States, or the GCC collectively, or on a comparative basis among all of the eight Gulf States.

Workshop Director Profiles

Professor Tim Niblock is Emeritus Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the University of Exeter. He also serves as Vice-President of the European Association for Middle Eastern Studies and Vice-Chair of the UK Council for Area Studies Associations. He began his academic career at the University of Khartoum in Sudan (1969-77), where he served as Associate Professor on secondment from the University of Reading. He has since worked at the Universities of Exeter and Durham. Between 1978 and 1993 he was at Exeter, establishing the Middle East Politics Programme there. In 1993, he was appointed Professor of Middle East Politics and Director of the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Durham. In 1999, he returned to the University of Exeter and served as Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies there from 1999 to 2005. He has been an Emeritus Professor of the University since 2008.

He has written widely on the politics, political economy and international relations of the Arab world. Among his books are: "Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century. The Local to Global Transformation" (edited, 2013), "The Political Economy of Saudi Arabia" (2007), "Saudi Arabia: Power, Legitimacy and Survival" (2006), "'Pariah States' and Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya and Sudan" (2001), "Muslim Communities in the New Europe" (edited, with Gerd Nonneman and Bogdan Szajkowski, 1997), "Economic and Political Liberalisation in the Middle East" (edited, with Emma Murphy, 1993), "Class and Power in Sudan" (1987), "Iraq: the Contemporary State" (edited, 1982), "State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia" (edited, 1981), and "Social and Economic Development in the Arab Gulf" (edited, 1980).

Abdullah Baabood is currently the director of the newly established Gulf Studies Centre at Qatar University. Before moving to Qatar Abdullah spent the last 4 years as the Director of the Gulf Research Centre-Cambridge at the University of Cambridge. His teaching and research interest focuses on international relations and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economic, social and political development and their external relations. Abdullah has several publications and conference papers to his name on these topics. He is also a member of a number of research institutions and think tanks. Abdullah has had a distinguished business career where he held several senior positions at a number of commercial institutions and has a track record of acting as a consultant to several international companies. He still acts as a member of several advisory boards. Abdullah is a graduate in business studies and he holds a Master in Business Administration (MBA), Master in International Relations (MA) and a Doctorate in International Political Economy (PhD) from the University of Cambridge.

Steven W. Hook is professor of political science and past department chair at Kent State University. He is the author of several books, including "U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power" (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2014, 4th ed.), co-author of "American Foreign Policy since World War II" (CQ Press, 2013, 19th ed., with John Spanier), and author of "National Interest and Foreign Aid" (Lynne Rienner, 1995). His edited books include "U.S. Foreign Policy Today: American Renewal?" (CQ Press, 2012, with James M. Scott), the "Routledge Handbook of American Foreign Policy" (Routledge Press, 2012, with Christopher M. Jones), and "Democratic Peace in Theory and Practice" (Kent State University Press, 2010). His articles have appeared in World Politics, International Studies Quarterly, Asian Survey, European Security, International Interactions, and other leading journals. Prof. Hook received a B.A. degree (1982) in Journalism and Political Science at the University of Michigan and an M.A. (1990) and Ph.D. (1993) in International Studies at the University of South Carolina. At Kent State he received the Distinguished Teaching Award in 2007 and served as department chair from 2008-2012. He is a past president of the Foreign Policy Analysis sections of the American Political Science Association and the International Studies Association.

Selected Readings

Niblock, T (ed), with Monica Malik, Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century: the Local to Global Transformation (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013).