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Joshua Rovner & Caitlin Talmadge

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Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil

JOSHUA ROVNER AND CAITLIN TALMADGE

International relations theories emphasize the stabilizing role hegemons play in world politics. But little scholarship has examined the link connecting hegemony to its potentially positive returns in the security realm: force posture. We correct this deficit by developing and testing an argument about the consequences of different hegemonic force postures under varying threat conditions. We present a typology of force posture options and probe their effects through over-time analysis of how major powers have worked to provide one particularly important public good since 1945: access to Persian Gulf oil. Drawing on field work, we also explore the implications of our framework for current and future US force posture in the region. We conclude that hegemonic stability is a very real phenomenon in the Gulf, but it does not require the massive forward deployment of US forces that has characterized the past twenty years of US presence there.

International relations theory emphasizes the positive and stabilizing role that hegemons can play in world politics. In the economic context, hegemons are said to provide leadership of the international financial system, serve as lenders of last resort, bear the burdens of asymmetric trade liberalization, and backstop the reserve currency. In the security context, hegemons are credited with protecting the global commons and providing security guarantees, reducing the likelihood of conflict and arms races. Though these

Joshua Rovner is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Southern Methodist University, where he holds the John Goodwin Tower Chair in International Politics and National Security. Caitlin Talmadge is Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University.

applications are different, the logic is the same: states with preponderant power assume the costs of providing public goods that benefit both themselves and others in the system, resolving collective action dilemmas and fomenting cooperation.

In the security realm, however, it is not obvious whether and how hegemons actually achieve these results. Do outside powers secure the commons and stabilize conflict-prone regions? If so, what forces must they commit in order to achieve these benefits? After all, foreign policies and forward military deployments can vary greatly even when hegemonic status does not, suggesting that the posited benefits of hegemony do not flow solely from the existence of a powerful state in the international system. Rather, a hegemon's choices about how to deploy military power should matter for the delivery of security gains. Unfortunately, existing scholarship offers little systematic analysis of what hegemons have to do in order to generate the public goods that their power supposedly makes possible.

We correct this deficit by developing and testing an argument about the consequences of different hegemonic force postures under varying threat conditions. We focus on the military aspects of hegemony because they are the backbone of political commitments: a hegemon may signal that it intends to provide public goods to smaller states, but its force posture—that is, the size and shape of the hegemon's military deployments—is critical to actually deliver such goods, for reasons we discuss below. Political commitments are certainly important, and they can signal the hegemon's priorities, but alone they are not sufficient to provide hegemonic stability. Promises not backed by capable military forces are inherently incredible; states may view them as evidence of wishful thinking or cheap talk. On the other hand, a sufficient military presence can guarantee public goods even if official policy statements are tepid or unclear.

This article presents a typology of peacetime force posture options, and then probes the effects of those options through over-time analysis of how outside powers have worked to provide one particularly important public good in a given region since 1945: secure access to Persian Gulf oil. We focus on this issue because it offers the opportunity to observe variation in both hegemonic choices and a regional threat environment while holding constant the public good that outside powers have sought to provide, namely, secure access to oil. Specifically, we examine the British military presence in the Gulf from 1945 to 1971, the almost complete absence of a hegemon from 1971 to 1979, the light US presence from 1980 to 1990, and the increasingly heavy US presence from 1991 to 2003. Drawing on interviews with US military commanders and diplomats in the region and in Washington, we also evaluate current US policy and force posture with an eye toward the future. In general, we find that the presence of an outside power has indeed contributed to providing the public good of oil security in the region but that hegemons have rarely, if ever, needed to forward deploy

large, permanent peacetime land forces in the Gulf in order to get this result. Indeed, such deployments often have been just as counterproductive as the vacuums created by hegemonic absence.

Our findings fill a significant theoretical gap regarding hegemony and international security. Although some scholars have applied hegemonic stability theory to security issues, few, if any, have described the causal mechanisms linking the presence of a hegemon to the provision of peace. Here we outline the conditions under which dominant external powers are most likely to deliver regional security—perhaps the ultimate public good. We also theorize about the hegemon's menu of options for projecting power. Matching force posture to the regional security environment is among the most important decisions a hegemon can make. Too little force in a high-threat environment is likely to doom the hegemon to failure, whatever its overall capabilities. But too much force in a low-threat environment will be unnecessary at best and erode hegemony at worst.

In making this case, we challenge widely held historical judgments about the British experience in the Gulf. Conversations with officers, diplomats, and analysts of the region reveal a pervasive belief that London's decision to leave the Gulf in 1971 was a milestone: the departure of British forces meant the removal of a force that kept the lid on regional hostility.¹ According to this familiar narrative, the Gulf states soon descended into conflict and war, and the security of oil became increasingly precarious. As historian Jeffrey Macris puts it, the British departure led to a "chaotic interregnum" before the return of large foreign forces in 1991.²

As we demonstrate below, however, Great Britain maintained a surprisingly small presence during its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, and such a force would not have been sufficient to guarantee oil security after the massive rise in global oil demand allowed regional powers to embark on major military expansions starting in the 1970s. In the early period, the British were able to play the role of hegemon and guarantee maritime security relatively cheaply, but they would not have succeeded later on in the face of increasingly capable land powers. In other words, the British exit was not nearly as important as it seems at first glance. Nonetheless, the British experience does offer some useful guidance for US posture in the region today, which, we argue, looks much more like it did in the 1950s and 1960s than in the 1970s and 1980s.

Indeed, our conclusions point to the benefits of an overlooked middle ground in today's policy debate between those who advocate near-complete

¹ This analogy arose frequently in interviews conducted by one of the authors in Washington, D.C., and the Gulf region during February–April 2012. It also was the explicit opening assumption of a recent conference hosted by US Central Command and the Brookings Institution, held in Washington, DC, on 11 September 2013.

² Jeffrey R. Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf: Anglo-American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region* (London: Routledge, 2010), 189.

US military withdrawal from the Gulf and those who advocate maintaining a heavy forward presence post-Afghanistan.³ Our analysis of contemporary US options in the Gulf, informed by our theory and grounded in our historical assessment of earlier eras, shows that a relatively light military posture—akin to that of the British in the post-war period and backed by a modest US land force—can achieve US goals in the region today while avoiding many of the costs that the United States incurred through its heavy forward presence in the 1990s and 2000s. In short, we reject calls for the United States to leave the region, because the historical evidence shows that hegemonic stability is a very real phenomenon in the Gulf. This same evidence, however, also suggests that a hegemon—in this case, the United States—can achieve stability at a relatively low cost.

We develop our argument in three main steps. We first draw on international relations theory to establish a framework for evaluating the role of outside powers in a given region, which we then apply to the Gulf. We define what we mean by “force posture” and “threat environment,” and theorize about how these variables mediate the relationship between hegemony and the key public good of oil security. Next we employ this framework to assess the effects of different hegemonic choices in the Gulf since 1945. Lastly, we draw out the implications for US policy today through a detailed assessment of current military forces in the Gulf.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE ROLE OF OUTSIDE POWERS IN THE GULF

International relations scholarship is rife with arguments about the purported benefits of hegemony for the international system. A remarkably wide range of theorists argue that the leadership of a single dominant state can help solve collective action dilemmas that might otherwise inhibit interstate cooperation.

Scholars of international political economy have emphasized the importance of hegemons underwriting free trade and financial integration, with

³ On moving US military capabilities out of the Gulf, see Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, “Footprints in the Sand,” *The American Interest*, March/April 2010, 59; Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), 247–48. On increasing US military presence in the region, see Thomas Donnelly, “A Recipe for Violence: Obama’s ‘Off-Shore Balancing’ and the New Middle East,” *Weekly Standard*, 10 December 2012, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/keyword/offshore-balancing>; Thomas Donnelly, “The Obama Way of War: To the Rear, March!” *Weekly Standard*, 30 January 2012; Frederick Kagan, *Iraq Threat Assessment: The Dangers to the United States, Iraq, and Mideast Stability of Abandoning Iraq at the End of 2011* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, Critical Threats Project, 24 May 2011), available at <http://www.aei.org/files/2011/05/24/Iraq-Threat-Assessment.pdf>; Eliot Cohen, “American Withdrawal and Global Disorder,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 March 2013.

the British during the era of the gold standard as the quintessential example.⁴ Liberal theorists have made similar arguments about the post-World War II order, pointing to US leadership of the Bretton Woods system and other international institutions.⁵ According to this logic, hegemony promotes prosperity by providing a rules-based international order. States do not need to worry about cheating by their trade and financial partners. When crises arise, the hegemon can play the role of lender or borrower of last resort, preventing the sort of protectionism and competitive currency devaluations that sparked the Great Depression.

Scholars of international security have made logically similar claims. Theories of long cycles and power transitions all operate on the assumption that a clear power hierarchy breeds stability; war and insecurity occur when the hierarchy begins to break down.⁶ According to both Geoffrey Blainey and Robert Gilpin, the international system is peaceful and stable when a single preponderant state dominates world politics.⁷ This argument has found new life in recent scholarship on the consequences of US unipolarity.⁸ A concentration of power makes miscalculation unlikely and deters states from challenging the status quo, thereby reducing the likelihood of major war.

⁴ The classic treatment is Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression: 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). Critiques include Duncan Snidal, “The Limits of Hegemonic Stability,” *World Politics* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 579–614; Timothy J. McKeown, “Hegemonic Stability Theory and 19th Century Tariff Levels in Europe,” *International Organization* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 73–91; Joanne Gowa, “Rational Hegemons, Excludable Goods, and Small Groups: An Epitaph for Hegemonic Stability Theory?” *World Politics* 41, no. 3 (1989): 307–24. For a recent discussion, see Daniel W. Drezner, “Military Primacy Doesn’t Pay (Nearly as Much as You Think),” *International Security* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2013): 52–79.

⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶ On power transition theory, see A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On long cycles theory, see George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics* (London: MacMillan, 1987); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁷ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For a concise description of the theory, see Mark S. Sheetz, “Correspondence: Debating the Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 22, no. 3 (Winter 1997/1998), 168–75. Not all realists agree that hegemonic systems are stable, not least because states have incentives to balance whenever too much power is concentrated in one state. See, especially, Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 44–79; Jack S. Levy, “What do Great Powers Balance Against and When?” in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michael Fortmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁸ Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/2013): 7–51. Making the case against is Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January/February 2013), 116–28. Monteiro also challenges the argument that unipolarity breeds peace, though he does not address the question of whether the unipolar power can provide public goods. It is entirely possible that a hegemon can provide such goods and still engage in more wars than would otherwise be the case. This is one reason why decisions about hegemonic force posture are so important. See Nuno P. Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is Not Peaceful,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011/2012): 9–40.

Hegemons also can extend security guarantees to allies, lessening allies' need to acquire arms and tamping down regional security dilemmas. The hegemon can use force in the unlikely case that challengers do arise, stepping in to stymie the rise of revisionist powers if neighbors prove unwilling or unable to balance. Additionally, the hegemon's military power can provide public goods with economic benefits, such as commercial freedom of navigation.

Much of the security-focused discussion of hegemony lacks analysis of the actual force postures that deliver these purported benefits.⁹ This is surprising because there is no *ex ante* reason for any given state to assume that even a very powerful hegemon will pay the costs of providing collective goods in a particular region absent a credible expression of intentions to that effect. Such expressions typically involve a mix of words and deeds on the part of the great power. The words are statements by political leaders who are declaring their interests in a given region and pledging to pursue those interests using specific levers of power. To be sure, these levers do not necessarily have to be military in nature, even if the declared interests are security-related. For example, the United States has economically subsidized peace in the Middle East through aid to Arab countries that made peace with Israel.

Nevertheless, pledges to defend security-related interests almost always depend on credible threats of military force. In some cases, the hegemon will issue vague statements of interest and resolve. In others, the hegemon will be more specific, describing the redlines that an aggressor should not cross and the military action that would be taken if they are. The effect of these widely known political commitments is to "tie the hands" of the hegemon, staking its prestige and reputation on fulfilling said promises. Such pronouncements deliberately invest the superpower's credibility in fulfilling its hegemonic duties, even in cases where the hegemon's own intrinsic interests in a hypothetical future crisis might be minimal.

But even though political commitments can play an important role by clarifying or reinforcing the implicit message sent by the presence of forward military forces, they are not enough to fulfill hegemonic stability theory's expectations of providing public security goods and resolving collective action dilemmas. Sometimes public commitments are simply ignored. Such declarations may sound like bluster if there is no visible evidence that the hegemon is willing to make good on its threats and promises. In other cases, the same general commitments may remain in effect for many years, even though force posture changes. Notably, the US commitment to oil security in the Gulf has been constant for over forty years, even as

⁹ An exception is Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5–48.

the nature of military deployments has varied wildly. For these reasons, the hegemon's local force posture is the crucial link that connects a hegemon's stated political commitments to the provision of security-related public goods.

We argue that local force postures can take three basic forms in a situation where a hegemon has declared a political commitment to a given region. First, a hegemon can maintain what we call "light presence" in the region. Such forces serve both operational and symbolic purposes. They support intelligence gathering efforts to provide warning of regional aggression, and they maintain a skeletal base structure capable of accommodating reinforcements later. They are not, however, intended to be sufficient in themselves to turn back aggression in the face of a serious challenger. Rather, they serve as a costly signal that the hegemon will deploy further forces to the region in the event that such a challenge arises. They show that the hegemon is willing to bear the fiscal and political costs of a commitment to the region in peacetime.

These forces also often deliberately create a "tripwire," ensuring that regional aggression will necessarily entail early engagement with the hegemon. The US decision to forward deploy forces in Germany during the Cold War served this function, for example. The purpose of these forces was not so much to fight the Soviets as to ensure American casualties in the event of a Soviet attack, thereby guaranteeing public support for defense of European allies. Deploying forces in this way sent a strong signal that the United States intended to fulfill its collective defense obligations. As this logic suggests, light presence is as much about backstopping political commitment as creating in-theater operational capability.

By contrast, a hegemon can maintain a second type of local posture that we call "heavy presence," the purpose of which is to create a permanent capability-in-being to turn back regional aggression almost as soon as it starts. A heavy presence seeks to deploy such an overwhelming concentration of hegemonic military power in a given area that the costs of challenging the status quo become unacceptably high to any aggressor. If light presence is about eliminating uncertainty about whether the hegemon will fight, heavy presence seeks to eliminate uncertainty about whether the hegemon will win. By so dramatically altering the regional balance of power, the posture thus seeks to achieve all the benefits of light presence plus an even more robust deterrent effect.

Of course, powerful states do have a third option: hegemonic absence. Nothing about strong political commitments guarantees that hegemons will forward deploy their forces to back their words with deeds. A variety of constraints or beliefs might prevent them from doing so. As other scholars have shown, US military commitments abroad have waxed and waned across the decades depending on the nature of external threats, fiscal constraints,

liberal ideology, and other aspects of domestic politics.¹⁰ An absent hegemon may array token forces that do not act as a tripwire or, frankly, provide any operational benefit. Such forces may be the product of simple bureaucratic inertia, lingering on station long after the bulk of formerly deployed assets have left the region. Alternatively, an absent hegemon may position no military capabilities in a given region whatsoever, and, of course, in cases where the hegemon makes no political commitments, we would not expect to see such forces deployed at all.¹¹

Admittedly, these three options—light presence, heavy presence, and no presence—are ideal types, and in reality the range of postures looks more like a continuum than a series of starkly truncated categories. But the heavy and light options capture a key distinction: the hegemon can choose a risk-averse approach by maintaining a very large presence, or it can maintain a light presence and rely on early warning and the promise of reinforcements. The precise size of the force is less important than how it is operationally deployed.

Furthermore, this three-fold typology captures the basic variation in force postures that the Gulf has seen outside powers adopt since 1945. In the 1950s and 1960s, the British backed their continuing political commitment to the region with a light military presence consistent with past practice and the fiscal realities of a declining empire. This presence consisted primarily of maritime assets along with intelligence and small rapid reaction forces ashore. Later, the period between the British withdrawal in 1971 and the establishment of the US Rapid Deployment Force (the precursor to US Central Command) in 1980 was one of hegemonic absence; for different reasons, neither the United States nor Britain forward deployed significant military forces to the region. During the 1980s, however, the United States built a light military presence to back a new commitment to secure the Gulf against foreign domination. This approach then changed dramatically in 1990–91. Rather than relying on light forces and the possibility of a rapid response to regional crises, the United States established an increasingly heavy peacetime military footprint. This phase ended with the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003.

The key question is what these different approaches achieved. Hegemonic force postures succeed when they provide the public goods that hegemony is supposed to deliver. The Gulf provides a useful opportunity to evaluate different configurations of forces because the core public good hegemons have tried to provide there has remained remarkably constant: access to oil. After all, oil security is exactly the sort of classic, non-excludable

¹⁰ For a discussion of these factors, see Brendan R. Green, “Two Concepts of Liberty: U.S. Cold War Grand Strategies and the Liberal Tradition,” *International Security* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 9–43.

¹¹ For a similar argument, see Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 90–92.

public good that hegemons are supposed to be able to secure. Oil is traded in a global market, so the hegemon cannot easily provide it for some states and not others.¹² Securing oil for itself means securing it for other states, even adversaries.

In the absence of this public goods provision, moreover, states would have incentives to compete over access to oil—in essence, to turn oil into a private good and even to use it as a political weapon. This sort of behavior poses risks to prosperity and peace, and both the British and the United States have consistently sought to forestall it. This is not to say that Britain and the United States have never had any other goals in the region, but ensuring the secure passage of petroleum and preventing a hostile power from consolidating control over a significant portion of the region's oil have been enduring concerns. "Stability" has been the means to a reliable flow of oil, not an end in itself.

In practice, the great powers have focused on two tasks in order to achieve this goal: preventing aggression against oil fields, production, and transport; and buttressing the internal and external security of friendly oil-producing nations. Our framework judges hegemonic force postures based on how well they perform these tasks—not on fluctuations in oil prices that depend on many additional factors such as the structure of the international oil market, patterns of global demand, political relationships among oil-producing nations, and domestic politics in oil-producing states. Hegemons are powerful, not omnipotent, but successful hegemonic policies do prevent supply disruptions and hostile consolidation of control over oil. Such policies are characterized by what does not happen.

Notably, oil prices can be low even if a hegemon's policies are not effective under our definition, and a successful policy would not guarantee that oil prices remain low, though it would make low prices more likely. This also is not to say that successful policies have no other drawbacks or that unsuccessful policies have no other benefits. Our definition simply reflects our analytical objective: understanding the extent to which different types of force posture do or do not provide public goods as theories of hegemony predict great power presence should.

Furthermore, we would expect hegemons to be able to achieve this aim more easily under certain threat conditions than others. For example, in a world where the Gulf had few organized violent actors, no revisionist states, little interstate rivalry, and little risk of domestic instability in oil-producing nations, there would be little role for outside actors to play at all. Hegemonic commitments to the region would be largely superfluous and, even if issued, would probably require little forward military presence to make credible.

In our estimation, however, the threat environment in the modern Gulf has never been quite this benign. Traditionally, the greatest threat to oil

¹² M.A. Adelman, "International Oil Agreements," *The Energy Journal* 5, no. 3 (1984): 5–6.

security has come in the form of conventional aggression that would enable a revisionist actor to gain physical control of the region's oil resources and then either cut off the sale of such resources to gain political influence or sell the resources in order to fund further military expansion. Even the fear of this possibility has had the potential to set off destabilizing regional security dilemmas. We characterize periods in which one or more Gulf states posed this sort of threat to the flow of oil as "high threat."¹³ We would expect a heavy force posture to be needed to provide oil security under such circumstances. Light or minimal postures would prove inadequate to deterring powerful revisionist actors, who would be more likely to view tripwire forces as a bluff.

By contrast, we characterize periods in which the most likely impediments to the flow of oil are attacks on oil infrastructure or domestic instability in oil-producing nations as "low threat." This is not to say that these dangers are somehow illusory or unimportant; they are serious and very real. Infrastructure damage is, however, relatively easy and cheap to repair, avoiding the need for costly military campaigns. The permanent forward presence of large foreign ground forces is not particularly useful for protecting pipelines in any case, nor is it useful for shoring up regimes. It can, in fact, be counterproductive if it provokes local irritation or unrest in host countries. In these low-threat environments, then, we would expect a lighter force posture to be more appropriate, mainly as a costly signal that the hegemon has credibly committed to block aggression.

Between these poles are two situations that we characterize as "moderate threat." One describes a scenario in which at least one regional power has the wherewithal to make a bid for hegemony but is satisfied with the status quo. The other describes a scenario in which at least one regional power has revisionist goals but lacks the capabilities to act on them with confidence. The former case is problematic because the satisfied power may become unsatisfied later, thus throwing the regional order into doubt. The latter case is problematic because a revisionist power may prove to be very risk acceptant, and its capabilities can grow over time.

Threats do not change from low to high overnight, of course, and oil security may become increasingly more or less precarious over time. We use the terms "moderate to high" and "moderate to low" in these cases, respectively. These intermediate phrases not only suggest the threat level at any given time, but also whether it is becoming more or less acute. In one sense, there cannot be a single, optimal policy for a region in which the threat level is changing, but we can say that an appropriate political

¹³ To be clear, a high-threat environment is not the same as oil insecurity. High threats will not reduce security as long as the hegemon has the means to guarantee the flow of oil, even in the presence of strong revisionist states. A successful hegemon is able to deter aggression even when regional powers have the capability and desire to aggress.

commitment and force posture will vary along with the threat to oil security. When threats are moving from moderate to high, for instance, we expect that the hegemon will start to increase its military presence in the region. Similarly, when the threat is moving from moderate to low, the hegemon can begin removing assets so that it does not overpay for security.

In sum, the hegemon's understanding of the regional threat environment and the choices it makes about deploying forces there determine whether or not it can provide public goods. Different force postures are appropriate at different times. Periods of high threat call for a heavier presence, even though this presence may have other costs. Periods of low threat call for a lighter presence, in part to avoid these unnecessary costs. A force posture poorly matched to the threat environment is unlikely to produce public goods, even if a hegemon sits atop the international system and is politically committed to a given region. The remaining sections of the article show that this understanding of hegemonic behavior explains variation in oil security in the Gulf since 1945 and has implications for US posture today.

HEGEMONS AND OIL SECURITY IN THE GULF, 1945–2011

The Gulf witnessed four major phases of hegemonic presence between 1945 and 2003 (see Table 1). The first phase saw a light British military presence under conditions of low threat from 1945 to 1971. In this period, a modest naval and land presence was able to effectively deter challenges to the regional status quo that might have put oil at risk.

The second phase was one of virtual military absence under conditions of moderate to high threat from 1972 to 1979. Britain withdrew from the Gulf in 1971, and the United States evinced little interest in replacing it. This weak political commitment was embodied by the sum total of its military presence in the Gulf: a token naval force whose flagship was a converted amphibious transport ship. Instead, the United States offered Saudi Arabia and Iran US weapons and technology in order to keep the Gulf stable and the Soviets out.

The third phase saw the return of a light military force from 1980 to 1990. Threats to oil were modest as the Iran-Iraq War settled into stalemate in the first half of the decade. The threat level increased later in the war,

TABLE 1 Hegemonic Force Postures over Time

Hegemon	Era	Threats	Posture	Oil Security Provided?
UK	1945–1971	Low	Light Presence	Yes
US	1972–1979	Moderate to High	Absence	No
US	1980–1990	Moderate to High	Light Presence	Yes
US	1991–2003	Moderate to Low	Heavy Presence	Yes, but costly

however, as Iraq successfully baited Iran into mining the Gulf and attacking oil tankers. The threat was arguably highest in 1990, when Saddam Hussein had large incentives to conquer oil-rich neighbors.

The fourth phase saw an increasingly heavy military presence under conditions of medium to low threat from 1991 to 2003. In the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm, Iraq still possessed some power projection capabilities in the form of intact Republican Guard divisions, and American officials had reason to believe that Iraq might attempt another rapid land grab. In fact, as became clear later in the decade, its military had atrophied and its economy collapsed. By the end of the 1990s, Iraq was not a serious threat to anyone. Iran also suffered a serious currency crisis and struggled to rebuild its military in the aftermath of its long war with Iraq. Sanctions stymied military and economic recovery in both countries.

Given these threat conditions, we argue that Great Britain maintained an appropriate policy from 1945 to 1971—a light footprint based on superior speed that allowed it to rapidly mobilize in the event of a crisis, thereby credibly backing its broader political commitment to the region. As Britain's fiscal problems grew and its empire contracted, this commitment officially ended in 1971 and was not replaced by similarly strong guarantees from the United States, which was facing its own fiscal troubles and foreign overstretch at the time. Even had the United States picked up where the British left off, however, such a light military presence likely would have been ineffective in ensuring regional stability in the 1970s. The oil boom gave key producers the ability to launch huge military buildups that, in turn, gave them power projection capabilities and fed their ambitions for regional expansion. In theory, a heavier hegemonic presence might have dampened the competition between Iraq and Iran, but the rise of Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini unleashed factors that were probably beyond the control of even the most committed external powers.

By contrast, the 1980s saw a new US force posture in the Gulf, one well-suited for the oil mission at the time, not least because Iraq and Iran had settled into a stalemate that effectively reduced how much damage they could do in the broader region. When Iran did threaten the flow of oil, the US Navy was quickly able to protect shipping, reinforcing US security guarantees. The buildup to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was arguably more threatening, because Iraq had had nearly two years to rebuild its forces, because it no longer had to expend so much effort against Iran, and because Saddam Hussein had huge incentives to act. A heavier US presence might have deterred Iraq, but again this is not clear from the historical record. Put another way, Iraq might have invaded Kuwait even if there had been a large and visible US force nearby, as we discuss in more detail below.

Finally, we argue that the threat level in the 1990s was moderate and declining. The situation for both Iran and Iraq was bad at the start and worse as the decade progressed. A light footprint should have been sufficient to

ensure the free flow of oil at a much lower cost, but the United States instead chose ever heavier levels of forward military presence throughout this period. The result was oil security, though at a very high political and strategic price.

Hegemony on the Cheap: Great Britain in the Gulf, 1945–1971

Post-World War II British presence in the Gulf was light, but it proved quite effective in producing oil security because the regional environment was relatively unthreatening. No regional actor had the conventional military capabilities needed to disrupt oil transportation or shipping or to consolidate control over a significant portion of the region's resources through aggression. As a result, oil producers faced relatively few external threats, and British presence was more than adequate to help protect them from internal threats.

The British conceived their post-World War II interests in the region much along these lines.¹⁴ For example, Sir William Luce, the longtime Political Resident and governor of Aden, argued explicitly that British presence helped stabilize the region by preventing security vacuums. The discovery of oil meant that “power pressures on the vacuum have increased and we correspondingly have had to fill it more strongly.” Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart accepted this logic as well: “In our absence there would be a security vacuum which would be likely to do grave harm to political stability throughout the area and to the production and transportation of oil, as well as encourage a renewal of Soviet southward pressure.”¹⁵ A 1961 joint paper from the UK Foreign Office and Ministry of Defense articulated this rationale too, noting that British forces remained in place to block “consolidation of control of Middle East oil by one or more of the remaining Middle East producers” and to ensure that producers continued to export oil “in adequate quantities and on reasonable terms.”¹⁶

British officials exaggerated the consequences of a vacuum. In fact, the threats they faced were relatively weak. For example, despite ambitions to transform Iran into a formidable regional power, the shah of Iran was unable to develop any serious power projection capabilities for most of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1950 Iran was struggling to maintain a force of just 113,000 men. Two years later the situation worsened when a power struggle led Mosaddeq to cut the defense budget by 15 percent, take fifteen thousand men out of the regular army, and purge 136 officers.

¹⁴ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 566.

¹⁵ Simon C. Smith, *Britain's Revival and Fall in the Gulf: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States, 1950–1971* (London: Routledge, 2004), 20, 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20–22.

Iran's ground forces recovered over the next decade but were unable to consider power projection until after 1965. The size of the regular army was only two hundred thousand by the end of the 1960s, and Iran lacked a reliable mobilization system for reservists. The air force also remained small, consisting of only seven thousand personnel and seventy-five combat aircraft in 1965. Iran's navy, too, was "virtually ignored until the mid-1960s." In 1965 total manpower was about six thousand, and the fleet included "two corvettes, four coastal minesweepers, two inshore minesweepers, six patrol boats, two landing craft, and other support vessels."¹⁷

Iraq similarly lacked meaningful power projection capabilities. The post-war Hashemite regime sent only two infantry brigades and one armored brigade to the Arab-Israeli War in 1948.¹⁸ By 1956 the army had grown to sixty thousand men and the air force maintained some modern British jet fighters. A military coup in 1958 ended the relationship with Great Britain but opened the door to the Soviet Union, and Moscow soon began delivering weapons to Baghdad.¹⁹ These arms were of lower quality, however. Iraq also was forced to maintain a large garrison at home to deal with the threat of Kurdish rebellion, which sharply constrained its ability to act outside its borders.²⁰

Against this backdrop of relatively low threats to oil security, the British adopted a posture of light presence. Until 1967 the regional command headquarters was at Aden. In the Gulf itself, the British maintained army battalions and Royal Air Force bases at Bahrain and Sharjah, northeast of Dubai. The army battalions were supported by armored cars, artillery, and combat engineers. The RAF bases sustained two fighter squadrons each, along with one and a half transport squadrons, one squadron of support helicopters, and one flight of long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft. About six thousand British troops made up the entire ground presence.²¹

Similarly, for all of the attention on British naval hegemony, UK presence was surprisingly minimal. Britain's base in Bahrain has been described as a "miniature bastion for the Royal Navy," and "miniature" is the right word.²² No more than a handful of ships regularly rotated to the Gulf. For example, at the time of Operation Vantage—Britain's 1961 effort to shore up the

¹⁷ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 186–98.

¹⁸ Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East*, rev. ed. (New York: Vantage Books, 2005), 56.

¹⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 136.

²⁰ Timothy D. Hoyt, "Iraq's Military Industry: A Critical Strategic Target," *National Security Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 33–50.

²¹ Geraint Hughes, "From the Jebel to the Palace: British Military Involvement in the Persian Gulf, 1957–2011," Corbett Paper no. 10 (London: Kings College, March 2012). Figures for ground troops are from Yergin, *The Prize*, 566.

²² Louis, "British Withdrawal from the Gulf," 89.

Kuwaiti monarchy against possible Iraqi aggression—only three frigates were assigned to the Gulf, and only one was on station. No carriers were nearby; when the crisis began, Great Britain quickly recalled the *Victorious* from Hong Kong. It also had to recall a troop ship from Karachi to deliver six hundred Royal Marines. British leaders concluded in the aftermath that they needed more naval forces nearby, but this only meant keeping two carriers and one troop carrier “east of Suez” for contingencies.²³ The actual forces in the Gulf remained largely unchanged for the rest of the decade: there were typically four minesweepers, one frigate, two landing craft, about two dozen fighters, and a handful of patrol aircraft.²⁴

UK force posture was based on the belief that it could deter hostile action with minimal investment as long as Britain enjoyed good tactical intelligence. Upon receiving warning, it would quickly send a small military contingent as a show of force, while mobilizing larger follow-on forces from elsewhere. Such actions were designed to reassure nervous local allies while deterring anyone with dreams of upsetting the status quo in ways that might endanger the flow of oil. Britain’s political commitment was credible only because of a demonstrated ability to move forces rapidly into theater.²⁵

Historians have cited at least three examples in which this approach proved successful. The first came after the 1958 military coup in Iraq that cost London its military bases there and took a major oil supplier out of the western military orbit. British officials feared that fledgling regimes in the Middle East were vulnerable to growing Arab nationalism that might open the door for Soviet encroachment. These fears increased in the wake of the coup, especially after reports came in that Jordan’s King Hussein was coming under attack from Arab nationalists and pro-republican forces. In response, the British rapidly deployed 2,200 paratroopers to Amman in order to bolster the government. The Hashemite regime survived.²⁶

A potentially more serious crisis occurred in 1961 after another oil producer, Kuwait, formally declared independence. Some British officials feared that Baghdad would use this as a pretext to invade. In late June the ambassador to Iraq reported that Iraq was already revising its budget in anticipation of incorporating Kuwait and that it had been making preparations for moving armored units to Basra. Although none of these reports was confirmed, London began sending forces to Kuwait. Less than a week later, Kuwait

²³ Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf*, 127–29.

²⁴ Richard Mobley, “Deterring Iran, 1968–1971,” *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 107–29, 108.

²⁵ Locals may have been impressed by Britain’s ability to mobilize the pre-independence Indian Army for this purpose. Even though that army was disbanded by the 1950s, respect for Britain’s logistical wherewithal may have lingered. We thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

²⁶ Stephen Blackwell, *British Military Intervention and the Struggle for Jordan: King Hussein, Nasser, and the Middle East Crisis, 1955–1958* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 107–25; Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf*, 114–15.

formally requested British assistance, and about eight thousand personnel quickly arrived to support the aforementioned Operation Vantage. No Iraqi attack materialized, and, indeed, British intelligence was never able to confirm the presence of Iraqi armor units around Basra. It might have been that Iraq never seriously intended to invade Kuwait, but some British officials viewed the episode as a case of successful deterrence. The ambassador believed that no Iraqi tanks appeared because they had turned around in the face of British power.²⁷

A final intervention occurred when British planners attempted to deter Iran from taking the Gulf islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the late 1960s. This was a peculiar case, given that London was not overtly hostile to the shah. On the contrary, while it was trying to deter Iran, it was also selling the shah weapons and participating in joint military exercises. British leaders were wary of Iranian ambitions, however, especially given the shah's belief that Iran must become the guardian of Gulf shipping in the wake of the impending British exit and that Britain still needed Iranian oil and overflight rights to ease transit to the Far East. London was basically trying to choreograph an orderly exit from the Gulf while also dissuading Iran from rash actions that might complicate its withdrawal.²⁸ Ultimately, it settled on a bluff: its operational plan called for responding to aggressive Iranian moves with shows of force, but it explicitly prohibited those forces from attacking Iran. Meanwhile, Britain convinced the shah that it would act to prevent Iraqi-linked guerrillas from seizing the island, thus removing a reason to invade.

It is important not to overstate what UK presence achieved in these episodes. The British contingent in Amman in 1958 may have provided succor to the government there, but it is unclear if fears of a revolution were justified. The US Embassy in Jordan was relatively sanguine, and even as King Hussein requested British assistance, he also considered an invasion of Iraq to restore the Hashemite monarchy there—hardly the behavior of a ruler who feared his own imminent overthrow.²⁹ The British operation in Kuwait in 1961 was similar in that it provided reassurance, but there is little evidence beyond ambassadorial hearsay that Iraq was actually mobilizing for an invasion. Finally, the effort to deter Iran in 1967–71 was a rather easy case for deterrence. Given that the British had publicly pledged to exit the Gulf, Iran was free to simply run out the clock.

Nonetheless, the claim that Britain kept the oil flowing, mostly by shoring up the internal stability of key oil producers, is plausible. Certainly the Gulf states believed Britain was playing the role of benevolent hegemon.

²⁷ Richard Mobley, "Deterring Iraq: The UK Experience," *Intelligence and National Security* 16, no. 2 (2001): 55–82. See also Hughes, *From the Jebel to the Palace*, 7–8.

²⁸ Mobley, "Deterring Iran," 109–10.

²⁹ Blackwell, *British Military Intervention*, 115–19.

When the British announced in 1968 that they would no longer honor defense commitments east of Suez, the Gulf states reacted with sadness, not relief. “Britain is weak now where she was once so strong,” lamented the amir of Bahrain. “You know we and everybody else would have welcomed her staying.”³⁰ Leaders of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia even offered to continue to fund British presence, to no avail.³¹

Hegemonic Absence: the US Adopts the Twin Pillars Policy, 1972–1979

The United States deliberately chose not to replace Britain in the Gulf, pursuing instead the “twin pillars” policy: strengthening and allying with Saudi Arabia and Iran, rather than forward deploying American forces in the region.³² Other than three US ships that had long been stationed at Bahrain, it was an era of hegemonic absence.³³

The effects were not immediately negative. It is true that shortly after British withdrawal, Iran and Saudi Arabia made some new territorial claims, and border disputes erupted between Qatar, Bahrain, and Abu Dhabi.³⁴ Iraq also declared ownership of all the waters of the Shatt al-Arab.³⁵ Yet overall, most of the 1970s were surprisingly stable.³⁶ The Gulf experienced several crises but no major wars.

The OPEC embargo of 1973 did cause oil prices to skyrocket, but it is unclear that a hegemonic presence in the region could have done much to prevent this development. The embargo resulted from a unique confluence of burgeoning global demand, unusual political cohesion among a relatively small number of oil producers, and extraordinarily high Arab-Israel tensions.³⁷ In particular, F. Gregory Gause notes that the key actor in the embargo was Saudi Arabia and that King Faisal became motivated to deploy the “oil weapon” fully only after Israel had decisively turned the tide in the Yom-Kippur War, throwing back the Syrian invasion and encircling Egyptian forces on the banks of the Suez Canal. Indeed, the Arabs’ schedule of production cuts was tied directly to demands that Israel withdraw from territories occupied in the 1967 war. Despite his good relations with Washington, Faisal

³⁰ Yergin, *The Prize*, 565–66.

³¹ F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 18–19.

³² Jeffrey R. Macris, “Why Didn’t America Replace the British in the Persian Gulf?” in *Imperial Crossroads: The Great Powers and the Persian Gulf*, ed. Macris and Saul Kelly (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 61–74.

³³ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 22.

³⁴ Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf*, 158.

³⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 18.

³⁶ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, chap. 2.

³⁷ Yergin, *The Prize*, 567–70, 589–90.

was deeply concerned that another Arab defeat would lead to the downfall of friendly governments in Syria and Egypt and usher in regimes that might be much less friendly to Saudi Arabia.³⁸ Perhaps greater hegemonic presence in the region could have played some role in assuaging these fears, although it is somewhat hard to see how. After all, the United States and Britain never seriously considered acting on thinly veiled threats to secure oil supplies by force in this period; the approach simply was not feasible.³⁹ As unpleasant as the embargo was for the United States and others, it seems to have been tenuously connected to the lack of hegemonic presence at best.

To be sure, other developments in the Gulf did have disastrous long-term consequences for regional stability, but these would not be visible until the late 1970s. Increased oil revenues, along with a lack of outside hegemonic presence and deliberate superpower strategies to arm proxies in the region, led to massive growth in the conventional military capabilities of regional actors, especially Iran and Iraq.

Iran had spent about \$1.5 billion on military procurements from 1950 to 1972.⁴⁰ It more than doubled that total in 1973 alone. In 1970 the total defense budget was \$900 million. In 1977 it had risen to \$9.4 billion. Iranian infantry units operated more than eight hundred US and Soviet armored personnel carriers by 1978, in addition to being equipped with modern rifles, machine guns, and anti-tank guided missiles. Iranian armor, having previously relied on older US M-47 and M-60 tanks, benefited from over two thousand new British Chieftains to counter the Soviet T-72s operating in Iraq. A new army aviation command operated 220 helicopter gunships and nearly 400 other helicopters.

The air force slowly began to expand in 1965 with the purchase of the F-5 Tiger. By 1968 it had also acquired the F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber and had nearly tripled its airlift and transport capabilities. It expanded much more rapidly in the 1970s and possessed nearly five hundred combat air craft, including the F-14 Tomcat, by 1978. Critically, Iran also acquired a fleet of tankers for in-flight refueling. The fleet of transports rose from eleven to seventy jets.

Iranian naval growth began in 1966, when the shah purchased four British frigates with sea-skimming anti-ship missiles and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), as well as a fleet of hovercraft. The shah did not start talking

³⁸ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 31. Faisal also was under tremendous domestic and regional pressure to support the "frontline" Arab states and Palestinians, and he urged the United States to distance itself from Israel. Instead, the Nixon administration decided to clandestinely resupply Israel during the war, but its cover was blown when changing weather conditions forced US cargo planes to arrive in daylight. Pressure to use the oil weapon mounted, and it is highly doubtful that any residual British presence would have mattered one way or the other. See Yergin, *The Prize*, 597–98, 605.

³⁹ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 31.

⁴⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, 193–94.

openly about using the navy for power projection until 1972, though. In November he announced that the Iranian security perimeter extended past the Gulf of Oman and into the Indian Ocean. From 1972 to 1978 the service grew from nine thousand to twenty-eight thousand personnel. Iran purchased two new destroyers, two new frigates, twelve missile boats, two landing ships, two landing craft, and a host of patrol vessels. It also established a naval aviation branch.⁴¹

Iraq also pursued vast military expansion in the 1970s. It was able to contribute sixty thousand men, seven hundred T-55s, five hundred armored personnel carriers, and over two hundred artillery pieces to the Yom Kippur War.⁴² Total defense spending in current dollars rose from \$252 million to \$1.66 billion from 1969 to 1979, and total military manpower rose from 78,000 to 212,000 over the same period.⁴³ The fourfold rise in oil prices after 1973 led to a fourfold increase in arms imports.⁴⁴ By the end of the decade, Iraq was openly buying arms from Western European countries in addition to Moscow.⁴⁵ The army doubled in size, and the air force purchased over two hundred new combat aircraft.⁴⁶

The 1970s were peaceful, if tense, because for most of the decade Iraq and Iran held their ambitions in check. The Iraqi Ba'ath Party had internationalist impulses, to be sure, but it was occupied with sweeping domestic reforms and a continuing Kurdish rebellion. The shah certainly aspired to increase Iranian influence in the region, exploiting the British exit to occupy Gulf islands and challenge Iraq over the boundary of the Shatt al-Arab, but he also remained staunchly pro-American, willing to balance against a Soviet-sponsored Iraq, and basically satisfied with the politics of the new Gulf states.⁴⁷ These factors tempered the shah's revisionist instincts.

Those intentions changed by the end of the decade, however, as Saddam Hussein rose to power in Iraq and the shah fell from power in Iran. Saddam had grandiose dreams of becoming the face of pan-Arab nationalism and was willing to take extraordinary risks to increase Iraqi power. Whereas the Gulf states had believed that a small and inconspicuous British military presence was enough to guarantee stability in the 1950s and 1960s, after Saddam took

⁴¹ Ibid., 193–99.

⁴² Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 167.

⁴³ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance, 1968–1969* (London: IISS, 1969), 43; IISS, *The Military Balance 1978–1979* (London: IISS, 1979), 37.

⁴⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons of Modern War*, 46.

⁴⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability: Saudi Arabia, the Military Balance in the Gulf, and Trends in the Arab-Israeli Military Balance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 398–99.

⁴⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 182; IISS, *Military Balance 1978–1979*, 38.

⁴⁷ For different views of Iran's intentions in the early 1970s, see Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf*, 214; Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 16–17.

control, it was clear that they would require a much more powerful patron.⁴⁸ This became all the more obvious in 1980, when the chaos of the Iranian revolution tempted Saddam into a risky invasion of his neighbor.

The Iranian revolution itself also posed a serious danger to oil security. Strikes by Iranian oil workers removed nearly 10 percent of world oil from the market in 1978, and production remained low well into 1979. For a variety of reasons, some apparently technical, the Saudis did not make up the slack in supply as they had in the past.⁴⁹ It is unclear whether the military presence of an outside power in the Gulf could have done much to arrest this course of events, however, especially given the Iranian revolution's wide-ranging roots: "an economic recession, inflation, urban overcrowding, government policies that hurt the bazaar classes, glaring income gaps, and conspicuous Western-style consumption by the elite and the lack of political freedom or participation."⁵⁰ Even if the United States had had access to former British bases, its options would have been limited. A rapid insertion of forces—akin to Britain's deployment of a couple thousand paratroopers to Jordan in 1958—would likely have been insufficient in the face of a massive revolution supported by virtually all sectors of Iranian society, including large segments of the shah's own military.⁵¹ Similarly, covert action—akin to the British and American choreographed coup in Iran in 1953—was a dubious option given the ferocity of the opposition and the fact that Iranians were already deeply suspicious of anything that smacked of foreign meddling.⁵² If anything, such activities, overt or otherwise, would have almost surely intensified the protests against the regime, with little operational benefit. A surge of military assistance would not have helped either; the regime was never short of US funds or hardware. The real problem was the shah's reluctance to order the sort of harsh crackdown that might have saved his regime, and the fact that his forces were not appropriately trained to put down large-scale protests.⁵³

That said, the twin pillars policy adopted as a substitute for having foreign forces in the region did little to help. It probably encouraged corruption, and it undoubtedly hurt the legitimacy of the Iranian regime. Confident in US support and awash in US arms, the shah did not take public grievances seriously until late in the decade. When the danger finally became unmistakable, he vacillated between crackdowns and reforms, and these half-measures

⁴⁸ Gary Sick, "The United States and the Persian Gulf," in *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (London: Palgrave, 2010), 305.

⁴⁹ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 52–53.

⁵⁰ Nikkie R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 167. See also Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 123–57.

⁵¹ Ward, *Immortal*, 216–24.

⁵² Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: the Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2005), 67–71, 386–89.

⁵³ Ward, *Immortal*, chap. 8.

were not enough to satisfy his opponents or brutal enough to coerce them into obedience. The result was a supply shock and, eventually, the start of a war with Iraq that would pose additional dangers to oil security in the 1980s.

All told, the contrast with the earlier period of British presence was stark. It is important to acknowledge that British absence did not cause every unfortunate development of the 1970s, such as the 1973 embargo, just as the light British presence could not have confronted every threat that arose in the period, such as the growing conventional power and revisionist intentions of regional actors. Nevertheless, the lack of any hegemonic presence in the region was not a positive development for oil security. US policymakers more or less appeared to agree with this assessment.

The Hegemon Returns: Light American Presence, 1980–1990

The events of 1979 shattered the region's relative stability and, combined with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, left the United States in a heightened state of concern about oil security. In January 1980 President Carter announced that the United States would use any means necessary to prevent foreign domination of the Gulf.⁵⁴ It was immediately apparent that implementation of the new Carter Doctrine would focus heavily on military means, suggesting again the specific connection between hegemonic provision of public goods and force posture.

The Pentagon rapidly established a joint command known as the Rapid Deployment Force, which eventually evolved into US Central Command.⁵⁵ This shift aimed to deter Soviet intervention in the Gulf and credibly threaten the ability to turn back such aggression. It also was intended to serve as a tripwire that could reassure Gulf allies of US commitments to the region, and it put the United States in a position to act against Gulf states, rather than just "outside powers."

Nevertheless, these US forces were intended to be light, primarily naval, and mostly over-the-horizon (that is, not inside the Gulf itself). The posture change mostly involved the pre-positioning of equipment and building of base infrastructure, rather than the permanent stationing of US forces in the region.⁵⁶ Even these changes took time, however, and the United States found itself with few feasible options for intervention in the early 1980s, despite the fact that the Iran-Iraq War had closed Iraq's Persian Gulf ports

⁵⁴ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 57.

⁵⁵ Paul X. Kelley, "A Discussion of the Rapid Deployment Force with General P.X. Kelley" (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1980); Robert P. Haffa, *The Half War: Planning U.S. Rapid Deployment Forces to Meet a Limited Contingency, 1960–1983* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984); Jeffrey Record, *The Rapid Deployment Force and U.S. Military Intervention in the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1983).

⁵⁶ Gholz and Press, "Footprints in the Sand," 59. The OTH approach is also discussed in Kenneth Pollack, "Securing the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July–August 2003), 10.

and, in 1982, resulted in the closure of its other major export route via a pipeline controlled by regional rival Syria. Luckily for the United States, these developments had a “surprisingly small impact . . . on the global oil market,” in terms of prices.⁵⁷ Global demand was dropping, new suppliers were coming on line, and divisions between OPEC members eventually led to a price collapse in 1986.

Even when the war escalated to attacks on tanker traffic in the Gulf in the mid-1980s, the United States did not intervene. Only when Kuwait sought assistance from both the United States and the Soviet Union in reflagging its tankers did the United States choose to get militarily involved, deploying naval forces to the Gulf and Arabian Sea, where they protected both Kuwaiti and Saudi tankers.⁵⁸ But these operations—which eventually led to direct battles with the Iranian Navy—stemmed more from a desire to limit Soviet influence in the region than to physically ensure access to Gulf oil.⁵⁹ After all, Gulf oil had been getting to market for several years without outside help. Under conditions of (very) light presence, supply shocks or attempts at aggressive consolidation of oil had not occurred.

The limits of this approach became clearer, however, when tensions between Iraq and Kuwait erupted in 1990. Iraq was in deep debt as a result of the war and publicly accused Kuwait of violating its OPEC quotas and drilling into Iraqi oil fields.⁶⁰ Kuwait demurred from US offers for a show of force in its defense, wanting to avoid further provocation, and American diplomacy did not communicate clearly to Saddam that the United States would respond to aggression against Kuwait with the use of force. The United States learned that its force posture in the region had not communicated this threat either when, on 2 August 1990, Iraqi forces invaded and occupied Kuwait.

In so doing, Iraq acquired control over 20 percent of global oil reserves and positioned the fourth largest army in the world on the doorstep of Saudi Arabia.⁶¹ American policymakers were alarmed and quickly decided on a military response. Over the next six months, the United States amassed an impressively large coalition that famously succeeded in expelling Saddam from Kuwait.

⁵⁷ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 69, 71.

⁵⁸ Martin S. Navias and E.R. Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping during the Iran-Iraq Crisis, 1980–1988* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996); Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pt. 5; Tamara Moser Melia, “Damn the Torpedoes: A Short History of U.S. Naval Mine Countermeasures, 1777–1991” (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1991).

⁵⁹ Some policymakers later argued that they were concerned with both oil security and Soviet influence. These are not mutually exclusive, of course, but the fact that the United States intervened only after Kuwait approached the Soviet Union suggests that the later motivation was pivotal and that US leaders were not unduly concerned that attacks on tankers would pose a serious threat to oil security. See Macris, *Politics and Security of the Gulf*, 214; Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 81.

⁶⁰ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 98.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

Privately, however, military leaders did not consider the US response entirely reassuring. It had taken the United States five weeks to get heavy mechanized forces from Europe and the United States to the Gulf. During that time, only the dismounted infantry of the Eighty-Second Airborne Division had protected Saudi Arabia. More troublingly, “even after two corps’ worth of heavy divisions had been assembled in Saudi Arabia, the logistical burden of sustaining the rapid advance limited the utility of the force on the operational level.”⁶² Iraqi Republican Guard divisions that the coalition had intended to encircle and destroy in northern Kuwait managed to escape back into Iraq, where they would continue to pose a threat to Iraq’s neighbors in the years to come.⁶³

From this perspective, the Gulf War seemed to invalidate the light force posture. In combination with the highly favorable conditions of the global oil market, the light presence had been enough to prevent supply shocks during the 1980s, yet it had not deterred a serious instance of territorial aggression against a major oil producer and the threat of attack on another. US forces had managed to prevail on the battlefield but only because they had enjoyed the luxury of taking several months to assemble.

Would a heavier posture have deterred Saddam from invading Kuwait? It is certainly possible that a large and visible US military presence might have caused him to think twice. Deterrence by denial might have succeeded if Saddam doubted that he could overrun Kuwait quickly and without serious resistance. For instance, if the United States already had a strong presence across the border in Saudi Arabia, he might have worried that US forces could act quickly to blunt the Iraqi offensive. There is some subtle evidence that he did think in these terms. Shortly after the war, Saddam suggested that he understood the value of Saudi Arabia as a staging ground. “Let’s theoretically suppose that Saudi territory and Saudi wealth did not exist,” he told his advisors in August 1991. “Would America have been able to undertake the campaign they launched against Iraq?”⁶⁴ Saddam’s rhetorical question implies that Iraq might not have acted if the staging ground was already occupied with a large land force.

On the other hand, deterrence may have failed in 1990 because it was not tried.⁶⁵ America’s position toward Iraq from 1988 to 1990 was called “constructive engagement.”⁶⁶ US intelligence had concluded that Saddam

⁶² Colin Jackson, “From Conservatism to Revolutionary Intoxication: The US Army and the Second Interwar Period,” in *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War: Creation without Destruction*, ed. Harvey Sapolsky, Benjamin Friedman, and Brendan Green (London: Routledge, 2009), 46.

⁶³ Jackson, “From Conservatism to Revolutionary Intoxication,” 46.

⁶⁴ Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark E. Stout, *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant’s Regime, 1978–2001* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 39.

⁶⁵ Richard K. Betts, “The Lost Logic of Deterrence: What the Strategy That Won the Cold War Can—and Can’t—Do Now,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 2 (March/April 2013), 87–99.

⁶⁶ National Security Directive-26 (NSD-26), “US Policy toward the Persian Gulf,” 2 October 1989, <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/pdfs/nsd/nsd26.pdf>. For a critique of constructive engagement, see

was an odious but predictable statesman, and formal US messages to Iraq seemed to suggest that the United States would not intervene in the case of a conflict with Kuwait. Perhaps the light footprint would have been enough to deter Iraq if accompanied by a harder line from Washington.

Attempting to reconstruct events from 1990 is difficult because it requires dealing with dueling counterfactuals. The first imagines a stronger US presence in the Gulf. The second imagines stronger US deterrent signals to Saddam. Publicly available captured documents from Iraq do little to help us evaluate these counterfactuals. The reason is that Iraqi officials appear to have spent surprisingly little time talking about the regional balance and almost no time talking about US signals. The much-discussed meeting between the American ambassador and the Iraqi president in July 1990, for instance, does not appear in any of the declassified Iraqi documents captured after the US invasion in 2003.⁶⁷ It may be that both a larger force and louder signals would have been necessary.

This suggests a third possibility: perhaps nothing would have deterred Saddam from invading Kuwait. The economic and political stakes may have been so high that, from his perspective, a different American force posture might not have affected his calculations. If this is true, it suggests the limits of any argument about hegemonic stability in that desperate leaders may gamble even in the face of an overwhelming hegemonic force. We cannot adjudicate these rival claims given the current state of knowledge about Iraqi decision making.⁶⁸ What we can say is that even with its light presence in the 1980s, the United States was decisively able to turn back the Iraqi land grab in 1990–91—probably the most extreme and intense threat to oil security observed in the period under study. Whether a larger military force would have deterred Saddam is unclear, but we do know that the lighter force provided the infrastructure that enabled the US buildup thereafter and allowed the coalition to concentrate overwhelming force against the largest and most lethal military in the Gulf. Even if the light footprint was imperfect in 1990, it proved sufficient in 1991 and ensured oil security at a much lower cost than the United States paid in the next decade.

The Era of Dual Containment: Heavy American Presence, 1991–2003

Much of the force structure that had surged to the region to fight the Gulf War in 1990–1991 remained to pursue the policy that became known as Dual

Zachary Karabell, "Backfire: US Policy toward Iraq, 1988–2 August 1990," *Middle East Journal* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 28–47.

⁶⁷ Woods et al., *The Saddam Tapes*, 20.

⁶⁸ For an argument that Saddam was probably undeterrable in 1990, see Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence and Compellence in the Gulf, 1990–91: A Failed or Impossible Task?" *International Security* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 1992): 147–79.

Containment. Introduced by the Clinton administration in 1993, this approach reflected America's frustration with past attempts to rely on regional allies to maintain a balance of power in the region.⁶⁹ The policy also reflected simultaneous American efforts to reassure Israel as it entered the Oslo peace process. Under Dual Containment, the United States itself directly blocked regional aggression by Iraq and Iran, using its forward presence to enforce sanctions, build the military strength and political cohesion of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and, in the Iraqi case, patrol no-fly and no-drive zones.

For the first time, an outside hegemon now maintained large, permanent, peacetime ground forces in the region. The US Army established a permanent presence of five thousand troops in Kuwait, along with pre-positioned heavy equipment, more than fifty tanks, and two dozen combat aircraft. It also pre-positioned substantial heavy equipment, including armor, in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. The US Air Force, too, was welcomed by the region's monarchs: it opened a large base, known as Al Udeid, outside Doha, as well as Saudi bases that came to house a squadron of combat aircraft and more than five thousand airmen. Meanwhile, the American naval presence grew, too, from three or four small ships homeported in Bahrain to fifteen vessels—including a carrier and its associated combat aircraft—on station at any given time. In addition to the ten thousand service personnel typically afloat in the area, the navy acquired a larger headquarters ashore in Bahrain and rechristened the forces there as Fifth Fleet in 1995.⁷⁰

Constant and visible military presence in the region provided a highly credible signal of US willingness and ability to reverse any regional aggression, thereby making such aggression unlikely to occur.⁷¹ Forward deployment positioned the United States to counter any attempts to revise the status quo from a position of strength, both militarily (the relevant forces would be nearby, familiar with their operating environment, with access prearranged) and politically (the United States would have strong relationships with regional allies, who would provide intelligence, possibly contribute military capabilities, and add legitimacy).

Dual containment also aimed to secure the flow of oil in other ways. Most notably, the US presence helped alleviate security dilemmas that otherwise would have arisen.⁷² As Kenneth Pollack has noted, "One of the dirty little secrets of the Persian Gulf is that GCC unity is a fiction: the Qataris want

⁶⁹ Anthony Lake, "Confronting Backlash States," *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 1994, 45–55; F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 1994, 56–66.

⁷⁰ Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 127–28.

⁷¹ On credibility, see Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Evaluate Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁷² Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214.

American military bases not to shield them from Iran or Iraq but to deter Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Bahrain wants powerful missiles not to make it an effective member of the Peninsula Shield Force but so that it can strike Qatar if it ever feels the need.⁷³ In short, US troops provided a security guarantee for allies, not only versus Iran and Iraq, but against one another. This reassurance, in turn, was intended to enable the Gulf states to cooperate on their common objectives of containing Iraq and Iran, or at least on supporting the United States as it did so.

This forward presence brought a well-known series of drawbacks. It may have secured the flow of oil, but the heavy post-1991 US footprint emasculated the region's rulers.⁷⁴ Such visible outside presence—especially in Saudi Arabia—also served as a rallying call for extremists.⁷⁵ Robert Pape has gone so far as to quantify the impact, noting that “although there may well have been excellent reasons for their presence, the stationing of tens of thousands of America combat troops on the Arabian peninsula from 1990 to 2001 most likely made al Qaeda suicide attacks against Americans, including the atrocities committed on September 11, 2001, from ten to twenty times more likely.”⁷⁶ The US presence also probably reduced the Gulf states' incentives to secure the supply and export of oil on their own.⁷⁷

Were these costs worth paying? US policymakers certainly viewed the 1990s as a period of increasing uncertainty. Iran remained hostile, of course, and Washington worried openly about Iran's growing ballistic missile capabilities. Meanwhile, Iraqi rhetoric was as belligerent as ever, and a series of Iraqi actions early in the decade convinced many Americans that Desert Storm was a temporary triumph. Soon after the war, Iraq brutally suppressed a Shi'a uprising, ending any hopes that Saddam Hussein had become less tyrannical. Iraq's treatment of UN weapons inspectors further fed suspicions. Most important was Iraq's mobilization of forces in the south in October 1994, a move that looked eerily like its mobilization before the invasion of Kuwait. The Clinton administration initiated a show of force to deter Iraq from acting and issued unambiguous threats to Baghdad. Iraqi forces quickly withdrew.

White House officials viewed the episode with dismay. Not only did it appear that Saddam was reverting to form, but also that the Iraqi Army was once again capable of large coordinated maneuvers that might give

⁷³ Pollack, “Securing the Gulf,” 15.

⁷⁴ Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, “Protecting ‘the Prize’: Oil and the U.S. National Interest,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 453–85.

⁷⁵ Gholz and Press, “Protecting ‘the Prize,’” 453–85; Gholz and Press, “Footprints in the Sand,” 59–67; Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 128–29; Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and the Structure of Gulf Alliances* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 25 February 1999), 41–43.

⁷⁶ Pape, *Dying to Win*, 242.

⁷⁷ Barry Posen, *Restraint: a New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

it the ability to threaten neighbors. But as became clear later, the Iraqi move was the last gasp of a would-be regional power in the process of rapid decline. Saddam later told his advisors that he sought only to generate an international crisis that would somehow ease sanctions.⁷⁸ He eventually backed down, realizing that he could not repeat what occurred in 1990–91. In the aftermath, Iraq formally recognized Kuwait as an independent state for the first time. Not only was Iraq deterred from invading, it was compelled to acknowledge that the status quo was permanently changed. Thus up to October 1994, there was good reason to maintain a heavy force posture, but afterwards there was little need.

Saddam's belligerence had obscured the reality that Iraq emerged from the Gulf War in deep trouble. The US-led coalition dismantled Iraq's vaunted air defense system early in the war, and Iraq subsequently lost about half of its aircraft.⁷⁹ Coalition forces decimated Iraqi ground strength, destroying or capturing 3847 tanks, 1450 armored personnel carriers, and 2917 artillery pieces. They also destroyed 143 naval vessels and every naval base, while also seizing Iraq's oil platforms.⁸⁰

Any hopes of rebuilding Iraqi conventional strength were dashed by the ensuing twelve years of sanctions. Iraq had been heavily dependent on arms imports throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but those sources were now unavailable. The Ba'ath regime did what it could to cannibalize parts from other systems in order to field some semblance of an army, but by the end of the 1990s, it was left with a force that relied on systems that were "decaying, obsolete, and obsolescent."⁸¹ What remained were increasingly antiquated and unreliable Cold War machines: T-55s, MiG-23 fighters, and, on the water, a single Osa-class patrol vessel. Worse, the sanctions shattered the Iraqi economy, leading to inflation and driving a deeply indebted regime into further distress. Anthony Cordesman estimates that by 1999, Iraq would have needed to spend almost \$48 billion in arms imports in order to return to its pre-Gulf War average and \$12 billion just to sustain the post-Gulf War force.⁸² But Baghdad's annual defense spending in the 1990s was a paltry \$1.4 billion, down from \$19 billion on average in the 1980s.⁸³ In short, Iraq did not meaningfully threaten Gulf oil between Operation Desert Storm and

⁷⁸ Woods et al., *The Saddam Tapes*, 266–69.

⁷⁹ Kevin M. Woods, *Iraqi Perspectives Project Phase II: Um Al-Ma'arik (The Mother of All Battles): Operational and Strategic Insights from an Iraqi Perspective*, vol. 1 (Alexandria, VA, Institute for Defense Analysis, May 2008), 352.

⁸⁰ William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 238–44.

⁸¹ See Anthony H. Cordesman's briefing book, *The Conventional Military Balance in the Gulf in 2000* (Washington, DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2000), 80, [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/gulfbalance2000\[1\].pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/gulfbalance2000[1].pdf)

⁸² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸³ George A. Lopez and David Cortright, "Containing Iraq: Sanctions Worked," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 4 (July/August 2004): 90–103.

Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the United States could have protected the flow of oil with a much lighter force.⁸⁴

Instead, however, the forces originally stationed in the region to pursue Dual Containment became the nucleus of American operations in Afghanistan starting in 2001 and in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.⁸⁵ Today, with withdrawal from Iraq now complete, US military commanders and diplomats continue to emphasize the importance of forward presence in the region. Notably, the 2012 US Defense Strategic Guidance stresses that “*the United States will continue to place a premium on U.S. and allied military presence in—and support of—partner nations in and around this region.*”⁸⁶ That said, the question remains as to what form this presence should take. Our framework based on past history provides an answer.

The Gulf Today: Why Low Threats Make Light Presence Feasible Again

We posit that there is little need for the United States to maintain the highly visible, ground-heavy forward presence that has characterized the last two decades. Although the region is not as benign as what the British experienced in the 1950s and 1960s, threats to oil security in the Gulf today are significantly lower than they have been at any time since at least 1990. Recognizing this, some analysts have suggested that the United States essentially return to the posture of the 1980s, maintaining a political commitment to the region but foregoing the permanent stationing of any US forces in the Gulf.⁸⁷

We share the intuition that less is sometimes more in terms of force posture, but a close analysis of today’s potential threats to the flow of Gulf oil suggests that there are significant drawbacks to keeping a US presence entirely over the horizon.⁸⁸ Although we argue that some forces should indeed be withdrawn, especially aircraft carriers and most ground forces, the nature of the threat environment suggests the wisdom of maintaining a low-profile, residual US forward presence in the region, especially smaller surface combatants, mine clearance vessels, and land-based air power. The resulting posture would be much lighter than that of the last twenty years

⁸⁴ Joshua Rovner, “Delusion of Defeat: The United States and Iraq, 1990–1998,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming).

⁸⁵ Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, 134–35.

⁸⁶ US Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, available at www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf (emphasis in original).

⁸⁷ Gholz and Press, “Footprints in the Sand.”

⁸⁸ This section draws on interviews by one of the authors with US diplomats and military officers in the region and in Washington, D.C., February–April 2012.

but more robust than US presence in the 1980s. Most importantly, it would be tailored to deter and defeat air and naval threats, rather than surge large land forces.

Below we review regional threats and the residual US air, naval, and land forces relevant to countering those threats.

Today's Threats to Oil Security in the Gulf

No country today poses the type of conventional ground threat in the Gulf once attributed to the Soviets, Iraqis, and Iranians. Instead, the biggest threats to the flow of affordable oil stem from three other sources. First, many analysts worry about the possibility of an Iranian attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow passageway through which roughly one-fifth of world oil passes on a daily basis.⁸⁹ Iran periodically threatens to take this step, has directed naval procurement to acquire capabilities relevant to such operations, and regularly exercises these capabilities.⁹⁰

Second, observers fear that Iran or non-state actors could engage in attacks on critical oil infrastructure in the region, such as the Saudi stabilization plant at Abqaiq or ports at Ras Tanura and Ras al-Juaymah. If such nodes were successfully hit—either by terrorist IEDs or Iranian missiles—the consequences for global oil production could be similar to those resulting from closure of the Strait of Hormuz.⁹¹ Most notably, Saudi Arabia would not be able to get a significant portion of its oil to market.

Lastly, civil conflict within the major oil-producing states, especially Saudi Arabia, could threaten the flow of affordable oil via strikes of oil workers or attacks on pipelines, refineries, or ports. Of particular concern is that many of Saudi Arabia's most unhappy citizens, the Shi'a minority, live in the Eastern Province where the oil production network is located.⁹² While the Saudi regime has taken a number of steps to insulate itself from nearby revolutions, upheaval in the kingdom would be of grave concern to world oil markets.⁹³

⁸⁹ Caitlin Talmadge, "Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz," *International Security* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 82–117.

⁹⁰ Adam Entous and Julian Barnes, "U.S. Bulks Up Iran Defenses," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 2012.

⁹¹ Joshua Itzkowitz Shiffrin and Miranda Priebe, "A Crude Threat: the Limits of an Iranian Missile Campaign against Saudi Arabian Oil," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 167–201.

⁹² Simon Henderson, "The Other Threat to Oil Supplies: Shiite Tensions in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain" (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 July 2012).

⁹³ Rachel Bronson, "Could the Next Mideast Uprising Happen in Saudi Arabia?" *Washington Post*, 25 February 2011.

Residual US Aerial Presence in the Gulf

The United States maintains substantial land-based airpower in the Gulf, headquartered at Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base that houses approximately eleven thousand US personnel and commands four air wings in the region. Among these varied forces, the most important for oil security are actually intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms—especially those that provide persistent, high-altitude coverage, such as the Global Hawk and Predator. Although these are not combat assets, forward deploying them makes such assets much less likely to ever be needed. Regional ISR presence reminds potential aggressors that any offensives will be detected quickly, thus reducing the temptation to try. For example, these platforms would be crucial to early detection of Iranian attempts to mine the Strait of Hormuz or of terrorist efforts to attack key nodes in oil production and transportation networks.

Furthermore, a forward ISR presence facilitates stopping any aggression that does occur in the least costly and escalatory manner. Defending the Strait, for example, becomes significantly more difficult for the United States the more mines Iran is able to lay without detection. Although there is no doubt that the United States ultimately could reopen the Strait even if Iran laid thousands of mines, the task would clearly be much simpler if the United States intervened on Day 2 of an Iranian campaign rather than on Day 20.⁹⁴

This sort of warning is exactly what carefully chosen forward deployed air wings can provide. Wings at Al Udeid and also at Al Dhafra in the UAE are well positioned to monitor Iranian mine depots, cruise missile sites, and submarine pens, all of which would likely display notable changes in the run-up to an Iranian attempt to mine the Strait or major Gulf ports. Early detection, in turn, could limit the total number of mines laid, greatly reduce the time involved in any mine clearance efforts, and reduce the length and severity of any price shocks. And again, communicating the existence of such monitoring to the Iranians could also help deter such aggression in the first place.

The forward presence of “enabling” platforms, such as tankers and airborne command and control assets, also would be valuable in the event that a crisis or war did occur. Although carriers could always provide a floating base for combat aircraft from the Indian Ocean, land-based aircraft in the Gulf would still be vital to increasing the range, sortie generation rate, and survivability of those missions. Furthermore, forward deploying these assets in peacetime would help ensure US access to the region's relatively small number of high-capacity bases during wartime.

Fortunately, maintaining a residual presence consisting of tanker and ISR assets, the regional headquarters in Qatar, and stocks of equipment,

⁹⁴ Talmadge, “Closing Time.”

advanced munitions, and fuel would not lead to an overly large air force footprint in the region. Air bases are already located well outside populated areas. The one exception, Al Udeid, is located on the outskirts of Doha, but it is still not easily visible from the main roads out of the city. Furthermore, the Qataris still own the base, control all access to it, and use it extensively for their own training and operations, so little about it appears American from the outside. Additionally, US aircraft taking off from or landing at Al Udeid follow flight paths that avoid travel over Doha. The vast majority of service personnel who serve a tour there never leave the base and never in uniform. US air bases in Kuwait and the UAE are even more obscure, and the bases in Kuwait—mostly an overhang from the Iraq War—likely could shrink or close. In short, there are real military advantages to keeping carefully chosen airpower assets in the Gulf, and relatively little political downside to doing so.

Residual US Naval Presence in the Gulf

The United States currently keeps about fifteen thousand naval personnel in the Gulf at any given time, commanded largely by Fifth Fleet/US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT).⁹⁵ Many serve afloat on carriers or on their associated cruisers, destroyers, frigates, and submarines. Notably, however, US carriers have never been permanently stationed in the Gulf. Rather, carriers rotate in and out of the Gulf as needed, with an average of nearly two strike groups having been in or near the Gulf at any given time over the last ten years.⁹⁶

Surprisingly, however, carriers are not the assets most relevant to oil security in the Gulf. In fact, Washington should reconsider the utility of keeping carriers forward deployed there. There is little operational reason to sail such valuable targets through littoral waters when virtually all of the ships' deterrent and combat power would remain intact in the Indian Ocean, perhaps augmented by an occasional patrol or exercise inside the Gulf.

Instead, it is the smaller US ships—the mine countermeasure (MCM) and coastal patrol vessels, as well as cruisers and destroyers, which already regularly conduct operations untethered from their carriers—that provide the most insurance against possible Iranian mine-laying and the highest likelihood of early visual warning of attacks on traffic in the Strait or on maritime

⁹⁵ Mark Gunzinger, with Chris Dougherty, *Outside In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran's Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011), 13.

⁹⁶ Carrier presence dipped more recently, as sequestration forced the Pentagon to cancel the deployment of a second carrier to the region, but there has been no strategically driven decision to permanently reduce carrier presence in the Gulf. Jeremy Herb, "Pentagon's Carrier Cancellation Heats Up Sequester Fight as Cuts Take Effect," *The Hill*, 3 March 2013, available at <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/285779-carrier-cancellation-heats-up-sequester-fight-as-cuts-take-effect>.

infrastructure relevant to oil production.⁹⁷ They are also the most appropriately proportioned partners for allied training and exercises, including activities related to port and maritime security.

Furthermore, these assets would have a hard time contributing to oil security from over the horizon. The MCM vessels move particularly slowly, already requiring roughly four days just to get from Bahrain to the Strait. They also are not meant to loiter on the open ocean, so stationing them outside the Gulf would probably mean putting them at Diego Garcia. But MCM ships could not travel such a great distance back to the Gulf under their own power, so they would have to be brought to the region on a heavy lift ship. These, too, are not known for their speed and have no ability to operate in a contested environment, which is presumably what the Gulf would be at the point where forces were called in from over the horizon.

In short, it makes little sense to keep these MCM capabilities anywhere but the Gulf. Forward deploying them contributes significantly to both the feasibility and speed of any potential US response to mines in the Gulf. It also affords the United States the opportunity to train and exercise with other nations whose MCM assets could be quite valuable in a crisis or war. Fortunately, there is little evidence that the United States pays much of a political price for its off-shore presence in the region. Virtually by definition, US ships are not visible unless the United States wants them to be.

The one exception is Bahrain, where foreign naval presence is so long standing and accepted that the US base is located quite centrally in Manama. This consensus seems to be holding despite the immense political tumult Bahrain has experienced since 2011, although this is no guarantee of future stability.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, there are real advantages to keeping a carefully tailored naval presence in the Gulf, including the headquarters in Manama.

Residual US Ground Presence in the Gulf

American ground forces today are the least relevant to maintaining oil security in the Gulf and are already smaller than they have been at any time in the last twenty years. The US Army maintains what is often described as a “brigade plus” in the Gulf, though this can often vary from as little as seven thousand soldiers to as many as 13,500, mostly in Kuwait.⁹⁹ Third Army presence there includes a string of bases and training ranges, as well as large stocks of pre-positioned supplies, munitions, and equipment, much

⁹⁷ This means that almost all of the United States’ worldwide MCM capabilities are concentrated in the Gulf. Sydney J. Freedburg, “Iran Mine Threat Scars Navy; CNO Scrambles to Fix Decades of Neglect,” *AOL Defense*, 4 May 2012.

⁹⁸ Brian Murphy, “U.S. Slammed from Both Sides of Bahrain’s Divide,” *Associated Press*, 28 May 2012.

⁹⁹ “U.S. Arms to Gulf Allies Hint of Strategy,” *Washington Times*, 16 December 2012.

of which actually goes to support other non-oil missions in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

That said, the army's enduring presence is largely uncontroversial in Kuwait, where the United States military still wears the halo of 1991. This is not to say the two allies experience no friction, but to find anyone clamoring for withdrawal is virtually impossible. Indeed, many Kuwaitis view Third Army as a bulwark against the violence and chaos of southern Iraq and potential Iranian coercion. No doubt US presence in Kuwait reassures the Saudis for the same reasons, while conveniently keeping US forces off their soil. And although most Kuwaitis are aware that some US forces remain in their country, these forces are not visible on a daily basis to the average person. It is notable, for instance, that in more than twenty years of US basing in Kuwait, there have never been criminal incidents of the type that made US presence in Japan and Korea unpopular. Nor have there been terrorist attacks on US forces of the type that occurred in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, though there have been some foiled al Qaeda plots in Kuwait.

In short, US presence in Kuwait may have minimal benefits, but it also has minimal costs, especially given that Kuwait covers basing expenses. In fact, Kuwaitis likely would react with alarm were the Third Army to depart. For these reasons, it makes sense to keep pre-positioned equipment and a *brigade minus* in Kuwait, but no more, at least for oil security reasons.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Hegemony delivers real benefits for regional security environments. These benefits are not free, but under the right circumstances, they can be comparatively cheap. Between the extremes of hegemonic absence of the type that characterized the 1970s in the Gulf and the costly heavy hegemonic presence in the Gulf that characterized the period 1990-2003 lies a middle ground of light presence. Though not appropriate for all threat environments, the British enjoyed great success with this approach to oil security in the period 1945-71. The substance of British hegemony, however, was quite limited. Despite the conspicuous role of the Royal Navy in the Persian Gulf for more than a century, actual UK naval deployments were surprisingly small, and land presence was paltry. Britain was able to exercise effective hegemony because it operated in very favorable circumstances. No regional power had the ability to project conventional military power in a way that would allow it to capture the lion's share of regional oil.

The United States today is well positioned to transition to a similar posture. Regional powers no longer possess meaningful power projection capabilities, meaning that the United States can continue to guarantee the flow of affordable oil to market without having to pay the costs or take the risks of a large and conspicuous military force. The drawdown that began

in 2011 can proceed as long as the United States maintains the intelligence and logistical infrastructure that will allow it to anticipate and respond to crises. As long as it retains a hub for land forces as well as key naval and air facilities, Washington can safely reduce the size of Third Army in Kuwait, cut the number of combat and lift aircraft as US forces draw down from Afghanistan, and curtail regular carrier deployments inside the Gulf. Despite ominous news reports about Iranian ambitions and US vulnerability to oil shocks, the United States actually operates in quite favorable conditions. Modest reductions beyond the current drawdown will allow the United States to sustain a durable, affordable, and effective posture in the Persian Gulf, even as it shifts military force and attention to the Pacific.

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