Persian Gulf Security: Improving Allied Military Contributions

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- Excerpt -
Summary
The United States remains the prime guarantor of Western security, especially in protecting common interests outside Europe. In the future, however, the task of sustaining this burden single-handedly is likely to become increasingly difficult for the United States for both economic and domestic political reasons. Political and military imperatives exist for having allies that are capable of bearing greater responsibility for defending common Western interests both within and outside Europe.

During the U.S. Senate’s consideration of NATO enlargement, serious bipartisan concerns were raised about the growing imbalance between the security commitments and military capabilities of the United States and those of its NATO allies. In ratifying enlargement, the Senate expressed its clear sense that the United States can no longer tolerate a situation in which its European allies are incapable of responding to common threats that originate beyond Europe, such as rogue-state aggression, terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the disruption of vital resources. In addition, there may be future circumstances in which the United States finds itself heavily engaged in another conflict during a military emergency in the Persian Gulf and will thus need an important military contribution from its European partners. In such a situation, political imperatives will dictate that the United States act in concert with its allies regardless of considerations of military expediency.

Simply put, unless America’s European allies take up more of the burden of defending common security interests outside Europe, NATO’s future and America’s continuing engagement in Europe could be placed in jeopardy. The challenge facing the United States therefore lies in developing and implementing a vision for the Alliance that, more than just offering the prospect of U.S. and NATO involvement in European peacekeeping operations, calls for America’s European allies to contribute substantively to military operations outside Europe when common Western interests are threatened. Accordingly, this study addresses three key questions: Will America’s European allies be able to marshal the political will and build the military capabilities to project significant military power to help defend the Persian Gulf? How much military power can our NATO allies project today and in the future? And finally, can Europe become a more equal partner in defending common interests that go beyond peacekeeping in Europe?

Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, NATO has taken great strides in adapting its missions, organization, doctrine, and forces to the new security challenges of the post–Cold War environment. In addition to maintaining the capabilities to carry out its central mission of collective defense, the Alliance has affirmed its commitment to a new purpose that is much more relevant to the challenges the United States and its allies face today: extending security and stability in and around the Euro-Atlantic region. The Alliance has created more mobile and flexible forces and new organizations and procedures to carry out a broader range of missions to enhance European security. Several allies are making improvements in their ability to project power outside Alliance territory.
Taken together, the Alliance’s new Strategic Concept and the Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI) approved at the April 1999 NATO Summit in Washington have laid the groundwork for more closely aligning NATO’s power with its purposes.

Nonetheless, much work remains to be done to complete the Alliance’s strategic transformation. Currently, for example, there is no consensus within NATO regarding the use of military force outside Europe to defend common Western security interests. On the contrary, most European allies eschew responsibilities beyond Europe, especially in the Persian Gulf—preferring to focus instead on improving European military capabilities for peace operations in Europe. While some progress has been made in improving power projection capabilities, such progress has been uneven at best, and prospects for future progress remain uncertain in the face of budgetary constraints and flagging political will.

At the same time, several factors will make the security of the Persian Gulf an increasingly vital issue over the coming decade. First, Europe will continue to import vast amounts of oil from the Persian Gulf to meet its energy needs. Second, Gulf oil supplies will remain vulnerable to a host of internal and external threats. Third, the U.S. military will come under increasing strain in meeting its global security commitments at a time when it is bearing most of the burden for defending common Western interests in the Gulf. America’s European allies thus run the risk that a military crisis in the Gulf could create serious tensions in U.S.–European relations.

THE GULF IS THE PROBLEM
The Persian Gulf will remain the main source of Western energy supplies over the next decade. Over the next 15 years, the portion of Western Europe’s total oil consumption imported from the Gulf will increase to 35 percent, compared to 14 percent for the United States. By 2010, Gulf exports will meet roughly half of all global oil consumption needs and will become the predominant source to which the Asia-Pacific region will turn to fill its burgeoning energy demands. Consequently, the perception is likely to arise that a serious interruption of Gulf oil supplies would cause severe economic and financial dislocation as well as political and social instability in the developing world, and this in turn could generate pressure for Western military action.

By contrast, the energy resources of the Caspian Basin will make a negligible contribution to global and Western energy supplies for at least the next 10 to 15 years. The Caspian region contains no more than 2–3 percent of proven world oil reserves, and bringing Caspian oil to market poses formidable challenges. As a result, by 2010 the Caspian will account for only about 3 percent of global oil consumption—or even less if the region fails to reach its full export potential. For the foreseeable future, then, a serious disruption in Caspian oil supplies would have minimal economic and security consequences and is thus unlikely to prompt Western military intervention, particularly in light of Russian opposition.

European security perspectives—especially those of NATO’s southern members—are increasingly influenced by the growing importance of natural gas exports from North Africa. Gas supplies from that region, which continues to be buffeted by political, economic, and social challenges, play a growing role in European Union (EU) economic development and modernization plans. France, Spain, and Italy import a large portion of their energy needs from the Maghreb, and the governments and security establishments in all three of these countries have become increasingly concerned about the possibility that turmoil and conflict in the area might disrupt gas supplies. Such concerns are reflected in increased military planning and preparation on the part of these countries to cope with a potential interruption of North African energy supplies. Indeed, if nonmilitary means were not available or effective, it is conceivable that such a disruption could prompt some southern members of the Alliance to assemble a European-led force and to request NATO support for an emergency response. In such a contingency, the United States might be asked to provide logistics, intelligence, and command-and-control support if not to commit combat forces.
OLD AND NEW THREATS
The security of the Persian Gulf will remain a vital Western interest for the foreseeable future. Therefore, planning for a major theater war (MTW) in the Gulf—particularly the ability to halt a large-scale invasion with short warning—will remain a cornerstone of U.S. defense planning. That said, winning big wars in the Gulf will present more difficult challenges in the future. The United States’ most likely adversaries, for example, could threaten or resort to the early use of nuclear, biological, or chemical (NBC) weapons. They may also employ other asymmetrical threats (e.g., terrorism or information warfare) to interfere with a Western military response.

Under these circumstances, the infrastructure on which the United States relies to conduct military operations could be damaged, hampering the introduction and buildup of U.S. forces. In addition, the United States and its European allies could face political restrictions on their access to regional bases. In this situation, it would be up to rapidly deployable air power to blunt the invasion before strategic targets in Kuwait and northern Saudi Arabia were seized.

Accordingly, U.S. preparations to defeat large-scale aggression will be essential to sustaining deterrence, demonstrating U.S. security commitment to the Gulf states, and maintaining U.S. predominance in a vital region.

At the same time, however, the United States and its allies must be prepared to cope with a broader range of threats in the Gulf. Because of the economic and military weaknesses of both Iraq and Iran, the danger of large-scale Iraqi or Iranian military attacks against the Arab states in the Gulf remains remote for at least the next five to ten years. Indeed, during this period both countries are likely to use other means to pursue regional hegemony and to end U.S. domination of the Gulf. The two most likely options are (1) use of NBC weapons, terrorism, and subversion; and (2) limited air and missile attacks or small-scale ground incursions to achieve limited objectives (e.g., seizure of limited territory or assets).

In other words, Iraqi and Iranian nonconventional warfare and small-scale aggression—as opposed to the “big war” scenarios that continue to dominate U.S. force planning—represent the most plausible threats to Western security interests in the Gulf. Consequently, the United States and its European allies should be prepared to deal not only with the “canonical” MTW threat but also with a broader range of more plausible Iraqi and Iranian challenges.

THE GULF IN THE GULF
A wide gap currently separates U.S. and European perspectives and policies toward the Persian Gulf, notwithstanding their shared interest in secure oil supplies. NATO faces severe institutional limitations on a formal role in Gulf defense, reflecting widespread apprehension on the part of European governments and publics about becoming entangled in security commitments and military operations outside Europe. Likewise, individual allied governments—with the exception of the U.K. and France—generally have little stomach for engaging in such operations outside the Alliance framework.

The reasons for these attitudes are not difficult to understand: many European governments do not share the United States’ view on the nature of Western interests in the region, the nature of the threats to those interests, and the most effective means of responding to such threats. In particular, many allied governments, believing that the United States has exaggerated the Iraqi and Iranian military threat, prefer strategies of constructive “engagement” rather than “containment” to cope with the broader security challenges posed by these states. In addition, there is still a lingering fear in Europe that the United States will embroil European countries in conflicts that do not involve threats to their vital interests.
These reservations are reinforced by political and economic constraints. European governments face strong domestic pressure to reduce spending. Thus, the use of force in the Gulf would be highly unpopular in many European countries except in cases involving clear-cut, unprovoked aggression, decisive U.S. leadership, a perception that vital Western interests are at stake, an endorsement of Western military intervention by the U.N. Security Council, and widespread international support for the deployment of Western military force. In the absence of these conditions, the United States cannot count on a large number of like-minded allies to help shoulder the burden of defending Gulf security.

The situation the United States confronts in the Gulf is therefore rich with irony: In the most challenging though unlikely scenario—large-scale Iraqi and Iranian conventional attacks—some allies will probably be willing to contribute to military operations to defend important Western interests. In the more likely but less serious contingencies, however, the United States will probably bear most or all of the military burden alone. Participation in the defense of the Gulf will be a matter of choice rather than obligation for America’s European allies—and most are likely either to opt out or to commit only token forces.

EUROPEAN FORCES: ASSET OR LIABILITY?
The prevailing view among U.S. defense planners and military commanders is that while there may be sound political reasons for the allies to fight with the United States in the Gulf, America does not need European military assistance to achieve victory. Indeed, a widespread if often unstated view within American military circles is that the allies will simply get in the way and that the United States is better off going it alone. These perceptions, however, represent only half-truths—and the half that is missing is potentially significant.

According to the results of RAND computer modeling done as part of this project, if the USAF promptly deploys a large force (i.e., four or more Aerospace Expeditionary Forces [AEFs]) to a Gulf contingency, allied air contributions would be of marginal importance. If, however, the USAF is heavily engaged in an MTW elsewhere and the Gulf is the second MTW, a prompt allied deployment of one to three AEFs could prove critical in halting an Iraqi armored invasion. Moreover, NATO allies can contribute meaningfully even if they are not engaged in killing Iraqi armor. In many possible contingencies, America’s European allies have specialized capabilities that could contribute significantly to Western military operations, especially in areas where U.S. forces face shortfalls or heavy demands—such as tactical reconnaissance and electronic warfare as well as airborne early warning. Because there are limits to what the allies can contribute to an MTW, the United States should encourage its allies to maintain and improve these "niche" capabilities.

More fundamentally, skeptics questioning the value of allied involvement in Gulf military operations miss a larger point: that there are strategic and political imperatives for America’s European partners to fight alongside U.S. forces in defending the security of the Persian Gulf. Therefore, in the real world—as opposed to the world of modelers and planners—some allies will provide help in a Gulf war. As long as they do, they should, at a minimum, hew to the Hippocratic oath of “do no harm.” Whether they will be able to fare better than that is a key issue that this report examines.

European allies face daunting obstacles to developing robust power projection capabilities. Moving significant allied forces, especially support elements, to the Gulf is a difficult problem, although it could be ameliorated with adequate access to forward basing and prepositioning of heavy stocks in the theater of operations. Equally problematic is what the allies can do once they arrive.

Some allies—notably the U.K. and France—are making progress in developing the capability to deploy sizable forces over a long distance and to sustain these units in high-intensity combat for
extended periods. But even the British and the French face serious shortcomings, and the rest of the allies are in far worse shape in developing serious expeditionary capabilities. The most glaring weaknesses are shortages of precision munitions, especially with all-weather capabilities; insufficient command-and-control systems that can be deployed in remote areas; and limited protection for forward-deployed forces against NBC attacks. Together, these limitations cast serious doubt on the military utility of European AEF operations in the Gulf.

Rectifying these deficiencies will require difficult choices that many allies may be loath to make. In some instances, increases in defense spending—or at least a halt to defense budget cuts—will be required. In other areas, European governments will need to reallocate defense resources and to restructure forces, both of which will be politically difficult in the current environment. Even more significant, most European governments and military establishments confront organizational, doctrinal, cultural, and philosophical obstacles to change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES

For the foreseeable future, it is likely that the United States will for the most part have to deal on its own with key threats to common interests outside Europe. NATO as an alliance will continue to have a strong aversion to any serious military role in the Persian Gulf. Similarly, the EU, with or without a common foreign and security policy, will continue to be wary of placing its imprimatur on European military participation in missions outside Europe—and European governments, with the notable exception of the U.K. and possibly France, will be reluctant to participate heavily in military operations in the Gulf. Most European militaries, moreover, will lack the capacity to project power in any significant way and will find it difficult to participate in coalition operations far from their borders.

Taken together, the expense of improving European power projection forces, the unpopularity of security commitments outside Europe, and deeply ingrained misgivings on the part of European governments toward the use of force in the Gulf will conspire to limit Europe’s focus to peace operations in and around Europe. For these reasons, contingencies in the Persian Gulf are likely to involve “coalitions of the willing” rather than NATO as an alliance. For all but the most serious threats, moreover, the number of willing allies and their ability to conduct effective military operations will be limited.

Consequently, the United States—and in particular the U.S. Air Force—must be realistic about its expectations of allied military support in the Gulf and must tailor its operational plans accordingly to fit political and military realities. At the same time, the forecast for augmenting allied contributions to Gulf security is not completely gloomy. The United States and its European allies could take several steps to help ensure that Europe shoulders a larger share of the responsibility for defending common Western security interests in the Gulf. These measures include:

• Improvements in allied force planning. The United States and its European allies must adapt the NATO force-planning process to the needs of power projection and coalition operations. In particular, they should institutionalize a dialogue, preferably within the NATO framework but outside it, if necessary, to formulate coordinated plans for developing power projection capabilities and conducting coalition operations in the Gulf. The key tasks involved are (1) to establish new force goals that are better suited to these requirements; (2) to reach a shared understanding of the operational demands imposed by power projection missions and agreement on contingency plans for these missions; and (3) to create a mechanism for the allied forces to execute these plans. If these steps are taken, commanders will have confidence in the size, mix, and operational requirements of forces the allies are likely to make available in the full spectrum of Gulf contingencies.
• Improvements in allied forces. The United States should encourage allies to focus on the most serious shortcomings in their power projection postures—i.e., inadequate precision-guided munitions, command-and-control capabilities, force protection, and logistics support. Redressing some of these shortfalls—particularly improved munitions—will require an increase of less than 0.5 percent in planned procurement spending, while other deficiencies can be addressed through more efficient use of existing resources. Given the special political, military, fiscal, and geographic circumstances each country faces, however, not every ally needs to make all these changes; instead, the United States and its European allies could seek a division of labor based on task specialization and complementarity. The NATO DCI provides a good planning framework to guide this process. Based on such a strategy, some allies would concentrate on developing Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)–type power projection capabilities, while others would focus on maintaining and improving “niche” capabilities or on providing timely and reliable access to facilities and overflight rights. In short, the United States would concentrate on what it does best, and willing allies would perform tasks at which they in turn are proficient. This would minimize the possibility of inefficient use of resources while exploiting the comparative advantages of each country.

• Increased allied pre-positioning and presence. If America’s European allies are to make a significant contribution to Gulf defense, they must be able to deploy forces to the region promptly and must operate out of a well-developed infrastructure. The most cost-effective means to improve allied rapid deployment capabilities is to pre-position heavy logistics support (e.g., ordnance and fuel) in theater that would otherwise require a large amount of lift to move. In addition, facilities in the Gulf states are oriented to supporting the operational requirements of U.S. rather than allied AEFs. The United States should encourage the U.K. and France to substantially expand their forward prepositioning of munitions stocks and to work with appropriate Gulf states to ensure that their facilities can provide the necessary support for deploying allied AEFs. In addition to the operational benefits that would result, an increased allied presence in the region would strengthen deterrence, sustain domestic support for U.S. deployments in the Gulf, and perhaps allow the United States to draw down its own presence, thereby reducing the exposure of U.S. forces to acts of terrorism and political violence.

• Increased military-to-military dialogue. The USAF should use its military contacts with NATO members to develop and enforce common operational practices, standards, concepts, and terminology related to coalition warfare. Such discussions could also facilitate solutions to affordability issues while addressing other barriers to improving interoperability, including differing perspectives on doctrine, objectives, and operational tradeoffs.

• Instituting changes in military exercises. New exercises should be designed to identify and train for commonly executed functions, especially those related to allied power projection operations. One possibility would be to conduct regular continental United States (CONUS)-based exercises in which the United States moves European ground forces or supports the deployment of an allied AEF. If necessary, the cost of such exercises could be funded out of additional European contributions to the NATO infrastructure account. Improving coalition operations in contingencies outside Europe also dictates that major allies should conduct exercises outside the NATO framework.

• Enhancing interoperability of air forces. The USAF will need to pay more attention to the requirements of interoperability with allied air forces. Reducing demands on interoperability will be a key element of this effort. Such measures include avoiding mixed air squadrons; having the USAF perform time-urgent and/or data-rich tasks; having allies attack only fixed or area targets and performing close air support only for their own ground forces; and scrubbing information exchange requirements. In addition, the USAF will need to work the supply side of the interoperability equation—for example, by developing allied-friendly standards for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems and compatible secure communications, Identification
Friend or Foe (IFF) systems, and security regimes. Equally important, the USAF will need to collaborate more closely with allied air forces in the planning of air tasking orders.

The above measures will facilitate an augmented allied air contribution to Gulf military operations and will improve the ability of allied and U.S. forces to conduct effective coalition operations. While some measures will face resistance on both sides of the Atlantic, they are for the most part politically sustainable, militarily feasible, and affordable. In the final analysis, however, there is no substitute for strong U.S. leadership. Unless American leaders convince their European allies that their failure to assume greater security responsibilities in the Gulf risks serious damage to the transatlantic relationship, most are unlikely to make the force improvements necessary to defend vital Western interests in the Gulf and other critical regions of the world.

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