

Oil and U.S. National Security in the Persian Gulf: An “Over-the-Horizon” Strategy

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Abstract

Oil is at the root of US national interests in the Persian Gulf region. We argue, however, that the current US strategy for protecting American oil interests there – specifically substantial military presence throughout the region, and close ties to several Gulf monarchies – is both unnecessary and counterproductive. We make three key arguments. First, the military threats to Gulf oil exports are typically exaggerated. The countries in the region have limited offensive military capabilities against oil-related targets. Moreover, a forward US military presence does not appreciably increase America's ability to respond to such attacks. Second, political instability within the major oil producers poses a greater danger to the flow of oil exports. Several major oil producers face domestic opposition, sometimes backed by external patrons like Iran or al-Qaeda, that could hamper oil output through coups, revolutions, or even civil war. But American troops do not play an important role in containing that threat, nor could US deployments be reconfigured for that mission. Even worse, close ties between the regimes and the US (and especially US troop presence there) may actually exacerbate the threat by helping opposition groups recruit supporters and radicalizing the population. Finally, the industrialized world is well prepared to ride out any disruptions that occur: several major oil importers including the US have built substantial strategic reserves. These stockpiles are sometimes ridiculed for being small compared to total oil consumption, but they are quite large compared to the plausible amount of oil that might disappear from the market during a supply disruption. In sum, the United States would be well served by an “over the horizon” strategy in the Persian Gulf: one that would allow military and political influence without close military or political coordination on a day-to-day basis.

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Since 1991, the United States national security strategy toward the Persian Gulf has been built around two central pillars: the forward deployment of substantial military forces throughout the region, and the maintenance of close ties between Washington and the Gulf monarchies. It is widely recognized that this strategy is costly. US military bases in the region present attractive targets for terrorists. Furthermore, the long-term deployment of US forces in Muslim lands has been a rallying cry (and recruitment tool) for al-Qaeda and other violent organizations. Finally, Washington’s close relationship to the Gulf’s repressive monarchies sullies America’s image as a country that stands for freedom. Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus that the current strategy is the only feasible option. After all, the countries surrounding the Gulf account for more than 20% of global oil production. As long as the global economy depends on oil, the United States seems wedded to this war-riven region.

This paper offers an alternative US strategy for the Persian Gulf. We argue that an “over-the-horizon” approach would protect vital US oil interests without incurring the serious costs of the current strategy. It would counter the traditional military threats to Gulf oil interests as effectively as the current strategy, and it would do a better job mitigating the more serious future threats in the Gulf: terrorism against oil infrastructure and domestic instability within oil-producing countries. Furthermore, an over-the-horizon approach would bring US policy in line with American values.

The military element of an over-the-horizon strategy calls for maintaining forces nearby in the Indian Ocean and (as needed) in the waters of the Persian Gulf, but it would end the current policy

of peacetime deployments to bases throughout the region. For contingencies beyond the capabilities of the nearby naval forces, additional forces would deploy to predetermined bases in the theater.

The political dimension of the strategy would maintain cordial, discreet relations with the Gulf monarchies. The United States would continue to guarantee the borders of the major Gulf oil producers from interstate aggression (e.g., protecting them against scenarios like Iraq's invasion of Kuwait). But America's overt political ties to the monarchies – ties that embarrass their governments and sap their domestic legitimacy as much as they embarrass us – would diminish.

The core of this strategy is to remain close enough to prevent major acts of military aggression in the region but to remain out of the daily fray of the region's violent politics and out of sight of the local populations.

Critics of new strategies often portray them as unrealistic or based on wishful thinking. To the contrary, both the Carter and Reagan administrations followed the approach we recommend. Given today's threats in the Gulf, an over-the-horizon strategy would serve us well again.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. First, we describe the traditional military threats to oil flows in the Gulf region and argue that an over-the-horizon approach (OTH) addresses them as effectively as the current strategy. In the second section we address the more serious threats to US oil interests from terrorism and domestic instability among oil producers. Neither forward presence nor the OTH approach eliminates these dangers, but an OTH approach mitigates them better. The third section lends support to an OTH strategy by highlighting the strategic significance of the emergency stockpiles that insulate the United States and the global economy from short-term disruptions in the Gulf. Finally, the last section describes in more detail some of the key elements of an OTH approach.

The Traditional Threat: Military Attacks on Oil Interests

The array of conventional and asymmetric *military* threats to US oil interests in the Persian Gulf can be organized into two broad categories: the threat that one oil producer will conquer another major Persian Gulf oil suppliers, and the possibility of harassment attacks designed to squeeze the flow of

oil from the Gulf to the industrialized world. The current US force posture in the Gulf appears specifically designed to counter these threats, but an over-the-horizon force could counter them both as effectively as a force deployed in the region during peacetime.

United States strategy has long included the sensible objective of preventing conquest of major oil producing areas in the Middle East. Consolidation of Middle East oil would have at least two detrimental effects on the United States. First, a successful aggressor would pose a huge threat to remaining regional oil producers and therefore could gain powerful leverage over them. The conqueror could exploit this leverage to enforce lower OPEC production levels and to skew the production quotas in its favor. These steps would reinforce the aggressor's power in the region and raise global oil prices. Second, even if the aggressor did not bully other regional oil producers, the simple act of reducing the number of global oil producers would ease the normal difficulties of cartel management by reducing the number of actors, helping OPEC raise oil prices closer to monopoly levels.

The good news is that no country in the Persian Gulf region is currently capable of major cross-border invasions. Even if US efforts stabilize Iraq, the Iraqi military will be a shadow of the Saddam-era force for many years. The United States is training the Iraqi military for counter-insurgency, policing, and small raids, but Iraq will lack the equipment and skills required for large-scale maneuver warfare for decades. Meanwhile, Iran may desire greater influence throughout the region, but its army is as poorly equipped as Iraq's. It lacks the armored vehicles required for large-scale aggression, and Iran's land forces, with two separate armies (the Artesh and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC), are structured to prevent coups d'état rather than to conquer neighbors. And Iran's military deficiencies run deeper than its land forces: Tehran's air force is antiquated, and its navy is suited for harassment missions rather than large, complex amphibious operations away from Iranian territory. The small, niche armed forces of the other regional actors – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman or the United Arab Emirates – are not geared for conquest, either.

More importantly, a US force deployed over-the-horizon could thwart efforts at conquest as well as a locally deployed force. Even as far back as 1991 (during the first US-Iraq War), the so-called

“Highway of Death” demonstrated the tremendous lethality of modern airpower against ground forces on the move. Today, US aircraft – whether land-based or carrier-based – have far greater capability against exposed, moving vehicles than they did in that first US-Iraq War. In fact, every US attack plane can now carry precision-guided munitions, so even carrier-based aviation is incredibly lethal against advancing ground forces. Surface ships and submarines can also contribute effectively to “halt phase” operations using precision-guided land-attack cruise missiles.

To be clear, there are advantages to flying combat sorties from local ground bases rather than launching strikes from aircraft carriers. Ground-based aircraft can typically sustain higher sortie rates than naval aviation, and aircraft carriers must hold back a share of their striking power to protect the fleet. Therefore to execute an OTH strategy US military planners could not simply replace each ground-based aircraft currently stationed in the Gulf with a carrier-based equivalent in the Indian Ocean. Rather, they would need to estimate (as they do now) the number of sorties required per day in the first few weeks of a conflict and then deploy sufficient combat power nearby – e.g., naval forces in the Indian Ocean and long-range bombers at Diego Garcia – to meet those requirements during the early stages of a war. These OTH forces would only need to provide combat power for a relatively brief period while additional American forces deployed to local bases in case combat operations had to continue for a long time. But given the lethality of air attacks against moving ground forces, and the limited capabilities of the region’s military forces to launch major invasions, the United States should have little difficulty fashioning an OTH force in the Indian Ocean up to the task of halting an invasion in the Persian Gulf region.

Thwarting harassment attacks against oil infrastructure or tanker traffic poses a greater challenge for the US military, but an over-the-horizon force could counter these dangers as effectively as a force deployed to local bases. Potential aggressors might use a wide variety of harassment methods. Iran, for example, could lay naval mines, send suicide speed boats to ram oil tankers, shoot tankers from mobile land-based cruise missile launchers, and / or fire missiles at oil facilities in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. Defensive military forces would struggle to protect against all of these types of attack simultaneously, but that might be necessary to enable private companies to reestablish normal commercial activities. For example, simply hunting mobile missile shooters along the Iranian coast would require maintaining intense surveillance and repeated strikes against suspected launchers and

missile storage sites. It might take weeks or longer to destroy a large fraction of the Iranian force. Suicide boats and mines present different but equally challenging operational problems.

But setting the bar for defender performance at a return to normal commercial activities is unnecessarily high: nothing is sacred about the current oil industry pattern of operations; what is strategically important is that sufficient oil supplies reach the global market to prevent an acute disruption. Although fully suppressing a harassment campaign would be a challenge, a US adversary intent on substantially disrupting oil flow would also face a daunting mission. For example, an Iranian attempt to target tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz would have to be a sustained effort not a one-shot strike. Iran could not physically “close the Strait of Hormuz” by scuttling a ship in the narrow waterway; even at its narrowest point the navigable channel for large oil tankers is nearly twenty miles across. The much narrower “traffic separation scheme” channel recognized by the International Maritime Organization for peacetime transit is by no means the only place where supertankers can sail. So instead of hitting just a handful of ships in a constrained space, Iranian attackers would need to disable tankers across a wide area day after day for an extended period.

Furthermore, Iran would have to contend with the many potential targets that pass through the Strait every day. Roughly a dozen supertankers make the transit in each direction each day, plus container ships, bulk carriers, and other vessels that would complicate Iranian operations in the haze that typically shrouds the Gulf. All of the other shipping would absorb scarce Iranian anti-shipping assets that the Iranians would prefer to expend against the oil tankers.

Moreover, tankers are difficult targets. They are massive ships that even dwarf aircraft carriers, and the severity of weapons damage to ships scales dramatically with size. Modern tankers have two layers of thick hulls designed to prevent oil spills, and they have few vulnerable points where a “lucky” shot could do much damage. It is likely to take many *hits* to cripple a large tanker – which would require even more missile shots, since the attackers should anticipate that several will miss or malfunction. An anti-shipping campaign that would threaten to disrupt a substantial fraction of oil throughput would rapidly expend Iran's limited supply of missiles.

Finally, the world would not sit idly as an aggressor tried to choke off oil supplies. Other oil suppliers around the world would have incentives to activate their spare production capacity. Spare capacity varies over time, depending on market conditions, but some exists even in today's "tight" market, and more is likely to be available from time to time in the future. And of course American (and allied) military forces, even if deployed over-the-horizon, would rapidly react to undermine the aggressor's freedom to conduct its attacks. Even a highly imperfect American counterforce operation – one that actually destroyed very few of the aggressor's units – would surely force the attacker to pass up some good opportunities to launch strikes or to launch hurried attacks that are more likely to miss their targets.

From the standpoint of assessing US security policy in the Gulf, an OTH approach would be as effective in the face of a harassment campaign as the current forward presence. The forces required to respond to harassment attacks are not ground forces in Kuwait but aircraft, ships, and perhaps submarines. In fact, a harassment campaign by its very nature is amenable to an American OTH force posture. Planners especially worry about relying on distant forces in scenarios in which adversaries can achieve *faits accomplis*. But harassment campaigns – especially blockades – are exactly the reverse: there is no knock-out blow, just steady grinding pressure. Under an OTH strategy the US would retain sufficient combat power nearby to immediately begin to suppress attacks on oil infrastructure, but there would be virtually no risk of catastrophe while follow-on forces flowed into the theater.

And facing a harassment campaign, the American military defenders would actually have the advantage of the initiative. Knowing when a group of tankers was about to transit the Strait, the US could surge attack aircraft into the skies over the Persian Gulf, flooding the zone at just the right time to make it dangerous for the attackers to turn on their fire control radars or to otherwise "pop up" to threaten the flow of oil. In these fights, the attacker always has to be on the alert for the opportunity to take a shot, while the defender can husband its efforts for the crucial moment. That initiative advantage would substantially reduce the immediate demands on American in-theater military assets even in the early stages of a crisis, and it would reduce the impact of some of the operational constraints of over-the-horizon naval forces and long-range bombers. An OTH force posture could accomplish the defensive mission as well as forward-deployed, land-based forces.

Our bottom line is *not* that over-the-horizon forces are equally as capable as land-based forces stationed in the Persian Gulf during peacetime – especially not measured on a per-aircraft basis. However, US strategic objectives *can* be accomplished with an OTH basing strategy, freeing the United States from the strategic costs of peacetime deployments in the Gulf region.

The Bigger Dangers: Political Instability, Terrorism and Civil War

Traditional military attacks on oil facilities or transit routes in the Persian Gulf are unlikely to substantially disrupt global oil supplies, but political instability in producing countries poses a graver threat of disruption. The situation in Iraq springs to mind. Many analysts attribute the low levels of Iraqi oil output during the past five years to the "security situation" there: in particular, terrorist strikes on the major export pipeline from northern Iraq essentially closed it, and the threat of additional attacks that might kill workers or make their efforts futile prevents repairs to the pipeline. Similar attacks in Saudi Arabia on major export terminals, pipeline junctions, pumping facilities, or even the oil fields themselves might block the export of vastly greater quantities of oil.

Terrorism is not the only form of “domestic instability” that threatens oil output from the Gulf; in fact, strikes and civil wars have caused several of the greatest oil markets disruptions in history. In most oil-producing countries, oil field workers are an important group in domestic politics, and strikes and anti-regime political activity by those workers can dramatically undercut oil production, as in Iran in 1978-79 and in Venezuela in 2001-2. A full-blown civil war in an oil-producing region, where workers become combatants or cannot reach their job sites due to fighting, might be even worse. Such disruption would last not only during the civil war but after its end, pending infrastructure repairs: the oil field fires that burned after the 1991 Gulf War kept Kuwaiti fields offline for roughly a year. Even more important, willful efforts by oil workers to hamper production are more damaging than a one-off successful attack by a foreign terrorist group. If oil workers want to continue with their normal activities after a terrorist disruption, they will work to repair damage or compensate for it, quickly restoring output; however, in a civil war where oil workers *choose* to reduce output, production may remain depressed as long as the workers wish.

Even the worrisome scenarios described above understate the dangers from instability because they presume that the "right" side wins the civil war. In a worst-case scenario, if an al-Qaeda-linked group were to win a civil war in Saudi Arabia, it would gain direct control of some ten million barrels per day of output that it could manipulate in dramatically anti-American ways. The new government could spend its oil export revenue on anti-American projects. Overall, internal political instability in Persian Gulf oil-producing countries is very dangerous for American interests.

Unfortunately, American military presence in the Persian Gulf region does not counter this threat. The deployment of fighter wings and ground forces to Kuwait, the command center and prepositioned matériel in Qatar, the US Fifth Fleet base in Bahrain, and other regional military assets are not tasked to prevent riots or fight on the regimes' behalf – nor would they be effective if they were given those missions. The US military does not hunt al Qaeda operatives in Saudi Arabia nor does it defend key oil installations there: the Saudi intelligence and internal security forces perform those missions. The US military may help train the Middle Eastern security forces, and American contractors may support some of the regimes' security activities, but those indirect efforts are not the same as direct responsibility for internal stability, and they do not require military presence from regular (or reserve) American soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines.

Iraq is the only oil-producing country where American troops even try to contribute to day-to-day internal security operations, and the experience there demonstrates why US forces are not well suited to this mission. Despite a huge American troop presence in the Sunni triangle, American forces were unable to dampen threats and restore oil flow through the northern pipeline until the change in local leaders' attitudes, especially Sunni tribes' cooperation as part of the Awakening movement. The locals now protect the pipelines more effectively than US troops ever could. They know the region and who "belongs" there; they understand the language (and its very local dialects), and local groups' spies have total freedom to move around, to observe developing threats, and to identify unusual activity that might portend an attack. American forces, no matter how well trained in modern counter-insurgency tactics, cannot do these missions as well.

Even point defense of the infrastructure, backed by a mammoth increase in the number of American troops assigned to protect oil fields, pipelines, and their work crews, would be impractical in Iraq.

US forces could not protect the entire dispersed infrastructure at all times, because it is simply too spread out. Nor would American defenders recognize all brewing infiltration attempts or stand-off attack preparations until after the attackers had launched their operations: even where the Americans happened to be in place at the right time, they would not always thwart disruption. The correct way to defend against repeated, effective attacks on infrastructure is with intelligence, not infantry divisions, and local intelligence is the strong suit of the Gulf states' domestic intelligence agencies.

Not only is a US peacetime presence the wrong tool for day-to-day internal security operations in the Gulf, the US forces in the region are ill-suited to respond to instability when it erupts. Effective US military response to political instability could come in two flavors. One requires very small-scale efforts, and the other requires an enormous operation. Peacetime military presence does not help in either case. For the smaller missions, special operations forces often travel around the world to train local soldiers. Those missions do not rely on the nearby presence of the regular American military; advisory teams usually travel from the United States to temporary quarters provided by the host government, frequently in remote locations, well away from civilian populations. Similarly, if the US decides to use covert action to reverse an unfavorable local political outcome or to attempt to grab a particular high-value target – for example, repeating the (perhaps unfortunate) experience supporting the 1953 coup that ousted Mosaddeq's Iranian government – the small team of forces for that operation would not need to stage from a peacetime American military base in or near the target country. They could launch from the US homeland or from bases outside of the volatile Persian Gulf region.

If instead the United States were to respond to Persian Gulf instability with a major military intervention – for example, an attempt at "peace-making" in an on-going civil war or at attempt to seize and operate oil fields despite surrounding violence among the locals – current (or foreseeable) forward deployments would not contribute much to the operation. Any major intervention force would have to come from bases in the continental US, Germany, or East Asia, like the forces that fought the Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003 (or that would have fought in Europe during the Cold War). At best, forward-deployed forces could offer some protection to the routes through which the very large follow-on forces would enter the Persian Gulf theater. But that contribution to a major American military intervention is probably small in light of the likely alternative operational

concept: use of allies' facilities offered temporarily during the crisis rather than on a sustained, peacetime basis. Most important, though, the US should recognize that a major intervention would be an over-the-horizon operation; the relatively small forces deployed for the peacetime presence mission could not directly deal with serious political instability.

Unfortunately, forward military presence in the Persian Gulf is not simply an ineffective remedy to the threat that political instability poses to oil flows. It is counterproductive, because peacetime American deployments may make instability both more likely and more hazardous to American interests. The presence of thousands of American military personnel (and the contractors that support them) in Muslim countries not only infuriates radicals like Osama bin Laden, but it also aids their recruitment efforts from the broader population, and it de-legitimizes local leaders. Whereas American military forces deployed in Cold War hot-spots served as a symbolic tripwire to reassure the citizenry that the US would show up in a time of crisis, the forces deployed in the Persian Gulf today remind even relatively moderate locals that their Westernized, elite governments do not share their citizens' values. For example, many experts believe that resistance to rapid modernization undermined the Shah of Iran. Moreover, the presence of American soldiers demonstrates to many locals that their governments cannot manage the threats and challenges that face them. The current governments seem decadent, ineffective, or even incompetent – and perhaps worthy of replacement; radicals can promise to govern on their own, perhaps by restoring national or religious "purity," if given a chance. Even if the radicals are unlikely to be able to follow through on their "good government" promises, the US presence is a sore spot that can help rally political opposition.

Forward military presence in the Persian Gulf also ties the US politically to the current repressive regimes. Some of America's Persian Gulf allies are worse than others, but even the most liberal do not meet modern Western standards for democracy and human rights protection. Supporting these regimes requires paying large ethical costs upfront in the hope that they will retain power. Weighed against those guaranteed costs, the alleged benefit is a gamble: the regimes might lose power anyway, and if revolutionaries seize power, they will associate the United States with the old regime. The Iranian government still distrusts the United States because of American support to the Shah's brutal government, and American acceptance of the Saudi regime's authoritarian side has probably contributed to virulent anti-American radicalism there, too. A higher chance that a successor

government to one of the current Persian Gulf regimes would be strongly anti-American makes it more likely that a future American government would be faced with the difficult choice to gamble on a massive American military intervention to restore friendly rulers to power.

The fragility of the monarchies, repressive governments, and even the nascent democracies (Iraq?) that rule the Persian Gulf oil producers should influence American military posture in the region. Political instability could pose a real threat to oil supplies, but current American military deployments and forward military presence in general cannot prevent political instability from disrupting the flow of oil. Unfortunately, the poor design of the US strategy in the Persian Gulf *can* affect the probability and severity of political instability.

Good News about Oil: Consumers' Massive Emergency Stockpiles

Leaders might fear that an OTH approach to Persian Gulf security would slow the American military's reaction to crises enough that the US could face a severe oil crisis in the interim, even if OTH forces would eventually arrive to remedy the situation. Even if OTH forces can in reality prevent disruptions as well as – or better than – forward-deployed forces, the intuitive argument that any military delay might be a problem in the high-speed contemporary world might seem persuasive. But the existence of massive emergency petroleum stocks around the industrialized world should assuage these fears. Strategic reserves are now so large that they can replace interrupted oil supplies for many months under a very wide range of plausible scenarios, providing an additional buffer to facilitate withdrawal of US forces from their land-bases in the region.

The industrialized world's emergency oil stockpiles have grown dramatically in recent decades. The United States alone stores just over 700 million barrels of crude oil in its Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR). Government stockpiles in Europe add another 200 million barrels of crude and more than 200 million barrels of refined products. In Asia, US allies hold another 400 million barrels. And China is creating a reserve that should reach more than 100 million barrels by 2010.

Those figures only count the government-controlled stocks. Private inventories fluctuate with market conditions, but US commercial inventories alone include over one billion barrels. Adding up commercial and government stockpiles, the industrialized economies control more than four billion

barrels of oil in ready-to-access storage tanks and caverns.

There is great confusion about how to assess the adequacy of these stockpiles. Some analysts and policymakers mistakenly measure these emergency stocks by comparing a given country's stockpile to its daily total consumption of oil (or comparing the total global emergency stockpile to the total global daily consumption of oil). Using those flawed metrics, the stockpiles seem inadequate. For example, the United States consumes about 20 million barrels of oil every day, so the vast US SPR (approximately 700 million barrels) could only supply the country for 35 days. (Furthermore, the United States could not draw oil out of the SPR at such a high rate.) Similarly, the 1.3 billion barrels of crude oil held by the US and allied governments could only supply the world economy for 16 days.

But this vulnerability is a mirage. Global stocks should be measured against the size of plausible disruptions, not against total global consumption. Using the US example from above, the SPR seems small when compared with total daily US consumption, but 40% of the oil consumed in the United States comes from domestic sources. That oil is not vulnerable to harassment in the Strait of Hormuz or anywhere else around the globe.

The worst oil disruptions in history deprived global markets of 5-6 million barrels per day: specifically, the collapse of the Iranian oil industry during the revolution in 1978 cut production by 5.5 million barrels, and the sanctions on Iraq after its conquest of Kuwait in 1990 eliminated 5.3 million barrels of supply. If a future disruption were as bad as history's worst, US and allied governments' crude oil stocks alone could replace every lost barrel for more than seven months. Over-the-horizon military forces would have plenty of time to arrive in the area of the disruption, if military action could help end the crisis.

Current fears about energy security focus on Iran. For example, Tehran could use oil as a weapon during a dispute by sharply cutting its exports to drive up global prices and punish the West. But Iran only exports 2.5 million barrels each day. A coordinated release of oil stocks by the United States and its allies could replace missing Iranian barrels for 17 months. To create a bigger disruption, Iran might try to take Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Iraqi oil off the market, too, by attacking oil tankers as they pass through the Strait of Hormuz, near Iran's coast. As we discussed in the previous

section, such efforts are likely to fail, but even if Iran could reduce the 15-17 million barrels of oil that pass through the Strait every day by 30%, global reserves could replace those losses for nearly a year. Again, forward military presence would not be required to deal with the crisis in time; over-the-horizon operations could counter the threat.

Emergency reserves have their limits. Government-controlled stockpiles should not be used to try to smooth out short-term blips in global supplies, the normal variations that private firms account for with their inventories and financial hedging. Public inventories are a blunt instrument designed to protect the oil market as a whole from major disruptions – national strikes, hurricane damage, wars, and attempts at political blackmail.

But political leaders contemplating a shift to an OTH strategy – which in reality will keep oil flowing as well as the current strategy – should be comforted by the knowledge that global oil supply does not hang by a thread.

Conclusions

Critics of the OTH approach might raise a range of concerns. First, the United States has other national security interests in the Persian Gulf region beyond oil. For example, could the United States pursue terrorists throughout the region if it adopted an OTH posture? The answer is "yes." Nothing in an OTH strategy would prevent the US from maintaining small groups of special operations forces at remote bases in the region to conduct clandestine raids. Large facilities full of US servicemen attract attention and breed animosity. Small desert encampments far from public view do not.

Other critics worry about the effect of an OTH strategy on US political ties to the Gulf monarchs. Would they remain friendly to the United States (albeit discreetly) and, for example, oppose OPEC price hawks to keep oil prices down? Or would they feel betrayed by the United States? Adopting an OTH strategy would greatly benefit the Gulf monarchies, and they would quickly see this. The United States would still give these monarchies what we give them today: protection from external military threats. But we would begin to do it without asking them to take the politically difficult step of hosting American forces.

Finally, some analysts might worry that an OTH approach precludes a progressive vision for the region. They argue that the people of the Persian Gulf would be better off in the long run if their societies democratized, liberalized, and gave greater respect to human rights. These critics wonder whether an OTH approach would abandon the people of the region to a long-term fate as subjects of authoritarian governments.

There is some truth to this objection – as we argued earlier, reducing the US military presence in the Persian Gulf region would enhance the Gulf monarchs’ domestic legitimacy and allow them to solidify their control. Free from the embarrassment of hosting infidels (us) in the Holy Land, the monarchs could get back to work rooting out al-Qaeda-linked cells (who also oppose the Gulf monarchies) as well as their domestic home-grown reformers.

However, it is equally plausible that in the long run reducing US overt support for repressive monarchs will strengthen the appeal of US values in the Gulf region. No longer will America’s calls for democracy and human rights appear as hypocritical as they might seem today.

In sum, most foreign policy analysts assume that America’s powerful oil interests in the Persian Gulf bind the United States militarily and diplomatically to that tumultuous region. In reality, the United States can get what it needs from the Persian Gulf – principally oil – without any ground-based military presence there, and without close, public ties to the monarchs. An over-the-horizon strategy seemed sensible to the Carter and Reagan administrations, and it is the best approach for the United States today.