

Strategic Insight

The Future of the U.S. Navy in a Post-Saddam Persian Gulf

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Over the past several months, the international debate over whether or not to forcibly disarm Saddam Hussein by invading Iraq has generated much speculation about how the future of the Persian Gulf will be shaped after his removal from power. Most concern has been focused on the government to be created in Iraq, and at least temporary military occupation by the United States and its coalition partners, the potential role of the United Nations allied powers, and how long it will take to reconstitute a viable Iraqi state.

Often overlooked in the analysis is the impact that Saddam's removal will have on the configuration of U.S. military forces in the Gulf that have been enforcing the United Nations sanctions regime on Iraq since the end of Gulf War I. The presence of these forces has entailed a major commitment of resources for all the military departments, which would probably welcome a reduction in these commitments. Much of the burden of this enforcement mission has fallen to the United States Navy, and Saddam's removal will have a big impact on its operations in the theater.

USN Forces in the Gulf

When compared to the force levels operating in the Gulf prior to 1991, the U.S. Navy's presence over the past 13 years has doubled to approximately 30 vessels and a continuously deployed carrier battle group, and operations over the past two months have seen the tripling of operational tempo in the Persian Gulf and surrounding seaways. As of 31 March 2003, naval air and ship support to Operation Iraqi Freedom included: six carrier battle groups (totaling over 50 ships, 400 aircraft, and approximately 50,000 personnel), including two amphibious task groups and three amphibious ready groups.^[1]

Once a new government is in place in Baghdad, it is easy to foresee that United Nations Security Resolutions 1441, 688, 661, and 665 will eventually be lifted or modified, which will change the way naval operations are conducted in the Persian Gulf. The new security environment will require the Navy to reexamine its mission requirements and restructure its forces accordingly. Certainly a naval presence will be necessary to help provide security and stability during the regime change, and naval forces will still have a role within the region to help prosecute the war on terrorism. Other mission requirements will need to be defined, while attempting to address Arab sensitivities by reducing the military presence within the Gulf, and maintaining the ongoing efforts to fight the global war on terror. At this point, it is unclear whether and to what extent the Gulf states will want and/or need a continuous naval presence.

Naval Presence Before the Gulf War

The Navy has been operating in the Persian Gulf region since 1801 and has maintained a continuous presence there over the past 40 years. The pressing need for fuel for the fleet brought the ships of the U.S. Navy to the Persian Gulf in the post-World War II era and led to the establishment of a small, rotating

force in the Middle East, under the command of the Commander in Chief, Northeastern and Mediterranean (CINCNELM). With the growth of the forces assigned to CINCNELM, the Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR) was established in 1949. It provided the initial U.S. military response to any crisis in the region, as well as humanitarian and emergency assistance. Its peace-time mission focused on building relations within the Middle East, while providing a force large enough to deter aggressive Soviet Navy expansion in the theater. However, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the United States gradually assumed a greater responsibility for Gulf security. During the 1979-1981 Iranian hostage crisis, nearly 30 Navy ships were on constant patrol in the region, including one carrier battle group in the Indian Ocean or North Arabian Sea.

In 1980, the Carter Doctrine declared the Middle East to be a region of vital importance to U.S. strategic interests and thereby dedicated additional forces to the region. Throughout the 1980s and at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, MIDEASTFOR was composed of at least 12 ships, mine countermeasure teams, special warfare units, and the Navy's Administrative Support Unit in Bahrain.^[2] This permanent force was periodically augmented by a carrier battle group. After the imposition of U.N. Security Resolutions in 1991 at the end of the Gulf War, MIDEASTFOR became U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), under the hierarchy of U.S. Central Command. By 1995, the course of events transpiring in the region required a renumbering of fleets, and after a 48-year hibernation, the United States 5th Fleet was reactivated. NAVCENT currently exercises command and control over all naval operations throughout their area of responsibility from its headquarters in Manama, Bahrain.^[3]

NAVCENT Today

Since 1991, NAVCENT has enforced the sea-borne trade embargo on Iraq through Maritime Interception Operations in and around the Gulf to monitor and inspect vessels for illegal shipments of oil and weapons, and to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to and from Iraq in accordance with United Nations Resolutions. Over the past 12 years, conducting operations within the Persian Gulf has cost the United States billions of dollars. The cost of one carrier battle group operations and maintenance is estimated at \$1 billion per year.^[4] From 1999 to 2000, the costs of U.S. peace and security commitments in Southwest Asia and Iraq have totaled over \$9 Billion.^[5] More specifically, in 1997, Operation Desert Fox cost the United States \$700 million to support 15,000 to 20,000 troops, 120 land-based aircraft, and one carrier battle group in the CENTCOM AOR.^[6]

To support ongoing operations, the Navy has built eight primary forward-based facilities in the region, including its headquarters in Manama, Bahrain, and 15 logistics facilities in Yemen, Jordan, Djibouti, Qatar, UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and Kenya.^[7] This infrastructure has provided the rotating battle groups in the region the ability to not only complete their missions and objectives, but also build security relations with the host countries. With the impending repeal of U.N. sanctions and the prospects of the type of future operations the navy will be conducting, a downsizing of presence levels is likely. Even though the number of assets deployed to the region will decrease, the U.S. Navy will maintain its forward headquarters and logistical bases in place in order to exploit their potential in fighting the war on terrorism and future threats to regional stability.

The Future Role

As tensions diffuse in the Middle East after Saddam's removal from power, the fact remains that the United States will still have strategic interests in the region that remain directly relevant to the Navy's mission. Maintaining its status as the "protector" of the world's oil supply is of critical concern to both the United States and the global economy. The Energy Information Administration projects that oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz will double from approximately 15 million barrels of oil today to 30-34 million barrels per day by 2020, suggesting that ensuring the free flow of oil through the Strait will continue to be an important mission.

The post-Saddam Hussein Middle East will continue to be a region of great importance to the United States, and a region still facing threats to its security and stability. Iran continues to have the largest conventional military in the region and is continuing its active pursuit of nuclear capabilities. A robust United States Naval presence can act as the main deterrent to Iran, both in countering weapons proliferation and providing security to smaller Gulf states. As was witnessed months ago when the North Korean vessel carrying ballistic missiles was intercepted before it reached its Yemeni destination, the threat of missile and WMD proliferation will continue in the post-Saddam era not only from Iran, but the smaller Gulf states as well. The threat of these weapons coming into the hands of terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda, will also continue for the foreseeable future. The war on terror is unlikely to end anytime soon and the potential for further fundamentalist threats in the region is great. The Navy could play a role in addressing all these threats.

In order to respond to these future threats, the Navy will need to restructure its forces into more flexible, responsive, rapid action teams. A permanent naval force in the Gulf should consist of vessels from all Allied nations in the CENTCOM AOR. NATO's Standing Naval Forces Mediterranean or the recently formed Black Sea Force could serve as examples in developing the structure. This would aid in training various Gulf naval forces in maritime operations, would maintain goodwill with those nations, and over time this force could become less reliant on American assets to maintain security. Reverting back to a pre-Gulf War I surface contingent of a single flagship and five other surface combatants in joint operations with Allied forces might be a model that could well serve the security needs of the United States in the region. An occasional carrier battle group deployment could augment this force in case of a rising threat or contingency.

The security environment within the Middle East promises to remain in a state of flux, and the United States Navy will have to adapt accordingly to those changes. The U.S. strategic goal of maintaining security and stability in the region while attempting to lessen its military presence will take time and cooperation from Allied and Gulf nations. The events that transpire in the aftermath of Saddam's removal from power and the responses from the surrounding nations will offer a tentative outline of what the future of the U.S. Navy will be in the Persian Gulf.

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6. adapted from material provided by the Department of Defense, 11-17-98.

7. Obtained on 15 March 2003 from [Global Security](#) website