

Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 44: The Rapid Deployment Force: The Few, the Futile, the Expendable

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David Isenberg

David Isenberg is a research associate at the Pacific Northwest Research Center in Eugene, Oregon.

Executive Summary

In the Persian Gulf the situation is becoming increasingly strained. Gulf shipping is being regularly attacked, the United States has sold Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia has shot down Iranian fighters, Iran has threatened retaliation, President Reagan has offered U.S. help to protect gulf shipping from attack, and U.S. warships in the gulf have begun escorting oil tankers chartered by the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command. Meanwhile the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council say they are ready to use force to keep Iran's air force at bay, but they do not want U.S. combat forces on their soil.

Given the uncertainty and confusion currently reigning in the Persian Gulf with regard to oil exports, one wonders what has happened to the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), which now is known as the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and is the latest U.S. unified command. (Because of the generally imprecise discussion of this issue, as well as the changes incurred by historical evolution, it has been necessary to use both the terms Rapid Deployment Force and U.S. Central Command. Although the RDF preceded CENTCOM and technically no longer exists, it is used throughout the paper in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.) After all, it was the specter of a threat to Persian Gulf petroleum that served as an official rationale for the RDF. Indeed, after the fall of the Shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the RDF supposedly emerged full-blown from the brow of the Pentagon into public consciousness. This emergence was made official by President Carter in his State of the Union address on January 23, 1980, when he declared: "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf regions will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America. And such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." [1]

Yet at a time when the threat to oil supplies has risen appreciably, nobody in the Reagan administration is suggesting that U.S. CENTCOM might have to send in the troops. There seems to be a curious reticence, almost as though the U.S. bull has finally learned to tread warily in the global china shop. However, if the RDF is not going to be used at a time when Western oil supplies are threatened with drastic curtailment, under what circumstances would it be used? Why was it formed in the first place? What can it do? Despite the enormous amount of literature produced about the RDF (one bibliography lists 279 references), these questions remain unanswered. [2]

When one considers that an ever-increasing share of resources is being devoted to the RDF, a long look at the history of the force is warranted. One defense analyst notes that the FY 1985 Department of Defense (DOD) budget allocates \$59 billion for the RDF, "of which about \$47 billion is for the Persian Gulf. (In 1985, the Pentagon will continue to increase its primary allocation of forces to the Persian Gulf. It will begin to implement a plan to create as many as five additional 'light' Army divisions, justified mostly by the Persian Gulf or Southwest Asia requirement, but without

adding any significant manpower to the Army.)"[3] A past Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report stated that "the RDF, and particularly the plans for a larger version, could give rise to pressure for eventual increases in the defense budget and could hamper efforts to reduce the budget deficit in the next few years."[4]

History

Regardless of what one calls it--Quick Strike Force, Unilateral Intervention Corps, Unilateral Intervention Force, or Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force--the concept of rapidly deployable military forces is not new. To many observers of the military establishment it seems reminiscent of the flexible response strategy articulated by President Kennedy shortly after he took office in 1961. At that time Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara created an organization, subsequently renamed Strike Command, with a mission "to furnish rapidly deployable, combat-ready forces in an emergency situation, calling for response on a scale less than all-out nuclear war." The command eventually consisted of the 100,000-man Strategic Army Corps and some 50,000 additional personnel from the U.S. Air Force's Tactical Air Command.[5]

After the turmoil of the Vietnam War there was a shift away from U.S. interventionary capability and a preference for letting regional powers, such as Iran, act as protectors of U.S. interests. This is what came to be called the Nixon Doctrine. The preference, however, was not to last.

Following the fourfold OPEC price increases of 1973-74, people began to think of military force as a means of maintaining access to Persian Gulf oil. Such speculation was first given official sanction by Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. Asked by Business Week on January 1, 1975 if Washington would consider military action in response to another round of price increases, Kissinger replied that "it is one thing to use it in the case of a dispute over price"--that is, a dispute that could be settled through negotiation--but "it's another where there is some actual strangulation of the industrialized world." [6]

Although he later qualified them, Kissinger's remarks set off a storm of controversy in the Arab world--but were soon affirmed by others at home. For example, President Ford told reporters: "I wanted it made as clear as I possibly could that this country in case of economic strangulation--and the key word is strangulation--we had to be prepared, without specifying what we might do, to take the necessary action for self-preservation." [7]

In May 1975 Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger told U.S. News & World Report that "we might not remain entirely passive to the imposition of [another oil] embargo. I'm not going to indicate any prospective reaction, other than to point out that there are economic, political, and conceivably military measures in response." [8]

During the same period the American press was flooded with articles and essays that advocated a confrontational approach toward OPEC countries and that supported the use of the military option against them. One of the first was "Oil: The Issue of American Intervention," an article by Robert Tucker which appeared in the January 1975 issue of Commentary. A little later an equally influential and somewhat more provocative article appeared in the March issue of Harper's Magazine entitled, "Seizing Arab Oil." This article, by one "Miles Ignotus," the pseudonym of a Washington-based professor and defense consultant with close links to high-level U.S. policymakers (according to the magazine), declared that all OPEC members were extortionists and that the Arab members were blackmailers whose excessive demands on Israel eventually would precipitate another war followed by an oil embargo or supply cut. At that point, according to Ignotus, we would go in with two U.S. Marine Corps divisions, the 82d Airborne Division, and another army division, for a total of 40,000 men on the ground supported by marine air wings, and "at least four aircraft carriers, 20 frigates and destroyers, and 10 nuclear submarines." Morally, according to James H. Noyes, the seizure would be justifiable because OPEC revenues had been used "only to finance the executive jets of the sheiks and the fighter bombers of the dictators," and because "a somewhat impoverished America [became] surrounded by a world turned into a slum." [9]

A few months after the Ignotus article the Congressional Research Service (CRS) produced a seminal study on the prospects of occupying oil fields in the Middle East. To this day its arguments have not been seriously refuted. The study found that a successful operation could be assured only if the United States could satisfy all aspects of a five-part mission:

1. Seize required oil installations intact 2. Secure them for weeks, months, or years 3. Restore wrecked assets rapidly 4. Operate all installations without the owners' assistance 5. Guarantee safe overseas passage for supplies and petroleum products

"In short," the CRS study concluded, "success would largely depend on two prerequisites:

Slight damage to key installations Soviet abstinence from armed intervention

Since neither essential could be assumed, military operations to rescue the United States (much less its key allies) from an air-tight OPEC embargo would combine high costs with high risks whenever we focused our efforts. This country would so deplete its strategic reserves that little would be left for contingencies elsewhere. Prospects would be poor, with plights of far-reaching political, economic, social, psychological, and perhaps military consequences the penalty for failure.[10]

Circumstances did not improve thereafter. In a report issued nearly six years later in 1981, for example, the CRS noted that "best case" U.S. contingents could defeat OPEC armed forces in the Persian Gulf, while seizing oil fields and facilities, but their victory would be "pyrrhic" unless constant security to protect facilities against sabotage could be maintained. To do so would require two to four divisions, with proportionate support on land and sea and in the air, to be employed for an indefinite period. Operations might become "so difficult that U.S. workers en masse might have to be drafted to replace OPEC counterparts." [11]

Considered strictly in terms of geography and without concern for logistical constraints, the U.S. occupation of the Persian Gulf region constitutes a staggering challenge. The region contains 6,000 miles of pipeline and 400 pumping stations set within 250,000 square miles of desert, and it is located thousands of miles from the nearest U.S. base. As Sen. Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.) observed, "The military demands for an operation of this size would be far beyond the capabilities of any country--or group of countries--on earth." [12] While the military forces of most Persian Gulf countries are inferior to U.S. forces, they could still cause tremendous difficulties for a U.S. occupation effort. Saboteurs could wreak havoc if they hit ports, air fields, and oil facilities before U.S. landings. Furthermore oil wells, pipelines, pumping stations, power plants, storage tanks, refineries, and loading installations would all be vulnerable too.

These physical realities did not change during the 1970s and early 1980s, but the political realities did. Although McNamara's Strike Command was no longer in existence it was not forgotten. Back in 1972, as part of the effort to streamline the military command structure, Strike Command had been replaced by the U.S. Readiness Command (REDCOM). Like its predecessor, REDCOM had no specific regional responsibility; it consisted of U.S.-based forces slated to reinforce other unified commands overseas. In the grand old tradition the Pentagon did not let a bureaucracy die; it just renamed it.

The Carter Era

The real opportunity for hardliner confrontationists, though, came in 1976 with the election of Jimmy Carter. After his inauguration President Carter, as a result of both the usual inclination of new presidents to do their own studies and pressure from hardline groups such as the Committee on the Present Danger, ordered a far-ranging review of U.S. national security capabilities and commitments.

The review, conducted mainly by the office of the Secretary of Defense, resulted in a series of presidential review memorandums (PRMs). The memorandum describing U.S. force commitments worldwide, which was the foundation for a presidential decision (Presidential Directive 18) in August 1977, was PRM 10. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown described several highlights of PRM 10 when he addressed the National Security Industrial Association on September 15, 1977:

We must continue to maintain a defense posture that permits us to respond effectively and simultaneously to a relatively minor as well as to a major military contingency. The needs of such a posture, over and above the forces we program for Europe are basically:

. a limited number of relatively light land combat forces (such as the three Marine divisions and some light Army divisions); . moderate naval and tactical air forces; and . strategic mobility forces with the range and payload to minimize our dependence on overseas staging and logistical support bases.[13]

This speech was duly recorded and analyzed by the specialized journals and periodicals, but it was largely ignored by the mass media. The RDF did not have any high-level policymakers pushing it at that time. As Jeffrey Record, a defense analyst, wrote several years later: "Little in the way of supporting budgetary initiatives was visible, however, until early 1980, following the seizure of U.S. diplomatic personnel in Tehran in November 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan six weeks later. The pre-Afghanistan defense budgets of the Carter Administration (fiscal years 1978, 1979, and 1980) reflected a continuing preoccupation with U.S. Army, tactical air, and other NATO-oriented forces. . . . This preoccupation vanished in the fiscal 1981 budget." [14]

The U.S. military establishment, however, began to move toward an RDF well before the crises in Iran and Afghanistan. Gen. Bernard Rogers, during his final press conference as the army's chief of staff on June 22, 1979, described the forthcoming creation of a 110,000-man Unilateral Corps.

In August 1979 DOD authorized the creation of a new program called Maritime Prepositioning, which encompassed a combination of airlift and sealift. It envisioned the purchase of new intercontinental transport aircraft (at that time called the CX) and 14 Maritime Prepositioning ships (MPSs) that would carry the equipment and supplies for three 16,500-man marine amphibious brigades. Planning proceeded so rapidly that by October 1 President Carter announced that he had directed the formation of the RDF.

Finally, early in 1980, a new bureaucracy was born. In his FY 1981 annual report, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown announced, "the President and I believe the prospect of renewed turbulence in the Middle East, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, and the possibility of new demands on our non-nuclear posture, require additional precautionary actions. As a consequence, we will accelerate our efforts to improve the capabilities of our Rapid Deployment Forces." [15]

On February 18, 1980, in what turned out to be a controversial and bitterly contested decision, Brown ordered the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), under the command of newly promoted Lt. Gen. Paul X. Kelley, to open its headquarters and begin operating as of March 1. General Kelley's headquarters would come under the command of Gen. Volney Warner, head of REDCOM, at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, unless RDJTF were actually in the field, conducting an operation. When RDJTF was in the field Kelley would come under the direct command of the National Command Authority (NCA) through the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In acknowledgment of the fact that the earliest possible deployment of new prepositioned ships would be in FY 1983, the administration developed the Near-Term Prepositioning Ships program. On March 5, 1980 Deputy Secretary of Defense W. Graham Claytor, Jr., announced that the Pentagon would deploy to the Indian Ocean seven existing cargo ships with enough equipment and supplies for a 10,000-man marine amphibious brigade plus several squadrons of air force fighters. He said that "our objective is to start loading these ships in May, and to have them loaded and on their way to the selected anchorage before the end of June." [16]

Table 1		
Units Designated for the RDF, FY 1982		
Service	Units	Personnel
Army	82d Airborne Division*	16,200
	101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)	17,000
	24th Mechanized Infantry Brigade (Georgia National Guard)	3,600
	Two ranger battalions	1,200
Marine Corps	Three amphibious brigades (15,800 in each brigade)	47,400**
Navy	Three aircraft carrier task forces	Varies***

Air Force	Tactical fighter wings and Airlift wings	Unknown
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Source: Congressional Research Service, Rapid Deployment Forces, CRS Issue Brief 80027, April 3, 1981, p. 4. * Includes combat and combat support units. ** Includes aviation and logistic support elements. *** Escorts and support vessels vary depending on task.

Thus in less than nine months the emphasis on quick-reaction forces had shifted from the army's Unilateral Corps to the RDJTF. During the course of the next year planning continued to quicken. By the time of Secretary of Defense Brown's last annual report, that for FY 1982, the units identified in Table 1 had been designated for use by the RDF.

Designating existing units for use in a non-NATO contingency was not the only initiative undertaken by DOD. The department also worked on related programs involving mobility systems, access to and improvement of bases, exercises, and specialized support. The focus of course continued to be on Southwest Asia. Although they did consider a number of potential non-Soviet contingencies in planning for use of the RDJTF, the planners focused principally on the threat of a large-scale Soviet invasion in the Persian Gulf region.

In 1980 three access agreements were completed that provided for the use of certain local facilities by U.S. forces in emergency situations. These represented limited gains for the United States for which Washington made pledges of substantial military and economic assistance.

The most important of the three agreements was made with Oman owing to that country's proximity to the Straits of Hormuz. The United States gained increased access to the air strip on Masirah island in the Arabian Sea, limited access to several other airfields, and port facilities in Muscat. In return Oman was granted military assistance estimated at \$100 million. However, the agreement places sharp restraints on the United States. In late 1981, for example, during an RDF exercise called Operation Bright Star, the Omanis placed severe restrictions on the RDF units deployed there. The U.S. Marine Corps landing force "was allowed to penetrate only four miles on the Arabian sea coast and remain on Omani territory for only 30 hours." [17]

The negotiation of the access agreements with Kenya and Somalia in East Africa was complicated by tensions between the two states, partly owing to Somalian claims to territory in northeastern Kenya. In June 1980 Kenya granted the United States increased use of port facilities at Mombasa, which was already a regular port of call for the U.S. Navy, and also use of certain airfields. The United States provided Kenya with \$44 million in military assistance and also food shipments. The next month, though, when the United States asked to carry out a small military exercise involving 1,800 men, Kenya refused. U.S.-Kenyan relations were further strained in August, when the United States signed an access agreement with neighboring Somalia.

The agreement with Somalia granted the United States use of air and naval facilities at Berbera, previously available to the Soviet navy, and at Mogadishu. The United States pledged \$40 million in military aid over two years and a further \$125 million in nonmilitary credits.

In addition, a special arrangement with President Sadat of Egypt granted the United States limited use of Ras Banas, located on the Red Sea across from Saudi Arabia, for RDF planes and troops in periods of tension. The United States was required to spend between \$200 and \$400 million to upgrade the facilities.

Also, in summer 1980 an intensive air combat exercise under the code name of Proud Phantom was carried out in Egypt by U.S. fighter squadrons in cooperation with an Egyptian air force squadron. In a logistical exercise held in November a battalion of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and a U.S. Air Force detachment were airlifted to Egypt.

The Reagan Era

By the time Caspar W. Weinberger issued his first annual report to Congress as Secretary of Defense (for FY 1983), the RDJTF was a thriving and bustling bureaucracy. As Weinberger noted: "On October 1, 1981 we chartered the

RDJTF to be a separate joint task force reporting directly to the National Command Authority (NCA) through the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Furthermore, the Commander, RDJTF is now assigned operational planning responsibility for SWA [Southwest Asia] only. This narrowed scope reflects our recognition of the need for a full-time major commander to develop detailed plans for the wide range of possible contingencies in the region." [18]

Upgrading of airlift continued. The Pentagon was procuring additional C-5 cargo aircraft and KC-10 cargo tanker aircraft, improving current aircraft such as the C-141 through wing modification and a stretch modification of the fuselage, and acquiring additional capacity through a restructured Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) enhancement program.

The Pentagon also continued to improve its access to facilities in the Southwest Asia area. The funds for military construction programs in that area for FY 1983-87 totaled nearly \$1.4 billion, a 30 percent increase over the FY 1982-86 levels.

In addition the number of RDJTF-oriented exercises increased. Besides Bright Star, other operations began to be conducted. These included Gallant Knight, Gallant Eagle, Bold Eagle, and Bold Star.

Most important, though, was the fact that a new command structure was being created. In his annual report Secretary of Defense Weinberger noted, "By January 1, 1983, the commander, RDJTF, will become Commander-in-Chief (CINC) of a Unified Command for SWA. Our decision to create a new command structure reflects the importance we have placed upon SWA and our ability to deter or oppose Soviet aggression in the region." [19]

The new command continued to be based at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, although studies were undertaken on the feasibility of locating the headquarters in the SWA region. The command also continued to acquire more troops. The forces available to U.S. CENTCOM are identified in Table 2.

Table 2
Combat Forces Available to U.S. CENTCOM, FY 1985

Army 1 airborne division
1 airmobile/air assault division
1 mechanized infantry division
1 light infantry division
1 air cavalry brigade

Air Force
7 tactical fighter wings**
2 strategic bomber squadrons***

Navy
3 carrier battle groups
1 surface action group
5 maritime patrol air squadrons

Marine Corps
1 1/3 marine amphibious forces*

Source: Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1985, p. 212.

*A marine amphibious force typically consists of a reinforced marine division and a marine aircraft wing (containing roughly three times as many tactical fighter/attack aircraft as an air force tactical fighter wing). **Includes support forces; does not include 3 1/2 tactical fighter wings available as attrition fillers. ***These bombers and associated reconnaissance, command and control, and refueling aircraft make up the U.S. Air Force's Strategic Projection Force.

Although the main CENTCOM headquarters remains at MacDill Air Force Base, DOD has established a small forward

headquarters element (FHE) afloat as part of the naval mid-east force in the Persian Gulf. The flagship of this force is the USS La Salle. As CENTCOM expands, more functions are expected to be transferred to FHE. Unofficially, however, DOD has established a secret base in support of the mid-east force. Although U.S. officials refuse even to discuss the existence of the base, it has been reported that La Salle is docked at a pier permanently leased from Bahrain. Backing it up is what is called the administrative support unit--a minibase manned by fewer than 100 U.S. sailors responsible for providing everything from communications to supplies.[20]

Problems

What are the problems of the RDF? Simply put, the RDF is a force in search of a mission. From the beginning it has never been clear what the RDF is supposed to do. Given the wide range of threats to oil exports, the planners for the RDF have chosen to focus on the worst-case scenario and structure their forces accordingly. Unfortunately, it is not at all clear that even if some state or crisis did threaten to halt the flow of Persian Gulf oil, the RDF could do anything to effectively oppose the threat. As one Congressional Research Service study stated, "The [Reagan] Administration has defined the threat which we must be prepared to meet in the Persian Gulf as that of a direct overland attack by the Soviet Union. While this is the most dramatic potential threat, it is far from the most likely. Moreover, it is extremely doubtful that measures which the Administration proposed to take in response to that threat have much bearing on other, more probable and potentially equally dangerous threats to the security of oil supplies." [21]

The threat of Soviet invasion is just one of many possibilities as a cause of instability in Southwest Asia. The Persian Gulf region itself is torn by longstanding political, religious, and economic conflicts. Border disputes and interstate rivalries are legion: Iran versus Iraq, Iraq versus Kuwait, North Yemen versus South Yemen, South Yemen versus Oman, and the Arab world versus Israel. Furthermore Iran still remains in a state of revolutionary chaos, and Saudi Arabia was shaken to its Muslim core by the 1979 rebel attack on Mecca.

Some people see all moves by the Soviet Union as fitting neatly into a master plan for world domination. This argument ignores the Soviet belief in the need for flexibility in exploiting trends and developments in the world. Nevertheless some people insist on seeing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as presaging a move into Iran and on seeing the Soviet position in South Yemen as a direct threat to Oman and Saudi Arabia.[22]

Is this in fact the most likely threat, and if it is, can the RDF cope with it? While thinking about the RDF it seems useful to try to establish some criteria for governing its use. One scholar, Kenneth J. Waltz, believes a force such as the RDF should be used only when three conditions obtain:

"vital interests are at a risk; non-military measures cannot adequately serve them; and the use of force can reasonably be expected to accomplish our purposes." [23]

Consider the possibility of a Soviet attack against Iran, the most frequently mentioned target. Historically the threat is not new and it does not come from Afghanistan. The Soviets have shared a border with Iran ever since Azerbaijan became a Soviet republic. Thus for nearly 50 years the Iranian oil fields have been within closer striking distance from the Soviet Union than from Afghanistan. Gen. David Jones, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged this, adding that even if the Soviets chose to blockade oil shipments rather than seize areas such as Abadan in the heart of Iran's oil fields, and consequently struck at Bandar Abbas on the Straits of Hormuz (a point more than 100 miles closer to the Afghan border), road conditions and other geographical factors would forbid the more direct route and the invasion would still have to come from Azerbaijan. Yet in all this time the Iranian oil fields have not been invaded.

Tom Gervasi, a former U.S. Army counterintelligence officer, notes, "The point on the Afghan border nearest Abadan is still 800 miles away. In support of a Soviet airdrop, ground columns whether moving from Herat through Meshad in the North or from Zahedan in the South, would have to cover a distance of more than 1,100 miles on Iranian soil, reaching Isfahan and crossing the Zagros mountains before descending to Abadan." [24]

Nevertheless, let us suppose a Soviet invasion of Iran took place. To mount a defense would require ground and air forces--almost all of which are based in the United States--to be flown or shipped to the Persian Gulf. Despite its best efforts, however, the United States does not possess sufficient capabilities to move the RDF in time. This has been

acknowledged by Lt. Gen. Robert C. Kingston, current commander in chief of CENTCOM, who has admitted that "the shortfalls in sealift and airlift are serious." [25] This has been confirmed by Gen. James R. Allen, commander of the Military Airlift Command, who testified before Congress that "when balanced against our overall requirements, our capability is significantly inadequate. In accordance with the data provided in the congressionally mandated mobility study, we have a requirement for 66 million ton-miles per day and our capability today is less than 50 percent of that." [26] Even with additional capability provided by new programs such as the procurement of C-5Bs and KC-10s and CRAF enhancement, General Allen estimated that by the late 1980s the United States will still have a shortfall of 17.5 million ton-miles per day.

It is not hard to understand why. Airline distances from the east coast of the United States to the Persian Gulf exceed 7,000 nautical miles. By sea, over which most of the RDF would be compelled to move, distances range from 8,500 nautical miles by way of the Suez Canal to 12,000 nautical miles by way of the Cape of Good Hope.

A defense of Iran would require prearranged access not only to Iran but also to the Arabian Peninsula. No major U.S. force in Iran could be sustained without the creation of a support infrastructure on the peninsula. Access to air bases in Turkey also is essential for the purpose of mounting an interdiction campaign against Soviet forces pouring through northwestern Iran. It is also presumed the U.S. Navy will be able to hold the Straits of Hormuz against attacks by Soviet Backfire bombers, attack submarines, and tactical air forces operating out of Afghanistan.

As Jeffrey Record has written: "These are heady, indeed mind-boggling, assumptions. No country on the Arabian peninsula has been, to date, willing to permit the United States to station forces on its territory even in peacetime. In a crisis, would the Turks, the Saudis and the Omanis be prepared to expose their countries to potential Soviet retaliation for the sake of assisting the United States in defending Iran? Would the government of Iran even in the face of a Soviet invasion, be prepared to invite onto its own soil forces of the satanic United States?" [27] Furthermore, could the U.S. Navy keep open any narrow body of water within easy reach of massive Soviet airpower?

Realists recognize that having the promise of access to facilities on a contingency basis is no substitute for having U.S.-controlled and operated bases not subject to the political calculations of host governments. It is worth remembering that during the Yom Kippur war of 1973, the United States was denied overflight rights by NATO allies, countries usually regarded as more reliable than nontreaty U.S. "friends" in the Persian Gulf region.

Another obstacle to U.S. military action in the gulf region is that it could be undertaken only at the price of diminished deterrence in Europe and the Far East. This is because most of the ground combat and tactical air force units earmarked for the rapid deployment mission are also assigned the mission of reinforcing NATO. This dual-role mission of most U.S. units that may be employed by CENTCOM presents serious obstacles to planners. No military force can be in two places at the same time, and it is difficult to envisage any hot war between the United States and the Soviet Union being confined to the Persian Gulf or Iran alone. As Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Me.) has noted, "In all probability such a conflict would spill over into at least the European theatre, raising the grim prospect of a war on two independent fronts against an adversary possessing superior forces on both, and enjoying the advantages of interior lines of communication." [28]

The decision to form the RDF from existing military units, most of which were already earmarked for other missions, has served only to widen and exacerbate what was already a substantial gap between U.S. commitments abroad and capabilities to defend them. The decision makes it nearly impossible to deal effectively with a significant military challenge in more than one area at a time. Army Chief of Staff Edward Meyer stated in 1980 that present U.S. force levels are "not sufficient to repel a Soviet assault [in the Persian Gulf] without jeopardizing our NATO commitment." [29]

When contemplating fighting against the Soviet Union in the Persian Gulf, we face a great paradox: Those U.S. forces that are rapidly deployable are least suited for combat in the Persian Gulf; conversely, the ground forces that are most suitable are not rapidly deployable. Because of their greater tactical mobility and firepower, even Soviet airborne forces alone could prove more than a match for early arriving RDF contingents should the decision be made to attack the Soviet forces. Having defined contingencies in the gulf almost exclusively in terms of mobility, Pentagon planners have ignored the fact that strategic mobility in U.S. ground forces has always been purchased at the expense of the

tactical mobility and firepower needed to survive against an armored or mechanized adversary. Currently the U.S. forces that can be delivered by air are limited to the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and 82d Airborne Division and several Marine Corps divisions. Numerically the personnel in these divisions may equal that of seven Soviet airmobile divisions, but here the equality ends. The Soviets have over 2,000 armored vehicles in their force, whereas we have less than 200. Our medium tanks, such as the M-60 and XM-1, can be airlifted only by the C-5A which itself is available only in very limited numbers.

With the exception of the U.S. Army's 24th (Mechanized) Infantry Division and 194th Armored Brigade, none of the U.S. ground force units earmarked for rapid deployment possesses sufficient tanks, self-propelled artillery, and armored personnel carriers to meet even minimum tactical mobility and firepower requirements against a fully mechanized opponent operating in terrain that favors armored maneuver warfare. The Reinforced Marine Division's equipment to be prepositioned afloat in the Indian Ocean by FY 1987 will include only about 150 tanks, 300 armored troop carriers, and 40 self-propelled guns--less than half the numbers of these weapons to be found in a Soviet-model mechanized division.

It has been suggested that a solution to insufficient military capability on the part of the RDF is simply to increase the size of the force. But the cost of increasing the size of the RDF to a higher level would be enormous. The CBO has estimated the cost as \$37.8 billion. Despite the Reagan administration's well-known tolerance for increasing military expenditures, it is doubtful that Congress would accept an increase of this magnitude.

In fact, the prospects for SWA-designated forces are downright grim. Gen. Volney Warner, commander of REDCOM, was quoted as saying "if somebody says we've got to commit the 82nd [Division] or that marine brigade . . . that's not too big a force to lose" to make a stand in the Persian Gulf.[30]

These criticisms, in turn, have led to a new strategy for the RDF. Abandoning the previous concepts of Green Beret-style fire brigades and counterattacking against a Soviet invasion, the RDF would now serve as a sort of tripwire for an open-ended U.S. commitment. As described by General Kelley back in 1981, this new preemptive strategy calls for immediate troop deployment at the first indication of a possible Soviet invasion in order to signal U.S. determination and, it is hoped, discourage any further Soviet moves. "Once you get a force into an area that is not occupied by the other guy," Kelley explained, "then you have changed the whole calculus of the crisis, and he must react to you, not you to him." [31]

Even if the U.S. forces are not likely to have any chance of winning, the implied threat of U.S. escalation is supposed to convince Moscow to gracefully bow out. These indirect hints of the use of nuclear weapons raise serious questions as to just how far Washington is prepared to go in fighting a Persian Gulf war. James R. Schlesinger, a former secretary of defense, has said the Pentagon must consider "the employment, or the threat of employment, of tactical nuclear weapons" in the event of a war in that area.[32] Certainly the Pentagon will have the capability of using nuclear weapons if it so chooses. The Nuclear Weapons Databook reports, "The unified commands with nuclear weapons responsibilities include the European Command, Pacific Command, Atlantic Command, and Central Command (formerly Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force)."[33]

However, in an era when many analysts grant there is rough parity between the United States and the Soviet Union--indeed, when many believe the Soviet Union is superior to the United States--the threat to resort to nuclear weapons does not seem very credible. At best the United States would be threatening the Soviets in their own backyard, where Soviet short- and medium-range missiles could accomplish what most likely only U.S. strategic weapons could; yet to use strategic weapons, in particular to destroy bases on Soviet territory from which their attack on Persian Gulf targets would be launched, would no doubt bring about a Soviet countermove.

More important is the fact that it is doubtful that U.S. forces could reach the gulf region before the Soviet forces. According to one study, even with an intervention farther south, at the Saudi oil fields around Dharan, the Soviets within three to five days could put in place four airborne divisions, four surface-to-air missile units, and one motorized rifle regiment (MRR)--and could land an additional MRR every 27 to 48 hours thereafter. No in-flight or ground refueling would be needed. The study concluded that for any Persian Gulf contingencies, "our ability to react with fire power in a matter of HOURS will be the decisive element in an effective U.S. defense." [34]

There are three problems with the concept of using the RDF as a deterrent to the Soviet Union. First is the diminished-deterrent effect mentioned earlier. The United States is unable to control the strategic setting that will prevail at the time of any deployment of forces. The conditions, which can be referred to as best case and worst case, are of enormous significance because they affect the availability of combat force capability. The point is, force availability is a function of circumstances and events beyond the direct influence of the United States.

A second problem is how the United States and its allies will view a Persian Gulf crisis. Despite the best efforts of the Pentagon, it remains questionable whether our allies would expedite the air deployment of U.S. forces by granting overflight and landing privileges to U.S. aircraft. Even though Congress has lifted its arms embargo on Turkey, for example, there is no guarantee the United States would be allowed to use its air facilities in that country, although such use would be essential to the prosecution of hostilities. In the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Turkey denied the United States use of its bases in that country.

Third, some people worry that a preemptive strategy would raise more political than military problems. Former Air Force Col. E. Asa Bates, for instance, wonders, "Would a President have the courage to order an abrupt pre-emptive action and persuade the Congress and the public to support it?"[35]

Finally, as has been mentioned already, the RDF as it is presently structured is simply not a credible deterrent. Except for certain carefully limited scenarios envisioned by planners, the RDF is not likely to win. And for the purpose of deterrence, credibility is everything.

In addition, the Pentagon, when it is not planning for eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with the Soviets, makes a highly dubious presumption that the RDF will operate in an uncontested benign environment. In short the RDF has insufficient forcible-entry capabilities. Jeffrey Record has argued that in a crisis, the Pentagon's inattention to maintaining those traditional capabilities would encourage the destruction of ports and airfields by potential adversaries.

If a full-scale RDF is unprepared to deal with fighting the Soviet Union, one wonders if it is likely to fare any better in internal conflicts, which are more common. These might include terrorism, nationalism, rebellion, religious fanaticism, and revolution, all of which are far less susceptible to purely military solutions than the problem of local aggression by a foreign power. Although the prospect for success depends in part on what scenario one chooses, the prospect is dim if recent experience is any guide. The Marine Corps forces that served in Lebanon in 1984 were part of the CENTCOM forces. Their tragedy there serves as a reminder of the limited usefulness of military force.

Even some conservatives are beginning to understand this. Columnist William Safire, for example, has written that "the notion that we should treat the Arab regional interests and the European and Japanese customer interests, as an American vital interest is muddle-headed. The blood feud between Iran and Iraq is for those totalitarian states to settle. The oil impact on Western Europe and Japan is for those democratic states to consider and perhaps for them to organize a collective defense. So long as the Soviet Union does not move in, the United States should not move in."[36]

The Reagan administration, however, is not listening. It keeps focusing on military solutions. Recently the United States told Arab countries on the Persian Gulf that it would actively protect the flow of oil from that region if it were allowed to build major military installations in the region. Under this plan American air bases would be established at existing airfields in Saudi Arabia, enabling military forces to act far more quickly than is now possible. The proposal would also increase the possibility of U.S. planes being involved in combat there.[37]

If the use of military force is not a viable alternative there, what can and should the United States and its allies do to maintain access to Persian Gulf oil? The brutal truth is they do not need the oil. Gulf oil shipments are no longer essential for the stability of the world's economy. Gulf oil producers export about eight million barrels of oil a day. If there were a sudden halt in all tanker traffic, more than half of this amount could easily be made up by other leading exporters, such as Mexico, Nigeria, and Venezuela. For six months after such a halt, the shortfall of four million barrels a day would be absorbed as a result of the present oil glut on the international market and expanded production by Saudi Arabia with shipments through its Red Sea ports.[38]

Curiously enough, the well-known advocacy on the part of the Reagan administration for letting the magic of the marketplace prevail seems to have been abandoned when it comes to energy policy. Many current government policies merely continue past government programs, which many people believe are the cause of energy allocation problems.[39] If the Reagan administration were devising policy to match its pronouncements, it would work to eliminate price controls; to eliminate government energy standards for buildings, cars, and appliances; to eliminate forced conversion of utilities to coal; to abolish the special monopoly privileges of public utilities which hold us in subjugation; and to remove the government-imposed roadblocks that stand in the way of alternative technologies such as solar power and gasohol.

It should be noted that the private enterprise system has shown great resilience in adjusting to the recent tanker attacks in the Persian Gulf. Total gulf exports were about 9.8 million barrels a day in early June 1984, a rate probably higher than normal for the second quarter. Insurance rates went up and schedules were disrupted, but oil exporters compensated: Iran discounted up to \$3 a barrel, more than offsetting the \$2.33 per barrel hike in insurance rates.[40]

In short, the United States should not choose between compulsory conservation or forced central planning. Instead, it should allow the price mechanism to operate in an unobstructed way so that the mechanism will mediate between shortages and consumption, and so that it will bring them into line and provide incentives for the private development of alternative sources and technologies.

Instead of being prudent, President Reagan has chosen to continue the risky policy first officially laid out by President Carter in his January 23, 1980 State of the Union address. The continuation of an RDF is a gamble that misjudges the fundamental threats to our national security and demands a unilateral increase in U.S. defense expenditures. And it is a gamble that vastly expands our global commitments in a region that cannot be effectively defended short of the threat of nuclear war.

FOOTNOTES

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