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Security Dilemmas of the Persian Gulf States – Challenges and Military Integration

The Persian Gulf region is very unstable, both from a political and a military perspective. It is where four significant wars have broken out in the past 30 years – Iraq with Iran (1980), Iraq with Kuwait (1990) and an international coalition with Iraq (1991 and 2003). The Persian Gulf region may be considered not to be safe and stable nowadays as well. The defeat of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 eliminated Iraq as a significant threat and a destabilizing force, especially towards states such as Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. New threats, such as the Islamic State, have emerged since then.

Any war scenario would be the worst possible for the Arab nations in the region, i.e., members of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council): Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Any political-military crisis would have serious consequences for the security of these states, as well as for Europe. This is because this region holds a considerable part of the world's oil and natural gas reserves. In the event of a crisis and a disruption to the supply of those reserves, many countries in the world – including European and Asian – would face economic problems.

Common Defence Efforts

States in the region have been trying to increase their security since they first gained independence. The collective defence concept of the Persian Gulf states gives some hope to the possibility that this strategic objective may be achieved. One of the results of this concept was the creation of joint military forces, called the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), which are to become “the armed forces” of the GCC, established in 1981. During the Iraq – Iran war, they were sent in response to the Iranian occupation of the Iraqi Al-Faw Peninsula. In 1990, the PSF began modernizing, rebuilding itself into an infantry division. Their formation began with the creation of a common doctrine and procedures.¹ The efficiency of the GCC members was undoubtedly tested in the international coalition's war against Iraq (1991) as units from these states served mainly within the Joint Forces Command-East.²

¹*Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - The Gulf States*, 14/03/2012. [www.sentinel.janes.com]

²*United Arab Emirates: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division 2004, p. 147.

The next stage in building collective defence was the signing of a multilateral defence agreement during the 21st GCC summit in December 2000. The Joint Defense Council and Military Committee were established. What is more, in the Joint Defense Agreement it was concluded that „any aggression against a member state would be considered as aggression against all the GCC states”.³ In 2001 a joint air-defence project was initiated (code-named “*Hizam al-Taawun*”). The GCC states conduct collaborative military exercises in the territory of one of the members every two years. More and more frequently, joint training facilities are being created. For example, the United Arab Emirates created a training base available to soldiers of the GCC members, pilots from this region practice at the Dhafra base, and with the help of the United States, a new centre for ballistic missile defence training is now being created at the Al Bateen base.

In 2006 – having decided that a joint, standing military contingent was too expensive – a plan to create rapid reaction forces, amounting to no more than 22 thousand troops, dispersed across the territories of the member states, under joint command in Riyadh (a Saudi project, precisely formed and formally accepted in 2009)⁴ was created. These forces were to possess an aerial and naval component, which the initial idea lacked. It is worth remembering that there were some voices in the past, which called for the complete dissolution of the GCC forces which – according to some – died a natural death in 2006.⁵

When, in the beginning of 2011, the government in Bahrain declared a state of emergency in response to lengthy pro-democratic demonstrations by the Shiite majority, an armed intervention by the GCC took place.⁶ As a result, representatives of the member states accepted a strategy to enlarge the PSF to as many as 100 thousand troops, located within the territory of the states from which they came.⁷ That would be an enormous quantitative leap, since these forces amounted to around 40 thousand troops at that time. Additionally, there is an idea to create a second base in Bahrain (to accompany the base in Saudi Arabia) which would allow for the faster pacification of social unrest. In December 2013, during the 34th Summit (taking place in Kuwait City), the GCC announced the formation of a joint military command.

³ C. Koch, *The GCC as a Regional Security Organization*, „Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Reports”, 11/2010, p. 28.

⁴ Information received from Kuwaiti Ministry of Defense, July 2011.

⁵ M.G. Ali Khan, *GCC to Discuss ‘Peninsula Shield’ Expansion*, “Arab News”, 02/11/2006. [www.arabnews.com]

⁶ GCC sent the first group of approximately 1.2 thousand soldiers and security forces from Saudi Arabia (in armored cars) as well as 600 policemen from the United Arab Emirates to this country. They took up key points within the capital of Manama (officially to “protect the critical Bahrain military infrastructure from a foreign intervention”, not because of the internal situation).

⁷ S. Kermali, *The GCC is expanding its army, but for what?*, “Al Jazeera”, 02/07/2011. [www.aljazeera.com]

A larger Peninsula Shield will enable two tasks to be potentially carried out. The first is the creation of effective deterrent forces in the case of a potential war with Iran. Although Tehran does not want a war – like the GCC member states – one cannot rule out the possibility of an indirect threat, i.e., a war between Iran and Israel or the United States. Tehran could then attack the American installations in Bahrain, Qatar or Kuwait. At least, this is what official declarations say.⁸ Iran's naval forces could block the strategically important Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman, thus confining the GCC members within the waters of the Persian Gulf. Iran could then use its mines, coastal anti-ship missiles and its own submarines to disrupt water traffic in the Persian Gulf. Exporting oil would be much more difficult or maybe even paralyzed. Iran could also commit secret acts of sabotage against coastal oil and natural gas extraction and processing installations. Such acts would have significant consequences for the economic situation of the GCC states and also for their national security. Successfully harming the Persian Gulf states' production would lead to a decrease in the world's oil supply.

Another task for the PSF is to “extinguish” all sorts of social unrest. Leaders of the authoritarian states in the region do not wish to share the fate of the dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Such a scenario, however, cannot be ruled out because, although the GCC members went through the Arab spring without any trouble, their internal situation is still uncertain. If the ruler in Bahrain fell, similar occurrences could spread to other GCC states. The conflicts between the Shiites and the Sunnites also play a large role. In order to explain how complicated the situation is, one should look to the GCC meeting in May 2011 when Jordan and Morocco were invited, neither of which are within the territory of the Persian Gulf.⁹ Both states are mainly Sunnite, have reasonably strong armed forces and could provide significant military support to the PSF, in return for financial aid. The idea was supported by Bahrain, which accuses Iran of interfering in its internal affairs and attempting to strengthen Shiite Islam in the territory of the Maghreb and the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ The idea of inviting Iraq – dominated by the Shiites – was rejected in advance, as the GCC is made up of a group of Sunnite states, all of which oppose Shiite Iran, which has a strong influence in Iraq.

It seems that it would be very difficult in practice for the joint forces to carry out the first task. Despite the declarations and the planned quantitative development, the problems remain the same, which are, for instance, a lack of armaments and standardization of procedures, a lack of interoperability, and a small military potential, which is no match for Iran's armed forces. The

⁸*Iran vows to hit US bases if Israel strikes*, “Al Jazeera”, 23/09/2012. [www.aljazeera.com]

⁹*Morocco and Jordan ask to join GCC*, “The National”, 11/05/2011. [www.thenational.ae]

¹⁰ B. Mikail, *Sectarianism After the Arab Spring. An Exaggerated Spectre*, FRIDE – European Think Tank for Global Action, “Policy Brief”, No. 131, June 2012, p. 2.

value of the PSF may be much larger with regard to the other aspect mentioned, i.e., as internal pacification forces.

Conclusions

In summary, there are many factors which – at least potentially – could facilitate a close political and military integration of the GCC states. Among these there are elements such as cultural and religious proximity and already existing organizational frameworks (such as GCC as a platform for cooperation), external threats as well as financial resources. These would allow the GCC states to accomplish even the most ambitious of visions. Nevertheless, in practice, the GCC states so far have been unable to create effective joint military structures or even to adapt a common vision of threats and challenges. The lack of a proper strategic culture and military ethos, strong divisions and rivalry within GCC, an anxiety over domination from Saudi Arabia, particular interests means that despite declarations and a planned build-up of common potential, the GCC states are not a monolith entity and in case of war, a joint military operation under the aegis of the “Peninsula Shield” would have a highly limited value. Of potentially higher value will be a second contingency presented in this paper – an internal pacification force which requires less operational preparation and is less demanding than a military force used during a conventional full-scale war. The use of the “Peninsula Shield” in such a role is essential for the GCC states because social and economic problems have not been solved and a new wave of civil unrest is just a matter of time. What is more, the GCC states cannot rely on the United States in that scenario.

If GCC is not a strong and unified entity as a whole, maybe its strength should be considered as a summary of particular states? The GCC representatives are trying to convince everybody that together they are very strong and capable. The PSF commander, General Mutlaq Bin Salem al-Azima, said the following in March 2011: “GCC forces are, after NATO, the best. No country has F-15s, Tornados, Mirages, and Typhoon jets, as well as the various different kinds of modern tanks, and all forms and varieties of naval craft. There is great coordination [between the Gulf States]; and we [the GCC military forces] have military forces that no state or institute in the world can compete with, with the exception of NATO”.¹¹

Such an approach is typical for decision-makers of the GCC, who view their armed forces and deterrence potential, from the perspective of the quantity of equipment they possess and its technological advancement, rather than their real capability to effectively use it. The question of the real combat value of the GCC states, their effectiveness and the ability to cooperate in the

¹¹ M. al-Saeri, *A Talk with Peninsula Shield Force Commander Mutlaq Bin Salem al-Azima*, “Asharq Alawsat”, 28/03/2011. [www.asharq-e.com]

face of a conflict remains unsolved. Even hundreds of state-of-the-art tanks and jets are not enough in the face of problems such as a low manpower potential and a lack of strategic depth. This weakness may never be overcome. As a result, as Omar al-Shehabi (director of the Gulf Center for Development Policies in Kuwait) notes that despite a high level of military spending, the GCC states need to “rely on Western countries to provide military protection and security”.¹²

The dependence on a foreign workforce, not only in economic terms, but also for the armed forces, is another vulnerable point of most GCC states. The indigenous societies of most of these states are small and lazy because of their wealth, and enlistment is not compulsory (it was in Kuwait not long ago).¹³ A large percentage of the soldiers are foreigners who cannot make use of the wealth, prestige and privileges of the indigenous population. This makes maintaining such an army expensive and its loyalty in case of war would be low. Who would die for his employer after all? In the event of a political-military crisis or a full-scale conventional war, the governing bodies of the GCC members will have to resort to praying and asking the United States for assistance.

¹²*Persian Gulf states 'unable to protect themselves' despite military buildups*, “Stratrisks”, 17 June 2013, [www.stratrisks.com].

¹³ In January 2014 the United Arab Emirates announced that they will introduce compulsory military service for all men over the age of 18 or those who have finished high school and are under 30. Y. Bayoumy, *With eye on troubled region, UAE plans military service for men*, “Reuters”, 19/01/2014, [www.reuters.com].