

Don't let Soviets in Gulf: Weinberger

U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger delivered a report to Congress on June 16, detailing the rules of engagement for U.S. naval vessels in the Persian Gulf. According to the 26-page unclassified version made available to the press ("Report to the Congress on Security Arrangements in the Persian Gulf," excerpted below) the Navy can fire at any entity that locks its radar onto a U.S. ship, as if to target a missile. U.S. warships traveling through the Strait of Hormuz will fully man battle stations; an aircraft carrier will remain in the Indian Ocean year 'round to help protect the tankers; and three combatant ships will be added to the U.S. Navy's current contingent of six warships in the Gulf.

Protecting 11 Kuwaiti ships under U.S. flag is . . . a limited but effective signal of our determination to stand up to intimidation, to support our friends, and to help contain, and eventually end, the Iran-Iraq war.

It is a fact of life that Western economies are heavily dependent on oil for their survival and a further fact that 70% of the world's proven oil reserves are in the Gulf region. . . . Often overlooked, is the fact that the world oil market is one market. If supply is disrupted anywhere, prices rise for *all* consumers and *all* world economies are adversely affected.

For example, as a result of the Iranian revolution and Iraq's attack on Iran, international fear that these developments would disrupt oil supplies sent the prices of a barrel of oil from \$13 to \$31. In short, our vital national interests are at stake in the Gulf. The Soviets, in contrast, do not have a vital interest in that region because they are a net exporter of oil. Their objective in the Gulf is to establish a presence that ultimately enables them to manipulate the movement of Persian Gulf oil. For these reasons, the United States must be present, vigilant, and resolute in the Gulf.

Stability, security, access

. . . The continued expansion of the Iran-Iraq war creates opportunities for the Soviets to expand their influence at our expense, increases the threat of Iranian hegemony over the Gulf Arab states, and endangers freedom of navigation for non-belligerent shipping and the free flow of oil.

1979-80 saw the first serious threat to U.S. interests in the Gulf since the late forties with the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war. Since then, we have faced additional serious challenges, including: Iranian intransigence in ending the war; Iranian determination to export its Islamic fundamentalism "from Teheran to Jerusalem"; continued Iranian intimidation of the smaller Gulf countries, in particular Kuwait, through attacks on shipping and territory; consistent Iranian support for and use of international terrorism; Iranian preparations to deploy Silkworm missiles to threaten non-belligerent shipping and the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz; and Soviet efforts to exploit regional tensions to increase their military presence and political stature in the area.

Target: Kuwait

To counter those threats and safeguard our interests, President Reagan has approved a strategy which has at its focal point a major international diplomatic effort to end the Iran-Iraq war. . . .

Last September, Iran began deliberately targeting Kuwait . . . in part because of Kuwaiti logistical and financial support for Iraq in the war. Iran has refused to end the war except on its own terms. Such continued aggression by Iran, if left unchecked, seriously threatens U.S. interests. . . .

Our reflagging arrangement with Kuwait is a limited response to a very real threat. Should Kuwait or the other Arab Gulf states be left without support in the face of Iranian intimidation, Iran's resources in the entire Gulf would increase significantly. Moreover, should we not be responsive to Kuwait's request for help, the Soviets will be quick to supplant us, thereby positioning themselves to become the protector of the Gulf.

. . . A retreat now by the United States would have a profoundly negative effect, raising basic questions in the minds of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states about the character of our commitments and sending a signal to the Iranians and Soviets that our interests in the Gulf must no longer be vital.

The risks to U.S. naval forces in the Gulf from these threats are low. The risks involved in protecting U.S.-flagged vessels are moderate. The protection plan, which calls for the Navy to escort flagged vessels, and the military resources we have deployed to implement this plan, were determined by the level of threat such shipping faces. . . . There are some risks, particularly from unconventional threats, such as Iranian terrorism or sabotage.

In proceeding with implementation of this protection plan the President has emphasized . . . the need for careful military planning and preparation; adequate cooperation from the allies. . . .

Another critical element

Another critical element of U.S. deterrent strategy in the region includes helping regional states acquire the capability

to deter, and if necessary, defend themselves against external aggression, specifically Iranian threats and intimidation. For this reason, the administration places an extremely high value on its security assistance relationships, including arms sales, with the moderate Arab Gulf states, and in particular Saudi Arabia. . . . Recognizing the key role Saudi Arabia plays in regional security, U.S. willingness to help the Saudis meet their legitimate defense needs sends a very strong signal, both to our friends and others, of the level of U.S. commitment and resolve to protect our interests in the region.

We understand the risks involved in our strategy. . . . But we are convinced that the risks of alternative courses of action—or inaction—are even greater. . . . The inadvertent attack on the *USS Stark* last month also has heightened perceptions that the situation in the Gulf is more dangerous now than before the incident occurred. In addition, it has raised the public profile of our military presence in the Gulf and, coupled with the ongoing debate about U.S. protection for Kuwaiti tankers, has led to an increase in vituperative Iranian rhetoric. There is no risk-free way to safeguard our vital interests. . . .

Vital chokepoint

Since the Gulf is a region of vital economic importance to the Free World and a potential chokepoint for vital sea transport, we have a strategic interest in ensuring that it does not come under the domination or hegemony of a power hostile to the United States, to our Western allies, or our friends in the region. Should this occur, a hostile power would be positioned to move against other regional countries, e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Turkey. . . . The region is . . . clearly vulnerable to Soviet meddling.

We do not want the Soviet Union either to control directly or increase its influence over the region. We have already seen evidence, including Afghanistan, that the Soviets are eager to exploit the opportunity created by the Iran-Iraq war and the perception of faltering U.S. interests to insert themselves into the Gulf. . . . The Persian Gulf has long been a strategic objective of the Soviet Union. . . . Iran's expansionism is another danger. . . . The effects of either Soviet or Iranian hegemony in the Gulf would be a strategic setback to U.S. and Western interests.

In 1986, about 30% of OECD Europe's oil consumption came from the Persian Gulf; the comparable figure for Japan was about 60%. This Western dependency is expected to increase as non-Gulf reserves are depleted. Likewise, while only 6% of U.S. oil consumption originated in the Persian Gulf in 1986, this level is expected to rise significantly in the future as our own reserves decline. . . .

In sum, the Soviets have long-term ambitions in the Gulf and they can be counted on to pursue them. The way the Soviets define their options . . . will depend in large part on Western and U.S. steadfastness, our willingness to protect our own and Free World interests, and the security and independence of our many friends in the Gulf.

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