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Gulf crisis ripples across the globe

By Brian M Downing
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The United States has shifted its attention away from Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world and firmly fixed it on Iran. Along with this has come a buildup of naval, air and ground forces to pressure and perhaps even attack Iran over fears its nuclear program might be designed to build a nuclear weapon.

Allocating military might into the Gulf entails removing it from other parts of the globe which may embolden actors in various parts of the world to act more aggressively. They need not act in concert with Iran nor out of any sympathy for it. They may simply sense an opening as the US military becomes more overstretched.

Historical examples of such actions abound. As Britain and France plunged into World War II, Japan seized their colonies in Southeast Asia. After the war, as the Iron Curtain descended in Central Europe, North Korea - with Soviet encouragement - drove into South Korea.

More recently, as the US and its European allies were mired in Iraq, Russia drove into Georgia, ably conveying its displeasure at North Atlantic Treaty Organization expansion. The world today is so laden with conflicts that one or more of them will likely assert themselves amid the ongoing Iran crisis.

East and Southeast Asia

The Gulf buildup has reduced the number of ships assigned to, or available for reinforcing, US flotillas along China's periphery. It is now the most important region in US global strategy, at

least in the long term, as it has been the scene of numerous worrisome actions by the Chinese navy.

Factions inside the Chinese state - the armed forces foremost among them - are annoyed at continued US hegemony in the Gulf and along China's periphery as well. They will see an opportunity to enhance national prestige, consolidate their institutional interests at the outset of an internal political transition, secure sea lanes and offshore drilling tracts, and ease US pressure on a vital ally. This would be an important step toward establishing their long-term geopolitical goal of their own East Asian hegemony.

Upon building consensus in the state, the Chinese navy could return to menacing ships of East Asian countries, surreptitiously planting flags on disputed islands, and otherwise asserting territorial claims. Naval exercises near Taiwan might be another show of force - one welcome in Tehran though almost nowhere else.

There will be considerable opposition to such measures within the Chinese state as more business-oriented factions seek to prevail over more power-oriented ones. After all, the former will insist, similar actions last year led to sharp rebukes from world capitals and a burst of security talks from South Korea to Vietnam to India - none of which was helpful in advancing national interests, military or economic.

North Korea is another possible source of disconcerting action in East Asia. The new leader, Kim Jong-eun, is a boyish and inexperienced figure whose image has to be embellished by repeated accounts of improbable deeds proffered to a credulous public. Less mythic acts may come early in his rule.

His father, Kim Jong-il, secured his son's succession by allowing the military to embark on aggressive actions against South Korea, including the sinking of a frigate and the shelling of an island. Kim Jong-eun may wish to cement his support in the military by allowing them another round of provocative actions. Though it might be said that the military may wish to cement its control over him by demanding latitude of action.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan region

The volatile countries to Iran's east are potent sources of additional trouble for the US. Iran has considerable support in the Tajik and Hazara populations of the north, but those peoples are supportive of the US presence in Afghanistan and will do nothing to discourage the US from staying on there.

The Taliban receive some arms from Iran and may be inclined to mount attacks, sympathetic or merely opportunistic. The Taliban are entering negotiations with the US but can scarcely be seen as forswearing violence in the meantime. In any event, the Taliban take cues from the Pakistani army.

A deceitful partner under ordinary circumstances, the Pakistani army is still angry over the US's Osama bin Laden raid of last May and the attack on an army outpost near the Afghan frontier

that killed 24 soldiers last November. Further, Pakistan has correct (though often strained) relations with Iran based on oil and gas purchases and a planned pipeline.

Pakistan could further restrict US/International Security Assistance Force convoys into Afghanistan or increase the tempo of hostile fire incidents with ISAF and Afghan troops which US soldiers report are almost routine parts of patrols along the AfPak frontier.

Two factors, however, limit the aggressiveness of any Pakistani response. First, Pakistan's ties to Iran are weaker than those to the US's chief ally in the Gulf - Saudi Arabia. Pakistan enjoys generous subsidies from Riyadh, which sees Pakistan as generally opposed to Iranian influence in Afghanistan, a source of anti-Shi'ite mercenaries in Saudi employ, and a vital partner in any Saudi nuclear program that might arise.

Second, any disruption from Pakistan would be unlikely to detract from US naval and air assets in the Gulf. They would only affect US ground forces in Afghanistan and hence would have little strategic meaning in the crisis.

Militant groups

Various parts of the world from North Africa to Southeast Asia face armed groups. Some are purely local in nature while others have ties to kindred groups elsewhere. Most if not all are opportunistic in their timing and choice of targets, and ever eager to grab world headlines.

Al-Qaeda is one such opportunistic group comprising, if only barely, a loose network of groups in the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, AfPak and Indonesia. The recent US assertion that Iran is harboring al-Qaeda personnel was intended to suggest operational ties with Tehran but it might also imply prospects for sympathetic terrorist attacks, though this is doubtful.

Iran interned several al-Qaeda figures as they fled Afghanistan following the Taliban's defeat in 2001 - a campaign in which Iran assisted the US, it might be noted. In early 2003, Iran offered to exchange them for members of the Mujahideen-e Khalq - a group harbored by Saddam Hussein in Iraq and branded as terrorists in Tehran and Washington alike. The US declined to make the swap and recently, amid the US buildup in the Gulf, Iran released the al-Qaeda personnel.

The al-Qaeda network is unable to mount a meaningful strategic diversion, but it could launch a number of opportunistic attacks that would add to global concerns about the wisdom of the showdown in the Gulf. Attacks might also cause a few already wavering publics to further question their governments' support for an impending war.

Sub-Saharan Africa, a region rich in resources and divided into western and Chinese spheres, is increasingly afflicted by religious and ethnic conflict. The recent influx of weapons and former mercenaries from Libya may worsen those conflicts.

The price of Kalashnikovs has dropped 50% in local markets since the uprising in Libya and the opening of many arsenals there. Furthermore, many of the Tuareg and other mercenaries in Muammar Gaddafi's now-disbanded army are looking to the south for opportunity. Tuareg unrest

is presently making itself felt in Mali and their kin in Algeria, Niger and Burkina Faso have local grievances and hopes for greater autonomy.

South Sudan seceded from the north in July of last year and since then has faced skirmishes with the north. South Sudan's recent decision to cease using an oil pipeline leading north and to build a new one running south will lead to greater conflict. This will attract mercenaries and millenarian fighters such as the Lord's Resistance Army - a group the US and Uganda have been countering for several years now.

South Sudan's oil went chiefly to China, which will be watching ongoing military developments, ever wary that South Sudan is aligning with Western-backed countries such as Kenya, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Uganda. Those countries are currently fighting al Shabaab groups in Somalia, who, though on the run, have proven themselves capable of opportunistic attacks in the region.

Shi'ite unrest may also abound in the Gulf, with varying amounts of guidance from Tehran. Saudi Arabia's Shi'ites in the east and southwest are daring to raise their voices after being quickly silenced last year. Shi'ites in Bahrain will mark the anniversary of the suppression of last year Arab Spring unrest on February 14. And the Shi'ite majority in Iraq may attempt to squash the Sunni-directed violence in the country.

In its effort to halt the Iranian nuclear program, the world may well see conflicts and dangers erupting in many parts of the world, which, again, may be sympathetic to Iran or merely opportunistic. Further unrest will underscore the problem of US over-commitment and lead to strategic and fiscal debates in Washington as to the size of US forces and the judiciousness of their use.