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Debating US Military Strategy in the Persian Gulf: What is the Way Forward?

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Abstract

Should the US strategy toward the Gulf be one of offshore balancing or one of deep engagement? The debate on US grand strategy lacks solid empirical ground. I address this issue by providing a study of the US' role as the Gulf's security provider. I investigate the extent to which distinct military strategies have affected the stability of the region. My findings show no clear correlation between increased US military presence and a reduction in either the incidence or the intensity of regional armed conflict, possibly lending credibility to the arguments of the advocates of a strategy of offshore balancing.

Keywords: US foreign policy; military strategy; offshore balancing; deep engagement; Persian Gulf; armed conflict.

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Introduction

In a world of limited resources, strategy is about making choices.

The 2007-08 global financial crisis has only made the finite nature of current resources more apparent. Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger (2015) has recently argued that "The United States has not faced a more diverse and complex array of crises since the end of the Second World War". (2015). In a context of limited resources and mounting security threats, making the **right** choices becomes of paramount importance. Moreover, as noted by James Goldgeier and Jeremi Suri (2015), a good strategy "allows powerful governments to become forward-looking international agenda-setters, avoiding the all-too-frequent tendency to react to emerging crises in piecemeal fashion" (2015, 35). Sound strategic planning is also necessary to make sense of a very complex international system by defining threats and opportunities, specifying interests, and reordering priorities.

In today's United States, this is illustrated by the especially vibrant debate surrounding the future of US grand strategy. Although there are shades of difference among proponents of alternative grand strategies, two perspectives have consistently dominated the current debate: offshore balancing versus deep engagement. At the core of this debate there is a profound disagreement on the benefits deriving from continued US security commitments abroad. Supporters of offshore balancing and of deep engagement differ on the extent to which the United States should be directly responsible for guaranteeing international security. This debate also includes the discussion of significant political and economic aspects of grand strategy, however, both camps recognize the special importance of the future nature of US military strategy.

In fact, the strategy of offshore balancing calls for the reduction of US security commitments abroad by mainly scaling back US forward military presence and devolving the primary responsibility for maintaining regional stability to local actors. Supporters of offshore balancing include Christopher Layne (2012), Stephen Walt (2011), Barry Posen (2013), and Paul Pillar (2016). Conversely, the strategy of deep engagement calls for the continuation of US global security commitments by primarily maintaining US forward military presence and remaining directly responsible for the stability of regions beyond the Western Hemisphere. Advocates of deep engagement include Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, William C. Wohlforth (Brooks et al. 2013), and Hal Brands (2015).

There is abundant evidence showing that the military component of grand strategy is critical to both the strategy of offshore balancing and of deep engagement. Given its centrality in the debate on the future of US grand strategy, I decided to make US military strategy, and especially US force posture, the primary object of this analysis.

Despite their many differences, people in both camps have consistently identified the Persian Gulf as one of the three regions, along with Europe and East Asia, vital to US national security (Thornberry and Krepinevich, Jr. 2016) (Brands 2015) (Kissinger 2015). This domestic consensus on the strategic importance of Gulf stability has also been reflected in the policy documents of successive US administrations. A few recent examples will prove this point. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush (1991) issued National Security Directive 54 in which he declared that the United States was 'committed to promote the security and the stability of the Persian Gulf.' Less than a decade later, President Bill Clinton's 1998 National Security Strategy Document read: "in Southeast Asia, the United States remains focused on deterring threats to regional stability" (Clinton 1998, 52. More recently, President Barack Obama (2015), in his 2015 National Security Strategy Document, repeatedly identified 'stability' as a major objective of US foreign policy toward the Gulf. This time-honored commitment to the stability of the Persian Gulf has continued to demand special attention also during the current debate on the future of US grand strategy.

On the one hand, supporters of a strategy of deep engagement, like Brooks et al. (2013) argue that a robust US forward military presence "reduces the risk of a dangerous conflict" (2013, 137). The United States "security commitments deter states with aspirations to regional hegemony from contemplating expansion and dissuade U.S. partners from trying to solve security problems on their own in ways that would end up threatening other states" (Brooks et al. 2013,

137). Brands (2015) concurs and notes that reducing US security commitments "would liberate the more destabilizing influences that U.S. policy had previously stifled. Long-dormant security competitions might reawaken as countries armed themselves more vigorously; historical antagonisms between old rivals might reemerge in the absence of a robust U.S. presence and the reassurance it provides" (Brands 2015, 20).

On the other hand, advocates of a strategy of offshore balancing maintain that their own brand of grand strategy best serves the US national interest. Walt writes that 'Offshore balancing is the ideal grand strategy for an era of American primacy. It husbands the power upon which this primacy rests and minimizes the fear that this power provokes' (Walt 2005). Posen (2013) agrees and criticizes deep engagement by saying that "it makes enemies almost as fast as it slays them, discourages allies from paying for their own defense, and convinces powerful states to band together and oppose Washington's plans, further raising the costs of carrying out its foreign policy" (2013, 2)

Given the enduring relevance of the Persian Gulf to the debate about the future of US grand strategy, this study specifically focuses on the US military strategy toward this region. Arguments advancing the adoption of one or the other strategy abound. However, these arguments have rarely been subjected to the rigorous empirical testing that is necessary to fully appreciate their soundness. Although some authors have used particular historical cases to advance their preferred strategy, the use of a small number of examples without establishing clear selection criteria has often resulted in an exercise of cherry picking; that is of considering only those cases that conform to one's own perspective. Moreover, even when considering the same historical example, authors have commonly accused their critics of making historically dubious claims or of misreading history (Brands and Feaver 2016). The undesirable outcome has been a debate characterized by ambiguity and weak empirical testing.

This article addresses both these weaknesses by providing a comprehensive and evidence-based study of the longstanding role of the United States as the Persian Gulf's security provider. To what extent have distinct US military strategies affected the overall stability of the region? Is there a causal relationship between the nature and magnitude of US security commitments to the Gulf (independent variable) and regional stability (dependent variable)? The existence of a positive relationship between the independent and the dependent variables (i.e. more security commitments equal more regional stability or less security commitments equal less regional stability) would lend credibility to the supporters of deep engagement. The lack of such a relationship (i.e. change in the nature and magnitude of security commitments has none or negligible effects on regional stability) would strengthen the argument for offshore balancing.

Here, some qualifications are in order. By focusing on US security commitments, I am not arguing that US military presence is the sole variable influencing Gulf stability. I acknowledge that other variables also have affected regional stability. For example, the overall structure of the international system (bipolar during the Cold War and unipolar afterward) plausibly influenced the politics of the Gulf as well. Moreover, I recognize that some of the conflicts considered in

my work pre-existed US direct involvement in the region. However, acknowledging as much does not diminish the relevance of this analysis. My intention is not to claim that US security commitments are the only variable capable of shaping regional stability. Nor is it to advance the idea that the United States is responsible for conflicts that sometimes predated US engagement in the Gulf. The specific purpose of this analysis, instead, is to assess whether, among these multiple variables and longstanding conflicts, distinct US military strategies have had a significant impact on regional stability. Have distinct US military strategies increased Gulf stability? Or have US strategies been mostly irrelevant? Answering to these questions has not only an academic interest *per se*. It also provides critical information to those policymakers responsible for designing future US grand strategies.

The recent election of a new US president only makes the need for this study more acute. In fact, the new US administration will face crucial decisions regarding its future overseas posture and policies, making a thorough exploration of the available strategic options imperative.

Empirical Testing

In order to assess the significance of US security commitments for the stability of the Persian Gulf, I have first to operationalize the dependent and independent variables. Furthermore, I need to set clear temporal and geographical boundaries to my analysis.

Let us start with the independent variable (US security commitments). National leaders' public statements and official documents could represent a first indicator of a state's commitment to regional stability. However, political commitments alone may not be an accurate indicator since national leaders may eventually prove reluctant to take action to enforce them. In contrast, force posture, especially the nature and size of forward military deployments, can be a better indicator of a state's commitment to a region's stability. Rovner and Talmadge (2014) also make a similar argument, "Promises not backed by capable military forces are inherently incredible; states may view them as evidence of wishful thinking or cheap talk. On the other hand, a sufficient military presence can guarantee public goods even if official policy statements are tepid or unclear" (2014, 549) In fact, by forward deploying military assets and personnel, national leaders signal that they are ready to risk costly national resources, other than political credibility, to enforce their foreign policies. For this reason, I decided to rely on US force posture as the main indicator of the United States' commitment to the stability of the Gulf.

To study US force posture in the Gulf, I apply a revised version of Rovner and Talmadge's typology of force posture options (Rovner and Talmadge 2014). The first option is called "light presence". In this case, forward deployed forces do not have the sufficient capability in themselves to repel aggression by a serious challenger. Their main operational function is to provide early warning in the event of aggression and to maintain an in-theater logistical structure capable of accommodating reinforcements if such an aggression occurs. Secondly, a state could opt for "heavy presence". This type of force posture corresponds to the deployment of a permanent and

overwhelming concentration of military power. Its primary operational function is to raise the costs of aggression so high that it is likely to deter any potential challenger from attacking. "Absence" is the third option. This scenario envisions either the total lack of forward deployed forces or the presence of only token forces with no meaningful operational function. To the three types identified by Rovner and Talmadge I add a fourth one: "exceptionally heavy presence". Contrary to the previous three, which are intended to be peacetime ideal types of force posture, this fourth option describes a situation where a state forward deploys military forces with the exceptional function of occupying, for an extended period of time, the territory of a hostile state.

Rather than being primarily based on the precise size of forward military deployments, this typology of force posture options reflects the distinct operational functions of such deployments. Furthermore, this typology conveniently encompasses the full-range of variations in US force posture in the Gulf since 1971.

The variation in US force posture in the Gulf is indeed the rationale I use to distinguish the five periods of time under analysis. In this way, I am able to link a particular type of force posture to a specific level of regional stability at a given time. This, in turn, will allow me to assess whether or not higher levels of US security commitments, measured in terms of force posture, correspond to higher levels of regional stability. Accordingly, each period begins with an event that markedly changed the posture of US military forces in the Gulf.

The first period goes from 1971¹ to 1979 and it is characterized by "absence". In 1971, Britain ended its military presence east of Suez, but the United States did not immediately replace it as the region's dominant security provider. For the purpose of this analysis, the decade of the 1970s has a distinct practical function. It represents a period of transition from British to US hegemony in the Gulf. Since the years of the 1970s feature the absence of a clear hegemonic actor they can be considered as a "control-case" in relation to the subsequent periods characterized instead by US dominance. The second period includes the years from 1980 to 1991 and it features "light presence". In 1980 the Jimmy Carter administration established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force; a new military force specifically tasked with guaranteeing the security of the Persian Gulf. The third period spans from 1992 to 2002 and it is characterized by "heavy presence". In the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the United States decided to maintain a large permanent military presence in the region. The fourth period runs from 2003 to 2011. During this time, US force posture is "exceptionally heavy presence" as a direct consequence of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The fifth and final period covers the years from 2012 to 2016. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011 marked the return to a "heavy presence" of US military forces in the Gulf.

With regard to the dependent variable, I take the level of armed conflict as the primary indicator of regional stability. The already-mentioned US national security documents clearly

1 The year 1971 is the starting point of my analysis because it represents a milestone in the contemporary international relations of the Persian Gulf. In fact, in 1971 Britain formally ended its decades-long military presence in the region and Britain's former Gulf protectorates of Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman officially became independent states. More importantly, Britain's withdrawal marked the beginning of a steady increase in US security commitments in the Gulf.

show that stability is a shorthand for the overarching US goal of maintaining a regional status quo favorable to US interests. Since armed conflict is without doubt a major source of change in the status quo, it is sensible to use the level of armed conflict as a measure of regional stability. In order to carry out my over-time analysis of armed conflict levels in the Persian Gulf I rely on the definitions and dataset provided by the reputable Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia).

According to UCDP, an armed conflict is "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year" (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia) (Uppsala University 2015). This definition includes three different types of armed conflict: interstate conflict (among two or more governments), intrastate conflict (between a government and a non-government party, with no interference from other countries), and intrastate conflict with foreign involvement (between a government and a non-government party where the government side, the opposing side, or both sides, receive troop support from other governments that actively participate in the conflict). Meanwhile, the UCDP definition excludes non-state conflict (between two organized armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state) and one-sided violence (the use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organized group against unarmed civilians) (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia). Another distinction that I use in my analysis is that between "war" and "minor conflict". UCDP regards an armed conflict as a war if it reaches at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a given year. Instead, an armed conflict is considered "minor" if the yearly number of battle-related deaths is between 25 and 999.

Time and again I have made general references to the region of the Persian Gulf. Now it is time to set clear geographical boundaries to this particular area of the world. In fact, the identification of the countries included in the Persian Gulf is indispensable for the measurement of both the independent and the dependent variables. Since this analysis is primarily concerned with regional security issues, I found the concept of regional security complex especially useful. Barry Buzan et al. (1998) described a regional security complex as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (1998, 201). In simpler terms, a regional security complex should include states that share both geographical proximity and intense security interdependence. F. Gregory Gause III offered a version of the Persian Gulf as a regional security complex that comprised Iran, Iraq, and the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Gause, III 2010). I argue that Yemen should also be part of this list. In fact, recent security developments in the country, especially the rise of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Houthis insurgency, have demonstrated, once again, how events in Yemen can have a significant impact on the security of the whole region. Therefore, my version of the Persian Gulf as a regional security complex includes nine countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Yemen.

The Twin Pillars Policy, 1971-1979

The United States had long relied on Britain to safeguard Western interests in the Persian Gulf. The full withdrawal of British military forces in 1971 raised the question of whether the United States should replace Britain as the region's dominant security provider (Gause, III 1985). US officials quickly dismissed such a possibility. In fact, at that time the United States was completely tied up with its military involvement in the war in Vietnam. Moreover, both the US Congress and the US public opinion had grown increasingly disenchanted with US military interventions abroad. Therefore, international and domestic considerations led US policy makers to rule out the possibility of taking new security commitments in the Gulf (Macris 2012). Instead, the United States looked at regional allies to protect Western interests. Such a decision took the form of the Twin Pillars policy under the administration of Richard Nixon. In keeping with the Twin Pillars policy, the United States encouraged Iran and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia to take responsibility for Gulf stability. In particular, the United States assisted Iran and Saudi Arabia through arms sales, training, and advisory and technical support (Kissinger 1979). Tellingly, US arms sales to Iran went up from \$103,6 million in 1970 to \$552,7 million in 1972. Similarly, US arms sales to Saudi Arabia increased from \$15,8 million in 1970 to \$312,4 million in 1972 (Gause, III 1985).

With regard to my typology of force posture options, the Twin Pillars policy resulted in a time of "absence" of forward deployed US military force. Throughout the 1970s, in fact, US military presence in the Gulf remained minimal. It basically consisted of a token naval presence of three ships that had been stationed off the coast of Bahrain since World War II (Hurewitz 1974). According to the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, during the years from 1971 to 1979, the Persian Gulf experienced seven armed conflicts: one interstate, four intrastate, and two intrastate with foreign involvement. Five of them are recorded as minor conflicts, one as a war, and one as shifting over time between the two categories (Table 1).

Table 1: (1971–1979)

Actors	Type of Conflict	Intensity
Government of Oman <i>vs.</i> PFLO*	Intrastate with foreign involvement	Minor
North Yemen <i>vs.</i> South Yemen	Interstate	Minor
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> KDP*, PUK*, KDP-QM*	Intrastate with foreign involvement	War/Minor
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> APCO*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> KDPI*	Intrastate	War
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> MEK*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of North Yemen <i>vs.</i> NDF*	Intrastate	Minor

Source: Prepared by the author (2017). *PFLO (Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman); KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq); PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan); KDP-QM (Kurdistan Democratic Party-Provisional Command); APCO (Arab Political and Cultural Organization); KDPI (Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran); MEK (People's Mujahedin of Iran); NDF (National Democratic Front)².

2 Comments: The main unit of the UCDP data set is an 'Armed Conflict'. Each conflict is listed in the database and given a unique ID code. The temporal aspect of a conflict is not addressed by the UCDP definition; hence, two conflict episodes over the same incompatibility are assigned the same ID regardless of the time separating them. This is why the conflict 'Government of Iraq v. KDP, PUK, KDP-QM' over the incompatibility 'Kurdistan' is counted as a single event whereas the conflict 'Government of Iran *vs.* APCO, KDPI, and MEK' over three distinct incompatibilities (Arabistan, Kurdistan, and government) is counted as three events. For further clarifications refer to http://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/124/124920_1codebook_ucdp_prio-armed-conflict-dataset-v4_2015.pdf (Themnér 2015).

The Carter Doctrine, 1980-1991

The events of 1979 brought about enormous change to the Persian Gulf and to US policy in the region. The violent overthrow of the pro-West shah of Iran and his replacement with an anti-Western, and especially anti-American, Islamist regime made the US policy of the Twin Pillars no longer feasible. The Iranian Revolution also led to the second oil crisis in less than a decade, causing manifest concern in Washington about the security of Gulf oil supplies. Moreover, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan put the Red Army in the position of dangerously threatening US vital interests in the Gulf. These combined events called for a new US approach to the region.

US President Carter outlined this new approach in his 1980 State of the Union Address. In his speech, Carter explicitly committed the US armed forces to the stability of the Gulf. The Carter Doctrine led to the creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force that, under the Ronald Reagan administration, evolved into a permanent unified command, US Central Command (CENTCOM). Overall, the new approach consisted of building base infrastructure and prepositioning equipment, rather than permanently posting US forces in the region (Gholz and Press 2010). The United States would use conventional naval and air assets to transport troops to the Gulf if necessary (Kupchan 1987).

Then-CENTCOM Combatant Commander General George B. Crist explained: "We do not seek permanent ground or air bases in the region. If we have to send US ground forces into the CENTCOM area of responsibility, the situation will be serious indeed" (Hajjar 2002, 18)³ One of such serious situations presented itself in the form of the so-called 'tanker war', as part of the larger conflict between Iraq and Iran of the 1980s. On this occasion, the United States agreed to both reflag a number of Kuwaiti tankers and to deploy a large naval force to escort them in and out of the Gulf (Russell 1999).

During this time US force posture in the Persian Gulf was one of "light presence". Despite proving insufficient to deter Saddam Hussein from attacking Kuwait in 1990, US forward deployed forces in the region fulfilled their primary operational function. In fact, they provided the critical in-theater logistical infrastructure that allowed the United States to respond to Iraq's aggression and to restore the *status quo ante*. Data from the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia reveal that there were eight armed conflicts in the Persian Gulf between 1980 and 1991: two interstate and six intrastate. Three of them qualify as minor conflicts, two as wars, and three as shifting over time between the two categories (Table 2).

The Dual Containment Policy, 1992–2002

Three significant changes in the early 1990s led to the revision of US policy toward the Gulf. The first of such changes occurred in US politics. The H.W. Bush administration, first, and the Clinton administration, later, clearly singled out Iran and Iraq as the two major threats

3 Sami Hajjar, U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2002), 18.

Table 2: (1980–1991)

Actors	Type of Conflict	Intensity
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> APCO*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> MEK*	Intrastate	War/Minor
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> KDPI*	Intrastate	War/Minor
Iran <i>vs.</i> Iraq	Interstate (US involvement)	War
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> SCIRI*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> KDP, PUK*	Intrastate	War/Minor
Iraq <i>vs.</i> Kuwait	Interstate (US involvement)	War
Government of North Yemen <i>vs.</i> NDF*	Intrastate	Minor

to US interests in the Gulf. In addition, US policymakers expressed frustration with previous US policies that had relied primarily on local partners to guarantee stability in the region. This change in US politics led to the adoption of the policy of Dual Containment; a policy that aimed at containing, and eventually weakening, the ‘backlash states’ of Iran and Iraq (Lake 1994). The landscape of international politics also underwent a momentous change. The formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 effectively eliminated a critical constraint to the ability of the United States to project its military power abroad. The final change took place in Persian Gulf politics. In the wake of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf countries become more forthcoming in accepting the stationing of US military assets and personnel in their territory.

To be implemented, the US policy of Dual Containment needed a shift in US force posture: from occasional and temporary troops deployments to a permanent military presence in the region. CENTCOM’s Strategic Plan II, 1997–1999 defined US force posture as one of ‘near continuous presence’ that could better “deter conflict, promote stability, and facilitate a seamless transition to war, if required” (US Central Command 1997, 5) Accordingly, the United States signed defense and access agreements with a number of Gulf countries. Among other things, such agreements provided for the deployment of 5,000 troops in Kuwait; the upgrade of US naval presence in Bahrain to fleet status (which now included the presence of an aircraft carrier); equipment prepositioning and access to airbases and ports in Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman; the stationing of 10,000 off-shore military personnel; and the presence of 5,000 air force servicemen and servicewomen with the specific task of enforcing no-fly and no-drive zones in Iraq (Rovner and Talmadge 2014).

The large-footprint nature of US force posture during Dual Containment was unmistakable. In March 2001, CENTCOM Combatant Commander General Tommy R. Franks noted that, on any given day, the United States had a forward deployed force of between 18,500 and 25,000 military personnel in its area of responsibility (with the majority of them operating in the Gulf) (US House Armed Services Committee 2001).

According to my typology, between 1992 and 2002 the United States opted for a force posture of “heavy presence”. This decision resulted in the forward deployment in the Persian

Gulf of a permanent and overwhelming US force whose main operational function was to deter any potential aggressor, in particular Iraq and Iran, from challenging the status quo. The UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia identified a total number of six armed conflicts during these years: one interstate, four intrastate, and one intrastate with foreign involvement. Five of them are recorded as minor conflicts while one as a war (Table 3).

Table 3: (1992–2002)

Actors	Type of Conflict	Intensity
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> MEK*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> KDPI*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> SCIRI*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> PUK*	Intrastate with foreign involvement (US involvement)	Minor
Government of Yemen <i>vs.</i> Southern separatists	Intrastate	War
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> US-led coalition (No-Fly Zones)	Interstate (US involvement)	Minor

The Occupation of Iraq, 2003–2011

Al Qaeda's attacks of 11th September 2001 profoundly changed the US perception of the potential threats emanating from the Persian Gulf. Officials in the George W. Bush administration became especially worried about a nightmare scenario where an extremist organization, such as Al Qaeda, would acquire weapons of mass destruction from a backlash state, such as Iraq, and then turn these weapons against the United States. In this sense, it can be reasonably argued that 9/11 represented a major permissive factor that led to the US decision to invade Iraq. George Tenet (2007), then-director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, wrote: "After 9/11, everything changed [...] had 9/11 not happened, the argument to go to war in Iraq undoubtedly would have been much harder to make. Whether the case could have been made at all is uncertain. But 9/11 did happen, and the terrain shifted with it." (2007, 305–6).

On 19th March 2003, a US-led military coalition attacked Iraq. Major combat operations officially ended on 1st May of the same year. The military invasion of Iraq was especially consequential. To begin with, it represented a systemic shock that completely upset the regional balance of power by removing one of its major power centers. Before the invasion, Iraq and Iran had traditionally checked each other's hegemonic ambitions. With Saddam Hussein gone and Iraq significantly weakened, Iranian leaders saw a unique opportunity for expanding their influence throughout the region. Moreover, despite the relative ease with which coalition forces had dislodged Saddam from power, the Bush administration was now confronted by a more daunting challenge. In fact, post-invasion Iraq rapidly descended into chaos marked by strong sectarian violence. Sunni, Shiite, and to a lesser

extent Kurdish factions ended up fighting against one another and against coalition forces. Sectarian strife also invited foreign meddling. As time passed by, Iraq increasingly became the stage of a larger confrontation for regional influence pitting Shiite Iran against Sunni Saudi Arabia.

As the primary occupying power, the United States took on themselves to help restoring order and overseeing the transition of power to a new Iraqi government. The role of occupying power, therefore, came with a significant increase in US troops' responsibilities. Then-CENTCOM Combatant Commander General John P. Abizaid reported to Congress that during that time US forces were engaged daily in the full spectrum of military operations, which included counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, training of friendly forces, civil affairs, and humanitarian operations. Such a large number of responsibilities required a large military presence. As of 2006, there were slightly more than 200,000 US troops in CENTCOM's area of responsibility. In Iraq alone, US military presence reached the peaks of 149,000 in August 2003 and of 165,000 in November 2007 (Abizaid 2006; Belasco 2014).

The number of US forces forward deployed in the Persian Gulf between 2003 and 2011 simply dwarfed previous US deployments in the region. A force posture of 'exceptionally heavy presence' was a direct consequence of the US continued occupation of a large country such as Iraq. General Abizaid (2006) explained: "It is important to understand that the current large conventional force posture is largely a function of counterinsurgency work in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As the lead for counterinsurgency operations shifts to Iraqis and Afghans, it is reasonable to assume that our conventional force levels will drop" (2006, 12)

In other words, US exceptional heavy presence during this period of time was meant to be temporary and it was due to exceptional circumstances. According to the data from the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, a total of four conflicts occurred in the Persian Gulf from 2003 to 2011: one interstate, one intrastate, and two intrastate with foreign involvement. One of these conflicts qualifies as minor, one as a war, and two as shifting over time between the two categories (Table 4).

Table 4: (2003–2011)

Actors	Type of Conflict	Intensity
Government of Iran <i>vs.</i> Jondollah, PJAK*	Intrastate	Minor
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> RJF (IAI), IS, Ansar al Islam, Al Mahdi Army	Intrastate with foreign involvement (US involvement)	War/Minor
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> US-led coalition	Interstate (US involvement)	War
Government of Yemen <i>vs.</i> AQAP*	Intrastate with foreign involvement (US involvement)	War/Minor

The Pivot toward Asia, 2012-2016

By the end of 2011, all major US military units left Iraq. US President Barack Obama had promised the complete withdrawal of US troops from the country during the 2008 US presidential campaign. The military withdrawal from Iraq was part of the Obama administration's larger policy of "pivoting" toward Asia.

The meaning of the pivot toward Asia has been often equated to US disengagement from the broader Middle East and the Persian Gulf in particular (Indyk et al. 2012). This is an inaccurate reading of the Obama administration's strategy, especially with regard to the administration's post-2011 security commitments to the Gulf. The real outcome of the pivot, in fact, was to give increased priority to Asia **in addition to, and not instead of**, priorities in the Gulf (Jentleson 2013).

The United States had no intention to disengage militarily from the Persian Gulf. Tellingly, the Pentagon's 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review stressed that the United States "will continue to maintain a strong military posture in the Gulf region – one that can respond swiftly to crisis, deter aggression, and assure our allies" (US Department of Defense 2014, 35). The same document noted that, as of 2014, the US armed forces still had about 35,000 military personnel stationed in and immediately around the Gulf (US Department of Defense 2014). Of these troops, 15,000 were based in Kuwait. The UAE and Bahrain were hosting 5,000 and 7,000 US military personnel respectively. Thousands of US troops were also stationed in Qatar, mainly at Al Udeid Air Base, which remains one of the most important US air bases in the world. Al Udeid Air Base also serves as the forward headquarters of CENTCOM. In addition, after the rise of the Islamic State in the summer of 2014, more than 3,000 US troops were sent back into Iraq (The Heritage Foundation 2015).

The Obama administration's decision to withdraw all major US military units from Iraq by 2011 ended the exceptional circumstances (aka the occupation of Iraq) that had made US military presence in the region skyrocket during the previous decade. The United States did not disengage militarily from the Gulf, it simply scaled US troop level back to the 'heavy presence' force posture of the 1990s, a time of deep US regional engagement. As argued by CENTCOM Combatant Commander General Lloyd J. Austin III, the operational function of such a heavy presence was to "prevent conflict through deterrence, manage crisis escalation through early intervention, and allow for a broader set of response options for consideration by national authorities" (Austin 2015, 2).

Data from the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia show that between 2012 and 2016 the Persian Gulf experienced two armed conflicts. Both were intrastate conflicts with foreign involvement and both shifted over time between the two categories (Table 5).

Table 5: (2012–2016)

Actors	Type of Conflict	Intensity
Government of Iraq <i>vs.</i> IS	Intrastate with foreign involvement (US involvement)	War/Minor
Government of Yemen <i>vs.</i> AQAP, Ansaruallah, IS*	Intrastate with foreign involvement (US involvement)	War/Minor

Conclusions

Table 6 summarizes the data from the previous five time periods. What do these data tell us about the role of the United States as the Persian Gulf's security provider? To what extent have distinct US military strategies affected the overall stability of the region? In particular, is there a clear causal relationship between the nature and magnitude of US security commitments in the Gulf and regional stability?

First, let us consider the impact of US force posture on the **incidence** of regional armed conflict. The data show an overall trend toward a reduction of the total number of armed conflicts that occurred during the period under analysis. This downward trend would seem to give credit to the argument that increased US military presence in the Gulf has corresponded to more stability. However, this connection is less obvious than it seems at first. In fact, the period of absence 1971–1979 (our control case) recorded a total of seven armed conflicts, one conflict less than those recorded in the period of light presence 1980–1991, and just one more than those in the period of heavy presence 1992–2002. In other words, while US military presence increased significantly (from a token presence in 1971 to about 25,000 military personnel in 2002), the corresponding reduction in the incidence of regional armed conflict was only minimal.

Second, let us discuss the impact of US force posture on the **intensity** of regional armed conflict. In fact, an analysis of the incidence of armed conflict alone is not enough to provide an accurate assessment of the US stabilizing role in the Persian Gulf. The intensity of armed conflict, that is the number of battle-related deaths in one calendar year, should also be considered. The reason for this is evident: a war resulting in 10,000 casualties is qualitatively different from a minor conflict leading to 25 casualties. Overall, the data show no clear trend toward a decrease in the intensity of armed conflict during the period under analysis. On the contrary, the percentage of war and war/minor conflicts was lower in the period of absence 1971–1979 (14% of total armed conflicts each) than it was in the period of exceptionally heavy presence 2003–2011 (25% and 50% of total armed conflicts respectively). Moreover, major wars featuring large numbers of battle-related deaths broke out between 1980–1991 (Iran *vs.* Iraq with over 10,000 deaths; Iraq *v.* Kuwait with over 21,000 deaths), between 2003–2011 (government of Iraq *vs.* US-led coalition with over 8,000 deaths), and between 2012–2016 (government of Iraq *vs.* IS with over 12,000 deaths). No major war instead occurred during 1971–1979 and 1992–2002. Interestingly, during

Table 6: (1971-2016)

Period	US Force Posture	Number of Conflicts	Type of Conflict	US Involvement %	Intensity	Intensity %
1971–1979	Absence	7	1 interstate	0%	1 war	14% war
			4 intrastate		1 war/minor	14% war/minor
			2 intrastate with foreign involvement		5 minor	72% minor
1980–1991	Light Presence	8	2 interstate	25%	2 war	25% war
			6 intrastate		3 war/minor	37.5% war/minor
			0 intrastate with foreign involvement		3 minor	37.5% minor
1992–2002	Heavy Presence	6	1 interstate	33.3%	1 war	16.7% war
			4 intrastate		0 war/minor	0% war/minor
			1 intrastate with foreign involvement		5 minor	83.3% minor
2003–2011	Exceptionally Heavy Presence	4	1 interstate	75%	1 war	25% war
			1 intrastate		2 war/minor	50% war/minor
			2 intrastate with foreign involvement		1 minor	25% minor
2012–2016	Heavy Presence	2	0 interstate	100%	0 war	0% war
			0 intrastate		2 war/minor	100% war/minor
			2 intrastate with foreign involvement		0 minor	0% minor

Source: Prepared by the author (2017).

the period of absence 1971–1979 the only two instances of armed conflict classified as war by UCDP did not reach 1,700 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. In short, the empirical evidence does not unequivocally support the argument that US military presence has decreased the intensity of regional armed conflicts.

Third, let us address the **frequency** of US involvement in regional armed conflict. There is no doubt that during the period under analysis the Persian Gulf has experienced a marked rise in US open participation in armed conflicts. US open participation has moved up steadily from no involvement in the period of absence of hegemonic presence in 1971–1979 to a staggering 100% involvement in the period of heavy presence 2012–2016. This finding is open to two opposite interpretations. According to the first one, US frequent involvement in the Gulf's armed conflicts reflects the United States' attempt to stop or contain such conflicts if deterrence fails. This particular reading supports the argument that US security commitments are necessary to

maintain regional stability. However, an alternative interpretation of the same finding would argue that US frequent involvement in the Gulf's armed conflicts proves that, far from being a stabilizing factor, US military presence in the Gulf is indeed a cause of conflict. Put in another way, is US military presence in the Gulf a constraint to armed conflict or a cause of it?

Although finding an answer to this question is beyond the scope of this work, I believe that the issue should be the object of further research. In fact, if the latter interpretation were to be true, it would seriously compromise the entire argument in favor of a strategy of deep engagement. In this regard, a number of issues should receive special attention. To begin with, further studies should determine the identity of the initiator of these particular armed conflicts. For example, in 1991, the United States intervened in the Gulf in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The objective was to restore the *status quo ante bellum*. However, in 2003, the United States arguably acted as a revisionist power when it initiated a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein in Iraq. US actions generated ripple effects that have destabilized the region since. In addition, further research should not be limited to US open participation in regional conflicts but it should also include the potentially stabilizing/destabilizing effects of US covert action. Since the end of WWII, the US government has frequently relied on the CIA and Special Operation Forces to advance their interests in the Gulf. The case of Iran is especially telling. Starting with the CIA-led operation to topple Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, US covert efforts at regime change in Iran have continued well into the twenty-first century (Hersh 2008). Furthermore, researchers should focus on the effects of US military presence on local politics. For example, does US military presence embolden Gulf regimes and make them more willing to resort to acts of one-sided violence against their own citizens? Therefore leading to cases of severe civil strife as occurred during the 2011–2012 Arab Awakening in countries such as Bahrain, Yemen, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia? Moreover, do US military presence and association with Gulf's undemocratic regimes generate resentment among the local population? Therefore resulting in increasing appeal and activity of extremist anti-American organizations like AQAP and the Islamic State? Finally, further studies should investigate the extent to which the small decrease in the incidence of regional armed conflict detected in this work is primarily the result of the Persian Gulf having become an inherently more stable region or, instead, the outcome of a strategic decision by local actors to shift to forms of asymmetric warfare, such as terrorism, in order to challenge the unquestioned military superiority of US conventional forces. These issues should deserve the attention of the academic community.

All that considered, what do my findings say about the role of the United States as the Persian Gulf's security provider? And especially, about the ability of distinct US military strategies to affect the overall stability of the region?

My answer is that this research found no unequivocal evidence supporting the argument that US security commitments in the Gulf are critical to the region's stability. In particular, I detected no clear correlation between increased US military presence in the Gulf and a meaningful reduction in either the incidence or the intensity of regional armed conflict.

These findings should be of special interest to people engaged in the debate on the future of US grand strategy. In fact, they would suggest that the United States could afford to scale back their military presence in the Gulf without significantly compromising the region's stability and consequently jeopardizing US interests. This finding, in turn, seems to give credit to the position of those like Christopher Layne, Stephen Walt, Barry Posen, and Paul Pillar who have consistently advocated for a future US grand strategy of offshore balancing.

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