The Cold War Origins of the U.S. Central Command

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Until the 1980s, the United States was unprepared to conduct major military operations in Southwest Asia and the broader Middle East. But after the Cold War ended, U.S. forces found themselves constantly engaged there, in three wars and many lesser operations. How did they come to be even marginally prepared for these challenges after decades of neglect of this large and volatile region?

The origins of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and most of the programs for the developing theater of Southwest Asia and the Middle East are to be found in the years of the Carter administration, from January 1977 to January 1981. The basic foundations of CENTCOM were created at this time. To be sure, a great deal of growth followed throughout the 1980s, but this expansion was intended mainly to fill in the outlines of what had been designed during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

The stimulus for this planning and organizational activity was the increased Soviet capacity to project power into the region, a region that was described at the time by Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, as an “arc of instability.” Containing Soviet power projection proved easier than limiting regional instability. But if the planning and organizational work had not been accomplished, the U.S.-led effort in 1991 to reverse Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait would have been far more difficult and would have required a much longer time, perhaps a couple of years. In such circumstances, Iraq’s invasion might have been accepted as a fait accompli. Would President George H. W. Bush have decided to go to war against Iraq if U.S. preparations in the theater and command arrangements in 1990–1991 had been what they were in 1979 or earlier? Would the Saudi government have permitted U.S. forces to deploy on Saudi territory? Would the Saudi infrastructure have accommodated them without a year or so of improvement? Would U.S. Army forces
have been trained in desert warfare, clothed in desert uniforms, supplied with water desalinization equipment, and familiar with the region through training exercises? Would Egypt have opened the Suez Canal to U.S. military shipping? Would the small states on the Persian Gulf littoral have cooperated? The answers to these questions are likely negative.

Similar questions arise about more recent military operations. Would U.S. military forces have been able to deploy as rapidly as they did for operations in Afghanistan in 2001 had there been no CENTCOM in place? How would they have managed with no unified command for the region? How would they have sustained operations without basing infrastructure in Diego Garcia, Oman, Kuwait, and several other locations in the region?

Whatever answers one might give to these “might have been” questions, they help us grasp the significance of the origins of CENTCOM. The founding of the organization was critical to the success of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990–1991, the toppling of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001–2002, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and many smaller operations in the 1980s and 1990s.

As late as November 1979 the process leading to the creation of CENTCOM had no formal name. Soon after employees of the U.S. embassy in Tehran were taken hostage on 4 November, Brzezinski declared that the NSC’s Special Coordination Committee (SCC), which was holding daily meetings to deal with the crisis and to gain the hostages’ release, was focusing too much on tactics to take adequate account of the larger implications for U.S. strategic interests in the region. Thus he initiated a parallel series of SCC meetings, once or twice a week, to take a longer view and work out a “strategic framework” for the region. This “Persian Gulf Security Framework SCC” (PGSF/SCC) met regularly for more than a year, ending with a full NSC meeting in December 1980. At that time, Carter signed Presidential Directive (PD) 62 and PD 63, formalizing all that had been done to serve as a guideline for the incoming Reagan administration.

No short essay can tell the full story of this complex endeavor. Here I will trace only the general outlines, perhaps inspiring some scholar to undertake a full account in the future.¹ What follows, therefore, is in part a memoir, docu-

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1. Olav Njolstad, a scholar at the Nobel Peace Institute in Oslo, has come the closest to fulfilling this need in his essay “Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in U.S. Strategic Planning in the Carter Years,” Cold War History, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2004), pp. 21–55, which appeared after I had completed the first draft of my own account. Njolstad, on the basis of this 2004 article and an earlier essay on the Carter administration that also drew extensively on archival research, “The Carter Administration and Italy: Keeping the Communists Out of Power without Interfering,” Journal of Cold War Studies, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer 2002), pp. 56–94, has emerged as the leading revisionist historian on the Carter administration’s foreign policy.
mented on most key points, but not exhaustively. 2 I have drawn on my own records as well as publicly available documentation.

**Following the British West of Suez?**

The Carter White House moved rapidly in the spring of 1977 to launch a series of foreign policy initiatives. Most of these initiatives derived from the Democrats' criticisms of the Nixon and Ford administrations' approach to the Soviet Union and from the lessons the Democrats drew from the war in Vietnam, an experience they generalized to almost all of the Third World. Underlying this new orientation was an inclination to believe that the United States and the Soviet Union were equally responsible for the troubles in the Third World. Many of the political appointees in the Carter administration had been highly critical of the Ford administration's reaction in 1975 when the Soviet Union undertook a massive sealift and airlift of Cuban troops to bolster the fledgling Communist regime in Angola. Congressional Democrats had successfully opposed the administration's covert efforts to support Jonas Savimbi's anti-Communist insurgents. Several Carter appointees, who believed that the Nixon and Ford administrations had not done enough to achieve U.S.-Soviet arms control agreements, argued that a more cooperative approach to Moscow would produce greater results in arms control.

In this frame of mind, the Carter administration launched a series of interagency policy reviews that led to the drafting of Presidential Review Memoranda (PRMs), followed by the issuance of PDs in which the president set forth in fairly succinct language his guidelines for a new policy, defining it and directing relevant agencies to implement it. 3 Not all initiatives were treated so formally—Carter’s human rights policy, for example, was shaped more informally—but most of the key policies, especially on national security, went through this formal process.

Four such initiatives in February and March 1977 significantly altered U.S. policies in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The first was the administration's new policy on conventional arms transfers. Although it called for a

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2. My vantage points were as military assistant to the national security adviser (1977–1981), assistant chief of staff of intelligence, Department of the Army (1981–1985), and director of the National Security Agency (1985–1988).

3. The Nixon and Ford administrations used the terms “National Security Study Memoranda” (NSSMs) and “National Security Decision Memoranda” (NSDMs). The Reagan administration returned to the “National Security” label with minor changes, but the Clinton administration revived the “Presidential” formula with a minor alteration, making PDs into PDDs, or “Presidential Decision Directives.” Whatever the acronym, these policy reviews and directives had the same status in each administration.
global reduction in U.S. military shipments to Third World countries, the large bulk of these transfers went to countries in the Middle East (especially Saudi Arabia) and Southwest Asia (especially Iran and Pakistan). The recipient countries, not surprisingly, reacted with puzzlement and anger.4

Several weeks later, the president initiated the Conventional Arms Transfer Talks (CAT Talks) and the Indian Ocean Arms Limitation Talks (IO Talks) with Moscow. The Soviet Union eagerly entered the IO Talks because the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean was trivial compared to the U.S. Navy’s deployments there, and the U.S. side’s goal of codifying “equivalence” obviously appealed to the Soviet Navy. The Soviet approach to the CAT Talks was less enthusiastic. Moscow’s biggest arms customers—Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq—were all in the Middle East, and Soviet arms transfers to India had an impact on the region through Pakistan’s reactions.

A fourth foreign policy initiative also affected Southwest Asia. Nonproliferation of nuclear weapons was not a new policy, but the Carter administration gave it higher priority, especially with regard to Pakistan. The Pakistani government had played an important role in facilitating Richard Nixon’s and Henry Kissinger’s secret opening of talks with Communist China. Nixon had reciprocated by expanding the sale of conventional arms and showing less concern about stopping Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program. The Pakistani authorities cooperated by keeping the program in lower gear. The Carter administration’s greater emphasis on nonproliferation, combined with its arms transfer policy, upset this tacit U.S.-Pakistani cooperation and led to strained relations in the latter half of 1977.

A fifth initiative by the Carter administration—the new human rights policy—had a further negative influence in Southwest Asia, primarily in Iran in 1978–1979. But unlike the four other initiatives, the human rights campaign also produced lasting benefits for U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Soviet Union.

U.S. embassy and intelligence reporting in the region from the summer of 1977 through the spring of 1978 made clear that moderate Arab states, Iran, and Pakistan were disturbed by the Carter administration’s foreign policy initiatives. The United States seemed to be acquiescing in a Soviet military buildup while denying new arms to its friends in the region. Some Middle Eastern and Southwest Asian governments feared that the United States

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4. Despite the new policy, arms sales continued in some cases, most notably with the sale of F-15 fighters to Saudi Arabia and F-5E fighters to Egypt (plus offsetting shipments of F-15s and F-16s to Israel) as an implicit tradeoff for the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel. The administration also was committed to proceeding with the transfer of sophisticated E-3A Airborne Warning and Control System (AWAC) aircraft to Iran, but this sale was canceled after the ouster of the Shah in early 1979.
would emulate Britain, which a decade earlier had decided to disband all its forces “east of Suez.”

Adding to the unease was the Soviet Union’s growing presence in the region. In 1977 and early 1978, the new regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia expelled the United States from its base in Eritrea and turned to Moscow for support. Soon thereafter, a coup brought a Communist regime to power in South Yemen, and a Communist government also seized power in Afghanistan. The Soviet Navy acquired new basing facilities on Ethiopia’s Dahlak Islands in the Red Sea and greater access to the port of Aden in Yemen. The Soviet military undertook massive air- and sealifts of nearly two divisions of Cuban troops plus large quantities of tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and artillery to reinforce the Ethiopian army in its Ogaden war against Somalia. Soviet military transport aircraft overflew Turkey, Syria, and other states en route to Ethiopia without asking permission. Not a single country openly protested, and the United States also stood by quietly, making no protest to Moscow, although a few U.S. ambassadors in the region strongly recommended doing so.

The diplomatic mood of nearly all the moderate Arab states, Iran, and Pakistan—countries normally well disposed to the United States and fearful of Soviet influence—became cool toward Washington. Although they were disturbed by the seemingly inexorable reduction of U.S. power in the region, they raised no objections in public. By all indications, they did not want to risk voicing complaints that they suspected would be ineffective, for if they did so they would be likely to incur Moscow’s irritation. A last ditch pro-American stand that failed would leave them ill-positioned to bargain with the Soviet Union. To be sure, the moderate Arab states always had taken this kind of low-key stance. An overtly pro-American policy would have incurred the enmity of radical Arabs because of U.S. support for Israel. Toward the end of the 1970s, however, some non-Arab as well as Arab states embraced this posture, suggesting that fear of the Soviet Union was the primary motive.

This point might not seem worth mentioning except that it affected judgments in 1979–1980 within the Carter administration about the willing-

5. This was clear from the daily flow of diplomatic and intelligence reports into the White House Situation Room at the time.

6. As Soviet transport aircraft brazenly violated foreign airspace, one U.S. ambassador was sufficiently distressed by Washington’s passivity that he wrote an uncharacteristically scathing cable, arguing that the United States appeared feckless and timid to government officials in his country of assignment. Why these officials themselves did not dispatch interceptor aircraft to challenge the overflights is only to be guessed at, but taking on the Soviet Union without U.S. backing probably seemed too risky.

7. This conclusion was also being reached by several other NSC staff members, people who knew the region much better than I did.
ness of countries in the region to welcome a reassertion of U.S. military power. The prevailing view in the State Department was that a more vigorous U.S. presence would be both unwelcome and disruptive. In the Pentagon and on the NSC staff, the opposite view prevailed. Officials in these bodies believed that although the moderate Arab states would never openly call for U.S. military deployments, they were desperately hoping that the United States would reassert itself. Moreover, support for an American presence grew in other countries when that presence extended east of Suez.

From PRM-10 to PD-18

In parallel with the various policy initiatives launched in February and March 1977, the Carter administration undertook a major assessment of U.S.-Soviet competition in the world. PRM-10 Net Assessment was the NSC-led part of PRM-10. The other part, a force structure review, was overseen by the U.S. Department of Defense. PRM-10 Net Assessment looked at a series of functional areas—the military balance, the economic balance, political institutional balance, intelligence capabilities, and others; it also examined most of the major regions of the world to assess U.S.-Soviet competition in each.

Based on the recommendations of this large and prolonged interagency effort, PD-18 was signed by the president in August 1977; it articulated U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union, primarily the military component, and gave special attention to the Persian Gulf. The document stipulated that the projection of U.S. forces into the Persian Gulf during a crisis must be as high a

8. As head of strategic planning on the NSC staff in 1977–1978, Samuel P. Huntington consciously sought to make PRM-10 Net Assessment the lineal descendant of NSC 68. He took note of it along with NSC 162 (the Eisenhower administration’s “New Look” in 1953); the absence of any such review in the Kennedy administration in 1961; the much narrower military force posture review of NSSM-3 by the Nixon administration in 1969; and NSSM-246, the Ford administration’s review in 1976. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski instructed Huntington, both orally and in the written PRM, to “tell us how we are doing in the world versus the Soviet Union.” This, of course, meant something much broader than a military net assessment, the kind of “Team B” effort sponsored by the Ford administration to gain an outside look at the U.S. intelligence community’s assessment of Soviet military power. Consisting of about a dozen separate interagency study-group products, PRM-10 Net Assessment included a number of “special studies” and an executive summary that was roughly 300 pages long. These documents provided the main intellectual capital for planning and analysis by key parts of the NSC staff over the next few years.

9. Nuclear weapons employment policy proved too controversial and complex to deal with in the spring of 1977. Not only was it entangled with strategic arms negotiations—a dynamic process—but it also encompassed targeting priorities; cruise missiles; intelligence acquisition capabilities for use in a nuclear war; civil defense; the robustness of command, control, and communications; and several other issues. Most of these matters were dealt with over the next three years in a series of directives—PD-41, -53, -57, -58, and -59—that were promulgated in 1978–1980. See Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–81 (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), pp. 454–459.
priority as the reinforcement of U.S. troops in Korea. To this end, PD-18 ordered the Pentagon to create a Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) for the Gulf region.

Why was so much attention devoted to the Persian Gulf? After all, Iran at the time still appeared to be a stable regional power with close and cooperative relations with the United States. The major problem confronting U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf since the 1950s, aside from the threat of Soviet expansion, had been the risk of Iranian-Arab tensions. Iranian leaders always believed that they “owned” the Persian Gulf littoral and indeed used the name “Persian Gulf” to convey that status. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and the small Arab sheikdoms on the southern littoral strongly opposed Iranian hegemony and used the name “Arabian Gulf.” Although animosity between the Arabs and Iranians had deep historical roots, U.S. influence in both Iran and Saudi Arabia was seen as adequate to maintain a Persian-Arab power balance.

The small U.S. naval “Middle East Force,” headquartered at Bahrain, was supposed to imply that larger military backing for the region could follow, but the idea of a significant air-land force projection capability that could move in quickly was new and unwelcome to the U.S. State Department, Defense Department, and intelligence community. Each agency had its own reasons for being unresponsive to the idea. The State Department tended to view any larger U.S. military presence as provocative to radical political groups throughout the Arab world. The Defense Department lacked the resources to create such a force, having experienced a 38 percent decline in its budget since 1968. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was more concerned about preserving facilities in Iran to monitor strategic arms agreements than about anticipating political instability. Not surprisingly then, the Defense Department essentially ignored the PD-18 instruction to set up an RDF.

Why, then, was the idea of an RDF even proposed? It was the largely unexpected result of the PRM-10 Net Assessment process. Samuel Huntington, the senior NSC official who directed PRM-10, found it difficult to convince the agencies to take seriously a clear-eyed assessment of U.S.-Soviet competition in the Persian Gulf region. Discussions with NSC staff members (particularly William Quandt, Robert Hunter, Paul Henze, and Gary Sick) alerted Huntington to the potential for domestic problems in Iran and also for strife across and within the Persian Gulf. Huntington, far more than the State Department, regarded the Soviet military buildup in the region as a worrisome

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10. Because of this dispute over nomenclature, the war in January–February 1991 to drive Iraq out of Kuwait is now referred to simply as the Gulf War.
development, and he began to speculate about the implications of internal disorders and how Moscow would react to them.

To address these concerns, Huntington drafted a section of PRM-10 titled “Crisis Confrontations” or “CRICONs,” to use his acronym. In this section he sought to anticipate where the United States and the Soviet Union might have a CRICON within the next four to eight years. Devising a set of criteria to identify the probable regions, he concluded that in only two or three places in the world was a CRICON likely to occur. Iran was the most disturbing of these sites from the standpoint of U.S. capabilities to deal with it—a finding that prompted additional attention to the region. The fragility of the moderate Arab states and the growing Soviet activity in the region supported the conclusion that the formation of an RDF would be a prudent step.

Although only a few agency participants supported the RDF proposal, others did not seriously object to including it in PD-18. Locked into their daily routines and worried mainly about current problems, the skeptics probably viewed it as largely academic and not worth a quarrel. Accordingly, once PD-18 was signed, the Pentagon essentially ignored the directive to set up an RDF, and the State Department showed no interest in making it acceptable to U.S. friends in the region.

**From the Horn of Africa to the Hostage Crisis in Iran**

Events in the Horn of Africa in the six months after the signing of PD-18 marked the beginning of a series of setbacks the United States experienced in the Middle East–Southwest Asia region. Seizing the opportunity to gain influence in Ethiopia, the Soviet Union readily abandoned its erstwhile support for Somalia by backing the Mengistu regime’s war in the Ogaden. As noted earlier, Moscow’s swift projection of military forces far beyond its borders, beginning in late 1977 and continuing into 1978, provoked a sharp policy dispute within the U.S. government. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance insisted that U.S.-Soviet competition in the Third World should not be linked to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union. Brzezinski and to some degree Secretary of Defense Harold Brown favored so-called linkage; that is, making progress toward a strategic arms treaty dependent on Moscow’s restraint in such places as the Horn of Africa, South Yemen, and Afghanistan.

As the Ford administration had discovered in 1975 with Angola, the Soviet Union did not accept “linkage” at all. Soviet leaders viewed détente with the United States as U.S. recognition that the international “correlation of
forces” was shifting against the “imperialist camp” in favor of the “socialist camp.”\textsuperscript{11} They believed that Washington would have to accept greater Soviet assertiveness in the Third World. From Moscow’s perspective, the move into Ethiopia provided further evidence of the change in the correlation of forces. The April 1978 Communist coup in Afghanistan provided still more evidence, as did the coup in South Yemen the following summer.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1978, reports from Tehran described the shah’s pessimistic mood about radical opposition forces within Iran. He openly discussed his fears with foreign diplomats and speculated about the likely results if he turned over political power to the military—results that he believed were not promising. In mid-January 1979 he was forced to flee Iran, leaving the country in the throes of an Islamic revolution with which it is still struggling. Following the shah’s ouster, the United States worked vigorously to influence developments inside Iran, but on 4 November 1979, when dozens of employees of the U.S. embassy were taken hostage by “militant students” aligned with Islamic fundamentalist rulers, the U.S. relationship with Iran was irrevocably lost. The hostages were not released until the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated.

These traumatic events gave a new sense of urgency to the proposal to create an effective RDF. The seizure of the embassy, however, was not the only factor prompting the scramble to reassert U.S. power in the Persian Gulf region. A shortage of gasoline in the United States in the wake of the Iranian revolution caused long lines at service stations and public discontent aimed at President Carter. This disconcerting experience made his domestic advisers acutely aware of the strategic significance of the major oil-producing states in the Middle East. Thus, Iran and the growing Soviet influence in the Gulf region became inextricably linked to U.S. domestic politics. After the embassy was seized, the president had to focus much of his attention not only on Iran but also on the larger issues of the region, including the potential for Soviet intervention. Against the backdrop of all these other events, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 was bound to push the RDF onto the front burner in the Defense Department.

This sequence of well-known events, however, does not tell the whole story of how the RDF came to be taken so seriously. In late 1978 and early 1979, President Carter became more concerned about Soviet influence in the region, although he did not publicly show it. His long-anticipated summit with the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, took place in June 1979 in Vienna,

\textsuperscript{11} On the disparate U.S. and Soviet conceptions of détente, see, for example, Anatoly Dobrynin, \textit{In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents} (1962–1986) (New York: Times Books, 1995), pp. 213–215.
where the two leaders signed the SALT II Treaty. Carter had come to office expecting to maintain and deepen the détente relationship with Moscow, but events on several fronts had thwarted this aspiration. Soviet actions in the Third World were one of the major factors, but human rights issues (e.g., the imprisonment of Anatolii Shcharanski) also played an important role. The Soviet Union’s lukewarm and even hostile reaction to several of Carter’s new arms-control initiatives further soured relations. The overthrow of the shah of Iran and the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Teheran contributed more specifically to Carter’s concern about the Persian Gulf because it was an unhappy vindication of Brzezinski’s description of the region as an “arc of instability” that could be exploited by the Soviet Union.

Amid these worrying developments, Brzezinski decided to offer detailed thoughts to the president about major changes that were needed to protect Western interests, deter Soviet interference, and stem the growth of radical forces in the Middle East and Gulf region. In a memorandum submitted to Carter in early March 1979, Brzezinski outlined the major features of what he called a “consultative security framework for the Middle East,” or what would later become formally known as the “Persian Gulf Security Framework.” Although Brzezinski did not cite PRM-10, his analysis of the Persian Gulf region drew on PRM-10’s concept of “Era I and Era II” in the Cold War. Era I was characterized by U.S. superiority in strategic forces and two strategic zones, Europe and East Asia. Era II, beginning in the late 1970s, was marked by Soviet attainment of strategic nuclear equivalence and by a third strategic zone, namely the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The three zones, Brzezinski argued, were strategically “interrelated” because both Western Europe and Japan were heavily dependent on Middle East oil. The steady increase in Soviet power projection capabilities, he added, posed the risk that the Soviet Union could gain regional hegemony and acquire great leverage over both Japan and Western Europe.

Brzezinski followed this analysis with an action plan that anticipated much of what would be done over the next twenty-two months under the aegis of the “Persian Gulf Security Framework.” In essence, he was calling for a major strategic reorientation. He emphasized that Western countries would have to reduce their dependence on Middle East oil and that the United States would have to develop a real force projection capability for rapid deployments in the Persian Gulf region. The diplomatic structure for the military capability, he argued, should be a framework of bilateral alliances that would provide additional security guarantees in exchange for access to military bases and transit rights as well as other kinds of cooperation. Egypt, Jor-
dan, and Saudi Arabia could form the core. Turkey, Sudan, and Iran (after its political situation had stabilized) should also be brought into these consultations. Brzezinski suggested that the military basing at the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia must be improved and that visible military exercises be conducted in the region; for example, in Oman. He also called for a larger U.S. naval presence in the Arabia Sea and the formation of an “east of Suez” military command located in the United States but able to move quickly into the region.

The full scope of Brzezinski’s recommendations was evident in his references to “the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and the creation of NATO,” the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He argued that the United States must bring the European allies along in support of this mammoth undertaking, but he left no doubt that the Europeans would do very little until the United States had made substantial progress toward building a regional security system. This new regional framework, he noted, would be facilitated by the administration’s efforts to encourage progress in peace talks between Israel and Egypt—talks that had borne fruit in the September 1978 Camp David accords and that by late March would result in the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

At the time this memorandum was written, in early March 1979, I had only a vague sense of what Brzezinski envisioned and no idea that he had proposed such wide-ranging ideas to the president. Although a few other NSC staff members (especially Paul Henze and Fritz Ermarth) and I had emphasized the dangers emerging in the region and had also proposed various steps that might be taken, none of us had offered anything as sweeping or as bold as the guidelines Brzezinski offered in his March 1979 memorandum. I occasionally insisted in chats with Paul Henze that a broad strategic framework was needed, but in the winter of 1979 neither he nor I believed that Secretary of State Vance, Secretary of Defense Brown, or the president himself would be willing to undertake such a major change in policy. Moreover, a transformation of this magnitude was bound to affect U.S.-Soviet arms-control negotiations and to spark tension within NATO if conventional military forces were pulled away from Europe for the RDF; it also was likely to cause an acute resource squeeze within the Pentagon, especially for the Army.

Brzezinski, however, was not deterred by any of these things, because he saw the stakes in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region as much larger. He soon reinforced his memorandum to the president by sending him an earlier NSC staff document, Comprehensive Net Assessment-1978 (CNA-78), in the hope that it would underscore the need for action, particularly on the

13. Njolstad, “Shifting Priorities,” p. 32–33.
RDF. The CNA-78 document had been produced the previous year, when Samuel Huntington and I had decided to update the findings of PRM-10 Comprehensive Net Assessment to see whether events had borne them out and what had changed. More important, the update could provide a measure of the implementation of PD-18, which had called for the reversal of trends in the East-West military balance. CNA-78 was completed in December 1978 but had not been submitted at that time to the president.14

With respect to Europe, CNA-78 reported that trends in the balance of conventional military forces had become more favorable as a result of the adoption of a Long-Term Defense Program at the NATO summit in May 1978. It also found that the modernization of theater nuclear forces, if undertaken by NATO, would deal with the problem cited by West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of a “Eurostrategic imbalance.” But CNA-78 acknowledged that adverse trends in the strategic nuclear balance had not been reversed. More important, the document pointed to serious problems in the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia, where the Soviet Union had made gains while the United States incurred setbacks in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and South Yemen. The implication was clear. The Defense Department had made no progress in creating an RDF, but such a force was essential to remedy the adverse trends in the Middle East–Persian Gulf region.

In late March 1979, Brzezinski dug out CNA-78 and sent it to the president to buttress the proposals in his memorandum earlier that month. Soon after the president had seen CNA-78, Brzezinski sent it to Vance and Harold Brown along with his own memorandum about the need for U.S. action in the Gulf region. The president had written “I agree” in the margin next to Brzezinski’s recommendations, a point that Brzezinski highlighted when sending the document to Vance and Brown. Vance reacted negatively to CNA-78 and Brzezinski’s memorandum and denied that the United States needed a standing military force projection capability for the region. Brown, by contrast, reacted favorably and found the documents compatible with his own growing concern. As a result, Brzezinski was no longer solely in a dialogue with the president and was instead engaging both Vance and Brown in behind-the-scenes debate on the matter.15 As the consequences of Khomeini’s
return to Iran began to emerge more sharply in the spring of 1979, Vance and
his aides also began to share some of Brzezinski’s sense of alarm.

At a meeting of the NSC’s Special Coordination Committee in early May
1979, Brzezinski suggested that the earlier notion that the United States and
the Soviet Union should have equivalent military capabilities in the Indian
Ocean—a notion that had guided U.S. proposals for the Indian Ocean Arms
Control Talks and the Conventional Arms Transfer Talks—was no longer
valid. Vance and Brown agreed that this principle had lost its validity be-
cause events were proving that the United States, far more than the Soviet
Union, had vital interests at stake. Upon reviewing the SCC’s recommenda-
tion, Carter approved it, paving the way for actions that hitherto had been
impossible for Brzezinski to place on the NSC agenda. Although I was aware
of the potential significance of the president’s decision—he had essentially re-
versed three of the four initiatives launched by the administration in the
spring of 1977—I did not initially realize how far Brzezinski and Carter had
moved the debate. Once SALT II was signed in Vienna in early June, the pres-
ident was ready to take action.

Not long after returning from Vienna, Brzezinski sent a memorandum to
the Defense Department asking what progress was being made in creating the
RDF. The Pentagon’s answer was essentially “not much.” Although officials in
the Office of International Security Affairs (OSD/ISA) had been concerned
about the lack of progress, the military services were not. Their budget con-
straints made it difficult for them to see how they could create an RDF.
Brzezinski followed up with a second memorandum expressing impatience.

Two things happened as a result. First, General David Jones, the chair-
man of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), initiated RDF planning at the “joint”
level among the services, a step that eventually led to the creation of the Rapid
Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF). Second, Brzezinski’s memoranda cat-
alyzed informal discussions between the NSC staff and the OSD/ISA staff.
Several officers on the Joint Staff and in other parts of the Pentagon also soon
became parties to these discussions. As a consequence, a few NSC staff mem-
bers learned about the political and military realities in the region and the
plethora of obstacles to the creation of an RDF. During the rest of the sum-
mer and fall of 1979, modest planning efforts moved ahead within the Joint
Staff, but no major shift of resources followed to support them.

and Brown about CNA-78. He has provided me with copies of documents that include these ex-
changes.

16. I did not attend this meeting, but when I heard about the decision, the implication immediately
struck me as monumental because it required a comprehensive reversal of U.S. policies in 1977 and
1978.
The Beginning of the Persian Gulf Security Framework/SCC

On the morning of 4 November 1979, after news arrived at the White House that Iranian radical groups had seized the U.S. embassy and taken its staff hostage, an NSC/SCC meeting was convened to address the matter. Chaired by Brzezinski, the SCC was, among other things, the crisis management mechanism for the Carter administration. Over the next several months the committee met daily to deal with the hostage affair and coordinate all actions taken by the State Department, the Defense Department, the Justice Department, the Treasury Department, and several other agencies. The White House press secretary, the presidential chief of staff, the White House counsel, and one or two other close advisers to the president were present at many of these meetings. All in all, the SCC proved effective in coordinating the diverse and complex actions of the entire executive branch, keeping the president well informed about what was being done, and providing advice about decisions he should make.

But this system, despite its virtues, necessarily focused on day-to-day issues; it dealt with the current crush of business but ignored the larger strategic picture for U.S. interests and influence in the region. After about a week, Brzezinski recognized this deficiency and initiated a parallel set of SCC meetings, the “Persian Gulf Security Framework SCC” (PGSF/SCC), which focused entirely on the bigger picture and the longer-term outlook. The PGSF/SCC did not meet daily, but it did convene at least once a week, sometimes twice.

The first couple of meetings were limited to discussions among the principals, mainly Secretary of State Vance, Secretary of Defense Brown, JCS Chairman Jones, and the director of the CIA, Stansfield Turner. As Brzezinski pressed them to move beyond talk to action, it became clear that any real movement would not come from either the Defense Department or the State Department. State Department officials were wholly absorbed in the hostage crisis and were disinclined to reverse most of the policies initiated in the spring of 1977. Vance himself and many of his assistants were still unenthusiastic about a reassertion of U.S. power in the region. Attitudes at the Defense Department were different. Secretary Brown and General Jones recognized the urgency of creating the RDF and of taking related steps to make it viable, but they confronted two difficulties. First, they were still short of resources. Although President Carter raised the defense budget for 1978, the deterioration of U.S. forces over the past decade, especially ground forces, was a serious constraint. Moreover, at the 1978 NATO summit, Carter had convinced the Europeans to increase their own spending on conventional forces by 3 percent.
per annum to match his own increases for U.S. forces in Europe. This agree-
ment spurred General Bernard Rogers, the NATO commander in Europe, to
oppose any diversion of resources to another theater. In the Far East, U.S.
ground forces were already in short supply as a result of the rapid cuts after the
Vietnam War. The administration had announced some pullouts from South
Korea, but renewed tensions on the Korean peninsula weighed against any
further reductions there.

To break this impasse and move to specific actions, the NSC staff began a
systematic planning effort. 17 Initially we put together a highly generalized
outline consisting of four components but capable of being expanded to in-
clude a good deal more. The first component was military force; the second
was diplomatic activities and goals; the third was economic measures; and the
fourth consisted of intelligence activities and goals. Each component was then
broken into several subcomponents. Under the first, for example, we included
four subcomponents: U.S. forces, en route basing for those forces, indigenous
military forces that might ally with U.S. forces, and interactions between U.S.
and indigenous forces.

Although still quite general, this framework helped us identify practical
actions. For example, Brzezinski could ask the Pentagon to report precisely
what U.S. forces and what command-and-control arrangements existed or
needed to be created. He could also raise issues of special training and war
plans. Under the second subcomponent, we needed to determine the quantity
of air- and sealift and to specify the basing available en route. This latter point
was crucial because Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece, all of which had
NATO air bases, did not always permit the use of these facilities for U.S. mili-
tary operations in the Middle East. The president would have to ensure that
the State Department would work out deals and permission for the use of
NATO bases for Persian Gulf contingencies. Access to bases within the region
would obviously be invaluable, but this, too, had to be negotiated—another
point encompassed by component two (diplomatic activities).

17. My assistant, Christopher Shoemaker, and I were the planners in this case. We drew from other
staff members, but those who were directly responsible for the Middle East and Southwest Asia were
absorbed in daily operations. We, by contrast, dealt with longer-term plans and strategy. Ironically,
Brzezinski was a critic of the Eisenhower administration's NSC system in 1960 because he believed it
was "too bureaucratized." Yet the distinguishing feature of that system was Dwight Eisenhower's pen-
chant for keeping "planning" separated from "operations," a penchant he shared with General George
E. Marshall. Moreover, Marshall established the State Department's Policy Planning Staff during the
Truman administration precisely because no separation between these activities existed when he be-
came secretary of state. Although we had a less formal structure than the Eisenhower system,
Brzezinski also separated planning, putting it under Samuel Huntington (with whom I worked) in
1977–1978 and mainly under me in 1979–1980. The Reagan administration's NSC had no clear dis-
tinction between the two. The key to making this separation effective is the ability of the principals to
stay abreast of both operations and planning, making sure that planning does not become irrelevant.
Marshall, Eisenhower, and Brzezinski all had this ability.
These cross-cutting military and diplomatic issues required interagency coordination to ensure close cooperation between the State Department and Defense Department. Some of the proposed arrangements could not be made public because of the political sensitivities of the countries concerned. In that case, the intelligence community was supposed to assist. A related issue was the need to train U.S. forces in desert conditions typical of the region.

The task of securing bases in the Gulf region ran into early bureaucratic problems. Initially, the State Department was strongly opposed to the acquisition or even temporary use of such bases. Secretly, however, President Carter had ordered planning for a hostage rescue effort—Desert One—and this operation was critically dependent on at least temporary access to bases in the region. Shortly after the embassy was seized, the president had asked the State Department to work out access to facilities in or near the Gulf, but no action followed. A couple of weeks later, he penned a comment on the summary notes of an SCC meeting, asking, in an irritated tone, why nothing had yet been done to secure access to any bases. Carter mentioned that Somalia, Oman, and Kenya were all known to be willing to provide access. Brzezinski read the comment aloud to the PGSF/SCC, letting the principals know of the president’s anger. Within two weeks, deals were negotiated with all three countries. This episode proved important because it conveyed to the principals of the PGSF/SCC that Carter was fully committed to building a security framework in the region and that it was not merely a scheme cooked up by Brzezinski and his staff. Thereafter, the responsiveness of the departments to NSC staff information needs and to PGSF/SCC directives was much greater.

Using the four components of the planning framework, NSC planners were able to specify a dozen or more actions that needed to be accomplished. Each of these was discussed informally with the relevant officials in OSD/ISA, the JCS, the State Department, the Treasury Department, and other agencies to determine what kind of document was needed for PGSF/SCC review to support effective decision-making. Thus the inventory of “actions to be accomplished,” far from being arbitrary, came primarily from within the departments. Well-informed aides could provide sound information about the advisability and necessity of specific actions.

The economic component of NSC planning was thinly developed at first, but after a few weeks of discussions with officials from the Treasury Department, the State Department, and other agencies, we decided that a number of major economic issues must be part of the overall effort. For example, both Pakistan and Turkey had foreign debt arrears that needed to be resched-

18. Njolstad, “Shifting Priorities,” pp. 21–55, offers evidence that Brzezinski, Brown, and Vance had discussed this issue much earlier and come close to agreement on it.
uled. By persuading the West European and Japanese governments to cooperate on this matter, we could ensure that both Pakistan and Turkey would be more amenable to the military and diplomatic actions encompassed by the framework. In a number of cases, economic actions involved getting oil-rich states in the region to underwrite the costs of certain projects. The construction of airfields, storage buildings, and other facilities to support a large projection of forces into some countries was an important aspect of this component. As the 1991 Gulf War would later prove, this expansion of capacities in Saudi Arabia was far-sighted indeed. The moderate Arab states were unwilling to disclose most of these actions in public, but the revolutionary turmoil in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan inspired them to cooperate behind the scenes. Also connected to the economic component were fiscal actions within the U.S. government to cover urgent military and foreign aid funding. Accordingly, the director of the Office of Management and Budget occasionally participated in PGSF/SCC deliberations.19

The intelligence component cannot yet be disclosed in all of its details, but a few of its actions have become public. For example, intelligence channels were occasionally used instead of diplomatic channels to work out agreements on military issues if a particular country would not allow them to be handled through regular diplomatic channels. Intelligence channels became deeply involved with the Afghan resistance movement in mid-1979,20 but after Soviet troops moved into the country en masse on Christmas Day, covert support for the resistance was sharply increased. In 1980, activities covered by the intelligence component expanded significantly, but they were often handled separately, outside the PGSF/SCC.

From an “Ad Hoc” to an “Orderly” Process

The PGSF/SCC process emerged less by calculation than from the pressures of cascading events in the region. Bureaucratic obstacles within the administration precluded calculation. The four policy initiatives in the spring of

19. Tying budgets to policy instead of letting budgets de facto make policy is a perennial problem for the NSC, and it is seldom done effectively. Only in 1979–1980 was the NSC successful in doing so during the Carter administration.

20. These channels began developing in the spring of 1979, and President Carter approved a “finding” to authorize covert support to the mujahideen much earlier, on 3 July 1979, as more Soviet military advisers and weapons poured into Kabul. See Robert M. Gates, From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War (New York: Tombstone Books, 1997), pp. 143–146. See also Steve Coll, Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001 (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 38–40; Milt Bearden and James Risen, The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA’s Final Showdown with the KGB (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 207–367; and George Crile, Charlie Wilson’s War: The
1977—two arms negotiations, unilateral reductions in arms transfers, and nuclear nonproliferation—had created a view of the region that ruled out a strong assertion of U.S. military power there. President Carter had begun to lose his own enthusiasm for these policies by early 1979 and actually reversed them in principle in the late spring, but because he planned to go to Vienna in June for a U.S.-Soviet summit to sign the SALT II Treaty, he could not yet openly voice concern about the Soviet Union’s growing influence in the Gulf and Southwest Asia. The embassy seizure in Tehran drastically changed the climate, but even then neither the State Department nor the Defense Department fully supported the pace of change envisaged by the president.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan created a strong sense of urgency that previously had been lacking, but widespread resistance at some levels still persisted within the State Department, the Commerce Department, and even some of the military branches at the Pentagon. The NSC approach, therefore, was to avoid a major and inevitably long interagency debate that would obstruct and delay the implementation of a new policy endorsed by the president six months earlier. Instead, we sought to address a series of catalyzing issues, secure presidential decisions on them, and then allow the agencies to move further on their own. Normally the PGSF/SCC would address only two or three specific actions at a single meeting, making recommendations to the president. Usually within a day, Carter made decisions based on the committee’s recommendations, although sometimes not precisely what was recommended. At the end of each meeting, two or three new specific issues were assigned for the agenda of the next meeting that would be held three or four days later. Such rapid turnarounds—from decisions to new issues to decisions and again to new issues for analysis and proposals for decisions—put a great strain on the personnel involved. Senior officials at the Defense Department and State Department complained frequently, but the crisis climate that followed the embassy seizure and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan tended to dampen these complaints.

By March 1980, officials at some departments and agencies began to accuse the NSC staff of engaging in purely ad hoc assignments without an overall plan. They claimed that their agencies were being forced into a mindless “churning” that was of no value. True enough, the framework design was not

Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003); Coll, Ghost Wars, pp. 50–186.

21. See Brzezinski, Power and Principle, pp. 426–428, where he describes his frustration throughout 1979 in getting Vance and Brown to take seriously the crumbling U.S. strategic position in the region. By the fall, however, both Vance and Brown were on board, but several of their subordinates were not. Brzezinski never specified the approach I was supposed to take in the PGSF/SCC series, but his favorable reactions to the meeting agendas I proposed indicated his approval and his awareness of the opposition we faced within the agencies.
shared widely at first. The greatest opposition came from the State Department, the Commerce Department, and some parts of the NSC staff that had devised the policy initiatives launched in the spring of 1977. Most of the officials who had helped shaped these initiatives had taken a relatively benign view of Soviet power and were still haunted by memories of the Vietnam War. During the early part of the Carter administration they favored withdrawing the United States from military involvement through almost the whole of the Third World, a sentiment that prompted their initial opposition to (or at least skepticism about) the Persian Gulf Security Framework. During the final two years of the Carter administration, many of these officials, especially at the Defense Department, changed their views. However, some key officials, including some NSC staff members, did not alter the original policies. Also the private business lobby, which sought increased East-West trade, made its preferences strongly felt through the Commerce Department, occasionally with strong support from the State Department, the Defense Department, and the CIA.22

Under each subcomponent, we compiled lists of things to be done, in progress, and completed. By the end of March 1980, the list of things that had been accomplished was impressive. Noticing this progress on a summary chart, Brzezinski showed the chart to the president to make him aware of what was being done. Carter reacted positively and asked that it be shared with the secretaries of state and defense. In late April, the chart was sent to them with a cover memorandum elaborating the “Persian Gulf Security Framework” strategy, its four components, and its numerous subcomponents. The goal was to demonstrate that the PGSF/SCC was by no means an ad hoc affair and was instead guided by a coherent framework.

This formal elaboration of the strategy, its structure, and its development process marked the completion of a change that had been occurring since the collapse of the shah’s regime in Iran in 1979, a change that had also been encouraged by Moscow’s anger at Carter’s emphasis on human rights and his objections to Soviet actions in the Horn of Africa, Yemen, and Afghanistan. The administration’s views of Soviet behavior and aims, and of the need for increased U.S. military power, had changed dramatically. In a sharp departure from his original policies, Carter reversed a decade of decline in military spending and initiated a military buildup, which the Reagan administration later continued mainly by increasing the rate rather than the programs. Carter had also instituted the harshest set of sanctions ever imposed against the Soviet Union in the post-1945 era, including a grain embargo, a boycott of the

22. In 1980, President Carter finally fired Stanley Marcus, an assistant secretary of commerce, for his open defiance of the change in trade policy and controls on technology transfers.
1980 Olympics, more stringent technology export controls, and other penalties. President Reagan, for all his rhetoric about an “evil empire” (actually a continuation of Carter’s human rights policy applied to the Soviet Union), actually lifted some of these sanctions less than a year after they were imposed. Carter’s approval of covert support to the Afghan guerrilla movement, initially in the summer of 1979, prevented the Soviet Union from crushing the resistance during the first crucial year of what became a long and ultimately futile war for the USSR.

Although the memorandum elaborating the PGSF cited a number of accomplishments, it was more a set of guidelines for additional endeavors than a celebration of what had been achieved. Reactions within the executive branch were mixed. The response at the Defense Department was extremely favorable. All the “churning” imposed on Pentagon officials for PGSF/SCC meetings turned out not to be as ad hoc as some had believed, producing a palpable sense of relief. Key OSD and Joint Staff aides had been supportive of the PGSF/SCC all along, but elsewhere in the Pentagon the process had exacerbated interservice quarrels and budget struggles. At the State Department, reactions in some quarters were decidedly negative. Even on the NSC staff, reactions were by no means uniformly positive. Not only did the memorandum make clear that the four policy initiatives in the spring of 1977 had essentially failed in the Persian Gulf region, but it also antagonized those who were convinced that a greater U.S. military presence in the region was a formula for disaster. In the summer of 1980, some mid-level and upper-level officials in the State Department and the Defense Department, joined by a few senior NSC staffers, sought to stop the whole process by persuading President Carter to call for a major review of U.S. policy toward the region. The NSC principals likely would never have supported it. After all, they had watched closely as Carter changed his views, and they had discussed and approved every action under the PGSF before the president directed it. Whatever the case, the effort died quickly, even before being put to the department secretaries.

23. We now know from declassified Soviet documents that Soviet leaders hated the sanctions imposed by the Carter administration, especially the grain embargo. It is therefore all the more ironic that the Reagan administration, in one of its first measures after taking office, lifted the embargo. See Mark Kramer, *Soviet Deliberations during the Polish Crisis, 1980–1981*, Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Special Working Paper No. 1 (Washington, DC: CWIHP 1999), pp. 157–170.

24. On a day when Brzezinski was out of town, I was invited to lunch at the State Department with the under secretary of state for policy, the under secretary of defense for policy, and, most surprisingly, Brzezinski’s deputy, David Aaron. I soon realized that their purpose was to bury the PGSF/SCC series, replacing it with an interagency policy review on the region. My objections were brushed aside, but it became clear to me that none of the NSC principals had approved of this move. When Brzezinski returned a couple of days later, the insurrection died out.
Creation of the Central Command

One of the most difficult issues in the military component of the PGSF was command-and-control. Under the joint command structure, the European Command (EUCOM) included not only Europe and Africa but also a large part of the Middle East. The command extended to Iran’s borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan but excluded the water in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. All of this maritime area plus Afghanistan and Pakistan belonged under the Pacific Command (PACOM). Because the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia had never been a significant theater of military operations for U.S. forces, this division through the middle of the region had earlier been tolerable. But in the new circumstances the division meant that no unified commander-in-chief (CINC) bore responsibility for the region as a coherent whole; it also meant that the CINC EUCOM and the CINC PACOM would never give their parts of it high priority. Understandably, the central front in Europe consumed the bulk of the attention of the CINC EUCOM; even the northern and southern flanks of NATO at times drew less attention in EUCOM than they deserved. The CINC PACOM gave his highest priority to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Straits of Malacca, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific island states. The Seventh Fleet, stationed in Japan, periodically sailed to the western Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, but its influence on events inland was never much more than psychological.

This long-standing set of command arrangements split the responsibility for most of the regional activities that were being initiated under the PGSF. At first, this bifurcation did not make a great deal of difference. But once serious war planning began and forces were assigned to execute the plans, the divided command became a major liability. If the existing arrangements had been preserved, no one would have known who was in charge—PACOM or EUCOM or both (or neither). The need to change the unified command plan by creating a new CINC for the region as a whole was obvious, at least from the perspective of the Army. To the Navy, however, it looked different. Naval officers feared the prospects of having a ground commander in charge of elements of the Seventh Fleet when it sailed into the western Indian Ocean. The U.S. Air Force (USAF) was largely indifferent or sympathetic to the Navy and was certainly not enthusiastic about being part of a unified regional command. During the early months of the hostage crisis, the USAF flew B-52s around the globe non-stop, refueling them at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, to demonstrate to the White House that it could bomb anywhere in the region from continental U.S. bases. Thus, the only real support for a unified regional command was in the Army, but General Rogers at the NATO European command was opposed, and the Army was outnumbered in the JSC, where any
change to the unified command plan would have to be approved. Interservice rivalries over unified command plans are legendary, and conventional wisdom in the Pentagon has long been that trying to change the arrangements simply is not worth the political pain.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the Defense Department made no attempts of its own to improve the command structure. The NSC staff tried to spur the Pentagon into taking action in 1979 but was unsuccessful. By early 1980, however, the issue had taken on much greater urgency. Intelligence reporting was making clear that the Soviet general staff had recently altered its wartime command structure and now regarded the Gulf region and Southwest Asia as a “theater of military operations.” As the year wore on, we received further evidence that the Soviet military was conducting large-scale command-post exercises to work out offensive war plans for the region. Moreover, the Soviet high command established a new multifront headquarters in Baku, a site in close proximity to Iran and other key countries in the Gulf.

These developments prompted Brzezinski to ask the Pentagon why the JCS was not responding by creating its own improved command-and-control arrangements. The answer he received was that if war in the Gulf grew imminent, the JCS would form a regional command at that time. Not surprisingly, the president was upset with the response. He pointedly asked Harold Brown in a handwritten note: “Who is in charge? PACOM? EUCOM? or who?” This put the secretary in a difficult position. Had he simply ordered the formation of a new command, the services would most likely have dragged their feet and sought to obstruct any change. He needed the unambiguous backing of the president if he wanted to break the bureaucratic logjam. Curiously, though, Brown never specifically asked the president to give him that backing either in the form of a presidential order or through some other clear-cut authorization.

Although Carter came close to ordering the change himself, he never did. But the pressure he exerted did inspire many positive developments. First, the chairman of the JSC, General Jones, moved as far toward a regional command as he could by creating the RDJTF. The 18th Airborne Corps became a main part of the Army’s component in this joint task force. For the first time, command-post exercises—the Positive Leap series—actually began to work out detailed war plans based on different contingencies. Also for the first time, intelligence analysis in significant detail was prepared to support the military planning.

The Desert One Operation—the attempted rescue of the U.S. hostages in Tehran—in April 1980 came to have an important effect on U.S. military preparations for the Gulf region. Planning for Desert One had begun on 4 November 1979; but the operation failed. An outside investigation of what
went wrong led to the Holloway Report, which revealed that irregular and ad hoc command arrangements that were not in accord with formal “joint command” doctrine were a major flaw in the operation. Although it might seem natural to blame General Jones for this, as some observers did at the time, such blame would be misguided. The services themselves had never voluntarily accepted formal arrangements, just as they would not accept a permanent unified command for the region. The Holloway Report was not completed until several months afterward and thus was not available in time to induce President Carter to direct the creation of a new regional command. But even if the command flaws that proved fatal to Desert One were not so obvious beforehand, the need for a larger permanent command in the region was evident from the beginning.

Although numerous events helped crystallize more effective planning by the RDJTF, one operation deserves special attention. A combined U.S.-Egyptian military exercise, known as “Bright Star,” took place in mid-1980. President Carter authorized the exercise as a result of a recommendation by the PGSF/SCC. The State Department was strongly opposed, but Harold Brown, General Jones, and Brzezinski were strongly in favor. Although the participating U.S. forces under the RDJTF were quite small, the consequences were not. Several points deserve emphasis.

First, the exercise did not provoke political disorders in Egypt or in other Arab states, contrary to what many State Department officials had feared. Their concerns were not groundless, but at this point some risks had to be taken. Bright Star demonstrated that political unrest could be averted, thereby removing the main basis for the State Department’s repeated objections to U.S. military operations in the region.

Second, Bright Star gave U.S. ground forces their first operational exposure to desert conditions in the Gulf region. Judging distances, map reading, camouflage, concealment, weather, and a host of similar factors required adjustments and new learning by U.S. forces in order to operate effectively in the region’s desert climes.

Third, logistical support in the desert required significant improvements and modifications. For example, the scarcity of potable water was a serious challenge, and glitches that arose during Bright Star prompted the development of a new water desalinization technology. Similarly, special combat dress for the desert environment was designed and tested during Bright Star. This new uniform was seen frequently a decade later during Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Fourth, airlift and sealift issues were addressed in a practical sense for the first time. Approval for en-route basing and refueling was obtained from several governments whose facilities had previously been off-limits. Issues of tar-
mac availability for receiving U.S. forces in Egypt had to be worked out, sensiti-
sitizing U.S. planners to what would be needed in other countries, especially those on the Persian Gulf littoral. The shortage of speedy sealift was discussed at a PGSF/SCC meeting, which recommended that the president direct the Defense Department either to buy or to lease as many as eight fast roll-on/roll-off (RO/RO) ships that could reach the Suez Canal from the U.S. east coast within nine to ten days. This small fleet in 1990 played a critical role in moving U.S. ground forces to the Gulf.

Fifth, health and medical issues—vaccinations, sanitation, and a multitude of related matters—moved from the hypothetical to the real. The Pentagon gained experience that helped it to overcome problems that would be met in any large future deployments, as in 1990–1991.

Sixth, the U.S. commanders and staffs of the RDJTF worked with Arab military and civilian officials. This was quite new, and the experience alerted the U.S. officers to the challenges they would face in other Arab countries in actual wartime contingencies.

Finally, the Bright Star exercise would never have occurred if the president had not succeeded in promoting the Camp David accords and the subsequent Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. In a strategic sense, the reestablishment of a U.S.-Egyptian connection helped to offset the collapse of U.S.-Iranian ties in early 1979. CENTCOM’s access to the Persian Gulf would have been vastly more difficult without Egyptian cooperation.

This list could be expanded, but these points should be sufficient to indicate how important even a small actual deployment of U.S. forces in the region crystallized awareness of a plethora of issues that would confront a U.S. force deployed for actual combat. Preparations to deal with these issues merely began in 1980, but in subsequent years they would be continually addressed. Experience accumulated, and military planners came to appreciate just what wartime operations would require. The planning and practice within the military services acquired its own momentum as a result of the sundry initiatives from the PGSF/SCC. That was the hope of the NSC staff when discussion of these issues first began. The initial focus on micro issues overcame much of the bureaucratic resistance. Some of these initiatives catalyzed additional initiatives at lower organizational levels. When that happened, the aggressive role of the PGSF/SCC could be reduced.

The culminating initiative of this sort was the creation of CENTCOM. As 1980 came to an end, the resistance to forming CENTCOM had weakened but was by no means gone. That would happen only after President Rea-

25. Egypt, of course, proved an especially strong ally on a number of regional issues thereafter, including support for the Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion.
gan came to office. Major General Robert Schweitzer, who joined the NSC staff under Reagan’s first national security adviser, Richard Allen, took the advice of Major Christopher Shoemaker (my assistant on the Carter administration’s NSC staff) on this matter and brought the issue to Reagan’s personal attention, suggesting that he order the Pentagon to create a regional unified command.26 The president heeded that advice, directing Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to move ahead. With that kind of White House backing, Weinberger quickly prevailed in forcing the JCS to establish CENTCOM.

**PD-62 and PD-63**

The PGSF/SCC efforts, as noted earlier, were laid out formally in PD-62 and PD-63. After the PGSF memorandum was distributed in April 1980, SCC meetings continued through the end of the year, providing greater presidential direction when it was needed to overcome bureaucratic and other obstacles as well as to ensure interagency coordination of the many actions that were being implemented in great haste. After Carter lost his bid for reelection in November and was at the end of his administration, he decided to formalize the PGSF strategy in a way that would give it a better chance of being sustained in the Reagan administration. PDs were of lesser status than an Executive Order, but the directives did remain official policy until formally revoked. Carter realized that by issuing a PD on the PGSF, he could prompt the Reagan administration at least to examine this strategy and all its related programs before revoking it.

The NSC met on 10 December 1980 and approved PD-62 and PD-63. The first directive was a minor revision of PD-18 to make it consistent with PD-63, which was devoted entirely to the PGSF, following the pattern of the April 1980 memorandum. The Reagan administration did not conduct a major strategy review of the PRM-10 Net Assessment type; nor did it see fit to produce a directive equivalent to PD-18, at least initially. Carter’s hopes, therefore, were not ultimately realized, but PD-63 did seem to have some impact. The Reagan administration’s NSC staff tried to maintain the momentum but largely failed except in the action that prompted the creation of CENTCOM. Although General Schweitzer and his assistant, Major Shoemaker, reviewed the list of PDs from the Carter administration and ensured

26. President Reagan’s first national security adviser, Richard V. Allen, retained me on his NSC staff for about three months, which allowed me to try to explain why the new administration should continue a number of the Carter administration’s policies, especially the PGSF/SCC. Schweitzer grasped my arguments at once, and Allen seemed to as well, but he was not able to establish an NSC system that could perpetuate processes like the PGSF/SCC.
that PD-63 and the decisions related to it remained active, NSC processes that supported the PGSF ceased to operate. But senior officials at the State Department under Secretary Alexander Haig belatedly recognized the importance of the PGSF effort. Reportedly, Haig himself remarked toward the end of his first year in office that “the Carter administration had accomplished as much in the Persian Gulf region in a month as the Reagan administration had accomplished in a year.”

**CENTCOM in the 1980s**

With the institutionalization of a unified command, war planning and preparation for other contingencies took on their own momentum. Despite the accomplishments from mid-1979 through the end of 1980, this was only a modest start. CENTCOM still faced immense challenges. Over the next decade, progress continued, albeit slowly. CENTCOM worked with Saudi Arabia to improve its facilities for a wartime contingency, enhanced ties with the Jordanian military, periodically revised its war plans, improved the U.S. logistics base in Diego Garcia, and placed forward-based stocks for Marine units on ships stationed in the Indian Ocean.

Nonetheless, the new command faced difficulties. Local friendly regimes viewed CENTCOM suspiciously. The military services continued to see it as a resource drain from other, more important missions—namely in Europe and East Asia. Airlift shortages were only marginally reduced over the decade, and sealift was not expanded at all beyond the seven fast RO/RO ships the Navy was forced to buy in 1980. The Navy overall continued to be the most reluctant actor in CENTCOM, but the USAF did not display a great deal more commitment. Although the Army committed forces to the command’s ground component—four divisions in 1980—the forces remained doubly committed, retaining their place in war plans for other theaters. Located at McDill Air Force Base in Florida, CENTCOM headquarters was never able to find a permanent location in the Gulf region, a severe disadvantage.

These handicaps kept CENTCOM among the weakest of all the unified commands. Although CENTCOM’s war plans were approved by the JCS, no one believed that the command had adequate resources to implement them in a timely fashion. Still, the fledgling command made progress throughout the
1980s and adjusted its planning focus to take account of the end of the Cold War. The details of changes through the 1980s are beyond this essay, but the broad contours can be briefly sketched.

Although the Soviet Union’s potential for entering the region by force, especially through Iran and Afghanistan, was the galvanizing factor for planning in 1979–1980, a new factor arose in the late summer of 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran. The reasons were far from apparent at the time and never fully clarified thereafter. After initial successes for Iraq, the front stabilized inside Iran. Over the next several years, Iran stubbornly fought back, recovering all of its lost territory and on occasion coming close to breaking the final Iraqi defenses.

These events turned Iran into a serious concern for CENTCOM. What would be the U.S. reaction if Iran suddenly turned southward and moved against defenseless Kuwait? What if the Iraqi forces collapsed and Iran was able to capture Baghdad? Such questions encouraged the United States to take some limited actions to help prevent Iraq’s defeat. Intelligence support to Baghdad was one. Taking a benign view of Iraq’s purchase of Soviet weapons and their movement across Saudi Arabia and Jordan from Red Sea ports was another. The United States had never enjoyed good relations with Saddam Hussein’s regime, but as the Iraq-Iran war dragged on, the bilateral ties improved.

In July 1987, CENTCOM took on the mission (known as “Earnest Will”) of preventing Iranian interference with oil shipping from Kuwait through the Persian Gulf. The origins of this mission are a separate story, but the point to be stressed here is that Kuwait initially asked Moscow to provide this protection. The United States responded quickly as Kuwait played it off against the Soviet Union. The mission ended up with CENTCOM.

Command-and-control arrangements for Earnest Will created a bitter dispute, reflecting a basic weakness in the unified command system. Legislation adopted in 1986 had given CINCs considerably more power over their service components than had previously been the case. But CINCPAC, headquartered in Honolulu, initially disregarded CINCCENT’s operational control over the Navy’s combatants in the Persian Gulf implementing Earnest Will. Somewhat surprisingly, the chairman of the JCS did not readily support CINCCENT, but eventually the full JCS resolved the dispute in favor of CINCCENT.

The significance of this episode and of the Navy’s resistance to unified command arrangements became apparent during CINCCENT’s preparations for Desert Storm in 1990–1991. Not only the Navy but also the Air Force struggled to remain independent of CINCCENT’s operational control. Because the USAF was reasonably successful in its attempts to prove that bomb-
ing alone could win the war, the Army drifted into an “army only” campaign plan as well.\textsuperscript{30}

Earnest Will, which continued until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, involved numerous confrontations with Iranian forces. An Iranian mine crippled a U.S. combatant; Iranian forces deployed Chinese-made missiles on the shores of the Strait of Hormuz; and the United States mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian airliner. The consequence was further U.S. drift toward Iraq’s side in the Iran-Iraq war—a trend that became conspicuous with the incident of the USS \textit{Stark}, a naval combatant in the Persian Gulf. Iraqi aircraft attacked the \textit{Stark} with air-to-ship missiles, causing severe damage. Afterward the Iraqi authorities denied that the assault was intentional. Ordinarily the United States might have treated this incident as sufficient cause for strong military retaliation, but in this case U.S. officials brushed the affair aside after a short period of perplexity and did nothing to punish Saddam Hussein. In any event, the U.S. protection of Kuwaiti shipping in the Gulf eventually caused Iran to drop its threats. The Kuwaiti regime showed little gratitude for U.S. protection, assuming rightly that it had goaded the United States into service by threatening to turn to Moscow. Iraq, for its part, was permitted to believe that it could count on U.S. assistance against Iran without any reciprocity. Unfortunately, despite all of CENTCOM’s preparations, which were focused initially on the Soviet threat to the region and then the threat from Iran, the new command (and the rest of the U.S. government) essentially overlooked the threat from Iraq.\textsuperscript{31}

Nevertheless, given the state of U.S. military force projection capabilities for the Persian Gulf region in 1979, a remarkable increase had been achieved

\textsuperscript{30} For an account of these problems, see Michael Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, \textit{The Generals’ War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

\textsuperscript{31} The full story of how U.S. diplomats and military planners misread and misjudged both Iraq and Kuwait from the time of Earnest Will until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait has yet to be told. The Kuwaitis apparently had far more influence with the U.S. Navy and the chairman of the JCS than was justified at the time. To some degree this was probably the consequence of personal relations between Kuwaiti officials and U.S. naval officers serving with the Middle East Force at Bahrain over several years. It may also have been related to the Navy’s resistance to having CINCCENT oversee Operation Earnest Will, resistance that enjoyed thinly veiled sympathy from the chairman of the JCS. Finally, because Iraq was on the verge of defeat several times in the mid-1980s, the JCS and CENTCOM—and the State Department and the CIA, entangled as they slowly became in the collaboration with Baghdad against Iran—tended to disregard Iraq’s real attitude toward the United States. The failure to foresee the possibility that Kuwait would intentionally or inadvertently lead the United States into serious trouble is equally puzzling. In 1979–1980, when the PGSF was in its formative stage, senior NSC officials were well aware that no regime in the Persian Gulf region was as widely despised as the one in Kuwait, and that none was more untrustworthy. In retrospect, it is interesting to contemplate what the outcome might have been if the United States had simply let the Soviet Navy counter Iran and defend Kuwaiti shipping. The long-term implications for a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement would probably have been much better, and the Soviet Navy undoubtedly would have so bungled the task that it would have been seriously discredited. The U.S. Navy, with its vastly better intelligence support and naval capabilities, had a huge edge.
by 1990. Without it, the U.S. ability to deploy adequate forces to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 would have been pitiful. Yet a great deal was not accomplished, as the Gulf War itself revealed. Most disturbing, shortfalls in strategic sealift and airlift prevented a much swifter movement of heavy forces to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, as the preparations for Desert Storm progressed, the lack of an effective doctrine for and practice of integration of air and land power became evident.32

Conclusions

Six concluding points are worth noting about the origins and development of the U.S. security posture in the broad region of the Middle East and Southwest Asia from 1977 to 1990.

First, whether consciously or by ad hoc policies, the United States followed a coherent overall strategy toward the region during the first few decades of the Cold War. The essence of this strategy was to straddle two regional conflicts—the Arab-Israeli confrontation and the Persian-Arab conflict—in order to maintain a regional balance of power. By maintaining reasonably good ties with both sides of these conflicts, the U.S. government was able to rely mainly on diplomacy, supplemented on occasion by military power. This posture required the active cultivation of effective ties with moderate Arab states while maintaining strong ties with the shah’s regime in Iran, with Israel, with Turkey, and periodically with Pakistan.

Second, core parts of this regional strategy became irrelevant during the Carter administration. The Camp David accords in September 1978 and the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty in March 1979 greatly improved the U.S. position across the Arab-Israeli divide, but the collapse of the shah’s regime in Iran in early 1979 removed a key pillar of U.S. policy. This setback forced the Carter administration to craft a new strategy. Although President Carter did not react at once, he began to devise an alternative strategy in mid-1979 and to implement it over the next year-and-a-half.33 The most salient manifestation of this new strategy was the Persian Gulf Security Framework, which proceeded on the recognition that the United States had to compensate for its weakened diplomatic position by acquiring a potent capability to project military force in the region. The improvement of relations with Egypt proved of great value in designing and implementing the new strategy.

32. See Gordon and Trainor, The Generals’ War, esp. pp. 82–84, 113–117, 211–214. The weakness of “joint operations” emerges repeatedly throughout this book.

33. For the best overview of Brzezinski’s and Carter’s thinking on this change, see Brzezinski, Power and Principle, esp. ch. 12 on the “Carter Doctrine.”
Carter had not persevered with the Camp David accords, the Persian Gulf Security Framework would have been far more difficult, and perhaps impossible, to construct.

Third, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, managing the Persian-Arab divide became far more demanding. The U.S. invasion of Iraq without first improving relations with Iran gave Iran great potential to cause trouble in Iraq. The Iranian regime used its ties to Shiite clerics in Iraq as a strong lever and allowed al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations to enter Iraq from Iran. Iran also retained influence within Afghanistan, despite the U.S. military victory there. Over the long run, the only way out of this predicament would be to achieve a rapprochement with Teheran, restoring the U.S. position in Iran. But U.S. diplomatic overtures to Iran in the 1990s under Secretary of State Madeleine Albright bore no fruit.

Fourth, creating an effective unified command in the region with adequate forces proved extremely difficult. The two biggest wars the Pentagon has fought since the Vietnam War were in CENTCOM’s area of responsibility, the very area in which the military services stubbornly opposed preparing for conflict. The torturous process of initiating the PGSF shows why imaginative changes in planning and preparations for future conflicts are difficult to generate within the military services, as well as within the Joint Staff.

Fifth, the rise of CENTCOM reflects a strategic change at the global level during the Cold War. Until the early 1970s, when the Soviet Union attained strategic nuclear parity with the United States, and until the growth of Soviet power projection capabilities in the 1970s began to give the USSR greater reach into the Middle East and Southwest Asia, the U.S. “containment” strategy against the Soviet Union depended primarily on two theaters, Europe and Northeast Asia. With the changes that emerged in the 1970s, the Soviet military posed a qualitatively new threat. If the Soviet Union had successfully displaced the United States as the major outside influence in this oil-rich region, its potential leverage over the economies of Western Europe and Northeast Asia would have been enormous. Western Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf were thus strategically interrelated. The United States had entered a new era in implementing its Cold War “containment” strategy.

This last point was neither widely nor uniformly accepted in Washington. Ronald Reagan, in his campaign rhetoric, showed little understanding of it, and hawkish Democrats on the Committee for the Present Danger shared Reagan’s view. They denigrated the “Carter Doctrine” as an empty slogan and failed to see the realities in the Persian Gulf as clearly as Carter did. Nor was Reagan willing to maintain all of the sanctions that Carter imposed against the Soviet Union after the invasion of Afghanistan.

Actually, Brzezinski perceived with surprising perspicacity the strategic
implications of the Soviet move into Afghanistan. In a memorandum to the
president on 28 December 1979, he explained that Afghanistan might well
become Moscow’s “Vietnam” and went on to encourage Carter to help make
that come true by supporting the resistance and imposing sanctions against
the USSR—advice that Carter heeded.34 These steps built on Carter’s ex-
tremely important decision in the late summer of 1979—some five months
before the Soviet invasion—to offset the massive buildup of Soviet advisers
and technical personnel in Afghanistan by providing covert support to the
anti-Communist insurgency. Carter has rarely received the credit he deserves
for this decision.

The sixth and final observation concerns the future of CENTCOM and
the PGSF. Although the Soviet threat was the main factor prompting the cre-
ation of CENTCOM, less than a decade later the usefulness of the command
in coping with other threats in the region was apparent. The end of the Cold
War initially raised doubt in the public mind about the future of NATO and
the U.S.-Korean and U.S.-Japanese alliances. The opposite was true in the
Gulf region. CENTCOM found itself preparing to reverse the Iraqi invasion
of Kuwait in large part because the Cold War had ended and the danger of a
U.S.-Soviet confrontation in the region was no longer a deterrent. But the
end of the Cold War also unleashed indigenous forces that had earlier been
constrained. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and
the Pentagon by terrorists trained and managed from Afghanistan were but
the most vivid indication. The surprisingly rapid U.S. defeat of the Taliban
and al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan would have been impossible without the
two decades of development of CENTCOM. Given the ongoing struggle
against al Qaeda and other such organizations with bases of support in the re-
gion, CENTCOM’s future is likely to include several more major military op-
erations as well as dozens of small ones. That the Carter administration’s ini-
tiatives in 1979–1980 would make possible the military successes of the
Reagan administration and both Bush administrations in the Gulf region is
especially ironic in light of all the charges hurled against Carter in 1980 of be-
ing “weak on defense.” The reality is that his military policies laid the ground-
work for all future U.S. operations in the Gulf and Southwest Asia.

34. This memorandum is now declassified, and a copy is available at the National Security Archive, a
private organization in Washington, DC.