Chapter VI

GCC'S CONTRIBUTION TO PROMOTION OF REGIONAL STABILITY

The Gulf Cooperation Council was formed in early 1981 against the backdrop of a series of highly portentous events which in the perception of the Gulf rulers posed a grave threat to the stability of their regimes, both internally as well as externally. Among such ominous developments mention may be made of the following: eruption of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 which threatened to engulf these oil-rich states; entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 and the installation of a subservient pre-communist regime there; outbreak of a civil war in Yemen in early 1979 and establishment of a pro-communist, radical regime in the PDRY.1

These developments must have fuelled the fears of the GCC rulers about possible Soviet designs on the Gulf, especially as during the previous 2-3 years the Soviet Union both directly as well as through its proxies like Cuba had intervened openly in Ethiopia and Angola. The Soviet Union had traditionally supported progressive Arab regimes as in Syria and Iraq and had been critical of Gulf monarchies. It did not have diplomatic relations with any GCC member except Kuwait during the 1970s. It had also given assistance to the Marxist dominated "Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman" (PFLO) based in the PDRY which aimed to overthrow the government.

of Sultan ⁴ ⁵ ⁶ ⁷ ⁸ ⁹. There is little doubt, therefore, that the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan as well as the coup in Yemen which brought to power a staunch pro-communist hardliner like Abdal-Fattah Ismail must have caused much unease among the Gulf rulers.

More unnerving than the happenings in Yemen and Afghanistan to the Gulf rulers must have been the cataclysmic changes taking place in Iran. Though they had regarded with a certain degree of unease the former Shah of Iran's aspirations to play the role of a gendarmerie for the Gulf through a rapid expansion of his military might, Iran was regarded as a counterpoise to the radical, anti-monarchical, Ba'athist regime in Iraq. Not only was shah toppled but he was succeeded by a government which openly challenged the hereditary right of Gulf monarchs to rule and which saw no compunction in describing them day-in and day-out as unIslamic, American stooges.²

The internal situation in the GCC was also giving a cause for concern as disaffection had began to spread among the Shias especially in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia where they had organised massive demonstrations and protests.³ The abortive attempt made by a group of Islamic zealots of forcibly occupying the Grand Mosque of Makkah in November 1979 and the

3. Ibid., pp.334, 335.
palpable failure of the Saudi security forces to subdue them quickly had created a sense of panic among the House of Sauds.4

It is thus seen that when the GCC came into being its rulers had every reason to apprehend a grave threat to the very existence of their regimes; surprisingly, however, the GCC charter made no mention of cooperation in the fields of defence and internal security as one of the objectives of this body. Both the GCC charter5 as well as the "Unified Economic Agreement"6 which was entered into a few months later stressed economic, commercial and monetary cooperation among these states.

There might have been several reasons which prompted these states to downplay the importance of security/defence cooperation in the beginning and among which mention may be made of.

i) Desire not to offend Iran through formation of an indirect military alliance against it.

ii) In early 1981 Iraq was expected to win a quick victory. Perhaps threat from Iran then did not appear as grave and imminent as it became a few months later.

iii) Differences among the GCC countries as to the kind of defence and security cooperation they should aim at.

4. Ibid.
5. See appendix 1 for its full text.
6. See appendix 27 for its full text.
iv) Lack of agreement as to the nature of the external threat confronting them. While Oman felt that the USSR posed maximum danger to this region, other GCC members looked upon Israel as their foremost enemy and envisaged that the USSR could play a constructive role in promotion of the Middle East peace process.

v) Differing perceptions as to the nature of military cooperation they should promote with the Western countries.

On the eve of the first GCC summit, Oman had submitted a detailed plan advocating close military collaboration among the GCC states and had suggested that the GCC should enter into a military alliance with a major Western power like the USA. Kuwait, on the other hand, had opposed this suggestion and had recommended avoidance of a military alliance with any outside power. The GCC rulers took no decision on this sensitive issue and the whole question was shelved.

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10. Two other proposals for intra-GCC defence collaboration were reportedly presented during this summit – one by Saudi Arabia and the other by the UAE. The Saudi plan called for series of bilateral security agreements between the Kingdom and other GCC members while the UAE's proposal envisaged closer military integration among these states without involvement of foreign powers. See, Sreedhar, n.1, p.123.
In the field of internal security too, Kuwait had been opposed to entering into a multilateral security pact for which Saudi Arabia was pressing. In November 1980 Saudi Interior Minister had declared that the Kingdom would enter into a series of bilateral security agreements with the Gulf states as a prelude to a comprehensive pact. Kuwait, probably as a result of Iranian threats, expressed its reservations and the Saudis could not pursue this proposal further.\footnote{Nadav Saffran, \textit{Saudi Arabia: Ceaseless Quest for Security} (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985), p.373.} It is thus seen that there was a sharp disagreement among the GCC members as to the nature of coordination they should try to achieve in the fields of security and defence.

Though the need for intra-GCC defence and security cooperation may not have appeared particularly pressing in early 1981, this was destined to change in a dramatic manner during the subsequent months and years. It was since the latter half of 1981 that Iraqi armies began to retreat and suffer defeats of the hand of the Iranians. During course of the Iraq-Iran war, the Iranians often appeared on the verge of occupying Basrah, Iraq's second biggest city, and whose fall would have brought them within an easy striking range of Kuwait. The fall of the Faw Peninsual in early 1986 brought the war almost to the doorsteps of Kuwait as only a narrow creek of water of less than 10 mile width separated it from Kuwait's Bubiyan island.
There was a major escalation in the threat posed by Iran to the GCC in early 1984 when it attacked three oil carriers belonging to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as a warning to them against granting assistance to Iraq. During the subsequent months, the Iranians systematically intercepted, strafed and damaged oil carriers plying through the Gulf while ships linked with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were chosen in particular for its attacks. During these years, Iranian dignitaries threatened Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in most unambiguous terms and called for overthrow of these monarchies on the ground of being unIslamic. There was a further escalation of tension between Iran and Kuwait in 1987, when for the first time since the outbreak of the Iraq-Iran conflict, Iran launched direct missile attacks against Kuwait, and a virtual state of war came to exist between the two.

It is thus seen that as the war proceeded the GCC states had every justification to step up their defence cooperation.

There were certain other factors which made it imperative that these countries should try to strengthen each other in the military field. The size of the armed forces of the GCC countries is extremely small due to their limited populations, as would become evident from the table given below:

12. See the section on the fifth summit in Part I.
13. See the section on the eighth summit in Part I.
Number of Armed Forces Personnel of the GCC Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Number of armed forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>2,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>21,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>52,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>6,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>43,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,37,800</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These include a large number of expatriate personnel.

Apart from the minuscule size of their armed forces, many GCC states like Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar lacked any strategic depth due to the small size of their territories. The total area of Bahrain is no more than 662 sq.km. What further increased the vulnerability of these states was the fact that their major population centres, oil refineries, vital installations like electricity generating stations were situated close to the coast and hence provided easy targets for Iranian air attacks. Even a cursory look at the geography of this region would be enough to convince one that no GCC member could have hoped to build a credible deterrent against
an air attack on its own and linking their air defences to the Saudi AWACS was the only feasible way in which they could have ensured some kind of protection against Iranian air aggression.

Due to the rapidly changing situation on the Iraq-Iran war front, the GCC states quickly gave up their earlier reservations on boosting military cooperation among them in an overt manner. The first meeting of GCC chiefs of staff was held during 21 and 22 September 1981.\footnote{14} The communiqué issued by the GCC Heads of State after their second summit in November 1981 contained the following paragraph on defence: "The six Heads of State studied a report prepared by the chiefs of staff of the GCC states and decided to invite the Defence Ministers to meet to set the priorities (which) the member countries require to secure their independence and sovereignty."\footnote{15}

This can be taken as marking the beginning of active efforts on the part of the GCC to evolve an integrated defence strategy to meet the Iranian challenge. Since then until the end of the Iraq-Iran war the GCC defence ministers met seven times and considered various proposals for strengthening defence links among the member countries.

\footnote{14}{See the section on growth of intra-GCC defence cooperation in Part II.}

\footnote{15}{From Keesing's Archives, vol.XXIX, p.32050, March 1983.}
Deliberations of the GCC defence ministers revolved around following themes:

i) Creation of an integrated air defence system linked to the Saudi AWACS as its linchpin to be financed mainly by Saudi Arabia.

ii) Providing protection to the merchant marine passing through the Persian Gulf. This aspect acquired special importance after 1983 when Iran began to mount regular attacks on ships plying through this waterway. A not insignificant number of oil carriers owned by Kuwait were damaged as a result of Iranian raids.

iii) Creation of a combined GCC armed force.

iv) Pursuing a coordinated policy in procurement of sophisticated weapons from abroad.

The GCC states succeeded in taking some concrete steps to further defence cooperation among them, and among their tangible achievements in this field mention may be made of:

i) Holding two large-scale military manoeuvres involving army units from all the GCC states in 1983 and 1984. These exercises formed a prelude to formation of a pan-GCC force called "Peninsula Shield Force."

ii) A number of combined exercises involving army, airforce and naval units from the GCC states were held during the two years 1984 and 1985.
The scenario for growth of military cooperation among these states indeed appeared bright towards the end of 1985 and it was felt by some observers that military links among the GCC members were likely to be strengthened to a considerable extent.

"Establishment of a collective air-defence system is more ambitious but seemingly within the range of GCC capabilities in the near future. Planning for an integrated system began in January 1982, and the go-ahead was received at the November 1982 summit. It is based on Saudi Arabia's AWACS radar and C^3I (command, control, communications and intelligence) capabilities, linked to anti-aircraft missiles and interceptor aircraft. Ideally, the UAE's projected Lambda air-defences and electronic warfare system and Kuwait's Thomson radars and upgraded Hawk missiles eventually would be plugged into the GCC system.

Another area in which cooperation has already been evident is joint military exercises, largely bilateral in nature. Saudi F-15s and F-5a were joined by Kuwaiti Skyhawks in 11-day manoeuvres in November 1983, covering training in air bombardment, air interception operations, fast transfer and take off and other exercises. This followed a Saudi-Bahraini air exercise inland-and-sea search and rescue. Then in 1984 Oman and the UAE held joint air force exercises in February and April; Saudi, Qatari, Kuwaiti and Bahraini units
participated in air mobilization exercises in Bahrain in April; Thamarit Air Base in Dhofar was the scene of Saudi-Omani exercises in August; Bahrain and Qatar conducted a naval exercise also in August; and additional manoeuvres were held in Saudi Arabia in October.

During 1985 Qatar hosted a joint naval exercise with Kuwait in January; the Kuwaiti and Omani air forces carried out joint manoeuvres near the Strait of Hormuz in March. Abu Dhabi was the site of a UAE-Kuwaiti exercise in March; the Kuwaiti navy participated in joint manoeuvres with the Saudi navy in April; the Saudi, Qatari and Omani navies held a joint exercise off Oman in September; and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia conducted joint air exercises in December. Another potential area of cooperation lies in joint naval patrols through the Strait of Hormuz (although only Oman and Saudi Arabia possess the necessary capability at present to contribute to this function).”

Surprising as it may sound, this early tempo in the growth of intra-GCC defence cooperation was not maintained.

No major joint exercises were held in 1985, 1987 and 1988 even though there was every possibility that Iraq might have suffered a decisive military defeat. The occupation of the Faw peninsula by Iranian forces in early 1986 had brought

them very close to Kuwait adding greatly to its vulnerability. During 1986 and early 1987 Iran stepped up the frequency of its attacks on Gulf-bound ships and those trading with or owned by Kuwait were in particular made targets of its aggression. During the latter half of 1987 Iran for the first time directly attacked Kuwait by hitting it with silkworm missiles.

The situation confronting these states was so grim and their individual capabilities for dealing with it effectively in a strict military sense so meagre that it was almost imperative for the GCC members to integrate their air defences as well as to provide collective security to the merchant marine traversing the Persian Gulf. However, paradoxical as it may appear, the extent of intra-GCC military cooperation rapidly declined during the years 1986 and 1987 when Iranian threat to this region, especially to Kuwait, was appearing more serious than ever.

As mentioned earlier, no major military exercise or joint manoeuvres were held after 1985; the much-vaunted peninsula shield force fizzled out and in practice became entirely composed of Saudi contingents. Air defences of the GCC members were never inter-linked and even Kuwait, despite its small size and lack of strategic depth, did not think it fit to integrate its air defences with those of Saudi Arabia, even though Kuwait more than any other GCC country faced the danger of air aggression from the Iranian side.

Western observers had anticipated that the GCC would initially encounter some serious problems in the way of defence cooperation.
"There are indeed major problems of coordination of mission and standardization of equipment as well as the formidable 'command and control' challenges inherent in any alliance." 17

"The Council, however, has a long way to go before realizing its RDF objective - not to mention the goal of a unified military command - despite the growing numbers of joint exercises. The difficulties encountered by the UAE in unifying its various armed forces stands as an example of the distance that the GCC has to go. There are more than enough obstacles with the proposed RDF alone". 18

Among the hurdles which it was envisaged in the beginning would impede intra-GCC defence cooperation were the following:

1) Employment of a large number of expatriates in the GCC armed forces.
2) Acquisition of weapons by GCC states from a wide range of sources creating difficulties in the way of joint operations, standardization of weaponry and interoperability of equipment by personnel belonging to different GCC members.
3) Problems associated with creation of a unified command structure for a pan-GCC force. These

18. Ibid.
problems in plain language centred round the reluctance of GCC states to place their troops under the command of a Saudi general.

The factors enumerated above no doubt represented some of the real hurdles obstructing intra-GCC military cooperation. As mentioned earlier, from early 1986 to the cessation of Iraq-Iran hostilities in mid-1988, defence coordination among the GCC members remained almost non-existent. If one were to assess whether the GCC since its inception to mid-1988 succeeded in any degree in evolving an integrated defence strategy, the answer will have to be a firm and unambiguous "no". The basic reason behind this phenomenon was the lack of consensus within the GCC as to the nature, magnitude and gravity of the Iranian threat.

Three members of the GCC, Oman, the UAE and to some degree Qatar, became increasingly convinced as the war proceeded that Iran meant no harm to them and that their interests were best served by following a policy of neutrality in the Iraq-Iran conflict. Even Saudi Arabia, despite the off-repeated Iranian diatribes against it, believed until the Mecca riots of July 1987 that a military confrontation with Iran was unlikely and it actively sought a dialogue with moderate elements within the Iranian leadership.

19. See the Section on evolution of GCC's relations with Iran in Part I.
20. Ibid.
In view of the above, it is not difficult to understand why intra-GCC defence cooperation did not develop. The other external dangers perceived by the GCC in the beginning consisted of:

i) Spectre of Soviet encroachment and the possibility of Gulf countries being caught in a giant pincer-like movement of communism - one arm advancing through Afghanistan and the other through Somalia, Angola, the PDRY, etc.

ii) Threat posed by a radical, pro-communist government in the PDRY, especially to Oman and Saudi Arabia.

As the years passed it became apparent that danger to the GCC on both these counts was more imaginary than real. All the GCC states gradually became convinced that the Soviet Union desired to maintain friendly relations with them and had no hegemonistic designs. Even a staunchly anti-communist country like Oman established diplomatic relations with the USSR in September 1985 and was followed a few months later by the UAE. The coming into power of Gorbachev in March 1985 who gave an entirely new orientation to the Soviet policy with his doctrines of "Glasnot" and "perestroika" must have gone a long way in assuaging any uneasiness which the GCC rulers might have been harbouring about the long-term Soviet intentions towards their regimes.

Even in the case of a country like Saudi Arabia known for the ardour of its opposition to communism and which had
given generous assistance to anti-communist movements all over the world, its relations with the Soviet Union gradually improved.

Concomitantly with these developments, there was considerable relaxation of tension between the PDRY and its erstwhile bitter enemy "Oman". An agreement to normalize relations between Oman and the PDRY was entered into 1982 and subsequently the PDRY opened its embassy in Muscat in early 1988.

It is thus seen that the very raison d'etre of defence cooperation within any association of countries - namely, existence of a common, shared threat directed against its members - simply did not exist as far as the GCC was concerned. Is it any wonder, therefore, that defence cooperation among these countries failed to achieve any tangible, permanent progress.

It has been considered in this part of the thesis how intra-GCC defence cooperation evolved as the Iraq-Iran war proceeded. Deliberations of the seven meetings of the GCC defence ministers held until the end of the Iraq-Iran war have also been reviewed in depth.

Turning now to the field of internal security, the period from the early 1981 to mid-1988 when the Iraq-Iran war ended indeed presented some serious challenges to the internal stability of these regimes. The first major destabilising event to occur after the formation of the GCC was the abortive coup in Bahrain
in November 1981 which aimed at the overthrow of the monarchy there through violent means. This conspiracy involved seventy, eighty persons consisting mostly of Bahraini Shias as well as a few Shias from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc., and there was little doubt about active Iranian support and encouragement for it. Following this incident, Saudi Arabia entered into bilateral security agreements with all the GCC members except Kuwait.

In the GCC, the country most affected by Iran-inspired acts of terrorism and sabotage was Kuwait and among the major incidents of subversion experienced by it during these years, mention may be made of: bomb explosions in important installations, including foreign Embassies, in December 1983; attempted assassination of the Amir of Kuwait as well as bomb explosions in two cafes which killed or injured more than 80 persons in mid-1985; a major fire in a refinery in June 1986; several incidents of terrorism and subversion such as fires, bomb explosions etc. in 1987 as well as discovery of a large cache of arms which were meant to be used for creating chaos and public disorder during the beginning of that year. Apart from Kuwait, the GCC member which experienced maximum menace to its internal security was Saudi Arabia where the annual Haj season was exploited by Iranian Hajis to hold vociferous demonstrations against the USA, Israel, the Kingdom itself, etc. The Iranian Hajis carrying portraits of Imam Khomeni would chant slogans expressing their total opposition to imperialism, zionism,
monarchical regimes in Islamic nations as in Saudi Arabia. It was the view of the Iranian authorities that their Hajis had every right, in fact obligation, to hold rallies of this kind and to freely give vent to their political opinions. There used to be considerable tension between Saudi authorities and the Iranian pilgrims during the Haj pilgrimage in the years from 1980 to 1987. To further exacerbate the matters, it was Iran's long-standing contention that Saudi Arabia had no authority to be the sole guardian of Islam's holiest shrines, namely, Mecca and Madina, and that this responsibility should be assigned to a group of Islamic nations. Finally, climax came in 1987 when bloody riots broke out between Iranian Hajis and the Saudi security personnel causing death of upward of 400 Iranians. This episode led to unprecedented rise of tension between Iran and the Kingdom leading subsequently to severance to diplomatic relations between the two.

The GCC Interior Ministers were not surprisingly much concerned with these developments. They held seven meetings since the inception of this body to the end of Iraq-Iran war during which they discussed various measures for strengthening cooperation among them in the field of internal security. During these meetings their deliberations centred on signing of a comprehensive security pact but due to Kuwaiti reservations this proposal was finally abandoned. The Interior
Ministers subsequently agreed on a watered-down version of this pact which they called "security strategy" and which was approved (though not ratified) during the eighth GCC summit held in December 1987.

In this part of the thesis, proceedings of the seven meetings held by the GCC Interior Ministers until mid-1988 as well as the extent to which the GCC members succeeded in strengthening inter-se cooperation in the field of internal security have been analysed in depth. It has been concluded that as in the field of defence not much headway had been made, despite existence of bilateral security agreements between them as well as endorsement of a security strategy. These agreements remained mainly on paper and were not translated into concrete tangible measure in actual practice.

The factors which stood in the way of growth of security cooperation have been essentially the same which hampered intra-GCC defence cooperation, namely, lack of a consensus on the kind of threat posed to its members by Iran. It is not difficult to understand as to why there was no unanimity within the GCC on this issue. Subsequent to the coup attempt in Bahrain in late 1981, the environment in the four GCC members, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman, had remained tranquil and peaceful throughout the period of the Iran-Iraq conflict. No wonder they saw no particular need to boost their security links with Saudi Arabia which might have irked Iran without any compensating benefit for them.
There were other factors too which impeded growth of intra-GCC security cooperation which involved reluctance of GCC members, especially Kuwait, to cede its national sovereignty in any degree for accepting a pan-GCC security umbrella which possessed certain supranational features. All these developments have been analysed in great depth in this part (Part II) of the thesis.