

Interview with Anthony Cordesman

I am pleased to welcome, from Washington DC, Dr. Anthony Cordesman America's Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Dr. Cordesman has a long and distinguished career in various branches of the US Government; both the legislative and executive branches, and also a very active research and academic career with various think tanks where he has delved deeper in many international relations issues: issues of war and peace, strategic issues, and also energy policy. Dr. Cordesman has written more than 50 books, and has a particular interest in the Gulf region.

- Dr. Cordesman, let me start first by what is the flavor of the month: the discussion about the strategic shift of the United States from focusing on the Middle East to focusing on the Asia Pacific region, this is not necessarily a new thing because we've been hearing about it quite a lot for a number of years, but certainly Afghanistan has brought it more into focus and there is a big discussion in many countries in the world about what this will mean for them.

Now, you are a person who brings together two strengths: One you have a lot of knowledge on area's issues particularly Gulf and Middle East, but you're also a strategist in the sense that you can look at problems from a much wider perspective, and recently you've written a paper which dealt with the issue of China Asia, and the changing strategic importance of the Gulf and the MENA region. In the paper you suggest that perhaps the MENA region and the Gulf in particular; this is not a question of their importance being less now for the United States and Western Countries, but that their importance has changed. How do you see the future of the Gulf region in the context of an adversarial relationship between the United States and China?

Dr. Cordesman: I think we need to be a little careful, because we are competing with China. At the same time, we still have major economic relations. We're cooperating in areas like the environment. So it is not a straight adversarial relationship. There is a particular point of tension, which is Taiwan and the South China Sea, and that has led to all kinds of exercises and demonstrative activities. But one problem that people seem to have is looking at how US military forces are organized. You have shifted some naval, and particularly Marine forces, to the Pacific. Some forces that were in Europe have been brought back to the United States, but it is America's global power projection capability which really counts, not the number of forces it deploys forward at any given time. And if you look at the US deployments in the Gulf and the MENA region today, even after removing most of the forces that were in Iraq and the forces in the region that were supporting the US war in Afghanistan, we're back to where we were after the first Gulf War in 1991. You're not talking about an American withdrawal from Europe, or from the Gulf or the

rest of the MENA area, because of the shift at China. And one of the side effects of the US focus on China – which has a much more developed level of technology and combat capability than a state like Iran or Syria or whatever might happen in Iraq or Yemen – is that what you've actually done is greatly improve US power projection capability globally unless we have a war that is so broad that includes both the MENA region and the Gulf. The other issue here is: a lot of what we're talking about is not fighting in the classic sense, it is about who has strategic leverage or influence. China looks at our capability to project power globally just as we look at theirs, and its where we project power and have influence that counts. China, I think obviously, at this point dominates the Asian landmass particularly the areas around China. The US through its strategic partnerships in the Gulf is dominating an area which exports petroleum and gas to China, and the studies that have been done by our international elements in the energy information administration show that China's dependence on the Gulf is going to steadily increase over time. A US presence supporting its strategic partners in the Gulf to deal with a threat like Iran, which is singled out in our national strategy in much the same way that China is, obviously gives us the potential capability to alter the path of China's supply of petroleum that moves from the Indian Ocean and near the strait of Malacca. So when you look at global power, and that's what we have to look at because certainly, if you are a Gulf country you are defending yourself in a very narrow area; if you are the United States you are a global power (one of two), and you are defending yourself on a global level.

- **The United States came to the Gulf, perhaps 50 years ago, at the time when Britain used to be the leading power in the region decided to leave, and there were at that point a lot of concerns about the vacuum that was being created and the United States stepped in essentially to fill that vacuum. Now, what you're suggesting is that we don't have a situation which is the same; that there is not going to be a vacuum of that sort. But you yourself over the last 50 years, or the peaceful part of the last 50 years engaged with the Gulf region; can you tell us a little bit about how you yourself got involved in the Gulf region and how you've seen America's relationship with the region evolve over these years as you were watching as a personal witness to all this that was going on?**

Dr. Cordesman: Well, initially you had a very limited US presence in the Gulf. I actually worked on studies inside the Pentagon that helped shape the initial US posture as the British were through from Eastern Suez, and the US presence has always fluctuated depending on the seriousness of the threat. For a long time, the US focused on Iran; it certainly was active in providing training and arms to Saudi Arabia, to the UAE as it emerged as a military power to the other Gulf Arab states. To some extent, that support was limited by US ties to Israel at a time when it was difficult to provide support to both Arab States and Israel. But the main factor was that Iran was near Russia, you were dealing with the former Soviet Union and the strategic threat in the Gulf initially was the fear that Russia would push south for access to the Indian Ocean to gain influence inside the area that was a key source of energy. That threat never actually

emerged. Two other threats did: one was what happened when basically the Shah of Iran was thrust out of power and all of a sudden you had a hostile extremist regime replace the Shah. The other which came very quickly afterwards, was having at other points come close to invading Kuwait. In this case Iraq started a war with Iran thinking it could invade Iran. And having been in and out of Iraq during much of that war was interesting. In some of the literature they never circulated: they talked about claiming many of the oil reserves inside southwest Iran near the coast. They only succeeded in their invasion for about a year and a half, and then Iran built up a serious resistance. That came to threaten not only Iraq, but all of the other Gulf states. At that point the US increased its presence, increased its arms transfers. You had effectively, towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the US was having what they called a tanker war with Iran. The US Navy was basically concentrated in the Gulf and near the Gulf, and became involved in major encounters or clashes with the Iranian Navy to protect the flow of tankers, particularly from Kuwait. That war never formally ended, it's still a sea spire technically between Iran and Iraq, but the next step, I think everyone can remember and that was when Iraq invaded Kuwait and attempted to annex it. That led to a whole new structure because the United States partnered with Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states to liberate Kuwait, supported by a number of European powers which included France and Britain. Well after 1991, you had a fundamentally different relationship: the US was a strategic partner that was present actively supporting the development of Gulf forces, particularly those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but it included Oman, Bahrain, and the other Arab Gulf states as well. That of course also led step by step to an effort to remove weapons of mass destruction from Iraq, to an invasion that was based on really seriously flawed intelligence, intelligence in part incidentally that Saddam had generated to try to convince Iran that Iraq still had some weapons of mass destruction when it didn't. The legacy of that is still playing out inside Iraq today; the confrontation with Iran has been going on ever since, there's been a major shift in terms of sort of the ability for the US to freely support its Gulf strategic partners without any of the former political constraints caused by the Arab-Israeli conflict. And that has made it easier to project power as well. So now we have a number of key naval and air bases, these aren't going to be eliminated or cut. There has been a shift of some forces to Jordan, but that's because of the threat to basically Syria and the problems caused by the civil war there. It has not been a withdrawal from the Gulf because we're talking primarily about air and naval power. This is something that people sometimes find a little difficult to remember: we're not going to be invading Iran, if there's a conflict we'll be supporting our Gulf partners primarily with air and missile and naval power; and that is power you can project relatively quickly even in the case of ships. So you have an ongoing partnership still in the region with major US arms transfers, but those arms transfers are back by contract groups that provide service and technical support that are helping Gulf states develop their own capability to maintain their equipment and in some cases produce it. Where we really are not yet decided on how we will proceed, and when I say we I don't mean the United States, I mean the United States and its Gulf partners, is how do we move forward in areas like missile defense, layered air defense, the modernization of how we integrate sea power, air power and missile power; what the United States calls Joint All Domain Warfare. Because you are seeing radical shifts in

weaponry and military capability and how military forces are trained, and in the ability to strike deep into the territory of other countries. This is a shift where I think all of us are still in the process of trying to reshape our force plans. And one of the great problems that the United States has had, and still has and it's a problem that is more serious for the Gulf states is: if you are going to have effective Gulf military forces they have to be interoperable, they have to share command and control; sensor systems like radar and missile defense and how the Gulf Cooperation Council is a start. As we've seen in the sort of feud that existed between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and as you see in the differences that still exist in the air defense systems and naval systems, the, sort of, separation in many ways of forces within the Gulf states to be effective to use money well to provide the kind of deterrence that can prevent war, you need a far better integrated Gulf as the core of forward defense.

- **So essentially, you are saying we need a NATO for the Gulf?**

Dr. Cordesman: I think you need a NATO for the Gulf. NATO isn't perfect, one would hope perhaps in some ideal world it would be the Gulf Cooperation Council that could show NATO what to do, but we may be a year or two away from that.

- **Indeed, but can I pause here for a moment because you spoke arrogantly about how the US posture is evolving and has evolved over the years in response to events on the ground, but clearly there has been huge changes in the Gulf countries over the last 50 years, if I can take the point of the change from Britain to the United States as the starting point and then what followed afterwards. So we see now the countries of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, becoming much more assertive in their foreign policy, ambitious if you want in their foreign policy, and also trying to build up their military capacity and capability. How do you think this is fitting into the wider picture of what the reality of Gulf region and the Middle East is today? Everything is sort of the same, but everything is also sort of shifting, so we have this rather unusual situation where in a sense people are striving for stability, but on the other hand they are also striving for change at the same time. Have you had time to reflect on these issues perhaps?**

Dr. Cordesman: Well you're asking some very good questions, and we know some these changes already. One is that you have seen: Iran expands its influence, its ties to Syria and we have to remember that Syria is one of the few countries to back Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. The tensions between Syria and Iraq, basically meant that there was conflict between two major Arab powers. You have seen that you now have a long civil war in Yemen, its scarcely the first war in Yemen. I have to say my first ever trip to the Gulf was in 1962, where I think probably no one

living in the Gulf except people my age can even begin to remember what it was like back then, and how small everything seemed by today's standards. So you now have modern states, well developed states, you're going from virtually small and tiny military forces with almost no major weapons to some of the best armed forces in the developing world. You have also seen shifts in the nature of forces, and the most serious ones I think have been the creation of a capability for irregular warfare in the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean within Iran, which is forcing the Gulf states to seriously consider having more modern and developed navies, and higher standards of training. You have seen a major shift away from simply relying on air power – aircraft – you're now talking about missile power and that missile power ranges from ballistic missiles that can strike anywhere in the southern Gulf, Iranian forces in particular, to small guided platforms which can be manually operated and are relatively low on altitude but can still carry out precision strikes. You're talking about decisions being made not necessarily with artificial intelligence or by it, but certainly with time limits, sensor systems, reaction times, which particularly in the case of missiles give you only minutes to deal with strikes which could potentially cripple a critical part of the petroleum resources, the power systems, the water supplies in the southern Gulf. These threats didn't exist even 5 years ago, and they are now becoming very serious, and are becoming subtly more serious over time. You've seen what we call Grey Area Warfare; countries from outside the Gulf, particularly the case of Syria-Russia, can provide support to political movements that have military or at least violent elements. You are talking about what we sometimes call proxy wars, involving non state actors. So all of these shifts are going on at once, and they're being driven in some ways by the competition between outside powers. So you have Russia and NATO racing to develop new more lethal missile, naval, and air systems, and you see the same in the competition with China. This is not simply a matter of Gulf development, its global and that's why basically one of the most important elements, particularly if the US is to provide the Gulf with the support it needs, is that the Gulf develop far better integrated forces. And if you think back this is something that for example Saudi Arabia under its previous King attempted to actually advocate and implement, but unfortunately tensions between the Gulf states particularly over Islamic parties have almost blocked that progress. It's not a matter of having more or better weapons, although the Gulf will have to buy things like missiles for instance, it's a matter of that these weapons and really only be used effectively, and that includes the aircraft and ships that Arab Gulf states already have, if they really are integrated, interoperable, and the Gulf states worked together. And it is immensely difficult for the United States to provide the kind of coordinated intelligence, battle management, outside military support that the Gulf states need if they don't cooperate to provide a common picture of what they need and what will defend the region. Imagine the UAE that has some very, very, effective forces; Qatar is developing some much more effective elements, but these are very small countries in territory and military force size compared to, say, Iran. You cannot, even if you have the best possible forces in countries as small as the UAE or Qatar, have effective defense because you are simply too vulnerable to strikes that can concentrate on one relatively small target area. People I think have not yet really debated this enough in the Gulf. I am sometimes a little puzzled that people are much more

worried about us doing something we haven't done than fixing the problems they have already created for themselves.

- **Well you spoke about your first visit to Yemen in 1962, and I am intrigued...**

Dr. Cordesman: No I didn't get to Yemen, I got to Kuwait, I got to Bahrain, I got to Saudi Arabia, I got to Oman, and I got to each of what became the Emirates.

- **Were you in Aden as well, or not?**

Dr. Cordesman: I did get near Aden; we were on a ship that stopped in a port, but we didn't get off.

- **Okay. Well, I want to conclude this conversation by asking you to look at two countries we have mentioned a number of times already: Saudi Arabia which is in a sense, compared to the other Gulf countries, the giant, it's the big power, compared in size with the others but which has its own very peculiar specificities that has both added strength to it but also makes it vulnerable in some other ways. And the UAE, which this year celebrates the 50th anniversary of its establishment. I wonder whether you can look back at your own engagements with these two countries and think of perhaps one or two things that strike out as being important to keep in mind both for outsiders, when talking about Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and people in these countries when they're talking about their future and their region.**

Dr. Cordesman: I think sometimes they forget that the core of military power and security, is really development. Certainly, when I think back to the years I spent coming in and out of the Gulf, watching basically these two countries emerge as what, by most standards, I think would be said to be fully developed powers with much higher educational and technical standards, and the ability to run and manage sensitive equipment capabilities. These are really important shifts; they are in some ways the human development has been at least as important as any arms imports or increase in military development and the level of sophistication of training. This is something when you talk about the Gulf when I first came to it, people tended to be educated as Officers if they were trained in modern systems in Britain; you know Sandhurst was the standard. I think you now have excellent training in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, you're not reliant on tribal elements in countries like Oman, which basically fought against the problems they had

during the rebellion at a tribal level, you're also seeing a country which is a far more developed modern military power and economy. The problem I think you have, to some extent, with that – and here Saudi Arabia is an example – is the modern economy also creates vulnerabilities. One thing that I think people in the southern Gulf don't ask themselves often enough is "how vulnerable are we?". Well if you have ever seen the output of a desalination plant, how small it is and how attractive of a target it is, you have an idea that while Saudi Arabia is large and has strategic depth in distance, it's also extremely vulnerable, as is the UAE. The same is true of dependence on electric power and obviously on very critical oil and gas production facilities in the Gulf, which today you can now at least incapacitate, not necessarily destroy, but make inoperable with even one precision strike from a conventionally armed missile launched by Iran. These are changes that people are just beginning to adapt to and I think that there is a real need, as there has been for the United States, to look beyond the threat that can be caused by terrorism and extremism and look at the full range of security; what does it take to deter and protect at every level of possible conflict. How can you reach out to the United States, but also to your neighbors in ways that create the most effective deterrents and barriers to war? I think these are issues which strike me as the ones the Gulf now really needs to address.

- **with these very pertinent questions. We have come to the end of this conversation; thank you very much Dr. Anthony Cordesman for joining us.**

Dr. Cordesman: Thank you.

- **I am very grateful Sir; this was a very good discussion that I am sure our colleagues will be able to....**