



**Report on the Gulf Naval Commanders Conference
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
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by Alison Lawlor

Background

On July 2, 2008, CNA participated in the Gulf Naval Commanders conference at the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The conference brought together military leaders in the region to discuss maritime security challenges in the Arabian Gulf. It was organized by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA), and was under the patronage of General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. The conference featured high-ranking officers from Arabian Gulf countries and coalition partners. The audience comprised Arab and coalition navy, coast guard, and marine personnel, as well as think tank and private industry professionals.

Lieutenant General Hamad Mohammed Thani Al-Rumaithi, Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces, gave the keynote address. The first panel was moderated by Major General (Ret.) Khaled Al Bu-Ainnain, former Commander, UAE Air Force, and featured Vice Admiral Kevin Cosgriff, Commander, U.S. NAVCENT, and Rear Admiral Mohammed Sabab Al-Teneji, Commander, UAE Navy. The second panel was moderated by Major General (Ret.) Mohammed Suhail Al-Marrar, former Commander, UAE Navy, and featured Major General Ahmed Yousef Al-Mullah, Commander, Kuwaiti Navy; Rear Admiral Jean-Louis Kerignard, Deputy Commander, French Maritime Forces; and Rear Admiral George Zambellas, Commander, U.K. Maritime Forces.

The Gulf and Iran

As the first presenter, Vice Admiral Cosgriff emphasized the strategic importance of the Gulf region and its recent exponential economic growth. About 60 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 30 percent of the world's proven gas reserves are in the Gulf region. Roughly 25 million barrels of oil travel by sea through the Strait of Hormuz each day. Maritime forces are responsible for providing security throughout the region in order to create and sustain the stability needed for trade, economic activity, and prosperity.

In response to a question on Iran's intentions to close the Strait of Hormuz, Cosgriff said that Iran will not try to close the strait and that the United States would not allow Iran to close it. Cosgriff questioned Tehran's ability to control its forces, citing recent harassment of coalition ships as evidence of an unclear chain of command or

“chain of influence” from Tehran. When asked about Iran, Rear Admiral Al-Teneji, Commander, UAE Navy, stated that Iran is a friendly neighbor to the UAE and that they have common interests. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) does not see any direct threat from Iran, but the UAE Navy stands ready to defend its territorial waters if attacked, regardless of the enemy.

Multinational force for new mission sets

In his presentation, Al-Teneji emphasized the importance of “jointness” and interoperability in the face of current maritime threats. In particular, he commented that the disaster relief mission is too big for one country. He recommended the *creation of a multinational force*, such as a combined task force, to share the capabilities of the GCC maritime forces for *humanitarian assistance* and *disaster relief operations*.

On a similar note, Major General Al-Mullah, Commander, Kuwaiti Navy, discussed the need for navies to redefine mission sets to meet new challenges, such as maritime terrorism and threats to border security. He also stated that GCC maritime forces need to adapt their force structures to face new threats and identify the assets and training needed to accomplish the new missions. In order to achieve this, Al-Mullah suggested that they form *a GCC-wide cooperation and policy strategy*, which would help GCC navies *move to offshore operations and integrate as a collective force*.

Interagency coordination

Rear Admiral Zambellas, Commander, U.K. Maritime Forces, counseled that the emergent threats in the region dwarf the contingent capabilities of most countries and that robust, dedicated forces are needed to counter these threats. He compared maritime forces’ capabilities to using a Swiss army pocketknife for border control and counterterrorism; maritime capabilities are just one component or tool of these missions. A model of collaborative security is the Joint Interagency Task Force – South (JIATF-S), which brings together international agencies to create operations for the SOUTHCOM region. This kind of interagency coordination (which could include civilian mariners) is necessary to manage a vast array of stakeholders, he said, because *knowing your ally is as important as knowing your enemy*.

Challenges to combined operations

Rear Admiral Kerignard, Deputy Commander, French Forces, discussed three challenges facing multinational forces in combined naval operations. The first challenge is the command structure of the coalition and the need for coalition commanders to develop the ability to quickly integrate newcomers into the command structure—a challenge that reflects the high turnover of coalition forces in the region. The second challenge is the frequent use of “for eyes only” classification for intelligence-sharing agreements, because it excludes some coalition partners and limits cooperation. The third challenge concerns rules of engagement (ROE).

Commanders must consider the ROE and know which forces can execute the missions and achieve the desired results.

Bottom line

In summary, there was no disagreement among the speakers regarding the major maritime threats in the region and the need for *cooperative solutions*. Chief among the threats discussed was maritime terrorism, which recognizes no borders and uses asymmetric and unconventional means of attack.

Participants shared concerns about protecting oil infrastructure, chokepoints, and sea lines of communication.

They also expressed concern about their ability to secure borders and the challenges inherent in preventing the illicit maritime transport of goods, people, and weapons of mass destruction in the Gulf.

Finally, several presenters emphasized the threat of a natural or man-made disaster with environmental consequences. The response to these maritime threats is beyond the capability and capacity of any one nation, and the presenters emphasized the need for collaborative and cooperative joint, interagency, and multinational solutions.