

POLICY BRIEF

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WHY THE GULF MATTERS: CRAFTING AN AUSTRALIAN SECURITY POLICY FOR THE ARABIAN GULF

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

While the Australian Defence Force has had elements deployed in the Arabian Gulf nearly continuously since 1991 and the magnitude and scope of Australia's economic interests in the Gulf are increasing every year, Australia lacks a coherent foreign and security policy for the region.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Australian policy-makers should view the Arabian Gulf as an area of priority strategic interest distinct from the wider Middle East. Given our ongoing interest in the region and limited resources to influence outcomes, the government should identify a key regional partner with whom to develop a strategic partnership. The most suitable candidate would be the United Arab Emirates.



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Introduction

The government's decision to withdraw Australian combat elements from southern Iraq by the middle of 2008 has the potential to consign the Arabian Gulf region¹ to the periphery of Australian policy interests. There is a consequent temptation to focus our security policy on Australia's immediate region, or within West Asia only on Afghanistan where our combat forces will likely be operating for some time to come. To do so, however, flies in the face of our substantial, diverse and growing economic interests in the Gulf (including an upcoming Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) free trade agreement), our interests in counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation, and our record of regularly deploying Australian Defence Force (ADF) elements into the region over the last 20 years. These factors, along with the government's recognition that '...the challenges (that) Australia faces will require us to be more internationally active, not less'² mean that, in an uncertain world where our strategic horizon extends beyond Southeast Asia, it is prudent to maintain and consider enhancing the diplomatic and security connections we have built up in the Gulf, albeit in a piecemeal fashion, over nearly two decades.

The purpose of this policy brief is to highlight the importance of the Gulf to our future

economic and broader security and to recommend a policy approach for our security engagement with the region. While other papers³ have touched on Australia's interests in the broader Middle East, they have not examined the Gulf in detail nor offered specific policy solutions for Australian engagement there. The drafting of a new Defence White Paper this year offers a good opportunity to address this deficiency and to establish the groundwork for a coherent Australian security policy for the Gulf, one that acknowledges the centrality of the area to our long-term security interests. This Lowy Institute Policy Brief outlines the nature of those interests and suggests an approach to the region (particularly the GCC) that is within our resources and capabilities without being seen as token, acknowledges our interests and those of our major trading partners, builds on relationships already formed and addresses not only present but also likely future Australian interests in the region.

Historical security interests

The ADF has had elements deployed within the region nearly continuously since the dispatch of naval forces in support of the Gulf War in late 1991. Land and air force elements deployed to Kuwait again in 1998, and ADF elements from

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all three services have been continuously in the Gulf region since 2001, initially in support of operations in Afghanistan and since that time in support of operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Securing host country support for these deployments required intensive and creative Australian diplomacy. Despite this, Australia has rarely, if ever, sought to view the Gulf as a region of specific national interest in its own right. This has been largely due to a view that the region only had importance because of our alliance obligations with the US, but also because Australia has traditionally viewed the Gulf as part of the wider Middle East.

The world has changed significantly since the last time that the Australian Parliament took a comprehensive, focused look at Australia's relationship with the Gulf, by way of a Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence report in 1982. This was at a time when the Cold War was still the main game, the Iran-Iraq war was being fought and concerns over possible Soviet designs on the Gulf led the US to examine options for a Gulf-based Rapid Deployment Force. Although the parliamentary committee report noted the needs of Australia and other non-communist nations to secure continued supplies of oil, it stated that Australia had no direct strategic interest in the Gulf.⁴ It was nearly 20 years before Parliament again addressed the region in a formal report,⁵

although the Gulf was not treated separately from the broader Middle East. The committee did however note that the Gulf region's strategic location and oil production capacity meant that it was important to our long-term national interests.

Formal Government consideration of Australia's security interests in the region has been even more scant, in part reflecting the hold of narrow 'Defence of Australia' thinking until the 9/11 attacks of 2001. The 2000 Defence White Paper makes no mention of the Gulf, let alone the Middle East, although it is likely implicit in references to possible conflicts beyond Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.⁶ The 2003 Defence Update and the Foreign Affairs and Trade White Paper of the same year did note that the Middle East was of strategic importance to Australia and that conflict there could directly affect our interests, without going into any detail about the nature of those interests (other than commercial) or what the policy implications of a threat to those interests might be. The 2005 and 2007 Updates added concerns about Iran's nuclear program and the reliance of our major trading partners on Middle East (as opposed to Arabian Gulf) energy resources, but discussion of a distinct Australian policy approach to the region was again lacking.

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Why the Gulf matters

Australia and the Gulf's energy resources

The extent of Australia's energy interests in the Gulf is often underestimated. In 2006/07, imports of crude oil from the Gulf were valued at \$2.2 billion (approximately 17% of Australia's total crude imports by value).⁷ Significant amounts of refined petroleum were also imported from Singapore,⁸ Japan⁹ and South Korea,¹⁰ which access most of their feed stock from the Gulf. In 2006-07, Australia effectively imported refined Gulf oil worth \$4.8 billion through these three countries.¹¹ As a result, Australia imported approximately \$7 billion of its crude oil and refined petroleum from the Gulf, representing 34% of its oil import needs. Declining oil production in Australia means that imports will make up an increasingly large proportion of Australia's future oil needs.

Dependence on Gulf oil affects our most important trading partners even more profoundly, as Table 1 illustrates.

This reliance on Gulf oil is only likely to increase in the years ahead, with Gulf countries making up five of the top six countries with the greatest proven oil reserves, accounting for 55% of the world's known reserves.¹²

Table 1

Bilateral Trade Ranking	Country	Percentage of Oil Imports from the Gulf (2006 figures)
1	Japan	83% ¹³
2	China	44% ¹⁴
4	Republic of Korea	82% ¹⁵
5	New Zealand	57% ¹⁶
6	Singapore	75% ¹⁷

Australia, the Gulf and the US alliance

While previous reports have acknowledged the energy importance of the Gulf to Australia, most of our strategic interests in the region have been viewed through the prism of the US alliance. Even before the ADF's current deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, Defence's strategic interests in the region were articulated largely in terms of the part Australian participation in military operations in the Gulf could play in the maintenance of the US alliance. Two of Defence's stated interests in the Middle East were the 'building (of) defence relationships with the Persian Gulf states which are robust enough in their own right to enable us to deploy to the Gulf in support of coalition operations' and 'demonstrating Australia's commitment to, and support for, the US role in the Middle East.'¹⁸

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Such an approach has tended to skew our view of the region and, in defence terms at least, confined our national security and engagement strategy in the Gulf largely to the ability to access basing rights in regional countries in order to support US-led military operations. This inevitably leads to a mindset that our regional interests are transitory in nature and dependent on US military plans for the area. As a consequence, Australia's strategic planners tend to view our relationships with the Gulf states equally in priority, to ensure maximum basing flexibility in the event of future deployments of ADF elements in the region. Bilateral trade interests may modify our national approach to the region, but there remains a sense that we have largely second-order interests in the security architecture of the Gulf region.

Contributing to collective security

While the US alliance remains the major reason for our continued involvement in the Gulf, broader notions of collective security in the region are also important to Australia. Counter-proliferation issues, particularly Iran's nuclear program, are a major concern for both Australia and our allies. Responses to Iran's continued flouting of nuclear inspection regimes will come to increasingly dominate the attention of US policy-makers, regardless of who wins the upcoming presidential election.

A practical example of where Australian involvement has had some impact in establishing a common counter-proliferation approach has been in the establishment of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a scheme aimed at preventing the flow of weapons of mass destruction and of which Australia is a founding member. A 2007 PSI exercise in the Arabian Gulf included Bahraini (and Australian) assets, as well as observers from Qatar and the UAE. Kuwait has also been a PSI participant in the past. Having already achieved a degree of participation by Gulf states in the PSI, Australia has an interest in encouraging continued participation on their part. This would be difficult were we to disengage from the region, whereas our role as an engaged and interested 'middle power' could be used to encourage further participation from other GCC states in an area where weapons proliferation is a major concern.

Aside from proliferation considerations, Australia should be interested in regional collective security issues because of the growing dependence of emerging major economies such as China and India on Gulf oil resources. China in particular is becoming increasingly reliant on Gulf oil. While China produces 50% of its own oil requirements at present, by 2030 this figure is estimated to fall to just 20%.¹⁹ As the US continues to reduce its reliance on the Gulf as its major source of oil, it nevertheless remains

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the sole guarantor of maritime energy security in the region. A potential future scenario could see an increase in tensions in the Gulf between the US, our major alliance partner (and Gulf security guarantor), and China, our major trading partner, a US economic rival and potentially strategic rival and major Gulf oil consumer. Indeed, strategic competition between the two economic giants could take on a sharper edge in the Gulf than in Asia. An active Australian presence in the region could help to promote two of our key national interests: maintaining stability in the Gulf, and encouraging constructive US-China relations. At the same time, if strategic cooperation rather than confrontation emerges between the economic superpowers in the future, there may well be an opportunity cost to Australia of not being involved in the region as our interests could be squeezed out by those of the main players.

Challenges for a remote ‘middle power’

The distance of the Gulf from Australia, as well as the demands of servicing our primary areas of strategic interest in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific naturally limits the diplomatic and military resources we have to expend in the region. This should not, however, deter us from establishing a comprehensive security policy that is appropriate for a region where we have

substantial long-term interests. We need to move beyond the narrow aim of building defence relations with the Gulf solely to facilitate ADF basing rights in the event we continue to deploy to the region to support coalition operations. An engagement policy of this type illustrates a short-term interest in the region rather than a real long-term desire to engage.

Other countries seeking basing rights are able to offer substantial benefits to the host countries that Australia cannot hope to replicate. The US provides a security umbrella for the region in general as well as to specific countries through the enormous al-Udeid airbase in Qatar, as well as the basing of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. In January 2008 France demonstrated a long-term commitment by signing a permanent basing agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for French forces in the region. While the hype surrounding this move was much greater than the reality of the proposed French presence, the agreement served to clearly demonstrate to the Emirati authorities that France’s interest in the country and the region was not solely tied to support for its military operations.²⁰ Relatively symbolic engagement strategies such as these are well received by the Gulf leadership.

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An Australian approach to Gulf security

Australia has neither the capability nor the need to consider the permanent basing of forces within the region. Although Australian forces are likely to remain deployed in the region for the foreseeable future, the government will need to be careful in managing relationships as our combat forces withdraw from Iraq to ensure Australia is not seen as losing security interest in the region with the change of government.

Protecting our economic and broader political interests in the Gulf dictates that we maintain good relations with all countries in the region. That said, resource constraints mean Australia has to be selective in its engagement. Our limited national assets cannot cover all countries equally, and our efforts would be diluted were we to try and do so. A viable alternative to this scattergun approach is to develop a new strategic partnership with a GCC country, signalling Australia's long-term engagement and intent to contribute to collective security in the region. This should not, however, be done at the expense of our existing diplomatic relations in the region. The model is not without precedent. Germany and the UAE signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2004, South Korea has established a Korea-UAE commission with a view to working towards a strategic

partnership in the future, India is looking to negotiate such a partnership with Oman, and former Chinese President Jiang Zemin announced a 'strategic oil partnership' with Saudi Arabia during a state visit there in 1999.

The UAE as a strategic partner

The issue then, is one of choosing an appropriate long-term strategic partner. In defence terms, we have relatively little profile in the region, having only established permanent defence representation in the region since 2003. Before 2001, Defence believed our closest regional ties were with Kuwait.²¹ In reality though, there was little substance to that relationship beyond individual officers attending courses in Australia. Since that time, the UAE has emerged to become our closest regional security partner, albeit more as a result of a series of uncoordinated events than as part of a coordinated plan. The reasons for leveraging off existing relations to engage the UAE as a strategic partner are numerous:

- **Economic links:**
 - In purely commercial terms, the UAE has overtaken Saudi Arabia as our largest regional trading partner, with bilateral trade in 2006/07 of \$ 4.1 billion (a 79% increase over the previous year and a surplus in Australia's favour of over \$600

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million), making it our 19th largest trading partner overall. It is our 15th largest export market with export growth of 45% last year.²²

- The UAE continues to look towards Asia as a future economic partner. In March/April 2008 the UAE Prime Minister signed several memoranda of understanding covering economic and security issues with the Chinese government, and a large proportion of the UAE's oil exports are destined for North and South Asia.
- **Existing bilateral military links:** In April 2007 Australia signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement with the UAE (a first for Australia in the region), and several other bilateral security agreements covering a wide range of issues have also been signed. It is the only Arab country (and one of very few countries in the world) that sends officers to Australia to undertake the full continuum of military officer courses, from initial officer training through specialised mid-career courses to Higher Defence College.
- **Support for Western coalition efforts:** The UAE has been among the most forward-leaning Arab state in providing military

support to largely western military coalitions. Examples include:

- A special forces task group that, as recently disclosed, has been operating in Afghanistan for the past five years.²³
- The hosting of coalition air assets and, more recently a US Air Force information, surveillance and reconnaissance launch and recovery facility at al-Dhafra airbase.²⁴
- In 1999 the UAE provided a mechanised battle group to Kosovo as a part of KFOR.
- Since 2003 the UAE has allowed Germany to train Iraqi police and military forces on its soil.
- Following the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah war, the UAE provided significant reconstruction funds to Lebanon, and gifted equipment to the Lebanese military.
- **Stable government:** The UAE has a very stable government with, for the Gulf, relatively liberal social policies. The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi (the successor to the President) is a former Armed Forces Chief of Staff who well understands and takes a keen interest in regional security affairs.

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- **Geographic advantages:**
 - The UAE's relatively central location between Iraq and Afghanistan provides a flexible location for basing Australian forces if required to support US or coalition forces in the future.
 - With the exception of Oman (whose oil reserves are limited), the UAE is also the only GCC member that has direct access to the Indian Ocean through its port at Fujairah (and plans to build a pipeline/rail link to the port), obviating the need to transport its oil through the natural chokepoint at the Straits of Hormuz.
- **Regional interlocutor:** Although the UAE continues to have a territorial dispute with Iran over the Islamic Republic's occupation of the so-called 'three islands', the UAE's extensive historical and commercial ties with Iran through Dubai and Sharjah in particular make it a valued interlocutor on Iranian issues.

Policy recommendations

Distinguishing Australia's security interests in the Gulf from the wider Middle East

The convergence of Australia's economic, security and US alliance interests in the Gulf puts it in a different category to the broader Middle East. Having acknowledged that the Gulf is of direct strategic relevance to Australia, the government should craft a comprehensive regional foreign and security policy with those interests in mind. The writing of a new Defence White Paper provides a timely opportunity to acknowledge the current and future strategic relevance of the Gulf to Australia. Rather than treating it simply as part of the broader Middle East, the Paper should include specific treatment of the Gulf and a clear articulation of the full scope of Australia's interests in the region, both direct and indirect. From this could then flow an integrated long-term diplomatic and military engagement strategy.

Establishing a strategic partnership

Resource constraints dictate the need to forge a deeper strategic relationship with one regional partner in the Gulf. Australia is in the fortunate position of already having a relationship of some substance in commercial, educational and to a lesser degree, security terms with the UAE. The formal acknowledgement of this relationship through the signing of a strategic

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partnership would signal that Australia has long-term interests in the region beyond basing rights for ADF elements. Prioritising our regional efforts by focusing on building a special relationship with one regional country would allow us to maximise our impact in the Gulf – although this should not be done at the expense of maintaining existing levels of engagement with other Gulf countries.

There is also little point in announcing special bilateral partnerships without first identifying the means by which they will be sustained. Military training capacity constraints in Australia limit any increase in individual training that could be offered. But other possibilities exist, including:

- annual or biannual military-military talks covering bilateral military relations, regional and energy security issues, border security issues and intelligence exchanges
- second-track or one-and-a-half-track dialogues could serve to raise the profile of the region within Australia (and vice-versa)
- multilateral meetings that included Asian regional states with shared security interests to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Conclusion

Australia's withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq should not signal a withdrawal of Australian security engagement in the Gulf region. ADF elements will be engaged in the region for years to come in both the Iraq and Afghanistan theatres, while the magnitude and scope of Australia's interests in the Gulf are increasing every year. The US, our major alliance partner, is committed to the region for the foreseeable future through its long-term basing arrangements and determination to provide security for global oil supplies. Australia's ongoing economic, political and security interests in the region require a coherent approach rather than one of benign neglect interspersed with occasional bursts of self-interested attention.

Choosing one country, the UAE, as a Gulf strategic partner would signal an intent for sustained engagement in the region, and would provide a flexible enough tool to achieve this without over-committing Australia in an uncertain strategic environment. For relatively little effort the long-term returns are likely to be substantial.

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NOTES

¹ Although referred to as either the Arabian or Persian Gulf, this paper will refer to it as the Arabian Gulf. In the context of this paper, the Gulf region refers to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as well as Iraq and Iran.

² Kevin Rudd. *Advancing Australia's global and regional economic interests*: Address to the East Asia Forum in conjunction with the Australian National University. 26 March 2008.

³ The Lowy Institute's *Reinventing West Asia: How the 'Middle East' and 'South Asia' fit into Australia's strategic picture* took a broader look at the region and noted the ongoing importance of energy security and proliferation issues to Australia, while ASPi's *Australia and the Middle East* was a good overview of Australian interests in the broader Middle East, but had little focus on policy.

⁴ Australia. Parliament. Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *The Gulf and Australia*. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1982, p 23.

⁵ Australia. Parliament. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Australia's relations with the Middle East*. Canberra, Parliament of the Commonwealth, 2001.

⁶ Australia. Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: our future defence force*. Canberra, Defence Publishing Service, 2000, p 52.

⁷ In 2006-07, Australia imported a total of \$13.0 billion of crude petroleum. See Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Composition of trade: Australia 2006-07*. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, pp 7-8; Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Kuwait fact sheet*. 2007: <http://www.dfat.gov.au/GEO/fs/kuwa.pdf>.; Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Qatar fact sheet*. 2007: <http://www.dfat.gov.au/GEO/fs/qata.pdf>.; Australia.

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<http://www.dfat.gov.au/GEO/fs/saud.pdf>.; Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *United Arab Emirates fact sheet*. 2007:

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/fs/uaem.pdf>.

⁸ In 2006, 74.8% of Singapore's crude oil supplies came from the Gulf. See Puah Kok Keong, *Energy for growth: Singapore's national energy policy* (paper presented at the 83rd ISAES Energy Forum, Singapore, 2008), p 1.

⁹ In 2006, 80.4% of Japan's petroleum needs came from the Gulf. See United States. Energy Information Administration. *Japan petroleum (oil) imports 1992-2006*. International Petroleum Monthly 2008: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/ipstr/t411.xls>.

¹⁰ In 2006, 82.2% of South Korea's total crude oil imports came from the Gulf. See Korea Petroleum Association. *Crude oil imports*.

<http://eng.oil.or.kr/statistics/imports1.jsp>.

¹¹ In 2006, Australia's imports of refined Gulf petroleum from Singapore totaled \$3.98 billion, \$450 million from South Korea and \$350 million from Japan. See Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Composition of trade: Australia 2006-07*, pp 7-8.

¹² Worldwide look at reserves and production. *Oil & Gas Journal* 103 (47) 2005.

¹³ United States. Energy Information Administration, *Country analysis briefs: Persian Gulf region*, 2007.

¹⁴ International Energy Agency, *World energy outlook 2007 executive summary: China and India insights*. Paris, IEA, 2007, p 326.

¹⁵ United States. Energy Information Administration, *Country analysis briefs: South Korea*, 2007.

¹⁶ New Zealand. Ministry of Economic Development, *Energy Data File June 2007*, Ministry of Economic Development, 2007; Statistics New Zealand, *New Zealand external trade statistics June 2007*, 2007; United Nations Statistics Division. United Nations

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<http://comtrade.un.org/db/ce/ceSnapshot.aspx?px=H1&cc=270900&r=554&cy=2006>.

¹⁷ Ministry of Trade and Industry Singapore, *Energy for growth: national energy policy report*, 2007, p 15.

¹⁸ Australia. Parliament. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Australia's relations with the Middle East*, p 67.

¹⁹ International Energy Agency, *World energy outlook 2007 executive summary: China and India insights*, p 326.

²⁰ Part of the French motivation for closer security ties is to boost sales of French military equipment to Gulf states.

²¹ Australia. Parliament. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Australia's relations with the Middle East*, 2001, p 73.

²² Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *United Arab Emirates fact sheet*.

²³ Frank Gardner. Muslim troops help win Afghan minds. *BBC News* 28 March 2008: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7318731.stm.

²⁴ Middle East Strategy at Harvard (MESH) Admin. *The American footprint*. Middle East Strategy at Harvard (MESH), Olin Institute for Strategic Studies 16 January 2008:

(http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/01/american_footprint/).

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