

2021

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Recommended Citation

Mobley, Richard A. (2021) "London and Washington—Maintaining Naval Cooperation despite Strategic Differences during Operation EARNEST WILL," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 74 : No. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss2/9>

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LONDON AND WASHINGTON

Maintaining Naval Cooperation despite Strategic Differences during Operation EARNEST WILL

Richard A. Mobley

We share the Americans' long term wish to uphold freedom of navigation in the Gulf, but we differ fundamentally from them in short and medium term aims and tactics.

JOINT MEMO FROM U.K. DEFENCE MINISTER AND
FOREIGN SECRETARY TO PRIME MINISTER, JULY 1987

The United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States cooperated successfully to help end the Iran-Iraq War, but national-level differences over how to protect reflagged Kuwaiti tankers revealed surmountable fissures in coordinating operations between the two navies, judging from recently declassified documents.¹ Mutually committed to a cease-fire, freedom of navigation, and a halt to attacks on commercial shipping, the two nations were poised to maintain their rich history of national-level policy coordination and naval cooperation when the American effort to escort reflagged Kuwaiti tankers—Operation EARNEST WILL—began in July 1987.² Throughout the operation, Royal Navy (RN) units continued operations in the southern Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, passing exercises with USN ships, and joint meetings with USN staffs. However, London's suspicions about the risks and viability of EARNEST WILL hindered Britain's ability to fulfill all of Washington's "asks," despite a largely successful record of cooperation. Perhaps anticipating notional U.S. accusations of free riding, London rightly argued privately and publicly that it already was doing its fair share for the

protection of shipping in the Gulf and continued to insist on national sovereignty. The benefits of the relationship fully justified the friction encountered in attempting to coordinate naval strategies.

American leaders repeatedly thanked their U.K. counterparts for Britain's diplomatic and naval support during the U.S. Navy's effort to escort

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Naval War College Review, Spring 2021, Vol. 74, No. 2

reflagged Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf starting in 1987, but hundreds of recently declassified British records reveal London's misgivings about the effort.³ In particular, the sources provide background to London's efforts to distance the Royal Navy from U.S. control in the Persian Gulf and additional evidence about the United Kingdom's initial rebuff of American requests to send mine countermeasure (MCM) vessels (MCMVs) to the Persian Gulf in mid-1987.⁴ Unfortunately, some of these issues—notably, London's initial reluctance to deploy MCMVs to the Gulf—also became public, and probably gave Tehran a heartening perception of disarray in the Western camp.⁵

The British archival documents illustrate the challenges of coalition warfare even under good circumstances. They also provide material for an early case study about these challenges in the Middle East, in this case coalition warfare with a close partner, one with whom the United States enjoyed excellent communications at all levels of the chain of command, agreed on long-term strategic objectives and perceptions of the adversary, and shared a rich history of naval cooperation. This article relies primarily on the archival material, with some corroboration from memoirs and published histories of the Iran-Iraq War.

The trove of evidence includes summaries of cabinet meetings and leadership exchanges with senior U.S. officials, talking papers supporting such events, written correspondence between U.S. and British national leaders, and message traffic between London and its embassies involved in monitoring the Persian Gulf. Topically the documents address assessments of U.S. naval strategy and reliability, the costs (to Britain) of the operation, and preferable courses of action, as shared among British leaders, including Prime Minister Margaret H. Thatcher, Defence Minister George K. H. Younger, Foreign Secretary Sir R. E. Geoffrey Howe, and Chief of the Defence Staff Admiral Sir John D. E. Fieldhouse. They were informed by frequent sharing of information among working-level British embassy staffs and members of the U.S. National Security Council, Department of Defense, and State Department, as well as at higher levels.

CONTEXT FOR EARNEST WILL

EARNEST WILL was an American response to Kuwait's request for maritime protection during the Iran-Iraq War, a conflict that by 1987 was stalemated. Iraq had expanded the war to the Gulf in 1984 to force Iran to accept a cease-fire and hinder Tehran's ability to export oil, the latter country's primary source of foreign exchange. Iran, unwilling to accept a cease-fire, reciprocated; generally, however, it responded to Iraqi ship attacks on a tit-for-tat basis while preferring to confine the war to land, where it enjoyed significant advantages.⁶

The two countries' approaches to conducting ship attacks differed considerably. The Iraqi air force typically attacked merchant ships that were in the Iranian-declared exclusion zone by launching Exocet antiship cruise missiles

(ASCMs) at suspected but not positively identified targets in or near the zone—an imprecise targeting technique that contributed to Iraq's inadvertent attack on USS *Stark* (FFG 31) in May 1987.⁷ (See “Key Events” sidebar for a chronology of events through mid-1987.)

In contrast, Iran often was more selective in choosing its victims, in an attempt to dissuade Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries from supporting Iraq, and to attempt to alter oil prices. In particular, Iran attacked ships associated in trade with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait because of those countries' significant financial and logistical support to Iraq. Tehran typically would identify the target using maritime-patrol aircraft or its own warships, and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (according to declassified CIA analytic products) assessed that Iranian intelligence could identify which ships transiting the Gulf were associated with the United States and that Iran's navies could identify these ships for attack.⁸

Both sides occasionally laid mines (of different types) even before EARNEST WILL started, a practice that Tehran employed to blame Baghdad for the Iranian minelaying campaign. Iran and Iraq also deployed different variants of the HY-2 ASCM, the so-called Silkworm, with Iraqi B-6D bombers using one version while Iranian shore batteries used another—a similarity that Iran, again, used to try to blame Iraq for missiles that Iranian forces fired.

These dynamics changed in 1987. Following Iran's September 1986 boarding of a Soviet ship, the Soviet navy began escorting Soviet merchant ships in the Gulf.⁹ To protect against an increasing number of ship attacks, Kuwait asked for Soviet and U.S. assistance in March 1987. The Soviets were prepared to reflag or lease all the tankers Kuwait required and provide for their protection—a move that spurred U.S. interest in reflagging Kuwaiti tankers.¹⁰ Kuwait ultimately chartered three Soviet tankers.¹¹ A Soviet combatant—typically a minesweeper drawn from the USSR's small Indian Ocean squadron—escorted each tanker. It was a relatively low-profile operation—at least compared with EARNEST WILL.¹² Three Soviet minesweepers routinely operated in the Persian Gulf, while a cruiser and a frigate joined their parent squadron, which also included several support ships.¹³

The costs of not aiding Kuwait would have been high for the United States, according to a State Department assessment published in July 1987. Had the United States refused to aid Kuwait, the Soviet Union would have seized the opportunity to increase further its presence and role in the Gulf, likely including gaining access to area port facilities it would need to maintain any substantial protection commitment over the long run.¹⁴

Iran perceived Kuwait to be a near cobelligerent with Iraq, given the economic aid Kuwait was providing and its willingness to allow its ports to be used as primary arms transshipment conduits to Iraq.¹⁵ Tehran viewed American assistance to Kuwait City as a step that would widen the war, tilt the balance toward Baghdad, and sharply increase the U.S. naval presence in the Gulf—all

Key Events in 1987 before U.K. Decision to Deploy MCMVs to Persian Gulf

25 March	United Kingdom is aware of U.S. decision to reflag ^a
17 May	Iraqi air force inadvertently attacks USS <i>Stark</i>
4 June	President Reagan requests enhanced U.K. naval cooperation ^b
8–10 June	Seven Power Economic Summit takes place in Venice ^c
9 June	Britain holds bilateral meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Shultz ^d
17 July	Prime Minister Thatcher meets with President Reagan ^e
20 July	UN passes UNSCR 598 in attempt to end Iran-Iraq War
24 July	<i>Bridgeton</i> strikes mine
25 July	Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff requests that United Kingdom prestage MCMVs ^f
27 July	Senior British cabinet officials formally oppose deployment of MCMVs to Gulf ^g
30 July	U.S. ambassador delivers request for U.K. minesweeping assistance ^h
30 July	Prime minister agrees that Britain should not send minesweepers to Gulf ⁱ
31 July	Secretary of Defense Weinberger also requests that Britain stage MCMVs ^j
31 July	Assistant Secretary of State Murphy discusses MCM support with U.K. ambassador ^k
3 August	National Security Advisor Carlucci meets with U.K. leadership ^l

- a. Private secretary (FCO), "Protection of Shipping in the Gulf."
- b. FCO, "Venice Economic Summit: 8–10 June 1987"; private secretary (FCO) to private secretary (prime minister), memorandum, "Venice Summit: Shipping in the Gulf," 8 June 1987, Ministry of Defence: Private Office: Registered Files, box FCO 8/6816, UKNA.
- c. FCO Research Department, "Iran Annual Review, 1987."
- d. FCO MED, "Venice Economic Summit: Secretary of State's Bilateral with Mr. Shultz."
- e. Private secretary to Galsworthy, "Prime Minister's Visit to Washington: Meeting with President Reagan."
- f. FCO to U.K. embassy Washington, "Shipping in the Gulf: Possible US Approach on Minesweepers"; defence minister and foreign minister, "Shipping in the Gulf"; Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff to Chief of Defence Staff, message, 25 July 1987.
- g. Private secretary (MOD) to principal staff officer (Chief of Defence Staff), memorandum, "The Gulf: Minesweeping," 29 July 1987, Defence Ministry: Private Office: Registered Files, box DEFE 13/2390, UKNA.
- h. Private secretary (FCO) to private secretary (prime minister), "Shipping in the Gulf: US Request for Minesweeping Assistance."
- i. Private secretary (prime minister) to Lyn Parker (FCO), memorandum, "The Gulf," 11 August 1987, Defence Ministry: Private Office: Registered Files, box 13/2390, UKNA; Moseley, "Minesweeper Request Rejected"; DeYoung, "Britain Rejects U.S. Plea."
- j. Ambassador Price letter.
- k. U.K. embassy Washington to FCO, "Shipping in the Gulf: US Approach on Minesweepers."
- l. FCO, "Call by Mr. Carlucci."

developments it was determined to avoid. Its attitudes toward Moscow were more tolerant—probably a reflection of Soviet efforts to improve diplomatic relations with Tehran and an Iranian desire to avoid confronting two super-powers simultaneously.

Perceiving such threats to Kuwait City, London urged diplomatic steps to help the United Kingdom lower the Royal Navy's profile in the Gulf.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Reagan administration was willing to protect the tankers, probably as an outgrowth of the Cold War and owing to a commitment to freedom of navigation and a desire to buttress its credentials with American allies in the GCC after the Iran-Contra affair in 1986 revealed that Washington had provided weapons to Tehran.¹⁷

After bitter congressional debate, EARNEST WILL started with a bang in July 1987 when *Bridgeton*, a reflagged Kuwaiti tanker, struck a mine near Farsi Island in the northern Persian Gulf while proceeding in the first EARNEST WILL convoy. Rather than constituting a single dramatic event, however, the escort regime evolved into a series of incidents, some occurring without warning, and intermittent American and British responses.

EXTENSIVE NATIONAL AND NAVAL COOPERATION IN THE GULF . . .

The United Kingdom and the United States worked closely at the national level while maintaining extensive naval ties in the Gulf. They pursued an overarching diplomatic strategy to help end the Iran-Iraq War and persuade the belligerents to halt attacks against neutral shipping, at least temporarily.¹⁸ Before and during EARNEST WILL both maintained combatants in theater to protect national shipping, shared operational intelligence, and worked on naval interoperability.

London and Washington perceived that ship attacks that had been occurring in the Gulf since 1984 were an outgrowth of the Iran-Iraq War and pursued separate but coordinated measures to stop the war writ large and attacks against commercial shipping in particular. The two nations worked in concert to persuade the other members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to endorse unanimously a resolution—UNSCR 598—that called for a cease-fire to end the war. The council passed the resolution in July 1987, a decision that Baghdad welcomed and Tehran, surprisingly, did not reject. UNSCR 598 called for Iran and Iraq to observe an immediate cease-fire and withdraw all forces to internationally recognized borders; requested that the secretary general explore the question of charging an impartial body to inquire into responsibility for the conflict; and prescribed that the UNSC would meet again as necessary to consider further steps to ensure compliance with the resolution.¹⁹

Iran, however, consistently rebuffed attempts to end the war and refused to accept a cease-fire. Given its unwillingness to comply with UNSCR 598, Washington and London pursued a second resolution that might impose sanctions against Tehran for refusing to comply; but while doing so they needed to appear to be neutral actors, to persuade the widest audience to support the problematic follow-on resolution.

Both Britain and the United States worked successfully to achieve temporary halts in ship attacks against merchant ships. London and Washington also agreed that the “Tanker War” might be paused if Baghdad could be persuaded to stop maritime attacks against Iranian interests. They judged that Iran’s approach to the Tanker War operations was generally retaliatory; Tehran’s ship attacks tended to follow Iraqi maritime air strikes. Both the United Kingdom and the United States judged that Iran might halt its ship attacks if Iraq did so.²⁰ The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in November 1987 reminded its posts of the need to maintain pressure on Iraq to stop air attacks, “which fuel the tanker war and obscure the issue of compliance.”²¹

Consequently, Washington and London repeatedly agreed to pressure Baghdad directly or via its GCC allies to halt ship attacks in the hope that Tehran would do likewise.²² In fact, the cabinet concluded on 23 July 1987 that the most important requirement in the immediate future was to end the ship attacks. The record of that meeting states as follows: “The government was doing everything possible to mobilize pressure for this on Iraq and Iran. There was hope that the message might have some effect.”²³ Iraq reluctantly agreed to halt ship attacks; there was a hiatus in the Tanker War for much of August 1987. Then Baghdad resumed air strikes against tankers and oil installations on 29 August, and Tehran resumed ship attacks two days later.²⁴

The Royal Navy and U.S. Navy both operated in the Gulf to protect national shipping and cooperated in the operational and logistics spheres, although the United Kingdom, to maintain its image as a neutral player in the Gulf, preferred not to publicize some of this activity.

- Logistics: U.K. tankers supplied fuel to U.S. units in the Gulf of Oman, according to a Ministry of Defence (MOD) memo written in May 1987.²⁵ Prime Minister Thatcher instructed senior British officials in July 1987 to remind the Americans of the help the United Kingdom already was providing them through Diego Garcia, its base in the Indian Ocean.²⁶ At U.S. request, London in July 1987 allowed Washington to use Diego Garcia to move American minesweeping helicopters into the region.²⁷
- Armilla patrol: London established the Armilla patrol in 1980, using two combatants to protect U.K.-flag and -registered ships transiting the Strait of

Hormuz and portions of the Persian Gulf extending as far as Bahrain.²⁸ British officials wrote that the patrol, with its deliberately low profile, had been broadly successful in protecting British shipping.²⁹ Proud of the Armilla patrol's record, they wrote in June 1987 that the United Kingdom "protects far more ships and has a far greater proportion of its resources in the Gulf than the U.S."³⁰—an assertion that the U.S. State Department seconded. Britain announced then that the patrol had escorted a hundred British vessels in the area over the previous year.³¹

- Expanded RN presence: Britain added a third combatant to its Armilla patrol in spring 1987 to enable more-frequent patrols in the Persian Gulf and to allow RN units to be near most British merchant ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz.³² After initially turning down Washington's request, London also committed four Hunt-class MCMVs and a support vessel to the Gulf in August 1987.
- Joint operations: An MOD memo issued in May 1987 stated that the United Kingdom had agreed to exchange information on threat assessments, daily shipping movements, and force dispositions with local USN forces. The ministry also endorsed briefings with U.S. Middle East Force ships. Although praising the value of exercises with U.S. carrier strike groups outside the Gulf to enhance British anti-air warfare capability, it discouraged RN exercises with USN units inside the Gulf as of May 1987—to avoid giving the impression of being "in bed with" the Americans.³³
- Command, control, and communications: USN and RN ships regularly established secure voice communications with each other. The United States also provided assistance to Britain in accessing the Airborne Warning and Control System (i.e., AWACS) downlink in the Gulf.³⁴

Given this background of a long-term naval presence and existing cooperation with the United States, London was sensitive to potential insinuations of free riding and pressures from Washington for it to contribute more to a naval coalition to execute EARNEST WILL. In talking points prepared for the foreign minister in June 1987, his subordinates wrote that congressional pressure following Iraq's accidental attack on USS *Stark* in May 1987 had led to American pressure on allies for more burden sharing, "preferably in a U.S.-led integrated naval force." Although London was attempting to help the U.S. government get through its temporary period of pressure, the drafters wrote that "we are already playing our full part," given the Armilla patrol's activities.³⁵

The FCO offered similar arguments to its embassies that month: "[Y]ou can confirm that we appreciate the pressures on the American administration at present but believe we are already playing our full part in the protection of shipping."

The FCO wrote that it had provided to the United States—notably, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger—a statement on the Armilla patrol to give the administration ammunition with which to “overcome the American public’s almost total ignorance of what we are doing in the Gulf.”³⁶

The foreign secretary and defence minister in July 1987 jointly reflected similar concerns about possible blowback from a British refusal to deploy mine-sweepers in response to a hypothetical U.S. request. Acknowledging the U.S. Navy’s limited MCM capability, they wrote that the United States was turning to NATO and other friends for help in the Gulf, and suggested that “refusal could fuel U.S. criticism that the Europeans are unwilling to pull their own weight.”³⁷ However, they also judged that there were strong counterarguments, which are addressed in the next section.

... DESPITE RESERVATIONS ABOUT SENDING MCMVS TO THE GULF

Despite Britain’s close naval cooperation with the U.S. Navy, however, its foreign and military policy throughout EARNEST WILL consistently also called for its warships to fall under national control, stay neutral, and pursue a de-escalatory policy in the Gulf while enabling a diplomatic solution to the war and protecting U.K.-flag shipping. For example, a draft negative response to a request from Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral William J. Crowe Jr. for the United Kingdom to deploy MCMVs to the Gulf stated that the “long term policy of keeping U.K. and U.S. policies in the Middle East separate[—]and both our governments have reaffirmed this separateness[—]is in our mutual regional interest.”³⁸

These broad objectives of British policy would prove problematic for the United States, which was interested in creating a joint naval command structure in the Gulf; sought additional, visible international support for EARNEST WILL; and had a lower threshold for engaging in contingency operations against Iran than did the United Kingdom. Several contentious issues arose from these different tactical approaches:

- Risks of escalation resulting from unpredictable Iranian challenges and potential preemptive or disproportionate U.S. responses
- How to maintain neutrality—a status both countries claimed regarding the war
- Size, number, type, and potential operational areas (OPAREAs) of ships the Royal Navy might send to the Gulf
- Frequency of and publicity accorded to joint training with the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf
- Naval command-and-control relationships in the Gulf

- Zones of responsibility
- U.K. responses to U.S. rules of engagement to facilitate a policy of “distress assistance” in 1988

Although subject to increasing U.S. pressure after the *Stark* and *Bridgeton* incidents, the United Kingdom’s national leadership initially refused to send more ships to the Gulf. Ultimately it would be actions by Tehran—not pressure from Washington—that provided the catalyst for Thatcher to commit British MCMVs to the Persian Gulf in mid-August 1987.

Before that happened, changes in U.S. national-security policy and the war itself forced London to review repeatedly key elements of Britain’s Gulf naval strategy between March and July 1987. Even in early 1987, London understood that Washington was considering a reflag venture with Kuwait City and was interested in forming a joint naval command in the Persian Gulf to protect shipping more efficiently.³⁹ Through that spring and early summer, American requests—albeit remaining informal—became more focused and urgent, particularly after rising tensions in the region made the issue of allies and burden sharing more salient in U.S. domestic debates over EARNEST WILL. American requests—perceived or delivered in 1987—included the following:

- The foreign minister’s private secretary wrote on 25 March that the United States would want Britain and other countries to participate in joint naval operations in the Gulf as an outgrowth of the reflag effort. He summarized, “[T]hey remain keen on multilateral naval activity in almost any combination of participants.”⁴⁰
- The British ambassador in Washington reported on 29 May that the U.S. National Security Planning Group had confirmed recommendations for action regarding EARNEST WILL. Although Washington was not then asking London to increase the U.K. naval presence, it sought London’s help in persuading other countries to make at least token contributions.⁴¹
- According to an FCO briefing, President Reagan wrote to Prime Minister Thatcher in early June to see whether the United Kingdom would find occasions to affirm publicly the importance of the region and highlight publicly what it was doing to further Western interests there. He also asked Britain to undertake “visible naval exercises with our ships”⁴²—a request that the FCO interpreted as a proposal to increase the number of passing exercises in the Gulf and publicity accorded to them.⁴³ A message from the FCO to its posts on 8 June called for a guarded response, telling them that it had advised U.S. officials that the United Kingdom would consider issuing “further statements as requested and, perhaps, slightly enhanced passing exercises in the Gulf.”⁴⁴

- CNO Admiral Crowe wrote to ask the U.K. chief of defence staff on 25 July—the day after the *Bridgeton* mine strike—whether Britain would consider moving MCMVs closer to the Persian Gulf to reduce potential response time.⁴⁵
- U.S. ambassador Charles H. Price II on 30 July met with the foreign secretary to request RN minesweeping in the Gulf.⁴⁶
- Secretary of Defense Weinberger wrote to his U.K. counterpart on 31 July to request that Britain preposition mine-clearing assets in or near the Gulf.⁴⁷
- On 31 July, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Richard Murphy and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Richard Armitage noted U.K. reluctance to deploy MCMVs in their discussions with the British ambassador in Washington. Armitage said that the Pentagon would want to have further discussions about how to achieve de-escalation in the Gulf without leaving Russia in a dominant position.⁴⁸
- Frank C. Carlucci III, the assistant to the president for national security affairs (i.e., national security advisor), met with several senior U.K. officials, including the prime minister, on 3 August.⁴⁹ Acknowledging that London was reluctant to send additional ships to the Gulf, he told the cabinet secretary, Sir Robert T. Armstrong, that Washington was anxious for a tangible manifestation of U.S./U.K. collaboration in the Gulf and asked him for suggestions about how that might be achieved.⁵⁰

London thoroughly debated these requests during the spring and identified potential ways to help Reagan through his administration's "domestic political difficulty" (in the words of an FCO overview) without compromising Britain's independent national-security strategy.⁵¹ Just before the United States began lobbying for international support for freedom of navigation in the Gulf in June 1987, the FCO notified its posts that "ministers are travelling to Venice in a mood to help the Americans over a period of increased congressional and public scrutiny of their protection of shipping in the Gulf."⁵² The FCO wrote then that the United Kingdom was "willing to help the United States while not compromising our basic posture of not provoking the Iranians, compromising our impartiality in the conflict, or being sucked into an unpredictable conflict through integrated operations."⁵³ In talking points prepared for a bilateral meeting with Secretary of State George P. Shultz in the same conference, the FCO wrote that the "U.K. will do what we can to help weather Congressional scrutiny in the aftermath of appalling USS *Stark* incident."⁵⁴

Given this context, the declassified documents collectively offer a complex set of reasons for initially demurring to repeated U.S. requests for the deployment of additional U.K. forces to the Gulf. A list of London's "cons" about EARNEST WILL

and deploying MCMVs to the Gulf probably would include the following arguments, judging from the raw reporting.

EARNEST WILL Was a Flawed, Escalatory Operation

Talking points prepared for Thatcher on 15 July 1987 warned that the reflag decision carried risks of superpower competition and a counterproductive confrontation with Iran.⁵⁵ The foreign secretary and defence minister jointly agreed on 27 July that it was U.S. action that had exacerbated the crisis by reflagging and convoying tankers. Supporting such an operation raised the risk of being drawn “further into involvement with U.S. policy, and into an operational crisis in the Gulf, which would in turn increase the risk to British vessels.”⁵⁶ They subsequently wrote on 29 July that U.K. policy had been to avoid joint operations with the Americans in the Gulf because “of the likelihood that they would lead to our being included in a U.S. confrontation over which we had no control. Once initiated, such a confrontation could last a very long time.” By joining in, the United Kingdom “might actually increase the risk to British shipping.”⁵⁷

The two leaders concluded that Britain would have to turn down the U.S. request for MCMVs despite any strains that caused on the alliance. They acknowledged that it would not be “an easy message to present to the Americans.”⁵⁸ And yet, only thirteen days later, even after they had submitted a strongly worded memo against deploying MCMVs to the Gulf, the prime minister would overrule them.

America Might Lack the Commitment to Sustain Prolonged Operations against Iran

In talking points for briefing the prime minister in March 1987, the FCO warned that joining in the U.S. operation had potential downsides, including a potential replay of the Multinational Force in Lebanon experience following the October 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing. “We should not encourage a U.S./Iran confrontation in Gulf from which U.S. might in due course need to withdraw, leaving Arab friends worse off than before.”⁵⁹ Younger and Howe wrote in July 1987 that “the Americans were unwise to rush into their policy of protecting Kuwait tankers without proper consideration how they could sustain their commitment; their credibility is on the line.”⁶⁰ Summarizing U.K. thinking on 30 July, the FCO advised its embassy in Washington as follows: “We remain doubtful about assuming commitments which cannot be sustained.”⁶¹ In recapping a meeting in October 1987 with Edward W. Gnehm Jr., the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Near East and South Asia, the FCO notified its posts that, although Secretary Weinberger’s trip to the Gulf had confirmed Gulf-state support for U.S. actions, the Arabs continued to doubt longer-term U.S. resolve.⁶²

Perhaps aware of such doubts, when National Security Advisor Carlucci met with the prime minister on 3 August 1987 he attempted to reassure London of

Washington's determination to execute EARNEST WILL and to protect U.S. interests. Speaking shortly after the *Bridgeton* mining, he opined that if there were further incidents directly traceable to Iran, Reagan would face considerable pressure to retaliate. Carlucci judged that there was a risk that Iran could conclude erroneously that it could divide opinion in the United States. Given this perception, he averred that if there was any hostile action public opinion would rally behind the president; it would not be another Lebanon.⁶³

Independence in Foreign Policy and Naval Operations Buttressed London's Image as a Neutral

Throughout EARNEST WILL, the United Kingdom remained adamant that the Royal Navy would not conduct integrated operations under U.S. control, although it allowed informal coordination among local naval commanders. When British officials met with Assistant Secretary of State Murphy on 5 June 1987, they "made it clear our non-provocative and independent policy continued and we had serious reservations about any more integrated operations."⁶⁴

The prime minister wrote in July 1987 that "there are formidable practical as well as political problems in the way of a multinational force. . . . [S]uch a force might in practice have a higher profile than the present arrangements."⁶⁵ She then directed the cabinet to prepare for discussions about bilateral coordination in the Gulf while making it clear that the RN presence would not include joint or integrated operations.⁶⁶

Even when Defence Minister Younger called Defense Secretary Weinberger in mid-August 1987 to announce that London would deploy MCMVs to the Gulf, he reminded Weinberger that "Armilla's role and AOR [area of responsibility] would remain unchanged."⁶⁷ Talking points prepared for the defence minister's use noted that Armilla would not go into the northern Gulf because "the risks of integration with the United States were too high to contemplate."⁶⁸

When EARNEST WILL was well under way by March 1988, R. Rand "Randy" Beers, policy coordinator in State's Political-Military Affairs Bureau, told officials in the MOD and FCO that the United States was considering extending protection for neutral shipping in the Gulf, an effort in which allies might be asked to provide more ships and integrate more closely with the U.S. Navy, or at least integrate more among themselves. The British responded that there was no likelihood the United Kingdom would alter its position on integration with the U.S. Navy. If the Royal Navy sent more ships to the Gulf, they would support U.K.-flagged/owned ships only.⁶⁹

Publicizing RN Cooperation Would Undermine London's Low-Profile Strategy

Consequently, Reagan's request that Britain highlight its actions to promote Western interests and undertake more-visible operations with the United States in the Gulf was problematic, although talking points that the FCO prepared for a

meeting with Secretary of State Shultz concluded that “we can meet both of Reagan’s requests presentationally without giving much of substance.”⁷⁰ U.K. officials had written earlier that the U.S. public had “almost total ignorance” of U.K. operations in the Gulf and that more publicity might reduce congressional pressure for further burden sharing.⁷¹ However, the notes for the Shultz meeting continued, “Publicity for exercises would look like participation in a Gulf war and will need very careful handling.”⁷²

*EARNEST WILL Might Lead to Preemptive or Disproportionate
U.S. Military Operations*

Monitoring U.S. press and official activity, London’s staffers watched for signs of escalatory American military activity, such as a preemptive attack on the Silkworm ASCMs that had appeared in the Gulf in 1987.⁷³ Minutes prepared for a briefing of the prime minister in March 1987 warned that “if naval discussions suggest U.S. seriously thinking of contriving to attack Silkworm sites we may need to express our doubts in Washington at high political level.”⁷⁴ The foreign secretary then was willing to consider limited coordination of RN activity with the United States, on the strict condition that the agreed aim was to deter Iran and “not to contrive an excuse for, say, striking the Silkworm missiles.”⁷⁵ Despite such willingness to cooperate, the FCO characterized the U.S. mood as being “aggressively anti-Iran” at the end of July 1987.⁷⁶

British officials repeatedly approached their American counterparts to assess the risks of a preemptive U.S. attack on the Silkworms, a course of action that by June 1987 was not being considered seriously in Washington, according to their interlocutors.⁷⁷ In preparing Prime Minister Thatcher for a visit to the United States in July, FCO officials raised the risk of a confrontation with Iran and wrote that they hoped the United States would be as “non-provocative as possible.”⁷⁸ When Thatcher met with Reagan on 17 July, she told him it was important not to escalate the conflict. Reagan agreed and said that the United States would attack only in self-defense against an Iranian attack.⁷⁹

These agreements did not reassure the FCO after further Iranian provocations. Following Iran’s Silkworm attack on the reflagged Kuwaiti tanker *Sea Isle City* on 16 October 1987 and the U.S. retaliatory attack on two Iranian oil platforms in the Persian Gulf three days later, the FCO prepared talking points for use with the prime minister; they warned of a “continuing need to counsel restraint and proportionality in response to Americans—wise counsels may not always prevail.”⁸⁰

In the subsequent cabinet meeting, the foreign secretary opined that the Gulf had become tenser than ever before. He commented that it might become increasingly difficult for the United States to respond to Iranian actions in ways that were both “constrained and effective.”⁸¹ Such doubts led Britain to seek early

notifications of U.S. contingency operations in the Gulf, a consideration repeatedly accorded to the United Kingdom.⁸²

Such concerns, repeated British requests, and the Royal Navy's presence in the Persian Gulf may have contributed to Washington's willingness to share with London the broad outlines of U.S. military planning and to warn London and U.K. forces in the Gulf of impending military operations. U.S. officials assured their counterparts that the United States intended to provide such warning, and the British seemed satisfied that the system was working.⁸³ For example, as the United States was planning Operation PRAYING MANTIS to retaliate for the mining of USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG 58) on 14 April 1988, the British embassy in Washington reported that "U.S. officials have assured us that we will be informed in advance of any operation, as on previous occasions."⁸⁴ CNO Crowe telephoned Chief of the Defence Staff Fieldhouse shortly before the operation started.⁸⁵ General Colin L. Powell, the national security advisor, the next day updated Thatcher's personal secretary on U.S. thinking regarding next military steps.⁸⁶

Minesweeping Was Neither Viable nor Currently Necessary

In late July 1987, Britain's foreign and defence ministers wrote that currently there was no mine threat in the Armilla OPAREA, although they acknowledged that could change with little warning. Moreover, in a long staff study they made a case against minesweeping, arguing that MCMVs could not clear a large area, would be confined to daylight operations at speeds not greater than eight knots, and would slow down merchant ships significantly if they tried to sweep ahead of a convoy. Additionally, Iran could reseed minefields easily. Destroying Iran's mine warfare infrastructure would expand the conflict greatly.⁸⁷

London preferred to use diplomacy and GCC MCM assets over deploying U.K. MCMVs, although the U.K. strategy for turning down the U.S. request was to offer technical naval counterarguments, in what its officials acknowledged would be a "difficult" process of declining the U.S. requests.⁸⁸ In answering Admiral Crowe's request for MCMVs, Foreign Secretary Howe in July 1987 recommended that the chief of defence staff should "quote technical military arguments demonstrating that it was not militarily sensible to use minesweepers, that they were too far away to do the job properly, and that a large number would be required, etc."⁸⁹

The ministers argued in July 1987 against even repositioning minesweepers to staging areas closer to the Gulf, as Admiral Crowe had requested. They characterized the measure as a "temporizing response" that would "soon become public and create an expectation that we would join the U.S. operation." Staging MCMVs also would have costs to the United Kingdom: "It would then be virtually impossible not to proceed without giving the impression that our nerve had failed."⁹⁰

Diplomacy Should Not Be Undermined by Naval Incidents

Throughout EARNEST WILL, Washington and London focused foremost on ending the Iran-Iraq War by reaching a truce that, through negotiations, might yield a lasting peace. They reasoned that a cessation in ship attacks might support the broader initiative.

Seeking to create diplomatic breathing room to allow time for a cease-fire in ship attacks to occur in July 1987, Prime Minister Thatcher told ministers drafting a response to the U.S. request for MCMVs that the West should avoid raising the profile of its military forces in the Gulf while a moratorium on ship attacks held. Her private secretary told National Security Advisor Carlucci on 1 August that the U.K. government “took the view that it was better not to increase the profile of the Western military presence at this juncture while there was a chance of progress on the diplomatic front towards de-escalating tension in the Gulf.”⁹¹

THATCHER REVERSES HER MCMV DECISION

Prime Minister Thatcher was attuned to threat conditions in the Persian Gulf, maintenance of good relations with the United States on issues such as burden sharing, and the importance of apparent cohesion in the Western alliance to enhance its diplomatic credibility and regional deterrence. These factors influenced her to reconsider in early August 1987 her refusal to provide MCMVs to the Gulf.

In part, she was struck by the rapidly deteriorating regional security situation in midsummer 1987. Thousands of Iranian pilgrims rioted in Mecca on 31 July 1987, with hundreds of people being killed.⁹² Attacks against the Saudi, Kuwaiti, and French embassies in Tehran followed on 1 August and were accompanied by official Iranian calls for the overthrow of the Saudi government.⁹³

By 4 August, the prime minister concluded that Britain’s posture on Persian Gulf strategy needed to be “looked at afresh,” and related taskers began to flow to the bureaucracy.⁹⁴ Iran’s mining of *Texaco Caribbean* in the Gulf of Oman off Fujairah, United Arab Emirates, on 10 August 1987 provided the immediate catalyst for her decision the next day to send four MCMVs and a support ship to the Gulf.⁹⁵

Meeting with Carlucci on 3 August 1987, Thatcher expressed concern about developments during the past few days and the prospect that Gulf tensions would continue to escalate in the form of maritime guerrilla warfare and possibly direct attacks on U.S. ships. The chance for diplomacy to reduce tensions had diminished. She concluded that the main requirement was action by every means at the UN and elsewhere to isolate Iran.⁹⁶

Thatcher told the cabinet on 4 August 1987 that there had been a qualitative change in the situation in the Persian Gulf that mandated a new look at the United

Kingdom's Gulf policy. She judged that it was unrealistic to think any longer in terms of a window of opportunity to de-escalate by diplomatic measures. Rather, Iran was intent on terrorist actions against the United States and GCC and might engage in further mining or other attacks. Britain's main priorities must be to take further diplomatic steps to isolate Iran, maintain GCC morale, and demonstrate the West's unity of purpose. The prime minister also was concerned that Britain's well-publicized decision not to send MCMVs to the Gulf—or even to preposition them—had conveyed the wrong political signal. “Our failure to meet a request for help from our closest ally had given an appearance of division and disunity among the Western governments and had probably worried the Arab states of the gulf. We should not think just in terms of British ships but acknowledge a wider duty to help uphold freedom of navigation.”⁹⁷

Her taskers to the cabinet had diplomatic and military dimensions. Diplomatically, the United Kingdom was to press hard and visibly for a further UNSC resolution imposing an arms embargo against Iran for not following UNSCR 598, and Britain also should promote a resolution condemning the mining in the Gulf and upholding freedom of navigation. London would urge Moscow to put all possible pressure on Tehran to desist from mining and garner Soviet support for the arms embargo against Iran envisioned in the follow-on resolution to UNSCR 598.⁹⁸

On the military side, the government would consider prepositioning MCMVs to possible holding points, including Gibraltar, Cyprus, Port Said, Djibouti, and Muscat. In the event they deployed, London would seek the “fullest consultation” with Washington about strategy in the Gulf. Early consideration would be given to other assets the United Kingdom might send to the region. Britain would prepare for further arms requests from the Arab countries in the region.⁹⁹

By 7 August 1987, Thatcher continued to weigh in to soften the United Kingdom's initial rejection by amending the British defence minister's draft response to Secretary of Defense Weinberger's 31 July request for forward deployment of MCMVs. She wanted to emphasize that Britain had “certainly not” ruled out eventually deploying its MCMVs to the Gulf. Her private secretary summarized her guidance for the revised letter as follows: “We are looking afresh at all our contingency arrangements, so that we would be able to move the minesweepers as quickly as possible. We are looking at the situation very closely, on a day to day basis, and looking to see how we can help from the U.S. viewpoint, as well as our own.”¹⁰⁰

On 11 August, Thatcher decided to deploy immediately four Hunt-class MCMVs and a support ship from the United Kingdom to the Persian Gulf, where they arrived in mid-September.¹⁰¹ The order reflected a British assessment that there was a heightened risk to the Armilla patrol following the discovery of mines in the southern end of and outside the Gulf during the preceding twenty-four

hours.¹⁰² The FCO prepared an overview that characterized the mining in the Gulf of Oman as a “direct threat to British ships” that led London to “send mine-sweepers in support of British national interests.”¹⁰³

Additionally, two maritime patrol aircraft were to deploy to Maşirah, Oman, by 14 August as a public demonstration of commitment.¹⁰⁴ London would send diplomatic notes requesting port access and logistics for the naval deployers to the Gulf.¹⁰⁵ The United Kingdom also prepared to encourage Western European Union (WEU) participation by sending messages to the governments of France, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands notifying them of the MCMV deployment, and adding that these countries would be assumed to be considering following suit.¹⁰⁶

BILATERAL COOPERATION FROM SEPTEMBER 1987 TO JULY 1988

The United Kingdom cooperated with the United States during EARNEST WILL by providing support in the UN and elsewhere; serving as a gateway to WEU countries—notably, Belgium and the Netherlands—for mine countermeasures initiatives, particularly in the Armilla OPAREA in the southern Gulf and Strait of Hormuz; recovering mines and continuing the patrol’s hectic mission of accompanying merchant ships; and pursuing diplomacy that helped the United States, particularly after Operation PRAYING MANTIS in April 1988 and in the aftermath of the Iran Air 655 Airbus shootdown in July 1988.

Although the United States did not then achieve the formal joint naval command structure it had proposed, by October 1987 Washington was “content with the pragmatic coordination of minesweeping,” according to U.K. diplomatic reporting.¹⁰⁷ British MCMVs contributed directly by clearing five mines off Fujairah and four off Qatar by the end of November 1987, according to John Roberts’s history of the Royal Navy.¹⁰⁸

The British also encouraged the Dutch and Belgian navies, with whom the Royal Navy had operated in a NATO context, to participate in the Gulf MCM effort. The Dutch in September 1987 committed two minehunters, while the Belgians sent two minesweepers and a support ship, which arrived in the Gulf by late fall.¹⁰⁹ As of November 1987, the Royal Navy was liaising closely with both navies in the Gulf, but their operations were not yet integrated.¹¹⁰ The three navies improved cooperation by February 1988 as the United Kingdom prepared to return one of its four MCMVs to home waters.¹¹¹ The FCO reported by April 1988 that “cooperation with the Dutch and Belgians (under a WEU umbrella) has worked well.” London also warned Washington that further U.S. pressure on its two allies to keep ships in the Gulf might be counterproductive.¹¹²

The Royal Navy saw the opportunity to showcase the MCM capabilities of the three navies in the southern Persian Gulf following the *Roberts* mine strike on 14

April 1988. The U.K. MOD directed its senior naval officer in the Gulf to encourage the other two navies to join British ships in clearing the minefield near the *Roberts* strike, as a good opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of trilateral cooperation. However, the MOD urged that the Royal Navy be seen as taking the initiative. In its guidance to RN senior commanders, the ministry added that it wished to “avoid the suggestion that we are responding to a U.S. request or that we are/will be under U.S. control or guidance.”¹¹³ In discussing the ongoing trilateral MCM operations on 21 April, cabinet talking points commented that the fortunate timing of the *Roberts* incident might persuade the Dutch and Belgians that their presence in the Persian Gulf was “useful and should not be terminated.”¹¹⁴ By June 1988, the three countries had established a joint command consisting of a flagship, supply ship, and five minehunters under U.K. control.¹¹⁵

In the aftermath of PRAYING MANTIS, Washington wanted to pursue further initiatives in the UN and to improve coordination of naval operations in the theater. Even as Secretary of State Shultz notified the United Kingdom of the operation on 18 April, he said that Iran’s actions “underscore the urgency of strong international measures in the UN to pass a followon resolution to UNSCR 598.”¹¹⁶ On 22 April, Reagan wrote to Thatcher proposing a new, intensive diplomatic effort in the UN to end the conflict, improve coordination among Western naval forces in the Gulf, and enhance surveillance there to prevent mining, according to U.K. diplomatic reporting. The FCO advised its posts that Defence Minister Younger’s discussions with now-Secretary of Defense Carlucci on 27 April 1988 had reached no firm conclusions, but at least the principals had agreed to explore greater coordination of MCM activity. Local commanders in the Gulf were to meet aboard USS *Trenton* (LPD 14) on 1 May to discuss the matter.¹¹⁷

However, the cabinet remained wary of expanding the Royal Navy’s role and advised a cautious response to Reagan’s letter. Concerned about the earlier U.S. proposal for a review of the coordination of forces in the Gulf, the foreign secretary said in a late April 1988 cabinet meeting that the United Kingdom must be careful not to allow “responsibilities to run ahead of the resources available.”¹¹⁸

The president’s letter also may have been prompted by the U.S. decision by 29 April 1988 to provide distress assistance to additional neutral merchant ships in the Persian Gulf.¹¹⁹ The Cabinet Office assessment on 3 May offered a range of complaints about the policy, noting that London long had urged Washington to be cautious about extending the rules of engagement. The new policy was announced without proper consultation with the United Kingdom. It could lead to pressure on Britain and other European nations to follow suit. The Royal Navy lacked adequate resources to support it, and the initiative might interfere with enhanced U.K. minesweeping coordination. Most seriously, a systematic policy of distress assistance was likely to lower the threshold for U.S.-Iranian clashes and

increase risks of Iranian attacks on shipping and offshore installations because of a narrowing of military options. Although the FCO wrote that it “must give general support [to] U.S. policy,” it began revising its response to Reagan’s letter, concentrating its warnings particularly on the dubious European reaction, the policy’s risk of lowering the threshold of conflict, and London’s concern that it had not been consulted adequately on this initiative.¹²⁰

Despite its misgivings, in a memo dated 24 May 1988 London determined that British shippers would be permitted to accept distress assistance on the condition that the master of the ship requested help in each case.¹²¹ Given its residual concern about perceived U.S. escalatory tendencies, the cabinet noted that the United Kingdom had accepted the offer, but hinted clearly that London saw distress assistance primarily as a humanitarian initiative and held that its use should not contravene the use of minimum force only. The note continued by observing that several European partners harbored doubts about U.S. intentions in offering distress assistance, which they considered provocative to Iran. Ultimately, in June 1988, the MOD provided British shippers with guidance on when to avail themselves of distress assistance, principally reminding them that such use should be confined to situations in which their ships were distant from the Armilla patrol.¹²²

The United Kingdom’s public messaging and private diplomacy also endorsed U.S. operations during PRAYING MANTIS. U.K. officials proved to be unsympathetic audiences when Iranian diplomats approached them to protest apparent British endorsement of the operation in April 1988. For example, the FCO reported that on 25 April 1988 M. Akhondzadeh Basti, the Iranian chargé in London, told U.K. diplomats that the attacks had undermined Iranian attempts to reduce tension. His British interlocutor countered that it was instead Iranian provocations that had raised tensions, and that the United Kingdom applauded the U.S. action. He continued that Iran should expect a strong reaction to laying mines in international waters and dismissed as ridiculous Basti’s claim that the Americans themselves had laid mines recently. Referring to the chargé’s warning that U.K. support would threaten the Western world’s economy, he expressed the hope that this was not a threat.¹²³

London also took diplomatic measures to blunt a potential Iranian-sponsored UN resolution against U.S. (and potentially all foreign) naval presence in the Gulf after USS *Vincennes* (CG 49) shot down an Iranian Airbus on 3 July 1988. That day, London issued a public statement—which Thatcher and Howe repeated—regretting the incident but noting that it “underlines the urgent need for early end to the Iran/Iraq conflict including an end to all attacks on shipping.” Cabinet discussions on 7 July 1988 revealed that Iran had requested a full meeting of the Security Council and was canvassing its members regarding a draft resolution condemning the United States and demanding withdrawal of foreign forces from

the Persian Gulf. Public comment by British officials had stressed the right of self-defense for U.S. naval forces in the Persian Gulf under article 51 of the UN Charter, a policy the FCO urged that Britain continue, given the Armilla patrol's activities in the Gulf.¹²⁴

Although the United Kingdom had its own reasons for supporting a naval presence in the Gulf, its postshootdown diplomacy might have been reinforced by a note from President Reagan to Thatcher on 11 July 1988. The missive argued that the UN should not be used as a forum “to undermine our mutual interests in the Gulf and the Western naval presence there, or as a means to undermine UNSCR 598 as the basic framework for a settlement.” While inviting Thatcher's advice and support, he shared a diplomatic strategy in which the United States would oppose a resolution that would distract from UNSCR 598. Rather, the president judged that Security Council unanimity might be preserved better by a statement from the Security Council president that regretted the accident; called for an investigation; and, most importantly, urged the earliest implementation of resolution 598.¹²⁵

Preparing for the Security Council's meeting on 14 July 1988 to discuss the shootdown, the FCO advised its posts that “we are not prepared to let Iran use the Council selectively. It has flouted the authority of the UN over UNSCR 598 and cannot now expect the Council to address the Airbus incident in isolation.” London intended to keep UNSCR 598 at the discussion's center and to refer to the principles of freedom of navigation and self-defense.¹²⁶ Following the debate, the UN on 20 July 1988 passed UNSCR 616, which expressed “deep distress” over the U.S. attack and “profound regret” for the loss of human lives, but also stressed the need to end the war.¹²⁷

THE CHALLENGES OF COOPERATION

The United States was fortunate to have such a good partner as the United Kingdom during the prolonged and risky tanker-escort regime. Although other countries reluctantly deployed ships to the region, none were so supportive—or so critical to achieving our shared diplomatic objectives for ending the Iran-Iraq War—as our partners in the United Kingdom. The Royal Navy worked closely with its U.S. counterpart despite national-level reservations and under trying circumstances that foreshadowed those encountered in the more complex coalition operations that followed.

A few observations about Anglo-American cooperation during EARNEST WILL are discussed below.

- The U.S. diplomatic record in the 1980s was not persuasive to all U.K. officials, who raised doubts about it in internal memorandums and even in discussions with the United States. Washington's allies in Europe and the

Gulf were sensitive to issues of U.S. reliability following American arms sales to Iran as part of Iran-Contra and the country's withdrawal of forces from Lebanon in 1984 after committing them to the Multinational Force there, alongside the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. The model that American policy makers offered—international cooperation to clear mines laid in the Red Sea in mid-1984—was unconvincing to the British officials, who pointed out that the 1984 effort was a poor analogy because countries in the Persian Gulf either distrusted Western presence and commitment or were active enemies, unlike those along the Red Sea.¹²⁸

- Under domestic pressure to create an international coalition for EARNEST WILL, U.S. officials at times appeared to be tone-deaf and insensitive to the dynamics of London's decision-making calculus. Washington's demands probably hardened London's attitude and its responses to the United States; its naval strategy in the Gulf did not change, for example, until the cabinet concluded that the threat to *U.K. interests*—notably, the safety of the Armilla patrol and U.K. shipping—had increased rapidly.¹²⁹ Repeatedly pressing an ally on the same issue is not necessarily effective, no matter how good the working relationship.
- The United States might have used a more persuasive, low-key approach in asking for the minesweeper deployments. When Carlucci met with the cabinet secretary on 3 August 1987, the national security advisor asked whether it would have been advantageous for the United States to take “informal soundings” of the British government before requesting the MCMV deployment to the Gulf. Sir Robert Armstrong responded that such informal communications certainly would have been helpful, if time permitted.¹³⁰
- In meeting with other British officials the same day, Carlucci told them that he thought the U.S. request for minesweepers—of which he and Reagan had been unaware—had not been handled very skillfully. Carlucci asked the prime minister whether a request for British naval support from the GCC rather than the United States would have been preferable. Thatcher replied that there were advantages in an appeal from the GCC for international cooperation to preserve freedom of navigation, but she doubted the GCC countries collectively would request minesweeping. Another possibility would have been to call for international action to remove mines, but she opined that that step would have been an invitation to the Russians to get involved.¹³¹
- A low-key discussion about potential U.K. minesweeper deployments earlier and at a much higher level might have been more effective. Instead,

President Reagan started with a relatively undemanding request for additional bilateral exercises and more publicity about the U.K. naval commitment to the region, but then as regional tensions rose subordinates requested more. As leaks occurred, both the U.S. request for MCMVs and the U.K. rebuff received press coverage—to the detriment of both parties.

- British officials were aware of U.S. domestic politics and privy to internal U.S. debates on EARNEST WILL.¹³² The sophistication of British policy makers probably contributed to their skepticism about some U.S. argumentation, since the United Kingdom apparently perceived American domestic politics to be as much a driver of U.S. behavior as an increasingly threatening Iran.
- Both Washington and London encouraged cooperation among local commanders in the Gulf. This allowed de facto coordination, even though at the time the United States never achieved its original objective of establishing a formal multinational naval command under its control. In other words, there were theater-level work-arounds within national constraints.
- Focused as Washington was on the maritime domain of war in a relatively small arena against a weak adversary, it probably would have found facilitating international cooperation during EARNEST WILL to be a relatively simple effort compared with planning for an intense, multidomain conflict against a more robust enemy in the future—conditions that would be found in many scenarios envisioned, and later encountered, by the United States and its allies.

Britain's collaboration with the United States demonstrated the benefits of having sophisticated, capable partners, but it also reveals the challenges of working in coalitions, even under the best conditions. To get the most out of such alliances, U.S. policy makers need to develop as sophisticated an understanding of their allies as they try to develop of their adversaries.

NOTES

1. The epigraph above comes from defence minister and foreign minister, joint memorandum to prime minister, "Shipping in the Gulf: The Mining Threat," 29 July 1987, attached to a memo by the prime minister's private secretary to his counterpart in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), 30 July 1987, Defence Ministry: Private Office: Registered Files, box DEFE 13/2390, UKNA.
2. U.K. embassy Washington to FCO, message, "US/Gulf," 27 July 1987, Defence Ministry: Private Office: Registered Files, box DEFE 13/2390, UKNA.

3. The British sources cited here are mostly hard-copy documents stored in the National Archives on the outskirts of London. See its website, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/, for search engines and descriptions of its collections.
4. For context, see David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin, 2012), and Harold L. Wise, *Inside the Danger Zone: The U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf, 1987–1988* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007). Then–Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. William J. Crowe Jr. and Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger devote lengthy sections in their memoirs to the operation. See Crowe, *The Line of Fire: From Washington to the Gulf, the Politics and Battles of the New Military* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 186–211, and Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), pp. 387–428. A recent summary of declassified information on the operation may be found in Richard Mobley, “Fighting Iran: Intelligence Support during Operation EARNEST WILL, 1987–88,” *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 3 (September 2016). William Luti’s work provides context for factors driving European responses to EARNEST WILL. See William J. Luti, “Ends versus Means: A Critical Analysis of the Persian Gulf Crisis (1987–1988)” (PhD dissertation, Naval Postgraduate School, 1990), available at core.ac.uk/.
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