

US Central Command Campaign Planning against the Soviet Union, 1979–1987



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Background



“The Middle East is the Achilles heel of the Free World. The Soviets do not have to attack in Europe, but merely control the oil and would effectively hold NATO hostage.” NSA Zbigniew Brzezinski Memo to the POTUS, July 1979

Likelihood of Soviet Invasion?



Possible Scenarios:

- Prevent spread of the Iranian Revolution. Conduct Limited incursion to forestall Islamists from subverting its own Muslim population, i.e. Afghanistan.
- -Communist takeover of the government and Soviet forces move in to support the new regime.
 - Tudeh party
- Internal Instability. Fragmentation of the Iranian state caused by internal strife or defeat in the Iran-Iraq War.
- Large-scale invasion as part of a conflict with NATO.

Large-Scale Soviet Invasion Plan



Forces Available:

- 24–28 Mech/Armor Divs
- 1ABN Div
- 700–1000 strike a/c

Execution:

Two Phases:

■ **Phase 1: Seize Tehran and NW Iranian provinces.**

- Require about a one week.

■ **Phase 2: Drive to seize the Khuzestan oil fields and Bandar Abbas/SOH.**

- 34 days unopposed.
- 61–103 days with Iranian resistance.

US Military Strategy



US strategy for Southwest Asia is to deter the Soviets from an invasion of the region. The key elements of this deterrence are:

- Capability to deploy and sustain a credible force to the region with the clear indication that a Soviet attack on a vital American interest would mean war with the United States.
- If a conflict begins, be prepared to attack and defeat any Soviet effort to control the oil of the Middle East.
- Widen the conflict beyond just the Middle East to other areas where the US and our allies hold military advantage.

SECDEF Memo to CJCS June 1981 and, JCS Memo to SECDEF August 1981

CENTCOM Operational Challenges



- Economy of force theater:
 - Supporting effort to any major NATO conflict.
 - Many units(101st and 82nd) were on the TPFDD for both Europe and the Middle East.
 - Navy opposed deploying CSGs—diversion from Pacific and Atlantic.
- No US bases and questionable ABO.
- Tyranny of time and distance.
- Need for advanced warning of Soviet military action.
- Uncertain reliability of regional partners.
- Reaction of Soviet Proxies:
 - Syria/Ethiopia/South Yemen.

Campaign Design



- Control the OPTEMO:
 - Rapid deployment of US forces into the AOR as a means to deter further Soviet aggression.
 - Delay the Russian advance and then move quickly into Iran to confront Soviet forces before they reach the Persian Gulf.
- Horizontal Escalation:
 - Expand the battlespace across the Middle East—not just limited to Iran.
 - Build operational depth across the theater.
 - western base network.
 - Incorporation of regional partners by building partner capacity and interoperability.

“Vertical Escalation”

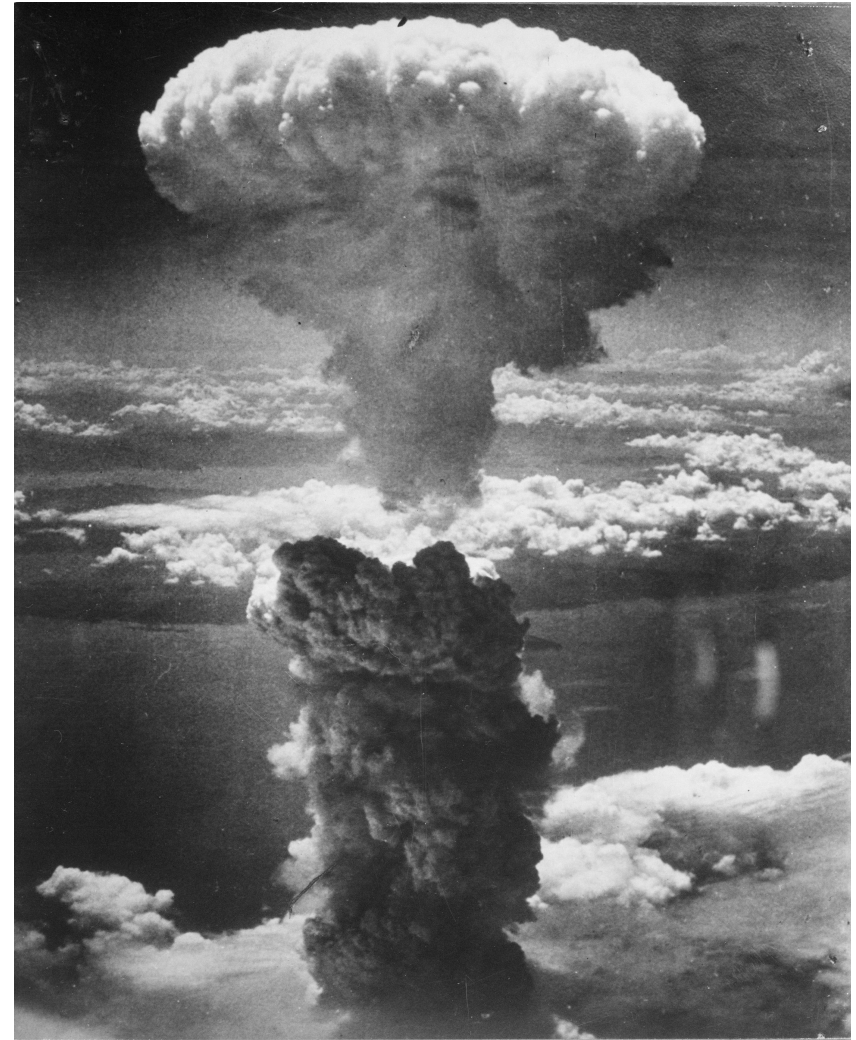
Nuclear Weapons

SAC strikes military
targets inside the
Soviet Union



“Passive Option”

Atomic Demolition
Munitions



***Likely COA should conventional means be either unavailable or fail to halt the Soviet advance.**

Campaign Phasing



Phase I: Pre-C Day: Set the Theater

- Activation MPF/ Civil Air Reserve/Mustering Sealift requirements.

Phase II: C-C+16: Delay and Deploy

- Air Force/Navy conduct strikes attacks against Soviet forces to disrupt/delay their advance.
- Conduct clandestine insertion of SOF into Iran from Turkey, Oman, and Pakistan to support air interdiction missions against Soviet LOCs and coordinate with resistance forces.
- Deploy Army Forces from CONUS to either Saudi Arabia/GCC or Western bases.
 - 82nd AB Div and Rangers move to Ras Banas and Thumrait.

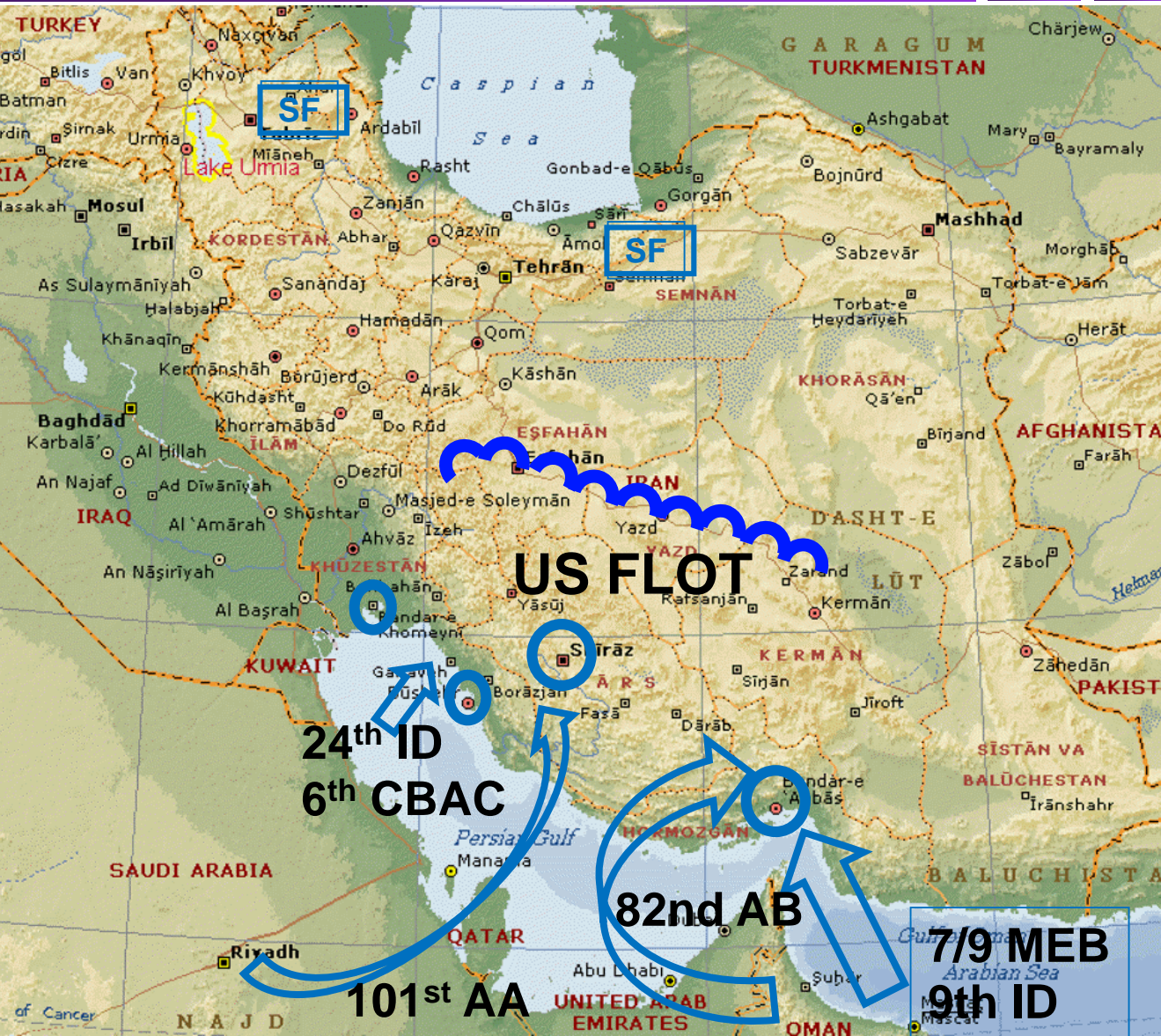
Phase III: D-Day (C+16-C+36)

- 3A: USMC/USN/Army Airborne forces seize Bandar Abbas and SOH to secure the Gulf SLOCs.
- 3B: US Army would seize Bushier/Bandar Khamenei, then Shiraz.
- 3C. Air Force deploys to Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, and Isfahan airfields.
- 3D: US forces move forward to a defensive line running roughly from Isfahan southeast to Kerman—a distance of 375 miles.

Phase IV: Defeat of Soviet Forces and retrograde

- * C2: CENTCOM would command initially from Tampa, but then move forward to Dhahran or Riyadh.

1004 Concept



US Forces:

Army:

- 1 ABN Div
- 1 AASLT Div
- 1–2 Mech Divs
- 1 CBAC
- 1 ADA BDE

Navy:

- 3 CSGs
- 1 BBSG

Air Force:

- 22 Tactical Fighter Sq
- 200 C-130s

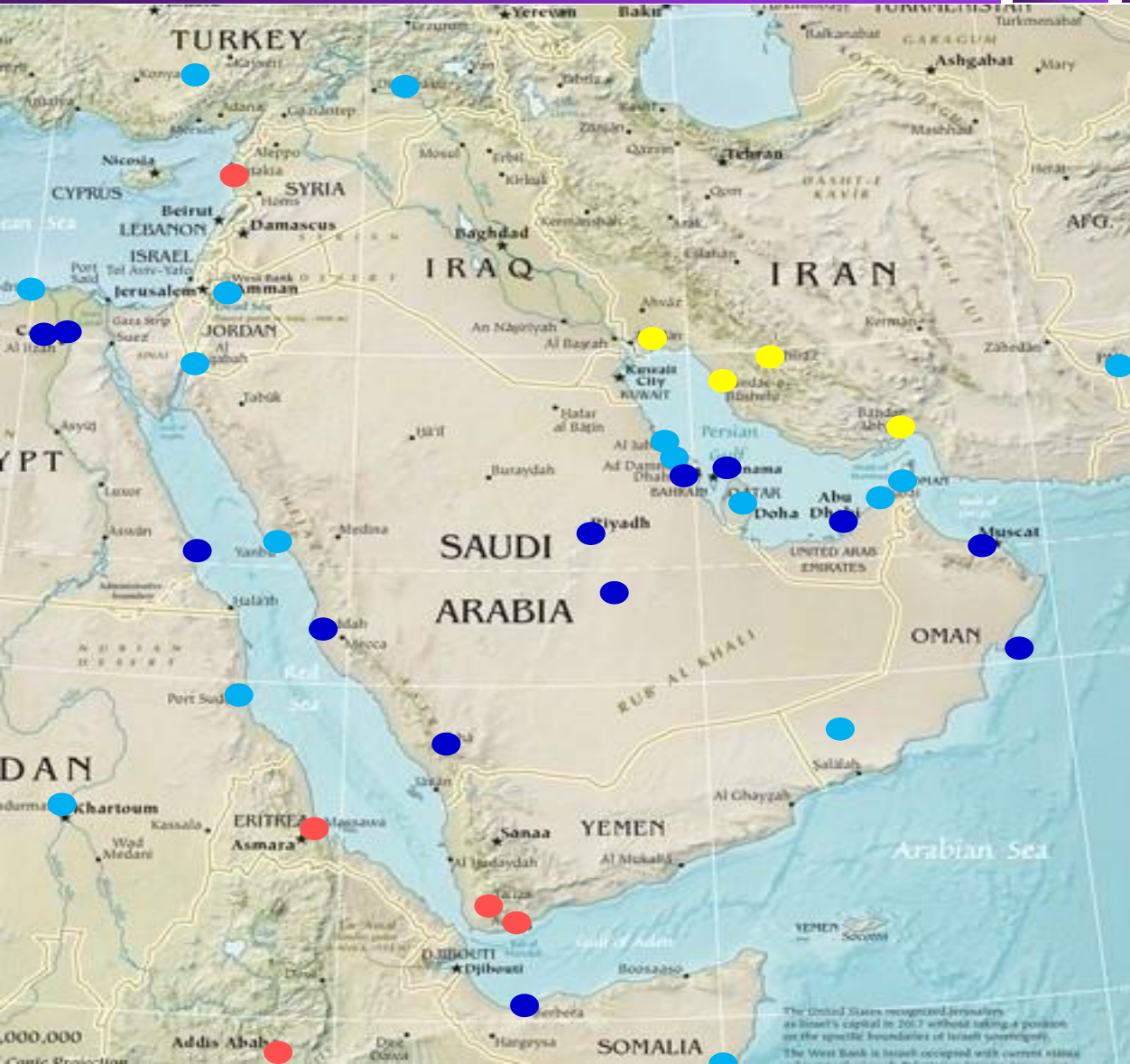
USMC:

- 2 MEBs

SOF:

- 2 Ranger BNs
- 1 NSW TU

Planned US Bases (CONPLAN 1004-84)

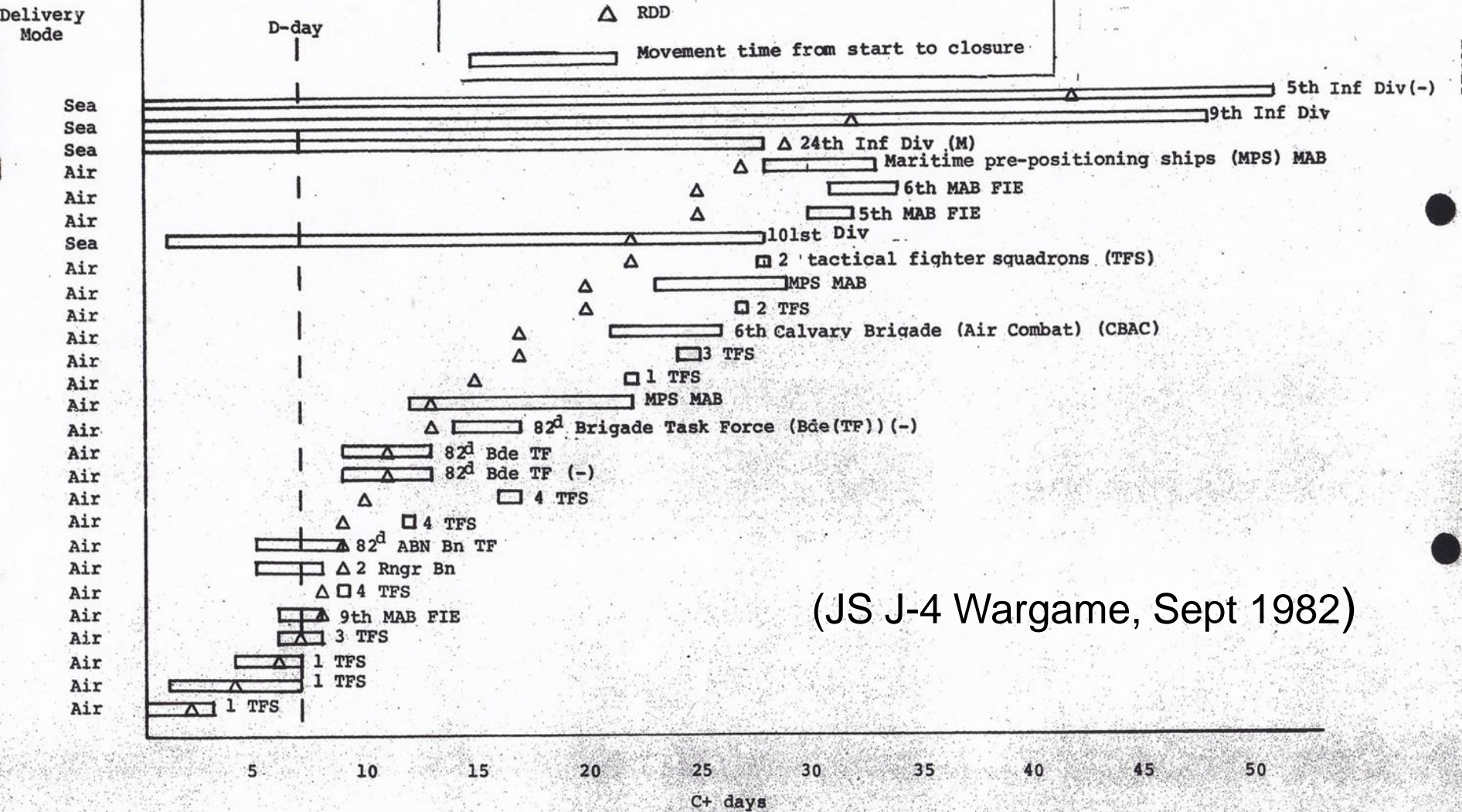


- Major Operating Base: ●
- Other US Naval/Air Base ●
- Major Operating Base in Iran: ●
- Soviet Base: ●

US Bases Not Shown:

- Mombasa, Kenya
- Diego Garcia

Tyranny of Time and Distance



Questions



The following brief was originally given by Dr. David B. Crist on 18 September 2020 at an offsite for US Central Command, commanded by General Kenneth F. McKenzie, USMC.

Good morning. Thank you, General McKenzie for the invitation to speak this morning.

Slide 2: On a cold January evening in 1980, President Jimmy Carter stepped to the podium for what would be his last but most significant State of the Union address.

The past year had been a catastrophe for the United States in the Middle East. The previous month, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan to prop up their fledgling client state. Within the framework of the omnipresent Cold War, policy makers in Washington viewed this action as indicative of larger Soviet designs on the Middle East—an area from which 40 percent of the free world’s oil originated. In February, the Iranian revolution ousted the American bulwark in the region—the Shah of Iran. In the midst of a chaotic revolution with a large, organized communist party, Iran appeared vulnerable to Soviet influence or even direct action.

Before an assembly of both houses of Congress, plus the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Carter laid out the threat: “The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.” In his most memorable line, he stated, “An assault by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

The Reagan administration shared similar fears. The Soviets did not have to attack NATO directly, but controlling the Persian Gulf and Middle East oil threatened the southern flank of NATO and would give the Soviets significant leverage over the West, cutting off vital oil supplies for NATO while crippling the economies of Western nations.

“If the Soviets could close the SOH [Strait of Hormuz], and with Iran subjected, they could take offensive action against the other Gulf states. Soviet aircraft could destroy Saudi and other GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] oil infrastructure,” the Joint Chiefs opined.

These strategic concerns led to the creation of this combatant command and consumed the energy of your predecessors who worked over in the old HQ building where your visitors’ office is today. To meet this security challenge, and the subject of my talk today, US Central Command (CENTCOM) developed a series of war plans designed to confront Soviet forces in Iran and deny their access to the Persian Gulf. These were broad, theater-wide campaign plans, designed to sustain and wage a complex fight against a peer adversary.

Slide 3: The US envisioned several possible scenarios for a Soviet invasion:

- Support a communist-led coup and insert forces to shore up the new regime.
- Prevent the new Islamic Republic from trying to spread the Iranian revolution to the Soviet Muslim population.
- Take advantage of Iran’s internal fragmentation caused by defeat in the Iran-Iraq War, civil war, and ethnic minority revolts.

- Serve as part of a wider conflict, either to seize Middle East oil as an indirect way to confront NATO or else as part of general war between the superpowers.

Slide 4: Soviet objectives would be to rapidly defeat the Iranian military—assuming they were not cooperating—and seize key ports and oil fields, control the SOH, and threaten Saudi oil production.

To achieve this, Moscow had 24-28 armor and mechanized divisions plus one airborne division backed by 700–1,000 combat aircraft. They would likely conduct the attack in two stages:

- Phase 1: seize Tehran—would require about a week.
- Phase 2: drive to seize the Khuzestan oil fields and SOH. Soviet forces could be at the strait in as little as thirty-four days with no opposition or sixty days with Iranian resistance.

Slide 5: The US operational design to counter this action was simple in concept but difficult in execution: The idea would be to rapidly deploy a credible-sized force from CONUS into the region, first as a show of American resolve to deter further Soviet action, and should that fail, to have the means to defeat the Soviet forces and prevent them from reaching the Persian Gulf.

Slide 6: This presented significant challenges for CENTCOM planners to overcome:

- The Middle East was an economy of force theater. In the event of a major war with the Soviets, many of the combat units needed for CENTCOM would be going to central Europe. Additionally, the Navy did not want to divert any aircraft carriers to the region and away from the Pacific and Atlantic.
- The US had only one small naval base in Bahrain; otherwise, it lacked any permanent bases in the region. Access, basing, and overflight rights remained a challenge with questionable Arab partners.
- Tyranny of time and distance. I don't need to tell this audience the challenges of getting forces into CENTCOM's area of operations (AOR) at the speed of relevance. It would be a race between the US and Soviet Union, and the victor would be the one who could get the "fastest with the mostest," as one Civil War general once noted.

There was hope for overcoming many of these challenges:

- Equipment such as Maritime Prepositioning and Fast Sealift Ships and the improved global communications needed to move forces and operate in the Middle East were being fielded sooner than expected.
- The US would have advance warning of Soviet actions. The Defense Intelligence Agency estimated it would have seven days of unambiguous warning for a limited incursion and about three weeks for a full-scale invasion with at least thirty days of some advanced warning before any Soviet military move. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) added that they could provide strategic warning when the politburo made the decision about invading Iran.

- Most of the Arab states were fervently anticommunist, and after the Iranian revolution, they became equally alarmed at Iranian aggression—all of which increased their willingness to work with the United States.

Slide 7: CENTCOM campaign design:

In the CENTCOM concept of operations, US forces would stage either in the GCC states or at western bases—depending on the tactical situation. Using extensive intra-theater airlift, amphibious forces, and prepositioned capabilities, they would move east into either Saudi Arabia or directly into Iran.

Planners described using “horizontal” and “vertical” escalation:

Horizontal escalation:

- Don’t limit the conflict to Iran, but expand the battlespace across the Middle East and incorporate other combatant commands. The goal was to strike from multiple axes against Soviet forces, including from Turkey and Pakistan.
- Build operational depth across the theater. Soviet missile and air threat were significant, especially to US forces operating from the nearby Gulf states. CENTCOM would utilize a network of bases farther west, around the Red Sea and East Africa, to safeguard US forces by getting them out of range and complicate the Soviet targeting.
- Develop an armed opposition movement within Iran—an internal guerilla force against the Soviet invaders. The Army 5th Special Forces Group worked with the CIA on an unconventional warfare plan to develop a resistance movement that could significantly disrupt Soviet forces by blowing bridges and attacking their rear area.
- Incorporate regional partners by building partner capacity and interoperability to augment US forces. The GCC could provide security to US installations and limited assistance in control of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs), both in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, as well as operate against Soviet client states, especially those with historic animosity. This would include Israel, who would ensure the safety of the Suez Canal by striking Soviet forces in the eastern Mediterranean. One of the concepts advocated by Rich Armitage was an integrated air defense system in the Gulf, which he thought we could achieve by 1987.

Slide 8: Vertical escalation:

This involved the scalable use of nuclear weapons.

- On the low end: there was the Passive Option advocated by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Robert “Blowtorch Bob” Komer. The 5th Special Forces Group would drop into northern Iran and detonate man-pack nukes to close key passes and roads to hinder the Soviet advance.
- On the high end: nuclear-armed B-52s would strike military bases and staging areas in the Soviet Union or against a concentration of conventional forces moving inside Iran.

US Navy and Army tactical nuclear weapons would be directed at frontline Soviet forces, especially if US forces were arriving piecemeal into Iran, as a means to buy time.

- US planners viewed nuclear weapons as the primary means to stop Soviet forces in the Middle East in the event of general, global war. The CENTCOM region would become an economy of force and limited US forces would be available to deploy to the region. Nuclear weapons would fill the vacuum of conventional capabilities.

Slide 9: CENTCOM envisioned a four-phased campaign (1004-84):

- Phase 1: Pre-C Day: set the theater for the introduction on combat troops. Force preparation—activation of Military Sealift and mustering of sealift requirements.
- Phase 2: C-C+16: conduct spoiling attacks against Soviet forces to disrupt their advance and deny access to key airfields in Iran.
 - 82nd Airborne Division and Rangers would move to Ras Banas and Thumrait as staging areas.
 - Four Army divisions would deploy from CONUS to various bases in the AOR. They would be prepared to deploy into Saudi Arabia or Iran directly.
 - US Special Operations Forces (SOF) would conduct clandestine insertions into Iran from Turkey, Pakistan, and Oman to support air interdiction missions against Soviet resupply lines and coordinate with resistance forces inside the country.

Slide 10: Phase 3: D-Day (C+16-C+36)

- US Marine amphibious forces and Army airborne forces would seize Bandar Abbas and around the SOH to secure this key chokepoint.
- Army forces would then seize Bushier and Shiraz, then move forward to a defensive line running roughly from Isfahan south east to Kerman— a distance of 375 miles.
- US Air Force fighters would deploy to airfields in Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, and Isfahan. From there, they would conduct operations to achieve air superiority over the Soviets.

Phase IV: Defeat of Soviet Forces and retrograde.

Slide 11: The entire plan hinged on developing a network of bases with sufficient duplication should access be denied by any host nation. The bases in the Persian Gulf would be better to facilitate operations in Iran. If a conflict had not begun, US forces could deploy directly there to both defend Saudi Arabia and act as a deterrent. However, if war had already begun, they were extremely vulnerable to Soviet missile and air attacks, and US forces would have to deploy farther west.

Counties in the CENTCOM region varied in their expected level of support for the US and were grouped into two categories: those allowing access/basing/overflight before Soviet forces crossed into Iran, and those who would only allow the US military in after Soviet troops had invaded.

- Egypt: support for staging and logistics and combat operations facilities before an invasion. Ras Banas was identified as an early air bed-down location and for

prepositioned equipment. US expected Egypt to grant permission for B-52s to conduct strike operations from Egyptian airbases.

- Somalia/Kenya/Sudan: full access to their bases and facilities before Soviet forces crossed the border. The facility at Berbera (now North Somaliland) was a key facility with a long runway and a robust port. Additional airbases were available in Khartoum and Wadi Seidna, Sudan; Mombasa, Kenya; and Djibouti
- Oman: access to its facilities before Soviet forces crossed the border and complete access to their bases in Masarah, Seeb, Turmait and Musandum, all of which had been constructed or greatly improved by the US for this contingency.

Saudi Arabia/UAE/Qatar/Bahrain: full access to their airfields and ports, but only after a Soviet invasion.

Kuwait: would not allow any US basing or access.

Pakistan: permission for US SOF to conduct clandestine operations from its territory before a Soviet move, but overt military access would not come until after the Soviets crossed the border. In the event of a major war, Pakistan did propose concentrating its military to threaten Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

Slide 12: Risks of this military plan were significant. The timeline for closure of US forces was highly suspect, especially if they flowed first into Western bases. It would likely take much longer than US logisticians anticipated.

It risked committing forces piecemeal into the face of the Red Army. Light airborne and infantry would arrive early and would be facing Soviet armor before the arrival of our own heavy divisions.

If it were part of a crisis in Europe, as Chairman David Jones noted, the strategic lift required would be prioritized to Europe, and this presented a “significant strategic risk should the Soviets conduct a demonstration in Europe as a means to draw US forces away from Iran and the Middle East.” This presented no real option short of using nuclear weapons.

Slide 13: As this is the war that never happened, it’s difficult to say how it would have unfolded and the viability of the 1004 plan. With four decades of hindsight, the idea of the US and the Soviets engaged in a great battle in the Zagros for control of the Middle East seems unrealistic at best. The notion that the Soviets could even maintain hundreds of thousands of troops over terrible terrain with bullets, beans, and benzene is even less probable. But through the lens of the Cold War, with the uncertainty of a still unfolding Iranian revolution, it did not seem outside of the realm of the possible in the early 1980s.

The CENTCOM military plan to counter the Soviets had major shortfalls, big and small:

- The time-phased force and development data was unrealistic.
- Concept of logistics for sustaining forces in Iran was never adequately developed.

- Despite the planned deployment of some 200 C-130s, the intra-theater airlift designed to move forces from the Western bases to the eastern bases or Iran was not fleshed out, especially under duress.
- Joint operations remained aspirational. The Army and Marine Corps each operated their own battlespace. The Navy refused to provide a senior commander and would not integrate under the Air Force joint force air component commander.
- The military abilities and fortitude of our GCC partners was suspect.
- A host of other minor issues were not addressed. For example, American troops were geared to fight in a desert environment, when most of the combat would likely have taken place in the Zagros Mountains. No cold weather equipment had been included in their kit.

The historian Williamson Murray noted that to “a considerable extent, military organizations will get the next war wrong.” In this case, it’s nuanced. Certainly, this was a plan for a war that never happened. Four decades of Cold War plans remained on the shelf. However, the planning that went into this possible conflict in the Middle East would be critical to the success of the next two wars: Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. The intellectual rigor that went into the Soviet campaign plan—especially on the logistical side—from basing to force deployments to capabilities development were key to both of those campaigns’ success. It’s hard to imagine either of those conflicts being nearly so easy without that rigor and planning during the 1980s. The US got the fundamentals correct, if not the enemy.

OPLAN 1004 and its variations provide a useful example of a theater-level war plan. They answer the question, How does one work with regional partners and complex logistics to expand the battlefield geographically to complicate an adversary’s intentions? The plan calls for built-in flexibility.

Lastly, the geography has not changed. Any Iranian-centric conflict will confront the US with similar challenges: the risks inherent in the flow of forces into the AOR during a crisis, the vulnerability of Gulf bases to enemy missile attack, the need to broaden the conflict and attack on multiple axes, the importance of unitizing the entire joint force and interagency capabilities, and the importance and never-ending challenges of working with our sometimes feckless partners in the region.

Thank you, and I look forward to the discussion.