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IMAGINING A NEW SECURITY ORDER IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky

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Summary

For over three decades, the question of who controls the Persian Gulf has formed the basis for America's massive military buildup in the region. At the heart of the region's security dilemma is a clash of visions: Iran seeks the departure of U.S. forces so it can exert what it sees as its rightful authority over the region, while the Gulf Arab states want the United States to balance Iranian power.

Resolving this impasse will not be easy. But the Iranian nuclear agreement presents an opportunity to take a first step toward creating a new security order in the Gulf, one that could improve relations between Iran and the Gulf Arab states and facilitate a lessening of the U.S. military commitment.

The Case for a New Architecture

- The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a key pillar of the existing order, excludes Iran, Iraq, and external powers with a significant role in the region. Moreover, it does not provide a platform for dialogue on many security challenges or for reducing tensions, managing crises, preventing conflict, and improving predictability.
- A new and inclusive regional security dialogue would complement a U.S. regional strategy for balancing Iran. Iranian integration with regional structures could create opportunities to lower Arab-Iranian tensions in the Gulf while still allowing the United States to impose costs if Tehran continues behavior that threatens core American interests.
- A more stable security regime would lessen Gulf state dependence on U.S. military presence and create a balance of power in the region more favorable to U.S. interests.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

- U.S. engagement in the region should elevate the priority of creating a new multilateral forum on Gulf security issues that includes the GCC countries, the United States, China, the European Union, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, and Russia. This forum should be the first step in realizing a long-term vision for a more formal, rules-based security structure.
- Creating an informal network that brings together technical experts to discuss transnational challenges is the most effective way to launch a new

regional security dialogue, assuming there is sufficient buy-in from potential stakeholders, in particular Saudi Arabia and Iran.

- The United States should launch a diplomatic campaign in the fall of 2015 to gain consensus among prospective participants on a plan to move this initiative forward, with the goal of beginning exploratory conversations over the next six months.
- To give this initiative a boost, a senior U.S. official—the president or the secretary of state—should articulate a long-term security, political, and economic vision for the Gulf that includes a more effective regional security organization.

The Need for a New Security Order

Who controls the Persian Gulf? For over three decades, this unanswered question has formed the basis for America's massive military buildup in the Middle East's most strategically important region, the vital waterway through which around 30 percent of all seaborne-traded oil passes.¹ The unstated reason behind American involvement has been to prevent one single power from controlling the region's resources. Through a combination of physical presence, training and arms sales to Gulf Arab allies, and, in the case of Iraq, military intervention, the United States has become deeply enmeshed in the region's security affairs.

The results of this involvement have been mixed at best, for both American interests and the region's development and stability. Yet successive U.S. administrations have found it exceedingly difficult to extricate the United States from the Gulf. The removal of the threat posed by former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein did nothing to change the power imbalance behind Gulf insecurity and indeed worsened it by opening a vacuum that has been filled by Iran.

At the heart of the current dilemma is a clash of visions between the two sides of the Gulf littoral: Iran seeks the departure of U.S. forces so it can exert what it regards as its rightful authority over the region (which it believes is self-evident in the area's geographic name). Meanwhile, the Gulf Arab states desire a continued American presence to balance what they see as Iran's historical ambition of hegemony.

A new window of opportunity may be opening to resolve this dilemma. The nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States plus Germany—raises the possibility, albeit a distant one, of creating a new security order in the Gulf, one that could improve relations between Iran and the Gulf Arab states and help reduce the American military commitment. This has been accompanied by the concurrent rise of a more militarily capable bloc of Gulf Arab states who—while still falling short of real self-sufficiency and, in the case of Yemen, using their capability irresponsibly—could presage a new era of confidence among these historically jittery kingdoms.

Opponents and supporters of the Iranian nuclear agreement have offered a dichotomy between a strategy of rolling back Iran or integrating the country into the global order. But this is not a binary choice. The nuclear agreement will empower Iran's hardline Islamic Revolutionary

The nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 raises the possibility of creating a new security order in the Gulf.

Guard Corps, which executes Iran's regional policies. But it could also create greater space for increased bilateral engagement between the United States and Iran. The United States should, therefore, try to foster Iranian integration in regional structures to encourage more responsible Iranian behavior while imposing costs if Tehran continues to make mischief in a way that threatens core U.S. interests.

Managing this balance between reconciling with and constraining Iran will be a difficult diplomatic and political challenge. One immediate test for the strategy will be whether the United States and its Gulf Arab partners can agree to create a more inclusive forum for multilateral discussion of Gulf security issues as a first step toward eventually building a rules-based security architecture for the region.

This idea is not without precedent. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, regional security organizations have emerged with the goals of lowering tensions, resolving disputes, managing crises, and preventing conflicts. Yet, the record of these organizations has been inconsistent.

In the Middle East, the failure has been especially stark. The League of Arab States, encompassing countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, is bereft of real conflict prevention capability.

In the Persian Gulf, the region's only multilateral security forum—the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—suffers from a number of shortcomings. First, as currently configured, the GCC is little more than a *de facto* collective defense alliance directed against Iran. It excludes Iran, Iraq, and outside powers with a strong stake in the security of the region, such as China, the European Union (EU), India, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Second, the GCC provides no multilateral venue for crisis management, conflict resolution, or implementation of measures to strengthen stability. In addition, it does not offer a mechanism for countries in the Gulf to candidly discuss threats and security needs.² This is particularly problematic because GCC countries face multiple, cross-border challenges that require greater multinational cooperation.

Opening a new multilateral framework to Iran could be one additional tool in a broader U.S. strategy of incentives and pressures to help influence Iranian behavior. But the immediate benefits of this opening should not be overstated. The modest gains afforded Iran by this structure would not outweigh the deeply entrenched drivers of Tehran's policies. Iran's dangerous meddling in the region appears to be driven by a mix of ideological fervor, strategic deterrence, domestic factionalism, and a deeply held belief among senior leaders that the Islamic Republic is and should remain the region's indispensable nation. That said, low-level dialogue between the Gulf states and Iran could be an important first step in reducing tension and influencing Iran's outlook. Further, this new multilateral forum could expand to a more regularized dialogue on Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Thus, a new regional security forum should be an integral element of the United States' long-term vision of a rules-based and more stable and predictable security order in the Gulf. Without such an order, the United States will likely remain stuck in the role of the region's fire brigade, forced to take greater ownership of problems that countries in the region must solve for themselves, often with the United States in a supporting role. The aftermath of the nuclear agreement with Iran, which imposes the dual requirements of containing and engaging the country, provides both an opportune time and context to construct these arrangements. Embedding the United States in a more robust regional security institution will also allay the fears of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states that it is withdrawing from the region.

A new regional security forum should be an integral element of the United States' vision of a rules-based and more stable security order in the Gulf.

U.S. Interests and Strategy in the Gulf

A more inclusive, legitimate, and effective security order in the Gulf would serve both America's and the Gulf states' interests. In his September 2013 speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, U.S. President Barack Obama identified the United States' core interests in the region: confronting external aggression against U.S. allies and partners; maintaining a free flow of energy; preventing the development or use of weapons of mass destruction; and dismantling terrorist networks.³ All of these interests are shared by the Gulf states. Moreover, the Gulf states and the United States would benefit enormously from a security regime based on rules and norms of acceptable behavior that would promote stability and reduce the risks of tension and conflict. The administration's strategy in the Persian Gulf is undergirded by six major premises.

First, the United States should maintain a minimum level of essential engagement to secure its core interests in the region and to sustain this engagement over the long haul while reducing costs and risks.

Second, countries in the Persian Gulf region must take primary responsibility for their own defense, in part to reduce the costs and risks of the heavy security burdens the United States shoulders in this region.

Third, many of the challenges confronting the Gulf cut across national boundaries and therefore can only be addressed through multilateral cooperation.

Fourth, mounting domestic pressures, rather than direct Iranian aggression, present the greatest long-term challenge to the stability of the GCC states. That said, Iran has indirectly contributed to these internal challenges: its meddling in the region, combined with the failings of Arab governance, has fueled Sunni extremism.

Fifth, the Gulf Arab states need to implement meaningful domestic reforms to provide more sustainable security for their citizens, reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies, and diminish opportunities for Iranian meddling. There are sharp limits, however, on what the United States can do to encourage these reforms.

Sixth, America should not choose sides in the sectarian and geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia but must instead work to establish a new equilibrium between the two countries. Creating a framework for more constructive and sustained U.S. engagement with Iran could increase U.S. leverage with other countries in the region.

America's approach to Gulf security has not included a commitment to work with states in the region to build a more inclusive security structure that would include the GCC states, Iran, Iraq, and other important outside powers. Yet, a functioning multilateral security forum would reinforce America's current security strategy for the Persian Gulf and many of the basic premises underpinning it. It would shift more of the responsibility for fixing the region's problems to local states, where it properly belongs, while encouraging responsible stakeholders from outside the region to share more of the security burdens.

Historical Experience

The Middle East is the only region in the world that is bereft of a legitimate, effective, and inclusive multilateral security organization—and there have been numerous and unsuccessful efforts over the years to fill this void.⁴ Many multilateral initiatives dot the regional landscape, from the League of Arab States to the EU's Mediterranean Dialogue and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. But for a variety of reasons, all of them suffer from serious shortcomings, and none possesses the combination of legitimacy, capacity, mandate, resources, and membership to make it a truly effective organization. The GCC fits neatly into this category.

There have been a number of experiences in constructing regional security structures in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific region, and Europe that offer instructive lessons for building a new security order in the Persian Gulf. In the short term, the experience of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is most relevant to creating a new forum for regional dialogue on multilateral security issues. In the longer term, the functioning of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and its successor, the Organization for Security

and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), offer better examples of more structured, rules-based security architectures.

A number of experiences in constructing regional security structures in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific region, and Europe offer instructive lessons for building a new security order in the Persian Gulf.

The Madrid Conference

The U.S. government launched the Madrid Conference in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991, when then U.S. secretary of state James A. Baker III proposed a new regional security architecture. The Madrid process created a framework for multilateral cooperation on shared regional issues—water, the environment, arms control and regional security, refugees, and economic development. Israel, most Arab countries, the United States, Russia, and the EU participated in these discussions.

The groups on water and arms control and regional security made modest progress. However, the overall process stalled and eventually collapsed when Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, to which the multilateral talks were linked, reached a dead end.

Since the collapse of the Madrid process, there have been vigorous discussions about a regional security architecture among Middle East experts and government officials. But they have occurred predominantly at the nongovernmental level (track 2) or with limited representation by governmental officials (track 1.5) and have yielded very little in terms of concrete agreements.

ASEAN

The experiences in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe with regional security organizations may offer lessons the Gulf countries could learn from when constructing their own security order.⁵ These structures cannot simply be grafted onto the Gulf, because circumstances there are very different from those that existed in Cold War–era Europe and Asia. But the Gulf states, in partnership with other like-minded countries, could adapt some of the practices from other regions to design a politically feasible and realistic blueprint for a regional security architecture and to overcome political, diplomatic, and practical impediments to progress.

The experience of ASEAN offers both positive and negative lessons. On the plus side, the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation set out foundational principles in 1976 that member countries have largely abided by and could serve as a basis for the charter of a new Gulf security forum:

- a. Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations;
- b. The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
- c. Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- d. Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means;
- e. Renunciation of the threat or use of force.⁶

The evolution of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which essentially operates as the security arm of ASEAN, also offers a positive example of

the kind of slow but steady pace at which a new security forum in the Gulf is likely to develop. The ARF was created in the mid-1990s to “foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and ... to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁷ The foundational document for the forum set out a three-step incremental approach to the ARF’s development, beginning first with confidence building and then proceeding to preventive diplomacy and, in the longer run, toward a conflict resolution capability.

On the negative side, while the ARF has agreed on a long-term blueprint for implementing this approach, progress has been slow and, for many American officials, extremely frustrating.

Its supporters argue that the ARF has built a sense of strategic community among its members and emerged as the key forum for dialogue on regional security issues and for developing cooperative measures to enhance peace and security in the region.⁸ They also point to some modest cooperation from smaller groups that meet every year between annual ministerial-level sessions, especially on counterpiracy and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These discussions, which cover counterterrorism, transnational crime, and nonproliferation and disarmament as well, have enjoyed a modicum of success because they bring together like-minded countries with common purposes and a capacity to act.

The ARF’s detractors, mostly American experts on the Asia-Pacific region, dismiss the forum as a talk shop with little to show in the way of concrete cooperation on crisis management, conflict prevention, and confidence-building measures.⁹ They argue that the ability of the forum to solve problems will continue to be hampered by its large membership; its strict adherence to sovereignty and noninterference principles, which make preventive diplomacy difficult in practice; and the competing strategic perspectives among its participants.

Nonetheless, the structural relationship between ASEAN and the ARF offers a potential solution to the thorny issue of membership of the United States and other outside countries in a new Gulf security forum. Over the years, ASEAN has spun off several formats that are separate from but connected to the main body. These include the ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea); the East Asia Summit, which is held annually and includes leaders from eighteen countries including the United States; and the ARF, which includes the United States and 26 other countries. In addition, the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) brings together ASEAN and eight partners for discussions on maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations.

The CSCE and the OSCE

Many aspects of the experience of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which resulted in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act to improve East-West relations, are directly relevant to a new security organization for the Gulf. Like ASEAN, the CSCE was based on a founding declaration of principles—norms that could help to undergird a new Gulf security forum. These include respect for sovereignty, non-use of force, respect for borders and territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes, and noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. Moreover, the CSCE was not initially institutionalized as a standing body with a secretariat. Instead, it was composed of different follow-up meetings and conferences at various venues throughout Europe held under the umbrella of the Helsinki process. This kind of loosely organized and informal process makes sense for the Gulf, at least until the parties in the new forum become comfortable operating in a more formal setting.

Unlike the protracted security dialogue in ASEAN, however, the Helsinki process led to some of the most important agreements in the history of arms control and confidence-building measures. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the 1986 Stockholm Agreement, the 1990 Vienna Document, and the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe produced a number of transparency measures, information exchanges, verification and inspection arrangements, and arms limits that significantly lowered tensions, stabilized the East-West military balance, and reduced the risk of armed conflict in the heart of Europe. Equally important, the Helsinki process established norms of behavior that reduced uncertainty about intentions and created greater predictability and thus stability. At a 1994 summit, the CSCE decided to turn the conference into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe with a standing body in Vienna.

From a regional perspective, an OSCE for the Persian Gulf is too ambitious as a near-term goal, and talk of creating this type of forum will be met with hostility. The OSCE's agenda placed much greater emphasis on democracy and human rights issues than had been evident in the past. These are neuralgic subjects for the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq, and it is extremely unlikely that any of them would want to have such a discussion under a public spotlight.¹⁰ The prospective non-Gulf members of a new security forum will want to approach this subject with great care and caution when hammering out an agreement on a mandate and agenda for a new security organization.

A loosely organized and informal dialogue makes sense for the Gulf, until the parties involved become comfortable operating in a more formal setting.

Organizational Matters

There are numerous diplomatic, political, and practical obstacles to standing up a new security architecture for the Gulf.¹¹ In the final analysis, of course, it will be largely up to the regional players to decide on the organization, scope, substance, and operating procedures of the new structure.

What Form of Security?

The design of the architecture is directly related to the form of security the new organization is intended to provide—and the answer to this question should inform decisions about many of the details that need to be resolved.¹² In broad terms, there are two models for multilateral security that are most relevant in the Gulf context: collective defense and a regional security regime.

Collective defense is the most well-known model—the security commitment that underpins NATO. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, NATO’s founding document, commits each member state to treat an armed attack against one member as an armed attack against all members. In other words, this is an all-for-one-and-one-for-all approach. The security commitment is intended to defend treaty members from an external attack by a nonmember.

A regional security regime represents another organizing principle of multilateral security. The primary goal of such an arrangement is to prevent aggression and war. States in such a regime establish norms of behavior—the rules of the road—to achieve this goal. The principles of a regional security regime are clearly embodied, to varying degrees, in ASEAN, the CSCE, and the OSCE, but the CSCE stands out as the framework with the greatest success in putting these principles into practice.

Which of these organizing principles for a multilateral security system would be most appropriate given circumstances in the Gulf, not only those today but also those that are likely to evolve over the next decade? These models

are not necessarily mutually exclusive and could be pursued either simultaneously or sequentially depending on the evolution of relationships and threat perceptions in the region. Indeed, experience in Europe demonstrates that different institutions can coexist and provide different forms of security so long as they are not working at cross-purposes. Thus, in Europe, members of NATO are also members of the OSCE.

The GCC is a collective defense organization directed against Iran (and against internal opposition to monarchical rule). The United States and GCC members, individually and collectively, have programs in the works to improve the organization’s collective defense capabilities, especially in the areas of missile defense, maritime cooperation, and cybersecurity. However, the United States has ruled out a formal mutual defense guarantee for the

The primary goal of a regional security regime is to prevent aggression and war. States involved establish norms of behavior to achieve this goal.

GCC states or any ironclad commitment to defend these countries against external attack comparable to a NATO Article 5 commitment. Moreover, it is clear from President Obama's statements that he envisions more cooperative approaches to Gulf security. As he said in his September 2014 speech to the UN General Assembly, "It's time for a broader negotiation in the region in which major powers address their differences directly, honestly, and peacefully across the table from one another, rather than through gun-wielding proxies."¹³ He reiterated this view in May 2015, following the U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David.¹⁴

The most practical, realistic, and feasible security model would be for the GCC to continue as a collective defense alliance and to work together with the United States to improve integration and interoperability while a new regional security regime is established in parallel. This is the template in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, where America's alliances are the bedrock of security but are complemented by a variety of mutually supportive and rules-based regional and subregional organizations. This construct has clear implications for determining the size and composition of the new security organization.

Membership

In addition to the GCC states, membership in a new forum organized around the principles of a regional security regime will have to include Iran, Iraq, and major outside powers if it is going to help lower tensions, resolve conflicts, and produce greater security and stability. However, as NATO, the EU, and other large and highly structured multilateral organizations have discovered, there is usually an inverse relationship between the size of an organization and its ability to take decisive action. The new forum, therefore, should be organized initially around a relatively small number of founding members.

There are many possible configurations involving all the littoral states of the Gulf (the GCC, Iran, and Iraq, also known as the GCC+2) and neighboring countries that have long-standing relationships with GCC countries and an interest in Gulf developments, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. However, expanding the geographic scope of membership to include any of these countries would make it more difficult for the forum to make decisions; it is also unclear what additional value these countries would bring to the table. These countries confront challenges that are mostly far removed from the transnational problems facing the Gulf states, none of them exerts major influence over Gulf affairs, and their military capabilities are not necessary to maintain the Gulf states' conventional military superiority over Iran.

Including countries of the Levant would inevitably raise the contentious issues of Israel's relationship to the new forum and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although this dispute contributes to regional uncertainty and

A new forum organized around the principles of a regional security regime has to include the GCC, Iran, Iraq, and outside powers if it is going to lower tensions.

instability, it is no longer central to regional security. It is also only peripherally related to the security problems confronting the Gulf states and, more broadly, to the conflicts dividing the GCC states and Iran throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Trying to find a seat for Israel in a new forum on Gulf security would be unacceptable to the GCC states and Iran.

Further, it will be hard enough for the GCC+2 to agree on establishing a new forum for the Gulf that also includes major outside powers. Increasing the size to include major regional powers will only make this process more protracted and contentious. Moreover, pushing for more comprehensive regional membership at the outset is unnecessary or at the very least premature—if the forum takes hold, additional members (and observers) can always be included later, and it may even be possible to replicate the new forum in other subregions in the Middle East and North Africa.

A related and even more difficult question concerns the role of nonregional actors—states, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations—in the forum. The policies and decisions of China, India, Japan, Russia, the United States, and, to a smaller degree, the EU all have a significant impact on the security, development, and stability of the Gulf region. The same is true for organizations like the United Nations and to a much lesser extent the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Nongovernmental organizations, including civil society groups, also have expertise, capacity, and resources that can be helpful in tackling many of the region's problems, though their participation in a regional security forum would be a sensitive issue for most of the Gulf states.

The challenge for the fledgling forum will be to leverage the value these actors bring to the table without creating an inefficient and unwieldy system that could cause the structure to collapse under its own weight. The founding members of the new forum would have the option of granting observer status to outside actors as well as regional countries beyond the Gulf; however, America's partners in the GCC would almost certainly demand formal U.S. membership in the forum as a counterweight to Iran.

U.S. membership in a security forum for the Gulf would be a nonstarter with the Iranians. As a practical compromise, based on the ARF model, Washington and Tehran could agree that, while the United States and other outside powers will not be members of the main body, they could participate in subgroups of the new forum dedicated to discussing security, confidence-building measures, and eventually perhaps arms control measures.

Agenda

The work of the forum would be organized around different baskets of issues. There are many possible agenda topics, and the United States should not hesitate to offer suggestions. Ultimately, however, the members of the organization

will decide on the scope and parameters of their work. One possible scheme, set out below, draws on the experience of the Madrid Conference.

Regional security: Although Saudi Arabia and Iran are at each other's throats in various proxy conflicts, a regional security track could tackle transnational challenges of mutual concern, such as threats to maritime security, piracy operations, and terrorism. The Gulf Arab states, Iran, and surrounding regional powers all face a common threat to shipping lanes from maritime piracy and terrorism. Attacks in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, two vital shipping routes, could block significant oil transports and severely damage the regional and global economy.

The United States has had some success in forming three combined task forces on maritime security and counterterrorism, counterpiracy, and Arabian Gulf security and cooperation.¹⁵ But the security force's nomenclature to describe its area of operations—the Arabian Gulf rather than the Persian Gulf—already precludes it from being a truly inclusive body.

To bolster confidence, the force's principles should be preserved, but its mandate and mission should be expanded to include a dialogue on maritime confidence-building measures and greater cooperation in combating the illicit trafficking of drugs and smuggling of other goods.

Environment: Cooperation on issues related to renewable energy sources and climate change is a relatively low-cost, low-threat enterprise in which all parties have a stake. The GCC states have already begun to cooperate on these matters, particularly on nuclear energy. Similarly, the forging of a joint strategy on environmental disasters has emerged as a priority for the GCC and is another area where Iran, because of its environmental problems and scarce water resources, shares a common interest with the Gulf Arab states. The provision and protection of potable water and food security more broadly are additional topics in this basket.

Trade and economics: Given fluctuating oil and gas prices, the Gulf Arab states have formulated ambitious plans for transitioning away from a rentier-state model, which relies heavily on revenues from extractive industries like oil and gas. Such imperatives have grown all the more pressing given the region's demographics and its increasing youth bulge. The expansion of the welfare state—in Iran and the Gulf Arab states—will not be enough to head off potential unrest. Yet revamping moribund educational systems at home and creating true, knowledge-based economies that would attract investment to promote economic diversification and thus greater employment of skilled labor remain elusive goals to implement.¹⁶ The new security forum could simultaneously build confidence among its members and promote the free flow of ideas and strategies if it included a basket on economic development. This is an area that Iran is already amenable to join.¹⁷

The creation of a new regional security forum would inevitably raise the question of whether it should have a mandate to discuss internal political reforms, human rights practices, and other political, social, cultural, and economic issues. These are extremely sensitive matters for the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq—and they are no less touchy when discussing issues related to better (as opposed to democratic) governance and human security (broadly defined as the ability of a government to meet the basic needs of its population).

America will have to accept the reality that circumstances are not currently ripe to push its democracy and human rights agenda in a new security forum. Instead, it will need to use bilateral diplomacy and military assistance more aggressively to pursue its agenda of political and security sector reform.¹⁸

Structure and Process

Given the enmity and mistrust among prospective participants and the absence of any meaningful relations over the last decade, establishing a sustained dialogue on both “hard” and “soft” regional security issues would have important political, psychological, and symbolic value. However, the goal should not be talks for the sake of talks but should rather be dialogue to reach agreement on concrete forms of policy coordination and security cooperation—confidence- and security-building measures and agreed rules and standards to promote predictability and stability. Accordingly, the structure, decisionmaking rules, and operating procedures should be optimized to produce actions rather than lowest-common-denominator outcomes.

In the new forum, working groups would be formed on the baskets of issues, and each group would establish the scope and parameters of its activities. Given the strained nature of relationships among many of the participants and the novelty of the experience, it would be best if these groups were given a large degree of autonomy. This would permit them to operate under their own rules and procedures and progress at their own speed—a process known as variable geometry.

The architecture for these groups should be open and flexible—that is, participants should consist preferably of countries that share common interests on the issues and have the will, resources, and capacity to act in a collective fashion. No member of the forum would be required

to participate in a working group, but no country should have the right to veto the participation of another country in one of these groups. Working groups would supplement but not supplant the efforts of existing organizations (for example, the Arab League, the GCC, or the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum).

The new forum’s structure, decisionmaking rules, and operating procedures should be optimized to produce actions rather than lowest-common-denominator outcomes.

Launching the Forum

What is the best overall strategy for getting the entity off the ground? There are two broad strategies, political and functional, and they are not mutually exclusive.

A political strategy would be based on the assumption that the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the key challenge to the entire enterprise and without some easing of Saudi-Iranian tensions, progress in constructing a new regional security forum will be problematic. The two countries have profound differences on a host of regional security issues, and many of these divides will never be fully bridged. But for all their differences, Saudi Arabia and Iran do share common interests in opposing the self-proclaimed Islamic State, avoiding direct conflict, preserving the sanctity of borders, and maintaining the free flow of oil and freedom of navigation. It might be possible, therefore, for the two sides to reach some understandings on agreed-upon rules of the road that could meaningfully reduce sectarian tensions in the region and create a more favorable political climate for a new security architecture.

Much of this hinges on the recognition that Saudi-Iranian relations are not preordained to be hostile or rooted in some immutable, Persian-Arab, Sunni-Shia clash. To be sure, there are structural and deep religious determinants behind their rivalry. But power politics, not sectarianism, ultimately governs the relationship. And rulers in Riyadh and Tehran have greater agency than many analysts concede. At various points in their modern histories, Saudi Arabia and Iran have cooperated—perhaps not as warmly as true allies—when their respective regimes perceived economic and strategic benefits to cooperation. The most obvious precedent was throughout the 1990s following the Iran-Iraq War and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, when the two sides faced a threat from Iraq, and they both began aligning their oil production policies to confront growing deficits (culminating in a quota deal in 1999).

Domestic leadership has also played a key role in shaping the relationship: then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah took over foreign policy in 1995 due to King Fahd's failing health and believed that reconciliation could strengthen the moderates in Tehran. The Iranian side was committed to repairing Iran's relations with the Gulf out of economic necessity. During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (from 1997 to 2005), relations reached their strongest point, culminating in a series of security accords. Although relations plummeted during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure as president, both sides still maintained some level of dialogue, particularly on Lebanon in the wake of its 2006 war with Israel. Episodic as it has been, this history of guarded engagement shows that the two sides' animosity has been tempered by shifts in their domestic leaderships, the regional environment, and their economic interests.¹⁹

A more functional approach to jump-starting a regional security dialogue would bring together experts in and possibly out of government to discuss

A functional approach to starting a regional security dialogue would bring experts together to discuss transnational challenges where potential members share common interests.

transnational challenges where potential members share common interests. These could include drug-trafficking and illegal-smuggling prevention, environmental remediation, energy cooperation, climate change, earthquake monitoring, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, natural resource management, medical and healthcare collaboration, and maritime security cooperation. As was the case with the integration of Germany into post–World War II Europe, cooperation in one area could spill over into other areas. Success in these functional discussions could also drum up support for the more ambitious goal of building new rules to anchor a new security organization.

Of these two options, the functional, bottom-up approach is probably best suited to make early progress in the Gulf, given continued Saudi-Iranian antagonism and the other difficult political shoals that have to be navigated. It took two years for the CSCE to produce the Helsinki Final Act and almost two decades before its members decided to make the conference more permanent. Rather than try to convene a conference to hammer out an agreement on all the details of a new organization, it would be better to create flexible and informal opportunities for dialogue among government officials on less controversial and more technical issues. This dialogue could take place even if Saudi Arabia and Iran remain at loggerheads with each other.

Challenges to a Viable Forum

Laying the foundation for this forum presents enormous challenges. Some of these impediments can be mitigated, managed, finessed, or worked around with strong leadership, adroit diplomacy, and a sound blueprint. Going too big at the outset—with a comprehensive and ambitious approach—will collapse the edifice, while making any progress on a new Gulf security regime contingent on a broader, regional détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a sure path to failure. What is needed instead is a collection of more modest and feasible objectives that will bolster confidence in the Gulf and lay a foundation for a more durable architecture.

Even these quick wins could face initial hurdles—just the nomenclature used to describe the Gulf region has been a surprisingly difficult obstacle. The authors have attended track 2 talks between Gulf Arabs and Iranians where substantive discussion was stymied because participants could not reach agreement over the terms “Persian Gulf,” “Arabian Gulf,” or “Gulf.”²⁰ Here, external arbitration could play a helpful role in devising a more neutral, anodyne name for this new forum.

Beyond this semantic hurdle, the construction of a viable architecture faces a number of uphill battles. The most fundamental one is rooted in contested visions of Gulf security.

Iranian and Arab Views on Gulf Security

Regardless of the type of regime in Tehran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states will continue to demand external military backing to balance what they see as Iran's demographic, economic, and military might. To assert what it sees as its rightful leadership role, Iran will continue to demand a Gulf that is free from U.S. and all foreign forces.²¹ Iranian hardliners and principalists close to Ayatollah Khamenei make no distinction between the Gulf states and the "arrogant" United States and perceive these countries as pawns in America's strategy of encircling Iran.

In contrast, pragmatists in the camp of President Hassan Rouhani believe that the nuclear deal could pave the way for Iranian engagement with the smaller Gulf states to drive a wedge between them and both Saudi Arabia and the United States. This view reflects a long-standing Iranian practice of trying to exploit intra-Gulf differences to cultivate relationships with individual states rather than with the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Iranian moderates have floated trial balloons on a rapprochement with the Saudi ruling elite. The latest example is Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's proposal in April 2015 for a new collective forum for dialogue in the Persian Gulf region to facilitate engagement. He said, in a recent article in the *New York Times*, the dialogue must address "a broad spectrum of issues, including confidence- and security-building measures; combating terrorism, extremism and sectarianism; ensuring freedom of navigation and the free flow of oil and other resources; and protection of the environment." In addition, Zarif called for this dialogue to include more formal nonaggression and security cooperation agreements, and proposed that it should be limited to regional states and rely on existing mechanisms for multilateral talks.²²

For the Gulf Arab states, however, such propositions sit uneasily with deeply ingrained fears and a skeptical reading of Iran's intentions. Riyadh in particular worries that, even if there is a friendly regime in Tehran, the kingdom will be consigned to the status of junior partner, with the United States favoring Iran, as was the case under former U.S. president Richard Nixon's Twin Pillars doctrine.²³ Moreover, the Gulf states continue to believe that, whatever the good intentions of Zarif, Rouhani, and other moderates, it is the principalists and their allies in the Revolutionary Guards who ultimately determine Iranian foreign policy.

More recently, Saudi officials and commentators under the newly assertive rule of King Salman have argued for a more robust and cohesive GCC that would obviate the need for an external balancer against Iran.²⁴ Some Saudi

The Arab Gulf states still hold deeply ingrained fears and a skeptical reading of Iran's intentions.

commentators have even gone so far as to push for the formal inclusion of Yemen, with its population of 24 million, in the GCC to give the Gulf Arabs a demographic edge over the Islamic Republic.²⁵ But such proposals, along with recurring with-or-without-you ultimatums to the United States, are ultimately a form of bluffing and leverage. This is because Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states have no viable strategic alternative to the United States as their security guarantor, and the effectiveness of their military and intelligence establishments depends critically on U.S. support.

Sources of Unity and Disunity in the GCC²⁶

Aside from clashing Iranian and Gulf Arab views, another stumbling block is endemic disunity in the GCC itself. Recent shifts in regional dynamics and the domestic complexions of the GCC have slightly tempered this disunity.

First and foremost, the threat from Iran—as the GCC sees in the country’s military, financial, and diplomatic support for the regime in Syria; the rise of the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen; and its control of the powerful Shia militias in Iraq—has resulted in an unprecedented show of GCC unity. The Saudi-led operation in Yemen in particular has been an effective rallying point. Even the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which was previously nonchalant about the Houthi threat, has participated, committing ground combat forces and shifting its fighter aircraft from attacking Islamist militias in Libya to conducting sorties over Yemen.

Another and more worrisome display of cohesiveness has occurred on the domestic security front. The intelligence services of the GCC are cooperating at unprecedented levels, sharing blacklists of dissidents, denying visas to foreigners critical of GCC regimes, and making arrests on one another’s behalf. Even in Kuwait, previously one of the more open and tolerant of the GCC monarchies, the security services have arrested politicians, activists, and bloggers for offenses ranging from criticism of the Saudi-led Yemen operation to “insults” against the Saudi royal family, as the Interior Ministry put it.²⁷ In Bahrain, the dragnet of detentions has been even larger.²⁸

A third and less obvious source of Gulf unity has been the development over the past decade of a new Gulf cultural identity known as *khaliji* (meaning Gulf). Part of this is top-down, reflecting the strategy of regimes—particularly those in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha—to make the Gulf a crossroads of global commerce, art, education, and sport. But the new Gulf nationalism is also bottom-up. Commentators frequently note that with the weakening or collapse of the Arab world’s historic cultural centers through civil war, invasion, and revolution—in the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt—the center of gravity has shifted by default to the Gulf.²⁹

In the economic realm, the Gulf has seen an uptick in intra-GCC investment. Recent plans for Gulf Arab nuclear power and diversified energy have spurred further cooperation. The growing weight of Gulf national airlines vis-à-vis American carriers has been another source of unity and national pride.

Despite these developments, a number of structural sources of disunity exist and, on balance, outweigh the recent signs of unity. Much of this divergence is rooted in familial disputes, territorial squabbles, and simple facts of geography. The last factor is especially evident in the GCC's longtime outlier Oman, which has historically considered itself more of an Indian Ocean power with arguably stronger links to Iran than the Arabian Peninsula. This was demonstrated by the role Oman played in facilitating the secret, back-channel discussions between high-level U.S. and Iranian diplomats that laid the basis for the subsequent P5+1 negotiations with Iran.

There are a number of looming developments that could exacerbate these structural differences. As the Gulf states face monarchical succession challenges, there may be a temptation for the ruling regimes in some countries to meddle in the leadership transition processes of their neighbors to shape them to their advantage. On the economic front, a shift by Gulf states in the future away from rentier economic models could create greater disunity. The Gulf states historically have shown a preference for bilateral trade deals with external powers—Bahrain's negotiation of a free trade agreement with the United States incensed Saudi Arabia, which accused it of breaking ranks with the GCC.

The United States has thus far had mixed success in promoting greater Gulf unity, particularly on the security front. On the one hand, American efforts to improve Gulf interoperability have had some success particularly on maritime issues and, more recently, in developing integrated air and missile defenses. And American diplomacy was crucial to building Gulf consensus around the anti-Islamic State campaign in Iraq and Syria, even if the preponderance of actual sorties continues to be flown by American aircraft. But on the other hand, America's provision of arms and training to the Gulf has given individual states strong incentives toward bilateralism in their security partnerships—and, on balance, they show no signs of abandoning the wheel-and-spoke arrangement that characterizes U.S.-GCC relations. Former defense secretary Chuck Hagel announced in 2014 that the United States would start selling arms to the GCC as a collective body, but the operationalization of this has proved challenging.

A number of structural sources of disunity in the GCC exist and, on balance, outweigh the recent signs of unity.

A New Direction for America's Gulf Policy

The United States has adopted a strategy of calming Gulf fears about the nuclear agreement with Iran and American abandonment with new arms sales and repackaging existing U.S. security pledges. The GCC countries are important military and counterterrorism partners, and arms sales and capacity building are essential elements of U.S. engagement with its GCC partners.

Nonetheless, the interests of the United States and some of its GCC partners diverge in sometimes significant ways. Moreover, it is by no means clear that the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, believe the United States' reassurances—or, if they do, that they believe Washington can deliver what they want on the time lines they want. The Gulf states already enjoy—and will continue to enjoy for some time—conventional military superiority over Iran,³⁰ and the weapons and equipment the United States has offered are not well-matched to the asymmetric threat these countries perceive from Iran and its proxies. The assistance would also not be of much use in addressing domestic threats to stability.

If the United States focuses only on reassuring its Gulf partners, they will continue their dual-track policy of extracting U.S. commitments while simultaneously undertaking actions that, in some cases, undermine the two sides' shared interests in regional stability.³¹ In other words, doubling down on the same tried-and-true formulas may be necessary to protect U.S. core interests in the Gulf, but it is not sufficient.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between the P5+1 and Iran has created space for a U.S.-led conversation on a new regional security forum and architecture that could reduce Gulf states' dependence on a costly U.S. military presence, reinforce long-term stability more effectively than U.S. and Gulf countries' military interventions, and achieve a durable and less costly power equilibrium. Perhaps eventually, it could also help incentivize governance and other internal reforms that Gulf countries need to implement to preserve their long-term stability and security. Absent functioning regional security and economic institutions, a U.S. strategy of relying on the Gulf states to address regional security challenges will be limited by their shortcomings.³²

Institution building will require the United States to up its diplomatic game. Washington will have to carefully approach its role to avoid political mines.

Institution building will require that the United States scale up its ambitions and diplomatic game. Washington will have to carefully approach its role in designing this new enterprise to avoid stepping on political and diplomatic mines. A new security structure will require local buy-in for lasting success—Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular, will need to take ownership of the initiative—and it will also need outside support to get it off the ground. That said, very few significant developments occur in the Middle East without strong U.S. leadership. The United States will need to participate in this forum to provide a counterweight to Iran. Moreover, the development of the new forum—and its potential evolution into a more structured security system—will, by necessity, be a U.S.-led iterative process of diplomatic give-and-take.

A successful outcome will require a more nuanced conception of American leadership grounded in the reality that a new approach to security in the Gulf will not gain any traction without the support and cooperation of the Gulf states.³³

Thus, Washington can and should propose ideas and solutions, but it should not try to dictate outcomes. A high-profile U.S. role in setting up the new security forum will be greeted with suspicion, and any plan will be dead on arrival if it is seen as “made in America.” Moreover, while the United States should be willing to take some risks to encourage participation, it should not be saddled with all the risks and costs of pushing this initiative ahead, setting itself up to take all the blame if it fails. Two of its operating principles should be regional solutions to regional problems and international partners to share the burden of constructing the new architecture.³⁴

Iranian involvement in the forum will be a tough pill for most GCC partners to swallow, especially for Saudi Arabia, and U.S. support for Iraqi membership will also be met with resistance. The United States will need to employ a combination of pressure and positive incentives to secure cooperation. Some gentle arm-twisting may suffice with countries that are more conciliatory toward Iran and Iraq, such as Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE. But the United States will likely have to persuade the Saudis at the highest levels; otherwise, their leaders will not take the initiative seriously. This arm-twisting should not, however, include direct U.S. government efforts to mediate the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran, because that would arouse Saudi suspicions about American intentions and carry a high risk of blowback from both countries.³⁵

It will be important to first engage the Saudis on this initiative and bring them on board. If the Saudis consent to informal and exploratory discussions with other prospective participants, the United States should socialize the proposal with countries (for example, a contact group) that will be the most enthusiastic about it—or the least resistant to it. The UN’s secretary general and the EU’s foreign policy chief would be strong candidates to play a leadership role in this group. The Omanis could once again serve as a useful intermediary with Iran, and perhaps the EU and India could also take on some of this burden; India, in particular, has a keen interest in expanding its influence in the Gulf. Further, Russia and China might play a constructive role in securing Iranian support for a new forum.

U.S. government officials from across multiple departments will need to stay on the same script to amplify the main messages that Washington needs to communicate:

- Binding Iran into a system of rules and institutions would be a way to limit Iranian power and make it less threatening, complementing more robust means of constraining Iran’s regional ambitions.
- The forum would provide an opportunity to reduce tensions, manage crises, and prevent disputes that could escalate into armed conflict that would not serve anyone’s interests.

- The bilateral military and security relationships the United States has developed with GCC states would remain the bedrock of Gulf security, and a regional security forum would not substitute for these commitments.

Over the coming months, the United States should take advantage of every diplomatic opportunity it has to begin quiet discussions with the Gulf Arab states and other prospective participants in a new regional security forum to gauge their interest in and support for the initiative. Qatar might also be prepared to host a dialogue between Iran and the GCC states, as the emir of Qatar recently announced in a speech at the UN General Assembly. In the following one to two years, meetings could be convened at any number of official or nonofficial venues throughout the region.

Quiet discussions will be needed between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Saudi counterpart on this initiative and, depending on how these talks go, for direct or indirect trilateral diplomacy among Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. A draft declaration of principles, loosely modeled after ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, would underpin the new security architecture and could serve as a focal point of these discussions.

In time, if these dialogues yield concrete forms of cooperation and greater trust among the parties, this loosely organized and informal network of meetings could be made more formal and institutionalized. Additionally, the agenda could be broadened to discuss more significant confidence- and security-building measures and, possibly in the more distant future, even arms reductions.

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers should be under no illusions about the difficulty of overcoming decades of ingrained mistrust in the Gulf and the Gulf states' strong bias for bilateral security relationships with the United States over multilateral cooperation with each other. Imagining a new security forum, let alone a future rules-based security regime, is one thing; implementing it is quite another. Much will hinge on the balance of power between the hardliners and pragmatists in Tehran and, especially, the calculus of Ayatollah Khamenei. The new forum will also depend on the Saudis dialing down their sectarian vitriol in the media and threat mongering of Iran, which have so far produced an unhealthy level of Sunni nationalism.

But a U.S. government strategy for the region that hinges entirely on rollback to the detriment of reducing tensions and pursuing mutual cooperation where U.S. and Iranian interests overlap will increase rather than reduce confrontation. A strategy that incorporates a parallel effort to construct a more inclusive dialogue in the Gulf would be more effective in advancing U.S. interests. It could even bolster prospects for successful implementation

of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action if conversations and cooperation in the forum serve to lower Gulf states' mistrust of Iran.

Implementing such a vision will face numerous obstacles. However, there has never been a more opportune time to explore such a forum. Ensuring its long-term success will hinge upon formulating a set of near-term processes and outcomes that are modest in scope, feasible, and designed to build confidence for more ambitious security arrangements down the road.

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