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The United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia: Necessary Steps Toward a New Gulf Security Order

The Persian Gulf has become the United States' primary foreign policy focus in recent years, and the importance of the region will not diminish in the near future. As the situation in Iraq deteriorates, as Iran becomes more vocal about its role in the region, and as transnational terrorism and domestic instabilities continue to worry the regional governments that depend on a largely unpopular external superpower to provide their security, the need for a revamped, retooled, and more comprehensive regional strategy is evident. These events illustrate a growing need for constructive regional cooperation on everything from WMD proliferation to terrorism to socioeconomic development.

In October 2005, the Stanley Foundation brought together former American officials, security analysts, and academics at Airlie Center in Virginia to discuss alternative security frameworks for the Persian Gulf with a special emphasis on US relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In addition to relations with these two crucial states, participants examined in detail the potential for creating a new multilateral security order that would:

- Lessen the US security burden and create a better US image with societies in the region.
- Increase economic prosperity, finance, and trade in the region.
- Create a sense of equity, fairness, and justice between all powers in the Gulf (Iran included).
- Better ensure the predictable supply of oil for the global economy.

The following sections discuss the constraints and obstacles to forging a new Gulf security order, including US-Iran and US-Saudi relations. After an extended discussion of the future regional stances and roles of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the brief concludes with an in-depth discussion of the basic ingredients and principles of a new multilateral security order in the Persian Gulf.

Geopolitical Obstacles to Establishing a Multilateral Framework

First, some participants were skeptical of any type of expanded, multilateral cooperation between Gulf States on common security threats, whether the threats were thought to be national or transnational in nature. For instance:

- Some felt that a formal bargaining mechanism with Iran would “legitimate suppressive regimes undergoing a slow but positive domestic transition.”
- Others believed that the era of “external security guarantees” by powers such as the United States is nearing its end, arguing that current regimes in the Gulf—both Arab and Persian—are inherently fragile and prone to increasing domestic instabilities. If domestic systems prove unstable, then international cooperation guaranteed by external powers will be hard to sustain.
- Still others felt that ideological and sectarian differences between various groups would ruin a cooperative venture. As posed by one participant, “How do you have a true inclusive exercise when some people within

This brief summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by rapporteur Michael R. Kraig. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this brief. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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the states in the Gulf really do not want to be together?”

- Gulf Arab states today are more like Europe *between* the two world wars, not Europe *after* World War II. The interwar period in Europe is viewed as a classic case of massive instability, uncertainty, negative competition, covert destabilizations by one power against another in unstable areas (as with Iraq today) and, more generally, “as a situation waiting for another war to happen.” If this is where the Gulf States are historically, how do you begin a truly inclusive, cooperative framework based on principles and norms?
- Others focused on the negative behaviors of Iran, which pitches all its statements and actions toward the United States and ignores the Gulf itself. This Iranian practice was not viewed as conducive to cooperation. According to some participants, Iran assumes that the European Union and Arab neighbors “are following US commands” and does not even consider Arab governments as independent actors.
- In this regard, some felt that the “weight of history” mitigates new forms of cooperation. As itemized by one participant with long experience in the region, “Iranians were responsible for the mid-1990s Khobar bombing that killed US marines; Iran invaded the three islands in the Hormuz Strait and subsequently militarized Abu Musa; Iran harassed and threatened American ships for no good reason; Iran allowed Iraqi oil to go through sanctions lines.”

Parsing the Iran Threat: Much Ado About Nothing?

As can be seen from the above comments, the regional role and actions of Iran were regarded as central to the question of building a new Gulf security order. The dialogue over Iran began with a request that the American-centered “Iran threat” be deconstructed. To what degree, one participant posed, is Iran an *actual* threat to the United States and to what degree is Iran a *perceived* threat? Is the problem related to Iraq? Israel? The Shia phenomenon? Nuclear weapons? Regional hegemony? Each of these issues needs

to be discussed and critiqued in more depth before a practical approach to Gulf security can be suggested.

For instance, one participant argued that the real threat to Iran and the region is a revitalized and transnationally legitimate Shia hierarchy in Karbala, Iraq, that would create a regional reality that others would react to negatively. Rather than upsetting the regional equation through traditional power imbalances between sovereign states, a revitalized Shia hierarchy (largely separate from Iran) would pose a transnational ideological and sectarian challenge to the majority Sunni societies and governments of the region. This fear has been shown in recent remarks by the Saudis, who have been arguing publicly that Iraq is witnessing the chance for a Shia-Sunni version of the Catholic-Protestant 30 Years’ War in Europe from 1618 to 1648, which tore Central Europe apart. A chaotic Iraq is a danger to Gulf Arabs, not Iran. Saudis are greatly disturbed by events in Iraq, but have reasonably good relations with the clerical leaders in Tehran. Indeed, according to one expert, Persian-Arab competition has not been inevitably rancorous and dangerous; rapprochement with Arabs has been happening since 1995.

One person argued that Iran does not have real conventional power-projection capabilities, and so “we need to ease up a bit on the hysteria of US threat estimates that see Iran shutting down the [Hormuz] Strait for indefinite periods.” Rather, the threat from Iran is primarily the threat of subversion, through Iraq and Israel, blended with the high-level nuclear threat. *This blend of a latent nuclear weapons capability and covert, sub-conventional activities has nothing to do with a traditional balance of power.* Therefore, traditional approaches based on collective security pacts, deterrence, and containment will not work, and a new approach is required.

One response was that the West should continue to block conventional arms going to Iran, but another person pointed out that lack of conventional arms is why Iran is pursuing missiles and nuclear weapons, and why it is pursuing political

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manipulation in Iraq. Thus keeping Iran perpetually weak is resulting in very unstable outcomes and less-than-ideal Iranian self-defense behaviors.

There was agreement among a number of participants that decisively stopping Iranian proliferation was not necessarily a vital US national interest. One participant suggested that Iran would never actually use nuclear weapons and that the only realistic scenario would be one of simple deterrence of US attack. And if virtual deterrence worked for India-Pakistan, suggested one participant, why not live with an Iranian option to go nuclear, as long as Iran does not weaponize? There is also the matter of Israel, which will stay far ahead of the Iranians on number and quality of both nuclear weapons and missiles.

Iranian geopolitical importance has also been overemphasized by American experts, one participant suggested. Iran is not the “rising regional power” that Americans characterize it as, but instead has seen its profile rise because of a temporarily high “oil bubble” and an unstable Iraq. The revolution will not be exported as some suggest.

Skeptics of this perspective raised a number of concerns, however. Iran holds, as one participant suggested, an increasingly strategic position in the region. Does that not provide them with levers of regional subversion? Is there some potential that a combination of domestic Iranian factions or institutions would raise trouble here, as in the past, underneath the strategic cover of a weak Iraq and an Iranian latent nuclear capability? This concern reflected an earlier point that the threat from Iran is primarily the threat of subversion, through Iraq and Israel, blended with the high-level nuclear threat.

This was countered with the proposition that Iranian foreign and security policy should now be defined as “survival of the Islamic Republic.” Its main focus is maintaining the status quo by retaining its place as a regional power. The gestalt in the highest Iranian leadership circles has turned toward a realist direction of aggressive pursuit of Iranian-Persian national interests. In this context, “Iranian nukes are realpolitik, Iraqi intervention-

ism is realpolitik.” These capabilities are actually *cards for bargaining and gaining influence toward defensive geopolitical goals*. Current leaders do not want confrontation with the United States, nor do they want a widening of the Western sanctions. Iran also does not want to “stir up trouble in Iraq, but rather wants to control Iraq” in a way that mitigates any future Iraqi threats to Iranian security or regional interests. Thus Iran must maintain its zones of influence in the Middle East, must strengthen its alliances with Islamic opposition groups such as those in Syria and in west Afghanistan, and must maintain its influence over Shia as an entire group, though in this case *influence* does not mean “control.” The Arab fears of a “Shia crescent” from Iran to Lebanon are overdrawn, given the diversity and independence of Shia groupings throughout the region.

Thus the current government in Tehran distrusts reformers and radicals alike. If the republic does not survive, it does not matter if the government is conservative or reformist. Iran is not interested in subversion—rather it is interested in a generalized “Shia zone” and is very worried about a Sunni challenge to Iran and the United States alike. These basic realities do not depend on who is in charge in Washington or Tehran, Tel Aviv or Arab capitals. The structural realities are fairly fixed and could therefore help construct a reliable and predictable bargaining process.

Domestic Realities Hindering Iranian Cooperation

One longtime expert in Iranian domestic politics argued that President Ahmadinejad, who is an extreme conservative, will simply not have influence on foreign policy or even domestic policies. His first speech at the United Nations was criticized domestically from both the left and right in Tehran; his cabinet was not approved by the Council of Guardians; and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has decreed that he can overrule the president and Majlis (parliament) via the use of Ayatollah Rafsanjani’s Expediency Council. Thus the presidency is greatly weakened, even worse than it was under Khatami. This analyst dubbed Ahmadinejad “a minnow in a pool of sharks.”

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The election put Khamenei in a preeminent position, equivalent to the shah in the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, Rafsanjani was embarrassed at the polls. The result of these two occurrences is that Khamenei does not fear Rafsanjani, even though Khamenei will use Rafsanjani when needed to counter others.

The wild card in this equation: Ahmadinejad *does* have the support of the Basij (voluntary militia) and connections to the Revolutionary Guards, which has some control over defense budgets and the Majlis. In short, while Ahmadinejad lacks the power to usurp the largely realpolitik direction of 21st-century Iranian foreign and defense policies and Khamenei remains firmly in control of actual policy actions (if not Ahmadinejad's embarrassing public statements), the current president does have the potential to use his connections and his public platform to hinder or constrain any push for international cooperation outside of current status quo.

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A Viable and Credible US Strategy for Engagement

A viable US strategy for engagement with Iran will require that US leaders put everything on the table, including the negotiation of sanctions. The United States has a long list of strategies that have not succeeded in influencing the Iran regime: counterproliferation is dead, rollback of the Islamic Revolution has failed, sanctions do not work, and supply-side export controls on sensitive technologies with potential WMD applications have not stopped Iran's programs. Domestic Iranian scientific and industrial talent strengthens the nuclear program despite sanctions, and the Russians and Chinese have not been willing to cooperate wholeheartedly with the EU and US diplomatic position of forbidding a nuclear fuel cycle of any kind in Iran.

The only option, one participant suggested, is containment of worst effects of Iranian nuclearization and Iranian interventions in Iraq or the West Bank. Efforts by the United States to make guarantees to regional allies, alongside a strategy of engagement toward Iran, would allow a second China model to take root in Iranian strategic thinking—i.e., "make money, not trouble."

The main problem, many agreed, is that there is no dialogue between Iran and the United States, or between Iran and Israel, nor is there credible strategic dialogue between Iran and the neighboring Gulf Arab states. A main hindrance to regional stability and prosperity is lack of knowledge about "the other." The United States does not know Iran's psychology of deterrence, and Iran does not know Israel's psychology. Further, neither side has a concrete understanding of what the other views as a "signal" involving nuclear posturing during peacetime or crisis.

One participant suggested that the best chance for an American-Iran dialogue will be in the near future. The United States and Iran have the most "user-friendly" leaders that they are likely to get in the coming years, because Democrats in the United States will have to work hard to prove their security credentials and will lack credibility with the very conservative US Congress. A Republican administration like the current one may be the best environment for engagement. Thus a Republican-led, Nixon-China scenario is a possibility that should be seriously considered. This is perhaps an opportune time—with the "mirror-image" reality of far-right regimes in both states—to establish a relationship. Because the United States and Iran are both faith-based and hegemonic in their foreign policy approaches, there may be a common basis for engagement inherent in each administration.

From this basis, there is a need for a strategy that includes a true, comprehensive bargaining process rather than a series of piecemeal, symbolic gestures toward cooperation. A document setting guidelines for bilateral bargaining is needed, including first principles and core concerns. In effect, a US-Iranian equivalent to the "Shanghai Communiqué" of 1972 between the United States and China is now required to move forward in the Gulf (see the Conclusion for further discussion of these points).

Threats to US Engagement With Iran

Despite a push for establishing a connection between the United States and Iran, participants were realistic in accepting the current environment. A number of issues could provoke the United States or Iran into declaring war instead of

pursuing direct negotiations. Among these issues: the failure of the United States to formally recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran, growing Iranian perceptions of a US-British intervention in Iranian internal affairs via opposition groups from bases in Iraq, or continued American and Israeli concerns with an Iranian nuclear program. For instance:

- A new Kurdistan or a new “Shia-stan” could endanger Iranian territorial integrity. Oil-rich Khuzestan in southwestern Iran could be the target of a strong and autonomous “Shia-stan” in southern Iraq.
- There are increasing misperceptions and an escalation of tensions and armed activities along the Iraqi border. Khuzestan is a classic area of insurgent and terrorist destabilization in Iran’s long Persian past. Britain fomented instability there during its colonial zenith in the region, which is why Iranian leaders have been reacting to renewed Khuzestani violence with mistrust and charges of meddling by Britain and the United States.
- The nuclear program is becoming a national issue with the Iranian populace in similar fashion to the nationalization of British Petroleum in the early 1950s under President Mossadegh. This indigenous, popular nationalism constrains the bargaining power of Ayatollah Khamenei on the nuclear infrastructure question and could lead to a deadlock between Iran and the United States.
- Israeli threat perceptions could hinder an American-Iranian relationship. Israel does not believe Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) would be stable. It has questioned the feasibility of a stable deterrent relationship with Iran due to ideological differences and opposing foreign policy goals.
- Khamenei holds the view that the United States will never accept countries that oppose it *or* who give easy concessions. The successful recipe, in his view, is for an opposing power such as Iran to have a position of strength from which to bargain, and furthermore to have bargaining cards to work with, such as Iraq,

Hezbollah, or a latent nuclear weapons capability. The problem with this attitude is that it may lead to Iranian behavior that the United States and Israel (and perhaps others) view as inherently “rogue” in nature, rather than defensive, conservative, or based on a bargaining strategy for engagement of the West.

- Domestic authority questions exist in Iran. There is discontent among a majority of the elite who thought the original rule by religious authority was violated by how Khamenei handled the last round of parliamentary elections. The recent power given by Khamenei to the Expediency Council was based on a necessary appeasement of these counter-elites, who are challenging Khamenei on the issue of disbanding parties and disallowing hundreds of candidates in the last Majlis election.
- If the United States and/or Israel strike Iranian nuclear plants preemptively, Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq *may* decide to work with Iran in striking back against the United States in Iraq. Thus, in order for the United States to ensure stability in Iraq, it should abstain from a strike against Iranian plants.
- Khamenei believes that the United States has a “red line” on nuclear activities, but that it is *weaponization*, not *enrichment*. Khamenei believes there is the possibility that a bargain can be struck where Iran would level off enrichment—to 500 or 1000 centrifuges rather than 3000, for example—and that the West as a whole would accept a basic enrichment capability. Whether this perception is correct or realistic is the real challenge to an agreement: Will Israel or US conservatives accept this Iranian version of a “nuclear red line”?

Saudi Arabia and Regional Security

Discussions at Airlie House also centered on the other large and geopolitically powerful Gulf State, Saudi Arabia. As one of the regional powers in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is a necessary partner in establishing a coherent, reliable, and predictable security order. Saudi Arabia has 13 neighbors in the region, is the oil “swing producer” for the global economy, and is geographically larger than all of Western

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Europe. In symbolic religious and cultural terms, Saudi Arabia is the founding member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (which incorporates the entire Muslim world), the Arab League, and the Organization of Petroleum Export Countries (OPEC).

On a global financial basis, the Saudis' investment of petrodollars the world over means that they could "pull the plug" on the dollar by, for instance, convincing the oil market to use the euro as the standard currency for oil deals and trades. Geographically, Saudi Arabia could block transport of goods from one Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country to another. It could also choose to stop cooperating on counterterrorism, which would be debilitating to the war on terror, given the Saudi leadership of orthodox Sunni causes and groups the world over. Saudi Arabia has direct channels to various Sunni groups in Iraq, and gave roughly \$29 billion from 1980 to 1988 for Sunni tribal groups during the Iran-Iraq war. Thus Saudi Arabia has a dominant position in the region—ironically similar to that of Iran's—and cannot be ignored or circumvented. Indeed, if the United States were to definitively end its preeminent relationship with the Saudis, others such as China or EU states would "gladly step in to take up the string."

But this crucial bilateral relationship automatically raises questions about overall regional security dilemmas. For instance, what does the "rise of a Shia crescent" or "Shia zone" mean for the region, as well as for US-Iran and US-Saudi relations? How is religion shaping the Gulf strategic environment? These questions get to the root of Saudi regional power.

Redefining the Status Quo

While not yet a hindrance to multilateral security in the region, the Saudi relationship with the United States is in need of redefinition. Both actors are too comfortable with traditional norms, although they have become passé and even unsustainable. Domestic pressures impact both sides in this regard, but are especially pressing for the Saudis. The US presence, though not overwhelming, is still highly contentious within the country. The "US military footprint" will contin-

ue to be in the form of "hubs" rather than committed bases—command and control facilities and various equipment and materials storage—but this minimization has not remedied domestic discomfort.

Some felt that a truly multilateral regional security agenda would soon encounter domestic opposition in Saudi Arabia. The interior minister, for example, is a very powerful individual and is dismissive of the advice of smaller GCC states. Further, the king must rely on the entrenched religious establishment for domestic legitimacy. There are limited tools for domestic mobilization, and these constrained options mean that the Kingdom will be "schizophrenic" in its foreign policies.

One participant put forth the example of the international community's demand that the king crack down on domestic Saudi support of violent Iraqi jihadist forces. However, reliance on the entrenched religious establishment means that the incentives for the king to address these concerns are minimal. Iraqi casualties and the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank cause discontent among Saudi citizens, and this is a long-term problem of domestic stability.

On the other hand, the Saudis are completing a long-term strategic planning process in regard to security, defense, and development. There is a relatively new Security Council headed by Prince Bandar, who left his longtime diplomatic posting to the United States for this purpose. Meanwhile, King Abdullah and his army of technocrats have captured the entire defense budget and are starting to crack down on corrupt acquisition processes and deals.

The Saudi-Iranian Nexus: A Force for Competition or Cooperation?

Saudi Arabia faces another challenge in the face of domestic pressure, however: its relationship with Iran. Iranian nuclear activities are a prime concern of the Saudis. Even if the United States chose to live with a certain level of uranium enrichment, the Saudis are deeply suspicious and fearful of *any* indigenous Iranian nuclear fuel cycle capability. The Saudis could respond to a

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nuclearizing Iran by importing Pakistani nuclear brigades—outsourcing or buying indirect nuclear weapons capability through which to balance Iran.

This might meet perceived Saudi defense needs, but it would represent a major case of nuclear proliferation, and as such, would challenge the legitimacy and continued credibility of the global nonproliferation regime. Thus what Iran and Saudi Arabia both do in response to “local” geopolitical threats could undermine global security regimes, even if such actions are seen by both regional powers as eminently rational, realpolitik, and stabilizing at the Gulf subregional level.

The dissonance with Iran is, in part, tied to religious, ideological, and identity schisms between the two countries. Despite their normalized relations over the past several years (since the reign of President Khatami), the official Saudi religious establishment and the young, populist, dissident clerics are virulently anti-Shia—and Iran is officially a theocratic Shia state. These potentially destabilizing factors will have to be addressed in order to succeed in establishing a new Gulf framework.

The Opacity of the Saudi Kingdom to Outsiders

The unfortunate, ironic fact is that Saudi Arabia’s own GCC allies do not understand the internal workings or drivers of the Kingdom any more than Western powers. The Saudis do not have clear friends or allies *anywhere*, either inside or outside the Arab world—whether defining those friends or allies in terms of ideology, domestic affinity, or geopolitical issues such as oil.

The United States and many others have strong realpolitik interests in common with the Saudi elites—mainly energy concerns, but also stabilizing the global economy in general. However, there are no consistent or deep connections with Saudi society. Neither Western nor Eastern nor neighboring interactions have occurred at an integrated, transnational level. Through the centuries, merchants, bankers, missionaries, and colonial administrators have not been able to effectively break into the society of the Arabian Peninsula.

This opacity and uniqueness of the Kingdom actually defeats the Gulf Arab states’ ability to come together in a truly cohesive, collective security organization, given Saudi Arabia’s power and weight in the Gulf. Over 92 percent of more than 300 people in the GCC Secretariat are Saudi for the simple reason that other GCC Arabs do not want to live in Riyadh, which is the headquarters for the GCC.

Saudi Arabia and the Battle Against Terrorism

The ruling establishment has made great strides in the past two years against internal insurgents and terrorist cells, the latter of which carried out large, damaging, and deadly attacks against Western compounds, corporate visitors, malls, and government installations in 2002 and 2003. The internal security forces have “wiped out the ‘Afghan generation’”—that cache of militant leaders who received paramilitary battle training from the US Central Intelligence Agency or the Pakistani intelligence services to fight the Soviets in the 1980s. The Saudi leaders have won this internal fight through cooptation of those who agree to a deal, by arresting some, and by the outright elimination of others. According to one participant, “they are now down to a third tier of inexperienced jihadists—down to killing extremist teenagers” without leadership skills or true training.

Despite these successes, there are still numerous issues that need to be addressed when it comes to terrorism, religious fanaticism, and the society’s relationship with the monarchy. The Saudi secular, royal leaders do not overlap with the religious establishment and are instead separate entities that influence one another. Meanwhile, secular technocrats are largely estranged from the royal family.

A potential solution to some of the issues may be the development of civil society beyond the mosques. For instance, the Saudi billionaire Al-Abid Talel is already funding certain programs for civil development. Institutions need to be expanded and opened up for outsiders to engage Saudi society. Currently, the intellectual environment is “sterile.”

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For King Abdullah, who understands these problems and wants to correct them, the admission of the Kingdom to the World Trade Organization (WTO) is a major step. The king wants to empower the middle-class entrepreneurs vis-à-vis the entrenched princes, who “are rolling in money and squelch free enterprise.”

One participant suggested that a major obstacle stands in the way: the Western idea of, and desire for, a “Wahhabi transformation” or alteration in basic Wahhabi Islamic precepts and doctrine. This is not happening—neither in Saudi Arabia nor elsewhere. Wahhabism should not even be considered the true target, because it is a peaceful doctrine that exists in other countries as well, such as Qatar.

A more pressing problem is extreme forms of Salafism. In the 1980s, the mobilization of extreme Salafis was seen as a “security benefit” to both the Saudis and the Americans, given the covert war against the communist Soviet Union in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the developing world. In fact, US and Saudi elites battled secular, “radical” Arab nationalism via the aid of ultra-orthodox, fundamentalist Islam. However, this has been largely discontinued by Saudi leaders.

There are heavy legacies from the 1980s that will take decades to overcome. For instance, in response to the Iranian revolution and Ayatollah Khamenei’s promise to spread Iran’s brand of theocratic, political Shiism to all quarters of the Middle East, then-King Fahd funded the construction of seven large religious universities with the sole purpose of inculcating orthodox Sunni doctrine among its students. There are nascent plans to transform these universities into scientific institutions, and King Abdullah is already taking women’s education out of the clergy’s hands at these institutions. The king is intent on ending the complete running of these universities by the clergy and putting the mark of the secular state apparatus on them.

Ultimately, though, if there is a transformation already happening in the Kingdom, it is not in regard to Sunni doctrine but rather in the form of Sunni-Shia dialogue, which the king is encouraging and aiding, despite constraints. Unfortunately,

this type of internal Saudi religious and cultural liberalization still does not touch what is happening in Iran. With the conservative President Ahmadinejad in power, Saudi-Iranian relations are not as good as they were two years ago, though still better than 10-15 years ago, when relations were hostile.

A Renewed US-Saudi Partnership in Support of a Gulf Security Framework

In sum, despite difficulties since 9/11, the United States must continue its attempt to create a productive, cooperative partnership well into the 21st century. One way forward would be to reach a US-Saudi-Iranian Entente in regard to common anti-Al Qaeda counterterrorism activities. While this will be difficult, it should be possible for the United States to help get Iranians and Saudis together to talk about their cultural and sectarian “red lines” in Iraq and elsewhere. Further, the United States must quit its passive acquiescence of Israeli settlement activities—illegal annexations of Palestinian lands—if there is to be a refurbished, healthy, and productive US-Saudi relationship in regard to Gulf security.

Conclusion: Fostering Multilateral Cooperation in a Divided Region

Traditional Containment Versus a New Balance of Interests and Responsibilities

In addition to focused discussions on Iran and Saudi Arabia, participants assessed the larger question of establishing a new, more stable security order in the Persian Gulf that would better meet US foreign policy goals. During this more general discussion of the principles of a new Gulf security order, some felt that the primary focus on cooperative multilateral approaches was neither necessary nor relevant because in the end, “You can’t get past the base geopolitical ingredients of the region in question. You can’t create what isn’t there.” The United States first created a balance in the Gulf, but is now destabilizing the region. The answer: “right the balance, which leads to cooperation.” A simple balance of power is the independent variable; cooperation is the dependent variable. In essence, this view argued for “better” or “improved” containment and deterrence measures, based on strengthened

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collective security pacts (bilateral defense pacts) with key Arab friends.

However, some argued that traditional deterrence and containment measures have *caused* the current “power keg atmosphere” in the Gulf, as opposed to mitigating it. As posed by one participant, “Can deterrence and containment actually be constructed in a way that is not automatically seen as offensive and aggressive by Iran, and can they be constructed in a way that does not automatically isolate, pressure, and coerce Iran?” Collective security based on opposing a clear-cut enemy will produce what already exists: the United States and Arab states against Iran, based on bilateral defense pacts with individual GCC governments. As noted by one former governmental official, “No cooperative multilateral regime can be built on assigning threats... Existential threat perceptions [on the part of Iran] are the mirror image of the pursuit of absolute security [by the external superpower].” Thus an anti-Iranian security order in the Gulf will not succeed because competition will continue to occur at the existential level, rather than being managed and constrained, as in the cases of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) during the Cold War and ASEAN today in East Asia.

But participants disagreed on this issue, with some saying the future of Gulf security would remain a traditional balance of power, deterrence, and containment of anti-status quo states. In response, one participant contended that “the whole Pentagon scheme of ‘lily pads’ won’t work well—citizens oppose it, while [Arab] regimes aren’t constants.” (Lily pads are hubs for US equipment, materials such as fuel and ammunition, as well as regionally based command and control facilities, all of which mitigates the need for the United States to have large, comprehensive military bases in sensitive geopolitical contexts). But in reply, one participant who favors traditional approaches said that just because citizens are increasingly critical of the United States’ regional role does not mean that the US military must leave entirely—compromise forms of US military presence are possible.

Overall, there was a general sentiment that the United States could not keep using “power” approaches alone. Rather, rights, interests, responsibilities, and norms must now augment pure defense approaches. One reason was simple political sustainability. A major critique of the status quo approach was the belief that ruling Arab families use the US bilateral collective security arrangements to secure their own domestic rule over their subjects, and this is tremendously destabilizing domestically. Regional states—i.e., authoritarian regimes—are interested in the continued “securitization” of the region on a competitive, international basis because they are afraid of their own people.

For instance, under the current “containment-deterrence-collective security approach” of the United States and its Arab allies, the military-industrial complexes of the West are driving—through sponsorship—conferences that lead to multibillion dollar weapons purchases that inherently contribute to the sense of Iranian threat. One expert dubbed this “the US-Arab-Raytheon Triangle.” Weapons purchases lead to more expansive forms of defense cooperation between friends/allies, at the expense of outsiders: joint training, seminars, security education at US elite schools, interoperability. This leaves out Iran, Iraq, and Yemen entirely, and destabilizes rather than stabilizes the region in the long run.

Therefore, according to most participants, the United States should not play into this dynamic by demonizing Iran and by defining the term *security* completely in terms of “collective defense” against an absolute threat. As expressed by one participant, “We can’t keep having Pentagon multilateral conferences without Iran and Syria.”

One participant’s attempt to cross the divide was to blend the current approach with a new, more expansive effort, which he termed as *collective defense, cooperative security*. This would keep US defense pacts with Arab regimes in place, but then add on additional dialogues, norms, and security agreements to include all states in one network.

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Further, another participant answered the earlier charge that a multilateral exercise would inherently legitimize dictatorial regimes, which was a major critique of the cooperative approach. He noted that ASEAN is now getting into domestic human rights questions as a matter of stability and security at the interstate level. Therefore, a CSCE-type process that stresses continuity of current, sovereign governments does not mean that human rights concerns or other domestic development issues are ignored and filtered out of cooperative security discussions.

Establishing a Framework: The Relevance of Historical Precedents

In assessing these innate problems in the Gulf security environment, the discussions incorporated a good deal of analysis of past attempts to create more sustainable security orders in other regions. Some participants believed that the Cold War-era CSCE—or Helsinki process of East-West dialogue—was a largely negative example because it simply “took too long” to be relevant to immediate crises in today’s Gulf security environment involving Iranian nuclear weapons proliferation and Iraqi instabilities. In particular, those participants who were themselves diplomats involved in the Cold War dialogues noted that the process started in the early 1960s, took 15 years to reach fruition and, even then, the finished products (actual institutions and legal agreements) were simply reflections of inherent geopolitical realities that had already evolved. In one person’s opinion, “The real accomplishment was not the end agreement but the negotiations toward that agreement,” which by themselves helped normalize the Cold War competition in Europe. The CSCE was the “dependent variable, not the independent variable”—a tacit system was already evolving through power realities, weapons realities, diplomatic interactions, experience with each other, and so on.

In short, during the entire process of negotiation toward formal institutions and legal agreements, there was a gradual normalization of relations, which was *multilayered in nature*, involving dialogue between the United States and the Soviet Union, between East and West Germany, and between the entire Western European bloc and Eastern European bloc. Hence what was particu-

larly successful was that many different groups were talking simultaneously, while at the same time those various groups (whether bilateral or multilateral) together composed the overall Cold War division between communism and capitalist democracies. Thus if US-Soviet or East Germany-West Germany talks broke down, then West bloc-East bloc negotiations could continue, or vice versa. Meanwhile, *a clear conceptual framework was developed* that served as the basis for (but did not create) this multilayered, simultaneous dialogue—a framework based on concepts of cooperative, multilateral, common, principled, and comprehensive security.

In the end, the goal of Helsinki/CSCE was *stabilization of the competition*, the latter of which was assumed to continue indefinitely. In one participant’s words, the philosophy was “end all armed conflict among and between states and create a mechanism with which to regularize diplomatic interactions, despite competition.” As voiced by another participant, “We will not let our stealing of secrets, mistrust, et cetera get in the way of our warm relations to address the common threats that face us.” In turn, all of this interstate interaction created a peaceful environment in which other purely domestic changes could take place. The *international* stabilization of conflict allowed positive *domestic* changes in East-bloc authoritarian regimes in Europe.

Based on this history, another participant argued that analysts and officials should not even use the term *security* when constructing a regionwide cooperative framework to address Iraq, especially since elites in the region equate the term *security* with *defense*. Instead, use *peace cooperation* or a similar phrase.

In support of this argument, one participant with direct experience in the region replied that there *is* indeed a common threat to base inclusive multilateralism upon: Islamic jihadi terrorism emanating from Iraq and elsewhere. However, this same analyst also argued that the new transnational threat realities challenged *all frameworks based upon sovereign states*, whether Helsinki-type norm-building or traditional containment and deterrence. As argued by this analyst, “Even our talk about cooperation is laden with Cold War jargon and frames

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of reference, let alone our talk about competition in the Gulf.”

Finally, participants with knowledge of the Asian multilateral experience argued that the value of ASEAN is its informality and its “multiplication of small states’ power through collective aggregation.” Essentially, the institution is a loose bargaining framework within which sovereign states with less power than China or Japan can press their common security concerns, thereby stabilizing the security competition in the region. However, this process is largely informal because ASEAN as a whole is a relatively weak institution.

Tactical Versus Strategic Cooperation

Given that formal institutions and legal agreements are the end result, rather than the cause, of multilateral cooperation, one set of participants stressed that a CSCE-type exercise in the Persian Gulf should involve immediate, practical measures such as disaster response and management—earthquakes, naval disasters, pollution—rather than formal mechanisms, norms, or institution-building between states. For instance, some participants stressed the need for “bottom-up” efforts on disaster relief planning and common drug interdiction measures between navies and land forces. These participants stressed discrete recent events involving tactical cooperation such as the Bonn talks to stabilize Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002 and various confidence-building measures involving the Iranian and American navies in the late 1990s.

However, this approach was severely critiqued. Others argued that such ad hoc cooperation will only change the negative, zero-sum structure of regional competition if states simultaneously decide to move gradually toward *mutually agreed economic, political, and military norms*, involving all governments and even prominent nonstate actors in a truly inclusive framework that looks at all threats (terrorism, liberalization agendas, WMD, conventional military balances). Only if the latter fundamental movement occurs will tactical and ad hoc cooperation on specific issues eventually lead to a new, stable, predictable regional security order.

For instance, one participant with extensive government experience during the past 15 years argued that “we should reject utterly the idea that we can deal with Iran or other potential threats through piecemeal, bottom-up efforts alone.” His argument was based on recent precedent: the Bonn Conference for stabilizing Western Afghanistan in 2001-02 included Iran as a central player (due to Iranian influence with various provincial warlords and leaders), but this tactical cooperation soon led to the “axis of evil” due to severe disagreements over Iranian aid of militant groups in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. As argued by this participant, such linked or non-linked issues will always “overwhelm, sabotage, and undermine” any piecemeal, pragmatic attempts at cooperation. Therefore, “we must have a formal bargaining mechanism” that is comprehensive and covers all issues, even if an actual institution is still not realistic. Movement toward formal norms of mutual behavior is still essential.

Going Beyond Traditional Containment and Deterrence

In the end, the key question that vexed discussion was: “What do we want to ‘stabilize?’” There was a general feeling that balance-of-power approaches at the interstate level have been domestically destabilizing and, therefore, international security (as currently practiced) undermines domestic security. Thus a new framework would go beyond existing collective security arrangements with friends/allies and focus on a balance of powers and interests and rights and responsibilities in mitigating common threats such as transnational terrorism. Ultimately, states must move toward an inclusive framework that “brings everyone under one tent,” which then allows for a “soft landing” within a framework for states like Iraq and Iran, and which above all “defines and develops norms.” As argued by one participant, “A norm that is established via agreement by all states will help in its own effective enforcement.” ■

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