Gulf Security Architectures:

Process and Structure

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With a transition in Washington, discussions in Western capitals will inevitably turn to the issues of how to deal with Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wars in Yemen and Libya, and so forth. Alongside those issues, almost underpinning some of them in a sense, is the matter of reassessing the security architecture in the Gulf and in the region more broadly. Policy planners in Western capitals will have their own ideas for desired outcomes in the region, but as they weigh their options they should consider how the format and structure of a security architecture can inadvertently shape and limit its effectiveness. The design and process of convening partners in the Middle East for a dialogue about peace and security is just as important as the execution and implementation of the vision that brings them together.

Definitions and Parameters

One often thinks of a regional security architecture as a forum with a secretariat and working groups, but it is important to recognize that security architectures usually encompass a wide range of activities. These could include strategic dialogues, financial sanctions, joint military exercises, or nuclear inspections. The architecture is not located in a single event or institution, and tensions can arise if diplomatic goals are not in alignment with military posture.[1] It exists as a conceptual framework accompanied by various diplomatic and security arrangements, which a country adopts in order to guide and shape its relationships with regional partners. It is due to the fact that there are so many different elements at play that different U.S. administrations over time have been able to rework and refashion individual activities to suit their overall policy needs even as the desired policy outcome changes. Just as policy planners in Washington, London, Brussels, Moscow, and Beijing hope to use their efforts to build partnerships in the region, so too do these Great Powers hope to guide and shape the relationships of those nations to one another. Building peace and security in the Middle East while extending the influence of a Great Power state around the world is achievable, but there is a tension between the two objectives that must be carefully watched.

Formalized structures with high-level summits, joint communiqués, and working-level task forces are certainly the most prominent feature of any security architecture, and a forum of that sort is still likely to be at the forefront of any Western-led initiative in the region for the foreseeable future. These bodies are designed to issue a statement of principles or a memorandum of understanding, which allow the regional partners to take the lead in implementation while at the same time enshrining a positive role for the international sponsor as a provider of technical support and assistance. Such activities have the attraction of presenting an outward show of solidarity and cooperation, though the process itself often becomes ponderous, weighted down with diplomatic wrangling. This derives from the way that participating governments posture for their domestic and regional audiences. It is just as true for countries in the Middle East who use their participation to compete for influence and prestige in the West as it is for the international powers who hope to take on their own leadership role in the region.

In the decade after 9/11, the United Nations succeeded in completing a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and a General Assembly Resolution on Combatting Terrorism, set up a Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, the Alliance of Civilizations, and an International Symposium on Supporting Victims of Terrorism, but was still bogged down in endless debates

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1) James A. Russell, "Whither Regional Security in a World Turned Upside Down?" *Middle East Policy* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 141-48.

about a definition of terrorism.[2] At the same time, Jordan took an independent path with the Amman Message, adopting its own leadership role by convening Muslim scholars to issue specific guidelines for limiting the declaration of apostasy and setting baseline standards for individuals issuing religious edicts.

Considering the Process

Any multilateral initiative is burdened by the challenge of Great Powers trying to explain to regional states what tangible benefit they will derive from membership in a new forum. It is difficult for Western nations to articulate what the incentives will be for forum members in a way that does not threaten to upset the regional balance of power, or sacrifice political, economic, moral, or technological capital.[3] When one thinks of regional security architectures, therefore, Western policy-makers typically consider three key elements: 1) timing and impetus; 2) format and venue; and 3) membership and process. Officials have to weigh the costs and benefits in each of these areas in the hopes of balancing their national interests with those of other partners. They want a security architecture that has the appearance of growing organically out of contemporary events – meeting a need that is apparent to all in the region – in order to garner both governmental and public support. Each of those three elements is often misunderstood by conference organizers, however, based on a false assumption about the need for a public demonstration of resolve and a mistaken belief that somehow the process is the product.

With regards to timing and impetus, it would be ideal if there were a seismic shift in the Middle East that called out for a new security paradigm with the assistance of the U.S., Britain, or Europe, but that does not mean a regional security dialogue requires such an event to be so carefully timed for its justification. By seeking external justification and broad public acceptance for such a security forum, planners run the risk of inadvertently tethering the event to their own political imperatives and thereby undermining the forum's cohesion and sense of joint purpose.

Nicolas Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union in 2008 was intended to give France a lead in integrating Europe's southern neighbors into a structure that would allow for economic and security cooperation. Its launch was perceived by some in the press, however, as a thinly-veiled effort to give his newly-installed cabinet a quick political win, with world leaders celebrating Bastille Day in Paris before the Arc de Triomphe.[4] French leadership on issues like Turkish integration into the EU and Arab-Israeli peace-making would have come at the expense of France's European neighbors, which caused Germany,

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2) Javier Rupérez, "The United Nations in the Fight Against Terrorism," United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (January 2006), https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2006_01_26_cted_lecture.pdf. The timeline of discussions in this period is found at https://www.un.org/en/ga/sixth/63/Terrorism.shtml.

3) U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "The Gulf Security Architecture: Partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council: A Majority Staff Report" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012).

4) Steven Erlanger, "Sarkozy's Union of the Mediterranean falters," *The New York Times* (July 6, 2008), https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/world/europe/06iht-sarko.4.14279170.html.

Spain, and others to insist on participation, thereby circumscribing the agenda. Without a clear roadmap for how to resolve regional issues, short of giving Egypt the co-presidency and establishing a secretariat of participating states, the forum lost momentum. In retrospect, one can imagine how a successful initiative might have provided a valuable function in the period right before the outbreak of the Arab Spring— had it been conceived from a different starting point.[5]

Concerning format and venue, it would also be optimal if the level of involvement desired by regional partners were commensurate with the format desired by the international sponsor(s). That should not preclude the hosts, however, from pursuing collective security efforts that may not have full support from the senior-most ranks of regional governments from the outset. In the Gulf, the formation of any security bloc has always been hampered by the desire of the larger states to control the agenda and the fear of the smaller states that their bilateral relations with Western capitals will be sacrificed as a result.[6] Policy planners often try to anticipate this by setting an agenda that is either too narrow from the start (out of fear that anything more ambitious will never find a mandate among regional heads of state), or too broad (out of fear that each member state will need its own

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5) Jean-Robert Henry, "Sarkozy, the Mediterranean and the Arab Spring," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 16, no. 3 (Spring, 2012): 405-15.

6) Joseph McMillan, Richard Sokolsky and Andrew C. Winner, "Toward a New Regional Security Architecture," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 161-75.

incentives for participation and only a big tent can accommodate all the different interests).

American efforts to forge a Gulf security architecture over the last twenty years have alternated between the two approaches. The Gulf Security Dialogue (2007-10), the Security Cooperation Forum (2015-16), and the Middle East Security Alliance (2017-20) were all large diplomatic structures with multiple pillars or lines of effort in areas of economic and defense cooperation. They overlapped at times with similarly grand regional initiatives, such as Iraq and its Neighbors, meetings of the GCC+2 (Egypt and Jordan), and, most recently, the Abraham Accords. On the other hand, successive U.S. administrations have focused on much more targeted interventions designed to encourage interoperability of military equipment in the Gulf, most notably for the purpose of ballistic missile defense. Driving the agenda towards either extreme is unnecessary, as the format and venue can (and probably should) change and evolve over time. The initial agenda items might later be dropped in favor of other emerging issues, or some participating states might break away to explore their own cooperative initiatives separately from the larger group. Those, too, can become diplomatic successes.

In terms of membership and process, it would fantastic if the relationships among regional partners aligned naturally with the interests of the international sponsors but that is rarely the case. For many Western nations, their interests often only coincide or overlap with regional allies, helping to facilitate cooperation on

> ## A regional security architecture has to be sufficiently broad in scope to give the participating states flexibility in how they engage with one another and how they engage in tandem with the conveners. Conference objectives and security definitions must have sufficient room to allow each participating nation space to reinterpret the terms of debate according to their domestic political needs and their own regional status.

tactical issues while obstructing a free and open dialogue on long-term conflicts. A security forum designed either to isolate Iran and its proxies, or even to re-integrate Iran as a responsible member of the international community, will almost inevitably meet with a wide range of responses from prospective Arab member states.[7] A regional security architecture, therefore, has to be sufficiently broad in scope to give the participating states flexibility in how they engage with one another and how they engage in tandem with the conveners. Conference objectives and security definitions must have sufficient room to allow each participating nation space to reinterpret the terms of debate according to their domestic political needs and their own regional status. That is a delicate balance.

One solution is to convene summits with fixed membership and well-defined agendas, while combining them with working group sessions and sub-committees that meet during the intervals between summits and that can incorporate other regional actors and issues on an ad hoc basis. Alaa al-Din Arafat has recommended a regional dialogue process to include Iraq, Iran, and Yemen alongside the Arab Gulf states, to be followed by a more semi-permanent organization that would also incorporate the U.S., China, Russia, India, and Turkey.[8] Although not a collective defense mechanism, he does encourage using such a structure to explore cooperative measures on everything from non-proliferation to climate change. That is unrealistic, and only possible if there is a genuine desire among these regional

7) Zachary K. Goldman and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Conceptualizing Containment: The Iranian Threat and the Future of Gulf Security," *Political Science Quarterly* 128, no. 4 (January 2014): 589-616.

8) Alaa Al-Din Arafat, *Regional and International Powers in the Gulf Security* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 239-45.

nations for détente, accommodation, and mutual recognition of interests, which there is not. Yet the principle of a flexible architecture comprised of multiple and overlapping structures is a valid one.

Models within the Region

We can see how some of these principles played out in the Arab-Israeli Multilaterals, which were launched in Madrid in November 1991 after the successful U.S.-led coalition's liberation of Kuwait.[9] The arms control working group was the centerpiece of the process, designed in the planning stages to be paired with another working group that would encompass all non-security issues. The structure was broadened into the now-familiar five pillars of Arms Control and Regional Security, Economic Development, Refugees, Water, and the Environment. Russia became a co-sponsor because it was better to have the former Cold War rival inside the tent than outside of it, and training sessions were set up to help some of the Arab delegations learn how to talk directly with Israel for the first time.[10]

According to Shlomo Brom, this was the most successful attempt to achieve a regional security architecture, and could still contribute to regional security today as long as it is put forward on a strictly informal basis, the multilateral aspects are delinked from bilateral tracks, participation

is broadened to include more states like Turkey, and a different context is found for dealing with the issue of a WMD Free Zone.[11]

The optic that Washington wanted to create was that of the George H.W. Bush administration extending American influence and prestige throughout the world for the sake of peace and security. This may have appealed to domestic American audiences and signaled strength to America's international partners and allies, but it also spawned competition in the form of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, launched in November 1995 and known as the Barcelona Process. This was not intended to replace the American initiative but it did raise the question of just how many simultaneous processes the region could sustain.[12]

American and European policy planners did not try to predict the outcomes of the multilaterals and then work backwards to derive a structure that would facilitate them, nor did they make the forum so open-ended that it devolved into endless debate over first principles. Rather, they devised a set of concrete Confidence-Building Measures that could serve as guideposts for the participants – a permanent communications network, military information exchange, guidelines for joint search and rescue at sea, seismic activity

9) Joshua Ruebner, "Middle East: The Multilateral Peace Talks," *Congressional Research Service* (August 17, 2000).

10) Etel Solingen, "The Multilateral Arab-Israeli Negotiations: Genesis, Institutionalization, Pause, Future," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 2 (March, 2000): 167-87.

11) Shlomo Brom, "The Middle East: Regional Security Regime and CSBMs," in Harald Müller and Daniel Müller, eds., *WMD Arms Control in the Middle East: Prospects, Obstacles and Options* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015): 245-50.

12) Rosemary Hollis, "Europe and the Middle East: Power by Stealth?" *International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (1997): 15-29.

monitoring and water desalinization research.[13] These were fixed points that brought stability to the discussions and a common agenda, while allowing debate to roam freely in the spaces in-between, especially on truly difficult issues such as compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the notion of a WMD Free Zone. The format was flexible when necessary, allowing for the creation of new sub-groups and extending an open invitation to Syria, even if it chose not to participate. Although discussions deteriorated in the overall forum, Jordan and Israel were able to take the results and use them constructively in shaping their bilateral peace treaty. This is all evidence that even if states are often preoccupied with messaging to their own foreign and domestic audiences to the detriment of substantive dialogue, given a flexible yet committed structure based on tangible confidence-building measures, participants will choose to care about structured relationships and not just national prestige.[14]

Conclusion

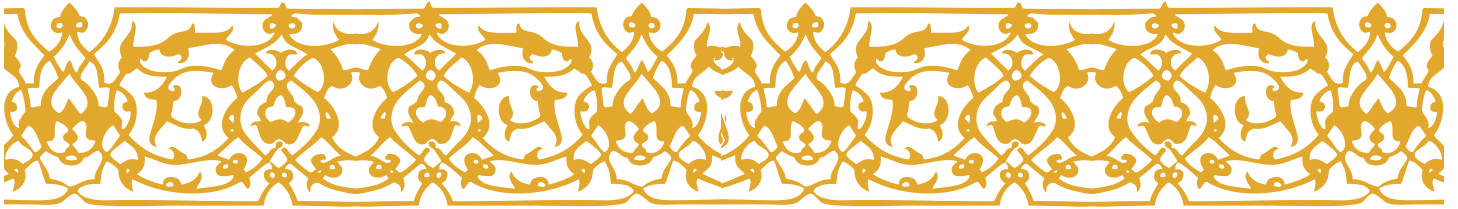For the Gulf, the challenge is finding a way to create a regular channel through which the GCC states can talk to each other, as well as with Iran, Iraq, and Yemen, if not for the purpose of collective bargaining then at least with the objective of de-escalating tensions. To date, such communications have usually been carried out only in moments of crisis, with one GCC state taking the lead in passing the demarche to Iran or coordinating assistance to the Yemeni Government. Even with that, other GCC states often maintain their own separate lines of communication that are poorly cross-hatched, creating a certain degree of confusion and the need for de-confliction. An argument can be made that simply allowing Iran, Iraq, and Yemen to have a routine mechanism for communications with the GCC – even if it's only an informal back-channel network without an official title or function – might encourage them to think twice before taking actions that impact Gulf security and stability. As for anything more concrete in terms of institutions or formal processes, we would do well to consider the advice that Colonel Joe McMillan once gave: "Institutional structures will have to grow out of habits of cooperation, not the other way around."[15]

13) Michael D. Yaffe, "Promoting Arms Control and Regional Security in the Middle East," *Disarmament Forum* (Spring 2001): 9-25.

14) Gabriel Ben-Dor, ed., *Confidence-Building Measures in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994).

15) Joseph McMillan, "The United States and a Gulf Security Architecture: Policy Considerations," *Strategic Insights* 3, no. 3 (March 2004).

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