

A new security paradigm for the Persian Gulf

The combination of economic strength, new partners and pressing security challenges could open the door for a new transregional partnership in the Persian Gulf which can in turn answer the strategic challenges of a new century.

The changing security environment in the region requires a different and more emancipated regional security approach, at the center of which is intensified cooperation between the region's rising powers Iran and Saudi Arabia. While existing contradicting political and religious extremes hinder such transregional cooperation, new economic and political opportunities and new partnerships may help to overcome the polarization.

The Gulf enjoys economic prosperity and importance on the international scene. Its oil resources provide the region with a competitive advantage in the international community. However, the entire area suffers from the negative impact of the foreign occupation in Iraq.

Transregional opportunities and challenges call for a new paradigm in Persian Gulf security, one based on transregional cooperation. The Gulf has to resolve existing intra-regional antagonism and convert its oil power into durable and independent growth. Intra-regional rivalry and competition is weakening the global position of the Gulf region.

1.1 Hegemonial rivalry

The constant rise of the oil price and regional economic strength could lay the foundation for political and economic consolidation of the Gulf region. Exploding gross domestic product in many states results in growing financial influence and independence of these actors. At the same time, the region is challenged by two major problems: increasing rivalry between Iran and its neighbors on the other side of the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, and the weak security situation in the region due to the conflict in Iraq.

The solving of these two crucial conflicts requires a synthesis of partly contradicting extremes - both sides, Iran and Saudi Arabia, claim regional leadership - emerging out of their shortsighted and self-interested strategies. Instead of working together, these actors try to contain each other.

Increasing sectarian strife in Iraq and the inability to reach a consensus between Iran and Saudi Arabia have characterized the Gulf during the past years. These negative experiences and developments need to be converted into a new and constructive paradigm of transregional cooperation and partnership.

In cooperation with the smaller states, the great powers of the region, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, could solve strategic challenges like repacifying Iraq and, at the same time, cartelize the region's economic power. Regional competition for hegemony negatively impacts the strategic and economic development of the Gulf region.

1.2 Security dialogue

With the exception of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), there is little security dialogue among the Persian Gulf states. Even in the GCC itself, with its members Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, security structures are weak. For example, the planned joint defence force Dira' al-Jazeera ("Peninsula Shield") remains a two brigade-strong force with only a small non-Saudi contingent.

The desire to establish a strong and independent regional security structure within the GCC has barely been addressed. The smaller states fear the dominance of Saudi Arabia and the growing influence of Iran. An essential consensus, let alone a unique regional position, is still inexistent.

But challenges like the situation in Iraq or the increasing tensions between Shiite and Sunni Muslim groups in other parts of the region like Bahrain, Yemen or Saudi Arabia demand strong regional security cooperation. In this context it is highly important to engage instead of contain Iran.

For the future, it is a key priority for the Persian Gulf littoral states to establish a transregional and coherent security structure together with Iran. Such a new security paradigm, together with the economic strength of the region, would shore up the region's standing and stability.

The combination of a unique position and a coherent strategy on security issues would calm the intra-regional rivalry and allow sufficient articulation of transregional interests. An essential security dialogue within the region could ward off an arms race.

1.3 New partners

The area can increasingly count on new partners due to changes in the international power structure. Growing multipolarism within the international environment opens the door for new alliances, more independence and essential dialogue at eye level.

The European Union (EU) for example, a rising power in the global resource competition, is highly interested in sustainable stability combined with good governance and free development in the region. Together with its geographical vicinity, the EU has the potential to be a major partner of the Gulf region, especially in the security and economic field. At the same time, the EU's intergovernmental system could serve as a prototype for the Gulf region.

China, India and Russia also offer new political and economic opportunities for the Gulf region. These countries are of growing importance globally in political and economic terms and do not have an imperialistic background in the Gulf. They are mainly interested in trade and strategic partnerships at eye level with less ambition toward regional domination.

Due to the region's economic strength, the Gulf countries can be considered reasonable partners or allies for their regional neighbors. Prosperity enhances the independence of the region. Full-fledged cooperation in times of economic growth and industrial diversification could boost the region's global position as well as its stability.

Individual or bilateral partnerships with external actors like between Saudi Arabia and the US or France and some smaller states in the region are not enough. The reasons for these partnerships are marked by insufficient regional containment strategies (for example Saudi Arabia – US vs Iran – Russia). To avoid an intra-regional struggle for power, a coherent intra-regional strategy toward external partners is needed.

1.4 A chance for transregional convergence

While the resources of the Gulf region are key to regional stability and independence, optimal growth and profit can only be reached by concentrating on the area's potential for strong transregional cooperation. Short-sighted conflicting strategies in intra-regional economic issues only result in losing the absolute advantage. Thus, a transregional and coherent approach to economic questions is overdue.

The division of the Gulf region into several individual and mostly competing economic and political actors not only weakens the region's potential. With the changing international security environment, the region's current and future security is also endangered.

Deepening convergence in economic terms would strengthen the region's position in times of growing global competition and be invigorating for its political stability and future.

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1.5 INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Iran - Making a Case for NATO's Political Engagement, by NATO, Brussels, Belgium

This committee report presents the main findings of NATO-Rapporteur Mike Ross (US) concerning Iran as a major challenge to the international community. It includes an engagement scenario for NATO in a possible military conflict.

NATO and Persian Gulf Security, by NATO, Brussels, Belgium

This report by NATO-Rapporteur Rupprecht Polenz (Germany) provides an overview of Persian Gulf security, including actors, conflicts as well as the impact of Gulf security for the Euro-Atlantic community.

United Nations Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Baghdad, Iraq

The United Nations Mission in Iraq promotes peace and stability in the country. In the aftermath of attacks on the UN in Iraq and the subsequent evacuation of UN international staff from Baghdad in

November 2003, a core UNAMI team remains in the country. The website provides information on UNAMI's mission and projects as well as news and background documents.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), founded in 1981, is a trade bloc involving the six Arab states of the Persian Gulf - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The website provides information on the member-states and offers a digital library as well as news.

1.6 NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Iraq Foundation, Washington DC, US

The Iraq Foundation is a nonprofit organization promoting democracy and human rights in Iraq. The website provides news, reports and archives on human rights, political and economic issues.

Persian Gulf, by Human Rights Watch, New York, US

This website provides news, reports and studies on human rights issues in the Persian Gulf. Human Rights Watch is a US-based international nongovernmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights.

1.7 RESEARCH AND ACADEMIA

A New Persian Gulf Security System, by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, US (PDF, 0.1 MB)
This issue paper by Andrew Rathmell, Theodore W Karasik and David C Gompert examines the options for a post-Saddam Persian Gulf security system.

Iran-Saudi Arabian Embrace: A New Beginning? by the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, New Haven, US

This article by Dilip Hiro offers an in-depth overview of the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two great powers in the Gulf region.

Gulf Research Center (GRC), Dubai, UAE

The Gulf Research Center (GRC) is a privately funded, nonpartisan think tank, education provider and consultancy specializing in the Persian Gulf region. The website provides regional news as well as publications, including issue papers, studies and articles on economic, political and security issues.

The Emirates Center on Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), Abu Dhabi, UAE

ECSSR is an independent research institution dedicated to the promotion of professional research and educational excellence in the UAE and the Gulf area. The website provides access to research publications and news.

1.8 MEDIA

Saudi: Iran's support for Hezbollah 'coup' in Lebanon will affect foreign relations, by the *International Herald Tribune*, US

This 13 May 2008 article points out the position of Saudi Arabia toward the Iranian support of militant actors in Lebanon and argues that this support endangers the relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors.