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GCC-Asia Ties and Collective Security

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Introduction

Taking inspiration seemingly from the adage “united we stand, divided we fall,” India’s new Prime Minister Narendra Modi surprised the South Asian region and the world with two unconventional moves even before he formally took office. The Indian premier not only invited his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif to attend his swearing-in ceremony in May 2014, but also extended the invite to the leaders of all South Asian countries – Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, the Maldives, and Bangladesh.

While the jury is still out on what this meeting will translate into in the long run, there is no denying that it could be a sign that a rethink is under way on the benefits of integration in the Asian sub-region among countries that for long have had strained or conflictual relations.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

South Asian regional integration was formalized with the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 – interestingly, a few years after the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed in 1981. However, SAARC has not lived up to its potential. It failed in its goals of strengthening regional security, implementing regional infrastructure projects, and stimulating inter-regional trade and economic ties. Similar to the GCC, the ideas of “common market” and free trade zones have also remained elusive.

One of the reasons for SAARC's poor showing is the distrust of the smaller countries, which perceived the forum as an "Indian project." It is feared that broadening economic cooperation within SAARC would lead to a stronger India, thereby harming the interests of the neighboring countries – an issue that is somewhat identical to the divergent political views within the GCC fold, especially on the Gulf Union proposal.

Since the early 1990s, however, several attempts have been initiated to boost South Asian economic integration through a number of trade pacts at the bilateral, sub-regional, and multilateral levels. As the umbrella organization in South Asia, SAARC has taken initiatives to enhance integration through the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), and the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services signed in 2010.

Though only limited gains have been achieved so far, it is worth noting that intra-sub-regional trade has improved. In fact, South Asia's trade with both its sub-regional and external partners has increased significantly since the 1990s, although trade growth with external partners has been faster, as it has been with the GCC. Trade among SAFTA members rose, though marginally, from 2.7 percent in 1990 to 4.3 percent in 2011.

Economic statistics aside, it is worth highlighting the economic-political-security links. Limited economic integration has hindered political cooperation, which has, in turn, led to gaping holes in the security domain. The most glaring of these in recent times was the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, which killed nearly 200 people. In order to turn the tide in India's favor and benefit all the SAARC countries, New Delhi is now renewing regional integration efforts. This was reflective in Prime Minister Modi choosing Bhutan and Nepal for his first official visits abroad. Even if these attempts are marginally successful, its impact could extend beyond the economic realm and impact foreign and security policies too.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

While attempts to re-energize SAARC are under way, ASEAN – a 10-country bloc established in 1967 – has achieved remarkable multifaceted success in comparison. It has sought to accelerate economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region and to promote regional peace and stability. The ASEAN Charter, which entered into force in 2008, provides a legal and institutional framework to support the realization of ASEAN's objectives, including regional integration.

The ASEAN Community comprises three pillars – the Political-Security Community, Economic Community and Socio-Cultural Community. Each pillar has its own blueprint approved at the summit level, and, together with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Strategic Framework and the IAI Work Plan, they form the roadmap for the ASEAN Community. ASEAN's work is based largely on consultation, consensus, and cooperation. The bloc commands far greater influence on Asia-Pacific trade and political and security issues than its members could achieve individually.

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)

Encouraged by the success of ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994. The ARF¹ meets annually to “foster constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern; and to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.”

In terms of achievements, despite the members' diversity, the forum has contributed to maintaining regional peace, security, and cooperation. In particular, the ARF has been useful “as a venue for multilateral and bilateral dialogue and consultations and the establishment of effective principles for dialogue and cooperation, featuring decision-making by consensus, non-interference, incremental progress and moving at a pace comfortable to all.”

ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

By the end of 2015, the ASEAN bloc is set to evolve into a more purposeful political and economic undertaking called the AEC. It aims to achieve a single market and production base, develop into a competitive economic region of equitable economic development, and fully integrate into the global economy. The AEC would comprise 600 million people, with a combined GDP of \$2 trillion. In comparison, the GCC has a combined population of less than 50 million, but a nearly equal combined GDP of \$1.5 trillion, thus making it a potential force to reckon with on the global stage.

The chances of AEC succeeding are high because ASEAN is already widely recognized in the international community as an exemplar of successful regionalism. Not only does the forum include some of the world's most dynamic economies, but

1. The ARF comprises 27 countries: the 10 ASEAN member states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam), the 10 ASEAN dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia and the United States), one ASEAN observer (Papua New Guinea), as well as North Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

it has been able to maintain peace and stability among its member countries despite competition at the economic and political levels and the many territorial problems among them.

As a possible role model for a GCC economic union, it is useful to look at the challenges the AEC is currently facing. ASEAN members still view each other as competitors. These distinctions may gradually start to fade, but in the future the line between competitor and collaborator within ASEAN has to be drawn so that distinctions are respected and managed in a spirit of competitive cooperation, not confrontation. The ASEAN members will need legally binding means to enforce compliance with the objectives of the AEC roadmaps.

ASEAN-China and GCC-Iran Ties

ASEAN is a good example of an Asian sub-regional organization that has expanded over time to provide a political forum where Asian countries and world powers can discuss and consider problems related to security, political issues, and military issues.

The fact that relative peace, security, and stability has prevailed not just in Southeast Asia, but in the entire Asia-Pacific, has encouraged rapid and sustained economic growth. Most importantly, ASEAN's success could be traced to the group's commitment to pragmatism, with ideology rarely playing spoilsport in its quest for the common good. This is not to suggest that differences do not exist, but ASEAN has rarely seen acrimony in the course of power shifts and realignments among the member countries. This calibrated approach has, in turn, brought about social progress and human development, thus making it a fit example of how regional integration can lead to comprehensive growth.

While the GCC countries have done fairly well on the economic indices individually and collectively, serious challenges exist in the political and security domains – the Gulf Union proposal and Iran, respectively. It may be worthwhile to borrow from the ASEAN experience of dealing with China, especially in the security sphere. Over the last few years, territorial claims in the South China Sea have grabbed international attention. Since all ASEAN countries are not equally involved in the dispute, there is no single approach to it. Yet, ASEAN has been united in conveying a clear message to China. At the same time, ASEAN has never let its political-ideological differences affect its business ties with China. The ASEAN-China trade bill was about \$400 billion in 2012 – a six-fold increase over a decade – and is optimistically tipped to touch \$1 trillion by 2020. In comparison, GCC-Iran trade is only about one-tenth of the ASEAN-China trade bill.

The GCC needs to consider the experience of the Asia-Pacific region seriously. The Iran factor is to the GCC countries what China is for the ASEAN countries. ASEAN decided to take ownership of the process of creating a regional security framework, which included China and other countries that had interests in the region. Similarly, the GCC countries have to take the initiative in putting together elements of new arrangements.

Can the GCC countries do it?

There is a temptation to write off the GCC countries as passive spectators of unfolding scenarios in regional foreign policy and security domains. However, as challenges have come closer home, the GCC as an entity and some of its members, in particular Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have been proactively involved in shaping the evolution of events and outcomes in Bahrain, Libya, Oman, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, among others. Again, whether one agrees or disagrees with their approaches, their actions and policies demonstrate that the GCC countries can and do take initiatives in defense of their interests.

Though each region has its own specificities, the security-related dialogue architecture created by ASEAN through its Dialogue Partners' network, the ARF, mechanisms such as ASEAN+1 (with any of these – China, India, Japan, South Korea and United States), ASEAN+3 (Japan, China and South Korea), and the East Asian Summit, involving all players who have interests in the region, could be models worth examining. Hardly anybody would contest that these arrangements have kept the Asia-Pacific region peaceful despite the existence of disputes. These arrangements have evolved incrementally over decades.

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To judge the GCC's utility and performance as an outright success would be an exaggeration. To call it a complete failure, on the other hand, would be an underestimation. The GCC's greatest success lies in the way each of the six member countries has charted its own destiny despite being a part of a bloc. This individual success, however, also explains some of its shortcomings as a collective unit.

The GCC since 1981 has focused on security concerns. The fact that it has been occupied with economic and political issues in the intervening period, and with varying degrees of success, is incidental. It may be a coincidence that every 10 years there have been major events that require the GCC to go through a period of introspection – for example, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; the political developments in South Yemen; the attempt to shut out Iraqi and Iranian interests in

the region after the Iranian revolution and the eight-year war during the 1980s; the Iraqi invasion, occupation, and subsequent liberation of Kuwait and the Gulf War during the 1990s; the consequences of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the repercussions of the US's anti-terror war during the first decade of the 21st century; and the impact of the Arab uprising during this decade, which includes the dramatic rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which could be the biggest threat that the region has faced. Further, the recent decision by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar has hampered GCC collective security efforts, necessitating a reassessment and collective crisis management.

While all these events have brought to the fore the security dynamic behind the bloc's formation, it has also thrown the focus on some inter-linked political and economic dynamics. The GCC has facilitated visa-less travel for its citizens, encouraged cross-border investments, as well as enhanced business and even employment opportunities in fellow member countries, among others. But, after setting out to achieve economic integration in 2003, the GCC has been bogged down by numerous differences, which has limited integration efforts to its latest announcement of implementing a customs union by 2015.

Further, though the value of intra-GCC trade is estimated to be over \$70 billion, up from less than \$30 billion in 2003, it is only a fraction of the GCC's foreign trade bill of about \$800 billion. What could give a fillip to regional business and trade is the early completion of the monetary union, railway network, power grid, and joint pipeline projects. These, together with greater political cooperation, could also boost integration. With external factors once again influencing the goings-on in the GCC countries, the Arab Spring has thrown up a new reason for the group to close ranks. Irrespective of their rationale and efficacy, moves such as the Saudi-UAE security force deployment in Bahrain, the \$20 billion fund announced to help Bahrain and Oman cope with their economic and political crises, and the continued mediatory efforts in Yemen are recent examples of collective responsibility.

As the GCC marches into its mid-30s, it is also bound to experience a mid-life crisis. Going by the developments of the last few years, the group has evolved considerably. Going forward, the tense relations with Iran are likely to dominate its agenda. Whether this moves towards rapprochement or confrontation will impact on the bloc's intensity in tackling domestic political, economic, and social issues.

Thus, while the GCC's impact may continue to be a point of debate, its utility as a buffer to alleviate the insecurities of small states remains largely undisputable, which reinforces the need for collective action.

GCC-Asia 'Strategic' Cooperation

Over the last few years, the GCC's decade-old 'Look East' policy in the economic realm is opening the door for a possible Asian role in the security domain. This has been aided by the US fatigue vis-a-vis the region and vice versa. Ongoing Track 1.5 discussions underline the fact that the GCC-Asia economic-security linkage is bound to intensify, with the US influence declining considerably, over the next two decades. Exploring the "what next" dimension of this engagement reveals tentative, but interesting, attempts to diversify towards strategic cooperation that offer alternative possibilities for Gulf security and stability in the long term. Asia's long-term interests cannot allow it to remain dependent on the United States for the security of its energy supply chain. Simultaneously, the US economic decline is adversely impacting its political and military influence, both regionally and globally. There is evidence of the GCC countries exploring strategic engagement beyond the exclusive arrangement with Washington.

In such a milieu, influential Asian countries committed to Gulf security, in consultation with GCC countries, are studying mechanisms that would not only encourage economic and political cooperation, but also provide an alternative and broad-based security architecture in the Gulf. The expanding defense capabilities, especially the navies of some Asian countries, are particularly relevant to the region.

An approach of this kind is equally pertinent because of Gulf-Asia ties being politically complex and sensitive. Just as many Asian countries have developed a special relationship with the GCC countries, they are also robustly engaged with Iran. Given the ongoing GCC-Iran conflictual-competitive relations, pursuing a collective approach to achieve Gulf security could serve twin purposes: one, enhance the security of the energy-rich region, from the perspective of both the Asian suppliers and buyers; and two, reduce regional tension by exploring a conflict resolution and security framework that incorporates the principal Asian and GCC countries.

In such a scenario, and in the wake of Asia becoming the main driver of the global economy with the potential to play a proactive role in global affairs, including the Gulf region, the only viable long-term policy plan for both the GCC bloc and Asia is to incrementally pursue and realize a broader "cooperative security approach."

The need to seek alternatives should serve as an incentive for the GCC and Asian countries to participate in regional security scenarios at a multilateral level. In this context, the GCC would benefit by approaching existing Asian mechanisms such as ARF, Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, among others, collectively rather than individually.

Conclusion: Security or Economic Cooperation?

The destinies of the GCC countries are intertwined. No matter what their differences are now, their strength to extract the best bargains on any economic, political, or security issue lies in putting forth their cause as a bloc rather than individually. The flip side was evident in the developments and arguments surrounding the 2005 Bahrain-US free trade agreement. It is important to point out that while the economic, foreign, and security policies of countries are, no doubt, meant to serve their individual interests, they are being increasingly shaped in consultation and accommodation with other countries, either at bilateral or multilateral levels. In Asia, apart from regional blocs such as SAARC and ASEAN, this is evident in the cooperation among India, South Korea and Japan, in conjunction with the United States. Though the GCC was founded and has functioned mostly as an organization rooted in security concerns, its future increasingly looks to be hinging more on economic cooperation. This is mostly the result of the rapid economic advancement that some of the GCC countries have made over the last three decades.

Growing financial muscle has contributed to both confidence and competition, resulting in independent approaches in the foreign and security realms. While this is not a negative development in the overall scheme of things, it would be disastrous if the current disharmony over foreign and security policies in the GCC hinders economic cooperation in future. Given the importance of economic growth for the governments and the people in the GCC countries, there is greater scope for consensus in the economic realm in the short and medium terms. This would keep the door open for continued integration and eventual reaching of a middle ground even on security issues. In the context of Asian countries seeking integration at various regional and sub-regional levels to maximize their economic, political, and security benefits, it would be in the interest of the GCC countries to seek cooperation with Asian countries as a bloc rather than bilaterally.

The GCC countries and Asia share a common desire for peace, stability, and security in the region and value the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all concerned countries. In the process of moving forward, the real test is how to turn the GCC-Asia economic bonhomie into a factor of regional security. The dilemmas in the Gulf region could ease if the GCC and Asian countries evolve new ideas of collective security that go beyond the restrictive paradigms of the past. This, in turn, makes GCC integration all the more imperative.

About the Author

Dr N. Janardhan is a political analyst based in the United Arab Emirates since 2000. His recent books include *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role* (Gerlach, 2014), *India and the Gulf: What Next?* (Gulf Research Center Cambridge, 2013) and *Boom amid Gloom: Spirit of Possibility in the 21st Century Gulf* (Ithaca, 2011). He is also an honorary fellow at the Centre for Gulf Studies, University of Exeter, and Managing Assistant Editor of *Journal of Arabian Studies* (Routledge). With a broad-based interest in the socio-political developments in the Middle East, Dr Janardhan's research areas include political reforms, international relations, education, media, gender, labor, migration, human rights and human trafficking in the Gulf region. After obtaining his Ph.D. in Gulf Studies from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, he was Program Manager, Gulf-Asia Relations, and Editor, 'Gulf in the Media', at Gulf Research Center, Dubai. He is a regular contributor to various newspapers and websites in the Middle East as well as to international academic publications.



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