



Beyond Camp David: A Gradualist Strategy to Upgrade the US-Gulf Security Partnership

MAY 2015

President Barack Obama will host leaders of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—at the White House on May 13, and then at Camp David the following day, to discuss ways to enhance political relations and deepen security cooperation.

Obama’s specific intention behind the summit is to convince his Arab Gulf counterparts to endorse the nuclear agreement between the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Germany) and Iran—which could be finalized by the June 30 deadline—by reassuring them that a potential deal would not

- weaken a decades-old US-Gulf partnership;
- allow Iran to violently expand its reach in the region at the expense of regional security and collective interests; and
- lead to a drastic reduction of US engagement in the region.

Over the past few years, most Arab Gulf states, along with other important US regional partners including Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, have raised serious concerns, both publicly and privately, over a nuclear accord with Iran that neither eliminates its nuclear weapons production capabilities nor arrests its growing destabilizing influence in the Middle East.

In an April 15 interview with *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman, Obama stated that “. . . when it comes to external aggression, I think we’re going to be there for our [Arab Gulf] friends.”¹ Hinting specifically at more formal US security commitments to Arab Gulf

1 Thomas L. Friedman, “Iran and the Obama Doctrine,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2015.

Middle East Peace and Security Initiative

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partners, he added: “. . . and I want to see how we can formalize [security relations] a little bit more than we currently have, and also help build their capacity so that they feel more confident about their ability to protect themselves from external aggression.”²

Yet Obama also cautioned against discounting internal sources of insecurity in the Gulf, stating that “the biggest threats that [the GCC states] face may not be coming from Iran invading. It’s going to be from dissatisfaction inside their own countries.”³ He called for a “tough conversation” on this issue and indicated that the United States would have to perform some type of balancing act to simultaneously deter Iran from attacking its neighbors and encourage Arab Gulf states (some more than others) to reform, while also increasing US-Gulf security cooperation in order to counter Iran’s hostile activities and neutralize the threat of violent, extremist movements including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (also known as ISIS) and al-Qaeda.

In a March 2015, Atlantic Council report entitled *Artful Balance: Future US Defense Strategy and Force Posture in the Gulf*, we made the case for a mutual defense treaty

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

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between the United States and willing Arab Gulf partners.⁴ Such a treaty would

- significantly enhance regional security;
- provide the ultimate security reassurance to Arab Gulf partners;
- augment the credibility and robustness of the US deterrent against Iran;
- help prevent Iran from violating a potential nuclear deal;
- put US-Gulf relations back on track;
- increase the chances of Congressional approval (formal or informal) of a potential Iran nuclear deal; and
- considerably contribute to a long-overdue, strategically-driven redesign of US force posture in the Gulf.

In short, the proposed treaty would upgrade the long-standing security relationships between the United States and willing Arab states from partnership to alliance. In this issue in focus, we offer a more comprehensive and detailed assessment of the risks, concerns, benefits, and opportunities that would be inherent in such a treaty. We recommend a gradualist approach for significantly upgrading US-Gulf security relations that effectively reduces the risks and maximizes the benefits of more formal US security commitments to willing Arab Gulf states.

Risks and Concerns

A US mutual defense pact—similar to that which the United States enjoys with NATO members, South Korea, the Philippines, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and a host of other allies—with willing Arab Gulf states would, depending on its terms, constitute a very important commitment on the part of the United States and should not be undertaken lightly.⁵ The American people are tired of conflict in the Middle East, and too much blood and treasure have been spent in that part of the world over the last decade. But beyond these factors, there are specific risks and concerns that would be attendant to a US-Gulf defense pact, which should be seriously considered and addressed:⁶

4 Bilal Y. Saab and Barry Pavel, *Artful Balance: The Future of US Defense Strategy and Force Posture in the Gulf* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, March 2015), <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/artful-balance-the-future-of-us-defense-strategy-and-force-posture-in-the-gulf>.

5 Such a pact would upgrade the relationship to a full-fledged military alliance, with permanent standing headquarters, diplomatic missions, and a range of supporting infrastructure and processes. A mutual defense pact would require Senate ratification and consent.

6 We deliberately employ the term “US-Gulf,” and not “US-GCC,” because the proposed defense pact is not between the United States and the GCC as a whole, but between the former and willing, individual Arab Gulf

► **A defense pact could incur a security risk to the United States.** Should Iran—which represents the primary external threat to the Arab Gulf states (some more than others)—get involved, deliberately or accidentally, in a direct military confrontation with any of the Arab Gulf states, under the terms of a US-Gulf defense pact, the United States would be legally obligated to intervene militarily against Iranian forces to help repel the attack. Iran’s options for responding to US military engagement would range from inaction to full-on war. Yet the massive military imbalance between the two sides, both quantitatively and qualitatively, would presumably factor heavily into Iranian decision-making and probably lead Tehran to choose restraint (evidence from multiple US-Iran crises in the past suggests that Tehran always prefers de-escalation). But Iran still could indirectly harm various US interests and assets in the region through surrogates and terrorist tactics. As unlikely as an overt Iranian military attack or invasion against any of Washington’s Arab Gulf partners is, and as modest as Iran’s direct military threat to the United States may be, it is still a threat to US security interests, which over time will increase in severity as Iran upgrades its military capabilities (according to several national US intelligence estimates since 1999, this year is when Iran was projected to have developed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could hit the United States homeland).⁷

► **The United States could get entangled in sectarian wars in the Middle East that could harm regional security and US interests.**⁸ If Iran avoids direct military action against Arab Gulf states, but steps up its destabilizing activities, this could lead, as it already has in Yemen, to war between Iranian proxies and Arab Gulf states, which itself could escalate to direct military confrontation with Iran. This would be a much more complicated scenario for the United States because it could lead to another costly and open-ended US military intervention in the Middle East with no clear purpose or achievable mission. The Obama administration and its Arab Gulf partners do not agree on the degree of Iran’s involvement in the Arab Gulf states’ internal affairs, on the depth of the security threat Iran poses to these countries, or on the best means to address this challenge. For example, what Riyadh sees as an existential threat, Washington may see as a manageable problem. It is also

states. There are significant merits to a US-GCC defense pact, but the reality is that the GCC does not operate in unison, and there are many important differences among its members.

7 Gred Thielmann, “Updated: Iran’s Overdue ICBM,” Arms Control Association, February 2, 2015. <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/ArmsControlNow/2015-01-26/Irans-Overdue-ICBM>.

8 A good definition of entanglement is found in Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 4, spring 2015, p. 12. “Entanglement occurs when a state is dragged into a military conflict by one, or more, of its alliances . . . often at the expense of its national interests.”

possible that the United States could get involved in a war against Iran as a result of unilateral actions taken by Arab Gulf states in the region. One example is a potential military campaign in Syria, most probably led by Saudi Arabia, designed to create a no-fly zone in parts of the country. Given the strategic significance of Syria to Iran, the latter would most likely respond using military force, which could escalate and lead to war against Saudi Arabia. Should that happen, the United States would have to come to the defense of the Arab Gulf states and enter a war it may feel should have been avoided.

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► **The United States and the Arab Gulf states do not share the same liberal values.** The fact that the Arab Gulf states are not democracies should not automatically rule out the formation of a defense pact with Washington. However, it could complicate the process. Because there is uncertainty over the domestic politics of some Arab Gulf states (some more politically fragile than others), the stability of any defense pacts would be suspect. Democratic institutions that enjoy independent political authority, including parliaments and judiciaries, protect and provide a high degree of predictability to interstate agreements. These institutions are either insufficiently empowered or do not exist in the Arab Gulf.

A defense pact could also lead to a public backlash in some Arab Gulf states. At a time when the United States is (and should be) trying to enhance its image in that part of the world and build linkages with nongovernmental societal actors, Washington has to be more sensitive to these constituencies' preferences and concerns. It may just be that a defense pact would not be welcomed by some Arab Gulf publics, and could even lead to political violence and contribute to further Islamist radicalization.

► **A defense pact could deepen the Arab Gulf states' security dependency on Washington and impede necessary security and defense reforms.** One of Washington's wishes in relation to its Arab regional partners is for them to build their own military capabilities so they can better protect themselves and share the burden of regional security. If the Libya and Yemen conflicts are any indication, the Arab Gulf states have come a long way in improving their war-fighting capabilities, but they still have security vulnerabilities that require more expansive security and defense reforms. It is likely, though not inevitable, that a defense pact with Washington could delay, and even interrupt, those important reforms.

► **A defense pact that is desirable to some but not all Arab Gulf states could undermine Washington's multilateral approach to the GCC and accentuate differences among GCC members.** A political and security union among GCC states represents the most powerful shield against Iranian intervention and aggression in the Gulf. While politics, rivalry, and differences within the GCC have stood in the way of such a vision, the Yemen conflict, and perhaps other collective security threats in the future, could get Arab Gulf states closer to achieving such an objective (perhaps not all Arab Gulf states would be part of the union but the majority). If Washington signs a defense pact with some but not all Arab Gulf states, it could lead to the end of that process. Countries such as Oman and possibly others could leave the GCC and establish much closer relations with Iran.

► **A defense pact with willing Arab Gulf states could challenge security relations with Israel, Egypt, and Jordan.** Washington would have to explain to these traditional partners why they would be left out. Washington could extend similar security commitments to them, but all at the risk of US military overstretch in the region and across the globe. Furthermore, more mutual defense pacts means more security risks for the United States. Logically speaking, the greater the number of parties to a defense treaty the greater the likelihood of militarized dyadic disputes with Iran and possibly other adversaries. In other words, the United States would have to contend not just with tensions and possible conflagrations between Arab Gulf states and Iran, but also between the latter and Egypt, Israel, and Jordan. In short, Washington's security responsibilities and challenges would grow significantly.

► **A defense pact could backfire and lead Tehran to opt out of its nuclear commitments and build nuclear weapons.** Surrounded by a consortium of states that all have substantial conventional capabilities and defense pacts with the United States, Iran might find that the only and most effective way for it to ensure the survival of its regime and defend itself against all perceived external threats is to pursue a military nuclear option. This would

significantly harm regional security and global strategic stability, and undermine all efforts by the United States to prevent a regional nuclear arms race.

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While these risks and concerns are legitimate, some are less likely and reasonable than others.

US entanglement. The phenomenon of entanglement, while real, should be placed in historical perspective. Throughout the history of US alliances with foreign nations (the United States has formed sixty-six such alliances from 1948 to this day), not once has there been a clear-cut case of US entanglement (the 1954 and 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crises, the Vietnam War, and the US military campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s come close but eventually have to be disqualified because they were driven not by alliance obligations but by an alignment of interests between the United States and its allies).⁹ An alliance with willing Arab Gulf states is not likely to be an exception. Here is why.

A careful review of the foreign policies of the Arab Gulf states over the past few decades shows that these countries do not engage in provocative actions and wars of choice that drag the United States against its national interests. They have been rather predictable, conservative, and risk-averse in their conduct of security policy. The Libya and Yemen conflicts may show a new trend of militarism on the part of some Arab Gulf states, but that is hardly an indication of new hawkish or offensive behavior. The security order in the Middle East is falling apart for a variety of reasons, and it is not surprising to see some Arab Gulf states, feeling abandoned by Washington, assume greater security responsibilities more assertively. Yet, despite what some news reports have claimed, not once have these states engaged in signifi-

⁹ Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances," op. cit., p. 10.

cant military operations without alerting or consulting with Washington first. Last but not least, Washington can effectively reduce the chances of or completely avoid entanglement by clearly specifying the terms of any defense pact. Defense pacts are not "blank checks that can be cashed under any circumstance."¹⁰ Should an Arab Gulf state blatantly instigate a conflict with Iran, the United States would not have to automatically intervene militarily. For example, the United States refused to aid Taiwan in Jinmen and Mazu in 1955, and did not come to the rescue of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.¹¹

Dissimilar values. That the United States and its Arab Gulf partners have dissimilar values presents ethical and practical challenges and complexities with regard to a defense pact. The question of succession and the overall issue of political stability in the Gulf is a cause for concern, but it should be more carefully and objectively analyzed and separated from political bias and emotion. For decades, analysts have predicted the fall of the Gulf monarchies, yet crisis after crisis, they have shown resiliency and adaptability and demonstrated staying power. It is entirely possible, of course, that a defense pact with an Arab Gulf nation could be broken or terminated with the collapse of that nation's government or the coming to power of a new leader with anti-US views. Yet by then it would become obvious to both parties that political circumstances had changed, causing a revision of the defense pact and overall bilateral relations.

It should be noted that the United States has existing alliances with states that have dissimilar values and political practices. The United States has a formal treaty alliance with Thailand—a monarchy that has suffered coups imposed by the military and lacks a strong and established track record of democracy. The United States also has an extremely close security relationship with Singapore, which the US National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2030* report said suffered from a democratic deficit.¹² Last but not least, the United States has alliances with NATO members Hungary and Turkey, both of which now can be characterized as illiberal democracies.

The United States should never be shy about sharing with its Arab Gulf partners the merits of liberal democracy. But that is not the real issue. The more important and relevant question is: What is the most effective approach the United States can employ to encourage its friends to further open up and achieve higher levels of political development *in ways that are consistent with their political culture and societal norms and traditions?*

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 47.

¹² National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, December 2012. http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf.

Is the United States better off aligning more closely with Gulf nations, and seeking to press them on reforms, from a close position, or from a tenuous one? Obama and his successors should have difficult and honest conversations about internal reforms with Arab Gulf leaders, partly because economic development and accountable governance are the most potent antidotes to Iranian interference in the Gulf and the region. Various Arab Gulf leaders have acknowledged the need for across-the-board reform, even if some have been slow in going about it. Some are doing better than others, but if and when they fall short, they will have to answer to their own people, first and foremost. Washington should continue to assist its Arab Gulf partners in building state capacity and integrating as wide a margin as possible of society into public life, but that is the limit of what it realistically can do.

Security dependency. Despite concern about potential increased security dependency of Arab Gulf states on the United States, the effect may well be the opposite. A defense pact is likely to bring higher integration of military forces, closer political-military consultation, and enhanced joint training, all of which will most probably improve the Arab Gulf states' military capabilities, and therefore gradually *decrease* their reliance on Washington.

GCC differences. It also is debatable whether a defense pact with Washington would exacerbate differences among Arab Gulf states. Such tensions are old and based on mistrust and rivalries that have nothing to do with the United States. A defense pact could actually drive these nations closer together because of the joint, regular political-military consultations among all those party to such a pact.

US security relations with other regional partners. Israel and Egypt are less vulnerable than Arab Gulf states vis-à-vis Iran, and it is not entirely clear that they would desire a defense pact with Washington (at least a public one). Jordan is a small nation with modest military capabilities, but it has been a crucial regional partner of the United States. While it has less than friendly relations with Iran, there are no major tensions, flashpoints or territorial disputes between the two sides, thus reducing the need for a stronger and more formal security arrangement with Washington.

Iran could get the bomb. While a US-Gulf defense pact could lead Iran to get the bomb for security reasons, analysts have been debating Iran's possible motivations for acquiring nuclear weapons for years without much agreement. We have to admit that we just do not know how Iran thinks and how critical its leadership believes nuclear weapons are to the country's survival and well-being. Assuming Iran succeeds in acquiring a nuclear

weapon undetected and without incurring a devastating military attack by the United States, the mere possession of the bomb would not guarantee its security. Instead, it may very well unleash a nuclear cascade in the region, a much more robust containment regime by the United States that could lead to war, and the return of debilitating sanctions and international isolation. Iran would have to carefully consider before risking everything merely to balance an arrangement between Washington and Arab Gulf states that was defensive in nature and not a physical threat to Tehran.

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Benefits and Opportunities

The risks and concerns of a US-Gulf alliance also must be weighed against actual and potential benefits and opportunities that such an alliance would bring to US strategic interests in an increasingly volatile and unpredictable region:

► **A defense pact with Arab Gulf states that are equipped with some of the most modern arms in the world is a net security benefit to the United States.** While the United States has the most powerful armed forces on earth, which allow it to defend itself against a variety of threats and pursue a wide range of political and security aims, an alliance with militarily capable Gulf nations will only enhance US security and contribute to US foreign policy objectives in the region. Admittedly, it is a marginal military increase, but an increase nonetheless. At the very least, an alliance with Arab Gulf states could decrease the costs of any war against Iran by ending it more quickly and on terms that are favorable to the United States and its allies.

► **A defense pact could help restore stability to an increasingly chaotic region and reduce the likelihood of the United States having to go to war again in the Middle East.** The chances of regional arms races, increased instability, and greater uncertainty in the regional security environment likely are much higher absent a new structured vehicle for cooperation among the United States and its current regional partners. The kind of unpredictable military operations that have occurred more frequently in recent years (e.g., UAE strikes in Libya launched from Egypt, Saudi-led operations against Yemen, which Washington subsequently supported) might not have occurred, or at least would have occurred after a more structured set of consultations, if there were a US-Gulf alliance. A key benefit of such an alliance would be to strengthen and regularize the habits of consultation and cooperation—with such an extensive structure for political-military discussions at senior levels in allied governments, the chances of unilateral action with little or no warning to other parties is greatly lessened. This might serve to have a restraining effect on planned operations that might not otherwise be subject to a structured decision-making process.

► **A defense pact would add teeth and credibility to deterrence efforts against potential Iranian violation of a nuclear deal.** If past performance is any indication, the chances of Iran trying to cheat on a nuclear deal are nontrivial. Iran may seek to go beyond the provisions of a deal in secret and prepare for the day when it may need to break out to a full nuclear weapons capability. A defense pact that aligns the United States and key Arab Gulf nations could help prevent Iran from violating the deal by significantly increasing the costs associated with doing so.

► **A defense pact would help counter Iran's expansionist ideology and check the continued growth of its military capabilities.** An Iran unshackled from debilitating sanctions will most probably be an Iran that throws significantly more resources into its military and paramilitary programs and activities. There is little evidence to suggest that a nuclear deal would fundamentally pacify Tehran or change the bureaucratic dynamics in its security decision-making, including the decision processes that have placed a priority on resource allocation to the Pasdaran and the Quds force. Thus, the capabilities associated with Iran's top military priorities should be expected to grow significantly in the wake of a deal—these include cyber, ballistic missiles, asymmetric maritime capabilities, space assets, and resources for expanding the reach of Hezbollah and other proxies whose goals are antithetical to US and Gulf interests. All of these developments will make the region less stable and require a much more cohesive approach to counter-

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ing them, specifically, a much more integrated US-Gulf defense and security arrangement.

► **A defense pact would constitute a major deterrent against potential Iranian attacks.** Many scenarios that involve Iranian conventional or unconventional attacks would directly affect US security interests. A defense pact could become a central pillar of a reinvigorated deterrent against Iranian coercion and aggression. With a significant number of US forces routinely operating in and from numerous bases in GCC countries (many of which are either US-run or jointly operated), not to mention the presence of forces from countries like France, the United Kingdom, and current NATO allies, the likelihood of US interests being harmed by any Iranian aggression is not small. However, a US-Gulf alliance could serve to give pause to Iranian commanders and decision-makers.

► **A defense pact would reduce strategic uncertainties and help stabilize a very dangerous security environment after the termination of an Iran nuclear deal.** After key provisions of the deal expire, Iran would be able to use advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium faster and acquire a nuclear weapon if it so chooses (though how quickly it can do so is unclear and has been hotly debated). A US-Gulf alliance that has already been in effect for a decade and that includes a US nuclear umbrella with Gulf nations may be the best option for preventing an all-out nuclear arms race in the region and hurtling the Gulf toward serial nuclear crises. It may be that only a step as clear and structural as a mutual defense pact may serve both to reassure Arab Gulf states that the United States will live up to its security commitments in a regional nuclear context and to deter a nuclear-capable Iran from conducting destabilizing and aggressive military and paramilitary operations.

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► **A defense pact would provide Washington much needed flexibility to erect a more politically sustainable, tactically robust, geographically distributed, and operationally resilient military presence in the Gulf.** The likely response to an Iran nuclear deal from many influential members of Congress and key political opponents of the Obama administration (both Republican and Democrat) will be to “do more in the Gulf.” What that most likely will entail is deploying more weapons systems and units in that part of the world. That, however, should be avoided because it is the least cost-effective approach to achieving current and future US political-military goals and plans in the Gulf.¹³ The United States must sustain a robust posture and increase the agility and flexibility of its forces now and into the future, but that should not mean stationing more hardware and soldiers in the Gulf. A defense pact that provides the ultimate security reassurance to Arab Gulf states would allow the Pentagon to more freely focus on ways to reach an optimal balance between US capacity (size) and US capability (military effectiveness) in the Gulf without having to worry about causing anxieties or perceptions of US disengagement on the part of Arab Gulf states.

► **A defense pact could help strengthen the economic integration of the Gulf into the global economy.** An additional core purpose for a nation to join the alliance would be to enhance its security, thereby increasing incentives for foreign investment and economic

diversification. As the saying goes, “money is a coward,” and it is reasonable to assume that an alliance structure in the Gulf that tethers the full weight and power of the United States to the region’s security also would serve to help buttress regional economic growth and the broader integration of the regional economy into the increasingly digital global economy. Finally, less concerned about survival and acute security challenges following an alliance with the United States, Arab Gulf states could spend much less on defense and allocate resources to the diversification of their economies.

A Gradualist Strategy

A careful weighing of the risks, concerns, benefits, and opportunities discussed above suggests that the United States move forward with a gradualist strategy in regards to upgrading security relations with willing Gulf partners. That strategy would begin with a formal declaration at the end of the Camp David Summit—a politically binding multilateral statement that commits involved nations at a political level to contribute to the defense of the others if attacked. A subsequent step could include a more formal multilateral security commitment, with the establishment of a real political-military consultative mechanism and a combined joint command structure. Finally, the ultimate step would be a formal, legally binding collective defense treaty as mentioned above. Each of these three options is discussed in turn below.

A formal declaration. The first step in upgrading the US-Gulf security relationship could include a joint formal declaration by the President of the United States and Gulf leaders at the conclusion of the summit stipulating that a military attack by Iran or another adversary against any of the nation-states involved would be met by a forceful military response. Such a politically binding (but not legally binding) statement would not remove the Arab Gulf partners’ concerns about US political will and resolve, but might warm political relations and lead to a more constructive and substantive sustained dialogue.

Such a declaration could be reinforced by the United States offering additional Gulf countries “Major Non-NATO Ally” status, which essentially confers on the recipient country military and financial benefits associated with purchasing US military equipment and services. Other enhancements could include additional combined military exercises, additional training, increased weapons sales, and higher quality weapons sales (e.g., the F-35 fighter jet). In the current security environment, this overall package may not be sufficient if offered as an end-state; however, as an initial step on a longer-term trajectory toward a clearly defined, more comprehensively updated security relationship, these measures could demonstrate important progress.

¹³ For a fuller treatment of this argument, please consult Bilal Y. Saab and Barry Pavel, *Artful Balance*, op. cit.

A more formal multilateral security commitment. A more formal multilateral security commitment would be a more ambitious option than just a declaratory statement. Such an option could “put meat on the bones” of a mere statement but would not necessarily have to go as far as a formal, legal, collective defense treaty. This intermediate option could include a number of elements.

First, the United States and interested Gulf partners could sign up to a politically—but not legally—binding statement that would commit all parties to the collective defense of the others. It could state that, in the event of a crisis, any party to the statement could call for collective political-military consultations among committed nation-states’ officials. It also could state that any threat to any other party would be considered a threat to all other parties and would result in consultations as well as a full military response against threatening forces.

In order to reinforce such a statement, the relevant military establishments of those signatories could be tasked to work closely together to erect a combined joint military command structure—à la NATO’s Supreme Allied Command—that could serve as a military planning headquarters in peacetime and then scale up to an operational headquarters in crisis and war. The US Central Command (CENTCOM) already has more than one headquarters that could (and in some ways, already do) serve as the nucleus for such a structure. Thus, in a way, this command structure would be a permanent, standing Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters—perhaps located at Al Dhafra Airbase in the UAE or another

key node in the Gulf military base network. This headquarters would be where the US and partner militaries would plan together; map out and schedule proposed exercises and training events; discuss evolutions in the threat posed by Iran and other potential adversaries such as ISIS; move forward on additional ways to deepen military interoperability in tactics, techniques, and procedures; and strengthen interoperability in military equipment.

Finally, a standing political-military consultation mechanism could be developed—which could be called the US-Gulf Council, or UGC—that would link the nations’ diplomatic efforts through routine consultations (e.g., every six months) and could be called into emergency session when needed. The UGC would replace the ineffective US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum (SCF), which has done very little, if anything, to seriously strengthen the partnership. The UGC would be a forum for the Secretary of State and relevant Gulf nation foreign ministers to discuss their top priority concerns, challenges, and opportunities. For example, if the UGC had already existed, the Secretary of State likely would have called it into session prior to and after every P5+1 negotiating session with the Iranians and other involved nations. It would be the consultative body of first resort whenever major issues arose that would merit bringing together the involved nations’ most senior diplomats and, when appropriate, heads of state. Thus, in a way, the President’s invitation to GCC heads of state to come to Camp David on May 14, 2015, could be considered the forerunner of a UGC Summit.

This proposal would represent a significant upgrade of the security relationship at a critical time. It would not constitute rhetoric alone, but would position the security establishments of all involved states to improve their consultations and to greatly strengthen their military cooperation to better address a very dynamic security landscape.

Toward a new alliance. Weighing the above options, a gradualist strategy makes the most sense: Beginning with a declaration at the conclusion of the Summit, the United States then could work with its Gulf partners to move with alacrity toward a more formal multilateral commitment. This step would entail very significant work among the nations’ diplomatic and military establishments and would represent enormous progress toward stabilizing the US-Gulf relationship in an unstable environment and at a historic time of transition across the global order. Once the machinery undergirding the formal multilateral commitment is fully in place and working effectively—which might take some time to get right—then the United States and its partners could seriously consider the ultimate step of moving toward a formal, legally binding defense treaty.

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Conclusion

Other than the risks and concerns outlined above, perhaps the biggest criticism of a US-Gulf defense pact is that it would be redundant and potentially irrelevant. After all, if any of the Arab Gulf states came under attack by Iran, the United States would not need a document to intervene militarily in defense of its friends. In many cases, it would take action. The 1990-91 Gulf War is a case in point. Kuwait did not have a mutual defense treaty with the United States. Yet when Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait, Washington—along with an international coalition that it had built—intervened forcefully and decisively, and expelled the Iraqi army from Kuwait.

But a defense pact is hardly an insignificant or superfluous piece of paper. It is a very serious, visible, impactful, and formal mechanism through which the United States can help stabilize a strategically vital region of the world and the global economy. It represents an absolutely clear and remarkably strong message of US-Gulf unity to Iranian hardliners and helps reassure key Gulf nations that have lost faith in US political will and resolve.

There is no immediate solution or magic bullet to counter Iranian expansionism in the region, which can be traced back to the very beginning of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But with a more positive political climate between the United States and its Arab Gulf partners, following Obama's (or his successor's) offer of any of the options laid out above, trust would improve, paving the way for a more methodical and collaborative treatment of Iran's asymmetric challenge.

The Camp David Summit will be a high-risk, high-reward moment. Obama deserves credit for calling for a summit and automatically elevating the conversation. But unless he treats Camp David with the seriousness that it deserves, this historic opportunity could quickly transform into a diplomatic nightmare and impel the Middle East further into chaos and instability.

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