

## **Security Arrangements in the Gulf Region**

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The Gulf region—comprising more than the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iraq, Iran, Yemen and neighbouring countries—lacks a common security framework. Some countries in the region dislike, and may even denounce, involvement from external powers as hegemonic, imperial or worse. However, the stark reality is that the countries of the region have failed to agree on both the objectives and means of maintaining peace in the region. They cannot even agree on mutual threat perceptions or modest steps to build regional security cooperation. Meanwhile, in recent decades the region has been rocked by the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a mini war in Yemen, the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and now heightened tensions over Iran's nuclear programme. The region has depended heavily on "imported security" to deal with volatility in past two decades. It lacks an indigenous balance of power, which causes instability and tensions. Looking ahead, is a regional security architecture for the Gulf fathomable?

Clearly there is no shortage of security concerns in the region around which practical cooperation could be built. Five possible issues include Iraq, terrorism, energy, maritime security, and proliferation. This essay briefly reviews each of these, and then delves into the proliferation crisis over Iran and examines whether it could provide the crucible out of which regional cooperation could grow.

### **Common Security Concerns?**

Instability in Iraq poses the most immediate security challenge to the region. Clashing forces challenge a fledgling government still in transition. Foreign forces are at once part of a solution and a problem in the eyes of Gulf states, which agree on the objectives but not necessarily the means of stabilising Iraq. Few expect an early end to Iraq's insurgency or to sectarian political violence, and some worry about a significance enlargement of the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict. While Gulf States hope to play a larger role in supporting the emerging Iraqi government, they also generally want the United States to continue to play a leading security role – and to listen and learn from others in and outside the region.

Terrorism poses a second critical challenge. Whereas most in the region see this as a vital common threat, there is no consensus on specific threats or remedies, other than the need for multi-faceted national and regional policies, in which military intervention is only one policy instrument. Even agreement on a basic definition is elusive, and some regional states, namely Iran, are considered by most a major state-sponsor of terrorism. Bringing Iran into even a basic discussion on this contentious topic could be useful to defining whether any

progress might be possible. Meanwhile, most states might be able to act on some remedies, including wider co-operation among Muslims on confronting the false narratives of those using a distorted version of Islam to justify indiscriminate killing. Although terrorism is a common threat, it is paradoxically difficult to forge effective international cooperation against it. The definition of terrorism itself is value-laden, with some insisting that Al Qaeda is little different from 'state-sponsored' terroristic acts such as assassination. Terrorism is also viewed as a personal issue for each nation. Despite the obstacles to cooperation, including the fundamental issue of trust, many supported deeper and wider intelligence sharing. Speed, precision, calibration of power, expertise, justice, leadership and deep interdependence all were seen as needed if terrorism were to be countered. More Muslims die from international terrorism than any other group.

Because the Gulf provides so much of the world's energy needs, and because secure access to energy is so vital to the world's leading economic powers and emerging economies, there would seem to be an obvious common interest to supporting an architecture that calms energy markets. Unfortunately, there is also fierce competition over preferred access, over specific over-land pipelines, and over specific countries as primary suppliers that forging a security framework around energy alone will be difficult.

A fourth area of cooperation that ties into energy security, as well as to counter-terrorism (and counter illicit trafficking in a whole range of commodities—from drugs and arms to people and toxic waste), is maritime security. The shores off of Somalia are considered the most piratical in the world, and an international task force currently led by Pakistan helps to provide an international mechanism for checking the whole range of illegal and dangerous wares plying the seas. While some Gulf region countries are landlocked, all depend to some degree on safe access to maritime routes for trade and security.

Fifth and finally, is the vital issue of nuclear proliferation. The prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme is the large international security issue on the agenda today. However, whereas external powers may worry most about Iran's nuclear programme, as well as clandestine support for terrorism and a desire to have a controlling hand in Iraq, Arab countries generally are more anxious over Iran's ascendant power.

Necessity is said to be the mother of invention. The urgent problem of the looming nuclear issue, which threatens both regional and international security, may yet provide the most serious fillip for regional security cooperation. It is this issue that threatens regional security and could easily spiral into armed conflict; and it is the outcome of this issue that will have a decisive bearing on future regional security arrangements. The present crisis could provide the crucible out of which will grow a more stable set of regional relations and processes that link the Gulf within and to the international community; alternatively, a failure by all

concerned to grasp the nettle for advancing peace could leave a searing legacy and foreclose the possibility of regional stability for years to come.

### **The Nuclear Crisis as an Opening for Security Cooperation?**

Although the nuclear issue has far-reaching ramifications for the region and the globe, it remains within the ambit of a single country to avoid escalation and the international isolation and economic deprivation that would ensue. However difficult a decision for its leaders to reach, the Islamic Republic of Iran could forego the sensitive nuclear technologies that could be used for fissile material for nuclear weapons and that are not necessary for Iran's nuclear energy programme. Fully suspending the enrichment programme would be the pivotal first step. Doing so, and cooperating fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency to resolve unanswered questions, would restore the world's confidence in Iran's nuclear programme, pave the way for tangible benefits to the Iranian economy and the Iranian nation, and transform the development of regional security arrangements.

Nuclear tensions drive greater external power involvement in the Gulf; the reduction or elimination of such tensions would ease the requirements for external intervention and put regional actors more squarely in the lead of the region's destiny. Any lasting solution to the nuclear issue should take into account the motivations that drive Iran's quest for a uranium enrichment capability. In our estimate, as described in the IISS net assessment of Iran's strategic weapons programmes published last September, the primary drivers are a need to achieve prestige, assert national pride and secure what Iran sees as its natural dominance in the region. Paradoxically, these goals would be more easily achieved by resolving the international community's concerns over Iran's nuclear programme. After all, Iran, unlike North Korea, is not motivated by militaristic ambition or a fear of over survival that requires some existential deterrent. Accordingly, there ought to be alternative ways to satisfy what drives Iran's programme, the drivers of which are in fact counterproductive to Iran's international prestige and regional influence.

Whatever the economic arguments for Iran's nuclear energy programme and the questions about whether the programme makes economic sense, even President Bush has said, in the context of Iran, that any country has the right to want nuclear energy. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made it explicit in remarks to the press April 12, 2006, that, "This is not a question of Iran's right to civil nuclear power. This is question of that the world does not believe that Iran should have the capability and technology that could lead to a nuclear weapon." And it should be clear that it is the world, not just the United States saying this. The international community, in repeated resolutions by the Board of Governors of the IAEA and most recently in the March 29 statement by the President of the UN Security Council, with the consensus of all 15 members, has called upon Iran to suspend all enrichment-related activities.

It cannot be doubted that national security concerns do play a role in Iran's motivations. Notwithstanding the government's claims that fuel for nuclear reactors is the sole purpose for the enrichment programme, most Iranians privately acknowledge that a strategic calculation is also involved. They may not agree that Iran needs an actual nuclear weapon and most may assure that Iran would never actually build one. But they maintain that Iran should have the capability to build nuclear weapons if needed, because they live in a dangerous neighbourhood.

As Iranians look around its region, nuclear-armed Russia, Pakistan, India, and Israel loom prominently. Today, Iranians also claim, with exaggeration that makes the point, that, besides Canada, theirs is the only country exclusively bordering the United States, or at least U.S. forces. In reply, it must be noted that, thanks to the United States, the two most immediate threats on Iran's borders have been eliminated. Saddam Hussein--instigator of the war that left a half million or more Iranian citizens dead or wounded, many the result of chemical weapons attacks--is deposed. The Ba'athist power structure against which Iran struggled is toppled. Iraqi Shiites friendly to Iran hold the majority in free elections that were a seminal success of the US-led intervention. How long has it been since Iran's western border was so secure? On the east, the cruel Taliban forces that contributed to the refugee exodus across Iran's borders, executed Iranian diplomats and fostered an opium drug trade that has effectively disabled 4 million Iranian citizens is similarly deposed, again because of a U.S.-led intervention.

Americans do not expect gratitude from Iran for eliminating these two threats, and the US-led interventions were not launched for Iran's benefit, although Iranians surely did and do benefit. This positive externality and a shared interest in bringing stability to the new Afghanistan is why the United States and Iran were able to at least sit down together in Geneva, in talks that grew out of United Nations-sponsored meetings. Those bilateral talks ended in 2003 over mutual accusations of support for terrorism, but they at least demonstrated a common purpose regarding Afghanistan. That Iran and the United States share a common interest in a stable, peaceful and unified Iraq are reason for hope that the two governments can also find common purpose in talks in Baghdad as proposed by US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad in December and agreed to Secretary of the Council for National Security Ali Larijani last month.

Both the consultations previously involving the United States, Iran and other Baghdad could be said to constitute fledgling ad hoc, de facto security arrangements.

More permanent, multi-party, longer-lasting security arrangements are necessary, however, if the dangerous neighbourhood in which Iran lives is to be made more secure.

### **E3 Proposal for a Long-Term Agreement with Iran**

One building block for a regional institutional arrangement was to be found in the framework for a long-term agreement that France, Germany and the United Kingdom with the support of the High Representative of the European Union proposed to the Islamic Republic of Iran last August 5. As part of an overall agreement, the so-called E3 said they would welcome an expanded dialogue with Iran on regional security issues. To this end, the E3, with the support of the EU, would, as part of an overall agreement, were prepared to commit to encourage confidence-building measures and regional security arrangements. The E3 suggested that such discussions should take place in close consultation with all the States of the region.

The discussions on regional security proposed by the E3 were one part of the much broader framework document laid out in August, which included other areas of political and security co-operation, long-term support for Iran's civil nuclear programme, and other forms of economic and technological co-operation. In the realm of political and security cooperation, under the sub-heading of non-proliferation, the E3 proposed a reaffirmation of commitments to abide by security and non-proliferation treaties and agreements to which they are party, and a reaffirmation of commitments to the objective of a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery.

The E3 proposal also included joint commitments on combating terrorism and drug trafficking. The E3 were to actively support international programmes designed to tackle Iran's drug problem, including by enhancing Afghan/Iranian border police co-operation, the training of customs officers, and the development of projects on demand and harm reduction in Iran.

A key element of the E3 proposed framework was recognition of Iran's rights under the NPT to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy in conformity with its obligations under the NPT, and cooperation between the E3/EU and Iran in the nuclear field, once Iran had restored international confidence that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes. To build that confidence, the E3 asked that Iran forego fuel cycle activities other than the construction and operation of light water power and research reactors. This request, of course, was the linchpin to the entire framework.

It is regrettable that Iran's leadership summarily and disdainfully rejected the E3 proposal without any attempt to explore the many elements of co-operation outlined in its 30 pages. The Islamic Republic of Iran justified this rejection on the mistaken accusation that the E3 sought to deny Iran forever the right to uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technology. Not so. There was no denial of rights. Yes, the E3 sought a commitment from Iran not to pursue these sensitive fuel cycle activities. But the very next sentence of the proposed framework agreement made it clear that this commitment would be reviewed in the context of a review mechanism. That is to say, in ten years. The implicit

meaning was that in ten years, if confidence is restored, there may be less concern about Iran pursuing these sensitive technologies.

By that time, however, and with the restoration of international confidence, Iran should be satisfied that it has no need for uranium enrichment technology. The Russian Federation has already committed itself formally to supplying nuclear fuel for the life-time of Russian-built reactors in Iran. Under the terms of the proposed framework, the E3/EU stood ready to develop with Iran a mechanism to provide an assurance of fuel supply. Indeed, international discussions are well underway involving the IAEA, the United States and other parties on how such assurances can be provided.

Today, over 30 countries in the world operate nuclear power reactors. Two-thirds of them do not enrich their own uranium fuel. Leading nations in the field of nuclear energy such as South Korea, Sweden, Canada and many others have the right to enrichment but voluntarily forgo implementing that right. Self-sufficiency in fuel production is not considered necessary, even for most of the countries that rely on nuclear energy far more than will be the case for Iran. Of the 12 countries that rely on nuclear power for 33 percent or more of their electricity, only one enriches its own fuel. There is no loss of prestige for South Korea in 1991 when, in 1991 it signed a joint declaration with North Korea in which both agreed not to possess uranium enrichment or nuclear reprocessing facilities. There is no reason for Iran not to be counted among these technologically advanced nations that forgo nuclear technologies that can contribute to the proliferation of weapons capabilities.

The United States was not a party to the E3 negotiations with Iran, and not a party to the E3/EU proposals for a long-term agreement with Iran. But in supporting the E3 engagement process with Iran last year, the United State implicitly supported the proposal. If Iran had responded positively to that proposal, there is reason to believe that the United States could have been persuaded to join in many of its features. When the US agreed in March 2005 to withdraw its opposition to Iranian accession to the WTO and to approve licenses on a case-by-case basis for spare parts for Iranian commercial aircraft, it was seen by many observers as the first step in a process that could lead to a US offer of further incentives.

For regional security arrangements of the type envisioned in the E3 framework proposal to have most value for Iran, they would have to include the United States in some form or another. It is likely that only the United States can bring to the table the security incentives – and disincentives – that could effectively alter both sides of the cost-benefit equation in Iran's long-term strategic calculations. The United States government supported the E3 offer to Iran last August, but given Iran's flat rejection of that offer, few in Washington see anything to be gained from offering additional incentives. Washington has made very clear that discussions with Iran in Baghdad, when they get underway, are to be strictly limited to security issues regarding Iraq. Given the international

consensus that has developed on the Iranian nuclear issue and the clear message the IAEA Board of Governors and the UN Security Council have sent to Iran, the United States does not want to change it to a bilateral issue between the United States and Iran.

Whether the United States would be willing at some stage to engage with Iran in a multilateral process that could lead to structured regional security arrangements is a question for the future, and will depend on how events unfold. Provided Iran and the United States (and other key international actors) can convert their current crisis into new momentum behind diplomacy, then much is possible that could alter regional security. In exchange for Iran voluntarily satisfying legitimate concerns about possible clandestine nuclear activity, not only should international trade and investment be on the table, but also regional security guarantees. This diplomatic path could eventually lead to a stronger, more cooperative regional security framework for all of the Gulf region. What is clear is that there is no basis for negotiation as long as Iran conducts enrichment activities in contravention of its Paris November 2004 agreement with the Europeans. Suspension of the enrichment programme and related activities is a necessary condition for any dialogue that could lead to resolution of the nuclear crisis. Without full suspension, talk about a regional security arrangement involving the United States, or members of the European Union, will remain academic, confined to the world of think tanks and conferences.

## **Conclusions**

Unless the nuclear issue can be put into a diplomatic framework, the hopes for an inclusive regional security framework will continue to be dashed. While even cooperation over the handling of Iran's nuclear programme is no guarantee of regional cooperation, the issues surrounding Iran's programme may well provide a strong basis for attempts to settle other differences and address other issues.

For the short term, however, the outlook remains more of the same: despite shared interests in a broad range of challenges, countries of the region are more likely to pursue national strategies and interests, preserving national and territorial sovereignty, preserving prosperity, hedging against uncertain neighbours outside the Gulf, and seeking ways to tamp down terrorism. A large Gulf country such as Saudi Arabia sees a singular role for itself in the region and the wider Islamic world, whereas smaller Gulf countries such as Kuwait are keen to advance collective security. While Gulf countries may be attracted to the notion of a more indigenous security framework, the idea of 'de-Westernising' regional security is prevented more by the absence of trust among regional powers than external intervention.

In the meantime, perhaps the best vehicle for inclusive security dialogue is the Gulf Dialogue sponsored by a non-governmental think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies. This December will be the third year that the

independent, international think tank has facilitated official, ministerial-level talks among all countries of the region and outside powers, with the support of Bahrain. When leaders approach the meeting this December, they should aim to define a few concrete, if modest steps, that might be taken to foster the kind of regional cooperation that could take root over the long term.