

Security Architecture in the Persian Gulf: A Comprehensive Appraisal

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Abstract

This article focuses on the security architecture of the Persian Gulf. Since the British left the Persian Gulf in 1971, maintaining the security of this strategic body of water has been a major concern for the governments of the region and for those who depend on energy supply from this region. Four decades later, after a revolution, three major wars, and regime changes in the region, defining a security system for the Persian Gulf remains a significant challenge. This article reviews the past security arrangements in the Persian Gulf and proposes a new framework for Persian Gulf security. Study of previous and current security patterns in the region reveal that the existing security frameworks have failed to ensure stability and led to massive direct military confrontations in the Persian Gulf. The authors argue that the failed strategies and theories of balance of power and arms race would intensify the atmosphere of mistrust and animosity in the region. They suggest that any meaningful security arrangement should involve all major regional actors the Persian Gulf. They conclude that common security can only be achieved through comprehensive security architecture in the region. Although they insist that achieving this objective needs confidence-building measures to be considered by regional actors.

Keywords: Persian Gulf, Common Security, Regional Actors, Balance of Power, Cooperation

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"In international affairs, there are three wasps' nests besides the Balkans: Morocco and the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the American Monroe Doctrine; God grant that we may never fall into one of them" (Townsend, 1930: 309). *Bismarck*

Introduction

The Persian Gulf has been a region of geopolitical importance for a long time, even before the discovery of oil in the region. Since the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971, maintaining the security of this vital body of water has been of primary concern, both for its littoral states and for the western countries that acquire their energy from there. The Persian Gulf has witnessed a revolution, two major wars, and regime changes since the British withdrawal. The emergence of radical regimes and movements such as the Taliban and Al-Qaida in the region in the last few decades has further raised concerns about the security of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, internal instability and increasing dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regimes are rendering the hitherto accepted tenets of security obsolete. Transnational terrorism and domestic instabilities continue to trouble regional governments and security of most of these states depends on their ties with external powers.

Hidden and overt animosity, rivalry, and war between the Persian Gulf states have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of various security arrangements tried in this region. With the Persian Gulf oil supplies as vital as ever to the global economy, the quest for reliable security in this region has never been more important. Thus, the need for a comprehensive regional security system is evident. This



article attempts to propose a basis upon which the future security architecture of the Persian Gulf may be built. The authors argue that all regional actors should understand the need for change the dire security situation of the Persian Gulf. This change, in its best form, can be achieved through cooperation and joint work. But due to the specific characteristics of the region, confidence-building measures must be initiated first. To advance this idea, first, the security situation of the region in the past decades will be analyzed. This would help elucidate the role of regional and foreign actors in the security arrangements of the region. Second, the security perspective of the regional actors would be explained. Finally, the definition of “common security” and the characteristics of comprehensive security architecture in the Persian Gulf will be considered. It is vital to understand what each state seeks in a security system for the Persian Gulf and how the atmosphere of animosity can be resolved in order to reach common security framework. In this regard, exchange of the security reassurance and practical confidence-building measures can initiate cooperation on security issues.

I- Past Security Arrangements

The Persian Gulf can be considered as a sub-system within the Middle Eastern regional system, yet it has its unique characteristics. This region includes three main regional powers; Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. In addition, there are five less powerful regional states. After the First World War, Britain was the main actor in terms of ensuring regional stability and protected many of the newly created states under its security umbrella. This “hegemonic” security framework was based on the primacy of interests of Britain over those of the others and on operational use of military and economic instruments for compliance as well as deterrence (Ikenberry, 2001: 26-29). As such, the security provided by the hegemonic power benefited only friends and allies. Given the overwhelming dominance of Britain, and presence of no actual challenger, one should consider this security



pattern as “direct hegemonic pattern”. Discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf was a turning point in the history of the Middle East and drew global attention to this region. Britain as the dominant power in this region and as the only external beneficiary of oil resources took responsibility for providing security until its final withdrawal in 1971 (Peterson, 2001: 23). The United States took over this role as the hegemonic power after Britain. Gradually, Washington got militarily engaged in order to preserve the Persian Gulf’s stability (Fain, 2008: 107-109).

In the 1970s, in accordance with the Nixon-Kissinger Doctrine, Washington opted for reliance on its local allies for preserving the security of the Persian Gulf, avoiding direct engagement (Fain, 2008: 113-114). Washington supported the Saudi’s monarchy and the Shah of Iran as the two main pillars of security of the Persian Gulf. The United States’ reliance on the strategy of “local hegemony”, which was in effect as “indirect” hegemonic dominance of the United States, was meant to be an alternative for direct hegemonic presence in order to avoid a Vietnam-type crisis. This security pattern seemed to work for a while. Endowed with tremendous oil revenues and generous American support, the Shah built up a large and modern military and was willing to counter any security disturbance in the region. In the early 1970s, he willingly sent Iranian troops to Dhofar and effectively crushed the leftist armed struggle that threatened the regime in Yemen (Yetiv, 1995: 32). The security pattern fell apart when the Iranian Islamic Revolution toppled the Shah’s regime in 1979. Later, the rise of fundamentalist groups in Saudi Arabia posed an internal threat to the Saudi state, further undermining the security arrangement put in place by Washington (O’Reilly, 2008: 139.)

The establishment of an Islamic revolutionary government in Iran was interpreted by Washington as an imminent threat to the United States and its regional allies. Although the Ba’athist government in neighboring Iraq was pro-Soviet, containing the Islamic Republic seemed to take precedence over that of Iraq (Alam,



1995: 113). After Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, the United States initiated the strategy of creating a balance between regional powers. Thus, when the Iranian army seemed to gain the upper hand during the war, Washington provided Baghdad with military intelligence. When Iraqi army seemed to gain the upper hand, Tehran would receive the necessary intelligence to counter the Iraqi offensive. This strategy kept either country from becoming too powerful and winning an outright victory in the war. However, this strategy allowed Iraq to become an offensive military power. Saddam Hussein's suppression of his own people and his use of chemical weapons against the Iranian people during the war were clear signs that, if given the chance, he would be a real threat to the security of the Persian Gulf and to the interests of the Western countries. Yet, concerned with the perceived real threat of the newly-born revolution in Iran, the United States turned a blind eye to his actions (Karsh, 2009: 53).

In 1991 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Washington reacted by a massive show of force; through the military operation that was named the Desert Storm, the US forces pushed Saddam's army out of Kuwait. The failure of the so-called bi-pillar strategy, namely, relying on the local hegemonies for maintaining the security of the Persian Gulf, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait taught the United States two important lessons. First, empowerment of the regional powers can get out of control and turn into a major threat to the interests of the United States and its allies. Second, Washington cannot depend on regional states to provide security. American presence in this strategic region would, therefore, be inevitable. Under the rubric of dual containment and lacking confidence in the ability of the GCC states to preserve their own security, the United States chose the path of "muscular forward presence". This involved a large-scale buildup of US forces in the region, regular military exercises, and rapid reinforcement of the troops at times of crises (O'Reilly, 2008: 177-182).

In 1999, the Whitehouse introduced a new strategy to minimize



what it called threats posed by Iran and Iraq. The Cooperative Defense Initiative (CDI) was a plan for integration of the defense forces of the friendly states of the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt, and Jordan and intelligence sharing between them (O'Reilly, 2008: 181). The CDI identified Iraq and Iran as the major threats to the region and emphasized the threat of attacks by either of the two states (Garamone, Apr. 10, 2000). All GCC members signed a joint defense pact. Yet, most of the expected objectives of CDI remained unfulfilled.

The terrorist attacks of al-Qaida on American soil were followed by a great deployment of US forces in the region and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. This development was a turning point in terms of security arrangement of the region. The Third Persian Gulf war and the subsequent removal of Saddam Hussein stand in sharp contrast to the previous two wars. Whereas the former only modified the triangular system of power in the Persian Gulf region, the latter completely changed this power system. By removal of Saddam Hussein and occupation of the country, the United States virtually replaced Iraq as a regional actor with no specific alternative to substitute the vacant position (Kaim, 2008: 130). Moreover, Washington attempted to take on the task of proving the security of the region single-handedly and solely according to its own wishes. In this scheme, key countries such as Iran were excluded from any security arrangements for the region.

In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared that the [Persian] Gulf Security Dialogue would work towards defense cooperation, rehabilitation of Iraq, regional stability, energy infrastructure security, counter-proliferation, and counterterrorism (U.S.-Kuwait [Persian] Gulf Security Dialogue Joint Statement, 2007). Based on the GSD, the United States would take responsibility for strengthening GCC members through military exercises. These exercises fit the United States' vision of the GSD as "a strategic framework designed to enhance and strengthen regional security"



(Knapp, 2010: 53). Excluded from GSD, Iran interpreted these measures as a threat to its national security. There were disagreements in Washington over arming GCC countries, but the administration tried hard to justify such strategy. Senator Charles Schumer said on May 2008, "To most Americans, a well-armed Saudi Arabia is far less important than a reasonable price for gasoline, heating oil, and all other products upon which oil is based" (Schumer, 2008). Security threats were always believed to originate from outside, usually in the form of a military attack by a foreign country. Governments, therefore, have spent a good deal of their countries' resources to strengthen their military capabilities. The unprecedented unrests that started in 2011 in the Middle East shocked many security experts as well as regional leaders. Threats to stability of governments were now shown to come from within, not from outside. They have appeared in the form of public demands for freedom, democracy and welfare by the people and not in the form of military campaigns from outside by other governments. This new situation requires a security arrangement that addresses this new threat.

II- The Security Perspective of the Persian Gulf Actors

In order to define any viable security arrangement in the Persian Gulf, it is necessary to understand the security concerns of the actors involved. Iran as an important actor in the region seems unsatisfied with the security arrangements implemented by foreign powers to date. Iran feels that its rightful position as leading power in the Persian Gulf has been denied. Iran also believes that its pursuit of nuclear energy has been completely peaceful and the "American provoked sanctions" are unjust and in violation of Iranian peoples' right to have access to such energy. In contrast, the United States unreasonably argues that Iran is well-endowed with natural resources and this persistent insistence on pursuit of nuclear enrichment has no justification.

Iran's neighbors have also grown mindful of Tehran's



intentions. Statements by Iranian officials and certain measures taken by the Iranian armed forces in the past few years have only intensified this concern. In July 2007, *Kayhan Daily* wrote in an editorial that Bahrain is more like a province of Iran than an independent country (Shariatmadari, Husayn, 2007). In January and April of 2008, incidents between US ships and Iranian speedboats raised international concerns over Iran's intentions to undermine the security of the Persian Gulf (Cordesman, 2008: 38). In September 2008, Iran assigned the 20,000-man Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy rather than the less confrontational regular navy to Persian Gulf defense. This deployment followed by the opening of a new naval base on the strategic Strait of Hormuz one month later. In the same year, Iranian marine forces upgraded their Assalouyeh naval base, establishing "an impenetrable line of defense at the entrance to the Sea of Oman," according to an Iranian admiral (Tehran Times Political Desk, Oct. 30, 2008). Yet, Islamic Iran has been far from being aggressive to the other actors. In the last two centuries Iran has never invaded its neighbors but has itself been invaded for at least twelve times. Even when it could retaliate, Iran didn't help coalition forces for crushing Saddam (Kesselman, 2009: 315-316). But these remarks and military fortifications has delivered mistrust to other neighbors.

After the relative failure of the nuclear talks between Iran and the western countries under the shadow of military messages sent by both sides and with the following sanctions on the Iranian oil and monetary sections, Iran's stance grew even harder. In an announcement, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, warned the West of Hormuz Strait Closure Plan; The words which have emphasized by Commander of Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy Ali Fadavi later (Fars News Political Group, 2012). In similar tone, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, denounced sanctions and the new US military buildup in the



region. He said “the enemy deals a blow to the Iranian nations step by step; but, in return, it receives a stronger, heavier blow,” adding that the Iranian nation’s path cannot be stopped (Press TV Political Group, 2012). These remarks by high ranking Iranian officials may show an unbending position of Iran in security matters in the region.

Iraq has the ambition to once again be a major player in the Arab world. Although the overthrow of Saddam Hussein weekend the military strength of the country, empowerment of the Shiite factions in the new political structure of Iraq and their ties with Iran have become a source of concern for the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and for Washington. But, the recent economic and political changes in the country have turned the attitude of the Iraqi politicians even from the Shiite parties. Thanks to the western investment in oil industry of Iraq, in August 2012 Iraq’s crude oil output rose above 3 million barrels a day overtaking Iran’s production for the first time since 1988 (Lee, 2012). Undoubtedly, these oil revenues can help the Iraqi politicians to re-build the war-torn country and settle the adversities. In fact, no matter how sentimental they are about the Iranian anti-western cause, the current Iranian security agenda in the Persian Gulf with the probability of closing the Strait of Hormuz can jeopardize the promising future of Iraq and that is not what the Iraqi leaders want. In this regard, Iraq has recently announced that some 1.7 million barrels of its oil transits the Strait and maintains that Iran should not close the passage (Barzegar, 2012). Thus, the Iraqi leaders try more than ever to help maintain security in the region.

Saudi Arabia as the third regional power in the Persian Gulf has shown to lack confidence in maintaining its security on its own and has cooperated closely and coordinated its actions with outside powers, namely the United States. Even its recent military intervention in Bahrain to help the ruling Al Khalifa regime suppress internal turmoil seems to have been initially approved by Washington. Saudi Arabia is well aware that despite its large military expenditures and good relations with the West, there are reasons to be concerned



about the internal and external security of the country. Internally, Riyadh is worried about the new democratic movements and the anti-American fundamentalism that condemns the Saudi leaders' ties with Washington. The Saudis have also been criticized by the "Arab Street" for neglecting the struggle of the Palestinian people and for cooperating with the West against other Muslim nations (Norris, 2003: 122).

In the regional security arena, Saudi Arabia faces Shiite Iran and the new Iraq. Such considerations seem to have pushed the Saudis toward the United States in order to ensure their security. After the failure of former UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan to bring peace to Syria, Saudi Arabia initiated a new confrontation line against Iran. In fact, the support of Bashar al-Assad has interpreted as an unjustified intervention of Iran in Arab world affairs. In order to overthrow Iran's strategic ally, Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported Syrian rebels financially and technically. But the two have switched roles in Bahrain, where the Saudis have been trying to protect the ruling Al Khalifa and Iran supports protesters (Press TV Political Group, 2012). This cold-war kind rivalry has many intangible grounds, most notably, the increase in oil production of Saudi Arabia in order to compensate for drop in Iranian oil supply. In fact, in Saudis' view the security stability of the region is severely damaged by Iran, thereby believing in counter-balance as a solution to this problem (Cordesman, 2003: 385). The solution which has been experienced many times in the region yet never ended up in peace and stability.

The other Persian Gulf states are in a similar predicament. Furthermore, these relatively young tiny nation-states enjoy abundant natural resources, but have limited population and human resources. The Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait in less than three days, revealed the major structural flaws in these countries' defense and security systems. It demonstrated that they had no chance of defending themselves even against a regional power such as Iraq.



Thus, they, too, welcome the American military presence in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, there is no symmetry between the major regional powers. Even though Iran has been substantially weakened by the eight-year war with Iraq and three decades of American sanctions, its strategic depth and large population still give it a naturally dominant position. The United States occupation of Iraq brought that country instability and economic disaster. Despite enormous energy resources, it will take years for Iraq to become a regional power it was before. Thus, the main security concern of these small monarchies is Iran and they embrace United States presence if it controls Iran's ambitions.

Economically, Persian Gulf states have opted for bilateral relations with the outside world - mainly western countries - rather than multilateral and regional relations. Meanwhile, as rentier economies that are heavily dependent on oil revenues from overseas, these countries are highly vulnerable to economic cycles and upheavals in the energy consuming countries. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the energy-rich states of the Persian Gulf have had significant economic growth in the last decades, meaningful economic development is yet to be achieved in this region. The current economic policies of these governments have not been able to address the alarmingly high rate of unemployment, especially among the youth, rising expectations of the young generation, poverty and inequality. Dependence on foreign manpower for skilled and unskilled labor, lack of modern infrastructure, and widespread class, ethnic, and religious discrimination have also undermined social and economic stability in these countries (Kober, 2011: 141-142). This has become yet another factor in undermining the internal security of the region (Ulrichsen, 2011: 86-88).

As rentier states, these governments get their revenues not from taxes, but from oil exports. Therefore, the gap between government and the people is considerable in this region and most of the governments are rarely obliged to respond to the will of the masses.



Political development is yet to materialize in most of the Persian Gulf countries. They lag far behind most of the rest of the world in participation of their population in the political process and in determining their destiny. Lack of democratic institutions and phony elections have increasingly become a source of dissatisfaction of the public in these Arab countries. Thus, most of Persian Gulf states are mindful of the contemporary security status of the region and they know that sooner or later dramatic changes would occur in their internal situation as well as in regional status. With this perspective, it is better for these countries to take part or even initiate the change rather than to be drifted by it. Meanwhile, in search for sustainable security some of the Persian Gulf countries - most notably Saudi Arabia - have been among the top fifteen military spenders of the world in recent years (Askari, 2010: 25). In 2011, Middle Eastern countries spent more than USD 123 b on arms (Trading Division of SPG. 2012). Most of these arms were bought by the Persian Gulf states. The average military expenditure of the Persian Gulf countries as percentage of GDP for the past decade is eight, which is much above the world average of one (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2011).

Most of the abovementioned arms deals of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf have been made with the United States through bilateral defense arrangements (Andrew Yeo, 2011: 29-30). Dependence of the Arab regimes for their security on the United States intensifies domestic pressure against these regimes because it demonstrates the inability of the government in power to provide for its own defense indigenously, thereby giving the popular impression of dependence on neo-imperial outside powers (Sokolsky, 2003: 154-155). Moreover, it works against security interdependence among regional states; each state receiving outside military support hopes to gain relative military advantage over an opponent through the help of the outside power, rather than through regional cooperation. Above all, these bilateral military agreements spread the seeds of mistrust in



the region and provoke other states to get more militarized. The subsequent arms race and militarization of the region may have dire consequences, including war (Potter and Sick, 2001: 109-110).

Moreover, the military ties and reliance on external powers may be followed with the imposed objectives of the foreign power making the contribution and subsequently, other great powers would be provoked. Some analysts believe that the recent situation of the region regarding the great support of Syria and Hezbollah by Iran and the dissatisfaction of Russia and China with the imposed sanctions on Iran and Syria, have roots in the American military ties with the Arab countries of the region (Parsi, Trita, 2012: 153-154). Such ties would ruin any chances for a comprehensive common security framework as well as prosperity and democracy for people of these states.

III- Comprehensive Security Architecture

Given the unsatisfactory state of security in the Persian Gulf, new arrangements need to be devised in order to escape the perennial cycle of instability that has plagued the region. Any security arrangement should take into account the failures of the past and consider the strategic circumstances that exist today. The new common security framework should include all the actors involved. The common security framework, which has roots in cooperative-security model, is based on a set of assumptions about the relative security stance of an actor vis-à-vis the others. Cooperative security has an extended definition. The general definition of cooperative security refers to a security system in which the military endeavors are not the primary focus. In this respect, the main concern is development of structures to attain a comprehensive and positive vision of security. In other words, cooperative security involves achieving proper measures to involve interested parties in order to resolve hostilities before they turn into violence and to use peaceful options. The idea of common security is that all states will find greater relative security through obligations to limit military rivalries



rather than through attempts to gain dominance (Kraig, 2003: 8). Such security architecture assumes that regional rivals that can be potential enemies will accept the same legal and offensive constraints on behavior as friends, despite the existence of considerable mutual mistrust. In this context, financial and human resources of the regional states are used primarily for socio-economic development, rather than for bilateral military alliances with external powers or for suppressive police forces (Kraig, 2004: 139).

In fact, the decline of a traditional realist perception of international relations and its related notions such as beggar thy neighbor policy or the zero-sum game to maximize national security has allowed more room for cooperative patterns of security. The main difference between the realistic school and common security framework is that the former, concentrates on threats through economic and military power (and temporary alliances to build up power), while the latter relies instead on promises, confidence-building measures, and verification of legal agreements (Ikenberry, 2001: 46-47).

Common security is essentially based on mutual gains. The assumption is that states prefer sharing the gains of cooperation on a positive-sum formula rather than sticking on zero-sum basis. If a security framework is to endure for any meaningful period of time, it must be supported by all actors involved (Ikenberry, 2001: 52-69). Thus, the gains accrued through the creation of a security framework must satisfy all actors in order to be translated into trust and reassurance in the region. But, what is that mutual gains in the Persian Gulf - a region with a long record of conflicts, mistrust and wars – that could invoke the regional states to leave arms race and participate in common security framework? Many analysts, most notably Ernest Haas, suggest economic cooperation as a key to regional integration. Haas argued that in a given region, economic cooperation can have a spillover effect on other fields such as security (Haas, 1958: 311). In the Persian Gulf, however, this seems unattainable. A key



precondition for any such regional cooperation is that the economies of the states involved need to be complementary. The rentier states have chosen bilateral economic relations with developed countries in the West over multilateral cooperation with their neighbors. Moreover, many Persian Gulf states consider their neighbors as imminent or potential threat to their security (Tehrani, 2003: 145-147). This perception further undermines any chance of a practical economic cooperation.

It seems that efforts to pave the way for meaningful cooperation in the Persian Gulf should start with a new security initiative. Trust-building measures and security reassurances could lead to a common security framework. Subsequently, one may see a spillover to other fields, which in turn would reinforce the security arrangement put in place. During the past three decades, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have spent billions of dollars on arms purchases and have entered into security alliance with the United States. Far from bringing any sense of security, this has created an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion. Their military ties with external powers have raised public concern and dissatisfaction (Peimani, 2003: 134- 135). This could potentially become a major security threat from within to the rulers of most of these counties.

Iran, a country of 75 million people that sits on the entire northern shores of the Persian Gulf, has been threatened by successive American administrations – a powerful ally of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf – with military action, invasion, and regime change. As though the eight-year Iraq-Iran war and Iraqi invasion of Kuwait were not enough, Washington initiated two major military campaigns at the two ends of the Persian Gulf, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The military campaigns and the consequent “regime change” in both countries resulted, in addition to widespread destruction and chaos, in increased instability. The United States, as the most powerful foreign power maintains the heaviest military presence ever in the Persian Gulf, only to raise Tehran’s concern for



its security. The US military presence has also led to increased terrorism and religious extremism in the region (Pillar, 2003: 62-63).

It is obvious that the present situation of the Persian Gulf is far from being stable. Sooner or later public dissatisfaction and military threats will affect the region dramatically. On the one hand, Iranian government speaks frequently of attacking US military bases in the countries of the region to counter any kind of aggression by US against Iran (Fars News Political Group, 2012). On the other, White House believes the military measures against Iran have been on the table for a long time and it would be considered if the current measures to stop the Iranian nuclear progress fail. And some Israeli leaders clearly speak about military invasion to dismantle Iranian nuclear facilities (Times of Israel Staff, 2012).

The wisdom of a peaceful change in the security pattern of the region is now in hands of the actors playing role in the Persian Gulf. Military confrontation will harm all of the actors and unfortunately the region is now going toward such an end. It seems that the so-called P5+1 group should consider the situation more carefully and move toward trust-building measures and abandon the language of threat toward Iran. This would pave the way for more constructive talks and will reduce possibility of a military confrontation for the time being. With the reduction of military threats, diplomats can gain greater role in the coming developments than generals. And this can be a base for founding a common security framework in the region.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the security architecture of the Persian Gulf. For a long time, foreign powers played a substantial role in security affairs of the region. This involvement, along with wide records of animosity among the neighbors, led the region toward the realistic policies of military empowerment and balance of power. But these policies have been far from being successful in maintaining security and stability in the Persian Gulf.



Given the history of the Persian Gulf, it may seem too optimistic at first to think about a cooperative security architecture in the region. It could be argued, however, that today a common security initiative has a reasonable chance of success. The security situation in the Persian Gulf can hardly be any worse than what it is today. If leaders consider the long-term and not just short-term gains, they would participate in construction of a viable multilateral common framework. Every actor should know that in this framework presumed short-term gains are traded for stability and predictability that will, over time, grant higher benefits to all parties involved. If they leave the region's security to continued arms race and hope for balance of power to guarantee it, they would be disappointed even further.

In order to build a common security framework in the region some preparations need to be made. First, a mechanism should be devised where experts and foreign policy advisors to governments could meet and exchange ideas on a regular basis. This should be in an unofficial atmosphere so that analysts could freely put forth their ideas and get feedbacks. A network or forum – real or virtual – could develop alongside the regular meetings to further expand the possibility of discussion. Such meetings could go a long way in eliminating misunderstandings and mistrust among the Persian Gulf states. Second, a consensus will be required around security goals, principles and norms by actors within the region, whatever their different national interests may be. Third, regional activities – both governmental and non-governmental - in the form of exchange of parliamentary delegations, artistic, scientific, and cultural groups should be increased. Experience has shown that the more officials and ordinary peoples of countries are exposed to and meet each other, the more trust and understanding is developed among them. Forth, Persian Gulf states should voluntarily reduce their offensive military endeavors. This can be a meaningful message of trust and reveals peaceful intentions. Finally, any Persian Gulf security



framework depends, not just on indigenous efforts alone, but on external contributions as well. This is needed to help build a system of balance of interests rather than the balance of power.

In the current circumstances, the regional actors concentrate on deterrence, while great powers only exacerbate the situation. Dialogue within the region is a key to constructing a new Persian Gulf system of conflict management. Through a reasonable process of confidence building measures, regional actors can participate in managing the security problems of the region. Based on this security cooperation, mutual trust and security reassurance can be shaped in this mistrustful atmosphere. The “security spillover” that follows could replace the current ineffective system of balance of power with a system based on balance of interests.



Notes

1. Some analysts believe that the visit of US Defense Secretary Robert Gates of Manama one week before the invasion and the supportive statement of the White House spokesman Jay Carney after that strengthen this notion (Bohan,2011).
2. Some of the Iranian foreign policy makers have supported the idea of the regional trust-making and application of a cooperative security framework in the Persian Gulf. Yet, their position seems weakened by influential military generals after the escalation of the west-imposed sanctions on Iran in November 2011. For more information see:
Speech of the former Iranian foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki in Stockholm in May 2007 Retrieved from <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=482339>
Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Middle East and African Affairs Hossein Amir Abdollahiyan announcements in Kuwait (Iran Newspaper, 2011: 2)

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